

Collected Short Stories Volume II  
by  
Barry Rachin

SMASHWORDS EDITION

\* \* \* \* \*

Published by:  
Barry Rachin on Smashwords

Copyright © 2016 by Barry Rachin

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com) and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This short story collection represents a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

## Table of Contents

[The Willy-nilly Hedonist](#)

[Sanctuary of the Whirligigs](#)

[Turgenev's Lost Tale](#)

[The Unemployed Minimalist](#)

[A Dutiful Wife](#)

[A Heart Yes, a Waltz No](#)

[Circus Maximus](#)

[What would Junie B. Jones Do?](#)

[Time of Sorrow](#)

[No More Piano Lessons](#)

[Emergence](#)

[Two Pockets](#)

[Still Virgin](#)

[Tulipwood](#)

[A Key to Paradise](#)

## The Willy-nilly Hedonist

A week before the wedding, Benjamin Brannigan visited his grandmother. He found the older woman in the sun room crouched over a tray of black Simpson lettuce seedlings. The plants were arranged in two-inch peat pots. “What’s with the blue powder?” He indicated a plastic container with a granular substance.

“Water-soluble plant food,” she replied, “with equal parts nitrogen, phosphate and potash.”

Benjamin surveyed the greenery. “None of the plants seem to be benefiting from your overindulgence.”

Granny Brannigan scowled. “Early April is still too early to grow plants indoors.” She rubbed her lantern jaw thoughtfully and adjusted the wire-rimmed glasses higher up on a beaky nose. “Not nearly enough sunlight or warmth.” “And how’s my favorite grandson?” Granny Brannigan said, shifting gears.

“Not so hot.” Benjamin sat down heavily in a wicker chair. “Angela’s been cheating on me with a co-worker, since as far back as the engagement. The wedding’s off.”

Granny Brannigan, who had been sprinkling topsoil mixed with worm casings, humus and perlite into an empty container, gawked at the young man. “Ouch!” When there was no immediate response, she added, “Did you tell your parents?”

“Not yet. I only found out last night.” The dark-haired boy with the sallow complexion and hazel eyes looked haggard, emotionally unhinged. He delivered the grotesque news in a numbed monotone. “I’ll call all the guests to cancel the wedding and return gifts, of course.” After an awkward pause, Benjamin noted, “Angela claims that she’s a hedonist at heart and the engagement was a mistake.” His features dissolved in a weak smile. “I looked the word up in the dictionary.”

“And?”

“Hedonism is the ethical theory that pleasure and the satisfaction of desire is the highest good and proper aim of human life.” Granny Brannigan massaged her massive jaw a second time. “Your fiancée is a birdbrain.” She spoke softly in a dispassionate manner. The observation wasn’t so much a reprimand as a statement of unassailable apriori truth.

“Former fiancée,” Benjamin corrected. “Our marriage is a distant memory... caput, finito, defunct, dead on arrival.”

Granny Brannigan held a peat pot up to the light. On the verge of collapsing, the stringy, transparent stalk was much too thin to support even a single green leaf. In addition to the lettuce there were heirloom beefsteak tomatoes, dill, oregano, basil, chive and cilantro in various stages of failing health. All was lost!

“Like a baby born prematurely,” Benjamin noted.

“Yes, a good analogy, but unfortunately there’s nothing I can do to correct the defect.” The woman pinched the stalk with a fingernail and tossed the wilted growth aside.

Pointing at the ruined seedling, Benjamin cracked a sick smile. “That’s pretty much what Angela did to me last night.”

His grandmother reached out and patted his hand sympathetically.

If anyone had asked Benjamin, who among his closest friends and relatives loved him most, the answer would have been a no-brainer. With Granny Brannigan there were never any hugs, kisses or mawkish terms of endearment. Language was a trap. Nothing of the sort. Far too

much got frittered away in emotional excesses. She portioned her affection discretely. A gently pat of the wrist following a failed engagement would suffice.

Benjamin scanned the hickory table which resembled a horticultural battle zone. All was lost. Two dozen tiny pots had been upended, the scraggily, brittle plants thrown in a heap. “Doesn’t seem like your vegetable garden is in any better shape than my wedding plans.”

The older woman’s features dissolved in a cagey grin. Throwing a fistful of tarragon sprouts aside she rose “Come with me.”

In the basement a collection of spruce two-by-fours cut into four-foot lengths were stacked in the far corner. “I need to rip these boards on the table saw.”

“For what purpose?”

“A cold frame... I’m gonna make a miniature greenhouse,” Granny Brannigan replied, “so I can plants these seeds outside without risk of a late-night frost or insufficient sunlight damaging the young plants. But that’s a project for another day.” Flicking the light switch, she led the way back upstairs.

“I could stop by Saturday and help you resize the wood,” Benjamin ventured.

“If you like.”

In the foyer Benjamin noted, “I’ll have to call Father Stan and tell him that the wedding’s off.”

His grandmother grounds her teeth and an unintelligible sound gurgled up in her throat. “You’ve been through enough already. I can handle that insufferable blowhard!”

A devout Catholic who never missed a Sunday Mass or day of holy obligation, Granny Brannigan, despised the parish priest. She ridiculed Father Stan as a hellfire and brimstone fanatic, a brittle-minded cleric who trafficked in original sin and the mortal unworthiness of his sinful flock. Granny Brannigan once confided that she wouldn’t be surprised to find Father Stan lurking in some dingy alley selling indulgences – leg bones of medieval saints, moldy scraps of sacred cloth or other holy relics of questionable origin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Benjamin could tally the woman he dated prior to meeting Angela on the fingers of one hand with several digits to spare. Each was precious in her own way. Each fatally flawed. None marriage material. Rita Winetraub, a Jewish girl whose parents emigrated from Poland, epitomized Benjamin’s romantic folly.

Graduating college *magna cum laude*, top of her class, she was well read, spoke several languages fluidly and had once, in a philosophy class, debated A.J. Ayer’s theory of logical positivism. Rita played second bassoon in the community orchestra. She whipped up gourmet meals replete with fresh herbs and spices, tutored English as a second language at the learning center and loved her nieces and nephews to distraction. Serenely quiet with an adroit sense of humor, the young woman was sexually frigid.

Rita kissed and hugged in a perfunctory manner. Physical intimacy was a tedious chore to be endured rather than savored. In every other respect the girl was normal, kind, considerate, decent. But Benjamin wanted the complete package and couldn’t cope with her blasé indifference to what seldom occurred in the bedroom.

At one point Benjamin confronted Rita with her aversion to intimacy. “It’s just the way I am,” she returned in an off-hand manner.

“Maybe you would feel differently... more passionately with a different man.”

"I've been with other men."

"You never mentioned it."

"It's just the way I am," she repeated for good measure.

*It's just the way I am.* A cousin on his father's side of the family was born with cerebral palsy. The poor unfortunate walked with a spastic gait and chewed at a cockeyed, lopsided angle for the longest time before swallowing a mouthful of food. Luck of the draw - no one was to blame for the cousin's birth defect. With Rita Winetraub physical intimacy was a nuisance, a distasteful ordeal to be shrugged off and forgotten as quickly as possible.

One muggy afternoon in mid-June three years earlier, Benjamin was lounging on a bench in Copley Square. Rita, who worked in downtown Boston, was meeting him for lunch. Trinity Church and the John Hancock Tower were clearly visible. He had only been waiting ten minutes, when a familiar face emerged from the deluge of college students and middle-aged urban professionals. Rita approached with a lilting gait, her hips rocking rhythmically from side to side. A print dress in pastel earth tones showed her fleshy arms to good advantage. Like something out of a Modigliani painting, the porcelain face, supple, elongated neck and chocolaty eyes were perfect in every respect.

Benjamin rose and went to kiss her, but at the last instant she pivoted so that his lips brushed her cheek. "You look beautiful!" he murmured. Reaching down he grabbed her hand. "Where would you like to eat?"

Rita gestured with her eyes. "There's an outdoor café two blocks down on Clarendon Street."

At the restaurant she laid both hands on the linen table cloth, palms down with the slender fingers resting inadvertently in a prayerful gesture. Benjamin reached across and cupped her hands in his own. "You are the loveliest creature on planet earth."

"And now you're repeating yourself," she quipped, "having just said something of the sort only five minutes ago."

At that moment something in Benjamin's superheated brain went awry. Feasting his eyes on Rita, he saw two completely different women - the twenty-three year-old overflowing with elegant grace and her glacial *doppelganger*, who later that night would unearth any excuse not to sleep with him. "I think I'll order a Cobb salad," Rita announced, pushing the menu away, "and maybe a slice of carrot cake for desert."

Marriage was a partnership, for better or worse. Nowhere in the ceremonial vows did it mention extenuating circumstances. After sixteen months of the drip, drip, drip of physical rejection, Benjamin broke off the relationship.

By comparison, sex with Angela was consummated in a fiery flash, a rapacious burst of lust followed by drugged sleep. The pudgy girl with the squat nose splattered with coffee colored freckles and perpetual sloe-eyed grin was an instinctual, primordial creature. Angela didn't think things through. Emotion urges surged and ebbed away with kaleidoscopic whimsy. One night when they were getting ready for bed, Benjamin said, "I found this clever book of poems at the library."

"Poetry... it's not my cup of tea," Angela muttered. "Not interested!"

"Just wait a minute." Reaching for a well-thumbed paperback on the bedside table, he flipped through the pages in search of a particular passage. Locating the verse, he began reading in a singsong cadence:

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you;  
Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you truly want;  
Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth  
Cross the doorsill  
Where the two worlds touch.  
The door is...*

Angela groaned. Reaching out, she splayed her fingers over the page and roughly pushed the book away. "Enough already!"

"Rumi was one of the greatest Persian poets, but perhaps this particular verse is too esoteric for your tastes?"

"Silly... dim-witted." She rejected his rationalization. "That business about the doorsill where the two worlds touch... it's just dopey gobbledygook."

"I'm not going to force you to listen if you don't want to." Returning the book to the night table, he glanced at her uncertainly. Angela was staring at the stucco pattern on the bedroom ceiling. "I want to go to Maine this weekend."

"Boothbay Harbor or Old Orchard Beach are nice this time of year."

"No. I had something else in mind," she parried his suggestion. "The shopping mall at Kittery... they've got designer fashions at wholesale prices."

\* \* \* \* \*

Several of Benjamin's friends from high school had already married and abruptly divorced. They chose poorly, impulsively, or not at all, because, over the four-dimensional continuum of time, love was little more than an emotional crap shoot. One encountered romantic bliss between the covers of a Harlequin paperback; everything else was Russian roulette.

*Don't turn your back on happiness in pursuit of perfection!*

Benjamin fell back on this saccharine adage, when deciding that Angela should be his soul mate, the mother of his unborn children. In the new world order, what worked for his parents, who were celebrating their silver wedding anniversary in October, was no longer relevant. He loved Angela and they would make a life together. He wasn't settling, selling himself short. No, nothing of the sort!

\* \* \* \* \*

Around the middle of the week Granny Brannigan called. "Are you coming by Saturday morning?"

"Yes, of course."

"I need a few things from the hardware store," she said. "A box of inch and a quarter deck screws plus a heavy-duty plastic drop cloth."

"Okay."

"Yesterday morning I spoke to Father Stan... told him the wedding was off." The older woman began chuckling – more like a spastic, dry cough than bona fide expression of mirth.

“The priest became rather indignant... acted as though he had been terribly inconvenienced. Even demanded to know what went wrong.”

“And?”

“I told him that the bride-to-be morphed into the town slut.” “By the way,” Granny Brannigan blurted before Benjamin could collect his thoughts, “I also need a carton of heavy-duty staples and a pair of small brass hinges.” Without waiting for a reply, she hung up the phone.

When he arrived Saturday morning, Benjamin’s grandmother was already in the basement setting the fence three-quarters of an inch from the carbide-tipped blade on the table saw. “Those are your plans?” He indicated a hodge-podge of pages scattered about the workbench. The cold frame would be four feet long with a plastic-covered lid that sloped gently toward the front of the project. Lap joints held the rectangular lid together with plastic sheeting stretched across the inner surface and stapled firmly on all sides. A miniature greenhouse for less than five dollars!

Benjamin pointed at a piece of wood resting nearby. “You’re gonna rip that stud in one pass?”

“Too dangerous.” His grandmother rotated the crank on the front of the saw, lowering the blade until it was almost flush with the table’s surface. “We’ll do it in small increments.”

Flipping the switch the tool came alive with a brutal, metallic whine. Positioning the first board firmly up against the fence, she eased the fir into the saw. The shallow kerf cut like butter. When the rear portion of the board was a foot from the whirring blade, Granny Brannigan released her grip and Benjamin pulled the board the rest of the way. Flipping the board end-over-end, the twosome repeated the process.

Granny Brannigan raised the blade a modest quarter of an inch and repeated the process. A minute later the thick board came apart in two equal sections. “Three more boards and we’re done!” The woman repositioned her wire-rimmed glasses back on the bridge of her nose.

“You’ll want to drill pilot holes,” Benjamin cautioned when the rest of the lumber was cut, “so the wood doesn’t crack, when you fasten the sides together.

“I won’t forget.” Granny Brannigan raised the bladed and wedged a piece of scrap wood firmly against the miter gauge. She made a pass for the lap joint, measured the depth then adjusted the blade accordingly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon the phone rang. Benjamin?” Angela’s voice was composed, friendly enough in a distant sort of way.

“Yes?”

“How’re you doing?”

*How was he doing?* The woman had just upended his universe, turned his guts inside out. “What do you want?”

“I’d like to stop by and collect the rest of my belongings.”

Benjamin’s brain went blank. In a fit of sadistic rage following the breakup, he toyed with the idea of doing something outlandish, sadistic, boorish, intentionally crass - like piling all her personal effects in back yard, dousing them with gasoline and lighting a bonfire. But the

mayor's office had just passed legislation the previous year. Outside burning required a municipal permit from the fire department.

He also considered carting all Angela's clothing and accoutrements - the frilly, push-up bras from Victoria's Secret, French-cut bikini underwear and hundred-dollar, Michael Kors shoes - to the Salvation Army where refugees from an assortment of third world banana republics could indulge themselves in a stylish feeding frenzy. "When did you want to come," Benjamin stammered.

"Now if it's not too inconvenient." Her voice was remote, bordering on impersonal. Scarcely a week had passed and Angela had moved on, given Benjamin the bum's rush. The wedding that never happened and idyllic life they meticulously planned together were little more than a historical artifact.

"When did you realize that you were a hedonist?"

"Excuse me?"

"You can come now to collect your stuff. I'll leave the front door ajar, Just lock it behind you when you leave."

"You won't be there?"

"No. It's less awkward this way."

Benjamin drove to a sports bar a mile from his apartment and watched the Boston Celtics battle the Cleveland Cavaliers with LeBron James in the first game of the NBA playoffs. With Boston up by twenty points at halftime, the game was a complete rout. Returning home, Angela was long gone. He showered and went to bed but not before remembering a curious incident.

As he was leaving after his last visit to Granny Brannigan, the woman suddenly began snapping her arthritic fingers fitfully as though trying to recall some fogbound memory from the distant past. "There was this massive book in three volumes... twelve hundred pages in all." "Anthony Adverse... that's what it was called. Hervey Allen was the author. Anthony Adverse... they even made it into a movie in 1936 with Olivia de Havilland in the lead role..."

"Why are you telling me this?" Benjamin pressed.

"One of the main characters, a middle-aged housekeeper was a hedonist." Granny Brannigan began to giggle uncontrollably, "an insatiable nymphomaniac as I remember." With a rickety, rheumatic gait, she shambled closer and tugged on her grandson's sleeve.

"Angela is selfish and crass. She lacks common decency. Her sexual predilections are more a matter of convenience rather than personal conviction. The housekeeper in Anthony Adverse was a hedonist in the truest sense of the word. Angela's just a spoiled brat."

\* \* \* \* \*

A month later Benjamin stopped by his grandmother's house. He found the woman in the back yard crouched over the newly minted cold frame. The plastic frame had been swung far back. She indicated a thermometer propped up in the corner next to a pot of red pepper seedlings. "Gotta be careful. With the plastic lid down, temperatures can climb to well over a hundred degrees!"

Benjamin was studying a row of butter crunch lettuce. Each plant hugged the earth, the emerald green leaves unfolding in a profusion of succulent new growth. At the rear of the cold frame a half dozen beefsteak tomatoes swayed in a light breeze. The young plants stood a foot high, the sturdy stalks coated with a gossamer, grayish film. All was right in the world.



[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Sanctuary of the Whirligigs

Ignoring the paved, red brick walkway, the dark-haired woman cut across the lawn to where Marcus Rosedale was lounging on the front stoop. Even by the most generous standards, she wasn't particularly pretty. Thick, charcoal eyebrows perched over pallid cheeks, sloping haphazardly toward fleshy lips. It was the sort of unremarkable, aesthetically commonplace face one seldom noticed in a crowd.

Some women possessed a certain penache. Even when wearing torn jeans and a blouse bought off the discount rack at the bargain outlet, they wreaked of *haute couture*. Sadly, this one was not of that ilk. How she appeared in middle age was not much different from how Marcus imagined she would look thirty years later when applying for Medicare and her social security pension.

She waved an arm at a collection of wind-driven lawn ornaments scattered across the weedy grass. "Are these gizmos for sale?"

"Whirligigs," he corrected. "They're called whirligigs and yes, I've got plenty in the basement."

The woman stabbed at a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, pushing the frames up on the bridge of a doughy nose. "Yes, well I really like the feisty chicken." She pointed toward a brightly painted wooden ornament perched on a spruce pole. A gust of wind tickled the blades of a purple propeller, sending the chicken's upper torso bobbing up and down in the direction of a terrified earthworm. A red barn with tufts of hay spilling out of an upper loft served as a makeshift rudder, steering the contraption into the fitful breezes.

"Hennie Penny." Marcus grinned good-naturedly. He disappeared into the house, returning moments later with a replica of the mechanical device.

"They're all so clever," she said, gesturing toward a red-capped lumberjack, who was chopping wood with an axe near a rock garden. Several feet away, a less-ambitious, bearded man snoozed leisurely in a rocking chair that rhythmically bobbed back and forth as the wind pumped a drive shaft hidden just below his feet. Directly to the left, a brown bear clawed the air with an outstretched paw, just out of reach of a salmon leaping from a frothy pond. It was all good fun – a comical, self-contained universe in microcosm where only good things happened and nothing ever went terribly awry.

"Do you teach?" She inched the glasses up on her humped nose.

"Teach what?"

"Woodworking... how to make them... The whirligigs, that is."

He rubbed his grizzled chin and looked away. "In the ten years I been assembling these mechanical contraptions, you're the first person to ask."

“How sad!” The woman ran a taut index finger over the brass welding rod that served as the drive shaft. She stroked the acrylic paint that decorated the wings and fancy plumage. “How much would you charge to teach me?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrea Simpson – that was the dark-haired customer’s name. After purchasing Hennie Penney and registering the unusual request, she was in no great hurry to leave. The woman was a psychologist with a PhD. Dr. Andrea Simpson – she worked at the women’s reformatory in Evanston, where she counseled lifers, hard-core recidivists and assorted social riff raff.

When Andrea finally left, Marcus went back indoors, fired up the band saw and cut a base plate replacement for the sold item, but, before he could measure for the brass drive shaft, the kitchen phone began ringing with shrill insistence. “What are you doing Wednesday night?” His sister, Brenda, was on the other end.

“What I do pretty much every night,” he replied cryptically.

“There’s something we need to discuss. Meet me at the Longhorn Steakhouse.”

*Something we need to discuss...* Marcus saw Brenda only sporadically. They seldom spoke even at holidays and when they did, his sister never mentioned anything more timely than the weather. Since elementary school, they shared no common interests. When there was no immediate reply, she blurted, “Six o’clock. I’ll be waiting in the lobby.” The phone went dead.

Marcus returned to the basement. He cut a slot for the metal cam then routed a quarter-inch groove from the propeller end. The brass rod was considerably thinner, but he always seated the metal in nylon bushings to reduce friction.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrea Simpson arrived early for her first woodworking session. Marcus brought her downstairs into the basement. “Table saw, drill press, router and scroll saw... these are the tools we will be using.” He laid a whirligig on the workbench alongside the metallic gray scroll saw. The elaborate design featured a bearded man in farmer jeans chopping at an upturned log. A pile of neatly stacked wood lay a short distance away. A brown dog resting on his haunches sat close by the propeller watching the woodchopper with a quizzical, upturned face. On the far side a tree in full leaf and stippled with pink blossoms served as a rudder to steer the ornament into the wind. “Thought we’d start with the woodcutter.”

“Isn’t this project a bit involved for a beginner?”

“Each design has a unique theme,” Marcus parried her question. “And, anyway, like I said earlier, we’re in no great hurry. Bit by bit, it all comes together.” Flicking on the scroll saw switch, the reciprocal blade pounded the air with an insistent fury. “We’ll cut the torso from half-inch pine... the legs from thinner stock.”

Marcus reached for a blonde board on which the man’s upper body including the axe had already been outlined in pencil. He inched the board into the thin blade then adjusted the blower to clear away debris. As the blade proceeded up the chest, down the back and over the shoulders, Marcus angled the wood to follow the penciled line. When the blade approached the back of the neck, he shut the machine down and stepped away from the table. “Now you finish the cut.”

Andrea reached for the switch, but Marcus grabbed her wrist. “Always know where your hands are in relation to the blade... that’s the cardinal rule in woodworking. He raised both

hands, splaying the calloused fingers. “The tool has no preferences... it doesn’t discriminate between wood and flesh.”

“Yes, I’ll be careful.” Andrea set the saw in motion and watched as the blade tentatively proceeded up the back of woodcutter’s scalp. As she rounded the tip of the nose, the woman momentarily backed off the cut in order to accomplish the sharp angle, but everything was proceeding nicely.

“Watch what you’re doing,” Marcus counseled as the blade negotiated the underside of the grizzled chin. “You’re forcing the cut, dragging the blade at a cockeyed angle. Let up on the pressure or you’ll snap the blade.” Andrea relaxed her grip and the metal strand eased back perpendicular. Sliding the board a quarter turn to the right, she finished the cut and continued past the belly to the hips.

“Not bad for a novice!” Marcus grinned good-naturedly. “You drifted a bit wide on the brim of the hat, but we’ll clean that up on the vertical belt sander.”

“What about the legs?”

“We’ll tackle them in a moment, but let’s tidy things up a bit.” At the sander he showed the girl how to remove the excess stock then handed her a small strip of 180-grit sandpaper. “Round over the sharp edges and the piece is ready for painting.”

As the sandpaper polished the surface silky smooth, Andrea’s expression settled into a determined grin. “Do you enjoy working at the prison?” he asked.

“I’ve only had the job a few months.”

Marcus’ visits to the lumberyard for rough-cut poplar and pine took him past the Evanston facility at least several times a month. A collection of drab, cinderblock buildings was connected by an equally depressing concrete walkway. A thirty-foot fence was capped with coils of razor wire. “They’re hardened criminals.”

She crooked her head to one side. “Yes, for the most part.”

“How do you rehabilitate incorrigible thugs?” he pressed.

Andrea was sanding the crevices around the eye socket and nose. All the features stood in bold relief. “There is no silver bullet or standard treatment,” she said and brushed a gossamer film of loose sawdust away with her slender fingertips. “Most are severely character disordered. From a psychological perspective, their problems are structural.”

It took Marcus several minutes to digest the queer remark. Pointing at a thick, hardwood beam that ran the length of the ceiling, he observed, “That timber is structural. Tamper with it and the whole building falls down.”

The woman lay the sandpaper aside momentarily and stared at him obtusely. “It’s the same with the human psyche. Given the opportunity, the level three sex offender will continue to molest young children, the pyro burn your house down without the slightest pang of conscience. Short of divine intervention, most of them will never see the light of day.” Satisfied that all the saw marks had been sanded away, Andrea placed the torso on the worktable. “Is there time to shape the legs? I’d love to see how the body parts fit together.”

Marcus handed her another board, half as thick with a pair of identical legs faintly outlined in pencil. Andrea cut and sanded the pieces then drilled matching holes in the upper thigh, assembling the various parts with a slim bolt and matching locknut. Standing the figure upright on the workbench, Marcus rocked the upper portion back and forth sending the long-handled axe in a sweeping arc. Chop! Chop! Chop!

The psychologist, who worked with the worst-of-the-worst female offenders at the state prison, grinned ecstatically. “Truly awesome!”

Marcus glanced at his watch. "Time for one last thing." He grabbed an oddly shaped metal object from the tool rack. "We're going to thread a length of eighth-inch brass, welding rod. The metal will be bolted to the propeller and serve as the drive shaft that powers the whirligig."

He locked the bronze-colored rod in a vice-grip before slipping an end into a narrow hole in the center of the tool. "Feed the rod into the center hole and twist clockwise, until you feel the teeth grab metal," Marcus instructed, handing the tool to the girl,

Andrea seated the tool on the rod and made several revolutions. On the fifth try she blurted, "Yes, that's it! I feel something."

"Good. Now make another half-dozen turns."

She spun the slender handles end over end until a brass filament spiraled out the mouth of the tool. Marcus retrieved the golden thread from the concrete floor and held it in front of her eyes. "Another thirty or forty turns and you'll have your threaded rod."

When the welding rod was finally removed from the thread cutter, Marcus studied the perfectly formed threads – not a single blemish or imperfection over the entire length of the cut. "Too bad," he mused, "that prison administrators couldn't conjure up a similar device to 'retool' deviant behavior, convert character disordered misfits into law-abiding citizens. Mechanical alchemy – that sort of miraculous twaddle only happened in the misguided Middle Ages."

Marcus spun a matching nut onto the freshly-minted thread. "The propeller will seat on that first nut while a second locknut on the far side holds everything firmly in place." Laying the welding rod aside, he dimmed the lights and headed for the stairwell. "I think we'll call it quits for today."

\* \* \* \* \*

*I'm not smart enough  
for the life I've been living,  
a little bit slow  
for the pace of the game.  
It's not I'm ungrateful  
For what I've been given  
But nevertheless, just the same...*

In the foyer of the Longhorn Steakhouse a bitter-sweet James Taylor tune drifted over the Bose speakers. Brenda had already arrived. The hostess showed them to their seats, provided menus and went away. "I'm thinking steak tips." Reaching for a glass of ice water, Brenda perused the menu. "Although the ribeye looks scrumptious."

Whatever seemed so urgent when she phoned earlier in the day, no longer was a priority. "How are you doing with the flea markets?"

"Craft fairs... I sell whirligigs at juried craft fairs," Marcus replied. "An art gallery on the East Side is also selling some of my original creations on consignment."

"That's swell." She was clearly underwhelmed.

According to Brenda's highly-refined sensibilities, Marcus' woodcrafts were tacky, vulgar and tawdry – the sort of frivolous *chachkies* that only knuckle-dragging blue-collar types and the culturally challenged could appreciate "Actually, I sold a whirligig earlier this week." He told her about Andrea Simpson.

“You’re gonna teach a psychologist, who works with female inmates, to cut wood and bend metal rods?”

“She came to the house yesterday for the first lesson.”

“Any possibility,” Brenda sniggered, “of a romantic tryst?”

“She’s not my type.”

Brenda sliced a hot roll in half and slathered it with butter. “Didn’t you have a craft fair last weekend?”

Marcus nodded.

“Weather was awful!” His sister noted. “As I remember, it rained nonstop from mid-morning through late afternoon.”

“That’s about right,” he replied morosely. The fair was held at a local farm. No sooner had the crafters set up their displays, the heavens opened with a flood of Biblical proportions, a deluge to put Noah to shame! Marcus was assigned a spot on a gravel embankment. The tent leaked. The unrelenting rain kicked mud onto the legs of the table, splattering the wood. When he got home, he had to wash all the merchandise that had been out on display. Several whirligigs had to be repainted. No customers showed up. He sold nothing and was out the seventy-five dollar booth fee plus travel expenses.

Marcus’ experience at the East Side art gallery, where he was selling his crafts on consignment, proved even more demoralizing. Among creative artisans an unspoken code of conduct existed: every crafter, if humanly possible, deserved to earn a reasonable profit not just break even. But Carl Swenson, the gallery owner, didn’t see it that way. “It’s a buyer’s market,” the proprietor glibly argued, “and I got a surplus of artisans, who would die to show their merchandise in *my* store.” With niggardly persistence he then proceeded to nickel and dime Marcus down to an absurdly low, wholesale cost.

Marcus wanted the account for prestige as much as name recognition, but when he heard through a word of mouth that the shrewd dealer had tripled the retail price, passing Marcus’ merchandise off as high-end collectibles, he realized the blunder. The cartoonish creations weren’t whirligigs, per se, but the folk art of a gifted artisan. Like any lucrative, financial investment, their worth could only appreciate with age. The dealer was a crook – not nearly as sinister as the hoodlums and nut cases Andrea Simpson counseled, but an entrepreneurial thug nonetheless.

Nothing was negotiable. Carl Swenson owned the store, set the policies as he saw fit. At the Swenson Art Boutique a keepsake jewelry box fashioned from rosewood and bird’s-eye maple sold for three hundred dollars, but the owner couldn’t cough up a piddly ten bucks, allowing Marcus to share the benefits of free market capitalism. He placed five of his best pieces at the store that day, but as he walked out the door and down the street past a Japanese sushi bar and theater that featured foreign films, the whirligig maker knew that he would never return.

The waitress arrived and took their orders.

Brenda reached across the table and tapped her brother forcefully on the wrist. “I’m leaving Jeffrey... moving out of the house over the weekend.”

“What?” Marcus felt blindsided.

“It’s been four years now,” she continued in a cavalier tone, “I’ve outgrown him.”

He stared at his sister bleakly. The body language didn’t jive with the topic at hand. Brenda was grinning mischievously, like an impudent adolescent who had committed a foolish

prank. “You outgrow a pair of shoes, not a spouse.” She glowered at him but held her tongue. “I assume you’ve told him.”

“No, not yet. Jeffrey has been away all week on a business trip. I’m clearing out Friday. When he returns, there will be a note taped to the bedroom mirror.” She cleared her throat of a non-existent obstruction. “Maybe you could...”

Jeffery and Marcus were best friends from high school. He introduced Jeffrey to his future wife. From best friend to brother-in-law and now this! Brenda knew a devastated and bewildered Jeffrey would contact her brother searching for answers. By telling Marcus, she could slip away without the need to defend her decision. “Maybe,” Marcus picked up where his sister left the sentence dangling in midair, “I could act like the guy who trails the circus elephants with a short-handled broom and metal scoop.”

“That’s a bit crass.”

“No, what *you’re* doing is crass. It’s also gutless.” The waitress arrived with the food and they ate in silence. Toward the end of the meal, the James Taylor tune returned in the background, the lyrics hitting him full force.

“Who’s the third party?”

“That’s not important,” Brenda shot back in a snippy tone.

\* \* \* \* \*

At their second meeting Marcus taught Andrea how to shape the drive shaft. He inserted the rod into the groove they routed previously then, with a felt-tipped pen marked the entrance to the cam shaft. Locking the rod in a pair of vise-grip pliers, he explained, “We’re going to bend the threaded rod at a right angle from the black mark.”

Bracing both elbows against his side, Marcus began bending the rod with his free hand. Well before the bend was completed, he handed the rod to Andrea. “Now you finish.”

She fumbled with the metal, adjusting her grip several times until she felt the stiff rod relent. “It’s coming now.”

“Yes, but is it ninety degrees?” Marcus held a Tri-square alongside the bent shaft. “Just a tad more and you’ll be there.” When the angle was respectably close, they repositioned the vise-grip and completed the final two bends. “Character disorder... that psychological term... you said it’s a structural problem.” The odd comment having nothing to do with the task at hand, Andrea stared at Marcus with mild confusion, trying to decipher his intent. “What you see is what you get,” he stumbled over the words.

“In a manner of speaking.” Andrea turned the bent rod over in her hand. She had drifted slightly astray on the third bend, but Marcus finessed the metal, brought it back in line with an adjustable wrench. Now the rectangular section fit perfectly in the wooden base. “There are all sorts of exotic, mental disorders... hysterical, compulsive, sociopathic.” She began to chuckle as though at some private joke. “Even a phallic character disorder.”

“Really!” Marcus eyebrows arched ever so slightly. “And what might that be?”

“Do you want the Freudian definition or the stripped down version?”

“Keep it simple.”

Andrea’s pushed her dark-rimmed glasses up on the bridge of her pudgy nose as her features morphed through a series of comical expressions. “The phallic type... they’re generally selfish and egotistical as hell... notorious for cheating on their spouses.”

“Which is to say, they got a major screw loose.”

“Couldn’t have said it better!” Andrea’s dark bangs bobbed up and down. “Now can we get back to woodworking?”

“One last thing.” Marcus stabbed at a blond pile of sawdust with the toe of his shoe. “Is it just criminal types who suffer these fatal flaws or -”

“Oh, no,” Andrea cut him short, waving both hands in the air emphatically. “There are more character disordered people walking the streets on any given day than locked up behind bars.” Andrea pursed her lips, a mischievously wry smile. “Perhaps you know somebody who fits the bill.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“Phallic character disorder... anyone from your immediate family, friends or business associates who deserves that unsavory moniker?”

Marcus chuckled and shook his head. “No, not really.”

Andrea held the drive shaft chest high. “Now can we mount the propeller and glue the wooden cover in place?”

\* \* \* \* \*

The middle of the week, Marcus’ brother-in-law wandered into the back yard where he was tearing rotten plywood paneling from the side of the shed. Jeffrey had the look of a beaten dog. The man hadn’t shaved in days, and his graying hair was matted in the front. He stood with his disheveled head tilted to one side, watching as the wall came down. “The shed tilts to one side.”

“Yes, I know. It’s been that way for eighteen years.” Unfortunately, when Marcus built the structure, he was a rank amateur. The foundation tended to follow the downward pitch of the land. He hadn’t a clue how to fix the problem. The finished structure, which resembled the Leaning Tower of Pisa, was sturdy enough if somewhat irregular. “I suspect it will limp along in that precarious state for another couple decades.”

Jeffrey took a couple steps closer. “What spacing did you use on the two-by-fours?”

“Sixteen on center.” Marcus pried a mangled nail from the damaged wood.

“How you gonna hammer nails in new wood, when you can’t see where the studs are located?”

“I had a funny feeling you were going to ask about that little dilemma.” Marcus tapped the wall a foot above his head. “I’ll set a nail in the wall above each vertical piece and then snap a chalk line to a corresponding mark on the foundation where the stud rests.”

“Clever as hell!” Jeffrey nodded appreciatively.

“Even if the chalk line careens at an utterly cockeyed angle, it will faithfully follow the lumber hidden on the far side.”

“So the nail grabs solid wood.”

“Yeah,” Marcus confirmed, “that’s the general idea.”

“Brenda left me... moved all her stuff out of the house while I was away on a business trip.” Jeffrey retrieved a bent nail that had fallen in the grass. “Did you know she was seeing someone on the sly?”

“She stopped by the other day,” Marcus spoke haltingly, measuring his words. “That was the first I heard of it.”

“The cheating... it wasn’t the first time.” Jeffrey’s voice cracked and he had to turn away to compose himself. “Over the years, there’s been a series of romantic intrigues.”

*His sister in the role of home wrecker - Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary.* Unaware of his sister's salacious propensities, Marcus felt nauseous, lightheaded.

The other party – she never even mentioned his name, never intimated anything about falling in love or meeting a spiritual, twin soul. Rather, there was a detached, business-like quality to the impending breakup, as though his sister was using the present arrangement as a slimy stepping stone from a tiresome marriage to a more manageable situation. “Did you ever confront Brenda with her shenanigans?”

“In the past,” Jeffrey replied bitterly, “she got all maudlin, teary-eyed... claimed that the debauchery meant nothing. Each affair only made her realize how much she treasured our marriage.”

“Until this last time.” Marcus shook his head. “My sister... she’s all mixed up.”

“On the contrary,” Jeffrey shot back, “I’m the emotion wreck. Brenda knows perfectly well what she’s doing.”

Marcus seated the claw of his hammer on a bent nail and pried it free. When he looked up again, Jeffrey was gone. Marcus replaced the front and both sides but ran out of steam before reaching the back of the shed. By the afternoon, the late June heat had topped out in the low nineties with a tropical-grade humidity that sucked all the oxygen out of his lungs and left him weak in the knees.

Putting his tools away, he went indoors and showered. In the kitchen, he removed a tub of red pepper hummus from the refrigerator and popped an onion bagel in the toaster. Several years previously, his sister decided to go strictly vegetarian, allowing no meat, cheese or poultry across the threshold. No matter that her husband was an all-American, meat-and-potatoes kind of guy.

At a pool party Brenda hosted, she served up a platter of bagels slathered with hummus, spinach and tomato slices. She drizzled the exotic appetizer with olive oil, freshly minced basil and parsley. The unusual hors d'oeuvres was just about the only thing of worth that Marcus associated with his sister anymore.

And now the marriage was defunct, blown to smithereens.

Marcus bit into the onion bagel and luxuriated as the disparate flavors enveloped his taste buds. The tomato dissolved into the salty chickpea paste as the succulent herbal garnish worked its flavorful magic.

With woodworking, whether it was repairing a rotted shed or building whirligigs, Marcus always found solutions for seemingly impossible problems. The cockeyed shed was a classic case in point. With the wind-powered ornaments, hardly a week passed that Marcus didn't discover a way to improve on a craft design. Frequently it was a matter of trial and error, a stumbling, bumbling process of elimination. Not this, not this, not this, THAT!

But you couldn't finesse human nature.

The damage Brenda perpetrated on a guileless world at large was exponential. Common decency never factored into the cosmic equation. Thirty-eight years on planet earth and, except for hummus bagels, she hadn't learned a practical thing of value.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I can't paint for crap... got no eye for color or proportion,” Andrea confided.



They were situated upstairs in the kitchen, where Marcus spread a collection of acrylic paints, brushes, a plastic palette and the unassembled pieces of her whirligig across the length of the table.

“This isn’t the Sistine Chapel,” he returned dismissively. “Not the Mona Lisa either.”

“Yes, but I’m really quite awful.”

“When you were a little girl, did you have coloring books?”

“Sure, every kid did.”

“Well then, just think of what we’re doing as coloring with paints instead of crayons.”

Marcus handed her a brush and the woodchopper’s left leg. A light pencil line at the bottom of the limb indicated where the ankle left off and the shoe began.

Squirting a generous dollop of blue paint into the palette, he handed her a sable brush. “Paint the pants down to the pencil mark near the ankle.”

Andrea’s hand trembled as she raised the bristles to the upper thigh. “If you’re having trouble controlling the brush, brace your right wrist with your left hand. She did as he said and the tremors subsided. “Start your initial stroke a half inch away from the edge and brush up. Any globs you can work back down into the piece.”

When Andrea reached the bottom, she looked up. The blue had smudged well across the pencil mark onto the top of the shoe. “See, I told you I couldn’t paint!”

“There’s a trick... a technique for fixing irregularities.” She eyes him doubtfully. “We can fix it,” Marcus continued, “once the paint dries on both sides.”

Andrea painted the legs front and back. With a tiny brush, Marcus added shoe laces. Reaching across the table he tapped her lightly on the forearm. “Watch closely.” Grabbing a felt-tipped Sharpie he deftly ran a thick black line across the area where the paint had smudged and the defect disappeared, swallowed up by the crisp, dark line that now separated the pant cuff from the top of the shoe.

Andrea shook her head in disbelief.

“Your first coat of paint sealed the wood grain so the black ink couldn’t bleed into the porous wood. You get a razor-sharp line every time. It’s a simple fix with the added benefit that the silky-smooth line makes the surrounding colors pop.”

“Everything looks so much better... more professional!”

“What color should we use for the face and hands?” Marcus shifted gears.

“I don’t know. Nothing you’ve got here looks quite right.”

“Then we’ll improvise... concoct our own.” He squeezed a generous splotch of white onto the palette, mixed several drops of chocolaty brown plus an even smaller quantity of orange. Stirring the mixture forcefully with a paint brush, a lightly tinted flesh color emerged. “Keep the wood directly in front of you, even if you have to rotate the work several times as you paint,” Marcus instructed as she spread a film of the blended paint over the forehead toward the broad-brimmed hat.

“How many craft fairs are you doing this summer?” she asked when the face was finished.

“I’m not doing any.” He told her about the soggy debacle at the farm and his more recent fiasco with Swenson’s Boutique.

“Why not set up your own website and sell your crafts through the internet?”

“I can just barely retrieve my emails,” Marcus replied sheepishly. “Setting up an online store isn’t a realistic consideration.”

“Too bad.” Andrea turned her attention back to the woodcutter’s hands, painting to the wrists before flipping the wood end over end and tidying up the fingers that gripped the axe handle. “Selling on the internet... it’s the way of the future.”

“Unfortunately, I’m mired in the past.”

\* \* \* \* \*

At the final meeting they assembled all the wooden parts with glue, nuts and bolts. Marcus attached a strand of 16 gauge wire from an eye hook embedded in the woodchoppers belly to the metal cam. A ceremonial gesture, they spun the propeller and the axe arched high in the air over the man’s shoulders. Chop! Chop! Chop! The twosome watched as the tiny log was blasted to splinters.

“Well’ that does it.” With a bittersweet half-smile, Marcus handed Andrea the finished craft. They climbed the basement stairs and lingered awkwardly in the kitchen, neither knowing what to say.

“Couldn’t help noticing your latest creation... the king or rock and roll.”

Marcus’ features lit up momentarily. “Yeah, that’s a hoot!” The newest whirligig featured a slightly rotund Elvis Presley decked out in an ivory-colored jump suit and dark sunglasses, strumming a guitar. When the propeller was set in motion, a wire rod fixed to the crooner’s waist sent the hips gyrating in a maniacal frenzy. “Elvis’ Pelvis... that’s what I call it.”

Andrea Simpson approached and stood so close that Marcus could feel her breath on his face. “A business proposition...I construct a website for your line of custom-built whirligigs with pictures, product captions, merchandise order form and email contact... the whole shebang, and you teach me how to make Elvis Pelvis.”

In response to Marcus’ dumbfound expression, she added, “I took a course in web design as an undergraduate... got all the computer software, everything you need to get up and running in cyberspace.”

When there was still no response, she thumped him in the chest several times with a taut index finger. “So, what’s the verdict?”

Marcus was only now looking her full in the face – that unremarkable, acquired taste of a face that he could never quite get out of his mind anymore. Twenty-four-seven, it floated back to him throughout the day, even in that Arcadian, twilight realm between sleep and fleeting wakefulness.

She held a hand out. He grabbed, shook once and sealed the pact. “Okay, I’ll teach you.”

“The Elvis’ Pelvis whirligig... how long should it take?”

“Oh I dunno. That’s tough to predict.” Marcus’ expression was perfectly serious. He still hadn’t thought to let go of the woman’s hand. “A few weeks... a month maybe. Perhaps the rest of our lives.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## I

“Who was the main character in Turgenev’s novella, *The Inn*?” Professor Portman opened the discussion the third week of class. The lecture hall was half-filled, twenty-five students on a Monday morning.

There was no immediate response. A minute passed. In his late fifties, the balding, stoop-shouldered man wore wire-rimmed glasses and a habitually congenial expression. An inveterate bachelor, the professor favored that indolent, reflective manner common among scholastic types. “Did anyone bother to read the story?” His tone was more joking than accusatory.

“Akim Semyonitch, the Russian serf who belonged to the widow landowner, Lizaveta Prohorovna,” a female voice three seats down from Frankie Endicott rang out. Since the first day of class, the girl wore a habitually surly expression like a badge of honor. She was cranky and taciturn. Perhaps churlish would be more apt. She possessed no social graces and yet, in Frankie’s eyes, each fatal character flaw only heightened the woman’s physical appeal.

“And how would you describe the widow landowner?”

“A conniving shrew!” the same voice rang out. The sound of light laughter filtered through the room.

“Shrewd and greedy,” Professor Portman confirmed.

A hairy arm shot up in the air. “How come no Hispanic writers were included in the course outline?” The challenging jibe drifted to the rostrum from the far back of the lecture hall, where a dark-skinned Hispanic, Julio Rodriguez, slouched in an insolent, half-reclining position. Frankie recognized the speaker from a previous English class. In his early twenties, Julio usually sat with the minority students in the cafeteria and, on the several occasions when Frankie greeted him in the school hallways, he never bothered to acknowledge the friendly gesture.

Over the last several years, Overland Community College welcomed large numbers of minorities – many on scholarships - from the low-income housing projects bordering the campus to the west. Diamonds in the rough, these students lacked basic skills. They couldn’t do simple math or punctuate a compound sentence. Worse yet, many were unprepared for the demands of academic life. They were increasingly confrontational and belligerent in class. Faculty couldn’t call them to task, because it was considered politically incorrect and anyone voicing concern was branded a bigot. Frankie tried to remain open-minded but felt the school’s generosity ill-conceived. Invasion of the Huns - it was an equal opportunity, public relations strategy gone haywire!

“Turgenev’s been dead a hundred years.” Julio made a vulgar gesture with his left hand. Without pivoting his neck, Frankie surreptitiously glanced to his right. The girl in the torn jeans three seats down perked up and was following the tête-à-tête with an amused expression.

*Did she sympathize with the dissident Hispanic or were her allegiances with the instructor?* He couldn’t be sure.

“We’re here to study literary classics,” the professor spoke softly, measuring his words. “Chekhov, de Maupassant, Turgenev, Flaubert... their works are anthologized over and over again for good reason.”

“Those names don’t mean crap to me.” Julio’s tone altered ever so slightly, taking on a more surly edge. “You never heard of Hector Santos?”

“A young Panamanian, who won the prestigious Booker Prize recently,” the professor replied. “Santos is an emerging writer with a certain amount of talent but not nearly the stature of any of the writers we will be discussing this semester.”

“That’s just your misguided opinion.” Julio glowered at the instructor.

Sensing that he was losing control, Professor Portman was becoming visibly flustered. Turning back to the class, he asked, “What other characters figure significantly in the story?”

“Kirillovna!” The girl’s booming voice echoed up into the rafters.

Even the professor was startled by the scruffy girl’s lightning-quick response. “Correct again... the despotic woman who manages Madame Pohorovna’s estate.”

Now the hand of a pudgy, freckle-faced girl with a receding chin near the front of the room shot up in the air. “Kirillovna... she took the five rubles that her mistress gave her for Akim, rushed off to her bedroom and locked the stolen money in a metal strong box.”

As though to bring closure to the earlier discussion, the Hispanic youth flung his pencil on the floor. “Still don’t see where any of this is relevant to my life!” With a theatrical flourish he stomped out of the lecture hall. A sinister tittered fluttered through the room. Clearly, among younger black and Latino students, Julio had his supporters.

“Stay a minute.” The class had ended. The whisper-soft injunction floated through the stagnant air from three seats away. Frankie gawked at the edgy girl, who was still facing the lectern. “Don’t leave... not yet.”

She never looked at him as she mouthed the stingy handful of words in a flat monotone. Only when the room had emptied out completely did she approach. By conventional standards, she wasn’t terrible pretty. The olive-colored face was plain and utterly non-descript. But if you looked long and hard enough, at odd moments an unadorned loveliness emerged from the aesthetic wreckage only to fade away like a fleeting afterthought.

“Something lousy is going to happen.”

“How so?”

“That skinny Puerto Rican has been organizing minority students. They’re pressuring the administration to revamp the curriculum.”

Frankie scowled and blew out his cheeks. “The jerk can’t bully faculty.”

“It’s worse than you think” she cautioned. “He’s organizing a coalition from the Latino Coalition to meet with President McElroy.”

A sense dread pervaded Frankie’s brain. “For what purpose?”

Reaching up with both hands, she rearranged her black hair. It was only then that Frankie noticed the gold band on the fourth finger of her left hand. Any romantic notions he might have entertained instantaneously went up in smoke. “Don’t know. I just wanted to give you a heads up.” Pushing past him, she headed for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Don’t suppose you ever read Hector Santos?” Frankie was sitting in the school cafeteria nursing a tepid cup of coffee and grilled cheese sandwich. Julio Rodriguez pulled up a chair next to him.

“Actually, I have.”

“And where do you stand on the issue?”

Frankie had no intention of humoring the man. “Hector Santos ... he’s a one-trick pony, who writes about the same sappy themes over and over and over again.”

If he was offended by the sarcastic rebuttal, Julio kept his composure. “Which are?”

“Hispanic men who cheat on their dishrag wives... teens who bunk school, deal drugs and shoplift at the local mall.” Frankie sipped at his coffee. “In Santo’s writings there’s never a happy ending. The men are all misogynists... the women subsist on welfare and AFDC. It’s worse than a Greek tragedy.”

“He won the freakin’ Booker prize!”

“Yes, he won the prize,” Frankie countered, “but, in literary circles politics influences decision-making more than innate talent. Everyone remembers a decade ago when writers from the Indian subcontinent were all the rage. Later we went absolutely gaga over Haitian short fiction. Then Cuban chick lit was center stage. Flavor-of-the-month – a week from Tuesday, transgender hermaphrodites may be flooding the marketplace. Who knows?” Frankie pushed his tray aside. “To say that Hector Santos won the Booker Prize means nothing.”

Julio rubbed his bristly chin. He rose and, much as he had in the lecture hall, skulked theatrically away.

Toward the end of the semester, the nasty impasse reached the tipping point, metastasizing like a terminal disease and spilling over beyond the classroom. One summer day in late May, a hundred students milled about the quadrangle that abutted the student union. “What do we want?” A student with a wispy goatee and blue-checked bandana knotted around his forehead barked into a bullhorn. Climbing up on a stone terrace, he converted the landscaped structure into an impromptu speaker’s platform. “What do we want and when do we need it?”

“In response to each question the crowd shouted, “Free Choice! Now!”

A series of speakers was demanding the creation of a minority studies program, women’s center and hodgepodge of esoteric demands that Frankie could make little sense of. At odd intervals, Professor Portman’s name resurfaced, eliciting derisive catcalls and jeers.

“The devil incarnate... Professor Portman’s the Antichrist,” the young girl who sat three seats down from Frankie in the lecture hall was standing next to him. He still didn’t know her name but, in recent weeks, had begun to think of her as the ‘wedding band girl’.

Julio Rodriguez, who was standing at the front of the crowd, leaped onto the terraced wall. Totally in his element, he brandished the bullhorn like a lethal weapon. “I gotta study some nineteenth century, Bolshevik bullshit,” he shrilled, “while native-born Latino and Afro-American authors go neglected... unread. Is that fair?” An irate rumble percolated through the crowd.

“Organizers met yesterday in the student union building.” The wedding band girl lowered her voice several decibels so the others couldn’t hear. “Our friend, the Puerto Rican, suggested mobilizing the ACLU so they can transform the protest into a civil rights issue. The Afro-American Coalition, wants to contact the NAACP.”

“All this because Professor Portman won’t give in to their moronic demands?”

“See that coppery-skinned girl over by the brick walkway?”

Frankie glanced to his right where a skinny girl was inching through the crowd to secure a better vantage point. She wore a skimpy halter top and cut-off jeans.

“That’s Trish. She’s in my creative writing class,” she continued. “The sweetest creature imaginable!” None of the crowd’s hostility or belligerence had rubbed off on the lithe girl, who

was alternately giggling and chattering away with another student. For her, the demonstration resembled a street festival. ”

“Trish... she’s a barrel of laughs but a moron... an utterly benign creature, who hardly ever shows up for class.” The wedding band girl paused to clear her throat. “Trish will flunk three-quarters of her courses and be gone from school by the end of the semester, but no matter - students like her... they’re a cash cow for the college, because their education is federally funded.”

“And Overland College understands perfectly well,” Frankie conceded, “who butters their bread.”

The wedding band girl waved an index finger at the mob. “Administration will be only too happy to throw Professor Portman under the bus, when the pencil-pushing geeks cave to their demands.”

“Something’s happening!” The throng unexpectedly lurched off, en masse, toward the building entrance.

“They’re gonna occupy the dean’s office,” she speculated. “Stage a sit-in.”

The crowd quickly disappeared into the forum, snaking its way haphazardly up the stairwell to the second floor landing where administrative offices were located. With her halter top that left little to the imagination, Trish, was giggling like an adolescent and pumping a closed fist up and down even though it was unclear whether she understood what was happening. It was all great fun.

“For sure,” Frankie muttered, “the school will capitulate to all their bogus agenda.”

The first week in May, Frankie met with Professor Portman at his office. “Mr. Endicott, what can I do for you?” The older man looked haggard, his bloodshot eyes mottled with dark circles.

“Nothing,” Frankie spoke briskly. “I came to offer moral support.” In recent weeks, the minority students had coalesced into a block of angry dissidents. Refusing to participate during class discussion, they only showed up in the lecture hall when the spirit moved them. The smoldering rage was palpable.

“It would appear that the inmates are running the institution.” Professor Portman sat slouched at an odd angle, his wire-rimmed glasses drifting precariously on the bridge of his nose. “The dean of students arranged an impromptu meeting with the minority advisory committee. That’s what they call themselves... the minority advisory committee.”

“Bunch of thugs.” Frankie muttered dismissively. “When is the meeting?”

“Already took place... yesterday afternoon.” Professor Portman stared at a tattered hardcover resting on the desk. “I asked them, ‘What do you want?’”

“And?”

The older man shrugged and his lips curled in a bleak smile. “No one seemed to know. Finally one of the hooligans shouted, ‘To be treated like goddamn human beings!’”

The professor fell silent, displaying no great desire to pursue the topic. Finally, he cleared his throat. “They want to be treated like human beings.” “For the past twenty-three years I’ve taught comparative literature at community colleges. It’s not my fault that Julio Rodriguez grew up in a broken home, on welfare and food stamps.” Professor Portman chuckled darkly as though at some private joke. I could have told the minority advisory committee that and a whole lot

more, but they probably would have tied me to the chair with an electrical cord and set the building on fire.”

## II

Ten years later while vacationing in central Maine, Frankie Endicott visited the hotel bar for a nightcap before going to bed. When he returned, his wife asked, “Are you okay or do I need to call an ambulance?”

Frankie did not immediately reply. Rather, he rested on the edge of the bed with his head slumped at an odd angle. His hands which rested in his lap were trembling noticeably. “At the bar I recognized someone I hadn’t seen in a decade.”

“And who might that someone be?” His wife, Alice, sat down on the bed and draped an arm over his shoulder. A petite woman, she wore her dark hair close cropped over a pert nose and pallid skin tones.

“Harry Portman, a chairman of the English Department at Overland Community College.” He rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully. “The fall semester of my senior year, Professor Portman went AWOL... literally dropped off the face of the earth. The disappearance caused quite a commotion.”

Alice stared at him curiously. “And how is it you never mentioned any of this until now?”

“I told Harry we were touring Booth Bay Harbor for the next few days,” Frankie ignored the question altogether, “and he invited us to visit. He’s got a place not five miles from here.”

“When exactly?”

“Tomorrow after breakfast we’ll take a drive down.”

Alice’s features congealed in a perverse grin. “What was that peculiar business about dropping off the face of the earth?”

Frankie glanced at the radio clock on the night table. It was quarter to eleven. “What happened to Professor Portman... it’s a rather lengthy, convoluted story.”

His wife kissed his cheek and rose from the bed. “Go take your bath and brush your teeth. While we’re snuggling under the covers in lieu of salacious sex, you can tell me the saga of Professor Portman’s vanishing act.

In the morning the Endicotts enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at the picture window in the main dining room overlooking the scarred, granite coast. “Frankie, you never quite explained why Professor Portman ran off.” As she spoke, Alice stabbed at a wedge of scrambled egg laced with cheddar cheese, chopped scallions and ham.

“I was in the process of explaining,” Frankie countered, “but you fell asleep and began snoring rather loudly.”

The waitress approached and freshened their coffees. “President McElroy, who ran Overland Community College, was intimidated by the hard-core agitators. When Professor Portman still refused to include any third world writers in his selected readings, more demonstrations erupted.”

“Inside the classroom?”

“Both inside and elsewhere on campus. The troublemakers raised an awful stink.” Frankie sipped at his coffee then added a spoonful of sugar and stirred briskly. “In Professor

Portman's course, we were trudging through some really tough stuff. In addition to Turgenev there was a novella by Flaubert and an obscure gem by the nineteenth century Swiss writer, Ernst Zahn."

"Never heard of him," Alice noted.

Out in the bay a trawler with lobster pots stacked six feet high was lumbering into port. A braided rope was tossed to shore and secured around a pair of metal mooring posts. "Few of his writings have been translated into English."

The atmosphere in the classroom had been poisoned, but Professor Portman survived to the end of term without any overt anarchy. Grades were posted and classes emptied out for the summer recess. In the fall when classes resumed, Professor Portman was nowhere to be found.

College administrators soon discovered that the truant professor placed his townhouse on the market in late July and absconded to parts unknown. Even extended family hadn't a clue regarding his whereabouts. In early October, a senior faculty member was promoted to department head and his courses reassigned.

Many faculty at the college viewed Professor Portman's behavior as vindictive. He was lashing out at an administration unwilling to censure agitators questioning his authority. At an impromptu faculty meeting, the dean of students, Professor Blackman, shouted, "Despicable, despicable... only a petty, little man runs away from healthy dissent." Like some ritualistic incantation, Professor Blackman repeated that tiresome refrain over and over. "Despicable, despicable... the actions of a petty, little man!"

"Dropping off the face of the earth like that... most saw it as a cowardly act." Frankie watched as the ship's crew, dressed in knee-length, waterproof boots, came ashore. "Other detractors went even further, arguing that Professor Portman had a moral obligation to acknowledge minority students' demands,... that the former chairman of the English Department had always been an intellectual Luddite out of touch with contemporary trends."

"And where did you stand?" Finishing her breakfast, Alice dabbed her lips with a napkin and pushed the empty plate away.

Frankie placed a generous tip on the table next to a water glass. "Let's go find the professor," he replied, sidestepping his wife's question.

Five miles due west heading away from the ocean they turned off the highway onto a scraggly, dirt road. A hundred feet from a tidy farmhouse, a battered mailbox with PORTMAN scrawled in red acrylic paint on both sides tilted at a cockeyed angle. Harry Portman was in the front yard scattering feed to a half dozen chickens. A dumpy, white-haired woman with braided pigtails on either side of her plump face was bending over near a pair of rickety beehives.

"How do you like the new chicken coop?" Professor Portman waved an arm at a broad enclosure where a dozen hens were pecking at the gritty dirt. "I built it with hand tools from do-it-yourself plans I found on the internet."

The professor had cut lap joints into the eight-foot vertical lumber that framed the outer enclosure, securing the wood, not with nails, but sturdy nuts and bolts. The frame was then covered with chicken wire held in place by rust-proof staples. The henhouse, where the birds spent their nights, was fashioned from particle board overlaid with cedar shingles.

"They don't teach such basic skills," he chuckled, "at colleges these days."

"Unfortunately not," Frankie agreed. He gestured with his eyes at the plump, middle-aged woman showing Alice the beehives.



“My wife, Chepi. We married five years ago. She’s Micmac... originally from Newfoundland.” “Last night,” Professor Portman shifted gears, “you mentioned that you were teaching high school English.”

“Six years now.”

“And how’s that working out?”

Frankie paused long enough to allow his thoughts to congeal. “Between cell phones and cyberspace I’m fighting a losing battle.”

“I don’t suppose they read much Turgenev.”

Frankie rolled his eyes, a disparaging gesture. “No, not in this lifetime.”

“That’s a shame,” he replied with genuine regret. A scarlet Cardinal and his coffee-colored mated flitted across the lawn, weaving in and out of the slender willow trees. “And whatever came of that upheaval at the college?”

“The minority students prevailed... got everything they wanted. Now there’s even a separate degree program focusing on emerging, third-world authors.”

Professor Portman listened with a vaguely disinterested smile. Clearly, he harbored no bitterness or remorse. The turmoil and subterfuge remained buried in the far distant, prehistoric past. “And that Puerto Rican dissident, the one who stirred up all the commotion... Whatever happened to him?”

“Julio Rodriguez,” Frankie confirmed. “A few years back he brought out a slim collection of short stories through an indie publisher. The book was all the rage with the academics. Now he teaches creative writing at a university in Upstate New York.”

“Did you read the book?”

Frankie cracked a sick smile. “Neither Turgenev nor Flaubert would have been terribly impressed.”

“And why not?”

“There was little plotting, just an endless stream of four-letter words, gratuitous violence and explicit sex bordering on hard-core pornography.” In the distance he could see his wife carrying on an animated conversation with Chepi. “The main characters were nothing more than one-dimensional, talking heads.”

Frankie kicked at the dirt sending a piece of gravel skittering across the path. “Julio Rodriguez managed to parlay his lack of talent into a lucrative career.”

“In today’s literary circles,” the professor confirmed, “that would appear to be the new normal.”

For the first time since arriving, Frankie gazed at the land surrounding the professor’s property. In the far distance the meadow was peppered with wildflowers and blueberry bushes - beyond that a placid lake dappled with a border of ivory water lilies hugging the shore. It was a Pantheistic, self-contained universe, sublimely at peace with itself - an Edenesque safe haven for damaged souls.

“Your wife is Micmac?”

“The region has a population of about forty thousand.” Professor Portman shook his head sadly. “Most of the young people are losing touch with the ancestral ways, although, to her credit, Chepi can still speak her native Algonquian. Unfortunately, few of her people in this region of Maine understand the tongue.”

“What about written language?”

“Professor Portman wagged his head a second time. “In the old days they used a fairly sophisticated hieroglyphic script, but that’s gone now... lost to progress and innovation.”

“Your wife speaks English?”

“Yes, of course. Chepi went through the Indian school to the sixth grade. She can read and write well enough for practical purposes.”

*For practical purposes...* Professor Portman, the former Chairman of the Overland College English Department and scholar of nineteenth century European literature, had set up housekeeping with a woman who was only semi-literate. Frankie wondered what the esteemed professor’s former colleagues might think of that outlandish bit of incidental trivia.

At the rear of the henhouse, the professor unlatched a rectangular, shuttered window and slid the wood out of the way to gain access to the inside of the coop. Reaching into a straw-strewn box, he deftly removed a pair of golden brown eggs. “Tomorrow’s breakfast,” he announced with a droll smirk. “Think I’ll put on a pot of coffee.”

“Coffee... yes that would be nice.” Frankie watched as his former college professor lumbered off in the direction of the front porch.

Close by an outcropping of silver birch trees the two women were standing next to a top bar beehive propped up on four, split-ribbed cinder blocks. “Since the spring thaw, the bees have built eighteen bars of honey to the rear of the hive,” Chepi explained. “Brood comb is up front closer to the entrance, which is where the bees store most of their pollen to feed newborn. Winter honey reserves are further back.” She gestured with a pudgy palm toward the rear of the box.

“Where did you learn all this?” Alice pressed.

“That’s the way honeybees organize the hive.” She thought a moment. “It’s just common knowledge.” “Everything you need to know about the colony can be learned by watching the entrance.” She pointed to the half-inch opening in front of a short landing strip where half a hundred insects were helicoptering, swirling in a dizzying, choreographed ballet in broad circles. “These are newborns making their maiden flight.” “The worker that just returned with the golden saddlebags on her hind legs is an older bee who has been out foraging for nectar.”

“Is that pollen?” Alice asked.

“Yes... probably goldenrod or pepperbush. It’s hard to say exactly what’s blooming now.” Chepi angled her head closer to the entrance. “Hear that deep humming?”

“Actually, it’s quite loud,” Frankie interjected. Like jet engine heard at a considerable distance, the muffled sound was quite constant. The electric thrumming energized the air, whipping the insects into a giddy frenzy.

Chepi pushed her thick lips outward in an appreciative attitude. “Happy bees... very happy bees,” She shared this certitude, with unwavering conviction.

“And why are they so happy?” Frankie asked.

“Plenty of nectar... much clean water. Sun and warmth and a fertile queen, who lays two thousand eggs a day.”

“Two thousand!” Frankie did the math in his head. “That would grow the colony by ten to fifteen thousand bees a week. Upwards of fifty thousand a month!”

“Like I said,” Chepi picked up her original theme, “very happy bees!”

“Coffee is read.” Professor Portman was standing on the porch waving an empty coffee mug over his head. “If you would like to come in for a while.”

Such a charming couple!” They were back at the motel later that night. Alice flossed her teeth, while Frankie sat on the edge of the bathtub. “Did you see her moccasins?”

“Very intricate needlework,” Frankie noted. During their visit, Chepi wore farmer jeans and a plaid blouse. The only nod to her Native American heritage was the moccasins.

“All that intricate beadwork was done with porcupine quills. Her grandmother taught her the traditional skill.”

As Chepi explained it, in the olden days, tribes moved constantly following seasonal cycles. In March the Indians converged on the smelt spawning grounds. Following that they hunted geese and collected waterfowl eggs. In the early spring Micmacs returned to the coast in search of fresh cod and shellfish. “By Autumn most of the biting insects – the mosquitoes, black flies and midges – were killed off in the first frost so the Indians could send hunting parties into the forest in search of caribou and moose.”

“A very resourceful race!” Frankie confirmed from his vantage point on the bathtub, “The professor was telling me that Micmacs used the moose for clothing and meat much as the plains Indians did with the buffalo.”

Alice rinsed her mouth and put the plastic cup aside. “Well, this vacation has turned into quite an adventure.”

Frankie came up behind his wife, wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed the nape of her neck. It was never the over-the-top, ostentatious happenings but the unanticipated and inconsequential that ultimately brought them closer, deepening the marriage.

Eight years earlier, the day that Frankie proposed to his future wife, he drove Alice into Boston. They cruised down Massachusetts Avenue, taking a hard right onto Huntington. Two blocks up, he pulled the Toyota into a concrete parking garage. They had front row seats to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Seiji Ozawa was conducting Beethoven’s *Eighth Symphony*, the entr’acte to an opera by Verdi and Borodin’s *In the Steppes of Central Asia*.

Through his teenage years, Frankie played trumpet in the high school concert band. He owned a cheap student horn, a Holton Collegiate model. The bell was riddled with dents and dings. Half the lacquer had fallen away. He played third trumpet – the low notes mostly – and seldom practiced.

During the spring concert of his senior year the orchestra played a stripped-down version of Borodin’s, *In the Steppes of Central Asia*. Midway through the symphony, while the rest of the brass section soared in the upper register, Frankie was blasting away triple forte – a series of low c’s, bass tones that rang out like a sonic boom! The recurring eastern melody in Borodin’s symphony – it was the highlight of his abortive musical career. That haunting, repetitive refrain - it repeated over and over in the flute section like some musical elixir or soothing balm for the human soul.

When the final notes died away and Seiji Ozawa rested the baton on the conductor’s stand, Frankie glanced at his future bride. Alice blinked several times to clear the residual moistness. She had felt the music every bit as deeply. Afterward in the lobby, she chattered away effusively. The Beethoven and Verdi were wonderful, but the minor-keyed Russian symphony stole her heart. Later that night when they reach home, Frankie produced a small velvet box and stole that ephemeral organ a second time.

“Chepi... did you ever learn what the name means?”

“Fairy spirit,” Alice replied. “Just before we left the Portmans I remembered to ask.”

She returned to the bedroom. “With all the excitement of the meeting your long-lost teacher, you never told what happened in the motel lounge.”

The previous night when Professor Portman recognized his former student, the older man hustled him into a booth away from the noisy bar. “You might find this hard to believe,” Frankie confided after the initial small talk ran its course, “but I kept the anthology... the paperback we used in your final course. Every year or so, I read a few stories.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

“Well, of course, Turgenev’s *The Inn* is wonderful but the de Maupassant piece is still my favorite.”

The older man pursed his lips. “The Frenchman wrote so many excellent stories that I can’t remember which one we covered in the coursework.”

“*Boule de Suif*... the Ball of Fat.”

The professor’s eyes lit up instantaneously. “Such a wonderful tale!” He thumped Frankie energetically on the forearm and leaned across the table. “You know, scholars consider *The Necklace* the author’s most famous work, which, of course is true, but *Boule de Suif* is far and away a superior piece of prose.”

“It takes place during the war.”

“The Franco-Prussian War.” Professor Portman was back in his element talking literary fiction. “A Prussian officer won’t allow the fleeing residents of Rouen to travel to safe haven. Only when the French prostitute is pressured by the group to sleep with the enemy are they finally allowed to continue on their journey.”

“Such a sad story.”

“Yes,” the professor agreed, “especially that poignant scene near the end where Boule de Suif is crying in the coach as the other travelers ignore the broken woman, refusing to even offer her anything to eat.”

The older man fell silent. He sipped his beer. The animation sloughed away and was overlaid with a deadened grimness. “They boxed the kind-hearted woman into an untenable position.”

Professor Portman swirled what little was left of the warm beer in a circular motion before tossing the liquid down his throat. “I asked myself, ‘What would Turgenev have done with such an unwieldy plot? How would the master construct a suitable denouement?’”

Frankie sensed that his friend’s thoughts had suddenly drifted elsewhere and they were no longer discussing the de Maupassant story. The waitress approached, but Professor Portman waved her off. “In the end, when all is lost, the fictional Akim Semyonitch realizes a blessing in disguise. He has lost everything... his wife, fortune, property, but only in the conventional sense.”

The professor winked at his former student. “Misfortune offers a new beginning, an opportunity to reinvent oneself.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## The Unemployed Minimalist

Iris Murdoch was in the rear of a forty-foot greenhouse watering a row of lemon verbena, when her supervisor, Emma Thomas, approached wearing a pinched expression. “There’s a young guy out by the cash register applying for work.”

Iris lay the hose aside and dabbed her forehead with a slender wrist. The noonday sun looming directly overhead, temperatures had inched up close to a hundred degrees in the sauna-like space. “Is there a problem?”

“I dunno,” Emma hedged. “There’s something weird about him... like a spring that’s wound a bit too tight.” She thrust a clipboard with an employment application into the girl’s hands and smiled weakly. “Maybe you could take a look at him.”

Reaching out she stroked a moist petal on a bed of aromatic herbs. “Sound like you already made your decision,” Iris observed. When there was no immediate reply, the lithe girl with the almond-colored eyes and straight black hair wandered to the front of the garden store, where a gangly youth in his early twenties was leaning up against a metal display of Burpee vegetable seeds. Wearing tan slacks, and a plaid short-sleeved shirt, the job prospect was ogling a stack of ten-inch clay pots.

Ned Ogilvie was twenty-one, presently ‘between jobs’ and possessed no previous experience in gardening or plant supplies. Iris took a deep breath, reconfiguring the corners of her lips in a phony-as-a-three-dollar-bill smile before lurching forward. “You’re here for the -”

“Iris Murdoch,” he brought her up short. “I had no idea that you worked here.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m Ned... Ned Ogilvie.” His limbs moving in a dozen different directions, he lurched a step closer and Iris retreated two. “We were best friends all through middle school.”

*Best friends?* Ned Ogilvie – yes, Iris vaguely recalled a socially awkward youth with a pronounced Adam’s apple, mop of dirty blonde hair and mild case of acne. Utterly tone deaf, he sang off key in the sixth grade choir. The adolescent was pleasant enough but gruesomely unexceptional. They had nothing in common, shared no common interests and never saw each other after classes let out in the late afternoon. “Yes, I remember. You played on the varsity basketball team.”

“Sat on the bench most games,” he qualified.

Iris tapped an index finger on the application. “You attended college.”

“That didn’t go so well,” Ned said, displaying no great desire to elaborate.

“Any experience working retail?”

Ned shrugged and grinned sheepishly. Iris gestured with her eyes at a row of plastic bags stacked along the far wall. “We sell potting soil, manure, peat moss, lobster compost, and various plant fertilizers. Each product serves a different purpose. Depending on the customer’s needs, we’ve got to steer them to the proper merchandise.”

“I’m a quick study,” Ned replied a bit too eagerly.

Even if he was capable of learning the greenhouse shop talk, Iris wasn’t so sure her former schoolmate could acquire a green thumb or natural affinity for plants. A few feet away a honeybee hovered over a purplish pot of lavender. A farmer at the end of the street kept six Langstroth hives, and every morning once the sun grew strong, the bees wandered over in search

of nectar and pollen. In summer they were particularly partial to bee balm, cosmos, echinacea and snapdragons foxglove. By late August the resourceful insects moved on to zinnias, sedum, asters, witch hazel and goldenrod.

“I don’t think I made a favorable impression on the other lady,” Ned confided.

Iris cracked a reassuring smile. “Emma makes all hiring decisions. She’ll get back to you in a week or so.” She cleared her throat self-consciously. Even now six years later, Ned Ogilvie reminded her of a klutzy adolescent – like some bit player in an amateur rendition of Peter Pan. Iris turned away and headed back in the direction of the greenhouses.

“My sophomore year, I dropped out of college.”

Iris returned to where he was standing. “I figured something of the sort.”

“What happened... it’s a long, convoluted story.”

Iris had the distinct impression that Ned, who clearly had no pressing engagements, would have gone into graphic detail, but she was already falling behind with three other greenhouses of equal length that needed her attention before noontime. “I’ve really got to get back to work.” Bending closer, she reached out and shook his hand before hurrying away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following week, Emma Thomas hired a Pakistani exchange student to fill the entry-level gardener position. Azeebah – the name meant something fresh and sweet in Urdu – claimed that her family going back ten generations tilled the soil and held a deep reverence for all things living. Over the centuries the relatives, who lived north of Islamabad near the Hindu Kush region, harvested rice, wheat, oilseed, cotton, maize, coarse grains and pulses. The olive-skinned girl sported a gold ring jutting from the side of her scimitar shaped nose and profusion of jet black hair cascading down to the small of her back. Things went badly from the outset. Apparently, the affinity for all things living skipped a generation and no longer extended to flowering garden plants or vegetables.

“I should have hired the college dropout,” Emma groused.

Iris shook her head in frustration. “Too late for that.” From their vantage point next to an array of purple cone flowers, the women could see Azeebah erratically spritzing a row of sweet basil, most of the water wasted on the gravelly pavement. The Pakistani girl seemed to be killing time until her next coffee break. “After she finishes wrecking havoc,” Iris muttered, “I’ll go back and give the seedling a proper soaking.”

“Can’t you talk to her?”

“Already discussed her slipshod habits twice today. She just shrugs and gives me dirty looks.

A customer pushing a cart weighted down with bags of manure and several hanging plants eased past. “Unfortunately,” Emma lowered her voice to a faint whisper, “we can’t fire the lazy oaf.”

“Why not?”

“Girl like her will play the race card... lawyer up and sue the garden center for mental cruelty or religious discrimination.”

“For all we know,” Iris smirked. “She could be an atheist.” Two hundred feet away, Azeebah put the sprayer down and pulled a cell phone from her rear pocket. Pressing the phone to her ear, she embarked on an animated conversation in a guttural, singsong language that neither woman understood.

“In September Azeebah goes back to college and we’re rid of her.”  
“Let’s hope,” Iris shot back, “the garden center survives through the end of summer.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Iris’ mother stuck her head in the bedroom door. “Someone’s asking for you on the phone.”

“Who is it?”

“Didn’t recognize the voice,” the heavysset woman with auburn hair, replied and lumbered back down the stairs.

“Don’t suppose I got the job.” Ned Ogilvie’s voice was surprisingly chipper given the subject matter.

“How’d you get my telephone number?” Iris parried the observation.

“Phone book, but that’s not why I called.” “I’ve been in a bit of a funk lately and meeting you at the Garden Center was the one bright spot in my otherwise abysmal universe.”

“I already have a steady boyfriend,” Iris lied.

The notion of a romantic dalliance with anyone as off the wall as Ned Ogilvie was more than she could handle. The man obviously had personal issues. Iris preferred the bedrock predictability of vegetables and fragrant blossoms. They grew, flowered, bore fruit and perfumed the air. They fed bees and the birds and nurtured the human soul. The Ned Ogilvies of the world meant well. They had the best of intentions but ultimately upset the ecological balance.

“I don’t want a date,” Ned protested. “Nothing of the sort!”

“Then what do you want?”

“An emotionally unencumbered soul to bounce ideas off... a neutral third party, a sounding board.”

Iris hadn’t a clue what he was alluding to. “Could you be a bit more specific?”

“There was this incident over the weekend,” Ned confided. “My father called a plumber, because we weren’t getting any hot water in the upstairs shower. An older guy with a goatee and hairy nose shows up, and it took him less than an hour to fix the problem. After he left, I had the craziest urge call you.”

“To tell me your shower was fixed?”

“No, of course not.” Ned spoke stridently as though she had somehow missed the obvious. “To tell you what I had learned about my *own* predicament from watching the plumber.”

A hazy image of Azeebah flitted across Iris’ mind, accompanied by a throbbing sensation in her temples. A decidedly bad day was getting worse by the minute. She would take a couple heavy-duty Tylenol capsules, a warm bath and go to bed directly after the evening meal. “I’ve had a rough day, Ned and I’m hanging up now.”

“Can we be friends?”

“Yes, no... maybe. Let me think about it.” She hung up the phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday morning an hour into the workday, Iris pulled Azeebah aside. “What did you eat for breakfast?”

The girl with the habitually sour expression eyed her distrustfully. “Hard boiled eggs.”

“What else?”

“Don’t remember,” she replied tersely.

“Think real hard.” There was no mistaking the sarcasm in Iris’ tone. “What did you have with your eggs?”

“English muffins, a slice of honey ham, some yogurt and a cup of coffee.”

“A nice, well-balanced meal.” She held up a plastic container filled to the brim with a pastel blue powder. “Every weekend we feed the plants a water-soluble fertilizer. Twenty percent nitrogen, potash and phosphate.” She carefully replaced the cover over the plant food. “Every week I remind you. Every week you forget.”

“That’s not true,” the girl fumed indignantly. “I’m fertilizing the plants right now, even as we speak.”

Iris took the bulky, two-gallon watering can from the girl’s hands and began drizzling water on the greenhouse floor. “The powder turns the liquid pale blue. This water is perfectly clear... colorless.” She handed the girl the empty can. “Go back to the potting shed and add a tablespoon of plant food for each gallon of water and start over.”

“You’re a bully,” Azeebah sulked.

“Do as I said or leave now and don’t come back.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After her tête-à-tête with the uncooperative Pakistani, Iris wallowed in a rotten mood for the remainder of the day. When she returned home in the late afternoon, she settled in the kitchen with a cup of chai laced with cardamom, ginger root and cloves. Her mother wandered into the room lugging a basket full of freshly washed laundry and began sorting and folding towels. “How was your day?”

Iris rolled her eyes. “Don’t ask.”

Mr. Murdoch, a stocky man with a bristly, salt-and-pepper moustache, stuck his balding head in the doorway. “Any of that blueberry crumb cake left?”

“Over there by the flour container,” his wife replied.

The man helped himself to a generous portion and settled in at the table alongside his daughter. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Rough day at work.” Mrs. Murdoch spared her daughter the bother of answering the question. Matching a pair of men’s socks, she tucked them together. “How many applicants did you interview for that position at the garden center?”

Iris ran a taut finger around the circumference of the mug. “Eight people ranging from sixteen to sixty-five applied for the job, and anyone of them would have been better than the woman we hired.”

“Ice cream,” Mr. Murdoch blurted, rising to his feet. “This crumb cake would taste even better with a dab of vanilla ice cream.” At the refrigerator he cracked open the freezer section and removed a round carton.

“Eight applicants,” Mrs. Murdoch noted, returning to the previous conversation. “You’d have been better off hedging your bets and hiring the Ogilvie boy.”

Iris, who had taken a swig of herbal tea almost choked on the steamy beverage. “What did you say?” She lowered the drink, pushing the cup away at arm’s length.



Mrs. Murdoch ran the heel of her hand over a pair of frilly, French-cut panties. “For the life of me, I don’t understand why anyone would waste good money on such ridiculously skimpy bottoms. You work at a garden center not a bordello.”

Mr. Murdoch winced but never looked up from his treat.

“What you said a moment ago,” Iris leaned across the table, wagging a teaspoon in her mother’s face. “That remark about the Ogilvie boy... I never mentioned his name in this house. Not once!”

“Yes, Ned... such a pleasant fellow. He was here earlier today. In fact, you just missed him.”

Maneuvering the last few soggy crumbs of desert onto a fork, Mr. Murdoch looked up. “Was that the young man leaving as I came home from the park?”

“We spent a solid forty-five minutes discussing his rather colorful life.” Mrs. Murdoch paused to locate the wayward mate to one of her husband’s athletic socks. She tended to match footwear not by brand name but by dinginess and level of decrepitude. “What a fascinating character!”

“Yes, he seemed awfully nice.” Mr. Murdoch rinsed his plate in the sink and left the room.

*This couldn’t be happening. Iris felt her brain go numb.*

“I never invited him,” Iris grouse. “What was he doing here?”

“Simple enough. Ned had a dentist appointment at Dr. Friedman’s office and, when he realized that the medical building was less than a mile from here, he made an impromptu visit.” Having finished with the towels, underwear, washcloths and socks, the woman pivoted to face her daughter. “Told me a condensed version of his life story, soup to nuts.”

\* \* \* \* \*

While anticipating Iris’ return from the garden center, Ned Ogilvie told the middle-aged woman how, six months earlier in a college philosophy course, he stumbled across the Indian mystic, Krishnamurti. The Hindu sage taught him that it was no measure of health to be adjusted to a profoundly sick society. Truth was a pathless land. All ideologies were idiotic.

“What malarkey!” Iris seethed.

“That’s not the half of it!” Her mother confirmed. “The Hindu sage preached that no one could live in a spiritual vacuum without human relationships. A person could withdraw into the mountains, become a monk, but he would still be intimately tied to humanity. No one lives in isolation.” Mrs. Murdoch shook her head emphatically as though confirming the unassailable efficacy of what she was sharing, then leaned back in her chair and showed no inclination to continue with her narrative.

“What else?” Iris demanded. Her voice, which was a bit too strident, startled the middle-aged woman.

“Oh, that’s when Ned decided to finish out the semester and leave the university.” Mrs. Murdoch picked up the laundry basket, wedging it against the side of her hip. “I’m going upstairs to put these things away.”

When her mother was gone, Iris’ thoughts reverted back to her Pakistani nemesis. The beginning of the week, she would draft up a disciplinary letter describing a multitude of indiscretions committed over the past month. She would mail the letter directly from the post

office, certified mail, return receipt requested. In the event that the garden center fired her, there was no question Azeebah was properly informed of problems in the workplace. Without a paper trail, the girl could apply for unemployment and spend the dog days of Autumn cooling her olive-skinned toes in the Atlantic Ocean, collecting a generous paycheck courtesy of Uncle Sam.

Later that night Iris asked, "What else did Ned tell you?"

"Nothing much." Mrs. Murdoch was in the bathroom flossing her teeth. "When Ned was at his lowest ebb after dropping out of school, he worried that he might become a nihilist, but then nihilists reject God and all moral principles."

"Life is essentially meaningless," Iris interjected.

"For sure! But Molotov cocktails and anarchy weren't his cup of tea. The boy wasn't so much a nihilist as..." Mrs. Murdoch snapped her fingers fruitlessly searching for the *mot juste*.

"A work in progress," her daughter offered.

"Yes, that's it! Since abandoning formal education, he's become a minimalist, but I'm sure Ned's already told you."

Iris sat down on the edge of the bathtub. "No, not really."

Tossing a length of the crinkled floss into the trash, Mrs. Murdoch reached for a toothbrush. "Ned claims that minimalism is a tool to rid oneself of life's excesses in favor of focusing on what's really important... finding happiness, freedom and fulfillment."

"But he enjoys none of those things!" Iris exploded petulantly.

Removing the toothbrush from her mouth, Mrs. Murdoch spat a mound of gooeey suds into the sink. She ran a tongue over her freshly polished teeth, dried her hands on a towel and finally turned to face her daughter. "You talk about Ned Ogilvie as though he was a lost soul, but it wasn't that long ago you experienced a similar metaphysical meltdown."

The linguistic tongue-twister caught her daughter off guard. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"In kindergarten...", she elucidated, "that god-awful Sunday school fiasco."

\* \* \* \* \*

Late September fifteen years earlier, Iris was comfortably settling into third grade at Saint John's parochial school. She adored all her teachers with, perhaps, the exception of Sister Helena, a strict Cistercian, who handled religious education. On this crisp autumnal morning, the stodgy nun chose to tell the Old Testament chronicle of Abraham and Sarah. As Sister Helena explained it, Abraham's wife, Sarah was unable to conceive, and so he took her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, as a second wife.

"Teacher, teacher... I don't understand." A dark-haired girl with pigtails three rows down from Sister Helena's desk was waving a skinny arm frenetically in the air.

"What don't you understand, Iris?"

"Abraham had two wives?"

"It's just a story," Sister Helena replied in a peremptory monotone. "Don't overthink the details." "Back then," she added for good measure, "polygamy was no big deal. A man could have as many wives as he could financially support."

Sister Helena suffered from an extreme overbite, the lower jaw jutting out precariously in front of a stubby nose. As she stared down at her, hands on hips in an attitude of simmering aggravation, the nun reminded Iris of a canine gargoyle, a ghoulish, stone-faced caricature of

sweetness and light. “Class is almost over and we don’t want to unnecessarily waste time, so let’s move on.”

Problem was, Iris’ eight year-old, preadolescent brain couldn’t process the information. Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and the siblings – their recklessly erratic behavior reminded her of a poorly scripted soap opera, an amalgam of the Three Stooges and Marx Brothers with a Biblical twist. “Abraham and Sarah,” Iris retrieved the tenuous thread of her previous thoughts, “sent Hagar and Ishmael out into the burning desert of Beersheba... to die.”

“Well, yes but it didn’t turn out so badly and that’s all that really matters.” Waving a handful of papers up overhead, Sister Helena effectively put an end to the young girl’s moral protest. “We have coloring sheets celebrating the miraculous event. Break out your crayons and color until the bell rings.”

Iris submissively removed a small box from the drawer under her desk and organized the bright assortment of crayons. Wedging a thick, black crayon in the palm of her hand, she wrapped the fingers in a clenched fist. Then she brought the wax stick down with such brutal force that the nub splintered and broke away. The girl smeared a grimy blackness indiscriminately over the coloring sheet tearing the surface to shreds.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” Sister Helena bellowed. “What’s the matter with you?”

The class fell deathly silent. A minute passed, the tension deepening incrementally. Iris began to make a fretful whimpering sound which expanded into a full-blown anxiety attack. The distraught child was quickly whisked away to the parish rectory where, half an hour later, the Murdochs collected their daughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

*It was no measure of health to be adjusted to a profoundly sick society.*

An hour later while luxuriating under the bedcovers suspended in that gossamer nether world between fading wakefulness and full-blown sleep, Iris recalled the Krishnamurti quote. Ned Ogilvie was an eccentric kook, a bona fide social misfit. True enough but, in her own, dark nights of the soul, how often had Iris shared similar misgivings? The unfortunate incident with Sister Helena at Saint John’s Sunday school was a classic example. Humanity was dysfunctional. Life sometimes felt like a benign disease. It didn’t kill the patient outright but neither did it foster good health.

The American dream was going up in smoke with little hope of rediscovering simpler, kinder, gentler ways. Mayberry – that fictional North Carolina community with its hodgepodge of hokey, old fashion virtues was little more than an idyllic pipedream.

Iris Murdoch was no Mensa student, but she understood perfectly well that the Greenville Garden Center was a safe haven, a refuge from autocratic, Cistercian nuns and their dystopian dogma. Earlier in the week, she whipped up a small tub of tarragon butter. While dicing the herbs, she slipped an emerald leaf under her tongue and savored the explosion of peppery licorice. Azeebah, the girl whose name meant something fresh and sweet in Urdu, would wreck endless havoc with her stubborn willfulness but the humble tarragon would always stay true to its unassuming nature

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday afternoon Iris chatted briefly with Emma Thomas and the determination to fire Azeebah was finalized. They would cut her loose by end of week. Once the decision was made, Iris' attitude toward the intractable pest softened and the simmering rage evaporated.

"I need to send a certified letter," Iris pushed an envelope across the counter at the post office.

"Need a return receipt?"

"What's the difference?" Iris already knew the answer but wanted to confirm the obvious.

"The recipient must sign. Once we get their signature, they are given the letter and we mail you back a formal receipt with their John Henry." "It's a bit more costly," she added as an afterthought.

Iris nodded her head up and down. "Return receipt, please."

The postal worker slipped the paperwork across the counter and pointed at a desk in the corner of the room. "Fill out the form and return to my window."

\* \* \* \* \*

The middle of the week Ned called. "Meet me over at the sports field." The Darrow Athletic Center three blocks down from Iris' home was a massive complex with four baseball diamonds sandwiching a soccer field large enough to accommodate three separate teams playing simultaneously.

"What's this about?"

"Nothing I care to discuss over the phone."

When Iris arrived, she located Ned lounging on the grass behind home plate. "Game just got underway," he announced and patted the grass encouraging her to sit next to him.

The first batter flailed wildly at three pitches in a row nowhere near the strike zone. The second batter hit a weak dribbler off the end of his bat that weaved drunkenly inside the chalk line. When the third baseman hurled the ball wide of the bag, the runner scooted down to second base. Ned, who hadn't said a word since the game began, pointed at the third batter, a gangly, disjointed youth with bulging biceps. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I don't follow you," Iris replied.

"Skolnick Plumbing," Ned elaborated, indicating the logo on the back of the batter's crimson jersey. "Myron Skolnick was the plumber who fixed the heating problem at our house last week."

The gangly youth took a ferocious swing, but his bat was far out in front of the pitch. "Yes, I remember something of the sort."

"Mr. Skolnick ... this elderly Jewish guy with scoliosis and a funny accent. I took him downstairs in the basement where the furnace was located and, after he poked about a bit, asked him what he thought the problem might be. He says, 'In life everything's a process of elimination. Could be any one of three things, boychik.'"

The plumber explained that a metal coil inside the furnace might be damaged and, if that was the case, it was a fairly simple fix. Then Myron Slotnick, a man with pronounced curvature of the spine, pointed at a black knob on the left side of the furnace directly above the transformer - a second mixing valve that controlled water temperature and another simple fix. There was also a separate unit controlling water temperature on the upstairs shower. It was a process of elimination. Not this, not this, not this. Thaaaaat!

Ned wagged his head from side to side gleefully. “What if that’s all there really is to life? It’s every person’s manifest destiny to find reasonable solutions and fix what’s broke.”

“Well, which of the three was it?”

“The plumber opened the hot water in the kitchen sink and let it gush. The temperature turned scalding hot so the problem had nothing to do with either the furnace coils or mixing valve.”

“Then it had to be a defective shower unit.”

“He went upstairs, changed the brass part in five minutes and everything was back to normal. Then Mr. Skolnick packed up his van, wrote out the bill and said, ‘Nice meeting you boychik.’”

“A regular comedian.” Iris ducked as a foul ball sailed over the backstop, disappearing into a patch of weeds in a wooded area.

“What if that’s all there really is to life,” Ned repeated laconically. “Not this, not this, not this. Thaaaat!” Ned ran a hand through his hair. “Well, I’ve bored you long enough. I’m sure you’ve got better things to do with your time than listen to my neurotic gibberish.”

He made an effort to rise, but Iris pulled him back down on the warm grass. “I’m in no great hurry. Let’s watch a few more innings.”

The baseball game was a complete rout. Connors Dry Cleaning destroyed Slotnick Plumbing thirteen to one. As parents were collecting their children and heading for the parking lot, Iris leaned closer to Ned. “Did you find work?”

“No, not yet.”

Over by the dugout, the gangly youth with the ferociously ineffectual swing lifted a leg over the seat of his three-speed bike and pedaled off into the fading light. “There may be another job opening up at the garden center and I could get you in.”

“Yes, I’d appreciate that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Today will be your last day at the garden center,” Iris announced in a soft monotone devoid of malice.

“You’re firing me?”

“Yes. If you prefer to leave now, we will pay you through to the end of the day.”

Azeebah tilted her head to one side. Her dark eyes compressing to narrow slits, the sinewy lips curled in a defiant sneer. “You hate me because of the color of my skin.”

“I’m resentful because you don’t follow directions or learn from past mistakes.” Just the other day, Iris discovered five trays of dahlias thrown in a heap alongside the trash bin. The withered plants had been left to rot – to crack, crumble and putrefy until they collectively gave up the ghost.

“I’m not a legal citizen, but I know my rights.” An exasperated snorting sound erupted from the Pakistani woman’s hooked nose as she rose to her feet. “You can’t fire someone without just cause. I’ll file for unemployment.”

Iris waved a cautionary finger in the humid, late-summer air. “Do as you please. The Greenville Garden Center will contest your claim.”

“On what grounds?”

“I spoke to you on numerous occasions about problems in the workplace, even sent you several letters to that effect.”

Azeebah's eyes brightened noticeably and a toxic smile deepened. "Never received anything of the sort!"

"Really?"

"No, not a single letter," she announced with glib conviction, "so it's your word against mine."

Drumming her fingers briefly on the desktop, Iris gazed into the far distance where the wall and ceiling converged before reaching into her breast pocket and extracting a crumpled pile of papers. "These receipts from the post office suggest otherwise."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What're you doing out here?" Ned, who had been searching for Iris all over the Garden Center, finally tracked her down in the potting shed where she was hunkered down with a bag of potting soil. "I'm rooting these branches in a special medium."

"Growing fruit trees from clippings?"

Iris nodded. Since coming to work at the Garden Center, Ned had proven himself reliable and, in his own words, 'a quick study'. Iris harbored no illusions that the new hire would win the horticulturist-of-the-year award any time soon, but he was resourceful and the staff appreciated his enthusiasm and off-beat sense of humor.

"How's it work?"

Tamping the top layer with her fingertips, Iris added a heaping scoop of medium to a clay pot. "The light-textured soil improves aeration and promotes root growth in seedlings." "The mix contains Sphagnum peat moss, fine sand for drainage, perlite and earthworm casings." She set the clay pot aside and reached for a plastic jar. "This special powder speeds root growth on ornamentals, fruit trees and berries."

"Sounds rather complicated."

"Actually it's quite simple. Cut, dip and plant... that's all you do." Iris demonstrated by misting the bottom half of a clipping with a spray bottle, dipping the dampened stem in the powdery mix and inserting the clipping several inches deep in the clay pot.

"Did you need me for something?" Iris asked before continuing on to the next pot.

"Those raised beds and cold frames out by the shrubs... do they sell well?"

"We sold a set yesterday and three more over the weekend." Iris dipped another tender stalk into the rooting powder and the wood emerged with a silvery gloss of gray powder. "A lot of older gardeners with arthritis and hip replacements prefer them, because they don't have to kneel or bend down."

"The raised beds go for two hundred bucks."

"Fancier ones," Iris qualified, "are considerably more expensive."

Ned pawed at the gravel with a steel-toed work boot. "I could make one for a fraction of the cost."

"Really?" Iris wasn't so easily convinced. "Cedar is rather expensive and no other wood is nearly as economical or versatile."

"What about traditional framing lumber...redwood, hemlock, pine or spruce?"

"Too thick." Using the head of a 16-penny nail, Iris created a small hole in the center of the clay pot and buried the bottom portion of the twig in the moist medium. "It's a great idea in theory, but not terribly practical."

“What if,” Ned argued, “premium grade two-by-fours were ripped down the center to produce thinner boards?”

Iris stopped what she was doing and laid the pot aside. “When were you planning to make one?”

“Already did... last weekend. The prototype is lying in the back of my car, if you care to look.”

Iris followed him out to the parking lot. Ned gingerly dragged a four-foot frame from the rear of his car and laid it flat on the ground. “It’s perfectly constructed,” she mused out loud, “but not nearly as attractive as the cedar.”

A second time, Ned rummaged around in the back of his car until he located a walnut-colored board. “What if the finished product looked like this?”

Iris ran her fingertips over the satiny patina. “Same wood?” Ned nodded in the affirmative, “What’s the finish?”

“Tung oil mixed with an antique walnut stain. The slurry was wet-sanded to two-twenty grit.” Ned tossed the glossy board onto the floor of the car. “So what’s the verdict?”

Iris took a step closer, draping her arm around his sunburned neck. Lifting up on her toes, she planted a generous kiss on Ned’s cheek. Easing back down, she let the arm remain. “I think we should discuss future possibilities, both personal and professional, over dinner.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## A Dutiful Wife

Following her husband’s death from a coronary embolism, Granny Baxter tumbled down a bottomless well of heartache and hurt. The family took her for counseling with a Dr. Wasserman. Three months later the woman was no better off than when she started therapy. Seventeen year-old Ralph accompanied his parents to the consultation in late August. From the outset Ralph disliked the sinewy, sallow faced psychiatrist, who had a penchant for twenty-five cent, clinical terms that stretched a block-and-a-half long.

“Mrs. Baxter suffers from involuntional melancholia,” Dr. Wasserman spoke in a rather dry, detached monotone. “Her depression is both endogenous and of idiopathic origin.” He went on to explain that involuntional melancholia was a condition affecting mainly elderly people. “Symptoms include marked anxiety, moodiness, despondency, agitation, restlessness and anorexia.” The doctor rattled off the terms in a glib, offhand manner as though reading from a manual of clinical abnormalities.

When the doctor finally stopped speaking, Ralph’s mother asked, “Idiopathic... what does that mean?”

“Of no known origin,” the doctor clarified. “We don’t know why the woman feels distraught.”

“Her husband died,” Mr. Baxter interjected. “She lost her soul mate. They were inseparable... married nearly half a century.”

The psychiatrist either missed the undercurrent of sarcasm or chose to ignore it. “Yes, but that was over a year ago and she’s still overwhelmed with grief.”

“What do you suggest?” Mrs. Baxter interjected. “We can’t go on like this. She isn’t eating properly, neglects her physical appearance... refuses to go out in public or visit friends.”

Dr. Wasserman removed his wire-rimmed bifocals and massaged the bridge of his nose with a thumb and forefinger. Rising from the leather chair, he went to the doorway and placed a hand on the wall switch. “There is a component of the brain that manages moods much like an electrical switch controls the flow of electricity.”

He depressed the switch and the room went dark. “The mind has to oversee a multiplicity of moods and dispositions – happiness, despair, contentment, rage, humor, grief...” As he enumerated the endless possibilities, the doctor toggled the switch up and down. “Sometimes a switch short circuits... gets stuck in the off position,” he said with a dramatic flourish, killing the lights, “and the person is unable to break free of dark moods.”

“What then?” Ralph ventured.

The psychiatrist returned to his desk. “Since the antidepressants we’ve tried over the past few months haven’t produced any appreciable results, you might want to consider ECT... electroconvulsive therapy.”

Mr. Baxter’s brow furrowed. “She’s seventy years old!”

Dr. Wasserman’s features remaining blandly impassive. “when all else fails, it’s a viable option,” he countered. “Sometimes the *only* option.”

“How much electricity are we talking?” Ralph’s mother spoke very slowly as though each syllable weighed her tongue down.

Dr. Wasserman made a pitter-patter sound, drumming his fingertips on the edge of the mahogany desk. “A hundred-eighty to four hundred sixty volts are fired through the brain for a tenth of a second up to six seconds, either from temple to temple, which is a bilateral approach or from front to back of one side of the head.” Having said this he flash a supercilious smile just as a nasally voice erupted over the intercom alerting the doctor that his next patient had arrived. Rising, he accompanied them to the door. “Give it some thought.”

When the Baxters returned home, Ralph’s younger sister, Faye, who had accompanied them to the meeting took her brother aside. “That screwball Dr. Wasserman looks to be about as old as dad.”

“What of it?”

“The shrink’s mother would be about the same age as Granny Baxter.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m wondering if he would be so willing to juice the old geezer ... strap his mother down in an electric chair, place a metal cap on her head and fry her freakin’ brains.”

“They use a bed not an electric chair,” Ralph brought his sister up short, “and nobody gets their brains fried.”

“Yeah well, I seen a movie where they stuff the patient’s mouths with gauze pads so their teeth don’t crack when they flip the stupid switch!”

*Idiopathic, endogenous, melancholia, involuntional* – Dr. Wasserman spoke a grandiose foreign language that hinted at salvation but ultimately guaranteed nothing. Maybe zapping Granny Baxter’s, seventy-year-old brain with four hundred volts of electricity for six solid



seconds – to Faye, that seemed like an eternity - would set things right in the world, or maybe it would turn her gray matter into Swiss cheese.

For his part, Mr. Baxter carried on in a manner neither Ralph nor his sister had ever witnessed before. Their usually mild mannered father kicked over the wastepaper basket, pounded his fist on the dining room table so hard the walls shook and even used a four-letter word when discussing his feeling about the eminent doctor. In the end, the parents decided to cancel the next scheduled office visit and manage Granny Baxter’s misery on their own.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Grandma’s remarrying. She hasn’t picked the date yet, but wants to tie the knot within the next few weeks.” Ralph Baxter stepped over the threshold into his sister’s bedroom and gently closed the door behind him. Six months had passed since the final visit with Dr. Wasserman.

Faye was lying on the bed with her nose buried in a history book. Her fifth grade class was preparing for a test on the Indian Wars during the colonial period. Several pitched battles were fought just over the Massachusetts state line in nearby Rhode Island. In 1675 a band of Wampanoag warriors raided the border settlement of Swansea, massacring the English settlers, setting off the brutal King Phillip’s War.

“Granny Baxter’s been a widow five years now,” Faye observed finally poking her nose out from behind the book. “She’s in her seventies, dresses in black and goes nowhere except to church and the supermarket.” Faye turned her attention back to the Indian atrocities.

Ralph brushed a sweatshirt off a chair and sat down heavily. His expression remained somber. The boy had always fashioned himself something of a comedian, a practical joker, but what he mistook for droll, cutting-edge humor usually fell short of the mark. He had a tin ear for the ridiculous – the silly, slapstick, goofy aspect of the human comedy. Humor was never his strong suit. He *always* loused up the punch lines.

A minute passed and, after learning that King Phillip, the Wampanoag chief, had been drawn and quartered with his head mounted on a stake, Faye laid the book aside a second time. “Why are you still in my room?” She was only half way through the chapter and still had a math project that needed attention.

“Granny Baxter said, ‘I was always a dutiful wife’”, Ralph repeated his grandmother’s word’s verbatim. “‘Forty-five years I cooked, cleaned and raised the children. Now, in my twilight years, an opportunity presents itself and I won’t be denied.’”

Faye was becoming frightened. If this was a joke run amuck, a carefully staged prank played out at her unwitting expense, Ralph was doing a masterful job concealing his end game. “That word... what does it mean?”

“Which one?”

“Dutiful.”

“It means conscientiously or obediently fulfilling one’s duty. .. pursuing a task or commitment motivated by moral or legal obligation.”

Faye rose and went to where her brother was hunched over with his head cupped in his hands. “Who exactly is Granny Baxter marrying?”

Never bothering to lift his head, Ralph directed his remarks at the floor. “When I stopped by unannounced for a surprise visit, there was this bald-headed guy sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a cup of coffee in his plaid underwear.”

It took Faye a good minute to digest the information. "Do Mom and Dad know?"

Her brother wagged a shaggy mop of brownish hair from side to side. "Nothing... They know nothing at all."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Ralph went away, Faye found it impossible to concentrate on much of anything except her impetuous, love-struck grandmother, the Doña Juanita of the geriatric set. Tossing the history book on a bedside table, she located her brother in the kitchen sifting granola into a small bowl. She waited while he drizzled a film of light cream over the cereal. "What else?" she demanded.

Ralph stirred the grains with a spoon and watched as the ivory cream bled into the oats. Her brother had the strangest, atavistic rituals! Carrying the bowl to the table, he tentatively tasted the food before adding another dollop of cream. "Granny Baxter's giddy as an infatuated teenager" "Not just happy," he qualified, "but the happiest I've ever seen her."

"But she's been morbidly depressed since Grandpa Jack died."

"Not anymore," Ralph insisted. "Mom's birthday is the week after next."

"What's that got to do with anything?" His sister was still trying to come to terms with her grandmother's romantic escapade.

"He'll be joining us... the new boy friend, lover, lecher, fiancé or whatever the hell he is."

"Cripes! Hadn't thought of that." Faye sat down across from her brother. The cereal bowl was empty and Ralph was finessing the last few crumbs of granola onto the spoon.

Ralph brought the bowl to the sink, rinsed it under warm water and laid it on the rack to dry. "From what I gather, they're already living together."

\* \* \* \* \*

The following Saturday Ralph and his sister visited their grandmother. They found her in the back yard raking leaves. Throwing the tool aside, she hugged and kissed the grandchildren. "I want you to meet a special friend," she said addressing Faye. Over by the rock garden an elderly gentleman in baggy corduroy pants and a flannel shirt was stuffing yard waste into a plastic bag.

"Bernie Mangerelli," the older man lumbered forward on rickety legs and pumped the girl's hand energetically. He had weather-beaten features, limpid, pale blue eyes and a kindly, unassuming manner. "We're tidying things up."

"Enough cleaning for today!" Granny Baxter stripped her garden gloves off, stuffing them in a pocket. "We'll take a break." She led the way into the house and set a pot of coffee on to boil.

"You're retired?" Ralph queried as his grandmother laid out the cups and saucers.

"Ten years now," Bernie rubbed his jaw ruminatively. "Sold women's underwear... unmentionables, along with lingerie throughout the Midwestern states."

Ralph thought the joke in decidedly poor taste, until he realized that the man with the hairy earlobes and silvery moustache was speaking in earnest.

"It was a small, regional distributorship," he added as Granny Baxter set out a pound cake and began pouring the coffee. "Nothing grandiose... just enough of a living for a confirmed bachelor to muddle his way through the better part of a lifetime."

“Did he tell you how we met?” Granny Baxter slid into a seat next to the older man. “Bernie and I were chums, best friends through middle school,” she continued.

“Then high school sweethearts,” Bernie interjected.

Granny Baxter sipped at her coffee. “Of course, that was light years before I ever laid eyes on your grandfather, may he rest in peace.” A satisfied contentment arched the corners of her lips at an upward angle as she reflected on decades of being a ‘dutiful’ wife.

Granny Baxter shifted in her seat and for a fraction of a moment, Ralph caught sight of his grandmother’s mottled hand beneath the kitchen table clutching Bernie Mangerelli’s pudgy fist. Was the gesture silly or poignant? Ralph couldn’t be sure.

That they were already sleeping together was fairly obvious, but something magical was present in the easygoing, low-keyed communion of spirits. It seemed as though the ardent couple had clearly picked up where they left off forty years earlier, their fervent first-love-revisited resembling a vintage wine that only mellows with age. All Ralph’s preconceptions about romance, the birds and the bees, had been blown to smithereens.

“Midway through our senior year,” a somber earnest wormed its way into Granny Baxter’s voice, “Bernie’s father was killed in a hit-and-run accident and his mother relocated the family to live with relatives in Kansas, two thousand miles away.” She swallowed and brushed a strand of silver-gray hair from her eyes. “That move put the end of our fairy-tale romance.”

“A year ago,” Bernie picked up the narrative, “I heard about your grandmother from a mutual friend and travelled east to see if we couldn’t resurrect what was lost due to an unfortunate roll of the dice.”

“You want to marry my grandmother,” Faye blurted, not so much as a question but as an unassailable statement of fact.

“Yes, as soon as possible,” Bernie replied.

Later that evening, Granny Baxter went to visit her son and daughter-in-law. The visit was unannounced. She arrived alone. “I was reacquainted with an old friend,” the older woman spoke in an unhurried, clipped tone, choosing her words with frugal efficiency. “We’ve fallen in love and plan to marry.” She paused to let the news settle in.

The Baxters, who were sitting on the living room sofa with their hands folded in their laps, smiled weakly. “This all seems rather rash,” her son muttered and glanced briefly at his spouse for moral support.

“Bernie and I intend to wed by the end of the month... honeymoon in Europe,” she ignored his son’s previous remark, rushing roughshod on to the next topic. “Neither one of us has ever been out of the country so it seemed like a lovely way to begin our new life together.”

“Begin a new life together,” Mrs. Baxter repeated dully. “When do we get to meet this fellow?”

“I’ll bring my new husband, Bernie, to your birthday party.”

“He’s not your husband yet,” her daughter-in-law corrected

“No, that’s true,” Granny Baxter replied with brittle certitude. “I should have said ‘future’ husband. I misspoke... it was a semantic *faux pas*, nothing more.”

Granny Baxter hastily rose to her feet. “Are there any questions?”

“This is all rather sudden,” Mr. Baxter mumbled as he trailed his mother into the foyer.

Granny Baxter’s malleable features cycled through a range of emotions – joy, grief, hope, despair – before finally settling on wistful nostalgia. “If you were dying of thirst in the desert, what would you prefer... a diamond or glass of water?” In response to her son’s dumbfound

expression Granny Baxter added, “It’s the economist, Adam Smith’s, famous diamond-water paradox.”

“I’m not familiar with any such thing,” Mr. Baxter mumbled.

“Although water is more useful in terms of survival, we always place a higher value of precious the gem.” The older woman nodded several times, affirming the inherent candor of what she was saying. “A diamond isn’t essential for living, but it’s valued more than a cup of water... except of course when you’ve got nothing to drink in the middle of a scorching sea of sand.”

You’re not making any Sense!” Mr. Baxter sputtered.

“Five years I’ve been alone.” The woman swung the front door ajar and stepped out on the landing. “I’ve mourned long enough. Now it’s time to live again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Bernie Mangerelli was nothing like Grandpa Jack. A stocky, heavy-set man with a ruddy complexion, Granny Baxter’s first husband was a gregarious, slap-you-on-the-back talkaholic. Grandpa Jack was brash and full of fun with a risqué and, at times, foul-mouthed sense of humor. He was a nice guy.

Bernie Mangerelli, on the other hand, was soft-spoken and unassuming. The man who sold unmentionables could sit quietly on the back porch nursing a cup of coffee and watching a pair of cardinals pecking thistle seeds from the bird feeder for the better part of an hour without losing interest or feeling the need to do much of anything. Thrust in a similar situation, Grandpa Jack, the type-A personality and overachiever, would be jumping out of his skin.

As he observed the newlyweds, Ralph sensed that his grandmother cherished Mr. Mangerelli slightly more than her first husband, but only because he was absurdly sentimental and doting. Grandpa Jack, the real estate mogul, possessed the impetuous swagger and penache of a self-made man. Bernie Mangerelli displayed the self-effacing humility of a guy who hawked women’s underwear for forty, hardscrabble years. Like an equal opportunity employer who agrees not to discriminate against anyone because of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, physical or mental disability, Granny Baxter embraced each husband with his own, unique, virtues, peccadilloes and eccentricities. To her credit, she proved a ‘dutiful’ wife to each, both the living and the dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Following the honeymoon – the newlyweds toured Paris, Italy and Southern Germany with a brief trip across the channel to London – Granny Baxter and Bernie flew home and settled into their new life together. They returned with the cheeky bravura of a couple of adventuresome, geriatric trailblazers. The following week Ralph’s father went to spend time with his mother but returned an hour later.

“What happened?” his wife pressed.

“Nothing I care to discuss,” he muttered gruffly. Faye, who was sitting in the kitchen nibbling at a plate of scrambled eggs, put her fork down and cocked an attentive ear to one side.

Mrs. Baxter followed her husband as he trudged upstairs and disappeared into the bedroom, closing the door discretely behind her.

“Geez!” Sliding her chair away from the table, the girl crept upstairs into the den, where she strategically placed an ear against the far wall which abutted the master bedroom. In a rage, Mr. Baxter was talking rapid fire, running all his words together in an unintelligible heap. The man kept repeating the phrase, ‘diamond-water paradox’ over and over again, and Faye came to understand that Grandpa Jack was the glittery jewel, Bernie Mangerelli the glass of water.

“The unmitigated gall of that man!” Mr. Baxter seethed.

A moment of silence ensued. “What will you do, Stewart?”

Mr. Baxter lowered his voice and mumbled something resembling a threat, but Faye could only pick out an isolated word or two. “Yes, I understand,” Mrs. Baxter was beginning to sound equally agitated, “but, under the circumstances, what recourse do we have? From a practical standpoint, what can a person do?” Faye’s father launched into another indecipherable rant, catapulting the young girl’s adolescent brain into an opaque fog.

Bang! Mr. Baxter smashed his fist on the bureau, causing his daughter to leap away from the wall. “I’m not going back there... won’t return to that house until my mother comes to her senses.”

Faye hunted down her brother in the back yard near the shed, where Ralph was adjusting the brakes on his ten-speed bike. She told him about their father’s abortive trip to Granny Baxter’s. Reaching for a quarter-inch wrench Ralph loosened a locknut screw securing the rubber brake pad and slid the rectangular section in line with the wheel’s metal frame. “What else... what else did Dad say?”

“I dunno... he was talking crazy.”

Ralph scowled and his features dissolved in a constipated expression. Balling his hand into a tight fist, he rapped the knuckles two, three times on the side of his skull. “Think hard. What else did they discuss?”

“I told you everything,” Faye insisted, “except for a couple of weird phrases that didn’t hardly make no sense... stupid stuff.”

“What stupid stuff?” Ralph tightened the nut fixing the pad permanently in place.

Faye massaged an earlobe meditatively. “Gold digger... ne’er-do-well. He shouted that Granny Baxter’s new husband was little more than a good-for-nothing gold digger and ne’er-do-well.”

Ralph flipped the bike right-side up and gingerly pumped the brakes several times. “That’s nice!” Faye wasn’t sure if her brother was referring to the refurbished brakes or her father’s commentary on the human condition. “After lunch,” he added, “we’ll take a trip to see Granny Baxter and her gold digger, ne’er-do-well second husband but don’t say anything to the folks.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Around four in the afternoon, Ralph and Faye arrived at their grandmother’s home, where the older woman was laying out an assortment of pastry supplies on the kitchen table. “I’m baking a German apple strudel.” She went to the cupboard, removed a plaid apron and handed it to the girl. “You kids can help me prepare the fruit filling.”

The woman pointed to a bowl of glistening raisins. “I’m already soaking the fruit in rum to spice things up.” She handed a paring knife to Ralph. “Peel and core the apples,” she instructed, indicating four Granny Smith apples, “while your sister and I get the dough ready.”

“Why green apples?” Ralph asked.

“The tart flavor balances the sweetness of the pastry.” Granny Baxter waved a taut index finger melodramatically overhead. “One thing we almost forgot...” She removed a golden lemon from the vegetable bin in the refrigerator and handed it to Faye. “Grate a tablespoon of zest then add the rind and juice to the mix.”

Granny Baxter had a clever trick ensuring that the pastry dough would stretch paper-thin without tearing. She placed a small pot of water on the stove to boil and, once the water was heated, emptied the liquid into the sink and dried the metal with a towel. After the flour, egg and water had been mixed into a gooey mass she transferred the freshly-made dough into the heated pot and replaced the cover. “The dry heat,” she explained, “will make the dough more elastic and pliable, while we prepare the rest of the ingredients.”

In a separate bowl they mixed the vanilla extract, brown sugar, rum-soaked raisins and diced apples into a sticky-sweet lump. Granny Baxter melted a half stick of butter, handed it to Faye along with a small pastry brush, then placed several sheets of parchment paper on the table. “Coat those sheets with butter.” When Faye gave her a quizzical look, she added, “We’re going to thin the dough with a rolling pin. The butter allows us to peel the pastry crust away from the parchment paper without tearing.” Setting the oven to three-seventy-five, she returned to the table.

While the women were preparing the crust, Ralph went off in search of Bernie. His newly-minted grandfather was in the living room reading a hardcover book, which he set aside as soon as Ralph appeared.

“My father had a fight with Grandma,” he said in a frank, no-nonsense tone. “Do you have any idea what it was about?”

“Yes, but shouldn’t you be going directly to the source?”

“I came to you,” he returned bluntly, “because I figured neither one would tell me much of anything.” Ralph ran an index finger over the glossy book cover. “*The Custom of the Country* by Edith Wharton... is it any good?”

Bernie shook his head energetically. “A literary classic... not read much anymore but a classic nonetheless.” “Mrs. Wharton came from one of the wealthiest families in New York. That was back in the early nineteen hundreds. Her father was a millionaire... a multi-millionaire.” Bernie clearly much preferred talking about fictional works than present realities.

“What’s the book about?”

“Rich people and how they make themselves miserable, chasing after things that aren’t essential.”

Ralph opened the cover and flipped through a half dozen pages. “You’re not going to tell me why Granny Baxter and my father are feuding?”

“No, it’s not my place,” Bernie countered affably. Rising to his feet, he added, “Let’s go see what the womenfolk are up to.”

Before they had gone a handful of steps Bernie changed his mind. “We can join them in a moment. There’s something I want to show you.” The older man led the way into the back yard where an arbor fashioned from pressure-treated lumber was overrun with a thick mantle of clematis, the rich profusion of purple and eggshell-white blossoms having long since vanished with the November frost.

Behind the wooden structure an aged apple tree leaned at a precipitous angle. A huge limbed rested on the topmost beam and it almost seemed as though the sturdy arbor was keeping

the tree in its decrepitude from collapsing altogether. Bernie plucked an apple from a low-hanging limb. With a penknife that he pulled from his pocket he cut a slice. "Taste this."

Ralph tasted the fruit, a perfect balance between sweet and sharp highlights. "That's awfully tasty!"

"Yes, but do you know the story behind the tree?" Ralph shrugged. "Grandpa Jack planted it shortly after they married and moved here, but the uncooperative tree never bore fruit... a blizzard of ivory blossoms every spring but never any apples."

"According to your grandmother," Bernie continued, "Grandpa Jack was far too busy with his business dealings to properly prune the tree so it grew helter-skelter in all the wrong directions." "Not a single decent crop in all those years!" he repeated emphatically. "Your grandfather wanted to take a chain saw to it, but your grandmother was adamant that the apple tree be left alone."

Ralph's eyes brightened. "The fruit for the German strudel came from the tree?"

"Yes, a meager crop but more than enough for one delightful dessert." Bernie peered up into the topmost branches. "That vertical new growth has to all be trimmed away as well as those scraggly limbs sloping at a downward angle. They drain nourishment away from the delicate fruit."

"You prune fruit trees?"

"Your grandmother," the older man sidestepped the question, "is a devout Catholic." "She claims the half-dead, barren apple tree is a miracle... a blessing from the Almighty."

"And what do you say?"

Bernie scratched the back of his neck then pawed at the ground with the toe of his shoe. "Traveling salesmen, as a rule, don't spend much time contemplating theological abstractions, but I'd have to agree with your grandmother on this one."

"She went through a bad time after Grandpa Jack died."

"So I heard."

*On, off. On, off. On, off. On, off.* A fleeting image of Dr. Wasserman flipping the light switch flitted through Ralph's mind. "You were Granny Baxter's salvation."

"I came at an opportune time, that's all," Bernie said, distancing himself from personal heroics. "In some ways your grandmother was *my* salvation. She rescued me from a tedious and tiresome old age." Having said this, Bernie pivoted on his heels and headed back into the house.

In the kitchen Granny Baxter was bent over the open stove, brushing melted butter over the strudel crust, while the room was filling with an intoxicating fruity aroma. "Just another ten minutes or so." She eased the oven door shut and drifted over to the sink where Bernie had begun clearing the counter.

"Dad came home in a foul mood earlier this morning," Faye picked up where her brother left off. "What did you fight about?"

"An unfortunate and regrettable incident." Granny Baxter grabbed a dish towel and began patting a freshly washed mixing bowl dry. "Nothing I care to talk about."

The young girl would not be denied. "He called Bernie a gold digger and ne'er-do-well."

Her grandmother winced and her eyebrows fluttered briskly. "Since he was in diapers," Granny Baxter spoke with a droll, biting humor, "your father had a fatal flaw." She paused to better organize her thoughts. "Your dad would lose his temper and spout all sorts of emotional gibberish. Five minutes later he'd feel contrite, but always too late. He never meant the half of what he said, but it was always too late."

Granny Baxter took a deep breath, expelling the air in a thin stream through tightly compressed lips. “Poor Bernie!” She waved a hand theatrically in her spouse’s direction. “That wonderful man absorbed the bulk of your father’s misguided abuse.”

Bernie, who was listening attentively, glanced at the children. “No offense taken,” he responded in an upbeat, jovial tone. “During my working years, I suffered a whole lot worse.”

“Those awful things your father said... nothing could be further from the truth.” She rested a hand on Bernie’s shoulder. “My husband’s a resourceful man, accustomed to living within his modest means.”

The German strudel emerged from the oven lightly browned to perfection.

Granny Baxter brought a carton of vanilla ice cream to the table. “I need a favor,” she said as she began slicing the loaf.

“Yes?” Ralph placed a forkful of desert on his tongue. All the delicious flavors – the lemon, rum-soaked raisins, cinnamon, nutmeg, brown sugar and tart apples – had married, melded together and yet each remained distinct.

“Grandpa Jack,” Granny Baxter continued with a dispassionate intensity, “was a bit of a braggart and insufferable self-promoter, but he could also be absurdly generous.” Her eyes swept right to left, including both children. “Before he died, he put aside a large sum of money in a trust fund for your future educations.”

“Your father got the mistaken notion that, since Bernie reentered my life, all that changed.” The older woman scooped a mound of ice cream from the carton and deposited it on Faye’s plate. “Tell your father that we intend to honor Grandpa Jack’s wishes. The trust will remain intact.”

Ralph stared at his empty plate. “Dad’s gonna feel guilty as hell.”

“And want to rush over here,” Faye interjected, anticipating her brother’s train of thought, “to apologize for the horrible things he said about Grandpa Bernie.”

“Apologies accepted in advance,” Bernie quipped with a congenial grin.

“No need for him to rush,” Granny Baxter observed. “Let you father wallow in self-loathing and recrimination for another day or so.” She dabbed her lips with a napkin. “Anyone want seconds?”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## A Heart Yes, a Waltz No

Dr. Stanley Gilford, chief cardiologist at Our Lady of Fatima Hospital, was not some mind-in-the-gutter degenerate. He never rented dirty movies - hadn’t bought a Playboy or Penthouse since his college days. More to the point, there were scads of desirable woman - nurses and technicians - who he saw daily at the hospital; he felt no compulsion to undress them with his eyes, to imagine lewd and lascivious trysts. And yet, here he was sitting at the counter of the Central Ave Diner in Pawtucket, Rhode Island indulging his sexual fantasies. In this latest



installment, Ruby, the head waitress, was flitting about the restaurant dressed in black, see-through panties and tasseled pasties. The previous week she sported a dominatrix's leather and chains. Since first coming to the Pawtucket diner six months earlier, he discovered that the erotic possibilities and permutations were endless. Still, it was not his fault. The waitress was a sorceress; she had put a hex on him.

"The usual?" Ruby eased Dr. Gilford's mug across the counter, filling it with steaming, black coffee. Less than two feet away behind the counter, her hazel eyes never rose above his Adam's apple, as though the physical effort to lift her head might provoke an hernia. Her pearly skin was flawless, the blond hair gathered at the nape with a hardwood comb. Midriff spilling over skintight jeans, the woman - she had to be at least thirty-five - exuded a flinty, hardscrabble loveliness undefiled by age.

"Yes, thank you." Dr. Gilford had a triple bypass scheduled at 10 a.m. then a round of consultations. Afterwards, he would go back to the office to see private patients - a brutal and demanding regimen. For the next fifteen minutes though, he could thoroughly relax and enjoy his meal. What intrigued him most about the tight-lipped blond was the contrast between her perfunctory way with customers - they could collectively and without regard to race, creed or color, all go straight to Hell - and the great care she paid to the food.

Ring! The cook had a small bell which he tapped with the palm of his hand each time an order was ready. The breakfasts - two ham and egg specials, a stack of blueberry pancakes and order of poached - for the truckers crammed into the end booth were done. Snatching the first plate, she ran the rest up the inner curve of her left arm well past the elbow. Ring! Ring!

"Who's got poached?" She set the plates on the table. As she turned back in the direction of the grill, a heavysset man with a walrus moustache grabbed her arm and muttered something under his breath.

"Only in your dreams, Romeo," she replied. The heavysset man chuckled and released his grip.

At the cash register, Ruby made change and set a family of five up near the door. A toddler upended a glass of milk. She cleared the mess and went back to the counter where an elderly man with a face like a dried prune complained that his 'eggs-over-easy' were runny. "Ain't gonna eat this soggy crap!" The old man pressed his wrinkled lips tightly together and twisted his scrawny neck to one side. Ruby hustled the plate back to the cook, who cracked two more eggs and threw them on the grill.

Ring! At the end booth, the heavysset fellow tried to revive his tasteless repartee, and the family of five finished their meal, leaving a huge mess. Sneering at no one in particular, the elderly man wolfed down his eggs and hurried off without leaving a tip.

"More coffee?" Ruby asked.

"Yes, thank you." She filled the cup. "I'm Stan."

Ruby gazed over his head at the row of paper plates describing the luncheon specials tacked to the far wall. "Got a job?"

"I'm a doctor."

"What type?"

"Cardiac." She stared at him dully. "A heart surgeon," Dr. Gilford clarified.

"Oh, yeah." She went off to check the food on the grill.

The product of liberal-minded Episcopalians, Stanley Gilford grew up in a tony section of Connecticut, peopled by bankers, lawyers, computer executives and the like. Blue bloods - well connected and, except for a few Johnny-come-latelies - backed by 'old' money. After high school, Stan chose the Brown University medical program. He met his future wife, Bernice, while interning at Rhode Island Hospital. They were divorced five years now.

Bernice, the love of his life. In later years, Bernice, the trial lawyer who let the courtroom invade their bedroom - who openly acknowledged the brain's preeminence over the heart and all other, ephemeral organs. In the summer of 1991, a physician in the cardiac unit of Fatima Hospital, Dr. Nesbitt, was sued for malpractice by the widow of a former patient. An improbable twist of fate, Stan's wife was spearheading the prosecution. "Perhaps you could remove yourself from the Nesbitt case?" Stan said. By this time their marriage was characterized by polite formalities.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Dr. Nesbitt's a colleague."

"I've nothing against the man," she said frigidly. "It's strictly a legal thing."

Something went awry in his brain - synapses misfiring, imploding and setting off multiple chain reactions. Neurological fission. Stan headed for the hall closet where they stored the 36-inch Pullman suitcase. "I'll pack my bags and be gone in the morning. But don't take it personal - it's a doctor thing."

During the trial, the prosecution created the appearance of wrongdoing and incompetence. Dr. Nesbitt's flawless record counted for nothing as did the fact that the deceased had been steadily losing ground to obstructive pulmonary disease long before coming under the physician's care.

*The appearance of wrongdoing.*

Through legal artifice, smoke and mirrors, Bernice persuaded the jurors to see Dr. Nesbitt as a bumbling fool. The doctor's physical appearance only bolstered the unflattering portrait. Tall and ungainly, his pilly, brown socks trailed around his ankles. The socks you noticed; the IQ of 130 and encyclopedic, medical mind were not so readily apparent. In the end, the jury found in favor of the widow. The heart doctor protested the decision and lost again on appeal.

Limbo: the abode of just and innocent souls on the border of hell.

When Stanley Gilford was a child, a pet spaniel got hit by a car. After the accident, the dog limped downstairs to the basement where it lay listlessly on a throw rug for the next six months. Its spirit and hind limbs sufficiently mended, the animal finally hobble outdoors. A year after the divorce and his friend's trial, Stan Gilford - his six months having long since expired - was still cowering on a metaphorical throw rug in the basement of his mind. Drifting aimlessly in a hellish limbo, he stopped attending church, let his membership in the tennis club lapse, swore off women altogether.

Dr. Gilford was away at a medical convention the following week - a new laser treatment for cardiac stenosis. When he returned to the Central Ave Diner, another woman, a chain-smoking redhead, was serving the food. "Where's Ruby?"

"Sinus infection. Won't be back until the end of the week."

For the next three days, Dr. Gilford ate all his meals at the hospital cafeteria. The next time he visited the diner, Ruby was back behind the counter. Dr. Gilford took a seat next to a well-dressed man in his sixties reading the Providence Journal Bulletin. Like weeds on a bone-

dry, August lawn, twin tufts of hair sprouted from the old man's nostrils. "Water's the thing, you know," the older man said, turning to Dr. Gilford with an easy smile.

"How's that?"

The man thumped the newspaper with a stubby index finger. "Politicians worry about air quality, global warming, holes in the ozone, hazardous waste. But talk to any self-respecting ecologist and they'll bend your ear about the shortage of potable water in third-world countries. Am I right or what?"

Dr. Gilford didn't have to consider the answer. "Yes, that's true." At the grill, the cook was mutilating an order of bacon. He always cooked the bacon too long, and it came away with the consistency of cardboard. The fact that they favored extra-thin strips didn't help matters.

"Desalinization," the old man said. "A great idea in theory, but those underdeveloped countries that need the technology most can least afford it."

Dr. Gilford agreed implicitly with his point of view. What future was there in desalination when people living in coastal areas of Africa and Asia were dying of endemic diseases such as cholera and typhus - both infectious organisms easily spread by contaminated drinking water?

The older man grinned broadly, wiped his mouth with a napkin and fumbled in his pants pocket for a wallet. "Money's on the counter, Ruby." With a half-dozen orders bubbling on the grill, the waitress didn't bother to look up. Grabbing a topcoat, the old man nodded pleasantly and headed out the door.

Twenty minutes passed. Except for a booth full of townies dawdling over tepid coffee, the Central Ave Diner was empty. "Planning a vacation?" Ruby leaned over the counter with her pretty face no more than an inch from his ear.

Dr. Gilford looked up from the travel brochure he had spread on the formica surface. "Copper Canyon. It's in the hill country of northern Mexico." He handed the brochure to Ruby. On the cover was a picture of a steep canyon with a waterfall cascading over rocky ledges down to a boulder-strewn riverbed. "In September, I'm going on a 5-day backpacking trip with a friend from the hospital."

"White water rafting and horseback rides into traditional, Tarahumara Indian country," Ruby read in a gravelly monotone. She flipped the brochure over. There were pictures of dark-skinned Indians, a Catholic mission constructed in adobe style, and hikers trekking through a verdant valley. "Not taking the wife?"

"I'm divorced."

Ruby bent so far over the counter, her breasts were almost in his face. Dr. Gilford could smell her musky perfume - a pungent scent reminiscent of English Leather. She held her left hand up, splaying the unadorned fingers. "Welcome to the lonely hearts club."

Dr. Gilford retrieved the pamphlet. "Not a very exclusive organization according to statistics. Would you like to go out some time?"

Ruby's features went slack. "You mean a date?" He shook his head up and down. The waitress let out a loud belly laugh, a cross between a guffaw and a whooping, straight-from-the-gut howl. Several of the customers looked up in mild surprise.

Dr. Gilford turned the color of fried kielbasa. "A simple yes or no would have sufficed."

Her face remained neutral. "Let me think about it and I'll get back to you."

He handed her his business card. "You can catch me at the office anytime after noon most days."

She thrust the card into her jeans pocket without looking at it and plucked a pencil from behind her ear. "So, what'll it be - besides a romantic interlude, that is?"

Had he totally lost his mind? Cruising down route 95 toward the hospital, Dr. Gilford felt his face flush hotly for a second time in less than an hour. He should have simply shown her the brochure of Copper Canyon and let it go at that. Not that there was any predicament, no reason for self-flagellation. The waitress' erotic good looks taken aside, Dr. Gilford understood perfectly well his own, hidden agenda: Ruby's appeal resided in the fact that, in virtually every respect - physical, emotional, intellectual and aesthetic - she was the exact opposite of his ex-wife.

He needed a strategy to recreate a semblance of order in his out of control, personal life. The Central Ave Diner was off-limits. A Newport Creamery two miles up the road served breakfast; if he didn't want to eat at the hospital cafeteria, he could stop there. As an additional precaution, he would instruct his receptionist to run interference; when Ruby called and was rebuffed a half dozen times, she'd get the not-so-subtle message. The burning pressure, like acid reflux, began to seep out of his chest. He felt restored, more his disciplined, purposeful self.

Around 11p.m. as he was preparing for bed, the phone rang. It was Ruby. "How'd you get my home phone?"

"It was on the card underneath the office number," Ruby replied. "Still want to go out with me?"

He did not even pause to consider the question. "I'd like that very much," he replied meekly.

"Here are the ground rules: if you come back to the diner, don't expect preferential treatment. I'll serve your number two specials and refill your coffee mug once at no additional charge. When you're finished eating, you pay the bill and go about your business."

Dr. Gilford placed a hand over his eyes and squeezed hard. "OK."

"I've had two cesarean sections and breast fed both my kids; with all the wear and tear, these knockers ain't holding up so well. Just so there won't be any illusions, I ain't half as nice to look at in the buff as I am with clothes on." "Not that my naked body should be of any interest to you," she added quickly, "cause I don't put out. Not on the first date, not on the twentieth."

His head was spinning. He sat down on the edge of the bed. "You're losing me."

"You don't get no sex without marrying me."

Dr. Gilford considered the double negative and was almost tempted to tell her what the sentence actually meant. "I asked you for a date, not a commitment for life." He shifted the phone to the other ear. "What are you doing Friday night?"

When he hung up the phone, Dr. Gilford was ecstatic, euphoric - out of his mind with joyful expectation; which is to say, he was more confused than ever. He went to bed but couldn't sleep. Ruby's disembodied voice - as abrasive and bruising as 50-grit, garnet sandpaper - kept floating back to him. Dr. Gilford climbed out of bed and wandered into the kitchen. On the oak table was the brochure from Copper Canyon. Next to a picture of several Indians, their skin so dark it might have been rubbed with black earth from the rain forest, was the following:

*"Tata Dios made us as we are. We have only been as you see us... there is no devil here. Only when people do bad things does He (God) get angry. We make much beer and dance much,*

*in order that he may remain content; but when people talk much, and go around fighting, then He gets angry and does not give us rain."*

Tarahumara Shaman 1893

Dr. Gilford desperately needed to visit a place where the devil hadn't made any appreciable inroads; where poverty, in the modern sense, was a relatively new phenomena; where people drank *tesgüino*, corn beer, and danced to appease the Gods so there would be sufficient rain for a plentiful harvest. An amorphous lump welled up in his throat and began to throb like a vestigial heart.

At forty-two, only now was he beginning - at the most crude and fundamental level - to understand certain basic truths, truths which had eluded him for the better part of a lifetime. He went back to bed and, almost immediately, fell into a thoroughly restful sleep.

On Saturday night Dr. Gilford drove to the working class, Mount Pleasant section of Providence past rows of three-decker tenements. The homes were older, some in disrepair. Not a bad neighborhood; certainly not the best.

"Hey, this here's a swell car!" Ruby noted as they drove toward the downtown district. She ran her hand over the Lexus' leather upholstery. "A heck of a lot nicer than my bag of bolts."

They ate dinner at the Biltmore. Following the caesar salad, the waiter returned with two cut glass bowls of lemon sorbet. "To cleanse the palette," the waiter explained in response to Ruby's puzzled expression and hurried back to the kitchen.

Ruby tasted the tart ice and put her spoon down. She wore a tight-fitting green dress with heels that showed her supple legs to good advantage. On anyone else, the outfit might have seemed tawdry, but the absence of makeup or jewelry threw the focus on her haughty good looks. No pretense or posturing - just a woman on the front side of middle-age perfectly at ease in her lovely body. Stan sensed that, if not a single waiter or guest were present in the dining room of the Providence Biltmore, Ruby would still cross the floor with the same blithe flair. By whatever name - *duende*, *panache*, *esprit* - she possessed it in ample supply.

After the meal, they went into the lounge for drinks. "You're obviously not dating me for my brains," Ruby said, her voice as dry as the wine she was sipping, "and the prospect of sex doesn't loom large on the horizon. So what's really happening here?"

Dr. Gilford thought a moment then gestured with his eyes at a youngish woman, a brunette talking energetically with a man of about the same age. The woman was impeccably dressed in a blue serge suit with pearl earrings and a matching pendent on a braided, silver chain. "That executive type sitting at the table in the corner - what do you make of her?"

"A classy dame with more than a few bucks in the bank."

"Or an upwardly mobile, workaholic - opinionated, self-serving, opportunistic. A woman who won't give you the right time of day unless she's billing at 150 bucks an hour."

Ruby leaned forward over the narrow table, kissed him on the ear and whispered, "You sure are a strange one!" As she pulled away, she let her lips brush the length of his cheek.

Dr. Gilford lifted his glass and stared at the transparent liquid without drinking. "I saw a five year-old boy this morning with a hole in his heart."

The boy had come to the office with both parents. He was underweight and sat listlessly while Dr. Gilford applied the gray blood pressure cuff and squeezed the rubber ball. With a wheezing sound the influx of air swelled the cuff into a turgid mass, and he stalked the thready pulse as it surged at 160 and skittered into oblivion at 110. He touched the flat disc to the narrow chest and studied the percussive sounds. There was the systolic contraction followed by the less intense diastolic release. And now a third sound - whispery soft, ominous. The raspy backflow of oxygenated blood spraying in the wrong direction; the fractured music of nature gone haywire.

An operation to repair the faulty valve had been scheduled in March but abruptly cancelled. Blood chemistries showed evidence of possible kidney damage. "When your son's condition stabilizes," he counseled the anxious parents, "we'll consider less invasive options." Dr. Nesbitt's bitter lesson was still fresh in his mind; too prudent to risk killing the child while repairing the damaged valve, Dr. Gilford finessed the pallid boy into a purgatory of chronic illness.

When his condition stabilizes ...

"A human heart is not suppose to beat in three-four time," he confided, sipping his gin and tonic. "Wrong cadence! A waltz yes, a heart no."

As they walked back to the parking garage, Dr. Gilford wrapped his hand around Ruby's waist, and her hips drifted close to his body. When they reached her apartment he kissed her on the lips. She kept her mouth closed and moved away almost immediately. "The sorbet taken aside, I'd a swell time."

She was already halfway up the stairs before he could think to ask, "Can I call you again?"

"Sure, I'd like that." Ruby went straight into the building without looking back.

On Monday morning, Dr. Gilford told the receptionist, "Any calls from Ruby, put her through immediately; if I'm already on the phone, let me know she's holding."

"But I thought - "

"Disregard," Dr. Gilford blustered, waving his hand abruptly in the air, "any previous instruction to the contrary and put the woman through."

The receptionist eyed him curiously. "Whatever you wish."

Later that night he called Ruby at home. "What are you doing this weekend?" She said she was free. "This time you choose."

"Dersu Usala," shereplied almost before the last words left his mouth.

"How's that?"

"It's a Russian foreign film playing at the Avon. One week only. I'd like to see it."

Dr. Gilford had expected something a bit more mundane, blue collar. "Yes, well that's fine."

"The film's in subtitles so you might want to bring reading glasses."

A waitress with a chastity belt and penchant for foreign flicks. The relationship was getting weirder by the minute. "I don't wear reading glasses." Dr. Gilford hung up the phone.

Friday afternoon, Dr. Gilford picked Ruby up around six. Arriving a half hour early, the line in front of the ticket window already snaked up the street to the end of the block. "It's a cult film about a Mongolian hunter, who leads an expedition into the Siberian wilderness," Ruby

said. "They bring it back every so many years. The crowds keep growing. Mostly Brown students and the hoity-toity, East Side set."

In front of them was a skinny girl with blue hair and a silver hoop in her nose. "You've seen the movie before?" Dr. Gilford asked.

"Three times."

The light went on in the ticket window and the line surged forward. "With your ex-husband?"

Ruby shook her head violently. "His idea of a culturally uplifting experience is sipping boilermakers at the Willow Street Tap. She reached out, grabbed his hand and gave it a playful squeeze. "My ex-husband is a Central Falls wise guy. The less said the better."

A Central Falls wise guy. Dr. Gilford was familiar with the type. The mental cretins with five pounds of gold jewelry dangling from their necks and wrists; tough guys and tough guy wannabes who punctuated every sentence with a certain, ubiquitous four-letter word and gesticulated wildly when they talked - a barbaric, sign language for the morally impaired. As a rule, they didn't spend much time on College Hill or frequent the Avon Cinema.

"After the divorce," Ruby interrupted his reveries, "weekends were the hardest. A waitress took sick, I was thankful to pull an extra shift just not to be alone. One Memorial Day weekend, I came up here and was wandering the streets like some half-crazed bag lady, and what do you think was featured at the Avon Cinema?" She pointed at the marquee.

Throughout his sheltered, college years, Stan had been dismissive of 'working class', blue-collar types - the depth of their feelings, sincerity and conviction - as if human virtue were a function of culture rather than innate character. Listening to Ruby's frank confession left him feeling like an elitist snob. An emotional fraud. Again the line heaved and contracted as people ahead trickled into the theater. "Funny thing is," Ruby added, "I don't choose the movies. They choose me."

The skinny girl with the hoop in her nose turned fully around. Her sneakers were so frayed they looked like they had been fed through a food processor. She wore no bra and her nipples caused the material of her tie-dyed T-shirt to pucker suggestively. "I don't follow you," Stan said.

"I only come up here when I'm lonely or depressed. Whatever's featured, that's what I get to see. French, Russian, Chinese, South American, German. I never even bother to read the reviews in advance."

They reached the ticket booth and Dr. Gilford pushed the money through the window. Ruby was in a pleasant enough mood, but once the film began, she pushed his hand away, fixed her eyes on the screen and withdrew into an emotional shell. Near the end of the film, when the Mongolian hunter lost his eyesight and was forced to give up his exotic lifestyle, Dr. Gilford glanced over at Ruby. She was sitting in the dark with tears streaming down her face, a wad of Kleenex clutched in her hand.

"If you're interested," Ruby noted as they were making their way back to the car, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show is playing over at the Cable Car Cinema the week after next."

"Another film I'm not familiar with."

"It's a spoof on horror films. This drag queen who..." Ruby pulled up abruptly. "There really isn't much of a plot."

Driving down Atwells Avenue in the direction of Mount Pleasant, Ruby asked Stanley if he was religious. "My parents are Episcopalians," Dr. Gilford answered, "but, since my divorce

and some unpleasantries leading up to it, I haven't been too sure of much of anything in the spiritual realm."

Ruby pursed her bottom lip. "That's too bad!"

Bernice never went to church, and only spoke of religion derisively. Dr. Gilford was of the opinion that his ex-wife would willingly consecrate her soul to a Wiccan priestess - a hermaphrodite, even! - but never a deity in the likeness of man. "Are you going to stop seeing me because I'm a failed Christian?"

"That's your business." Ruby glanced briefly at him and looked away. There was no arm-twisting or sense of urgency in her tone. "I'm Methodist. You can attend services with me some Sunday if you ever get the urge."

Dr. Gilford downshifted as he approached the lights at the bottom of Mount Pleasant Avenue. When they pulled up in front of the apartment, Ruby kissed him discreetly, then pushed him away at arms length. "About that little boy with the heart condition, what are his odds surviving surgery?"

"Fifty-fifty. And that's a generous assessment."

"If he's going to eventually become an invalid and die, wouldn't it be better to operate?"

"Perhaps, but I'm not willing to take that risk."

"You could let the parents decide."

"Ultimately, it's a medical decision."

"If it were my child, I'd want a say."

For such a normally sullen, close-lipped woman, Dr. Gilford marvelled at her persistence. "I'm opting for the lesser of two evils."

Ruby laughed but it was not a particularly pleasant sound. "Lesser of two evils for who?" As Dr. Gilford turned the engine over and pulled away from the curb, his normally steady, surgeon's hands were visibly shaking.

A month later Dr. Gilford took inventory and this is what he knew about the woman. Once a week on Saturdays, Ruby took a hot bath, lacing the water with Calgon bath beads. She read the latest issue of *Woman's World* from cover to cover, while soaking in the blue suds. She owned an old-fashion, 3-speed bike with a straw basket fastened to the handlebars. During the spring and early fall, she strapped the bike to the trunk of her rusting, 2001 Camaro and drove to the East Bay bike path where she pedaled several miles along the ocean through Riverside all the way to Barrington before turning back. On the way out she stopped for raisin rum ice cream; on the return trip she ate New York style wieners with all the fixings. This is what made her happy.

In 1996, Ruby enrolled in night school and passed her GED. "The math was agony! Away from the cash register, I ain't much good with numbers." She never spoke of her ex-husband and hardly reacted when Stan tried to draw her out. Like the dodo bird and saber tooth tiger, the man had long since ceased to exist.

Stan told her about Dr. Nesbitt's trial. Ruby shrugged and said, "Rhode Island's the smallest state in the union, but, more people sue each other here than in all the others but one."

"A sobering statistic," Dr. Gilford replied. "What's the other state?"

"I don't remember."

Ruby joined a women's support group but lost interest after only the third session. "A bunch of bitchy broads bellyaching about their sorry lives. I needed that like a second asshole."

Dr. Gilford, who had no specialized training in proctology, shook his head in agreement.



Regarding the prospects for sex, he was like a ship dead in the water with a blown engine and defective rudder. Ruby wasn't frigid; she had no phobias or neurotic blocks. She just didn't put out without a gold band on her finger. Yet, after fifteen years of being rubbed raw by Bernice's double-entendres and acidic humor, a female who spoke in broken sentences and required minimal emotional maintenance was a refreshing change.

Only by a queer process of elimination, could Dr. Gilford comprehend the woman. Ruby was not a snob. She wasn't particularly outgoing but, then, neither was she withdrawn. Innuendo and petty mind games were not a part of her emotional repertoire. She was neither profound nor flagrantly stupid. She was not particularly generous or kind-hearted, a quality which was balanced by a certain tough-minded fairness. Ruby could be crass and unapologetic. She was far from perfect. She had no fatal flaws.

Stan and Ruby were sitting in the Dunkin' Donuts on Mineral Spring Avenue in North Providence. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a crumpled envelope and slid it across the table toward her. Inside was the brochure from Copper Canyon plus a round-trip ticket from Northwest Airlines. "Tuesday, Dr. Spiegelman's mother fell down a flight of stairs and broke her hip. He's canceling out. Gave me his ticket gratis and said to find someone else who could appreciate the subtleties of Mayan culture."

"You can't be serious?" The rough-cut edginess in her voice that he originally mistook for a character defect had emerged as one of Ruby's most endearing virtues. By way of a reply, Dr. Gilford inched the packet across the table. "We've got nothing in common," she continued fretfully. "Why are you doing this?"

"I feel good when we spend time together," Stan said softly. "And when I haven't seen you for a few days, I don't feel so good anymore. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand that."

"You know the ground rules."

Powdered sugar crusted on his fingertips as Stan reached into the envelope and retrieved a piece of paper stuck at the bottom - a brochure for a 4-star hotel in Chihuahua City. Dr. Gilford flattened the brochure on the table and indicated a column of print indented and flared in phosphorescent, gold ink:

'Our honeymoon suite includes king size bed, Jacuzzi, complimentary bottle of champagne and bouquet of freshly cut flowers. Along with the customary amenities, on the day following their arrival the newlyweds will receive a full breakfast served in the rose garden where ...'

"Is this some sick joke?" Ruby muttered, never lifting her eyes from the printed matter.

Stan rose and helped her on with her jacket. "The plane leaves Saturday at noon. Let me know in a day or so what you decide. And for what it's worth, I'm in love with you."

They drove back to Providence in silence. When he pulled up at the curb, Stan said, "About the little boy with the heart trouble, I told the parents their options."

"And?"

"He's scheduled for surgery the first week in November." Stan shook his head grimly. "Now I've got to find an anesthesiologist - questionable kidneys notwithstanding - willing to put him under."

Ruby sat in the darkness, head lowered and tilted to one side. The acrid scent of marigolds floated into the car on a warm breeze. Five minutes passed without a word. Finally she looked up. "Animals don't scare me, at least, not the four-legged kind. Except for merry-go-rounds, I've never been on a horse."

"A minor technicality. Does this mean - "

"Don't," she hissed, "go reading anything more into it." Her gruff tactlessness was tempered with more than a hint of bluster.

Dr. Gilford waited until she was safely in the apartment before putting the car in gear.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Circus Maximus

"Hazelton's back!" The voice on the far end of the cell phone belonged to Rodger Ephraim, chairman of the philosophy department at Brandenburg Community College. Rodger assumed the plum position three years earlier under the most peculiar circumstances, when Buddy Hazelton, the previous department head, walked away from the position. Professor Hazelton offered no formal notice. From one day to the next he didn't simply show up at the college. The cryptic message taped to his desk blotter read:

*I am taking a sabbatical of unspecified duration.*

Eight, unambiguous words that revealed nothing. A month earlier, Buddy emptied his bank account and canceled his townhouse lease. Saying nothing to anyone, he vanished. Poof - up in smoke. Just like that! Local police could do nothing. The academic had no history of mental aberrations, vices or kinky predilections. He oversaw the philosophy department while teaching several post-graduate classes on A.J. Ayer's theory of logical positivism and Wittgenstein's impenetrable *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. As months passed with no new revelations, jokes about 'finding Buddy Hazelton' became endemic, faculty members vying to one-up each other with outlandish theories about what really happened to the mild-mannered scholar.

"Okay, so where is he?" I blurted awaiting the punch line.

"I'll be over in ten minutes." Rodger's tone had assumed a flinty edge. "Dress casual. We're going for a little drive."

\*\*\*\*\*

Rodger Ephraim said nothing as we cruised the interstate to South County. Abandoning the highway in Tiverton, Rhode Island, the Volvo hugged the marshy coastline for another three miles until a huge canvass tent appeared off to the right in a sandy field. The Waverly Brothers Traveling Circus loomed directly ahead. A garish billboard they passed just before reaching the fairground boasted fire breathers, trampoline acts, plate spinning, contortionists, sword swallowing, juggling, acrobatics, wild animals and a even freak show.

Rodger parked the car in a weed pocked lot. "Let me do the talking."

An emaciated employee with protruding ears and dirt-streaked face was sitting on a stool just inside a fenced-off enclosure. A wad of chewing tobacco the size of a golf ball bulged from his left cheek. "Gates don't open for another half hour," he drawled, pointing at a ticket booth two hundred feet away where a small crowd of families were milling about.

Rodger waved a hand dismissively. "A mutual friend... a roustabout works for your outfit."

The employee shook his head from side to side and spat a syrupy wad of tobacco juice in the dirt. "And who might that be?"

"Buddy Hazelton." Rodger pulled his faculty ID from a breast pocket and waved it under the man's hairy nose. "Show this to Buddy and tell him -"

"Can't do that." The man brought him up short. "He's hosing down the elephants and visitors aren't allowed back there under any circumstances." The man paused to snort a bugger from his right nostril. "Anyway, this being the big day, he don't need no distractions."

"How's that?"

"Buddy's cannonballing... first time in public. The crazy sonofabitch volunteered last week after Rufus went off his trajectory and tore the hell out of his rotator cuff." The man grinned displaying a set of pebbly, tobacco stained teeth and receding gums.

"Why don't we just wait over there," Rodger pointed to a trailer with 'Cotton Candy' painted in huge pink letters, "until Buddy finished with the elephants." The man shrugged and finally let them pass.

With an hour to show time, performers and circus workers were rushing about purposefully. Still out of costume but boasting pastel-colored clown's faces, several midgets hobbled by. A wiry woman with an elaborate bouffant hairdo was doing stretching exercises. On the far side of a huge tent an elephant trumpeted. Rodger glanced over his shoulder. The gatekeeper had his back to them and was jawing it up with the midgets they passed moments earlier just as the pachyderm let loose another shrill blast.

"Let's take a look see." Rodger meandered off in the direction of the noisy commotion but pulled up immediately. Halfway across the field near a stand of sugar maples, a full-grown, bull elephant was being washed down by a slope-shouldered, balding man with a long-handled brush. The former chairman of Brandenburg College's philosophy department had traded a tweed jacket for cutoff dungarees and flannel shirt with a raggedy gash under the right armpit. Rodger ducked back out of sight. "It seems our esteemed colleague," he observed with pokerfaced dismay, "has bartered away a PhD and academic tenure for a garden hose and lifetime supply of buttered popcorn."

\*\*\*\*\*

Always a bit of an oddball, Buddy Hazelton kept a mystical verse tacked to both sides of his faculty office door so visitors got the full effect both coming and going.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you;  
Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you really want;  
Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth*

*across the doorsill  
where the two worlds touch.  
The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep.*

Rumi, Persian Poet

On more than one occasion, I questioned Buddy about the inscrutable poem, but he either made a joke of it or conveniently sidestepped the issue. A week before he disappeared, we visited a local Mexican restaurant during a break in classes. "That jackass, Rodger Ephraim, approached me yesterday with the most outlandish request," Buddy fumed. "He wanted to shoehorn his entire lecture schedule into three days."

I tried to imagine such a feat but my usually nimble brain balked at the notion. "Wouldn't that push undergraduate classes into the late afternoon?"

"More like early evening," Buddy corrected. There was no mistaking the look of revulsion.

In addition to core curriculum, Rodger Ephraim taught *Fundamentals of Ethics*. It seemed hypocritical - unconscionable even - that, the educator would take unfair advantage of students, while pursuing his own enlightened self-interest. But then, Rodger didn't give a rat's ass if twenty-year-old co-eds languished in musty classrooms from early morning straight through suppertime. "So what happened?"

"I told him the request was absurd and to get the hell out of my office." Buddy laughed mirthlessly. "Ephraim's got a time share condominium on Lake Winnepesaukee. Since separating from his wife, he's also been having an affair with one of his leggy coeds. Every weekend, the lech drives north to the New Hampshire border with the twenty-something blonde - like transporting stolen property across state lines where nobody knows his business."

The waitress approached. I ordered the quesadilla with guacamole and a Coke.

"The zesty chili cheese fries sounds interesting," Buddy said, folding the menu.

"It's not for the faint of heart," the waitress cautioned. "Chili fries are seasoned with green onions, jalapenos, sour cream, garlic pepper, and a sharp Monterey jack cheese."

"Yes, I'll go with the zesty chili cheese fries." Buddy relinquished his menu and leaned back with a satisfied expression. "What do you have on tap for dark beers?"

"St. Pauli Girl," the waitress replied.

Buddy splayed his legs out at a cockeyed angle under the table. "Bring me a mug."

"On second thought," I blurted as the woman was turning away, "make that a gin and tonic."

When the waitress returned with the drinks, Buddy adroitly drew the head of foam off the top of the chilled mug then sipped deeply at the chocolaty liquid. "Language is a dicey proposition." A morose expression enveloped his normally buoyant features. "Nothing's ever what it seems to be." "Whether it's a length of rope of a philandering philosopher," he added cryptically, "you gotta cut through the semantic bullshit."

\* \* \* \* \*

The length of rope reference referred back to a discussion in his office the previous summer. "Here's a little joke I like to play on incoming freshman." Buddy rose and went to the

closet, where he removed a thick coil of rope. Cutting a foot-long section with a pocketknife, he waved it in front of my face. What do you see?"

"A piece of rope."

He snapped the rope taut and held under his stubbly chin. "The tensile strength is rated at three hundred pounds." Buddy began unraveling the braided rope, picking it apart with his nicotine-stained fingernails and after a minute lay three separate strands on the top of his desk. "And now what do you see?"

"I dunno," I ventured hesitantly. "The individual components of what was formerly a piece of rope."

Next, Buddy ripped the material into tiny shreds until all that remained was a pile of cottony fluff. "And this... how would you define this untidy mess?"

"Rope in the abstract," I quipped.

He gathered the gossamer filaments in his cupped hands and held them over the waste paper basket. "Can the original rope be put back together?"

"No more likelihood of that than Humpty Dumpty being put back together again by all the king's horses and all the king's men."

Buddy spread his palms and the fluff floated gently downward disappearing into the trash.

*Never stay up on the barren heights of cleverness, but come down into the green valleys of silliness. If people never did silly things nothing intelligent would ever get done. A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.*

Buddy could quote Wittgenstein verbatim, off the top of his head. Linguistics masquerading as innocuous, light dinner repartee - he pulled it off with an opaque smile and self-effacing wit.

"Resting on your laurels is as dangerous as resting when you are walking in the snow. You doze off and die in your sleep," he noted irreverently one day as a stultifying faculty meeting was breaking up.

I should have seen it coming. All the telltale signs were there. Buddy was going to do something rash. Outrageous. Utterly absurd. He had no intentions of staying at the university. Prestige meant nothing to him. His studies in phenomenology taught him that a red delicious and a Fuji share the category of meaning that we might call "appleness but that's where all epistemological similarities fell to pieces." He was more concerned with Husserl's "essences. From Buddy's perspective, humans were imprisoned in a room with a door that was unlocked and opened inward as long as it never occurred to them to pull rather than push.

\*\*\*\*\*

"He's finished with the elephants!" Rodger barked, jolting me out of my reverie.

Sure enough, the animal having been led away by a handler, Buddy was coiling the hose. Temporarily blinded by the bright sunlight, he squinted at our approach. Recognizing his former colleagues, Buddy tossed the hose aside and stepped forward. "If you're looking for work," he quipped, "there're no vacancies." We shook hands. Buddy's demeanor was gentle and self-effacing.

A morose looking older man with a three-day growth of beard and a pronounced limp straggled across the open area. In his left hand he clutched a set of flat throwing knives. With his

free hand he repeatedly flipped a balanced blade end-over-end, catching it effortlessly on the descent. Bringing up the rear, a younger man dressed in sequined tights with a crimson bandana knotted around his neck led a dappled horse into an adjacent tent and started the animal trotting easily counterclockwise around the circular track. "Whatever possessed you?" Rodger blurted what everyone at the college had been thinking for the past three years.

Buddy shrugged and wiped a bead of sweat from his neck. "You're both still with the college?"

Rodger stared at him incredulously. "I assumed your position when you took sabbatical."

Rodger Ephraim prospered from Buddy's fall from grace.

As the newly minted chairman of the philosophy department, his future was secure, regardless of the fact that his grasp of philosophical theory was rote, formulistic and patently uninspired. If Rodger chose to 'consolidate' his work schedule so he could spend more time at Lake Winnepesaukee with bodacious bimbos, no one would challenge him.

Buddy reached up and scratched his armpit through the rip in his shirt then pointed at the trainer, who now had the horse cantering in the opposite direction. "The standard diameter of a trick horse-riding ring is exactly forty-two feet, which is the minimum distance for horses to circle comfortably at full gallop." As Buddy explained the physics, the centrifugal force generated by cantering in circles allowed riders to stand fully erect without falling, a feat which would be next to impossible otherwise.

"Your Wittgenstein article," Rodger noted, "still gets quoted regularly in the scholarly press." Reaching out, he placed a hand on Buddy's shoulder. "The college administration would probably take you back even in a lesser capacity if..."

"It's swell to know there's no hard feelings," Buddy's face scrunched up with warm emotions. "I sure hope you'll stick around for the finale."

*The finale... was that when they shot Buddy Hazelton, a man who could read Ludwig Wittgenstein in the original then sit down and write his own scholarly exegesis, out of a cannon?*

\*\*\*\*\*

Back outside, we bought tickets and half an hour later reentered the circus through the main gate.

*People are going back and forth*

*across the doorsill*

*where the two worlds touch.*

*The door is round and open.*

*Don't go back to sleep.*

The animal smells, the raucous calliope music, clowns, performers on stilts, midgets, strongmen, acrobats, fire eaters, fat and bearded ladies - they all hovered at the threshold, the doorsill where the two worlds touched. Before we reached the big tent Rodger pulled me aside. "I'm going over there," he gestured at a smaller, dingier tent near the porta potties, labeled 'Freak Show - Grotesques and Human Oddities from around the World! "What do you say?"

"No, I'll just wait here for you." Rodger hurried off.

Up ahead, the door to a trailer opened, and Buddy Hazelton, dressed like Captain America in patriotic colors emerged followed by the wiry woman with the bouffant hairdo.

Buddy held a star spangled helmet by its chinstrap. The woman draped a comforting arm around his shoulder, said something briefly and they both laughed. Leaning over, she kissed him on the cheek effusively before rushing off toward the big tent.

What was it Buddy said at the Mexican restaurant over chili fries and Saint Pauli Girl? They had been discussing Wittgenstein, the 'illustrious one'. Wittgenstein had written that philosophy was like trying to open a safe with a combination lock: each little adjustment of the dials seems to achieve nothing, only when everything is in place does the door open.

Ten minutes later, Rodger resurfaced wearing a foolish smirk. "Well that was interesting."

"Did you see the Pugilist Pinhead?"

"What's that?"

I pointed to a garish poster, a cartoonish mural depicting an oriental man replete with Fu Manchu, bulging biceps and a head the size of a tennis ball. "Oh him... the pinhead was just a witless microcephalic but the other freaks were pretty interesting."

Rodger found us good seats halfway up a center row. We bought popcorn and peanuts. I ate a corndog on a stick as the full-size clowns and rowdy midgets worked the crowd in preparation for the opening act. Sporting a tuxedo with top hat and tails, the ringmaster drifted center stage. "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls of all ages..."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## What would Junie B. Jones Do?

"Mr. Jacobson, the old Jewish guy who lives on Bickford Street, sniffs little girls' bicycle seats," eight-year-old Benjamin Carter announced cavalierly as though the topic made for polite dinner conversation.

The family had just sat down to the evening meal. Grace Carter poured some gravy on her mash potatoes, cleared her throat and asked, "Where exactly did you learn this?"

Benjamin sipped at his apple juice. "Mitzi Brookfield... she overheard her parents talking. They said Mr. Jacobson's got mental abba... abba... abba..."

"Aberrations," his mother offered.

"Yeah, that's it."

Lillian Carter was a quiet, undemonstrative woman, who favored gardening, crossword puzzles and feng shui. The previous year, she arranged Benjamin's bedroom to promote a harmonious flow of nourishing energies. The new setup was supposed to 'excite and calm' at the same time, a concept that neither Benjamin nor his father comprehended. To that end, Mrs. Carter removed the television and kept windows open until later October. Sometimes she even placed small dishes of essential oils – the young boy was partial to bergamot, citronella Java, clary sage and jasmine - on a shelf. She positioned the bed away from the doorway and replaced his bedside table with a twin black walnut set. When Mr. Carter inquired why the boy needed two tables, Mrs. Carter smiled and explained that it was a matter of balancing positive energies.

Mrs. Carter glanced across the table at her husband. The man, who had raised a forkful of meatloaf to his open mouth, lowered the food back to the plate without tasting it. "Speaking of

mental aberrations," Mr. Carter said, "the Brookfield clan are a bunch of knuckle dragging nitwits who - "

"Phillip!" Mrs. Carter rose with such force that her chair went flying out from under her, slamming against the hickory hutch. The children eyed their mother uncertainly. The woman retrieved her chair, setting it in its proper place. Her husband smiled indulgently at the three youngsters, placed the meatloaf in his mouth and chewed with his head tilted at a sharp angle. "Very tasty. What spices did you use?"

"Seasoned bread crumbs," Mrs. Carter replied evenly. There would be no more discussion of the Brookfields or Mr. Jacobson's predilections for adolescent bicycle seats. "Basil and thyme."

He speared another portion of the succulent meat. "Yes, very nice."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night after Benjamin brushed his teeth and crawled under the covers, his mother came to his room and said, "Regarding our neighbor, Mr. Jacobson, you shouldn't believe much of anything that gossipmonger Mitzi Brookfield says."

Jeremiah Jacobson had lived on Bickford Street forever - long before the Carters bought their split-level ranch house. The Jewish man resided there with his wife and two kids. Over the years, the children grew up and moved away. In late November, three days before Thanksgiving, Mrs. Jacobson, a short woman with sclerotic legs, suffered a massive heart attack and passed away. Since then, old man Jacobson had gone a bit queer in the head. He let his hair, what little there was, creep helter-skelter down over his prominent ears. And then there was the scraggly salt-and-pepper beard which enveloped his sallow cheeks. Whether he grew the beard in mourning or as social protest, the patchy growth made the elderly man look utterly derelict, down-on-his-luck.

Since Mrs. Jacobson's passing, Lillian felt a strong neighborly sentiment towards the widower. When the temperature topped out in the low nineties, she sent Benjamin's older brother over to trim the old man's lawn. A couple of times when the ShopRite Supermarket featured two-for-one coupon days, she even picked up extra groceries for the older man and had Benjamin lug them over to the dilapidated house with the weed-strewn lawn.

"Regarding Mr. Jacobson," Mrs. Carter began again, "he wasn't always so odd. The man designed custom bracelets, rings and pendants for thirty-three years. Balfour Jewelry gave him a retirement party when he left work, and there was even an article in the newspaper." Mrs. Carter eased down on the edge of the bed. "The year the New England Patriots won the Super Bowl, Mr. Jacobson helped design the fancy team rings."

Rising, Mrs. Carter wandered over to the bookcase. Teasing a tattered paperback from the shelf, she returned to the bed. "What's this?" She laid the book on the bed sheet next to his chest.

"Junie B Jones and the Yucky Blucky Fruitcake."

"What's with the B?"

Benjamin wrinkled his nose. "The B stands for Beatrice. Except Junie don't like Beatrice; she just likes B and that's all!"

Mrs. Carter ran her fingertips over the mangled cover. "How come the book is such a mess?"

Benjamin wiggled his smallish rump settling it comfortably on the mattress. "Probably because I read it a million, quadrillion times, that's why."



Mrs. Carter shut the light. Then she kissed his cheek as she did every single night since as far back as Benjamin Carter could recollect. The pretty woman with the pale blue eyes stood over him swaying gently in the dark. Benjamin couldn't make out her features. "Maybe, at this stage in his life, Mr. Jacobson feels a bit like your favorite book. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The crickets were chirping in the back yard. A neighbor had trimmed his lawn in the late afternoon and the cloying scent of fresh-mown grass drifted through the open window. "No, not really."

Benjamin felt his mother's hand caress his cheek. "Well, perhaps someday you will." "The Brookfields," she mumbled distractedly almost as an afterthought, "have a penchant for stirring up trouble."

"What's a penchant?"

"It doesn't matter," his mother replied rather abruptly, "just so long as you know that Mitzi Brookfield is a first-class troublemaker and don't feed into her nonsense." Benjamin fluffed the pillow and lay back down. She kissed his smallish hand, pressed it to her warm cheek and went away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I spoke to Ben about Mr. Jacobson." Lillian Carter stood just outside the bathroom door where her husband was hunched over the sink, raking a toothbrush across his gums.

"And how did that go?"

"Pretty good." The woman pawed at the oak floorboards with the toe of her slipper. "The kid's in second grade. What's he know about malicious slander?"

Mr. Carter put the toothbrush away and reached for the unwaxed dental floss. "Jacobson's wife died... his kids moved away. He's eighty years old for Christ's sakes!" He wrapped a length of floss around his left index finger, pulled the strand taut then wriggled it down between a rear molar.

"I ran into Jake Brookfield in the Dairy Mart the other night, buying a slew of lottery scratch tickets. He also had a three-pack of those glossy, soft-porn magazines they stow away behind the counter."

"You don't say!" Mrs. Carter chuckled and shook her head.

"The mags were lying there on the counter wrapped in thick plastic. *Salacious Sluts & Blatantly Busty Bimbos*... that was the title of the topmost magazine.

"Salacious Sluts," she repeated, leaning hard, for theatrical effect, on the first consonant of each word. "And the jerk wasn't the least bit embarrassed?" Her husband flashed a sick smile and wagged his head from side to side. Lillian shut the lid on the toilet and sat down. "Back in October... do you remember that ugliness with the little Hispanic girl in Benjamin's class?"

Mitzi Brookfield started a rumor that a Hispanic classmate was an illegal alien. The Mexican family dogpaddled across the Rio Grande and picked their way to Brandenburg, Massachusetts where they were presently living under false pretenses. Around midday, Lucinda Rodriguez, the scandalized third grader, went home crying. The next morning, Benjamin spotted the dark-skinned girl, clutching her father's hand, heading in the direction of the principal's office. Later that same day, The Brookfields were call into school to meet with the

superintendent. After the unfortunate incident, there was no more mention of undocumented aliens or Spanish-sounding rivers that bordered the southern United States.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following Saturday afternoon, Officer Murphy drove down the street and waved to Benjamin out the window of the police cruiser. Officer Murphy was a tall man with a prominent, beaky nose. Sometimes he pulled over and chatted with the neighbors, but most days he just drove to the end of the cul-de-sac, turned around and headed back to the main street at a crawl. Earlier in the week he pulled the car over at the mouth of Bickford Street and got out his radar gun. "Whatcha doing?" Benjamin asked.

"Looking for people in a hurry to go nowhere fast." The officer winked and aimed his gun down the street in the direction of oncoming traffic. He seldom stayed longer than an hour or so. Then he packed up his hi-tech gadgetry and drove away. Today though, ten minutes passed and Officer Murphy's cruiser never reappeared. Benjamin pedaled his dirt bike to the bend in the road where a small crowd had gathered. The cruiser was parked in front of Mr. Jacobson's bungalow, and the Jewish man was sitting in the back of the police cruiser. Normally easygoing and unperturbed, Officer Murphy wore a sullen expression as he climbed into the car, barked something into the two-way radio and drove slowly away.

"What happened?" Benjamin asked.

"They arrested the old geezer," a teenage boy replied.

"What for?"

The youth shrugged. "Who the hell knows?"

Benjamin hurried home and told his mother what had happened. She was outside hanging delicate items on the clothesline. Mrs. Carter fixed a clothespin on the tail of a pleated blouse. "Do you need to pee?" Benjamin shook his head. She threw a handful of wet clothing back in the wicker laundry basket and headed back toward the rear deck. "Get your jacket. We're going for a little ride."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I need to speak to the chief," Lillian Carter demanded. At the Brandenburg Police Station, Benjamin sat on a chair near a corkboard with a collection of black and white photos of grubby looking men and a handful of equally uncouth females, while his mother spoke to the officer manning the front desk. After a brief exchange, Mrs. Carter disappeared down a hallway into an adjoining room. Ten minutes later she returned and sat down on the chair next to him. Benjamin looked at his mother. She was studying the collection of mug shots stapled to the corkboard. Another few minutes passed in silence. "What are we doing?"

"Waiting," Mrs. Carter replied.

"For what?"

"For Mr. Jacobson to collect his belongings and join us here in the lobby." Another five minutes passed. Benjamin had lost all interest in the unflattering photos. There were too many and, after a while, they all looked the same. Not that the felons looked alike. There were Hispanics, Negroes, a couple of Asians and a still larger collection of white faces - an army of lost souls. Lost and clueless.

Finally, the older man with the unkempt beard appeared in the hallway and came out to join them. "Hey, I know you!" Mr. Jacobson ran his bony fingers through Benjamin's hair and flashed a good-natured smile.

"I'll be just a minute." Mrs. Carter disappeared a second time down the hallway.

"My mother says you made the championship rings when the Patriots won the Super bowl."

The man laughed making a dry, cackling sound. Benjamin had never heard anyone laugh like that, but it didn't bother him in the least. "I didn't actually *make* the rings; I designed them. Employees who worked in the jewelry plant actually poured the metal, fastened the precious stones and polished." "How do you like this?" The elderly man extended his right wrist to reveal a thick gold bracelet. "That's my own design. It was very popular - a big seller back in the nineteen eighties. Although, I suppose that was a little before your time." He removed the bracelet and draped it across his knee. "It's 10K, yellow gold Cuban Link."

"Cuban what?"

"Cuban link... that's the design style." He pointed toward the center of a strand. "I used a four-millimeter, rope pattern with a hand-crafted lobster clasp." Mr. Jacobson returned the bracelet to his emaciated wrist then held the metal up to the bright sunlight streaming into the lobby from an adjacent window. "Pretty snazzy, huh?"

"Sure is a swell bracelet," Benjamin confirmed.

"You and twelve thousand fifty-three people share the same sentiments."

"What's that?" Benjamin was pointing at the man's hairy chest.

Mr. Jacobson reached up with a gaunt hand and fingered a gold chain. Several alternating circular links were coupled with a longer oval section to produce a very masculine braid. "Now this charming bit of artisanship is a *Figarucci*. The design combines elements of both the Figaro and mariner-style."

"No, not the chain," Benjamin brought the elderly man up short. "The star."

He tapped a six-pointed Star of David. "I'm Jewish. It's the symbol of our faith."

"I know. My mother told me."

"Religions... they're all the same," Mr. Jacobson rambled on in his easygoing, distractible manner. "As long as the believer's heart is true, one faith's as good as another. But you don't have to be a Jewish scholar steeped in esoterica to appreciate the basic sentiment."

Benjamin had no idea what his neighbor was talking about but it was pleasant listening. Mr. Jacobson's singsong voice seemed to build with subdued intensity and conviction. No matter that the boy understood nothing his neighbor was telling him. The older man had taken him into his confidence; now a pact, a sympathetic communion existed.

"Do you know," the man reached out and tapped the boy forcefully on the kneecap, "in the Talmud it's written that every blade of grass has an angel that hovers over it and whispers 'Grow!' 'Grow!'"

"Grass angels?" Benjamin repeated.

The old man nodded soberly. Well that was something Benjamin could appreciate. As scatterbrained as she was, Junie B. Jones would also have cherished the notion of tiny, winged sprites flitting about the suburban countryside assisting with lawn care.

Mr. Jacobson, who seemed a bit bleary-eyed, pulled out a grubby handkerchief and blew his nose rather loudly. "Growing grass... it's an incremental, cumulative process. No need to rush the miraculous."

Mrs. Carter, who had wandered off to speak with an officer at the front desk finally returned. "Let's get out of here." Lillian muttered. Benjamin took one last look at the cork board. Was the Brandenburg Police Department planning to put Mr. Jacobson's picture up on the Wall of Shame?

\* \* \* \* \*

On the ride home the boy sat in the back. "You could sue the Brookfields for libel," Mrs. Carter spoke without taking her eyes off the road. "Character assassination."

"At my age?" Mrs. Jacobson laughed making a dry cackling sound. He didn't seem angry in the least. "That Officer Murphy's a nice guy. I don't think he realized..." The old man didn't bother finishing the sentence.

"Yes," Mrs. Carter agreed, "he just got caught in the middle." Benjamin was still trying to figure out what exactly Officer Murphy didn't realize and why, as they were leaving the police station, he came out in the parking lot and apologized to the older man.

"Mitzi's mother was the chief instigator."

"Did Officer Murphy tell you that?"

"In a roundabout manner, yes."

After dropping Mr. Jacobson off, Mrs. Carter swiveled in her seat to face her son. "How're you doing?"

"Good," Benjamin replied.

Their neighbor, who worked at Balfour Jewelry for thirty-three years, was arrested but then, just as quickly, released and sent home. Officer Murphy and Mr. Jacobson were back on friendly terms. Everything was returning to normal.

Mrs. Carter pulled the car over to the side of the road and slid the shift in park. She sat staring at the dashboard for several minutes. When another car pulled up behind her, the woman promptly rolled the window down and waved the driver past. From where he sat in the backseat, Benjamin could see the right side of his mother's face. Walled up in some private reverie, the hazel eye never blinked. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Your lips were moving," his mother pressed.

"I just remembered something Mr. Jacobson said."

"And what was that?"

Benjamin felt his eyes compress to tiny slits. "Every blade of grass," he recited with a rhythmic cadence, "has an angel that hovers over it and whispers 'Grow!' 'Grow!'"

Somewhere in the distance a lawnmower fired up. "What Mr. Jacobson told you... say it again." Benjamin repeated the Talmud saying.

Several minutes passed. The lawnmower sputtered and the engine noise was replaced by the trilling of songbirds and crickets. "Mitzi got Mr. Jacobson in trouble." His mother spoke so softly, he could barely make out the words. "For no good reason... from sheer spitefulness."

"Yes, I figured as much." Benjamin felt a wave of despair settling in his gut. He could picture the girl grinning with orgasmic glee when she learned of Mr. Jacobson's arrest. Normal people didn't revel in other people's misery. But Mitzi Brookfield, who was heavysset with orangey hair and ridiculously large freckles resembling liver spots, was an eight year old grotesque - a sadistic monstrosity through and through. "What now?"

"I'm wondering," Mrs. Carter ran a tongue over her lips, "what Junie B. Jones might do in a similar situation."

"Junie's just a stupid kid," Benjamin shot back. "She can just barely tie her shoe laces much less solve the world's problems."

"A grownup Junie B. Jones," Mrs. Carter amended her previous remark. "How would she handle a preadolescent psychopath?"

Benjamin didn't like where this was going. The trip to the police station was bad enough, but falling back on a fictional character from a children's book as a role model didn't seem like such a great idea. "Junie does lots of dumb things."

"Yeah," his mother replied, "but they always turn out right in the end."

"I suppose so," Benjamin mumbled half-heartedly.

Mrs. Carter put the car back in gear. "There's one last bit of unfinished business." She drove to the end of the cul-de-sac and turned the car around. Three streets down, she pulled over in front of a blue house with white shutters. "This won't take long."

*Wowie wow wow! That's a hoot, I tell you. Wait till you hear this!*

Junie B Jones had a dozen and one nifty catchphrases, but none could adequately describe what Benjamin's mother did over at the Brookfields. Mrs. Carter rang the doorbell. Mitzi's mother, a short dumpy woman with a mottled complexion similar to her daughter's, cracked the door. She refused to let Benjamin's mother in, but listened with a constipated expression, her eyes compressed to tiny slits and lips pinched so tight that the ruttled crow's feet on the side of her head stood out in bold relief. When Mrs. Carter finished speaking her mind, Mrs. Brookfield shouted, "Get the hell off my property!" But Mrs. Carter didn't budge. Mitzi's mother hollered all the louder, but the squat woman didn't seem to be making a whole lot of sense that Benjamin could wrap his nine-year-old brain around. Mrs. Brookfield was vindictive just like the daughter. Or was it the other way around?

The dumpy woman made a motion to slam the door shut, but Mrs. Carter, with a firm grasp on the doorknob, positioned her right leg against the molding and, using the foot for leverage, muscled the door open. Mrs. Brookfield collapsed in a heap, sprawling backwards on the living room rug. Stepping over the threshold into the home, the uninvited guest shut the door behind her. "Aw crap!" Benjamin muttered.

Five minutes passed. Things got very quiet. The front door opened and Lillian Carter emerged. Before his mother reached the car, Benjamin could hear Mrs. Brookfield let loose with an endless barrage of profanities, and then a second, childish voice began sobbing inconsolably, begging for mercy.

The bedlam at the Brookfield residence continued unabated as Mrs. Carter turned the ignition key and put the car in gear. At the end of the street, the woman pulled up at a stop sign and looked both ways.

*"Wowie wow wow! That's a hoot!"*

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Time of Sorrow

Padding along the tiled rim of the children's wading pool, the young woman came directly to the lifeguard's chair. Heavy, charcoal-colored eyebrows sprouted over wire-rimmed glasses. Mottled with acne, the pasty skin would never tan, not in a hundred, cloudless summers stretched end to end. "Peter Ostrowski?"

"Yes?"

"*Ani rotzah lomar, shmee Ruthie.*"

"Hello to you, Ruthie," he said, refusing to pick up on the woman's garbled Hebrew.

She wore a shapeless, one-piece swimsuit of solid blue and exuded the slightly warped, God-crazed look of a religious fanatic. "My father, Rabbi Abramson, gave me your name."

"Just a minute." Outside the chain link fence was a wiry alder, which, throughout the summer, sent a steady barrage of fruiting, golden catkins and olive nutlets cascading into the wading pool. From a lanyard around his neck, Peter groped for a whistle and blew a shrill, sustained note. The children, mostly preschoolers and a handful of mothers, climbed up on the slick walkway. With a mesh scoop fitted to a 6-foot, aluminum handle, he began skimming debris, mostly Japanese beetles, alder catkins and grass clippings, from the surface. Five minutes later Peter blew the whistle, three short blasts, and the children scampered back into the shallow water.

"You were saying," he said settling back down on his haunches.

"I'm studying at the University of Jerusalem in September and need a tutor."

Something didn't gel. The pale, owlish girl lacked the playfulness, the *joie de vivre*, of a student leaving home for the first time on an exotic adventure. "Many Americans studying at the Hebrew University speak only halting Hebrew," he said evasively. "You can take the bulk of your courses in English and learn the language in your spare time."

Peter warned a freckle-faced boy for belly-flopping. The boy scowled and retreated to the far end of the pool. "Your father speaks fluent Hebrew."

"Would you take lessons from him?" the girl replied.

Peter conjured up a mental image of Rabbi Jacob Abramson - an inch or two over five feet, scraggly beard, chain smoking one unfiltered cigarette after another. Glassy, bloodshot eyes - hypertensive, myocardial infarct eyes. A devoutly religious, thoroughly tortured soul. Yes, this would be his daughter!

Reaching into her beach bag, she removed a tattered volume, which she handed to him. "A friend recommended this."

Peter glanced at the title, *The Auto-Emancipation of the Jews* by Leo Pinsker. "Where'd you find this prehistoric bone?"

"Hebrew Teachers' College in Brookline. They have quite an extensive collection of Judaica." Ruthie removed her glasses and gawked nearsightedly. The myopia was so pronounced that Peter doubted she saw much of anything beyond the tip of her nose.

"Something funny?" Ruthie asked.

He didn't realize he was smiling. "For historical perspective, you choose a book over a hundred years old and written by someone virtually unknown except among Jewish scholars." Handing the book back to her, Peter added, "For the record, I'm no Jewish nationalist. I think the Israelis are a bunch of narrow minded xenophobes."

"My father told me you came back disillusioned."

*Disillusioned.* The word hung in the air like the ever present stench of chlorine.

In the fall of 2007, Peter Ostrowski went to Israel intent on becoming a rabbi, but, a regrettable incident halted his spiritual quest dead in its tracks. Traveling through Hebron with a group of Jewish seminary students, Peter witnessed the shooting of a pregnant, Arab woman.

The day had started out innocuously enough. At the Egged Bus Station, the students bought tickets and stood in line with the other passengers heading south. The station smelled sweetly of rotting orange rinds and Turkish coffee. Peter gazed at the scruffy pines and jumble of sand-colored, block buildings which clung precariously to the uneven hills. From the dusty bus station, the Jerusalem countryside wasn't nearly as picturesque as in the vivid postcards which hung in the kiosks of the Arab quarter. The rolling hills of Vermont or New Hampshire were far more appealing and agriculturally productive, but the devout didn't make pilgrimage to admire the Judean topsoil or covered bridges.

There were soldiers in uniform and dark-skinned Sephardic Jews who gestured histrionically and shouted back and forth at each other while spewing airy sunflower seeds in every direction. An elderly woman with chipped teeth and a red scarf knotted around her head, held a live chicken upside down by the ankles. It was unclear whether she was seeing a relative off or planned to board the bus with the scruffy fowl.

"Nice, Jewish girls!" Peter's roommate at the yeshiva gestured with his eyes toward a kiosk near the ticket counter. An elderly Arab, his head and lower portion of his face shrouded in a black plaid kefiyah, was waiting patiently while two Israeli women dressed in khaki, military uniforms examined his identification papers. The man looked to be in his eighties with a stubbly, wrinkled face. The more aggressive of the two women, a beefy brunette who wore her military cap at a jaunty angle, kept slapping the tattered papers against the palm of her hand while peppering him with a never-ending series of questions. Her expression was grim, tactless. The second woman was slight-of-build and carried an Uzi machine gun on a leather strap that she kept shifting from one shoulder to the other. She looked utterly disinterested, more concerned with the unmanageable weight of the weapon than any threat posed by the decrepit Arab.

"Not much of a security risk," Peter noted, "even by the most demanding standards." The bus to Elait pulled into the quay and the passengers began jostling one another in anticipation of boarding. Peter found an empty seat toward the rear of the bus. The bedraggled, chip-toothed women with the upside-down chicken did not board the bus. Through the open window, he watched as the beefy brunette handed the Arab back his identification papers and sauntered away. Still struggling with the unwieldy gun, her friend hurried after her. Old enough to be the girls' great-grandfather, the Arab adjusted the rope-like band on his headset and gawked at the retreating soldiers.

Later that afternoon near the center of Hebron, a gang of Palestinian youths blocked the main road with a jumble of burning truck tires, while others were tearing up cobblestones and hurling them at the Jewish troops, who hung back seeking refuge in doorways and behind trees. A young toddler clutching a doll - she couldn't have been more than eighteen months - sat on the curb watching the chaos with a gentle smile, until an elderly woman whisked her up and disappeared down an unpaved alley. The younger children laughed like it was a holiday; their older brothers and sisters hooted and jeered in defiant rage.

For their part, the Israeli soldiers ignored the youngest and their foolish antics. They looked nervous and with good reason. On a rooftop a masked youth waved a bottle filled with clear liquid. A dirty rag dangled from the neck of the Molotov cocktail inviting instant horror and disfigurement. And then, like a fourth of July cherry bomb, the gun exploded. An Israeli

soldier shot a woman in the stomach as she passed quietly in the street on her way home from market. A single round squeezed from a high-powered, assault rifle. Peter watched the pregnant woman crumple to the ground clutching her side, the groceries - eggs, bread, Turkish coffee, cheese and milk - scattered in the dirt and rubble. Several Arabs, their faces hidden behind plaid kaffiyehs, carried the woman away without waiting for the Red Crescent ambulance howling in the distance.

Only the week before, the Jerusalem Post revealed that IDF soldiers were using rubber bullets rather than live ammunition for crowd control. Rubber bullets. Crowd control. Both the woman and the unborn child died en route to hospital. Throughout the West Bank during the intifada, beatings, injuries and fatalities were commonplace. In Gaza a teenager was brain-damaged, bludgeoned into a vegetative state by a hate-crazed Israeli soldier. A thirteen year-old girl shot in the head in Jericho. An elderly man, overcome by tear gas, suffered a fatal heart attack. The difference: the victims being anonymous, faceless, Peter felt no intimate connection. No personal culpability. In Hebron, he witnessed senseless murder.

The next day, Peter went to a kiosk around the corner from his apartment and bought copies of the two largest, Hebrew papers. Yediot Achronoat reported that a 27 year-old woman and her unborn child had died of accidental wounds in the Gaza Strip. The woman was survived by a husband and three young children. Maariv offered no obituary, focusing on renewed violence anticipated in the wake of the double funeral. No mention of a military inquest. No expression of rage, regret, remorse, sorrow, repentance, grief, collective guilt or wrongdoing. Not even a compound sentence-worth of editorial comment or sympathetic reflection. Nothing.

Peter finished out the semester at the yeshiva, went home and withdrew from school. A month later, Rabbi Abramson telephoned and asked what happened. "Nothing I care to talk about."

"This is no answer," the rabbi countered.

"It's the best I can do."

"Why have you turned against your faith?"

In the past the stubby, bearded man smelling of stale tobacco filled him with reverence and awe. Now he viewed the rabbi as preposterous, grotesque. "If I tried to explain, you would tease the truth into a corner and then turn it to your own advantage. Black would become white; night transformed into day; up refashioned into down. The Jewish approach."

The rabbi exploded in a raspy, smoker's cough. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"An eschatological nightmare. A teleological pile of shit." Peter hung up the phone.

Fifty feet away at the full-sized pool Maria Espinosa, Peter's Puerto Rican girl friend, was slathering her thighs with sun block. They'd been dating three months now. She adjusted the halter on her French-cut bikini. Rising from the chaise lounge, she slipped her bare feet into a pair of Dr. Scholl's sandals and strutted back and forth along the lip of the adult pool. With Maria it was a territorial thing, like a coyote peeing on a bush. On a good day, there weren't a half-dozen women who could match her fleshy charm. And she knew it. Ruthie Abramson was no threat; the behavior was reflexive, involuntary like breathing or moving her bowels.

"I'm leaving for Israel in two months," Ruthie said and handed Peter a piece of paper with her address and telephone number written in bold print. "How soon can we start?"



The boy who bellyfopped into the pool only a few minutes earlier, went crashing into the water again - a four year-old recidivist. Peter removed him from the pool and told the boy he was persona non grata remainder of the week. Ignoring Ruthie's question, Peter wagged a finger at the book. "What's Mr. Pinsker's *weltanschauung*?"

"Only a handful of Jews can live peaceably among Christians at any given time. Once the population crosses a critical threshold, pogroms, looting and rape."

"An arithmetic formula for ethnic strife." Peter nearly burst into hysterical laughter. "The number of local Jews divided by square miles equals impending calamity?"

Ruthie was unperturbed by his antics. "Something of the sort."

Peter's expression darkened. "Israelis view Theodore Herzl as the father of their country - a Jewish George Washington. His portrait hangs in municipal buildings from the southern port of Elait to Keriak Shemona on the Lebanese foothills. But Herzl, unlike Pinsker, was essentially a pluralist; under the right circumstances, he believed all races and religions could live peaceably."

"History proved him wrong," Ruthie countered. "Will you teach me modern Hebrew?"

"Haven't decided."

When she was gone, Peter realized they hadn't even discussed a fee. He raised the whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast. "Everyone out of the pool!"

"Who was that strange girl?" Maria asked.

It was after five, and they were driving home together. Peter rested his free hand on her thigh. "Ruthie Abramson. She's leaving shortly to study in Israel. Probably intends to emigrate. Forfeit her American citizenship... join the Israeli Army and dedicate her life to tormenting and denigrating the Palestinian masses." Maria pushed his probing hand away from her crotch. She was used to his satirical excesses. "Ruthie," Peter continued, "will marry a member of Mossad, the Israeli secret police, give birth to ten children - all sons, cannon fodder for the next generation."

"Such an ugly woman!"

"Peculiar looking."

"Even by the most forgiving standards," Maria qualified, "that woman was ugly."

They passed the Mobil gas station and turned left on Thatcher Street. "She had this book," Peter said.

"What sort of book?"

From the moment he spoke, Peter regretted mentioning the tattered text - as though talking about it was an implicit breach of trust. Religious scholars taken aside, how many educated Jews had ever heard of Leo Pinsker and his cockeyed theory of human devolution? Before Ruthie Abramson's arrival, he certainly hadn't. The book was an oddity, an ethnic aberration. He was not about to discuss 19th century Zionism with Maria Espinosa, a woman who worked in a nail salon, listened to gangsta rap (Queen Latifa and DJ Cool J) and, for the solitary semester she attended Rhode Island Community College, just barely pulled a C average. "The book was nothing really."

Maria's parents immigrated to Brandenburg, Massachusetts, in the early seventies from Cayey (population 23,000) in the mountainous southwestern district, inland from the Caribbean. The father managed a tobacco plantation; Mrs. Espinosa worked for the Post Exchange at the nearby Henry Barracks, a U.S. military facility.

Peter met the leggy, dark-skinned girl in early June when Maria came to the swimming pool with her younger sister. Nothing subtle in her romantic style, on the third visit she sashayed up to the lifeguard's chair and asked, "You got a girlfriend, Cutie?" Maria wore a mint green bikini and a gold crucifix, which alternately vanished then reemerged from her cleavage. Only by an effort of will, could Peter refrain from gawking at the erotically hypnotic cross.

From the beginning, Maria had her priorities in order: the Catholic Church, her work at the nail salon, helping her mother with domestic chores, the Catholic Church, satisfying Peter's carnal needs, the Catholic Church. Raw sex posed no obstacle to religious devotion; on the third date, they went to bed. "I go to church on all saint's days and holy days of obligation," she explained. "The rest takes care of itself."

The rest did strangely take care of itself.

Maria brought a bare-bones simplicity to the relationship that Peter initially found unnerving. A perverse mental image crept into his mind: a dark-skinned troll (resembling the dwarf in the TV series *Fantasy Island*) with an old-fashioned, straw broom sweeping all troubling thoughts and unpleasantness from Maria Espinosa's lithe mind. And yet, Maria manifested an unflagging constancy, a generosity of spirit and optimism that turned a potential character flaw into a full-fledged asset.

When they pulled up in front of Maria's apartment, she noted, "I shouldn't have said the Jewish girl was ugly. In all the ways that count, I'm sure she's perfectly nice."

Peter gazed out the window. On the telephone lines, fourteen pairs - he had actually counted them - of tattered sneakers hung where their owners had flung them the previous spring. It was a wacky rite of passage, a game inner-city, latchkey brats played, snaring their worn-out sneakers in the overhead lines.

What to do about Ruthie Abramson? It wasn't the demand on his time that irritated him but the utopian ardor; the fever-pitched idealism struck too close to home. He would call her in a day or two and politely decline. Or ignore the matter altogether. Peter felt no personal obligation. Let her illustrious father find a bona fide, Jewish zealot to teach his daughter the sacred tongue.

Around seven, Maria called. "My parents went to the movies. Come over and we'll have some fun."

"I got a sore throat," Peter lied. After supper, he drove to the Brandenburg Library and browsed the computer catalog. There were no listings for Leo Pinsker. Not there or at any branch in the lending network. In volume 9, page 456 of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* he found the following entry:

*Leo Pinsker. Born 1821 in Toaszów, Poland. Died December 21, 1891. Russian-Polish physician and pioneer Jewish nationalist who was a forerunner of Theodore Herzl. Joined the Society for the Promotion of Culture among the Jews of Russia, an assimilationist organization. Founded in 1863, the organization advocated secular education for Jews and the translation of the Bible and prayer books into Russian.*

*A pogrom in Odessa in 1871 shook but did not destroy Pinsker's beliefs; in 1881, however, another severe pogrom broke out in Odessa not only ignored but abetted by the government and defended by the press. His assimilationist beliefs were shattered and he turned to Jewish nationalism.*

*In 1882 Pinsker anonymously published in German an incisive, embittered and impassioned pamphlet, Auto-Emancipation of the Jews, which provoked strong reaction both critical and commendatory from Jewish leaders. In the pamphlet he contended that the only restorative for Jewish dignity was a Jewish Homeland.*

Ants yes, humans no. According to Pinsker, an obscure, 19th century Jew and historical anomaly, society was based on the faulty premise that people could live together. After two pogroms, Pinsker was driven back to the Zionist fold. The cosmopolitan assimilationist and enlightened freethinker metamorphosed into a rabid nationalist!

Peter went to the pay phone in the lobby of the library and called Maria. "Can I come over?"

"Feeling better?"

"What?"

"The sore throat."

"Much better."

At night the tattered sneakers gave the street a gritty, mean-spirited grimness less evident in the morning hours. Peter parked in the street and entered the house. Maria was in the living room reading *La Semana*. He reached for the topmost button on her blouse, but she wriggled free. "My parents will be home any time now." She folded the newspaper neatly in her lap.

"*Mujeres tras rejas*," he read the caption. "What's it mean?"

"Woman behind bars," she translated. "It's a weekly column about Hispanic women who do stupid shit when they come to America."

"Such as." His mind was racing, free associating. Streams of consciousness ricocheting off continents, caroming among races, centuries, disassociated circumstances.

Maria scrunched up her nutmeg face. "A silly, made-up story really... a Columbian woman carries a boyfriend's package in her luggage. When the plane lands in New York, the authorities open her suitcase, discover drugs, and she's thrown in jail. Her children come to visit her *tras rejas*, behind bars. A good woman's life is ruined, spirit broken because of one act of stupidity."

Peter took the paper and flipped it over. "And this?"

"Why the sudden interest in Hispanic culture?"

"Just tell me what it says."

Maria read the script, lips moving soundlessly, as her eyes scanned the newsprint. "A bank on Federal Hill is offering low-interest mortgages to first-time home owners of minority background. The bank has Spanish-speaking loan officers for anyone speaking English as a second language."

Peter pointed to the picture of a grown man dressed in a tan uniform with a red scarf knotted around his neck. "Hector Gonzales. Started the first Hispanic boy scout troop which meets regularly at the YMCA on Broad Street in Providence. Mr. Gonzales, a native of Honduras, welcomes new applicants."

"A newspaper like any other," Peter said.

"What did you expect?"

He flung the newspaper on the sofa. "A apostate Jew and a Puerto Rican Catholic... if we have any long-term future together, it's as Americans... only Americans!"

“Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States,” she countered blandly. “We can’t vote, but in most other respects, Puerto Ricans are.” Maria rapped Peter’s head lightly with her knuckles. “This conversation is getting weirder by the minute. It would have been better if you came over earlier and we—”

“Only as Americans,” he muttered and rushed out the door.

Later that night Peter dreamed of the pregnant Palestinian woman.

With Pinsker and Herzl, he attended the wake. Speaking in Esperanto, Herzl, the pluralist, told the Arab mourners, “Rabbi Joseph ben Akiba taught that love of one’s fellow humans is the central commandment; people have free will, and God’s attitude toward the world is tempered with mercy and justice.”

Too distraught for words, Pinsker sat in a darkened corner weeping and rocking back and forth on his heels. The deceased’s husband approached and, putting an arm around his shoulders, whispered, “So nice of you to come in our time of sorrow.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## No More Piano Lessons

Muriel Beagle was an awful piano teacher. An abomination! Which is why, Allan Swanson blew a mental gasket when his ex-wife asked if he would shuttle their daughter, Ruthie, to her Thursday afternoon lessons from late April straight through until the end of school.

It had been an amicable divorce. Lois, who was newly remarried, seldom bugged Allan when he fell behind with child support payments or his share of their daughter's expenses. The only thing she asked was that he pitched in for the kid's music lesson. Being a professional musician, a saxophonist on the wedding-bar mitzvah circuit, it seemed crass not to oblige. Thirty minutes - that's all Mrs. Beagle allotted per lesson, and most days she started late or was interrupted by one of her bratty kids bursting in unannounced. Lost time was never recouped on the back end of the lesson, and once, the music teacher even took a cell phone call and it wasn't an emergency. So unprofessional!

In the divorce agreement, Allan got shared custody. Ruthie, who turned twelve on the third of the month, visited weekends and slept over straight through to Monday mornings. One afternoon three weeks earlier, she was playing the Love Theme from Doctor Zhivago. Reaching the bridge, her fingers stumbled over an eighth-note run. "You left out a beat."

"No I didn't." The child’s tone was brusque and dismissive. "I played it just fine."

"No, look... When you started the ascending triplets -"

"I've played the tune exactly the same for Mrs. Beagle," Ruthie insisted, "and she never complained. Not once!"

Check. Checkmate. What could he say?

The piano teacher gave lessons in a claustrophobically small den just off the kitchen. At the following lesson, Allan sat outside the door in an equally tiny vestibule as Ruthie played through the delicate waltz. When she reached the bridge where the melody modulated down a minor third, Ruthie dropped a whole note. He waited for Mrs. Beagle to cut her off, to point out the musical indiscretion.

Nothing! Further along, Ruthie fingered the major seventh on a dominant arpeggio. Allan cringed inwardly. The teacher let the musical mayhem pass without comment. A major seventh in a dominant chord - Allan almost lost his lunch.

"She's coming along nicely don't you think?" The lesson was over and Mrs. Beagle was standing in the door way with her arm draped around his daughter's shoulder.

The artistically-challenged piano teacher was young, in her late thirties with three children. With her close-cropped, dirty brown hair and an overbite Muriel probably hadn't won any beauty contests since elementary school. And, even in the short time that Allen had known the woman, she had begun putting on weight. Fast forward ten years into the future, she would have added a sedentary pound or two annually until her girlish figure was little more than a fleeting memory.

And then there was the matter of Mrs. Beagle's voice. The words came in a nasally monotone that never varied, neither in pitch nor intensity. She talked through her nose in a grating, infuriating, mind-numbing drone that made most everything she said seem utterly irrelevant. There was no variation in the cadence. She didn't bunch her words together in a rush of exuberance when enthusing over some bit of musical minutia. Drip. Drip. Drip. Twenty-four-seven, the words meandered along like water cascading from a leaky spigot. Chinese water torture!

Saturday afternoon, Allen played a wedding at the Foxhill Country Club. The piano player, Herb Calloway, was something of a musical celebrity having recently come off the road with the Woody Herman big band. "That lick you played on the last two measures of Misty," Allan was addressing the piano player as they picked their way to the back of the room after finishing the first set. The bridal party and wedding guests had taken their seats as the main meal was being served. At the rear of the function hall a table had been arranged for band.

"The polytonal run?"

Allan laid a cloth napkin over his tuxedo pants and reached for a roll. "I was wondering if you could write it out for me."

A waiter approached with a bronze pitcher and began filling water glasses. Herb grinned good-naturedly. Heavysset with a mop of curly brown hair, he was far and away the most accomplished musician in the band, having recorded with a number of big name performers. "Sure, before we start the next set," he promised. "It's just a grouping of two-five progressions repeated in various keys." He spread a napkin across the front of his tuxedo pants. "It also works with symmetrical patterns... fourths and whole tones, pentatonics and altered diminished scales." He took a sip of water and reached for a warm roll.

Allan hadn't a clue what Herb was talking about. He had heard the piano player finger a tricky run and then, on the final chord of the tune, the same series of notes oddly repeated but in a different tonal center before modulating back to the tonic F major chord.

Herb Calloway was the complete package. He had the technical facility to pull off impossible runs and make them seem commonplace. Five minutes earlier in the context of a lush

ballad, he had played a string of dissonant inversions, making the mysterious harmonies sound perfectly natural.

Allan could cobble together a respectable solo playing off the existing chord changes, but what Herb was doing – well that was taking things to the next level. Twenty minutes later back on the band stand, the piano player ran a series of broken arpeggios and leaned over. “Here let me show you.” He fingered a block chord in his left hand and ran an inverted pentatonic scale with the right. Dropping down a half tone from G to G-flat he repeated the theme. “Do you see what I’m doing?”

Allan was beginning to understand but only at the most basic level. “Create your own patterns.” He chose another series of melodic notes but this time dropped the chord a minor third away from the original and repeated the theme. “It works every time, because the listener's ear gets drawn away by the thematic material.” Herb kept negotiating his supple hands up and down the piano as he spoke, demonstrating the concept.

The drummer, who was the bandleader, sat down at his traps. “The girl from Ipanema, and keep the volume down while they’re still eating.”

The next day, Allan took his car to be inspected. On the way home, he stopped by his ex-wife’s place. “About the piano teacher...”

“Yes,” Lois said anticipating his train of thought. “She’s quite horrid. We won’t be continuing much beyond the end of the school year.” Her response caught Allan off guard. “What with all the interruptions, Muriel never gives Ruthie a full lesson,” she continued, “and I don’t see where the girl has progressed very much in the six months she’s been with Mrs. Beagle.”

Allan was pleased that his ex-wife saw the situation for what it was. “And that mind-numbing voice!”

“Dear god!” Lois tittered and immediately broke into a zombie-like monotone, mimicking the piano teacher.

“We’re not being very nice are we?” Allan smirked sheepishly. The woman might have been a third-rate piano teacher with a schizoid drawl, but that didn’t make her a bad person.

“Do you remember,” Muriel added more soberly now, “that horrid Christmas recital?”

Mrs. Beagle arranged a piano recital for all her students the second week in December. There were elementary school age children thumping out melodies with one finger. No chords – the left hand was optional as were the other four digits on the right hand! No matter that the budding child prodigies, were in kindergarten or first grade – everyone got a shot at the brass ring! One ham-fisted Hispanic girl slapped at the keys creating a Bartok-like percussive effect that might have been intriguing except for the fact that she was slaughtering a watered-down version of Claude Debussy's *Claire de Lune*. Still later, in the hands of a manic eight year-old, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* assumed the abstruse unpredictability of a Hindemith, twelve-tone row.

Allan wasn’t being petty or overly harsh in his assessment of the next-generation Van Cliburns and Horowitz. He had attended a similar recital put on by a colleague in August. While the children played reasonably well, they too missed notes and pressed down errant keys, which was to be expected. With Mrs. Beagle's protégés the difference - and it was a profound difference - was that the students were completely clueless that anything was amiss. The flubs were not

artistic errors, per se, but variations on the composer's original intent. Subject to interpretation, a bright tempo, allegro vivace marking might resemble a funeral dirge. Major chords degenerated into minor, turning the standard classical repertoire into a harmonic comedy of errors. Half the students should never have been allowed to get up on the stage; the rest ought to have been better prepared.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the ever self-aggrandizing Mrs. Beagle charged ten bucks a head for every guest who attended the pitiful performance. Allan footed the bill for both sets of grandparents and Ruthie's god-mother so, by the end of the recital, he had a vicious headache and was out sixty dollars! Now the charade was over. No more piano lessons. Once school was finished, so was Mrs. Beagle.

\* \* \* \* \*

In early July an unfortunate incident occurred that sent Allan spiraling into a black funk. From early summer, he planned to take Ruthie to the Haxton Field Fourth of July fireworks display, but a nasty sinus infection coupled with a muggy heat wave left him disagreeable and out of sorts. "Maybe we could stay home and rent a movie," Allan suggested.

Ruthie's eyebrows rose halfway to the ceiling. "On the Fourth of July?" The issue was non-negotiable.

"I don't feel so hot."

"You can lie on the blanket and go to sleep." The girl pursed her lips. "We only get to see the fireworks once a year and, anyway, it was your idea."

*It was your idea.* That was the clincher. Over a month ago, Allan asked to take his daughter. Brandenburg put on one of the best fireworks displays in all of southeastern Massachusetts. If Allan weaseled out - pulled the plug on the festivities without a bona fide excuse - being struck by a bolt of lightning, losing a limb in a freak accident, falling on the third rail at the South Boston MBTA station - his ex-wife and daughter would treat him like a mental defective.

At seven o'clock, Allan collected the bug spray, blanket, a cooler full of soft drinks and munchies and they headed off for Haxton Field. "Do you feeling any better?"

What type of killjoy didn't like fireworks? "Yeah, I'm okay," Allan muttered. He felt rotten but didn't want to play the spoilsport. They were trudging up the street. The entrance to Haxton field was just beyond the senior housing complex. Allan blew his nose and a clot of greenish-yellow mucous lay streaked halfway across the handkerchief.

A busty brunette decked out in a tank top and cut off jeans was approaching from the opposite direction. What was she... sixteen years old? Seventeen, eighteen tops? "Put your goddamn eyeballs back in your head, pervert!" the fleshy girl chided brazenly, as they passed on the narrow sidewalk. A teenage boy who was accompanying her flipped Allen the bird and stuck out his tongue. Then the twosome immediately erupted in a fit of hooting and jeering. It was all over in the blink of an eye. Allan felt a crushing despair. Mercifully, Ruthie, who in her excitement had rushed a dozen paces ahead, never witnessed her father's fall from grace.

It wasn't just the derisive remark from a preternaturally pretty girl that sucked all the joy out of his life. Twenty years earlier when he was their age, Allan felt that same heady rush, that intoxicating exuberance of being on the threshold of some great adventure. But that was before the inguinal hernia, periodontal disease and an anxiety attack in the parking lot of Cooper's Hardware Store the day his wife had him served with divorce papers.

*The threshold of a great adventure ...* What adventure? Had anything even vaguely resembling a great adventure ever materialized. The girl with the beguiling breasts would go from the Fourth of July fireworks to even more dazzling pyrotechnics. She was a comet streaking through the heavens, more glorious than all the bottle rockets, cherry bombs, sparklers, spinners and jumbo jumping jacks. Like a territorial animal peeing on a bush, she drizzled her insouciant scent everywhere. But Allan, the crusty old geezer with post nasal drip had absolutely no right lusting after the glorious creature. He deserved what he got. Yes, he truly deserved public humiliation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thirty years earlier in nineteen fifty-four, the nation was buzzing with the first nuclear powered submarine. The Kellogg's Cereal Company came out with a miniature facsimile that ran on baking powder. Allan was eight years old. He hand delivered a cereal box top and twenty-five cents in an envelope to the post office. Exactly two weeks later the plastic toy arrived in the mail.

His best friend, Morris, was visiting that day. They locked themselves in the bathroom with the metallic gray submarine, the printed directions and a box of Clabber Girl baking powder. Allan filled the raised compartment on the submarine deck with the white powder, inserted the lid and placed it in the sink. The four and a half-inch toy sunk to the bottom coming to rest on the scaly enamel. Then, miraculously as the baking powder reacted with the water, carbon dioxide was produced forcing some of the water out and causing the device to drift back to the surface.

Fizz! Fizz! Fizz! In much the same way that a real submarine rose to the surface by purging its ballast tanks, the toy delivered the goods. What did Allan or Morris know about buoyancy, density, or the production of CO<sub>2</sub> when sodium bicarbonate mixed with acidic cream of tartar? The toy burped, gurgled and bubble. Over and over again, it rose up and settled back down until the baking powder was exhausted. Then the third graders spooned another heap of mix into the top and did it again. An hour and a half later, only when the box of Clabber Girl baking powder was completely empty, did the bathroom door swing open. Allan's mother wasn't going shopping until Thursday. For the next few days it was agreed that Allen would bring his toy sub over to Morris' house and they could continue the great fun until that caché of white gold was gone.

Apparently the clever gadget was still popular even today. A slew of baking powder submarines, deep sea divers, frogmen and sea creatures could still be ordered from a toy manufacturer in Sherman Oaks, California. The cost was negligible. He located the supplier over the internet. Thirty-eight year old Allan Swanson gawked at the offerings for a full five minutes before shutting down the computer. Nostalgia was one thing, but, short of a psychotic break, people couldn't travel back in time. A sink full of baking soda submarines couldn't dull the melancholy or fill the void. He shouldn't have gawked at the obscenely pretty girl. He should have made better choices with his stultified life.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Tuesday before Labor Day, Allan stopped by to collect his daughter. "I could never picture them as a married couple, and yet they're so blissfully happy together." Muriel tossed the



comment out, a total non-sequitur. When she realized that Allan had no idea what she was alluding to, she added, "The Beagles."

"No, they seem like an odd match," Allan added with a self-conscious chuckle. "But then, it's not like I'm the leading authority on marital bliss."

"Speaking of romance, how are you doing these days?" Muriel cocked her head to one side and poked her tongue in the side of her mouth causing the cheek to bulge.

"Okay."

"Seeing anyone?"

Allan flinched. Muriel meant no harm. His former spouse was neither vindictive nor intentionally malicious; it wasn't in her genetic makeup. And she seemed genuinely happy, fulfilled in the new marriage. "Nobody special."

Allan was still ruminating on the mismatched Beagles. The husband, Bruce, was a strikingly handsome outdoorsy type with Robert Redford good looks. One week when he brought Ruthie to her piano lesson, Allan ran into him loading up the Jeep Grand Cherokee with camping equipment and fishing gear. "Going white water rafting in Vermont," the man explained.

"What about the little woman?"

Mr. Beagle cracked a conspiratorial grin. "No women allowed, little or full-size, on this trip." He crammed a pair of waterproofed hiking boots to the left of a propane stove. "We're just a bunch of working stiffs traipsing off to commune with Mother Nature."

His easy-going, if slightly chauvinistic, charm was infectious. Allan certainly couldn't picture the joyless, pokerfaced Muriel Beagle slogging through the underbrush, fighting off mosquitoes as big as raisins and poison ivy for the privilege of sitting on an inflatable raft as it catapulted through roiling water, dodging jagged rocks.

Allan spent a good fifteen minutes talking with the piano teacher's husband while Ruthie finished up her lesson, and the boisterous man never came up for air. As Bruce Beagle explained it, he and a group of buddies from the heating and refrigeration firm that he owned were heading north to tackle class III and IV rapids on the West River. Driving in separate cars, they would rendezvous at the base camp in Stratton Mountain. They had opted out of the full package, which featured an Alpine village with full amenities in favor of tents and sleeping bags. "I prefer going whole hog with the back-to-nature shtick," Bruce noted.

Allan was delighted - flattered even - at the way Bruce took him into his confidence. He could almost picture himself shooting the rapids, camped out later that evening on the banks of a placid lake buried in the New England wilderness, throwing back long neck beers and bullshitting with the guys.

"We put in at Ball Mountain Dam, but the first big water doesn't come until we hit Landslide Rapids."

"How long a stretch?"

"About two miles of continuous churning white water." Bruce unscrewed a water-tight aluminum canister stacked with sulfur-tipped wooden matches. Lips moving silently, he counted the slender sticks before securing the lid back in place. "There're a couple of pretty tricky S-turns that push your paddling skills to the limit, but it's really tons of fun."

Her piano lesson over, Ruthie emerged from the side door. Mrs. Beagle cracked a toothy smile and waved sharply before disappearing back into the music studio. "Seems like you got the best of both worlds," Allan noted, watching his daughter near the porch, playing with a calico

kitten. The Beagles had several dogs, three canaries, a painted turtle and indeterminate number of cats.

"How's that?"

"Along with a beautiful family, you still get the privilege to come and go as you please." No sooner had he spoken, Allan wished the words back. It sounded peevish - as though he might envy the handsome man's inordinate capacity for pleasure and personal fulfillment.

Bruce simply smiled and jutted his chin out with a mischievous smirk. Raising his hands, palms splayed to the bright sky, he whispered, "Guilty as charged." Then the robust man winked, a conspiratorial gesture, and turned his attention back to the packing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Allan took Ruthie to see Toy Story II over the weekend. Afterwards, they went to Ryan's Diner for supper where she ordered a hot dog with curly fries from the children's menu. Allan settled on the brisket. "That Mr. Beagle seems like a swell guy."

"He cracks tons of jokes," Ruthie waved a French fry in the air, "and he's always smooching and hugging his wife." She dabbed the fry in a puddle of ketchup and deposited it in her mouth.

"Mrs. Beagle ... you're piano teacher? He's always kissing her?"

"Who else?" Ruthie looked at him queerly. "He can't hardly keep his hands off the woman. It's a bit embarrassing but sort of cute." The waitress returned with a pile of napkins which she centered on the table. "Were you and Mom lovey-dovey like that?"

Allan speared a slice of brisket and jabbed it in the brown gravy. "Yeah, sort of."

"Well, were you or weren't you?"

"At the beginning... for the first few years." He cleared his throat. "I don't think, maybe with the exception of the Beagles, too many people stay that way much beyond the honeymoon."

"Well they ought to."

Allan shook his head up and down just a bit too vigorously. It suddenly occurred to him that, somewhere up in the pristine wilderness of Vermont, Bruce Beagle was probably hunched over a campfire with his buddies sipping black coffee. The good-natured man, who brazenly pawed his wife in front of the piano students, would curl up in a sleeping bag and be lulled to sleep by a symphony of frogs, crickets, owls and assorted night creatures. "You know what I liked best about the movie," he blurted, deflecting the conversation elsewhere.

Allan needed a new life - a hobby, an ardent passion, a raison d'être. He definitely needed a break from the tedium, something a tad more adventuresome than honking on a saxophone at weddings and bar mitzvahs. White water rafting was out of the question. First of all, he had no intention of becoming a Bruce Beagle clone, replicating the man's back-to-nature lifestyle and habits. Secondly, as a swimmer, he hadn't progressed much beyond the dogpaddle. At one point earlier in the week when they were commiserating, Bruce Beagle wandered into the garage to retrieve an item. "That's one hell of a weapon." Allan gestured at a crossbow hanging from a rack on the far wall.

Bruce lifted the bow free of the wall and ran the palm of his hand over the wooden stock. "It's a, Excalibur Equinox model with a sixteen and a half inch power stroke." He pulled an ominous looking arrow from the bow-mounted quiver. "Velocity's up around three hundred fifty feet per second, which will bring down a full-grown stag instantly as long as you set the shot up

properly." He passed the bow to Allen who lofted it up and down in his hands. The lethal device was remarkably light. "I always try to set my shots up broadside or quartering away."

"And why's that?" Allan had no idea what the man was talking about.

"The razor sharp arrow's got to penetrate both lungs for a quick kill." He took the crossbow back, repositioning it on the far wall. "You don't want an animal to suffer needlessly."

"No certainly not," Allan agreed.

"I hit a buck last year in Aroostook County, Maine, and the poor son of a bitch ran off into the brush. I had to track him for three miles before the injure critter expired." Bruce wagged his handsome head thoughtfully then tapped the bridge of his nose - once, twice, three times - with a taut index finger. "The nose knows - it's a saying among hunters. An injured animal can smell the fabric conditioner or laundry detergent your well-intentioned spouse used when washing a camouflage jacket, so, with a wounded animal, all you can do is follow the blood trail until you finish the job."

Allan jettisoned Bruce Beagle from his mind. He couldn't remake himself. The time for midlife crises was passed. He went into the den and pulled out his saxophone. Fitting the mouthpiece on the neck, he blew a series of velvety-soft whole tones. Allan was still working out the melodic inversions that Herb Calloway had shown him. G-minor seven, C seven. He ran a linear riff based on pentatonic scales and passing tones. Simple stuff. Next he transposed the lick up a triton interval to the key of F-sharp. What was it Herb had cautioned? The weird-sounding notes become upward extensions of the original chord. Flatted ninths, raised elevenths ... that sort of textured voicing.

The other night at a nightclub south of Boston, Allen blew a new lick he had worked out using Herb's harmonic substitutions. He muddled through the first flurry of notes only to crash and burn on the backside of the angular, melodic phrase. A customer at the bar looked up from a watery martini with a foul expression.

\* \* \* \* \*

A year later Ruthie had a baby brother. Her mother and step-father had decided to start a family of their own. Allan was happy for them, if a bit jealous. Once or twice his ex-wife inquired about Allan's personal life but, since the new arrival, discretely avoided the topic and for that he was thankful. Allan went out on a couple blind dates - fix-ups-mix-ups. In October the band was offered five nights steady in the Marriot Hotel lounge. The money was lousy, and the musicians would be forfeiting more lucrative, 'commercial' gigs on nights that the band was committed to working the lounge, but it was steady work - steady work in a tough economy.

"You know that dame?" They were fifteen minutes into the second set at the Marriot. The bass player was gesturing with his eyes at a woman with a modestly good figure in a strapless, black evening dress.

"Never seen her before," Allan replied. He bent over the bandstand and thumbed through a list of tunes trying to decide on the next selection.

"Strange, because she's been gawking at you for the past five minutes."

Allan looked again. The darkened lounge was riddled with shadows and a cloud of cigarette smoke obliterated the tables over by the vending machine. Muriel Beagle, his daughter's former piano teacher, was standing near the entrance. He hadn't seen or heard from her since the final lesson. No, that wasn't completely accurate. Muriel had called the house mid-September the

week after school resumed to inquire about Ruthie's musical plans. As soon as Allan recognized the grating monotone, his mood soured. "She's taking time off," Allan returned noncommittally.

"Well, Ruthie shouldn't wait too long or her technique will suffer. Learning to play a musical instrument is a cumulative process."

"Yes," Allan brought her up short. "We'll get back to you as soon as she's ready to resume." The man had never bothered to tell Muriel that he, too, was a professional musician. He just wanted to finesse the insufferable woman off the phone and be rid of her - irrevocably and undeniably finished with Muriel Beagle. But like an apparition from hell, there she was again, and Allan couldn't just ignore the former piano teacher. Resting the saxophone on its stand he descended the stage and crossed the room.

"You never told me you were a musician."

Allan shrugged. "It's nice to see you." She still looked the same - the toothy overbite and languorous expression. Lipstick and eye shadow afforded the woman a certain perky flair, but it wasn't enough to offset the excess baggage. "What brings you here tonight?"

Muriel gestured toward the main function hall across the hallway at a diagonal. "My nephew's wedding."

"How nice!" If they hadn't taken the lounge gig, Allan probably would have found himself fifty feet away on the other side of the partition. He reached out and patted her on a bare arm. "I've got to get back to work."

"Yes, of course. Give my regards to Ruthie."

Why did he touch the woman's arm? Back on the bandstand, Allan adjusted the strap and reached for his instrument. He shouldn't have touched her. It was just a formality, a social amenity, but still... And he had forgotten to ask about Bruce. Was he still shooting the rapids and bagging big game - hitting them broadside or quarter away so as to ravage both lungs with razor sharp arrows? "Let's pick up the tempo," the drummer said. "Green Dolphin Street in E-flat." He counted off the tempo and the rhythm section kicked into overdrive.

Around eleven-thirty, Allan caught sight of Muriel sitting alone at the bar. The wedding had broken up around ten o'clock after the bride threw the bouquet and the wedding cake was served. Shortly thereafter, the guests collected their belongings and filtered out of the function hall. Something clearly was wrong. When the final set ran its course, Allan wandered over to the bar. "How was your nephew's wedding?"

"Great! They're flying to Aruba in the morning." Muriel was totally drunk.

Allan scanned the hallway. "I didn't see Bruce."

"And with good reason." Slurring her words, she almost toppled off the barstool. Allan reached out to steady the woman but she didn't seem to notice. "About eight months ago, Bruce ran off to North Dakota with a twenty-something, back-to-nature bimbo."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." Her tone was equal parts flippant and dismissive. "Except for sex, we were never a particularly good match." She paid her tab and stood up on wobbly legs. "That progression you played on the last measure of The Shadow of your Smile was quite clever."

Allan explained that the technique was based on symmetrical patterns." She glanced at her watch. "It is rather late and I should be going." Muriel lurched forward and almost lost her balance a second time.

Allan steered her into a Windsor chair. "Wait here, while I collect my stuff. I can give you a lift home."

"Lucky you!" The bass player tittered when Allan climbed back up on the bandstand.

"Yeah, lucky me," he muttered morosely.

On the ride home, Muriel fell sound asleep, snoring loudly with her right cheek - not a pretty sight - mashed up against the passenger side window. The house was empty. "We are your kids?"

"My mother took them for the night so I could attend the wedding."

"I'll swing by in the morning and shuttle you back to the hotel to collect your car."

"That's so sweet of you." The music teacher began to cry. She cried quietly, the way children sometimes do without bothering to place her hands over her face, the salty wetness dribbling down her chin.

Allan handed her a napkin. "Why don't I make some coffee?"

The woman in the strapless black evening dress shook her head up and down as she blotted the tears. "I'm not usually like this," she confided with a sheepish smile.

A blob of purple mascara was smeared garishly across her left cheek. "Go in the bathroom and wash your face," Allan suggested while I make the coffee?"

Ten minutes later, Muriel shuffled back into the kitchen. She was wearing a pair of flannel pajamas. Her face had been scrubbed clean, the hair pulled back with a cotton scrunchy. She walked up to Allan and stood so close that he could feel her whiskey-sour breath on his cheek. "There's something you need to hear." Muriel had regained her composure; she wasn't drunk anymore. "I'm a shitty piano teacher - the worst music teacher in the universe."

"This really isn't nec -"

"No, even if you hate my guts, you're going to hear me out." Three or four inches shorter than Allan, the woman had to crane her neck to make eye contact. "I chose badly. I should have been a construction worker, pastry chef, dentist, mortician, street walker... anything but a goddamn piano teacher."

"Geez, Muriel. For Christ sakes get a grip!"

"But everything's gonna change." She rushed ahead, ignoring his plea. "I'm closing the studio. No more music lessons. My brother-in-law, the one whose son got married today, runs a catering business. I'm gonna work for him arranging functions and preparing meals."

A strong aroma wafted through the room. "I think the coffee's ready."

"Would you like to spend the night?" She was leaning up against him now and, through the fleecy flannel, Allan could sense that Muriel Beagle was not wearing any bra. Her enticing fleshliness notwithstanding, Allan's muddled brain was preoccupied with a different agenda. He detected a subtle inflection - a sense of urgency coupled with restraint - as she spoke. The words rose and fell in rich cadence; earlier Muriel tripped over a troubling phrase then, catching her emotional stride, rushed impetuously ahead. She sounded human, vulnerable, exposed, and utterly human.

"Would you like to spend the night here," she repeated.

"Yes, I would like that very much, but since we went to all the trouble, let's have coffee first."

The sex - it wasn't quite what Allan expected. He had only been with a meager handful of woman before marrying and even fewer since. "Following my second pregnancy, I had my tubes tied," Muriel Beagle whispered, "so there's no need to worry." With a deep sigh she threw her arms up over her head and gave herself to him. It only took a few minutes. Afterwards, Allan lay

on his back in blissful torpor. "I'm going to grab a quick shower, if you don't mind." Muriel slid off the sheets and disappeared into the bathroom. Ten minutes later, a freshly scrubbed Muriel Beagle was snuggling next to him with a hand resting on the small of his back. Her breath smelled of minty Listerine. "I want what you have."

"And what might that be?"

"Since my husband left, I've been crippled by loneliness. I don't feel like a complete person ... whole inside."

Yes, there it was again! She spoke in whisper-soft, hushed tones, and yet an oddly expansive sonority had crept to her voice. "I didn't know I was a role model for much of anything." Allan kissed the side of her face then rubbed the moistness away with the heel of his hand. "Let me tell you about my Fourth of July." Allan recounted his dark night of the soul at the hands of the spunky teenager vixen with the amazing chest.

"And you think it's any different for single, middle-aged woman?" Snuggling closer, there was nothing judgmental in her tone. She draped a calf over his leg. Allan could feel Muriel's pubic hair tickling his crotch. "What do you think?" Her intent was unmistakable.

Slipping an arm around the small of her back, he rolled over. "Yes, I don't see why not."

On the ride home, Allan took stock of things. A Friday afternoon booking had been cancelled on short notice. The groom got cold feet and ran off somewhere. The band got paid whether they played or not, because, in the event of conjugal calamities, 'no refund beyond a fixed date' was stipulated in the contract. Allan would take Ruthie out for supper and she could sleep over, freeing up his ex-wife to do as she pleased. Monday afternoon, the band was rehearsing new material - mostly covers of Top-40 material. Allan would have preferred an earlier time slot, but the lead guitar player, who had a thyroid condition and took hormonal supplements made from desiccated pig glands, could never pull himself out of bed much before noon.

There had been another session with Herb Calloway. He showed Allan how to substitute augmented scales over dominant seventh chords to add musical color. The 'trick' - Herb had a thousand-and-one musical tricks up his sleeve - was to approach the dominant seventh as a whole tone scale. "All six notes will hang together," Herb counseled, "because the first three are diatonic to the triad. Next comes the sharp eleventh, augmented fifth and the dominant seventh." He wrote an example out on a sheet of music paper labeling each tone as either complimentary or an upward extension of the original chord.

Allan made reservations to take Muriel Beagle out to supper at an Indian Restaurant three blocks over from Copley Plaza in downtown Boston. Muriel was partial to curry and had a crock pot recipe for curried chicken basted in white wine sauce, topped with Basmati rice, green onions and pineapple chunks. She thought she might introduce the recipe as an offering with her brother-in-law's catering business, but not until later when she was more settled in the new venture.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Emergence

The diary lay abandoned on a chair in the passenger terminal of Southwest Airlines. Nadia Rasmussen noticed the leather-bound journal as she slumped down in the seat opposite and reached out reflexively but almost immediately thought better and pulled back.

A year earlier almost to the day she had been returning home from another librarians' conference in Seattle when she spied a shiny paperback – a perfect bound, Penguin Classic edition with the signature black spine and orange logo. This book, too, had been orphaned, deserted, cast off like a jilted lover by its anonymous owner. Nadia held the book up to the dim light. The First Circle by Alexander Solzhenitsyn - what a find! She had already *read A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Cancer Ward*. Now this thick tome would keep her occupied for the better part of a week or more.

Strange though, how the cover appeared flawlessly immaculate without a single crease or physical blemish – not just pristinely clean, but unread. But then, perhaps the owner bought the novel for the flight out and promptly mislaid the book in the commotion as the plane began boarding. Nadia cracked the front cover, curling the spine stiffly back on itself. A coffin-like rectangle an inch deep had been carved out of the text block.

The previous owner was smuggling drugs!

Once through customs, the mutilated masterpiece had served its purpose and been promptly discarded. Looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching, Nadia replaced the disfigured book back where she originally found it and moved several rows away. After that unsettling experience, she resolved to ignore any similar serendipitous finds.

“Is this yours?” An elegantly-dressed, black woman with pearl drop earrings was leaning across the aisle waving the leather journal at Nadia.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied absently. Nadia took the book and concealed it in the side compartment of her carryon bag. Then she felt her face flush and heart racing out of control. What if the owner came rushing back to reclaim his property?

*Did anyone see a coffee-colored, leather-bound journal with an ornate hand-tooled façade?* Over the intercom a representative announced that the Southwest flight to Boston's Logan Airport would be boarding momentarily. The black woman with the stunning earrings went and stood in line with other passengers queuing up in front of a small door leading to the plane. Nadia waited discretely a good a five minutes before collecting her carry-on luggage and joining the others.

An hour into the flight, Nadia settled on a plan of action. Without bothering to examine the content of the journal, she would locate the author's name and address, which in all likelihood was recorded on either the inner flap or first few pages. Once home, she would mail the object to its rightful owner with a short note explaining how the diary came into her possession. No need to identify herself or provide return address. The simple, straightforward act of returning the journal – unread, of course - would rectify the earlier *faux pas*. However, an hour into the flight when she finally got around to opening the manuscript, Nadia discovered no address, not even a first or last name. Thumbing through to the back, the last few pages were utterly blank. The owner would remain forever anonymous, nameless and unidentified.

The ethical dilemma having taken yet another perverse detour, whatever personal obligation she originally felt to reunite the handwritten diary with its creator no longer existed.

Nadia could discard it by dropping the journal in the trash at her earliest convenience once the plane touched down in Boston. Or she could leave it somewhere in Logan Airport – perhaps near the reservations counter or on an empty seat in one of the terminals for the next would-be passerby.

The fasten seatbelts sign was extinguished, and an hour later the stewardesses began serving a light lunch as the plane passed over the Rockies. Nadia sipped a V-8 vegetable juice cocktail while munching an oatmeal raisin cookie. The rather plump middle-aged gentleman sitting next to her in a pin-striped suit ordered a gin and tonic, which he polished off in short order.

The man, who was rather short with a washed out, pallid complexion, suffered from male pattern baldness, the fine hair on the crown of his head receding in frizzy tufts to form an unflattering ‘M’. Nadia had read somewhere that the condition was induced by hormones and genetic predisposition. As the stewardess passed in the aisle, the fellow pulled her aside and ordered a second drink. Just a moment earlier, Nadia had caught him ogling her chest, although maybe it was just her imagination. “What are you reading?” He indicated the leather journal.

“It’s a diary of sorts,” Nadia replied obliquely. Even if the fellow, who was old enough to be her father, hadn’t been staring at her bosom, she wasn’t quite sure how she ought to answer the question.

“That’s nice.” His drink arrived, sparing Nadia from any additional small talk.

*April 5th, 2010*

*The Tarahumara Indians here in the hill country of Northern Mexico are not well-liked by much of anyone outside their immediate clan. The mestizos - half-breeds with Indian and Spanish blood - view them as lazy, stupid, and totally unwilling to conform to conventional society. I’m not sure how the Mexicans define the term ‘conventional’. The Tarahumara regard the mestizos as evil and aggressive chavochis, or bearded ones, who have intruded on their land.*

*Yesterday I spotted a group of Tarahumara women sitting outside the community store in a tiny hamlet just south of Sisoguichic on the Rio Concho River. With few exceptions, they have no need for store-bought goods so they sat for hours on end - self-contained, impassive and perfectly at peace with the world around them, a world that views them as grossly inferior and unworthy.*

*As the civilized world encroaches on them, the Indians retreat deeper into the wilderness of the high plateau country of the Western Sierra Madre in the northern state of Chihuahua. At last count, seventy thousand remain. Clinging to their primitive culture, the Tarahumara want no part of progress as we define it. They exist in a parallel, non-contiguous universe, farming their rocky, inhospitable soil. They raise corn which is ground into meal and stored in small, water-tight sheds fashioned from rough-hewn logs which they harvest from nearby forests. Some Indians keep goats, sheep and cattle but eat little to no meat. They also grow squash and beans and collect oregano along with several other greens which they boil and eat as we do spinach. The dried corn can last upwards of a year. From the sheep, the women weave elaborately designed blankets and cloth to protect themselves from the brutal winters.*

*Everything they need is supplied by Tata Dios, their animistic God. Many Tarahumara were converted to Catholicism by missionaries, but their Christian celebrations are quite bizarre and incomprehensible, even to the local, Christian clergy. By our twentieth-century standards,*



*their aspirations are quite limited and circumspect. They have no need for money. Their agrarian lifestyle is Edenesque in its utter simplicity and disregard for modern convenience.*

Nadia wasn't being paranoid.

As soon as she lowered her head to the journal, her seatmate began undressing her with his eyes, but she was too engrossed in the narrative to make an issue of it. And, if she smart mouthed him, what good would that accomplish? For the duration of the flight, she would still be stuck sitting there next to the horny old fart and his endless parade of gin and tonics.

Reading on, Nadia learned that the diarist – she assumed he was male, although he never properly identified himself as such – was studying anthropology at Antioch College and had traveled to northern Mexico to live with the Indians for the summer. The author was hoping to write his doctoral thesis on the Tarahumara Indian culture, folkways, traditions and myths.

*April 10th*

*I have learned two words today: Quiravi, which means 'How are you?' and Bearipacheva!, which translates 'Until tomorrow!' So now I can greet people both when coming and going. Not that it makes much difference. I understand no other Indian words and communicate in broken Spanish with the handful of Tarahumara who are bilingual and willing to accept me, the crazy white man, into their confidence.*

*"The Tarahumara in his native condition is better off, morally, mentally and economically than his civilized brother."*

*The above quote, which I found in a moldy text squirreled away in the Antioch College library is from the Norwegian explorer, Carl Lumholtz, after he visited the region in the nineteen forties. I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of his observation.*

*One of the locals fixed me up with a family who have agreed to let me live with them for a few weeks, and I will be trekking up into the mountains to their small farm toward the end of the week. The beginning of a wonderful adventure is at hand!*

The pilot's voice came over the intercom. The plane, which had banked out over Boston Harbor, was starting its final descent into Logan Airport. Nadia stowed the journal in the bottom of her bag and, closing her eyes, leaned back in the seat. A strategic maneuver, she could hear the fellow next to her shifting about. For sure, he was giving her a thorough once over. Cheap thrill! She wasn't even remotely interested in his midlife crisis.

\*\*\*\*\*

Her first day back at the Brandenburg Public Library, Nadia waded through a listing of new titles recently published. The library had just received their budget for the new fiscal year. In September she was put in charge of new acquisitions. Like a child in a penny candy store, Nadia ultimately decided which hardcover books to buy among the multiple genres – romance, mystery, literary, detective, young adult as well as juvenile. And that didn't even take into account nonfiction offerings.

"I'm doing a term paper on the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner." Nadia looked up from her desk on the second floor. A high school girl with blond hair tied back in French braids was leaning against the counter.

"Yes, I can find that for you."

"CliffsNotes," the girl interjected rather gruffly. "All I need are CliffsNotes." The nasally voice was tinged with surly impatience.

"Yes, well, we have that, too." Nadia led her to the section in the stacks where study materials were stored. "You're a lucky girl."

"How's that?"

"There were only four copies available this morning. That's the last one." Clearly, Nadia mused, the churlish blonde had no intention of ever reading the poem in the original. When the girl was gone, Nadia returned to the stacks, pulled a slim book from a shelf and returned to the reference desk. She flipped through the pages randomly ignoring text until she found what she was looking for.

"Such a pretty flower!" Liam MacDonald, the library director, came up behind her and was squinting over her shoulder.

Nadia smiled faintly. The director, who was of Scottish background, reminded her of a medieval, Hassidic rabbi with his long, horse face, scraggily reddish-brown beard and prominent nose. The director's lanky body was soft and doughy. "It's a flowering peyote," Nadia explained. The cactus, she had just learned, grew in south Texas and Mexico in the high-elevation, desert thorn scrub. The flower pictured in the photo was sitting atop a diminutive, dark green cactus no larger than a bell pepper. A dozen or so delicate, purple petals shot out from the pastel golden nub.

"Peyote's a hallucinogenic," the director noted.

"Yes, but the local Indians also use the plant to treat toothaches, pain in childbirth, fever, breast discomfort, skin diseases, rheumatism, diabetes, colds, and even blindness."

"As I recall," the director added, "some of the New Age writers and 'beat' poets experimented with a peyote derivative, mescaline. Ken Kesey, the author of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Allen Ginsberg come to mind. But since the psychedelic sixties, the drug has fallen out of vogue."

Ken Kesey. Allen Ginsberg. Liam had to be a few years shy of Medicare, which is to say, he was just coming of age when the flower power generation were experimenting with a smorgasbord of mind bending drugs. "The plant also has antibiotic properties," Nadia said, shifting gears. "An extract from the peyote cactus has proven effective against eighteen strains of penicillin-resistant bacteria, and fungus."

"Really!" The director went back downstairs to the circulation desk.

Nadia had no great interest in the plant's medicinal properties. The nameless author of the leather-bound journal had chewed the disc-shaped peyote buttons, documenting in his journal that the plant was extremely bitter and nauseating. But he mentioned nothing of a personal nature in the text about his experience other than to report, in a rather dry, clinical reportage that, after ingesting five grams of peyote (i.e. approximately five hundred milligrams of mescaline), he experienced heightened states of introspection and insights of a mystical nature.

\*\*\*\*\*

Later that night at supper Nadia asked, "Is our property still zoned agricultural?"

Mr. Rasmussen, who taught physics at the junior college, was spooning out a helping of mashed potatoes onto his plate. "From here west to the Seekonk line has always been considered farm country." He passed the bowl to his wife. "This place was a working farm when you grandfather lived here, albeit they didn't have that many animals. Why do you ask?"

"I was considering buying a few chickens to raise out in the back."

Mrs. Rasmussen's eyes narrowed. The big-boned woman shifted uncomfortably in her seat and compressed her lips in a tight line. "For what purpose?"

"I don't know. So we could have fresh eggs whenever we wanted."

"Eggs are still relatively cheap and when you consider upkeep, it may not be practical."

Mr. Rasmussen smiled but when he spoke his tone was more inquisitive than argumentative. "You'd need a coop, not to mention both time and energy to manage the fowl. Have you considered the potential headaches?"

"The old shed could easily be converted into a coop," Nadia parried the question, "and setting up a run for a half-dozen birds is no more difficult than fencing off a vegetable garden."

"Chickens?" Nadia's mother began fidgeting again, this time more aggressively, in her seat and looked to her husband for moral support. "I really don't know that -"

"What's the problem?" Mr. Rasmussen interjected, waving a hand dismissively in the air. "You buy fully grown birds, some grain and basic supplies. If the scheme doesn't work out, it's not the end of the world." Nadia's father grabbed a warm roll from a basket, tore it in half and reached for the butter. "If memory serves me right, free-roaming fowl are inexpensive to maintain, their eggs fresher than anything you could buy at the local market and they manufacture the world's best fertilizer."

"You're not quitting your job at the library, are you?" Mrs. Rasmussen asked frigidly.

"For God's sake, of course not!" Nadia groaned. "It's just a hobby ...something to do in my spare time."

"While you're hunting around for chickens," her mother added peevishly, "maybe you could scare up a husband or two."

Since middle school, Nadia's looks had been, at best, problematic. If the cheeks had been just a bit more sculpted, the features less dense, the effect might have proven modestly attractive. By her senior year in college Nadia Rasmussen had given up on the singles bars. A decade later, she pulled the plug on the internet dating services and lonely hearts section of the *Brandenburg Gazette*. By the age of thirty-five the woman had effectively thrown in the romantic towel – *no mas!* - resigning herself to a nether world of terminal spinsterhood. "Apparently nobody wants a homely wife."

Mrs. Rasmussen's bottom lip quivered and her eyes clouded over as though the remark was a malicious slight. "You're not homely and don't ever suggest such a thing!"

"Unfortunately," Nadia countered, "nobody else shares your maternal bias." A tense silence pervaded the room like a raw, early morning mist. "I found this weird journal at the airport in Seattle." Nadia told her parents about the anonymous author and his experiences with the Indians of the Sierra Madre.

"So now you want to run off and join a tribe of God-forsaken, Stone Age heathens!" Mrs. Rasmussen, who was, by nature, both excitable and high-strung was becoming increasingly shrill.

"On the contrary," Nadia replied. "I feel no great affinity to the Tarahumara, but reading about them does makes me want to connect in some small way with ..." She didn't quite know

how to finish the sentence and, judging by the unforgiving expression in her mother's eyes, didn't see where a flurry of flowery speechifying would make a difference.

"My advice," Mr. Rasmussen poured some iced tea from a carafe, "is that you check with the feed and grange store near the fire station in Rehoboth. They're always advertising small critters of one sort or another and might be able to give you some practical advice if you're serious about the venture."

"You're a reference librarian, not some hillbilly farmer's daughter," Mrs. Rasmussen sputtered under her breath.

As the matter had been resolved in a thoroughly democratic fashion, no one seemed to be paying much attention, and mercifully, Mr. Rasmussen began discussing plans for a late summer vacation on Lake Winnepesaukee. Her father, if not wildly enthusiastic, remained relatively neutral. Raising chickens was little more than a venial sin, the sort of psychological aberration that, if things didn't pan out, could be set right quickly and with minimal, collateral damage.

Nadia showered, washed her hair and was in bed with the lights out by ten o'clock. A short time later, her father shuffled into the room. Mr. Rasmussen stood mutely by the headboard, waiting patiently for her to acknowledge his presence.

"What?" Nadia murmured. She was dozing off.

"Why did you say what you did earlier?"

"About the chickens?"

"No, not that. You're no movie star, but you're plenty pretty enough to get a husband without groveling or settling for second best." When there was no reply, he retreated from the room. A minute later Mr. Rasmussen was back again, thumping Nadia insistently between the shoulder blades.

"Jesus, I was sound asleep! You went off and I thought - "

Her father lit the light and sat down on the side of the bed, cradling a textbook heavier than most doorstops in his lap. Nadia draped her forearm over her eyes to block the light. "Emergence theory," her father spoke rather softly in a deliberate, unhurried manner, "describes how complex patterns arise from relatively simple interactions. The concept has been around since the time of Aristotle."

Nadia let out a muffled groan. "First thing in the morning, Liam MacDonald's scheduled a staff meeting at the library after which I'm meeting with a group of prospective senior volunteers." Mr. Rasmussen positioned the book in front of his daughter who was now sitting up in bed. On the right-hand page was a picture of a rather elaborate termite mound – more like an orangey cathedral - somewhere in the grasslands of Africa. "Very impressive but I don't understand why you're showing me this."

"The termites have no idea that an architectural masterpiece will emerge from their collective efforts. Generations of insects go to their mindless graves without even an appreciative glance at the end product of their labors." Clearly, Mr. Rasmussen was just getting up a head of steam and had no intentions of condensing or abbreviating his remarks. Regardless of the late hour, there would be no CliffsNotes version.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"The termites had no conscious knowledge of what they are creating when they start hauling debris years earlier." He jabbed at the photo emphatically. "In Emergence Theory, systems can have qualities not directly traceable to the original components, but rather to how

those components interact.” Nadia’s father lowered his eyes and began reading directly from the accompanying text:

*Emergence theory is uncomfortably like magic. How does an irreducible causal power arise, since by definition it can’t be due to the collection of things at a lesser level? It turns human reason and scientific methodology on its ear by giving you something for nothing. Nothing commands the system to form a pattern. Instead, the interaction of each part with its immediate surroundings causes a complex chain of processes leading to some order.*

Flipping the page, Mr. Rasmussen pointed to several other examples: sand dunes in the Saharan Desert reconfigured and set in constant, undulating motion by a violent windstorm; a mosaic of kaleidoscopic crystals feathering across a pane of glass during a Siberian ice storm.

Mr. Rasmussen shut the light but showed no inclination to leave. “Emergence Theory would suggest that there’s a reason – most probably beyond our limited comprehension - why you stumbled across that abandoned journal. It’s all part of the grand design.” Mr. Rasmussen suddenly reached out and stroked her face with the palm of his hand. “One last thing,” he added hoarsely as an afterthought, “Everything about you is an unimpeachable work of art.” Leaning forward, he kissed her once on the forehead and silently left the room.

*May 5th*

*The Tarahumara are essentially a ‘stone age’ culture. Even today they want nothing to do with money. Material possessions are of no importance. They are a very shy, sensitive, bashful and isolated people, even within their households. Family members only speak to each other when absolutely necessary and woman are not allowed to be seen naked unless in the act of lovemaking.*

*These unusual – unusual by our Western standards – traits are reflected quite graphically in the way they handle conflict. The Tarahumara practice a Gandhi-like passive resistance characterized by physical withdrawal and avoidance. In recent years, when the Mexican government has been encroaching on their traditional homelands in search of minerals and logging interests, the Indians simply stand quietly and let it happen. Then they retreat even further into the Barranca del Cobra (i.e. the remote Copper Canyon) and even harsher environmental conditions.*

Saturday morning Nadia Rasmussen drove to Hoxie’s Feed and Grange Store in Rehoboth. “I need some chickens.”

“Dual purpose or layers?” the owner, a portly man in farmer jeans asked.

The question caught her off guard. “All I want are the eggs.”

‘Would that be for a commercial venture or just recreational, family farming?’

“Family. All I want are a few birds.”

With a wave of the wrist he indicated a door at the far end of the building. “Go out back and see Jonathan. He’ll take care of you.” Just as abruptly, the man turned away to the next customer.

As she walked through the barnlike structure, Nadia saw bags of grain and feed for every manner of animal, four-legged and otherwise. There were gerbils and hamsters in metal cages with water bottles and circular tread mills. A pastel yellow cockatoo with a bunching of feathers

sticking straight up from the crown of its delicate head was pecking away at a tray of seeds. Nadia generally didn't do well with animals, domestic or otherwise. They needed to be fed and groomed on a regular basis; they peed, defecated and infused every permeable object with a musky, unhygienic odor. Visiting the Hoxie Feed and Grange was, in a manner of speaking, like facing down her demons, like learning how to swim by pinching one's nose and belly flopping into the deep end of the pool. Just outside the rear door on the loading platform was a short, stocky man in his mid-thirties dressed in farmer jeans and a plaid shirt. "I need a few chickens."

Dual purpose or layers?"

It was the same question the older man had put to her. "All I want is a handful of chicken so my family can have fresh eggs."

The fellow pushed a pair of dark-framed glasses up on the bridge of his nose and massaged a scraggily beard with the palm of his hand. "We don't keep mature fowl here on premises, but I can get whatever you want in a day or two."

"Well that's the problem," Nadia confided. "I don't know the first thing about raising chickens."

Jonathan blinked several times and cleared his throat. "My father sent you back here?"

"Yes, he said you could get me situated."

He continued to stare at her with a disconcertingly blank expression. "Food, water, space..."

"Excuse me?" Jonathan Hoxie was proving to be about as much help as his tight-lipped father

"A moment ago, you said you didn't know the first thing about raising chickens. You just learned pretty much everything there is to know about the topic." His laconic features dissolved in a whimsical smile. "Unlike most domestic animals, chickens don't really need us for much of anything. As long as you set clean drinking water aside, a little nourishment and don't crowd them together, they'll look after their own needs." Jonathan Hoxie led the way back into the building to a small office next to a hutch full of short-hair, Holland lop rabbits.

"Now this is what I would suggest..."

As Jonathan explained things, all Nadia needed were five or six chickens to produce a couple dozen eggs weekly – more than enough to feed the entire family with a few left over for breads and pastries. He sold her a fifty-pound bag of calcium for ten dollar and when she asked how long the bag would last, Jonathan replied, "You and all your feathered progeny will be dead and buried before the calcium runs out." He sold her two each of Rhode Island Reds, Barred Plymouth Rocks and White Leghorns. "You'll find the Plymouth Rocks are a bit more docile than the others."

"I thought chickens were pretty much the same when it came to temperament."

The bearded man's eyebrows rose a good quarter inch before settling back down. "Each bird – even in the same breed – will display a different personality and temperament. And they're infinitely entertaining." The Jonathan looked down pensively at his heavy work boots. "What do you do for a living, Miss Rasmussen?"

"I'm the reference librarian over at the Brandenburg Public Library."

"If you traffic in poetry and prose, then you must know where the term 'pecking order' came from." Nadia thought a moment. When no reply was forthcoming, he continued, "A social caste system always emerges among the dull-witted critters in chicken coops. Some birds are more aggressive and dominant while others, like the rock hens, tend to be more laid back,

curious and easygoing.” He stroked his whiskers thoughtfully. “Do you remember back to high school with all the silly cliques - the geeks, valedictorians, mean girls, jocks, highfalutin homecoming queens and fashionistas?”

“Chickens move in their own social circles?”

“After a fashion, yes.”

Off to one corner in the cramped office, a stack of cardboard boxes labeled 'Merrick Gourmet Dog Food' teetered five feet off the rough-sawn floorboards. *Burger Pie and Sweet Fries. Campfire Trout Feast, Harvest Moon. Love Potion #9.* Did they really put succulent trout in the dog food, Nadia mused, or some dirt-cheap facsimile? And Love Potion #9 - what a goofy name for over-priced mush served in a stainless steel dog bowl!

"Wingaling," He whisked an orphaned can off the desk and held it just under Nadia's chin. "It's one of our biggest sellers. Features pressure-cooked chicken bones, sweet potatoes, carrots and peas."

Jonathan, who lived close by, agreed to deliver the hens directly to Nadia's house later in the week along with a chicken tractor, a moveable screened pen that would protect the fowl from predators at night and when no one was around. Nadia, the reference librarian who had never even owned a cat much less a half dozen chickens, drove home with a profound sense of awe and trepidation.

*May 11th*

*The Tarahumara are best known as the "running Indians". Running a twenty-six mile marathon is no great deal for these amazing people who have been known to cover distances of fifty to eighty miles on a regular basis and at a consistently fast pace. Endurance takes precedence over speed, and, in their hunting practices, the Indians have literally chased after deer, wild turkey and rabbits until the animals collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Their unusual hunting practices are common knowledge throughout the Southwest where ranchers have hired Indians to chase down wild horses.*

*A medical doctor, Dale Groom, who has studied the Tarahumara, writes: "Probably not since the days of the ancient Spartans have a people achieved such a high state of physical conditioning."*

*From what I've observed in the relatively short period that I have boarded with the Indians, conditioning seems to explain their amazing endurance, rather than heredity or genetics. In one competitive race called the 'rarajipari' two teams must kick a baseball-shaped wooden ball as they run. Each man takes turns dribbling the ball, soccer-style, along a course that extends over very rocky, rugged terrain. Racers drink an alcoholic drink called tesguino, which is made from fermented corn, right up until the start of the race. Contestants often smoke a combination of tobacco mixed with dried bat's blood to help them run faster and fend off the other team's malicious spirits. It is not uncommon for runners to drop out of the race due to superstitious fear but never from exhaustion.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Driving a battered Chevy pickup with a blown muffler, Jonathan Hoxie rumbled into the Rasmussen's back yard Thursday late in the afternoon. The six birds were packed away for

safekeeping in the chicken trailer, which he deposited in the back yard next to a clump of silver birch trees. Nadia's father, who had purposely come home early from work to welcome the new arrivals, stood off to one side wearing distracted expression.

Almost as soon as the chicken trailer arrived, one by one, the birds climbed down the slatted ramp to terra firma to inspect their new digs. Jonathan unlatched the door, reached in and grabbed a white leghorn, which he cradled against his barrel chest. "Meet the welcoming committee!" Without forewarning he handed the plump fowl to Nadia. The bird clucked and craned its neck but settled back down fairly quickly. "You can keep them in the wire coop or let them roam about the yard during the day. The choice is yours." Jonathan pointed to the fifty pound bag in the rear of the truck. "Where do you want the calcium?"

Mr. Rasmussen was already waiting with a two-wheel hand truck to cart the dietary supplement off to the shed. "I threw in a bag of pine shavings. The carbon emitted from the wood chips will absorb any odor from the bird waste. Also, you can shift the chicken tractor about from one location to another to give the birds a new collection of weeds, worms and insects to feast on." All six birds were out of the coop now, foraging about the yard. "They're nothing like dogs or cats," Jonathan noted, anticipating her train of thought. "You don't need to do much of anything except put out fresh water and collect the eggs each day."

Mrs. Rasmussen came out on the back stoop and gawked at the new arrivals with a look of apocalyptic despair before retreating to the domestic safe haven of her kitchen. Meanwhile, Mr. Rasmussen had cornered Jonathan Hoxie down by the shed where he was haranguing the feed and grange man with an endless barrage of questions. Ten minutes later the man jumped back in the cab of his truck and sped away.

"What was that all about?"

Her father waved a hand distractedly in the air. "A private matter." Mr. Rasmussen went off to inspect the chickens.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two weeks had passed since the hens arrived. They started laying eggs almost immediately and truly required next to nothing from their human hosts. "Your father's making me nervous," Mrs. Rasmussen sputtered morosely.

Nadia, who had just returned home from work, was replenishing the plastic water tray. The birds seemed to be managing nicely on a steady diet of table scraps, grubs, worms, spiders, commercial chicken feed – twenty percent protein layer pellets mix with whole grain - and the oyster shell calcium Jonathan recommended. "And why is dad making you nervous?"

"When he comes home from the college in the late afternoon, he sits on the back porch staring at the chickens."

"That's a problem?"

"Your father's up to something," Mrs. Rasmussen fretted. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Watching the birds is therapeutic."

"Your father's a physic teacher at the community college not some gentleman farmer."

"I didn't know the two were mutually exclusive."

Her mother lumbered back to the house. As much as Mrs. Rasmussen bellyached about the hens, she, too, had grown attached. On more than one occasion, Nadia had caught her mother observing them with a transfixed expression as the birds, like an impromptu vaudeville act, went



about their daily routine. The heavyset woman regularly brought baskets of surplus eggs over to the neighbors who reported how fresh and noticeably tastier they were.

Nadia's father had begun studying each bird, identifying certain anomalies and predilections. "That feisty Rhode Island red hates one of the rock hens," he observed earlier that morning. Mr. Rasmussen pointed out the troublesome bird in question. Sure enough, no sooner had he spoke when the Rhode Island Red could be seen chasing the terrified rock hen out from behind a clump of tulips past the gutter spout at the far end of the house. "Strange, though, how he leaves the other rock hen alone. It's only that smaller one she torments." Sure enough the second rock hen was pecking away in the dirt not three feet away, oblivious to the donnybrook.

The third week in June, Jonathan Hoxie visited the library. "I drove by your house but nobody was home. I've got a message for your father, but he'll have to hurry or the opportunity could slip away."

Nadia stared at the short, compact man. When they first met, Nadia originally thought Jonathan slightly dull-witted, but realized that she had misjudged the man. As comfortable and self-assured as he was around gerbils, hamsters and Holland lop rabbits, Jonathan was horribly hamstrung and socially inept – totally out of his element in social situations. In a word, the man was excruciatingly shy. "What opportunity are we talking about?"

"A dairy farmer just up the road in Seekonk is culling his herd. The owner's got a Jersey that's only producing thirty pounds a day and is willing to let her go for a fraction -"

"My father approached you about a cow?"

Jonathan blinked and gawked at her queerly. "He's been calling me at least twice a week since I dropped off the hens." The man leaned forward and lowered his voice, assuming a confidential tone. "The Jersey's a good deal because it's on the small side – a tad under eight hundred pounds – and, even taking butter, cheeses, cream and yoghurt into account, what's a family gonna do with more than thirty pounds of high-fat milk each week?"

Nadia sat for a full minute staring blankly toward the stacks at the far end of the room. Her pudgy hands were folded on the top of the reference desk in a prayerful attitude, as she recalled a peculiar incident from earlier in the week. Wednesday evening after bathing and combing out her hair, she decided to check her email on the internet. When the darkened computer screen came to life, she was staring at a website from Holly Lake Ranch in Hawkins Texas, featuring old-fashion, wooden butter churns. The tapered buckets were held tight by metal bands with the slender pole attached to the butter paddle sticking straight up from a hole in the center of the lid. Navigating out of the website so she could retrieve her mail, Nadia thought nothing of the queer incident. "Could I see this animal ... this eight hundred pound Jersey cow?"

"Now?"

"Yes, right now."

Jonathan rubbed the back of his neck with a broad, callused hand. "Well, I don't see why not. The farm's only twenty minutes away. We could shoot over there in my truck and be back in no time."

Rising from her chair, Nadia followed him downstairs. At the front desk she cornered an elderly woman processing a pile of books in circulation. "There's been a family emergency. Tell Liam I had to leave on short notice but will be back in an hour or so."

On the ride over to the dairy farm, Nadia noted, "What you told me was true."

"Which was?"

"That chickens develop their own pecking order."

Jonathan slowed for a family waiting at a crosswalk. “Always do.”

“Does their social system ever break down?”

Jonathan thought a moment. “Poultry can’t manage in flocks of more than twenty.”

“And why is that?”

They were already away from the congestion of the inner city on a two-lane road headed east with corn and vegetables planted in tidy rows on either side of the highway. “Chickens are social, class-conscious animals. Once every resident knows their place in the coop, the pecking order works fine but only up to a certain, fixed point. Add even one or two more birds to the mix, however, and their dim-witted, poor little brains can’t keep track of who belongs where in the fixed scheme of things. The result is pandemonium and a coop full of stressed-out, neurotic birds.” Directly up ahead the dairy farm with a series of barns and fenced off fields came into sight. Jonathan turned off the road onto a narrow muddy path and slowed the truck to a crawl as they negotiated the rutted driveway. “Twenty birds,” he repeated, “that’s the outer limit before the proverbial bird poop hits the fan.”

The cow in question, a tan Jersey with graceful legs and creamy white markings around her eyes and muzzle, was located in a field two hundred feet away from where they parked the truck. “It always pays to examine new cows firsthand to get a feel for the beasts’ qualities,” Jonathan noted. “I came by Tuesday and observed her during milking.”

“And what did you discover?”

“She’s a real classy lady. Calm, mellow... didn’t hardly give the dairy workers any grief.” “You could go with a Dutch Belted, Ayrshire, Guernsey or Dexter, but, to my mind, that Jersey’s a sensible choice.”

Jonathan gestured with a flick of his head at a grouping of much larger cows with patchwork black and white markings. “Take those Holsteins for example. They go upwards of twelve hundred pounds, consume a heck of a lot more fodder and the milk isn’t nearly as rich.” He stared thoughtfully at the cattle. “Now that chubby lady over by the rotted stump is carrying.”

An acrid smell, wet clay mixed with the sweeter more pungent odor of fresh dung suffused the air. “Carrying what?”

“She’s pregnant... probably four, five months gone.” He cracked a mischievous grin. “A two-for-one special.” Jonathan shifted thirty feet along the fence still eyeing the pregnant cow. “Do you notice how that bovine holds her head cocked slightly to the side?”

Nadia studied the pregnant cow, which was chewing her cud and staring absentmindedly in their general direction. “The back of a cow should be straight, with prominent hipbones; the neck and head ought to move freely without any stiffness. A cow that stands with her head always tilted to the side may have some visual or inner ear problems.” Jonathan picked up a small branch and hurled it to the right of where the cow was standing. Startled, the animal lumbered awkwardly several paces further away, then turned and stared dully at the humans one last time before wandering off. Again, the cow’s head was decidedly off center.

“Now that one over by the watering trough – you probably didn’t notice – is missing a teat, but that don’t matter just so long as she’s got three working teats and there’s no mastitis or udder, infectious diseases.” He quickly turned to Nadia, grinned foolishly and tapped her on the forearm “You get it? Udder... other diseases – it’s a farmer’s joke.” Jonathan began chuckling at his own cleverness.

The subject matter, which had taken an unexpected turn, left Nadia queasy, light-headed. One of the cows bellowed, a deep throaty bass sound that seemed to rile the other animals who joined in the improvised, atonal chorus. “You don’t want a cow with a nasty disposition, overly

aggressive or intimidating. The opposite can be just as bad. If Bessie frightens easily, is shy or nervous, that could be a problem.”

“But you said that the Jersey was calm during milking,” Nadia replied.

“Yes, the cow that’s for sale seems quite docile.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Returning home, Nadia found her father out on the back porch watching the chickens. The Rhode Island Red, who was pecking at a clump of dandelions, suddenly flew into a tizzy and, clucking like a banshee, chased her rock hen nemesis, to the opposite end of the yard. “How much time before the sun goes down?”

“Another hour and a half, maybe two.” Mr. Rasmussen replied. “Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering if you would you like to take a drive ...go meet the latest edition to the family?” On the ride over to the dairy farm Nadia asked, “Buying a cow – is that another example of emergence theory?”

Mr. Rasmussen shook his head in the negative. “No, it’s just animal husbandry.”

#### *June 29th*

*The Tarahumara consume huge amounts of an alcoholic beverage, tesguino, which is made from fermented corn. The Indians consider being intoxicated a matter of pride and are not ashamed to become drunk. Properly understood, it is an inextricable part of their tribal culture*

*These communal drinking festivals are important because they allow the Tarahumara to vent violent and aggressive emotions, something that would not be acceptable in ordinary, everyday life. It is said that ninety percent of all social infractions – fighting, adultery and occasionally murder - occur at the ‘tesguinado’. What is amazing, from our skewed, European point of view, is that a person who commits one of these crimes is unlikely to be punished or suffer any serious repercussions. The Tarahumara simply blame anything that happens during the tesguinado on the alcohol.*

*The roots of the Tarahumara beliefs and religion are very puzzling. In the middle 1600’s Franciscan missionaries arrived in the Copper Canyon and tried to instill Christianity as the Indian’s religion. The Tarahumara never fully accepted Christianity. They believed that their own views on religion were too important to just forget, and so, over time, the Tarahumara have assimilated bits and pieces of both religions. It is now impossible for people to find the roots of current Tarahumara beliefs. Their most important belief that has remained unchanged over the years is that God is the sun, his wife is the moon, and the Devil is the father of all non-Indians. This belief is an example of the Tarahumara extreme ethnocentrism; they believe that they are a superior race and that they are more important than other people.*

*The Tarahumara are not very hygienic. The washing of their clothes is usually either an annual or semiannual tradition. The Indians have no regular sleeping habits and simply go to sleep whenever and wherever they are tired and feel that they need rest. The practice of childbirth is also distinct to the Tarahumara. When a woman feels that it is about time for her to deliver the baby, she will go off by herself into the wilderness, brace herself between two small trees and attempt to have the baby safely. Infant mortality is very high. This fact is counterbalanced by the fact that the average Tarahumara woman gives birth to about ten babies*

*hoping that three or four will survive. Adulthood is usually short for the Indians with the average life expectancy being forty-five.*

Nadia, who was lying on the living room couch, flipped the page but discovered no more entries. It was the end of the journal but certainly not the final chapter in the saga of the Tarahumara. In an illustrated book, *Indians of the Southwest*, located in the history section of the library, she learned that the Mexican government had run train tracks through the isolated Copper Canyon opening the region up to tourists. A medical clinic, the first of its kind in the isolated area, had reduced infant mortality among the Indians by half, but the increased numbers inhabiting the region had put a strain on natural resources. There simply wasn't enough open space and farmable land left to sustain the Indians' traditional lifestyle.

\*\*\*\*\*

In late October, two months after the Jersey arrived at the Rasmussen's, Nadia stopped by the Rehoboth Feed and Grange. "I'm on my way to Logan Airport and was wondering if you would like to come along for the drive."

"Going away?" Jonathan asked.

Nadia shook her head. "It's a bit complicated," she hedged, "but I can explain everything on the Southeast Expressway. When do you get off work?"

Three hours later as they were cruising north on route three into Boston, Nadia told Jonathan about the ornate, leather-bound journal. "Now that I've finished reading it, I'm leaving the diary at the airport for someone else to find."

Directly ahead and slightly to the left, the Prudential Building loomed high above office buildings dotting the metropolitan skyline. Chinatown came into view and just as quickly disappeared as the car entered a tunnel under the city outskirts. "Sure wish you'd told me this earlier," Jonathan muttered.

"And why's that?"

"I'd sure like to read the journal."

"Then we made the trip for nothing."

Jonathan thought a moment. Up ahead a sliver of light indicated that they were exiting the tunnel heading in the direction of Faneuil Market and the Boston Aquarium. He pressed down on the directional, easing over into the far right-hand lane. "So the drive won't be a complete loss, why don't we double back to Chinatown and grab something to eat?"

Nadia rested a hand on Jonathan's forearm. "That sure is sweet of you." They were already winding through narrow, congested streets lined with oriental restaurants and exotic shops. Many of the signs on storefronts were lettered in Chinese characters. A young Asian woman with jet black hair fluttering about her waist hurried by. The woman wore a skintight dress fashioned from two-tone silk brocade with a Mandarin collar. The car inched up to a red light. "My father teaches physics at the community college."

"Which makes him both a dairy farmer and a man of science," Jonathan quipped. Reaching out with his free hand, he grabbed her palm and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"Emergence theory... Are you familiar with the concept?"

Jonathan shook his head and turned sharply into an outdoor parking lot that bordered a string of glitzy Chinese eateries. "Never heard of it."

Once settled in the restaurant, Nadia made a mental note to tell Jonathan about scaly termite mounds taller than most NBA basketball players; and ravishingly beautiful ice crystals as ephemeral and fleeting as a heartbeat; and desert sands whipped into frothy, undulating ribbons when caressed by the super-heated North African wind. Over pork chop suey, pan fried Peking dumplings, won-ton soup and endless cups of Oolong black tea, she would explain how seemingly random, meaningless and thoroughly unremarkable events might conspire to enchant and ultimately transform an otherwise drab universe.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Two Pockets

*According to Hasidic tradition, everyone must have two pockets, so they can reach into the one or the other, according to need. In the right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in the left: 'I am dust and ashes.'*

Since graduating high school, Miriam Applebaum noticed a creeping malaise among her friends. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something to happen. But waiting for what? For the *moshiach*, the messiah, to come the first time? The 'other one', her father insisted indignantly was a well-intentioned, if somewhat misguided, false prophet.

Her best friend, Mitzi, was waiting – waiting to find a husband and begin raising a family. Mitzi's brother, Yossi, attended Brandeis. He returned from the prestigious college with a bachelor's degree in nothing-in-particular. After loafing about the house for the better part of a year, the boy went to work in his uncle's delicatessen cooking brisket, corned beef and tongue. And waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting. Waiting to figure out what to do with the rest of his miserable, well-educated existence on planet earth.

Of course, Miriam's brother, Saul, didn't suffer from any such existential ennui. On Saturday evening, she spied the tall, emaciated youth with his wispy beard and skullcap, prancing about the house in a freshly ironed shirt, his frizzy hair blow dried, and cheeks reeking of St. Johns Bay Rum cologne. He favored the fragrance with West Indian lime that left a cloying trail of pungent citrus odors in every room he passed through. "Where're you going all dolled up?"

Saul was preening in front of the bathroom mirror. With a pair of pointed scissors, he snipped a few errant hairs– his beard was still a work in progress - from the side of his chin. "No place special." Pulling a billfold from his back pocket, Saul took silent inventory of his finances.

"Must be a heavy date," Miriam said in a goading tone.

Flashing a dirty look, he bolted for the front door.

Did he have to call ahead, Miriam wondered, to let the Russian sluts know that the rabbinical student, Saul Applebaum, was on his way? Slathered in St. Johns Bay Rum with a hint of lime and horny as hell, God's anointed messenger would be arriving shortly.

Later that night as she lay under the covers, Miriam felt like a dry leaf in late October. Waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting. For what? To fall. To fall and, perhaps, be caught in a frigid

updraft of autumnal air. No more malaise. A new life. A new beginning. Which was not to say that Miriam would ever turn her back on her faith.

Once a Jew, a Jew for life.

But a Jew with a myriad of options. Just as the Sephardic Jews in Medieval Spain learned from the Moslem invaders to cross-pollinate their Cabalist theology with Sufi metaphysics, so too would Miriam Applebaum, an orthodox Jewish woman who followed the precepts of *Halakha*, find a way to pass cleanly through the eye of the needle.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dark-haired girl arrived unannounced. Though the weather was humid in the mid-eighties, she wore long sleeves buttoned at the wrists and a drab, moss green skirt that hung well below the knees. The skin was pale with an ivory texture and lush, jet-black eyebrows that lent the otherwise placid features a haughty boldness. “My name is Miriam Applebaum and I live in the slate blue house with the shutters on the corner.”

Mark Cassidy, who was seated at the kitchen table drawing up a list of building supplies, threw the pencil aside. “Yes, I know the house.”

The Applebaums moved into the community several years back. They belonged to an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, *Beth Ohavai Shalom*, off Seneca Drive. Every Saturday the congregants traipsed in and out of the temple, the men dressed in black with skullcaps and prayer shawls. The women covered their heads with scarves even through the scorching, late summer months. “What can I do for you, Miriam Applebaum?”

The exotic-looking girl took several steps forward and was standing at the kitchen table now. She was medium height with a fleshy body. “Your pickup truck pulls onto the street every day in the late afternoon.” “*Fournier Builders. General carpentry. New construction, interior and exterior renovations.*” She recited verbatim as though reading directly from the metallic red lettering on the cab of the truck.

An easygoing affable smile lit up her features, and the thought occurred to Mark that the annoyingly persistent Jewish girl with the long sleeves wasn’t leaving anytime soon. “I was wondering if you might have an entry-level position available.”

A Chevy pickup with a blown muffler pulled into the driveway and his foreman, Kenny, lumbered up the backstairs and into the kitchen. Kenny handled finished work – oak staircases, cornices, custom fireplace mantles, fancy trim, baseboard, windows and moldings. Noticing her strange dress, the middle-aged man gawked uncertainly at the girl.

“This is Miriam from down the street,” Mark said. “She’s looking for work.”

Kenny rubbed the back of his sunburned neck with a row of stubby fingers. The nail on the left index finger was blackened from an errant hammer. “What can you do?”

Again, as if on cue, her malleable features dissolved in an eager grin. “Anything, everything. I’ve never done construction, but I thought maybe ...” The sentence sort of petered away.

“Since Smitty quit, we ain’t got no helper,” Kenny ruminated, as though talking more to himself than anyone else in the room. “And we need someone to prime all that freakin’ fascia and baseboard trim.”

A week earlier, Mark placed an order with the lumber company for several hundred square feet of molding. The shipment of wood arrived bare, with no protective primer coat.

Rather than return the wood, the lumberyard agreed to sell him the entire load at cost. When Mark balked, the purchasing agent threw up his hands and said, "We got no use for it... take the crap and we'll eat the loss." The senior community center project was already three days behind schedule due to bad weather and now a new headache; since Smitty quit, the mountain of unpainted lumber that cost him diddly-squat was utterly useless. Think wonders, shit blunders!

"What's a helper do?" Miriam pressed.

"Anything and everything," Mark reiterated what she said a moment earlier. "One minute you're filling a dumpster with worksite debris, the next your lugging four-by-eight sheets of plywood to where a crew is installing subfloors."

Mark stood up and leaned forward so that his nose was a fraction of an inch from the girl's face. "Any idea what you're getting yourself into?"

The girl never blinked but only grinned more brazenly. "How soon can I start?"

Fifteen minutes later, as she was leaving, Mark called out, "Wait up!" Lumbering to the front door, he positioned his work boot over Miriam's string sandal and pressed down gently. "Imagine that instead of this being my foot it's a pressure-treated four-by-four post slamming down on your big toe." He eased the dirt-crust shoe off her foot. "You're gonna need a pair of steel-toed work boots when you start on Monday. Also, no skirts. Pants or dungarees but no skirts."

"Anything else?"

The impish grin was beginning to grate on his nerves. "Yeah, pick up a pair of work gloves, preferably heavy-duty."

"Now comes the hard part," she said, the smile wilting noticeably."

"How's that?"

"I've got to go home and tell my parents."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night as Mark was preparing for bed, the phone rang. "I bought the steel-toed work boots."

"Where did you get my telephone number?"

"Off the side of your pickup truck, of course.."

"That's nice." He didn't quite know what else to say.

"And a pair of genuine rawhide work gloves, too." When there was no reply she added. "Should I go directly to the worksite?"

"No, just drop by my place at around eight o'clock."

"Good night." She hung up the phone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Miriam Applebaum showed up Monday morning for her first day at Fournier Construction dressed in a navy blue uniform that made her look more like a janitor or maintenance worker than carpenter's helper. "We need the raw lumber primed." Mark brought her out back of the Brandenburg senior center where several sawhorses were lying next to a pile of molding and random boards. "The paint and brushes are just inside the door." He pointed to the back entrance to the building. "Any questions?"

She shook her head, which was covered by a dark scarf similar to the ones he had seen the other Jewish women wearing as they walked back and forth from the Orthodox synagogue on Saturday mornings. Mark sauntered to the front of the building where a heavyset man with blond hair was framing the walkway for a handicapped ramp. "There's a girl taking Smitty's place. A nice kid. You leave her alone, okay? No foul language, ethnic slurs or dirty jokes."

The fellow slid a metal-shanked, Estwing hammer from his carpenter's belt and looked up. "Why should I give her any grief?"

"Because you're an asshole with a warped sense of humor," Mark replied and walked away.

The previous week the crew gutted the interior of the main function hall, framing the structure according to the architect's new plans. Now three palettes of drywall had to be installed before the plasters arrived midweek. Because the building was older construction, an extra width of board had to be doubled up to reach the ten-foot ceiling. More aggravation and wasted time.

At ten-thirty Mark laid his pale blue *Makita* screw gun on the ground and turned to Kenny. "I gotta check on the Jewish girl." Out in the back of the building he found a row of freshly painted boards lined up on the ground. "Not bad."

A drop of white paint was smeared across the side of her cheek. "It's not rocket science."

He waved a hand at the remaining pile of unpainted boards. "We got two more piles of this stuff coming. Once the wood is done, we'll get you inside and involved with basic carpentry."

"Okay." She dipped the brush in the can, wiping a glob of excess paint on the inner rim.

"I met your father," he suddenly said, shifting gears.

She lay the brush aside momentarily. "When was that?"

One day in late September, as Mark explained it, he was coming home from work and spotted a heavy-set, older man standing next to a Subaru with a flat tire. Mark pulled over. "What's the problem?"

The bearded man, who was dressed in black pants and a white shirt, waved a tire iron in the air and glowered at him suspiciously. "Lug nut's frozen... won't budge."

Mark went back to his truck and returned with his own iron. "Too big!" The middle-aged man exploded angrily. "You don't see what such a little tire I got?"

Mark pointed at the four-posted tool. "Each end has a different size socket. This one should fit your car." Still fuming, the man reluctantly stepped aside. Mark seated the tool over the frozen nut. "With the T-shaped design, you get twice the torque to muscle rusty bolts free."

Bracing his legs, he leaned into the tool twisting counter-clockwise, and, after a moment, the nut slid to the left. He loosened the rest of the bolts and stood up. "Can you handle it from here?"

"Yes, thank you so much." There was a perceptible softening to the man's tone, tinged with appreciation.

"The younger fellow with the thin beard who was with you father..."

Miriam resumed painting, brushing the creamy white paint over a length of beaded molding in smooth, even strokes. "That would be my brother, Saul." Finishing with the fancy strip, she laid it aside to dry and reached for another.

"What does he do for a living?"

"Oh, he doesn't work. Saul is too busy with other pursuits."



“Such as?”

“My brother spent most of last year at a yeshiva, a Jewish seminary, in Jerusalem. He’s studying to be a rabbi.”

“Very devout.”

“Yes, when he’s not chasing whores, he is the model of spiritual virtue and godliness.”

The odd remark caught the carpenter off guard. “Where does a rabbinical student in the Holy Land find prostitutes?”

“In Jerusalem, there are many Jewish refugees recently emigrated from Russia. The women arrive with no money... can’t speak the language or find meaningful work. The more desperate women sell themselves for a few liras.” She ran a second coat of paint over the wood to touch up the bare spots. “A handful of these downtrodden Russians also find their way to America.”

Mark had to get back to the sheetrock, but lingered a moment longer. “Does your father know about his son’s shenanigans?”

Miriam squatted down on her haunches, took a wooden stirrer and mixed paint, which had begun separating from the base coat. “About a month ago, my father spoke with a shadchan, a Jewish matchmaker, about finding my brother a suitable match and weaning him away from his perverted pastime.”

“And?”

“Saul’s future bride is still a work in progress.” Mark shrugged and went back to work.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the ride home following Miriam’s first full day of work at Fournier Construction, a cell phone with a decidedly minor-keyed melody chimed and Miriam fished about in her pocket “*Nu?... Gar nicht. Ich bin fahrtig.*” She hung up the phone, glancing at the driver self-consciously. “My mother... she wanted to know if I’d been molested or forced to bow down before graven images.”

Mark, who was becoming accustomed to the girl’s eccentric mannerisms smirked. “Why do your parents dress like they’re still living in the Middle Ages?” They were a mile from home as the car pulled up at a traffic light.

“We’re Hasidic Jews. The Eastern European tradition goes back to two hundred years.”

Which tells me nothing.”

Miriam stared out the passenger side window for the longest time before replying “According to Hasidic tradition, everyone must have two pockets, so they can reach into the one or the other, according to need.” Mark flipped his directional on as they neared Hathaway Street. “In the right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake was the world created,’ and in the left: ‘I am dust and ashes.’”

The truck pulled up in front of the slate blue house with the shutters. “That makes perfect sense. See you tomorrow, Miriam Applebaum.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Three months passed. Bit by bit, Miriam learned construction. Not that she was anything more than a carpenter’s helper, rank novice, gofer - go for this, go for that - or fledgling

apprentice. Still, she got up every day, and, even when her back ached, hauled her weary carcass off to work.

At first her father showed no interest one way or the other in his daughter's aberration. To his way of thinking, that's all it was – a fleeting mental derangement. The Goyim weren't necessarily bad or misguided; they just did things differently. Religious Jews led perfectly sensible lives. Nice Jewish girls didn't pound nails. They didn't work in blue collar trades, building homes for people who worshiped several gods at once and had spent the last two thousand years tormenting God's Chosen People.

But by the third week of the second month, Morris Applebaum had seen enough. "*Meshugenah!* What is this craziness?"

Miriam had just returned from work. She unbuckled her leather carpenter's tool belt and let it fall on the floor next to the bed. "We finished the senior center today," she said ignoring his belittling tone. "Tomorrow we're renovating that mill complex over by the YMCA. High-end luxury condos—that's what the developer wants."

"And this is a job for a nice Jewish girl?" Rolling his eyes, Morris Applebaum began pacing back and forth, hands clasped behind his back. "Nothing good can come of it."

Miriam momentarily drifted into the bathroom where she stripped her clothes off down to her underwear. Pulling a bathrobe over her limbs she returned to the bedroom. "Fifteen pounds," she said. "I lost fifteen pounds since I started this job, and I never felt so healthy in my life."

"You know what you are?" The father suddenly wheeled around waving a finger menacingly in the air. "You're a Babel... an female incarnation of Isaac Babel!"

"*Gotenu!* Bite your tongue to say such a thing!" Miriam's mother was standing in the doorway. The large-bone woman placed a trembling hand over her mouth. "Isaac Babel was no better than a traitor,... a Molotov-cocktail-throwing, self-hating Jew who joined the Cossacks, the very people who persecuted our race. How could you say such a thing?"

*You're a Babel... a female incarnation of Isaac Babel!*

Miriam understood perfectly well what Morris Applebaum meant by the outlandish remark. Isaac Babel was a *haskelah* Jew, an enlightened soul equally comfortable among Bolshevik rabble rousers as mystical Jews. His stature as a great writer only complicated matters. Hero, traitor, lunatic, visionary, political agitator, heretic, prophet – how one understood the anomaly that was Isaac Babel depended as much on one's personal biases as what side of the bed he woke up on.

Mr. Applebaum threw both hands up in an attitude of despair and rushed from the room almost knocking his wife down in the bargain. When he was gone, she slumped down on the bed next to her daughter, took Miriam's hand and kissed it. Then she turned the palm over. "Your beautiful fingers... they're covered with calluses."

"From honest labor." In the yard adjoining their property, a lawnmower fired up. Miriam retrieved her framing hammer from where she abandoned it in near the closet. "Kenny, the man who does all the fancy work, showed me how to properly set nails." She raised the shank chest high. "Your arm is just an extension of the tool." She snapped her wrist and let the head of the hammer fall in a broad sweeping arc, striking an imaginary nail dead center. "I can set a sixteen-penny framing nail in three strokes. No wasted effort. Perhaps it's not as impressive as studying the *Midrash* but still it's an accomplishment of sorts."

Miriam's mother kissed her cheek and sighed. "What we have here," she waved a hand fitfully in the air, "it's not enough for you?"

"I'm going to take my shower now," Miriam replied evasively.

Before she reached the doorway, her mother said, "In a fit of anger, your father compares you to Isaac Babel." The older woman spoke in a confidential tone so the words wouldn't carry beyond the threshold. "But deep down, in his heart-of-hearts, you're the *ben h'bachoor*."

"The first-born son," Miriam translated from the Hebrew. The tacit implication was both flattering and unsettling. The first-born son inherited the father's fortunes; he honored and preserved his family's good name. Saul, the religious zealot and sexual glutton, was not up to the task. Wrong man for the job. Miriam was the newly anointed *ben ha'bachoor* – by default, the Applebaum dynasty's heir apparent.

Her father could rage about the house, muttering to himself, arms flailing like a madman, but squirreled away behind the fierce eyes and bushy eyebrows was an inchoate fear - the fear of losing his beloved Miri, the indisputable *ben habachoor*.

Mr. Applebaum followed all the precepts of his religion. He recited his prayers, never straying from Hasidic custom. When he crawled out of bed in the morning, the stoop-shouldered man carried the added burden of two thousand years of Jewish tradition on his portly frame. But not one word in the many dozens of frayed books that lined his study ever taught the devout seeker of eternal truths how to love his wayward daughter with moderation.

"Any news from the Shadchun?"

"Your father met with Mr. Gorelnik on Tuesday and they discussed certain possibilities."

"What about a meeting?"

"Things haven't progressed that far yet."

Miriam lowered her voice. "What Saul does with the Russian girls isn't right... not for Jew or gentile. Some of those girls are here without work permits or proper visas. If someone abuses them, they have no place to turn."

"Once your brother is engaged," her mother replied nervously, "all that ugliness will be in the past."

Miriam laughed abruptly making an unfeminine snorting sound through her nose. "Our religion teaches the past has consequences that can come back to haunt you."

\*\*\*\*\*

On Saturday afternoon, Miriam walked over to Mark's house, where she found him in the driveway hosing down the truck. "I want my own circular saw." Over the past few months she had been borrowing a reconditioned Ryobi model that the crew used for odds and ends.

Mark ran a soapy sponge over the tires and muddy hubcaps. "They got a real nice seven-and-a-quarter inch Rigid over at Home Depot for a little over a hundred with discount if we put it on the company account." He rinsed the wheels off and carried the bucket of soapy water around to the opposite side of the truck. "That's worm drive, not traditional."

"Worm drive?" Miriam repeated.

"The motor housing runs parallel with the saw blade and uses gears to increase torque," Mark explained, "so it's better suited for the type of heavy-duty construction we do."

"How soon could I get it?"

He came out from behind the truck, tossing what remained of the soap out across the lawn. "Let me clean up and we'll drive over there right now."

At Home Depot they went directly to the tool department. “The handle feels a bit strange.” With the fingers of her right hand wrapped around the grip, Miriam hoisted the tool up in the air and made several passes over an imaginary sheet of half-inch plywood.

“Once you get use to it, you won’t feel comfortable with anything else.” He grabbed a carbide-tipped, Freud blade off the display rack. “You’ll want a decent blade to compliment the new saw. My treat.”

After paying for the tools, they drove to Friendlies for coffee and dessert. “My father’s unhappy with my choice of careers.”

“Can’t imagine he would be.”

“He called me a modern-day Isaac Babel.”

Mark stared at her blankly. “A turn-of-the-century, Russian Jew,” she explained the obscure reference, “who ran off and joined the Red cavalry.” “Babel was on familiar terms with rabbis, thieves, Cossacks, religious mystics, anti-Semites and murderers. Being a traditional, goody-two-shoes Jew was never enough.”

“So, what happened to him?”

“Under Stalin’s reign of terror, Babel was arrested by the Soviet secret police, tortured and executed.”

Mark shook his head in disbelief. “A story with a not-so-happy ending.”

“Yesterday in the late afternoon,” Miriam’s mind scurried off in another direction, “Tom McSweeney was hanging sheet rock in the vestibule.” Tom McSweeney, an immigrant Irishman, was painfully shy. Not much of a talker, he arrived fifteen minutes early to work every morning with a metal lunch box, thermos of hot chocolate and piece of fruit. he was always kind and respectful. The previous week, when the fire-coded wall board that lined the stairwell leading to the second floor arrived, Tom warned Miriam, “Don’t try lifting that stuff alone.” Interrupting his own work, he helped her lugged the absurdly heavy sheets to the where a metal staging had been erected in the stairwell.

No one on the crew could hang drywall as fast or accurately as Tom. At six-foot-four, the gangly Irishman with the scraggily red beard was constantly in motion, measuring cutting and screwing the gypsum boards in place. Like a whirling dervish, he snapped a line of blue chalk every sixteen inches, hoisted the board in place against the studs, then ran a vertical row of black screws from ceiling to floor leaving an endless row of dimpled impressions in the paneling.

Tom started the vestibule a little after four and by five-fifteen had the entire room covered with the gypsum board from sub-floor to the scruffy furring strips that crisscrossed the ceiling joists. Letting the electrical cord slither through his fingers, the tall man gently lowered his screw gun to the floor. Removing his dark-frame glasses, he wiped the lenses clean. “Here, let me give you a hand with that.” He grabbed a push broom and began sweeping up the white powder and scattering of blue-black sheet rock screws that littered the perimeter of the room.

As they were leaving work that day, one of the other carpenters offered Tom a pair of tickets to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park. “Thanks but I got choir practice all week.”

In response to her questioning look, Tom explained, “I sing liturgical music in a church choir. We’re getting ready for our annual concert with full orchestra. *Carmina Burana*.”

“Carmina what?”

“It’s a collection of religious songs dating back to the Middle Ages,” Tom noted. “Pretty intense stuff.”

Miriam leaned across the table. “If I hadn’t come to work at Fournier Construction, I’d never have met someone like Tom.”

“He’s married and the wife’s pregnant with their third kid, so don’t get any ideas.”

Miriam made a face. “You know perfectly well what I mean.”

Mark sipped at his coffee. “There’s Tom and there’s foul-mouthed Ralphy, who slaps his diabetic wife around, goes on a bender and drinks up all the grocery money.” Mark shook his head from side to side. “You’re glamorizing a mundane task; it’s just Tom, a journeyman carpenter, working at his chosen trade.” He gulped down the last of the coffee. “I got to get home and make some calls.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The following Saturday afternoon when Miriam returned home from work, she found a police cruiser pulled up in front of the house. She could hear her father bellowing like an ox from fifty feet away. Inside the house a uniformed officer, hands on hips, was glowering at the older man. “Don’t shoot the messenger, Mr. Applebaum.” The officer was clearly in a rotten mood. “I drove over here as a courtesy to you and your family.” Without waiting for a reply, the officer spun around on his heels, lumbered back to his cruiser and drove off.

Miriam’s mother was hunched over by the stove, her face buried in cupped hands crying noisily. “Okay. Okay,” Mr. Applebaum spoke in an unnaturally furtive, high-pitched tone. “It’s not the end of the world. Now, let me go upstairs and get my checkbook.”

“What happened?” Miriam asked once her father was out of earshot.

“Saul was arrested for soliciting a prostitute.”

“One of the immigrant Russian girls?”

“Ten times worse!” the mother wailed. “An undercover police officer! They got my baby, the future rabbi, locked up in the pokey.”

Mr. Applebaum returned. He had changed into a freshly ironed shirt. “I’ll go with you,” Miriam said, draping her tool pouch over a chair. On the short ride to the police station, Mr. Applebaum was unnaturally quiet. An air of resignation, more like catastrophic defeat, had settled over his grim features.

“It’s not like someone was maimed or murdered,” Miriam spoke softly. “I can think of a hundred things worse than what Saul did.”

Her father cleared his throat. “Name one.”

Incest. Sodomy. Pedophilia. Fratricide. Almost immediately, Miriam regretted her last remark.

“What he did isn’t the problem.” Mr. Applebaum looked straight ahead. “The schlimazel never learns from his mistakes.” Like a blind person groping his way down an unfamiliar street, the older man tripped and faltered over his words. “He doesn’t understand why it’s wrong to do what he does.” The older man’s lips trembled. “It’s the ‘why’, not the act itself, which worries me.”

At the Brandenburg Police Station, Mr. Applebaum craned his neck to one side, scrunching his shaggy eyebrows together while sniffing the humid air. “Well, your brother’s definitely been here.” The undeniable scent of St. Johns Bay rum with a hint of West Indian lime seemed embedded in every permeable object.

They discovered Saul waiting docilely in a cramped jail cell. Out of a sense of compassion – or was it sick humor? – the barred door had been left wide open. There he sat with

his neatly-trimmed, wispy beard, wire-rimmed glasses and paisley yarmulke like a traveler seated on a bench waiting for the next Greyhound bus to pull up to the curb.

“What happened to your hands?” Miriam asked.

Saul stared at his bony fingers which were smudged with dark stains. “They fingerprinted me.”

Miriam could just picture her brother having his fingers rolled over a pad of blue ink. Then the humiliating mug shot. Did he even have the good sense to remove the yarmulke? If the picture appeared in the local press, the entire Jewish community, not just immediate family, would be scandalized!

A thirty-something blond with a voluptuous figure was sipping coffee from a Styrofoam cup thirty feet away. Her top, a low-slung halter trimmed with frilly sequins, was overly tight. She kicked off a pair of patent leather, stiletto heels, which lay to one side on the linoleum floor. The woman was chatting energetically to a uniformed officer. At one point she glanced brazenly over at Miriam’s brother but just as quickly averted her eyes. In her left hand she clutched an official-looking document, most likely the police report identifying Saul Applebaum as the dim-witted ‘John’ who propositioned her earlier in an otherwise uneventful evening.

“You couldn’t keep your lousy *schmeckel* in your pants,” Mr. Applebaum, who was staring morosely at the well-endowed under-cover officer, growled. “Now the whole family’s disgraced.”

Saul cringed and seemed to wilt under the crass indictment. Miriam, who had never heard her father use foul language, felt her brain grow numb. The penultimate insult - now, not only had her brother victimized the Russian immigrant women, but his parents as well. What was it she told to her mother only a week earlier? The past has an uncanny habit of doubling back and biting you squarely on the *tuchas*. With the vengeance of a deranged pit bull, it rips your tender ass to shreds.

“Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay.” Mr. Applebaum’s voice had gotten even softer, almost childlike. Not a good indicator of things to come. He turned to the officer who had brought them into the rear holding area where the prisoners were held. “Now we will pay the bail and go home.”

At the front desk, Saul had to sign for his belongings: a gold watch – a cheap knock-off of a Rolodex he bought from a street vendor on the Avenue of the Americas in New York City, his belt, wallet, some pocket change, a handkerchief with his initials embroidered in wine colored thread and two lubricated condoms wrapped in plastic. “Why two?” Miriam thought. “Was he planning to move from one brothel to the next?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Around ten o’clock Mark Cassidy heard the doorbell chime. Miriam was standing on the front stoop with a pillow and an overnight bag. “Was wondering if I could crash for the night.”

Mark held the door open. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with the cop car in front of your place earlier this afternoon?”

She told him about her brother soliciting the undercover police officer. “He gave her thirty bucks so they got him dead to rights.”

“Tough luck.”

Miriam grinned. “No, fitting justice. His name will be printed in the *Brandenberg Gazette* police log along with all the sordid details.” She tossed the pillow onto the sofa, depositing the

bag on the floor. "In the morning, my father will call the shadchan and withdraw Saul's name as an eligible suitor."

"You seem a little ... " Mark didn't quite know how to finish the sentence. "Can I get you something to drink? A cup of soda or tea?"

"Why don't you ever ask me out... on a date?" She blurted the words with such force that he took a full step backwards.

"You're an Orthodox Jew. I figured - "

"Well maybe you figured wrong. Remember, I'm the heretic, the Isaac Babel of the female set."

Mark leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. "Don't talk nonsense. You're not like that."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. "I want to sleep with you tonight. In your bed."

"I don't have any protection."

Miriam fished a Trojan condom from her shirt pocket.

"Where did you get that?"

"While my father was downstairs berating my brother, I went rummaging through his dresser. He had a carton full."

"Guess he won't need them any time soon." Mark pulled her close and felt her warm cheek wedged against his neck. "That Hasidic saying about the two pockets—tell it again."

"According to Hasidic tradition, everyone must have two pockets, so they can reach into the one or the other, according to need." Her voice was tinged with a dreamy, effervescent quality, a breathy, musical sonority such as he had never heard before. "In the right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in the left: 'I am dust and ashes.'"

"And what are we?"

"Too soon... too soon." She rose up on tiptoes, brushing his ear with her lips. "Ask me again in the morning."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Still Virgin

"I'm not a virgin anymore," Clarissa announced as soon as we were seated in the restaurant. The chubby girl with the unfashionable horn-rimmed glasses spoke primly, in a plainspoken manner. "At least not in the technical sense," she added as though the initial statement demanded further elaboration. The word 'least' sounded like 'leathhhed' because of a pronounced lisp. Normally none of Clarissa's friends ever made fun of the speech impediment, but, in the context of what she had just told us, it did sound rather absurd. The three of us agreed to meet at the Italian Garden for lunch to celebrate finishing our freshman year of college. And then, out of nowhere, ditsy Clarissa makes this crazy pronouncement, bursts into tears and runs off barricading herself in the lady's room.

"Well, this is fun," Ted quipped and sipped at his raspberry cream Italian soda. Ted, who is flagrantly gay, a real *femme fatale*, brushed a wavy strand of blond hair out of his eyes. His hair being rather straight, he uses a curling iron to create the effect of natural curls.

After a minute, Clarissa returned. Her emotions back under control, she sat down, grabbed a breadstick from the basket and waved it in the air like a dagger. "Don't you just love the way they do salads here?"

"It's nothing special," I interjected slightly disoriented by the emotional outburst and subsequent *non sequitur*. "Just oil and vinegar."

"Yes, but I can never get it to taste quite like this" Clarissa began heaping her plate with lettuce, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes and red onions from the salad bowl. "Perhaps it's a special brand of olive oil."

Ted just sat there staring at us like we both were nuts. "If we're finished discussing gourmet salad dressings, perhaps we could get back to virgins in the technical sense."

Clarissa stopped eating. She lowered her eyes and, for a brief moment, I thought she was going to go postal on us again with another crying jag. She raised her hands over the table, palms facing down, as though she was participating in a séance, took a deep breath and let the air out ever so slowly. "I got intimate with this guy from college. We're in love. He wants to get married, and I don't know what to do."

The waiter returned, refilled our water glasses before running off with the empty salad bowl. "You had sex with this guy." I posited the question as an immutable, a priori statement of fact.

"Well, yes and no."

Ted rolled his eyes. Then he reached across the table and grabbed Clarissa by the wrist. It was the sort of impulsive move only a swishy gay guy could pull off with panache. Of course, the fact that he was so damn sweet and kind-hearted didn't hurt. "Intercourse, fornicating, doing the no-pants dance, wango tango - it's when two consenting adults come together for the purpose of - "

Clarissa scowled. "It's not as simple as that."

Ted stared at her with that insouciant, lovable smile that he reserved for miscellaneous lost souls. The waiter returned. "I'm watching my weight so I'm going to order the zuppa Toscana... that rather earthy soup with the escarole, sweet sausage and red potatoes. What about you?"

"The veal parmesan looks good, although they always give you twice as much as a person can realistically eat." Clarissa closed her menu and laid it on the table. "Of course, I can always take what I don't finish home for later."

I felt like a patient on the locked ward at a mental asylum. "Ditto on the veal."

After we placed our orders, Ted told a funny story about his 'friend', Roger. They were devoted to one another and flagrantly monogamous. But, for reasons that only the dysfunctional couple were privy to, Roger and Ted were forever squabbling then reconciling. Roger was flaky, a full-blown swish, but at a much deeper level, something clicked between the couple, and I had the distinct feeling that a dozen years from now Ted and Roger would be having their silly tiffs, patching things up and making a perfectly wonderful life together.

"Technically still a virgin..." I just can't let such a weird statement pass without some coherent explanation," Ted blurted. "That's like saying a girl with a swollen stomach is only slightly pregnant."



"Yes, I guess I owe you both an explanation." Clarissa twirled a forkful of spaghetti but put the food aside without eating. "Jeff and I met at a dorm party." The food was growing cold but nobody seemed to care. "Almost from the outset, it was like that exquisite Neruda poem... the one about blurred boundaries."

"I simply love Neruda!" Ted sipped at his frothy drink.

Clarissa ran her tongue over her lips and began to recite from memory in a whispery, lilting voice:

*I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.  
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;  
so I love you because I know no other way than this:  
where I does not exist, nor you,  
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,  
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.*

"Dear God!" Ted impetuously raked the cloth napkin across his eyes, blotting away a fistful of tears. Several diners looked curiously but quickly turned back to their meals. "That's the most beautiful sentiment I ever heard." He reached across and placed a hand on Clarissa's shoulder. "You must write that out for me. I'll use it on Rodger the next time he goes bitchy on me."

Clarissa momentarily turned away and began rummaging in her handbag. Pulling a three-by-five glossy from her wallet she handed it to me. The picture showed Clarissa decked out in a fur-trimmed winter coat and mittens standing in the snow outside a campus dormitory. Behind her was a young man, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist. He had pudgy, rather non-descript features, a fleshy, bulbous nose that seemed set down on the face as an unfortunate afterthought and wire-rimmed glasses. The couple looked sublimely happy - ridiculously and immodestly in love.

"Through all four years of high school I never had a boyfriend, not a lousy date or kiss." Clarissa's homely face dissolved in a sheepish grin. "Want to know where I spent my senior prom?"

"No, not really," I blurted. Wherever Clarissa ended up, it certainly had nothing to do with the Marriott Hotel, tuxedos, lavish evening dresses, cut glass floral centerpieces and an eight piece rock band.

"I went bowling... ten-pin with the big balls. Almost got a freakin' hernia."

"If it's any consolation," Ted noted peevishly, "I went to the movies with Roger, who was acting hormonal and very unpleasant."

What was I doing? Oh yes, I made a brief appearance at the prom before rushing off to the lake in Ricky Fleischman's Camaro coupe where we... Well, it doesn't really matter what we did at the lake, but I could certainly empathize with someone who couldn't even scare up a nerdy reject for the senior prom. Clarissa swiveled in her chair. "What do you know about tantric sex?"

I'd squirmed uncomfortably. A lowlife sophomore I regrettably dated only a few months earlier showed up at my dorm room one night with a pack of playing cards denoting certain sexual positions more suited for a double-jointed contortionist than first year college students. The raunchy drawings were originally taken from a Hindu manuscript. "The Kama Sutra - it's supposed to show you how to increase carnal pleasure and - "

"No, not that smutty crap," Clarissa brought me up short. "I meant the spiritual practice where you don't climax but channel the sexual energy for spiritual purposes." "Phil had his own apartment off campus so, by the end of second semester, we had done pretty much everything but you-know-what." She sipped at her water. "A week ago Tuesday, a day before I was driving home for the summer, we were in bed together. I said, 'Oh, for God's sake, just put it in.' He didn't have any condoms and I wasn't on birth control. But we were both aroused, and it was the last time we were going to be together until the fall semester."

The couple dining opposite our table suddenly broke off their conversation. They were sitting rather stiffly with their heads tilted at a rather odd angle, and I had the distinct impression - not that anyone could blame them - the twosome were eavesdropping. "Anyway, I says, 'Put it in. We won't do anything,.. just see what it feels like.' So he climbed on top of me and I spread my legs and it sort of went in real easy and then..." Her voice fell away just as the waiter arrived with the check and three mint chocolates wrapped in green foil. "And then we just lay there together holding each other."

The couple sitting opposite were pawing at their food but still not eating. The woman, a heavy brunette was breathing heavily through parted lips with her eyes half shut. Her partner was leaning so far back that the front legs of his chair rose a good three inches off the carpeting.

"And that's when it happened."

"What happened?" Ted pressed.

"This tingly sensation in my pelvis, curling up like dense smoke through my stomach. It kept climbing higher and higher until it went straight up to the roof of my brain. Then I drifted into a blissful state, bordering on pure rapture. About thirty seconds passed and Phil says, 'Did you feel that?'"

"Geez!" Ted blew out his cheeks. "Would you mind if I brought Roger along to lunch next time?"

"It didn't break!" For the first time since we arrived at the Olive Garden, I finally understood Clarissa's original intent. "It didn't break, did it?" I repeated more forcefully now, rephrasing the original statement as a question.

Clarissa was preoccupied, adding up the crumpled bills and loose change we had thrown in a heap, separating out the tip. "No, it didn't."

"So, technically, you're still..."

"Oh, dear!" Ted fluttered both slender hands in front of his chest in a frenzied gesture. "The hymen... Oh, dear!"

Out in the parking lot we kissed and hugged. Clarissa drove off with a promise to get together over the weekend for either a movie or shopping date at the mall.

"So close that your eyes close as I fall asleep," Ted repeated the final verse of the Neruda poem. "Do you remember the rest of that exquisite poem? I'll just shrivel up and die, if I can't get my hands on it."

"Clarissa... she was always the ugly duckling," I blurted peevishly, ignoring Ted's histrionics. "All through high school, she was the fat frump with the goofy lisp and heart of gold. I was the hottie, the babe, the cutesy, the dreamboat, the perfect ten knockout glamour-puss."

"Not anymore, sweetie!" Ted pressed his thin lips so tightly together they seemed to merged with his chin. "Clarissa's the new gold standard!"

## Tulipwood

"Hey, Kid!" The woman's menacing tone brought Frankie Dexter up short before he even made it halfway across the darkened lawn. Frozen in place, the fifteen year old peered about but saw nothing, not even the scraggily weeds beneath his feet. No street lamps existed this far down the road, and the thin sliver of a moon was wreathed in clouds. "What are you doing on my property?"

What if the owner of the disembodied voice had dialed 911 from when she first noticed him prowling the street and already notified the police? Maybe the cops were on their way and she was just stalling for time until the authorities arrived. "I'm going to the 7-Eleven," Frankie mumbled.

A skinny blonde in her late thirties stepped down from the front stoop of the Lomax place. The owner, Edgar Lomax, had suffered a stroke and passed a while back. The blonde, his common-law wife, settled in five years earlier. The reclusive woman lived alone, having nothing to do with any of the neighbors. "Convenient store's that way." Though he couldn't see the outstretched arm, he knew that she was pointing down the street in the opposite direction from where Frankie was headed.

The sound of wolfish laughter shot through with vulgarities filtered through the wooly darkness along with the clatter of an empty beer can skittering across the asphalt. "Can't get to the 7-Eleven that way."

"Why's that?" The gravelly tone was downright inhospitable.

"The McElroy hoodlums are out on their front stoop drinking and spoiling for a fight."

A Friday night ritual, the McElroy clan would be sitting out on their front stoop, pie-eyed and looking for trouble. The front lawn was probably littered with crushed beer cans and cigarette stubs. The old man was out of prison a year now. The oldest son worked at the gas station three blocks down from the Kentucky Fried Chicken. The younger boy dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade. He didn't work and had been in and out of trouble with the police since eighth grade.

Frankie considered running the gauntlet - casually meandering to the end of the street and continuing down Oak Hill Ave to the center of town. The ex-con father would give him a dirty look or flip him the bird. The demonic sons would hurl insults and challenge his sexual orientation along with a few choice obscenities. Or, for the sheer fun of it, they might beat the crap out of the fifteen year old boy.

Another burst of foul-mouthed laughter was followed by a loud guffaw. The McElroy's took great pleasure letting the community know they held everyone in utter contempt. "It's almost eleven o'clock," The nastiness in the woman's tone ebbed. "What the hell are you doing out this late at night?"

It was a perfectly reasonable question. Frankie took a deep breath air and considered his options - the truth, a flagrant lie or hodgepodge of supercilious nonsense. "My mother is home drunk. My father's got a girlfriend, and I just didn't want to hear it anymore."

The crickets were chortling away, a rhythmic, high-spirited cadence. Down toward the end of the street one of the McElroy degenerates howled like a lunatic at the wispy moon. The outburst triggered another wave of sniggering and crude laughter. Frankie was stuck in a nether

world. The boy certainly didn't want to home while his parents were sniping at each other. He couldn't make it past the McElroy's place without considerable risk. And now the deceased Edgar Lomax's live-in girl friend had just caught him trespassing.

"What's wrong now?"

"Nothing," Frankie blubbered. He had begun crying rather noisily, making embarrassing snuffling sounds through his soggy nose. "Everything's just peachy keen!"

The skinny woman quickly closed the distance between them. Wrapping her arms around Frankie's waist, she pulled him up against her. "Poor baby!"

No one other than his mother had ever held him like that. The crickets continued their nocturnal symphony shot through with a slurry of four-letter word as discordant counterpoint from the far end of the street. But nothing mattered anymore. There in the pitch black on Edgar Lomax's front lawn, a woman was cradling Frankie up against her chest and crooning unintelligible, infinitely reassuring sounds in his left ear.

"Hey kid, you're squeezing the life out of me!"

Without realizing it, Frankie's arms had snaked up behind the woman in a fierce bear hug. She broke away and held the boy at arm's length. "The McElroy party doesn't seem to be winding down any time soon," she noted with a flick of her head in the direction of the late night revelers. "Would you like to join me for a cup of coffee?"

Frankie wiped the tears away with the heel of a hand. "Yeah, that would be nice."

"I'm Kendra Ryder."

"Frankie... Frankie Dexter." She led the way into the kitchen, which was rather neat and tidy. A Tiffany lamp with a multi-colored glass shade threw a dim warmth across the room. She put a pot of coffee on to perk. "I'll be just a minute."

Retreating into the bedroom, the woman emerged five minutes later. Something was different about the way she looked. She hadn't changed her clothes or makeup. Her ratty hair was still unbrushed. "Coffee looks about ready."

Kendra Ryder, who wore a pair of jeans and cotton blouse, was rather harsh looking. A smattering of laugh lines and crow's feet dimpling the corners of the watery blue eyes; a certain feminine delicacy in the thin lips and squat nose was offset, neutralized by a brittle obstinacy in the pokerfaced expression. The skin was pale, translucent. Frankie noted a fleeting prettiness but only when the woman smiled, which she didn't seem to do that often.

Kendra set a plate of Oreos on the table between them and then began picking at her fingernails. "Glue... epoxy," she said by way of explanation. "It's a bitch trying to get this stuff off your nails. Mineral spirits doesn't really help and the more volatile stuff like lacquer thinner just burns."

Frankie was trying to figure what the woman had been doing that her hands were so frightfully calloused, but she didn't readily volunteer additional information and the boy didn't feel comfortable asking. A short while earlier he was standing in the yard next to a forty-foot, white mulberry tree bawling his fool head off, and now he was sipping coffee and nibbling cookies. He felt strangely safe, no longer vulnerable. All the anxiety and confusion had sloughed off like so much dead skin.

A timer on the microwave suddenly beeped. Kendra rose. "This won't take long," she said, disappearing down a narrow stairwell just off the kitchen. When she was gone ten minutes, curiosity got the better of the boy.

Unlike the kitchen, the unfinished basement was flooded with a bank of fluorescent lights. An array of woodworking tools - table saws, belt sanders, jointers, planers, drill presses

and a six-inch Ryobi band saw - were arranged about the concrete floor. Kendra was releasing the pressure on a steel clamp. Lifting a square block of solid maple, she turned the surface over to reveal a parchment-thin web of blue masking tape rimmed with glue.

She looked up and smiled when he approached. "Here's the fun part." She began gingerly peeling the tape away to reveal a decorative mosaic of exotic woods arranged in an intricate pattern not unlike a patchwork quilt. "That's bubinga," she pointed to a dark, wine colored wood shot through with black, "a form of African rosewood. The golden veneer with the pale flecks is Brazilian satinwood."

She eased another strip of tape free of the surface and tapped a greenish, scaly wood that ran around the perimeter of the design creating an inlaid, quarter-inch frame. "This here's a domestic species... sassafras." When the last piece of masking tape had been removed, she wiped away some excess glue with nail polish remover and laid the rectangular object aside."

"But what is it?"

"A keepsake box," the woman replied.

"Where's the lid?"

Kendra pointed at a band saw in the far corner of the room. "Tomorrow morning, I'll saw the lid free of the carcass, round over all the sharp edges on the router table and insert the brass hinges.

On a separate work table a grouping of ornate jewelry boxes were arranged in various stages of completion. "Did you paint the woods?"

Kendra flashed a closed-lipped smile. "No, they're exotics. That's exactly how the lumber looks in its natural state. After sanding, I wipe them down with light Danish oil to bring out the lustrous warmth of the grain but nothing more."

"But where did you -"

"Edgar," Kendra interjected, anticipating his train of thought, "was a master woodworker. We met at a craft fair. I was selling crappy jewelry at the time. After we started dating, I took over finishing and placing his merchandise in art galleries. By the time Eddy took sick, I had already picked up enough of basic woodworking skills to actually design and build boxes.

Before they left the basement, Kendra lifted a strange looking contraption from a pile of discarded odds and ends. A woodsman fashioned from a slab of half-inch thick wood stood alongside a pile of fresh cut pine logs. "My lumberjack," the woman murmured with an odd mixture of gentle humor and pride. "It's a whirligig," she added, when there was no immediate response from the befuddled boy.

Chop. Chop. Chop. With a taut index finger, Kendra spun a slender propeller, and the blade of an ax bobbed up and down in the direction of an upturned log. "Edgar used to build a few dozen every spring and sell them along with the boxes. They make great lawn ornaments... conversation pieces."

Chop. Chop. Chop. She twirled the propeller a second time and with a frenetic fury the woodcutter attacked the log. Frankie ran a finger over the brass brazing rod that served as the drive shaft for the animated project. "You don't make any?"

"No... too complicated." Kendra's head wagged from side to side. "It's not just woodworking skills. You gotta learn to bend the wire, attach all the moveable parts, and decorate the finished project."

"Jewelry boxes,... you build an project and that's the end of it. With the whirligigs there's always a problem." "Here, let me show you." She pried the top from the base to reveal an eighth-inch metal rod that ran the length of the project. "Originally, when Edgar built this project

the brass drive cam kept binding up against the wooden carcass.” She indicated the wooden base where the lumberjack’s feet were glued in place. “Edgar, who was an ace at solving problems, simply recessed nylon bushings on either end of the base. Problem solved.”

Frankie eyed two ivory bushings strategically positioned at the ends of the drive shaft. The plastic spacers held the rod in position, allowing the propeller to spin effortlessly.

Kendra chuckled self-consciously as though at a private joke. “Whirligigs are sort of like life... an endless series of pain-in-the-ass complications, Chinese fire drills and mechanical calamities.”

“Edgar painted the whirligigs?”

“For the most part... when he got too sick from the medication, I helped out some. The words caught in her throat and she momentarily looked away. Tossing the whirligig back onto the messy pile, she added, “It ain’t the Sistine Chapel... just crude folk art, tole painting on unfinished boards.”

Frankie took a parting glance at the lumberjack before Kendra flicked the basement lights out. There was nothing amateurish in the choice of pastel, earth tones. The middle-aged woman had painted a patch on a pant leg and grizzled beard on the woodsman’s face. With a tiny, fan-shaped brush, she even feathered in the wispy stamens and pistils in a patch of orange-gold wildflowers.

"Me and Eddy... we met at a rainy, late October craft fair," Kendra confided. They were sitting back in the kitchen. "Not terribly romantic by most people's standards." She glanced at a clock over the stove. "Your parents are probably wondering where you are." The implication was fairly obvious.

"What do you do with the jewelry boxes?" Frankie blurted.

"Already told you... sell them through art galleries, flea markets, craft fairs, whatever." She brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes with her glue-stained fingers. "You gotta go home now."

"Can I come see you again?"

"I dunno," she hedged. "Maybe, if your folks don't mind."

"Yeah, they won't care."

"And you can't go near the tools. They're dangerous as hell." Kendra held her hands up in front of his face. "How many fingers?" The boy counted ten, all intact. "Touch any of my power tools, and that will be the last day you ever set foot in this house."

Frankie lingered in the doorway. "I wonder if the McElroys are still partying."

Sensing his reluctance to leave, Kendra disappeared back down the stairwell. When she returned, the woman was holding a small strip of cream colored wood delicately veined with orange. "Smell this." She stuck the milky wood up under his nose.

"Don't smell nothin'."

Kendra scuffed the wood with a piece of 120-grit sandpaper she was holding in her free hand and extended the wood a second time.

"Cripes!" An intoxicating sweetness resembling an expensive, designer perfume wafted through the room

"It's tulipwood and, like bubinga, also from the rosewood family." She handed him both the sliver of wood and the sandpaper. "Next time your parents have a tiff or the McElroy clan is stirring the pot, take a whiff of tulipwood and it will calm your nerves." She gently pushed him out the door into the warm night. "Goodnight, Frankie Dexter and I hope your parents can work

things out." Kendra stood out on the landing and watched the young boy reluctantly shuffle off down the empty street.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You got in late last night," Mrs. Dexter was in the kitchen cooking waffles. She added a tablespoon of vegetable oil to the mix, an egg and a splash of milk. With his brown hair and fair complexion, friends claimed that Frankie was the spitting image of his mother. They both had dimples that only surfaced when they smiled and a malleable softness about the mouth.

"I met the lady who lives in the slate blue cape."

"The Lomax place?" His parents still referred to it as the Lomax place even though the owner was long dead.

"She does fancy woodworking... said I could come back and visit as long as I got your permission." Before his mother could respond, Frankie jumped up from the table and ran out of the room. He returned a moment later holding the slender length of tulipwood and the sandpaper. "Here, smell this." He rubbed the sandpaper over the surface briefly and held it up to his mother.

"What a delicious scent!" Mrs. Dexter grabbed a whisk and stirred the batter to a frothy consistency.

Frankie told his mother how Kendra took over the woodworking business after Edgar became sick. "She said I had to get your permission," Frankie repeated.

"Well, I don't know," his mother wavered. "A woman living by herself and..."

"For God's sakes, she's older than Aunt Helen!" Aunt Helen was Mrs. Dexter's younger sister.

"I'll think about it," his mother replied evasively, "and let you know later tonight." Spraying the waffle iron, she poured the batter onto the griddle and lowered the lid.

Frankie was about to argue the issue but held his tongue. His mother, who wasn't being contentious, seemed genuinely pleased with the fragrant tulipwood along with the notion of a woman building ornate boxes. "Well, that lays one mystery to rest."

"Which is?"

"Whenever I passed the Lomax place coming home from market," his mother remarked, "I heard the sound of heavy machinery and wondered what they were doing. Now we know."

Frankie went upstairs and lay down on his bed. An older woman had held him tight up against her wiry body. This was unfamiliar territory. He had to think it through. Not that there was anything much to think about. Kendra had pulled him close in the feral darkness out of pity not lust. The 'poor baby' was clearly meant as an expression of sympathy and maternal affection. The way she held him, Frankie could feel every crevice, fleshy bulge and contour of her body.

"Aw, shit!" It suddenly dawned on him what changed when Kendra ran off to the bedroom, slamming the door shut. She had slipped on a bra. Even alone in his own bedroom, the stolid, middle-aged woman's sense of modesty and decorum caused the boy to blush self-consciously.

The Lomax place resembled a safe haven, a protective womb. The several hours spent there was like a idyllic dream - unfortunately, a dream that, similar to most pleasant fictions, seldom last. Before leaving the basement, Kendra had shown him a crate full of finished boxes. The artwork was meticulous. Marquetry - the handicraft dated back to the Italian Renaissance -

was the name of the technique she used to puzzle the tiny slivers of wood into intricate design patterns.

After the glue dried, Kendra sanded through eight, increasingly finer grades of sandpaper ranging from two-twenty to fifteen hundred before applying Danish oil. "Chatoyance," she spoke softly rubbing a thumb lovingly over a glassy wooden surface. "From the French *œil de chat*, meaning cat's eye." "You sand the wood until it's so smooth that, when the finish is applied, the surface flings the light back at you in shimmery brilliance." She held the box up to the light and the decorative surface exuded a luminous glow that caused Frankie's breath to catch in his throat.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the early afternoon, Mrs. Dexter went off somewhere and didn't return until late in the afternoon. "The police visited the McElroys' place last night?"

"How do you know?"

"The Hispanic lady who lives diagonally across from them works behind the deli counter in the market. She says the two brothers got plastered and started beating on each other. They're out on bail now."

"What about Kendra, the lady who makes the fancy boxes?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Dexter replied almost as an afterthought. "You can spend time over there but don't go near the machinery." Frankie's mother shifted the several bags she was balancing in her arms and headed in the direction of the kitchen. "Now I've got to make supper."

Later that night while he was lying in bed, Mrs. Dexter came into the room. "Kendra goes to church Sunday mornings over at Saint Stevens... she also volunteers stocking shelves at the food pantry." After a brief pause, she added, "Ryder... her last name is Ryder. Kendra Ryder."

"How do you know this?"

"If you go to visit and hear machines running down in the basement," she sidestepped his question, "don't set foot in the house until the noise dies away."

"Okay."

"I'm doing laundry in the morning. Do you need any clothes washed?" Frankie had a bad habit of burying dirty laundry under the bed.

"No, I'm fine," the boy replied. Mrs. Dexter went away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Your mother came to visit," Kendra said the next time Frankie stopped by. It was a Thursday afternoon. The black sky had been spitting warm rain off and on all day.

Rain was the kiss of death to crafters. The previous Saturday, Kendra had set up her ten-by-ten foot canopy at the Stonington Craft Fair only to see her profits literally washed away by a torrential downpour. Forty-seven soggy exhibitors spent the day staring bleakly at one another in an otherwise empty field. Only a small handful of diehard customers, sporting rain gear and umbrellas, visited the fair. They didn't linger and nobody was in a buying mood. Luckily, the fair extended straight through the weekend, and Sunday when the sky cleared Kendra was able to recoup her losses and turn a small profit.

"I gotta cut slots for the brass hinges," Kendra said. "Sit over there," she pointed at a folding chair a good thirty feet away from the drill press. "Don't belch, fart or pick your nose."



As she explained it, the tiny, razor-sharp slot cutter, which measured a meager three inches in diameter, was, far and away, the most dangerous tool in her arsenal. The Delta, ten-inch table saw made a god-awful racket and ripped through rock maple with lethal indifference, but stock could be guided safely along a metal fence or miter gauge.

The tiny slot cutter afforded no such luxury.

Kendra fashioned a right-angle brace from scrap lumber and clamped the lids onto the brace before cutting slots. Reducing the speed on the drill press to a sloth-like six hundred rpm's, she inched the wood across the table until the horizontal blade barely kissed the grain. Then she locked her elbows rigidly against her sides and eased the wood forward in tiny increments.

Thuck. Thuck. Thuck. Thuck. Thuck.

When the blade cut to a depth of half an inch, she pulled back, freeing the stock from the whirring blade. "What's that for?" Frankie gestured at a can of silicone spray that Kendra waved over the slot saw.

"The slippery silicone lubricates the metal teeth so there's less chance of the wood seizing up in the middle of a cut."

"What if the blade grabs the wood?"

Kendra cracked a gritty smile. Rummaging around on the floor under the workbench, she located a badly shattered box with an amboyna burl lid. "If the slot cutter blade seizes up, you concede defeat and let go."

She handed him the ruined box. The orangey wood was speckled with reddish-brown, black and gold highlights. "Amboyna burl is imported from the jungles of Cambodia. The sheet of veneer that lid came from set me back a pretty penny."

Later that night at home Frankie could still picture the willowy woman hunched over the drill press, her elbows straight-jacketed against her slender waist. Just before she pressed the wood up against the slot cutter, Kendra filled her lungs with air. Listening to the mute language of the slot cutter blade as it blindly wormed its way through the black walnut casing, she didn't breathe again until the cut was complete. Thuck. Thuck. Thuck. Thuck. Thuck.

\* \* \* \* \*

In September, Frankie returned to school. He dropped by the Lomax place a couple days after school. One afternoon as the boy was approaching the slate blue house, the front door opened and a middle-aged man hustled past him. Climbing into a Buick convertible, he slammed the door and drove off in a rage.

Kendra was in the kitchen. A rather imposing tea box fashioned from red birch was resting on the counter alongside several sheets of flamboyant handmade paper. "I found these beauties," she said, "at the Rhode Island School of Design."

"Nice stuff!" Frankie gazed at a pile of velvety, cream-colored papers.

"A slurry of twigs, leaves and flower petals are added to the moist pulp. When it dries, the paper has an organic, three-dimensional quality." She transferred a piece of the ornate paper to the top of the unfinished, birch tea box. "I'm thinking of using it as the medallion to showcase the wood."

Kendra told Frankie on more than one occasion that 'presentation' was everything. The artisan needed some central theme or unique feature to draw the consumer in. "Yeah, I get it... the mint green and dark purple...that's swell!"

She lay the paper aside. "Of course, we can't use wood glue... too brittle" She was thinking out loud. "Maybe an acid-neutralized PVA."

"What's that?"

"Water-based white glue with a vinyl additive." She turned and smiled at the boy, a conspiratorial gesture. "Did you get a chance to meet Edgar's brother as he was leaving?"

"Almost knocked me over."

"Yes, well, the man was a bit upset." Kendra rolled the exotic, handmade papers in a bundle and fastened them with a pair of elastic bands. "He wants to put the house on the market... gave me thirty days to pack up my belongings and clear off the property." She sipped from a cup of coffee. "After he took sick, Edgar warned me that his brother was a greedy bastard and might try some funny stuff. That's why Eddy went to an attorney and redid his will... signed the property over to me, free and clear."

"So the family can't kick you out?"

Kendra raised her hands, palms up, and smirked impudently. "Not in thirty days, not in thirty years."

For the second time since he met the hardscrabble woman with the unlovely features, the boy burst into tears. Kendra reached out and pulled him close. "I ain't going anywhere, so don't you worry."

Only when he got his emotions back under control, did she gently pull away. "The Boxboro juried art festival is coming up next month."

"Yeah, you already told me." Frankie blew his nose and dabbed his cheek with the back of a hand.

"I sure could use an extra pair of hands."

"Okay."

"I'll need someone to sand and finish, while I get the rest of the inventory together. Can't afford to pay you much better than minimum wage, but..."

"Yeah, I'll do it. When can I start?"

"Unless you're planning another emotional meltdown," Kendra tucked the red birch tea box under her arm and headed for the basement, "you can get cracking now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Frankie told his mother about his new, working relationship with Kendra Ryder. "So everything's going good over there."

"Yeah, real good."

"Staying away from the power tools?"

"She lets me use the stationery belt sander and a scroll saw but they're pretty safe."

"Good." His mother wet her lips. "Your father called from the office. He won't be coming home tonight."

"Okay."

Frankie turned to go, but his mother brought him up short. "I suppose he's spending the night at his girl friend's place." Her voice was devoid of anger, no hint of bitterness. "So it will be just the two of us for supper."

He eyed her uneasily. "You're not going to drink, are you?"

"No, not tonight." The woman pursed her lips and gazed pensively out the bay window. "I still care about your father but he's all mixed up."

They ate supper alone. Somehow it didn't feel so bad. Frankie sat in the kitchen while his mother did the dishes. "Don't you have homework?"

"Already did it."

Frankie's mother squirted a stream of dish detergent into the sink. "Be nice to the Ryder lady." She was facing away when she made the odd remark, and Mrs. Dexter blurted the handful of words with an abrupt severity that caught the boy off guard. He stared open-mouthed at his mother's backside. "I want you to be nice to the lady who lives at the Lomax place," she repeated.

"Why wouldn't I be," he stuttered. His mother reached for the sponge and began scrubbing a Pyrex baking dish. He waited. After Mrs. Dexter finished the dish, she washed the rest of the plates and rinsed the sink. Approaching the kitchen table, she cupped her son's face in her moist hands, planted a kiss on either cheek and said, "I gotta throw a load of laundry in the dryer."

Frankie went upstairs and took a shower. Then he got in bed with his tulipwood. He had already used up the old piece and Kendra sliced him a new one off a three-foot slab. He scuffed the surface and raised the pungent wood to his nose. Yes, that was better.

*Be nice to the Ryder lady.* What the hell did his mother mean? Kendra was the nicest goddamn person he had ever met! No one had to tell him to be kind, or generous, or decent or anything! Frankie felt a lump growing in his throat. He scratched the tulipwood a half dozen times for good measure, rolled off the side of the bed, went and found his mother in the laundry room. "The Ryder lady,... why did you say what you did?"

Mrs. Dexter had finished with the dryer and had moved over to the ironing table. She added a cup of distilled water to the steam iron and raised the temperature to the cotton setting. "I ran into her when I returned some books at the library earlier today." She pressed down on the steam button and a puff of watery vapor burst from the sole plate. "Anyway, we got to shooting the breeze the way women do and one thing led to another."

Frankie's mother spread a plaid, perma-press blouse over the nose of the ironing board and made a tentative pass. "Well, the conversation turned to a certain fifteen year-old boy and she kept going on and on about what a swell kid you were." Finishing with the blouse, she grabbed a pair of black slacks. "Then the woman goes all mushy on me and confides how she and Edgar Lomax were planning to start a family of their own right before he took sick and how she looks at you almost like the son she never had." Only now did the woman set the iron aside and look her son full in the face. "I'm only sharing this because you forced the issue. What I'm telling you goes no further than this room."

"Kendra... she really said all that?"

His mother turned back to the ironing. "No further than this room, mind you!"

Still later that night while teetering on the cusp of sleep, Frankie tried to reconcile the notion of the utterly fearless, taciturn female hunched over a slot cutter chucked into a drill press lumbering at six-hundred rpm's and the mushy sentiments volunteered at the Brandenburg Public Library.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chop. Chop. Chop. Edgar Lomax fashioned a hummingbird whirligig from ridiculously expensive marine-grade plywood. When the wind blew, the bird rocked back and forth dipping its slender beak into a cluster of burgundy flowers. A week after he placed the gizmo in the back

yard, the heavens spit rain relentlessly for three, solid days. On the fourth when the skies cleared, Edgar discovered that his hummingbird had given birth to three, identical siblings. The veneer sheets separated accordion-style. They warped, cupped, bowed and, in three-dimensional chaos, became insufferably gnarly. Additionally, all the propellers had fallen off and were scattered about the yard.

Edgar collected the wreckage, carried the pieces indoors and conducted a forensic audit - a mechanical post mortem, of sorts. Then he fashioned a new hummingbird from poplar, a sturdy member of the North American cottonwood family. After painting, he coated the wood with exterior-grade polyurethane then reattached the propellers with a two-part, waterproof epoxy.

Problem solved!

\* \* \* \* \*

Kendra had signed on for a couple of local craft fairs. The third Sunday in October, Frankie helped load the rust-pocked Dodge Caravan and spent the day watching her greet customers and sell merchandise. As Kendra explained it nobody bought the big stuff. The elaborate, mixed-media tea boxes and multi-drawer jewelry cases sold reasonably well through the chic galleries on Cape Cod and Newport but were outside the price range of the average craft fair shopper. "They usually stop to ogle the really fancy stuff and admire the workmanship, then settle on a smaller keepsake."

She also set out items each show as a '*lost leader*', cheaper offerings she sold for cost and never really brought in any profit. The sign over a hexagon-shaped ring box fashioned from bird's-eye maple read:

*Clearance Sale!!!  
Ten dollars while they last!!!*

A dozen or so ring boxes were spread out on the table. "Customers view the ring boxes as a solid bargain so they grab them up. Meanwhile, more people crowd under the canopy to see what all the fuss is about, and medium-priced items start flying off the table."

"Even if I lose a few bucks on the ring boxes, I recoup the loss twice over on pricier stuff that gets tacked onto the initial sale." Kendra gestured with a flick of her eyes at a lanky older man sitting on a director's chair next to a tent full of watercolors. "That fellow isn't going to sell crap!"

"How can you be so sure?"

Kendra smiled at a woman pushing a baby stroller past her booth. The woman nodded amiably but didn't slow down. "You see how the sourpuss sits with his nose buried in the newspaper?" Sure enough, the fellow was leaning back in his chair, ignoring the customers streaming down the walkway. The artist's expression was sullen, disinterested. "Customers aren't stupid. They can tell when a vendor is giving them the holier-than-thou, cold shoulder." Kendra waved a hand emphatically in the air. "By five o'clock, you will be able to count the number of sales that guy's made on the fingers of one hand."

A young woman approached and was staring at an unusual box with green, gold and black highlights. "That's paldao," Kendra explained. "The wood is harvested from the jungles of Indochina. It's a dangerous wood to harvest... most natives won't go anywhere near a paldao tree."

"Why is that?"

"Boa constrictors frequently nest in the lower limbs."

The woman flipped the lid up then ran her fingertips over the crushed velour interior. "You're joking." Kendra grinned and shook her head slowly from side to side.

The woman left but returned an hour and a half later. "About that tree and the snakes... you were pulling my leg, right?"

"Boas hang from the trees searching for prey; the natives, who are animists and believe in voodoo, are terrified of the snakes. The logging companies had an awful time finding locals willing to go into the jungles and cut down the trees." The woman promptly pulled out her wallet and paid cash for the paldao box. By closing time Sunday night, Kendra had pocketed fifteen hundred dollars. Peeling five twenty dollar bills off the roll, she handed the money to Frankie. "What's this for?"

"Your take. Now help me break down the tent and pack up all this crap so we can get home."

\* \* \* \* \*

The first week in December, Frankie stopped by the Lomax place. The door was open but the basement was empty. He glanced in the bedroom. Kendra was lying under the comforter with a box of Kleenex balancing precariously on her chest. "What's the matter?"

"I gotta bad cold. Bronchitis."

The boy placed a hand on her forehead. "You feel hot."

"I was up to a hundred and three last night, but the temperature came down since then."

"What about the Litchfield Christmas Fair?"

"I dunno," she said listlessly.

Frankie went and sat on a chair in the far corner of the room. "You got food?"

"Yeah, I went to the market just before I got sick. There's plenty to eat, but I can't keep anything down." The woman coughed spastically, blew her nose and lay silent. Five minutes later, Kendra Ryder began snoring softly. On the night table was a framed photo of Edgar Lomax. Heavyset with a dark beard and plaid flannel shirt, the unsmiling hulk of a man resembled a backwoodsman from the hills of Appalachia. This was the man who taught Kendra Ryder to cut finger joints, miters, dovetails and mortises. This was the man who died before he could give the woman what she wanted most in the world.

Frankie went home and told his mother what had happened. "When is the Litchfield Fair?"

"This coming weekend. It's an indoor event at the art center. The booth fee was two hundred dollars."

Mrs. Dexter groaned. "Maybe she could tell them what happened and get a refund."

"It's a fancy-schmancy, juried art show," Frankie explained. "By invitation only... no refunds."

Mrs. Dexter blew out her cheeks. "Tough luck!"

Thursday Frankie's mother came into the bedroom as he was climbing under the covers. "How's the Ryder woman doing?"

"Much better, but she's still too weak to work the fair." He breathed out heavily making a disagreeable sound. "She spent the whole month making inventory for the show, and now she'll have to eat the loss. What a waste!"

His mother picked up a pair of Dockers slacks, folding them on the crease. "You know how to manage the booth, right?"

"Yeah, but each crafter has to set up, greet customers, track sales ... "

Mrs. Dexter hung the slacks in the closet and turned to face her son. "Perhaps if she got permission from the sponsor, we could manage the booth in her absence."

Frankie's brain flickered, momentarily dimmed then grew white hot again. "I can sell. That's no problem as long as somebody helps bagging, collecting the money and sales tax."

"What's Kendra's telephone number?" Mrs. Dexter shuffled to the door. "I'll call over there now and let her know."

When his mother was gone, Frankie reached under his pillow and fingered the milky white shaft of Brazilian tulipwood. He ran his palm over the surface of the redolent, ornamental wood - the talisman of a kinder, gentler universe - but left it where it lay.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## A Key to Paradise

### Part I

Grace Paulson took advantage of a free period at eleven forty-five and ran across the street to the Kentucky Fried Chicken. A colorful sign in the window trumpeted: *'Today's Special: Chicken Pot Pies only \$2.55!'* Inside another cardboard display propped on the counter repeated the bargain. A bleary-eyed youth behind the counter took her order.

"Whadayawanna drink?" The clerk asked, running all the syllables together in a semantic salad.

"Nothing, just the pie," Grace said.

He rang up the order. "That'll be 4.79." Grace pointed to the sign next to his elbow. The youth scowled and punched in the correct number on the keypad. No apology. Not even a hint of embarrassment.

It was a few minutes past noon when Grace returned, and most teachers at Brandenburg Middle School were eating lunch in the staff dining room. Ed Gray, Chairman of the English Department, entered. The man was a bit of an oddity at Brandenburg. Gaunt and high-strung, he kept apart from the rest of the staff but was not unfriendly. A real bookworm.

Under his left arm was a tattered, hard-covered volume which he placed on the table as he sat down next to Grace. The binding of the book was coming unglued, the spine just barely

holding the frayed, yellowed pages together. "Didn't see that on the menu," Ed remarked with a wry grin, indicating the chicken pot pie.

Grace plunged a plastic fork through the flaky, golden crust and speared a wedge of chicken floating in a creamy, vegetable broth. The previous Tuesday, the KFC was sold out of chicken pot pies well before noon and she had to settle for a plate of fried chicken with a side order of lukewarm potato wedges and crumbly biscuit. Bait and switch. Even something as simple as buying lunch was becoming a royal pain in the derriere. And who could you complain to? The pudgy, white-suited colonel was long dead and no one in the store looked old enough to vote.

"How is it... the pot pie?" Ed's voice jolted her back to reality.

"Actually, it's quite good," Grace replied nibbling on a succulent carrot. She told him about the incident at the KFC.

"An innocent mistake," he said. "The clerk probably forgot the pies were on sale today."

"Perhaps," Grace countered, "but then he wasn't the least bit concerned about ringing up the wrong price and actually seemed offended when I pointed out his mistake."

Ed shrugged and pursed his lips but had nothing more to say about the matter. Grace, on the other hand, couldn't let it rest. She had a nagging suspicion that, out of pig-headed spitefulness, the next dozen customers to order the chicken pot pie would be charged full price.

She broke off a section of the papery crust, swirled it around in the thick broth and deposited the soggy dough on her tongue. Regardless of price, the pie was awfully tasty. "Now that's an ancient artifact," Grace gestured toward the damaged book. She was teaching eighth grade English and worked with Ed on the curriculum committee during the summer.

"A collection of Pushkin's short stories," Ed replied, turning his attention to the food on his plate.

Grace wracked her brains. She had a decent grounding in Russian literature—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov. She's even read some Turgenev and a smattering of Gogol but no Pushkin.

After a moment Ed raised his head and noticed Carl, the janitor's helper, staring at the clothbound object by his tray. "It's quite good," Ed said. His thin, delicate fingers danced over the torn binding.

Carl's face went blank and then the hint of a smile formed at the corners of his lips. The smile faded just as quickly as it had appeared. "I'm familiar with Pushkin."

There was an uncomfortable pause, as though some code of etiquette had been breached and no one in the dining room quite knew how to set things right. Ed Gray smeared the watery brown gravy from his meat loaf onto the mash potatoes with the flat side of his knife. "You're familiar with Pushkin?" He repeated the man's words without bothering to look up."

"The father of modern Russian writing."

Tapping his fingers in rhythmic staccato a second time, the Chairman of the English Department opened the front cover of the book and began turning pages at random. His forehead furrowed and lips tightened in a thin, bloodless line. "But that's not possible," Ed countered in a slightly petulant tone. "Pushkin wrote in the early eighteen hundreds. There was nothing modern about his prose. Perhaps you have him confused with someone else."

Carl glanced up at a florescent light that had been flickering erratically then resetting itself throughout the meal. The corners of the bulb had turned a sickly bluish-orange; there was no more life left in the mottled tube. "Pushkin broke with the romantic tradition. Everything changed after that."

Dead silence.

Those teachers who, for the sake of propriety, had averted their eyes, now stared intently at the janitor in the blue coveralls. Ed Gray blanched; he had the look of a man free falling through space. No one spoke for the remainder of the meal.

Grace finished her chicken pot pie, sopping up the last remaining peas and carrots with a piece of crust. She glanced curiously at the janitor's helper. How long had Carl been employed there? She couldn't recall when the wiry man first appeared at Brandenburg Middle School. It may have been in the spring of 2004, a particularly cold year with many snow storms and an endless series of illness that thinned the classes by half on any given week. Or it might have been the following September. No one really noticed. Nor did they care.

The janitor's helper. Teachers sometimes used the term interchangeably with his name but not in a mean-spirited way. There was technically no such thing as a janitor's helper. But the man was too old, in his late thirties, to be a career-minded new recruit. He swept the floors, scraped and painted old furniture. He washed the windows and emptied the trash. He did whatever Bob Watson, the head janitor for the past fourteen years, told him to do. He did his job quietly, unobtrusively. Hardworking and dependable, you saw him and didn't see him at the same time.

A nonentity to most of the staff, Carl brought a sandwich and a piece of fruit to work in an old-fashioned lunch pail and sat in the far corner of the lunch room, most days, with the cafeteria workers and bus monitors. Lean and muscular with a perpetual scowl, he ate his food without looking up or taking part in the general conversation. Neither liked nor disliked by the rest of the staff at Brandenburg Middle School, he was the janitor's helper.

When the meal was done, Carl rose abruptly and grabbed his lunch pail. "After we set the gap on the boiler," he said over his shoulder, directing the remark at Bob Watson, "I'll change that dead bulb."

"No hurry," Bob replied with a dry grin. "Whenever you get to it."

\*\*\*\*\*

Once word got out that Ed Gray, head of the English Department, had been bested, one-upped, made a fool of - take your pick - by Carl Solomon, the teaching staff were divided in their loyalties. Those who disliked Ed and saw him as a pretentious windbag got a sadistic satisfaction out of the incident, while strangely refusing to admit that the janitor's helper could score any higher than dull normal on a Stanford-Binet.

Those who supported Ed Gray, which was most of the senior teaching staff and the head librarian, Miss Curson, felt that Ed had been duped; in all likelihood, Carl was talking off the top of his head and had never read a damn thing worthy of literary consideration.

"You know that custodian, Carl, ...the janitor's helper," Grace spoke in a casual tone, as though the information was of no great importance.

Pam Sullivan, the office manager, raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips by way of a response. "You sure are desperate for a date."

Grace winced. She told her about the incident with Ed Gray and Pam's mouth eased into a wicked grin. "Serves him right, the arrogant snot!" As a part of the office staff she had no allegiances to the head of the English Department and felt free to speak her mind. Unlocking a file cabinet, Pam fingered through a stack of manila folders. "Carl Solomon... lives over on East Ave. Whenever I call over there some old lady with a foreign accent answers the phone."

"His mother?"



Pam shrugged. The door opened. A boy with jet black hair and Hispanic features dropped off an early release form. He waited patiently while Pam checked the signature. Pam always nabbed the underage forgers. She knew where a stepfather habitually lifted the pen off the paper in the middle of a signature or crossed the t's with a downward slash. The boy sauntered off down the corridor in the direction of the entrance. A bell rang shrilly. Students spilled out into the hallways and began rushing pell-mell off to their next class. Grace ran her tongue over her lips. "How long has Carl been working at Brandenburg?"

"Damned if I know. A couple years at least." She grinned again. "Seems like we got ourselves a real mystery here."

Grace didn't like where the conversation was going. "Maybe the incident was nothing at all. A tempest in a teapot."

"A what in a who?" At the far end of the hall, Principal Skinner exited a classroom with a teacher's aide and was moving in their direction.

Grace reached for the door. "Gotta run."

\*\*\*\*\*

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Several students stayed after for extra help with an essay assignment: WHAT I WOULD DO IF I WON THE MASSACHUSETTS STATE LOTTERY. One freckle-faced, floppy-eared boy, Benny Finnegan, reminded Grace in a twisted sort of way of Alfred E Newman from Mad Magazine. The public health nurse visited the Finnegan family in October after an outbreak of head lice and an older sister, Nadine, had been treated for rickets.

Benny said he would spend at least a hundred grand on Play Station 3 video games. "Yes, well let's see if we can get that down in print," Grace suggested. She tried to picture the gawky youth as a middle-aged homeowner burdened with a mortgage and family obligations, but her mind balked at the effort. What if this silly kid ended up marrying the girl of his dreams and his life unfolded a huge success? Grace's life over the past few years had spun out of control, her dreams gone up in acrid smoke.

"A comma after the dependent clause, Benny," she said gesturing to a spot on the page. The boy lifted his head. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down like an elevator circulating randomly between floors. Then he smiled, a goofy, endearing gesture. With a knot welling up in her throat, Grace smiled back.

Another bell rang. The clock on the wall registered three-thirty. Grace and her daughter would be on the road to Cape Cod by six. They had her cousin's cabin for the weekend. A mini-vacation in Mashpee. No matter that the weather had turned abruptly colder with frost on the early morning ground. The Cape was especially beautiful this time of year free of summer tourists and gridlock. And she definitely needed to get away.

Bob, the head Janitor, stuck his head in the door. "Pam said you were looking for me."

"I need construction paper. Two reams." Because of a tight budget and dwindling resources, art supplies were kept under lock and key in a closet off the boiler room.

"I can get that for you now," he replied.

Everybody was fond of Bob, both students and faculty alike. Short and heavy set, he lumbered about the school with a pokey, low-keyed authority. When the rear door got damaged by an errant delivery truck, he rebuilt the frame from scratch and hung the new door. During outdoor recess, Grace had watched him shim the jamb using cedar shakes, plumbing each side

with a 48-inch level. When the new door was finally hung, it swung freely and closed tighter than the original. Once finished, Bob packed his tools and went back to collecting adolescent trash and cleaning heel marks.

“Here we are.” Bob held the boiler room door open for her and they were both were greeted with a blast of warm air. “Need anything else?”

“Just the paper,” Grace replied.

Bob removed a key from a box perched on a cluttered desk and disappeared into the supply room. Almost a foot tall, the box was egg-shaped with two, sleek drawers which followed the sloping contour of the wood. Grace stepped closer and ran a finger over the coffee colored surface, which was smooth as a freshly powdered, newborn’s bottom. The box wasn’t so much a container to store small objects as a work of art, a sensuous, freeform sculpture. Grace shook her head in disbelief. “Your talents are endless,” she said as Bob came up behind her with the reams of paper.

“Black walnut,” he remarked shyly, indicating the carcass, “with red birch handles.”

Grace pulled a drawer gently open. “And this?” She gestured at the orangey wood with paisley swirls ranging from blood red to lemony yellow.

“Amboyna burl from Cambodia,” Bob removed the delicate drawer and handed it to her. The inside was lined with emerald flocking. “The tricky part is gluing the amboyna directly to the walnut.” He caressed the burnished wood with a stubby finger. “The surface is wet-sanded with tung oil through eight, separate grades of sand paper. It takes a week or so for the finish to properly cure. Then it’s rubbed out to a high luster with rottenstone and beeswax.”

The boiler suddenly fired up with a loud swoosh. Grace’s nostrils tingled with the faint odor of fuel oil. “The box belongs in a museum not a boiler-room.”

“That’s not for me to say,” the janitor replied with a mischievous grin.

Grace handed the drawer back to him. “What?”

“Carl Solomon built the box. He’s the artisan.” Bob Watson shook his head emphatically. “This stuff is so far out of my league ...” He left the sentence unfinished. The boiler clicked off and a pump turned over making a rhythmic, whirring noise. “If you want to see more of his handiwork, Carl has another box on display at the Brandenburg Art Center through the holidays.”

Grace felt the breath catch in her throat. Something inchoate rumbled deep down in her solar plexus sending waves of indefinable emotion rippling up to the surface. Bob returned the key to the delicate drawer and inserted it in the box. “And yes, despite all rumors to the contrary, he does read Russian literature.”

\*\*\*\*\*

*If you wish to appeal this decision, please notify the Brandenburg District Court within fourteen days of receipt ...* Grace crumpled the letter from the district court and flung it in the trash.

The Toyota dealership had promoted her ex-husband, Stewart, to assistant manager in June. Now he cruised about in a fully-loaded Camry XLE—a twenty-five thousand dollar car with heated outside mirrors, chrome-tipped dual exhaust, a rear lip spoiler and leather-wrapped steering wheel. All this extravagance, yet the state of Massachusetts couldn’t see fit to increase his child support by twenty-five, lousy bucks.

And that was only half the problem.

Grace got home from school around five-thirty. Her daughter, Angie, arrived two hours earlier. The sixteen year-old collected the mail and laid it out—sales fliers, junk mail, credit card applications, magazines and assorted bills—on the kitchen table along with the court letter perched conspicuously on top of the pile. Angie was sure to ask about the letter, and Grace would be compelled to tell her. To tell her what? Your father, the congenital philanderer who favors blustery lies over simple truths, is a skinflint. He begrudges his own flesh and blood an extra hundred bucks a month.

Grace climbed the stairs and entered her daughter's bedroom. Angie was curled up on the bed reading a paperback. On the cover of the book was a picture of a bearded Hindu poised in full lotus position. A chalkboard hung from the mystic's neck by a piece of string. "Is that required reading, or are you off on another weird adventure?"

With the breakup of her parent's marriage, Angie developed a spiritual wanderlust.

There was a short flirtation with Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Scientists. Trips to a musty reading room on Huntington Avenue and an occasional Sunday service—that lasted a sum total of three months. Later Grace found several Hari Krishna brochures wedged under her daughter's bed. They were wrapped in a furry tangle of dust bunnies. She never broached the issue.

More recently, Angie had gone off with a friend to spend the weekend at a Sufi commune in upstate New York. The teens drove the entire length of the Massachusetts Turnpike, through the scenic Berkshires crossing over the state line heading westerly toward the Catskills. Nothing came of that either. There were no metaphysical earthquakes. The girl returned from the land of the whirling dervishes with a bad case of diarrhea and craving for junk food. Angie threw the book aside. "I'm hungry. Could you make me a crazy omelet?"

In the kitchen Grace cracked a couple eggs and scrambled them briskly with a fork. She diced some sweet onion together with green pepper and warmed them in a pan until the translucent onions turned pearly. While the vegetables were cooking she laid a row of sliced pepperoni on the edge of a plate and opened a bag of cheddar cheese. Angie hadn't mentioned the letter from the court and that was good.

"Gina Grabowski accused the gym teacher of trying to look down her blouse while she was tying her sneakers."

"Really!" She added a dash of salt and pepper. When the vegetables were sufficiently caramelized, Grace slid them directly from the pan into the egg then poured the batter back into the pan. She drizzled the cheese over the egg, topping the concoction with a layer of pepperoni. When the egg began to sizzle, she added a splash of water and covered the pan, steaming the omelet. That was the trick. The bottom never burned and it came out perfect every time.

Grace could imagine a half dozen over-sexed male teachers who might (the operative word here was 'might') ogle Gina Grabowski's smallish boobs, but the gym teacher was not on the list. Kurt Smiley was a deacon at Saint Phillip's Church and taught CCD classes two nights a week. Grace lifted the lid. A cloud of sweet smelling steam floated toward the ceiling. She folded the sides of the omelet toward the middle, added another tablespoon of water then lowered the lid.

"As I recall, Gina accused a male teacher of a similar indiscretion last year." The spicy odor of the pepperoni and cheddar billowed through the kitchen. She slid the egg onto a plate, placed a dollop of sour cream on top of the omelet then rounded off the creation with a splash of mild salsa.

Angie was big boned with a fleshy nose and bronze complexion. Not pretty in the traditional sense but attractive, sensuous even, in her quirky, understated way. Grace bore little physical resemblance to her daughter. She had a reasonably good figure, but you would never know it by the way her clothes hung on her angular frame. Her hair was dark and straight. She never knew what to do with it. If she grew it long, the wispy strands hung limply. An act of desperation, she had her stylist trim it short over the summer. The page boy was suppose to make the lanky woman who turned forty on Tuesday look mod, hip, svelte, cool—not like Tinker Bell in a midlife crisis. Over the years, the body had seen a bit of wear and tear—a handful of birthing stretch marks around the lower belly and, more recently, a smattering of crow’s feet about the eyes. The not-so-subtle indignities of aging. “This is wicked good!” Angie smeared more salsa on what was left of the omelet. The oils from the pepperoni bled into the egg staining it with an orange glow.

“About the book,” Grace pressed.

“It’s no big deal!” Angie said abruptly, showing no willingness to pursue the matter, but after a moment she added, “The swami got disillusioned with the material world and took a vow of silence.”

“Language being corrosive to the spirit,” Grace added.

“He communicated by scribbling brief messages on a chalk board then, after a couple years, announced that he’d put away his chalkboard and begin speaking again. But when the moment arrived, he had a change of heart, went into spiritual seclusion and never spoke another word for the remainder of his worldly existence.”

Grace squirted a stream of dish detergent into the sink and let the water fill. “You’re not planning...”

“Cripes,” Angie exploded, “it’s just some dopey book!”

Grace tapped her daughter on the wrist. “Are you packed for the trip?”

“All set.” Angie rose from the table and began putting food away. They were only taking the bare necessities - a couple changes of underwear, towels, sheets and a few cosmetics. There was no one Grace had to impress on the island. She had budgeted the trip as down time - a chance to decompress, recharge her emotional battery.

“The Village Idiot got kicked off the school bus,” Angie said in a flat, matter-of-fact tone.

The Village Idiot was Dwight Goober, a twelfth grader who lived two streets over. He’d been in trouble with the law since elementary school when he defaced the brand new playground at Lexington Park with graffiti. Dwight, who always struggled with academics, couldn’t even get the spelling of the four-letter words right. That’s how the police knew it was him. Who else could be so dimwitted? And he readily admitted vandalizing the playground as though it was a badge of honor. The court put him on juvenile probation and his mother had to pay a fine. Over the years his penchant for petty crime and mayhem reached legendary proportions.

“What did he do,” Grace asked.

“Punched a kid.” Angie pulled on a wind breaker but thought better of it and switched to a warmer jacket. She stuffed the windbreaker in her overnight bag. “Ellen Barrows.”

“Nice girl. What about Ellen?” Grace asked distractedly.

“Ellen Barrows—that’s the girl Dwight clobbered.

Grace retrieved her car keys and checked the time. She hoped to reach the Cape Cod Canal before sunset. “You didn’t say he hit a girl.”

“You didn’t ask.” Angie grinned but it was not a particularly pleasant expression. “When they passed out brains, Dwight thought they meant ‘trains’ and said ‘I’ll wait and catch the next one’.”

“The Village Idiot has to live in Brandenburg.” Grace set the security alarm and they went out the door.

\*\*\*\*\*

The drive to Cape Cod was uneventful. Few people were heading south this late in the season. The maples and oaks gradually gave way to scrub pine rooted in bleached soil. A huge hawk sat far up in a tree just outside of Fall River. As they sped past, the bird spread its massive wings and flew off to the north, on an updraft of frigid air lifting the bird high above the earth.

“Your father’s stopping by to see you Tuesday,” Grace said. The predatory bird had nudged her memory, a free association of sorts.

“Whatever.” Angie curled up in a fetal position next to her mother with her knees jammed up against the dash. They reached the Bourne Bridge that took them across the waterway in record time. Halfway around the rotary, they picked up route 6 that meandered all the way to Hyannis, where the Kennedys lived and, still further north, to the gay and lesbian populations of Provincetown.

Grace spotted a diner up ahead. She must have traveled this route a hundred times or more and never noticed the brown, clapboard structure. A dozen cars lined the front of the building. “Hungry?”

“Not really, but there won’t be any food at the cabin.”

Grace pulled the Volvo off the road into the parking lot. Most of the patrons were Indian. Some wore braided hair and cowboy shirts. One man with prominent cheekbones sported a string tie fastened with a turquoise clasp. All the customers seemed to know each other. Behind them, the door opened and more smiling Indians straggled into the diner. “Mashpee,” Grace spoke softly. “They’ve lived in this region for centuries.”

These were the descendents of the legendary Indians who greeted the Pilgrims when the first settlers arrived in Massachusetts in the early 1600’s. The Wampanoag Tribe presently numbered about 1500 on the Cape. Each July 4th they joined with other tribes from across the country to celebrate their traditional customs, folklore and dance. Grace and her family had attended the Mashpee Wampanoag Powwow often when she was a young girl. They feasted on fried dough and clam cakes, listened to the tribal drumming and chants. The highlight of the three-day event was the fireball contest held at dusk on Saturday night where a flaming, kerosene soaked rag ball was kicked and tossed about in an attempt to score points. Soccer with a decidedly homicidal flair!

The restaurant smelled of fried clams, coleslaw and fresh-ground coffee. They found a booth near the door and the waitress, a dark-skinned woman with a braid of hair that hung down to the small of her wide back, took their order and hurried off.

“How we mistreated the Indians is a black mark on American history.” Grace said. “Trail of Tears, Little Big Horn, the Seminoles in Florida - all a part of our shameful past.” But only fifteen minutes later, Grace leaned forward and whispered, “Angie, didn’t you order a cheeseburger with fries?”

“Sure did.”

“That fellow with the cowboy hat came in ten minutes after us and he’s being served a cheeseburger with fries.”

“With my tossed salad and blue cheese dressing,” Angie rested her chin on the edge of the table and blew out her cheeks in protest. “This stinks!”

The waitress came out of the kitchen with a spaghetti dinner, which she placed in front of a man seated at the counter. The pudgy waitress freshened his coffee then began a leisurely conversation. “That fellow,” Angie was furious now, “came in no more than five minutes ago. How do you figure it?”

“Trail of Tears, Battle of the Little Big Horn, the Seminoles in Florida,” her mother replied. “It doesn’t appear they’ve forgiven past indignities.”

Grace’s blood was beginning to percolate. An inconvenience was one thing. What if they had no intention to serve white people? She could complain, draw attention to the fact that half a dozen customers who arrived after they did were already eating and maybe—hocus pocus—the food would suddenly appear. Or maybe, out of sheer vindictiveness, the cook would push their order back by another half hour. Grace wished she had a kerosene-soaked rag ball to kick toward the front of the restaurant.

The food arrived. Arranging the plates on the table, the round-faced waitress smiled. It wasn’t so much a nasty smile as one of bland indifference. Cheeseburgers and fries. The fries were burnt and greasy; the burgers undercooked.

“Well, we’re off to a good start,” Angie muttered.

\*\*\*\*\*

Back on the road they picked up route 151 heading east and entered the outskirts of Mashpee. The sun was almost down. “Bastards!” Angie spit the word out, an explosion of hatefulness. “Stinking Indians!”

Grace wasn’t quite sure how she felt. Were the Indians to fault or was it just the same old same old? Another drop in the never ending pitter-patter of life’s disappointments. Too many shitty experiences like the Mashpee diner cobbled together with a never ending mishmash of false starts and shattered dreams could wreck your faith in humanity. In recent months, she felt her purpose in life frittering away and that frightened her. “Those Indians made us cool our heels and the food was crap.” Grace spoke without rancor. “Lesson learned. Next time we visit Mashpee we don’t break bread with the Redman.”

Finally they reached the causeway that connected the island where the cabin was situated. “What the heck is that?” Angie pointed to a large bushy object perched on top of a telephone pole. The pole was forty feet tall and tilted at a queer angle. A short, chirping whistle filtered down to the marshy wetlands.

“Osprey nest.” Grace replied. With their white breast and belly, Ospreys were one of the largest birds of prey in North America. The wingspan alone could reach well over five feet. “Osprey feed almost exclusively on fish,” Grace explained. “The birds are protected under the endangered species act. And with good reason.”

A large bird suddenly appeared, soaring in from the bay and landed on top of the rickety structure. “They look like they can fend for themselves,” Angie replied.

Grace shook her head. The species had gone into a steady decline since the early 1950’s due to pesticide poisoning. But after the ban on DDT, the massive birds bounced back. They

built their nests frequently on manmade structures like telephone poles, duck blinds and even channel markers.

Grace eased passed the pole on the thin slip of roadway and found the cabin a short distance nestled between a row of holly and slender birch trees. What little light was left quickly bled out of the sky and the New England night arrived serene and darkly beautiful. From the upstairs bedroom they looked out over a calm bay. Too far away to be seen, the island of Martha's Vineyard rose out of the Atlantic waters due south. Nantucket, the former whaling center, sat only a handful of mile off to the east.

The women quickly arranged the linen, washed up and got ready for bed. Angie shuffled into the bedroom barefoot. She kissed her mother's cheek. "I didn't mean what I said about the Indians."

Grace sighed and pulled her daughter close, rubbing the nape of her neck. "The strangest thing happened to me today." She pulled Angie down on the side of the bed next to her and told her about Carl, Pushkin and the amboyna burl box.

When she finished, Angie asked, "What else do you know about the guy?"

"Nothing."

"A regular mystery man."

Grace blinked. That was the same thing the receptionist, Pam, had said. "For the time being, yes."

She squeezed her mother's hand. "I'm tired. Goodnight."

When she was gone, Grace thought, "A thousand questions in search of a thousand and one answers." It was an old Arabic saying she had read somewhere, possibly in graduate school - the implication being that a person, no matter how sincere and earnest, can search a lifetime and still come up short. Grace listened to her daughter's steady breathing. Deep, serene and unencumbered. The sleep of a youth with little to no excess emotional baggage. As tired as she was from the drive south, Grace hovered on the edge of sleep but could not slip across the threshold. Some bit of unfinished business?

Wait. She did know something else about the enigmatic Carl Solomon. But it was really only more of the same, one more bit of ephemeral nothingness. A thousand-and-one questions in search of a thousand-and-two illusive answers.

A little more than a year ago, the teachers at Brandenburg were negotiating a new contract with the school committee, and the meetings were going poorly. In December just before the holidays, a number of staff refused to attend a parent-teacher conference. The act of defiance, which was written up in the local press, backfired and was interpreted as a slap in the community's face. Many parents who previously were sympathetic toward the teachers, felt betrayed. Between the staff who attended the conference and those who stayed away, a rift developed; best friends were no longer on talking terms, and an ugly mood settled over the school unlike anything Grace could remember.

She saw little of Carl during this time. He seldom ate his lunch in the staff dining room and was either working snow removal or doing repairs in some other wing of the building. One afternoon when the children had been sent home on early release, the janitor's helper came quietly into her classroom. He walked with the weight of his body far back on his heels - the strong, earthy gait of a man used to doing heavy, physical labor. His expression was flat, opaque. "Floor needs washing. Did you want me to come back?"

Grace looked up from the pile of papers she was correcting. His face was framed in the habitual scowl, but the tone of voice was unmistakably neutral and polite. Almost but not quite

friendly. "No. That won't be necessary. I'll be out of your way before you get to the front of the room.

Stacking the chairs and desks to one side, he left the room and returned with a mop and pail of water. His eyes shrouded over, turned dull and inward as he leaned into his work. Rinsing the water after each pass, he swabbed the floor down with smooth, muscular strokes, paying special attention to the baseboards and space under the heating vents. When half the floor was washed, he dragged the dirty liquid out of the room and returned with a bucket of clean water. Moving all the furniture to the other side, he repeated the process.

"You're getting a new floor," he said leaning on the mop handle at the far end of the room. The entire length of floor between them was still quite wet. For the second time, Grace put her pencil down and looked up. The classroom floor was covered in linoleum tile, except for a smaller section toward the rear of the room that was solid oak. The wood was originally installed as a purely decorative feature - decorative and utterly impractical. Over the years, the finish had been eaten away and the damaged boards reduced to an eyesore.

"This oak," he said tapping the floor with the head of the mop, "may look a mess, but it's in reasonably good shape. This weekend I'll be sanding away the stains and dirt to the bare wood. Come Monday morning, you'll have a brand new floor." Carl rubbed his chin meditatively. "We're using a water-based sealer that dries real fast and leaves very little odor."

He lugged the filthy water back out into the hallway and disappeared. In the morning the children would be back with their dirty feet and untidy habits. Once more the scuff marks, bits of scrap paper torn haphazardly from spiral binders and other bits of educational debris would litter the floor - the disorder and chaos of half-formed minds.

On Monday as Carl had promised, the classroom floor near the coat racks in the back of the room had a bright new look. All the scrapes, gouges and discolorations were gone. The oak had lightened to the color of golden wheat. There was an odor from the high gloss finish but it was slight and inoffensive. Even the blackened stain - India ink - near the water cooler was mysteriously erased, the wood fiber sanded flush then finally bleached back to its original color before the final, satiny film was applied.

Later in the day when the children were gone, Grace sat for the longest time staring at the new floor and wondering at the hidden allegory: the dirt and dust swept clean; the blemishes and discolorations undone; the multi-textured grain of each, thin board stripped, restored, made whole again.

A new floor. A new life.

\*\*\*\*\*

The clock on the bedside table registered two a.m.. Grace's brain was shutting down. Like a ship coming untethered from a dockside mooring, her body was drifting off to sleep. Her last conscious recollection was an image of Carl's deadpan face and cryptic, oddly visceral body language which kept floating back to her with obsessive force. Then with equal insistence, another image presented itself: that of Ed Gray, the neurasthenic Chairman of the English Department. Grace imagined him dressed in blue coveralls and steel-toed work boots laboriously swinging a mop back and forth across the classroom floor. With his wire-rimmed bifocals perched on the tip of his nose and the tattered copy of Pushkin's short stories protruding from his back pocket, the middle-aged academic flailed away with the string mop, splattering water in every direction.



Where this bizarre imagery came from or what it meant, she hadn't a clue. For sure, Ed Gray was an odd duck, but he wasn't a bad person. He certainly wasn't malicious like some people.

Like Stewart.

Stewart could be hateful and cruel. When they married, he seemed so full of enthusiasm and spunk. Misdirected enthusiasm. Self-serving, opportunistic spunk. A thousand-and-two questions in search of a thousand-and-three answers.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the morning they watched the harbormaster cruise up the channel from the breakwater. During the summer he would be checking permits for anyone digging clams, but this late in the season it was just a routine patrol. Locals waded out waist deep with a wire clam rake, which they scraped along the sandy bottom. When they hit a hard object, they scooped it up. Mussels, smallish clams, succulent quahogs, even spiny starfish were all fair game.

They drove back across the narrow slip of land that connected the island to the mainland. Wild lilies, yellow with speckled mouths and lavender-fringed blossoms fading toward porcelain centers, rimmed the inland grasses. High up in the telephone pole, the osprey was feeding her young. Grace pulled off the road onto the stiff marsh grass so they could get a better view. "Osprey eggs seldom hatch at the same time," Grace said. "There could be a lapse of five days between the first born and the last chicks.

The women craned their heads far back but all they could see was the huge basket-shaped nest fashioned from twigs and branches. "The older chick dominates the younger ones. If hunting is good, there's no problem among the chicks. But if food is scarce, the older ones won't share even to the point of starvation."

They ate breakfast at a bagel shop near the rotary then drove out to South Cape Beach. The beach was empty except for an older couple searching for sea glass and an occasional surf caster. The bluefish had been running since late September and sea bass were also plentiful.

The twosome headed off down the wintry beach. A flock of grayish-brown whimbrels bobbed easily on the calm water. Near a hillock in the distance, stiff plume grass and salt spray roses bloomed close by a marshy wetland where phragmites grass rose four feet out of the water on elegant, plumed stems. Angie meandered near the shallow surf, dodging stranded horseshoe crabs and rubbery stalks of seaweed. A pale jellyfish floated by, sucked in toward shore then thrust back to sea by the whimsical currents. They skirted a cove and, on the far end, found a middle-aged man laying out the frame of a smallish kite on a terrycloth beach towel. Thirty feet away a team of three men was flying similar bat-shaped kites in precision drill.

"Those are synchronized flying kites," Grace said. With a hand shielding her eyes from the bright sun, she stared up into the sky. "Very expensive."

Angie followed the trio of kites as they pirouetted in a perfect figure-eight then hovered motionless for a fraction of a second before darting off in another combination of twists and turns "Next month there's an oceanfront festival off Newport. Kite clubs from as far away as Connecticut and New Jersey will be competing. My parents and I use to go every year." The festival featured teams from all over New England. The more sophisticated models were constructed of lightweight, space-age metals and colorful fabrics. Four-member groups took turns running through a series of choreographed maneuvers, with the team leader calling out directions seconds in advance of each, new routine.

"Too bad!" Angie said, gesturing with her eyes. The end kite on the far left suddenly veered off in the wrong direction from the other three. "He missed the call." Angie had never seen anything quite like it. The kites dived and soared in perfect - or, as in the previous, botched effort, near perfect - unison, covering a span of a hundred feet out toward the ocean.

"See how they adjust the height and direction," Grace said, "by moving their hands."

Her daughter had been too busy enjoying the acrobatics to notice how the men handled the strings. But now she could see, as the kites tacked in a new direction, the three sets of hands moving in and out, up and down, accordingly.

"Kites are easy," Grace thought on the walk back. Angie was skipping about in the tumbling surf. "Something goes wrong with the routine,... you adjust the line or check the metal kite frame. With human nature it's not so simple."

Grace glanced over her shoulder at her daughter bringing up the rear. Angie looked up and smiled - a quirky, darkly beautiful expression that pulled all her malleable features at cross-purposes. "There was a letter from the court," Angie said.

Up ahead a tall man in his thirties was surfcasting with a metal lure that sailed far out over the breaking surf in a looping arc. "I asked the judge for a few extra dollars, but it wasn't meant to be."

Angie put her hands inside the pouch on her windbreaker. "Why didn't you just ask dad directly?" Grace had asked him on several occasions. More like begged. "He doesn't get it, does he?" Angie said, anticipating her mother's thoughts.

"No, I guess not."

Monkey syndrome. That's what Grace called Stewart's affliction. Baby monkeys developed at the same rate as humans up to a point. Then the primates hit an intellectual brick wall and stopped learning. Stewart might have been an ace at the Toyota dealership, but as a parent his potential petered out shortly after his daughter was born. Now, strangely enough, Angie had come into her own and outstripped her father in subtle, undemonstrative ways that Stewart would never comprehend.

They hung back to the left of the surfcaster, watching him heave the monofilament line out over the water. "Any luck?" Grace asked.

"Not today." He kept jerking at the rod with a spastic pumping action to simulate an injured minnow on the end of the line. "Fish aren't cooperating." He gestured with his head so they could pass safely.

"Dad's got this new girl friend," Angie said.

"What happened to Gloria?" Angie shrugged. "What's the new one like?"

Angie flicked her hair back over a shoulder. The sun caught the blond highlights in the dusky, chestnut colored strands. She didn't answer right away. "She's nice enough."

Another unwitting victim. When an Osprey caught a fish, it always carried the prey back to the nest tail down so its flight was unencumbered. Grace imagined Stewart carrying his romantic quarry back to the domestic nest in a similar fashion, but kept the thought to herself. A soft breeze was blowing now diagonally across the beach. They could smell the pebbly seaweed drying in the damp sand. Up ahead, another fisherman was threading a sea worm onto a barbed hook. The worm was blood red and slimy, its tiny legs and pincers writhing in agony. In a pail next to the fishing gear was a half dozen flounder, flat and smooth.

"I'm going to take a vow of silence," Grace spoke in a confidential tone. "Show up to school on Monday morning with a chalkboard on a string."

"And how exactly are you going teach eighth-grade English?"

“Don’t know. Haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

A chalkboard and a string. Grace was talking nonsense, but behind the silly blather hid a darker reality. The brown-skinned holy man could parade around with a goofy chalkboard dangling from his scrawny neck. But maybe he was a colossal faker - that’s faker, not ‘fakir’, as in religious mendicant - and who would know the difference? He never spoke a solitary word just smiled incessantly. Enlightened soul or simpleton? Besides levitation, mind travel to distant cosmic galaxies and sleeping on a bed on rusty nails, did the mystic possess any practical skills? Could he teach eighth graders how to conjugate a verb? Make an amboyna burl box? Grace was tired of all the phony baloney. The verisimilitude. The appearance of truth. The sham. Maybe the bearded yogi in the geriatric diaper was on to something. Or just maybe he was laughing at humanity behind his silvery beard.

\*\*\*\*\*

On Sunday morning an icy chill gripped the air, but the sun quickly rose over the bay nudging the temperature up to a reasonable forty degrees. Crossing the inlet, the Osprey were feasting on the remains of a large fish. The mother held the mangled body in her beak while the fledglings ripped the flesh to pieces.

They cruised south on Route 28 into the center of Hyannis where the harbor was filled with private yachts and sailboats. On the main square that meandered along the wharf, they found a few boutiques still open this late in the season but came away empty handed. But for the cool weather, they could just as easily been on Beverly Hills’ Rodeo Drive. They bought cappuccinos and croissants at a gourmet pastry shop and lounged outside on metal folding chairs with their food. From her handbag, Grace pulled a small brochure she picked up at the visitor’s bureau. “In 1602,” she read, “Captain Bartholomew Gosnold was the first of the Old World explorers to view the area now known as Hyannis. Settlers from England incorporated the Town of Barnstable in 1639.”

“Scintillating.” Angie smeared butter on the flaky crust and sipped at her coffee.

“In 1666 Nicholas Davis, first settler and businessman, built his warehouse for pickling oysters in brine on Lewis Bay at the foot of what is now Pleasant Street.” “It says here,” she scanned further down on the pamphlet, “that, from the days of the earliest settlements, the Indian Sachem Yanno, for whom Hyannis is named, sold the area presently known as Hyannis as far as Craigville for 20 English pounds and two small pairs of pants.”

“Now you know why the Mashpee hate us,” her daughter added.

An elderly woman with a wrinkled face and platinum colored hair emerged from a jewelry store with several bags. She was carrying a funny looking dog that resembled a cross between a Shiatsu and a poodle. The dog had a face like an exploded cigar with dark, spiky hairs sprouting in a dozen different directions. The pooch was decked out in an almond-colored sweater and a collar studded with garish stones. The woman hurried past with a preoccupied expression, on her way to some hoity-toity tea party or socialite function. “Such a slave to fashion,” Grace muttered under her breath. A Boston Brahman with a pampered pooch. Not the sort of woman who would ever have to beg the courts for chump change. But still, the weather is delightful and it’s a blessing to get away.

Two doors down was a store with a blue awning. The sign over the door read Cape Cod Collectibles. Grace stepped over the threshold. Metal sculpture and small statuettes in various

medium rested on tiered displays; pottery and ceramic vases were washed in a soft sheen from overhead track lighting. From a speaker in the rear, Clifford Brown's limpid jazz trumpet was navigating through the melodic chords to Joy Spring. The smoky horn leaped into the upper register, hammering out a barrage of staccato triplets before settling back into the final chorus of the tune.

A man came out from behind the counter. He was casually dressed in a V-necked sweater and hush puppies. "That sculpture you were admiring is by a local artist." The fellow had a boyish appearance despite a barren patch on the back of his skull where the hair had thinned away to a mere wisp. "It sold yesterday."

The piece, which stood four feet high, had been executed entirely in thin-gauged, brass. Using multiple strands of wire to recreate the instrument and performer, the artist had literally drawn the figure of a jazz saxophonist in silhouette. Off to the side was a trumpeter, a skier and a ballerina up on her toes. A five hundred dollar prima ballerina.

Grace budgeted everything. Without that extra twenty-five bucks from Stewart there was no margin for error. And yet, some people could blow five hundred dollars on a brass ballerina and never give the extravagance a second thought. The Kennedy compound was less than a mile down the road. The senator from Massachusetts could, on a whim, buy the jazz saxophonist or an entire sixteen-piece big band without breaking a sweat.

"Clever concept, don't you think?" The proprietor explained how the artist drew a rough sketch in charcoal in order to visualize each figure. Then, using the drawing as a template, he shaped, rolled and twisted dozens of metal strands to bring the figure to life. "They're three-dimensional," he added. "The images have depth despite the thinness of the metal."

The talkative owner knew Grace and her daughter had no intention of buying anything but didn't seem to care and Grace appreciated that. To meet someone without an agenda or ulterior motive was refreshing. "My name's Donald. Donald Carrington." He handed Grace a business card. "Feel free to stop in any time."

\*\*\*\*\*

On Monday after classes, Grace went to the Brandenburg town library and searched for books by Pushkin. She found nothing. A volume by the author was available at a neighboring branch. Grace had the librarian order the book. When it arrived, she read the introduction and a half dozen short stories written in a simple but straightforward style. The prose was lean and muscular with a sharp, realistic edge. In one of the stories, a Mongol chieftain from an eastern province staged an uprising against the local ruler and was put to death. Was the tale meant to be taken literally or was there something more - a childish parable masking a deeper, hidden truth? In the biographical postscript that followed the stories, the editor wrote:

'Alexander Pushkin's highly unique style  
*laid the foundation for modern Russian literature.*'

\*\*\*\*\*

When she arrived home later in the afternoon, the light in the living room was burnt out. Grace replaced the bulb but that didn't fix the problem. "It's gotta be the switch," Angie said.

Grace removed the plastic plate and stared at a jumble of wires. "Maybe you ought to shut off the electricity at the main box," Angie cautioned, "before pulling things apart."

"Stupid me," Grace thought, easing her hands away from the bare wires. There were different voltages in different parts of the house. Two-twenty and one-ten. She wasn't sure what she was dealing with. But replacing a wall switch wasn't brain surgery. How difficult could it be to change a stupid switch? "Let's go for a ride."

At Home Depot the electrical aisle was thirty feet long with offerings on both sides. Fourteen-gauge wire in fifty-foot coils, junction boxes, wall outlets in a huge metal bin, black electrical tape, shiny metal conduit, wire strippers, needle-nose pliers and plastic splicing nuts in various color-coded sizes. With Angie bringing up the rear, Grace cornered a salesman.

"New or old installation?" The man had a walrus moustache and grumpy disposition.

"I just need a light switch."

Everyone else seemed to know perfectly well what they were doing. There were contractors loading up shopping carts with every conceivable electrical offering. An older black man was rummaging in a bin of 20-amp circuit breakers. None of the other customers needed any help. The salesman hooked a thumb on either side of the buckle of his leather belt and scowled. His gut hung precariously out over the inverted buckle. "Two-way or three-way switch?"

Grace felt her brain grow numbed. "I don't understand the question."

The salesman made a sound that was a cross between a belch and a death rattle. "You don't know the first thing about electricity, do you?" He ran a crooked forefinger over the salt and pepper moustache. "Lot of people come in here. Do-it-yourselfers. They can manage a regular switch without too much trouble, but when there's an extra hot wire thrown into the mix, that always sends them to the nuthouse."

A fellow snaked passed them pushing a steel flatbed loaded with framing lumber and sheets of particle board. The metal wheels on the bottom of the cart made an unholy ruckus. "All I asked ..."

"We're not in business to teach novices complicated installations." The salesman's cell phone rang and he answered it. "Be back in a minute." He strode off down the aisle as though escaping from the plague.

"Idiot!" Angie fumed.

Grace put her hands over both eyes and bent over as though someone had sucker punched her in the gut. She wept quietly and with infinite self-loathing. She had come to Home Depot tabula rasa, intent on facing down her demons, and what did she get? The electrical salesman from hell, a misogynistic son of a bitch!

"Gees," Angie hissed, "get a grip!" Twenty feet away, the older black man sorting through circuit breakers was staring at Grace with a blank expression. The hardware department was no place for strong emotions. A young man with thick glasses was restocking a bin with yellow extension cords. Angie slithered in front of him. The man dodged to one side, but she blocked his path. "My mother needs help with a switch. Really really bad!"

"Two way or three way?" the geeky fellow asked. Angie's mouth fell open. "How many switches," he rephrased the question, "control the light that won't work?"

"Just one."

The man sauntered halfway down the aisle and removed a small switch from a bin. "There you go." Grace stood beside her daughter now, dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex. "Something wrong, miss?" He seemed genuinely concerned.

“Allergies.”, She cleared her throat and spoke a bit more forcefully. “How do you install the damn thing?”

He turned the switch over. “There’re only three wires. Two black and a bare copper ground. Just hook the blacks - that’s your hot wires - to the bronze screws and the bare ground wire to the smaller green nut here at the bottom.” He pointed to each place as he spoke.”

“It doesn’t sound that difficult,” Angie said.

The young man wagged his head up and down. “Easy as snapping a circuit breaker into a junction box.”

“This is all I need?”

“That’s it, lady.” He pushed the glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “Three-way switches are just a tad more complicated, but if you ever need to change one, come back and see me.” He handed Grace one of his business cards and hurried off down the aisle.

Angie studied the layout of the switch. “Cripes, I could do this!”

In the parking lot Grace hesitated. Turning to her daughter she said, “There's one more thing I want to do before we head home. It will just take a moment.”

The museum was open late due to the fall art show. The Brandenburg Gazette devoted considerable advertising to the event and several dozen visitors were still milling about the foyer with only half an hour to closing.

They found the standard fare of water color paintings—still lifes, floral arrangements and nature scenes. A potter with an unusual glazing technique had three bowls set out on a lighted display. Not all the offerings were conventional or even attractive. One offbeat artist had worked facial features into an odd-shaped gourd along with a bulbous nose and formidable set of teeth. A vegetative rodent. The work reminded Grace of the satanic creatures in a Hieronymus Bosch painting.

“A bit too avant-garde for my tastes,” a woman sporting an Etienne handbag directly in front of them murmured to a friend.

Close by the back wall was a bust of Abraham Lincoln cast in bronze. The emancipator of the slaves looked rather melancholy. Grace could picture such a piece in a government building, but couldn’t imagine a morosely depressed former president sharing her personal living space.

“Here’s Carl’s box.” In the far corner was a diminutive box no more than four inches square. Unlike the amboyna burl masterpiece, it offered no fancy curves or daring swirls. The surfaces had been planed perfectly flat, the edges gently eased.

The sides of the box were fashioned from a light, cream-colored wood, but this was clearly just a pleasant detail and nothing more. The viewer’s eye was immediately drawn to the lid which was done in three, exotic contrasting woods—a mottled, golden outside layer which exuded an irresistible glow as though it contained its own, inner light source. Nearer the middle was a band of quilted, reddish wood and, at the center, a coffee-colored burl with numerous swirls and intricate patterns.

A tall blonde woman, the museum director, came up behind them. She had a pleasant, sensible face. “You like the box?” Grace nodded. “The lemony gold wood is avodire and the red is sapelé. Both come from Africa. The medallion in the center is walnut taken near the root of the tree. The tremendous pressure the wood is under creates the unusual, paisley pattern.”

“I know the artist,” Grace said. “He works at our school.”

The director smiled. Though it was late, she didn't seem in any great hurry to close the museum. "Perhaps you could tell me something about the man. I haven't actually met Carl personally."

"But I thought -"

"When he made his application," the director continued, "he simply filled out the form and clipped it to a brown paper bag. The box was in the bag."

"Wierrrrd!" Angie held out the 'r' for dramatic effect.

The director reached out and waved an index finger over the lid. "Everybody ogles this little box but never bothers to look inside." The director winked at Angie - a conspiratorial gesture - then motioned with a flick of her head. "Go ahead, open it." Angie placed her thumb in an indentation on the front and raised the lid to reveal a poem which had been recessed beneath the lid.

*Paradise is there, behind that door,*

*In the next room;*

*But I have lost the key.*

*Perhaps I have only mislaid it.*

Kahlil Gibran

Paradise is there, behind that door,... A poem hidden away, like a precious gem, in a box. A gift within a gift. What did it mean?

"The paper is archival, acid neutralized so it will never fade or yellow. Come back in a hundred years and it will look just as crisp and clean as it does today." The director glanced at her watch. "We'll be closing in five minutes." She lowered the lid hiding the enigmatic verse and went off to tell the other patrons. Grace grabbed a pen from her purse and, reopening the lid, jotted the poem on the back of a slip of paper.

\*\*\*\*\*

Monday night they got home too late from the museum to tackle the light switch. The following evening after supper, Grace assembled what few tools Stewart left behind when he drove off in the U-haul. "So this is it." She began unscrewing the light plate."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Angie cautioned. Her mother stared at her with a blank expression. "The power. You have to shut the electricity off at the main box."

"Silly me." They went down into the basement and tripped the circuit breaker that controlled the hall lighting.

Back upstairs, all the lights in the entryway were dead. Grace used the Phillips screwdriver to remove the two screws securing the switch to the wall. Just as the pleasant salesman with the horn-rimmed glasses had assured her, the black wires were fastened to the brass nuts; the neutral ground tucked under beneath the switch. All she had to do was remove each wire, one at a time, from the broken switch and shift it over to the new one.

And to think the obnoxious salesman with the bowling ball gut had tried to break her spirit - make her feel like the only thing women were good for was cleaning house and fornicating, not necessarily in that order. Boorish swine! He probably sat home all day Sunday

watching WWF wrestling matches on his flat screen TV and smashing empty beer cans on the side of his primordial skull.

All the wires were replaced and Grace tossed the broken switch into the trash. “Moment of truth.” Angie went downstairs and threw the circuit breaker. The other lights went on but the hallway was still dark. A fleeting image of the salesman with the walrus moustache floated back to her. He was wagging a finger in front of Grace’s nose, his lips curled in a dismissive sneer.

This wasn’t rocket science. For God’s sakes, how difficult could it be? Grace peered into the metal receptacle box. “Wait a minute. I see the problem.” The topmost wire had wiggled loose from the fastener, when she folded the wires repositioning them in the wall. She poked at the loose wire with the tip of her screwdriver. Big mistake! The second the metal blade made contact with the bare wire, there was a loud hissing sound and a bright arc of white light shot through the air.

“Mom!”

Grace tumbled backward, collapsing in a heap on the floor, and the room went totally dark again. Dead silence. “I think,” Grace gingerly lifted herself up on her elbows, “we were suppose to shut the power down.”

Angie held a flashlight over the box while her mother attached the errant wire. When they flipped the power back on, all the lights worked. “On. Off.” Grace flipped the switch and watched the light alternately glow then fade to darkness. “On. Off. On. Off. This is fun.”

“You’re a regular card-carrying electrician.” Angie stared up at the ceiling as her mother played with the new switch. Suddenly her daughter’s face clouded over. “Damn!”

“What’s wrong?”

Angie gestured toward the picture window. “We’ve got company.”

Grace peered out the window, but the street was empty. It was after nine o’clock. For the past hour, a light rain had been falling in a steady drizzle. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Over there by the shrubs.” Diagonally across the street and partially concealed behind an outgrowth of lilacs stood Dwight Goober, the Village Idiot.

Grace snuffed the lights, climbed the stairs and drifted noiselessly into the bedroom. She lifted the curtain and peered into the street.

“What’s he doing now?” Angie whispered anxiously. Dwight had shifted away from the lilacs and was standing in the middle of the street. All six feet of him. At nine o’clock on a school night in the pouring rain. Even when the boy stood rooted in one place, all his limbs were in perpetual motion, elbows stabbing the moist air, hips jerking about fitfully.

“He’s like a wild animal,” Grace mused. “A dangerous one at that.”

There had been a youth at Brandenburg Middle School several years back who reminded Grace of Dwight Goober. Same feral quality and lack of impulse control. Some of the teachers felt sorry for the troubled youth, even suggesting that he might benefit from one-on-one counseling. The well-intentioned teachers changed their tune after a kindergartener was found raped and beaten in the woods behind the elementary school.

“What are you going to do?” Angie pressed.

“I don’t know.” What could she do? Call the police and, as soon as Dwight saw the flashing patrol car lights turning onto Adeline Avenue, he would run off down a side street as far as the cul-de-sac and disappear into the woods. The police might take a report, but then he’d be back the next night, like a bad dream, to settle scores. Dwight Goober was vindictive. He smashed mail boxes, let the air out of neighbors’ tires, set an empty lot on fire and trashed the Wilson’s storage shed. Not that anything ever came of it. When something rotten happened,



everybody knew Dwight was to blame but go try and prove it. He had the brainpower of a slug but always did his malicious dirty work late at night, when it was impossible to see much of anything and the neighbors already were sound asleep. Charles Manson, Jeffery Dahmer, The Boston Strangler, Jack the Ripper, Dwight Goober—they were all cut from the same bolt of cloth. It wasn't as simple as fixing a broken light switch.

“What am I going to do?” She repeated her daughter's question. Grace boiled herself a cup of tea and sat in the kitchen making out the grocery list. When the clock struck eleven, she went back to the bedroom and pulled back the curtain a half inch.

“Is he still there?” Angie had taken a shower and changed into a pair of flannel pajamas.

“Yes, over by the lilacs again.” Dwight was lurking in the rain with no hat, swaying from side to side like a back ward schizophrenic. But he wasn't psychotic, not in the traditional sense.

“Maybe he'll catch pneumonia.”

“Not likely,” Grace replied. A herd of cows over at the Cumberland Dairy frequently stayed out in the rain for days. They seldom became sick. Sometimes their hooves got infected, what with the mud and muck, but, otherwise, inclement weather was just a minor inconvenience. Grace lay down on the bed but she couldn't sleep. All the excitement and exhilaration over fixing the switch ebbed away. She felt depressed. Dwight Goober was a blight on society. A malignant growth. The damage he did to the community was exponential. He had the power to turn the whole neighborhood topsy-turvy, but what could anyone do?

Shortly before midnight, Grace got up to pee. She went and looked out the window. The rain was still coming down. The street was empty now, Dwight crawled off to his smelly lair. She went back to bed and pulled the comforter up around her throat. A vision of the poem box danced in her mind's eye.

*Paradise is there, behind that door,  
In the next room;  
But I have lost the key.  
Perhaps I have only mislaid it.*

A car swerved onto the street and the rain-soaked tires made a gurgling sound. Only fools would argue that an earthly paradise was easy to come by. Too many complications, missed opportunities, false starts. Tomorrow midterm grades would be printed and sent home. Brandenburg had scored poorly on the state MCAS test, and Ed Gray was on the warpath. He scheduled a faculty meeting to plan a strategy to remedy the problem. More aggravation. More grief. What year was it exactly when Grace lost her key to paradise? But then, as the Lebanese poet coyly implied, perhaps she had only mislaid it. Having almost electrocuted herself earlier in the evening, she still managed to fix the light switch. Hopefully, before she ended up toothless and senile in an old age home, she could figure how to set her private universe back on an even, harmonious course.

\*\*\*\*\*

Every year the Brandenburg Knights of Columbus donated turkey dinners to needy families. Grace helped deliver meals. It was a family tradition. On Thanksgiving morning the phone rang. “We got three deliveries, all in the same area.”

Grace grabbed a pen and jotted down the addresses. Around ten she and her daughter stopped by the hall and collected the meals. The first stop was an elderly man who lived with his wife and a Siamese cat. The wife suffered from Parkinson's disease and sat quietly in a recliner while her husband arranged the food in the refrigerator. Next was a Hispanic family in a three-decker tenement over by the Safeway Plaza. The father broke his leg and was out on disability. The wife thanked them profusely and offered Angie a small bundle of sugar cookies.

"Two down one to go." Grace pulled the car back out in traffic. They drove cross town past the new fire station and cruised through an older residential area of modest split level ranches built in the mid-fifties. The single family home was similar to the others except for a fresh coat of slate blue paint. Grace rang the doorbell.

When the door opened, she blinked twice and felt her jaw go slack. Carl Solomon was standing in the doorway. He wore tan Dockers with a plaid flannel shirt; the heavy work boots had given way to a pair of suede Nikes. "We're delivering Thanksgiving meals." The remark was phrased more like a question than a statement of fact.

"The Knights of Columbus called earlier," Carl replied. "Mrs. Shapiro was expecting you."

An elderly woman, petite and neatly dressed, limped into the room favoring her right leg. "Whose there, Carl?" The accent was distinctly European but with another inflection that Grace could not readily identify.

"Your holiday meal," he explained.

"Please come in. I'll just be a minute." The woman took the food and went off. The living room was quite small but neatly arranged. An old-fashioned mahogany table decorated with lace doilies stood in the center of the room. Reflecting the somber tastes of a previous age, a stuffed arm chair rested in the far corner next to a tiffany lamp and brocade ottoman. Scattered about the room were several small boxes with fancy inlays.

"I know you," Carl said softly. "The English teacher."

"We saw your box at the museum," Grace blurted out, stumbling over the words. "The one with the Gibran verse."

Angie kept looking back and forth between her mother and the man in the flannel shirt. "Wait a minute. You're the janitor who makes boxes!" Carl shrugged then his face dissolved in a self-conscious grin. "Someone loses a key but then maybe he only misplaced it and can't get into paradise or heaven or whatever ..."

"I think," Grace interrupted, "the verse is intended as an allegory."

"You understood the poem?" Carl's eyes glowed with fixed intensity.

"Perhaps,... not completely." Grace blushed and felt the words catch like a logjam in her throat.

Finally, Mrs. Shapiro returned carrying a tray of pastries. "I hope you don't have to rush away."

"No, you're our last stop." Grace eyed the pastry. "Is that German strudel?"

"Homemade, no less."

Carl brought napkins and cups from the kitchen. Mrs. Shapiro eased gently onto a chair. "Had a stroke in April and I'm still not a hundred per cent. Old age—it's a real pain in the butt." "So you know Carl?"

"Yes, from school. I teach at the middle school."

“When I was her age,” Mrs. Shapiro waved her good hand fitfully in Angie’s direction, “we were reading *The Magic Mountain* and Goethe’s *Faust*. Now you’re lucky if young people have enough patience to wade through the *National Inquirer*.”

Carl grinned. “Ruth can be a bit melodramatic.”

“For what it’s worth, I read *The Magic Mountain* my freshman year in college,” Grace replied. “Thomas Mann is one of my favorite writers.”

Mrs. Shapiro raised an eyebrow. “You just made a friend for life.” In the street a car with a blown muffler backfired as it raced past the house. The old woman muttered something angrily in a language that Grace could not readily identify. She picked up a word or two in German but then there were others in a more guttural tongue that eluded her. “That bum—he lives two blocks down,” Mrs. Shapiro grouched. “Almost ran a kid over last week. You might think he was competing in the Daytona 500.”

Grace broke off a piece of strudel and nibbled at a powdered raisin. The papery thin layers of pastry dough were flaking in her fingers. “What was that you said a moment ago?”

“*Du solst wachsen wie ein tzibilah ...*” “It’s Yiddish. Old German mixed up with Hebrew and some Slavic offerings. The European Jews spoke it as a common tongue for centuries... a modern day Esperanto.”

“And the meaning??”

“Well, it’s not very nice,” Mrs. Shapiro didn’t seem terribly contrite. “I was referring to the hooligan who just used our street for a drag strip. I said that he should grow like an onion with his head in the ground and ass in the air.”

Grace flinched, not expecting such language from an elderly woman, while Angie burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

Mrs. Shapiro talked at great length about a variety of subjects. Born in Germany, she immigrated to Israel only a few years later when her parents fled the Nazis. She worked as a chicken farmer—a very smelly affair—then a journalist with *Yediot Aharanot*, a popular Hebrew newspaper. In the early sixties she emigrated to the United States and taught German at Boston State College, where she met her third husband. What happened to the other two she conveniently omitted or forgot to mention.

But she didn’t just speak about herself. After Mr. Shapiro passed away, she rented space to make ends meet. Carl responded to an ad in the local classifieds. He had been staying by the week in a rooming house over on the east side. Not a nice place—a lot of riff raff and *fershtunkener* bums. Her last husband—may he rest in peace—had been a cabinetmaker. While cleaning the workbench, Carl found a book on joinery buried under a pile of pipe clamps and plywood jigs. He asked Mrs. Shapiro’s permission before using any of her late husband’s tools.

\*\*\*\*\*

“What a character!” Angie said. Mrs. Shapiro had insisted that they take what was left of the strudel and Carl had wrapped it in a paper plate. “He treats her swell, don’t he?”

“Doesn’t he,” her mother corrected. “And, yes, he treats Mrs. Shapiro very respectfully indeed.”

As they were preparing to leave, Carl helped Mrs. Shapiro to her feet, supporting her under the left elbow, which was her weak side. Whether it was clearing the table or locating a three-pronged cane so she could see the visitors off, there was nothing forced or affected in his actions.

“Carl’s nice,” Angie said. “A bit Neanderthal but nice.” There was no response. “So...”

“So what?” Like an over-the-hill boxer telegraphing his punches, Grace could see where her daughter was heading with the conversation.

“What do you think, I mean, about Carl?”

“The world would be a splendid place if there were more people like him.” Grace realized that she was doing ‘the voice’. The voice was a stilted, high pitched tone she unconsciously slipped into whenever she felt uncomfortable, out of her element. She pulled up at an intersection and waited for the light to turn. Five more minutes and they would be safely home. A quick shower and off to bed. Tomorrow was another full day at school, the formal beginning of a new semester and grading period.

“Why don’t you ask him out on a date?” There was no reply. “Women do it all the time. They see somebody they like. Maybe the guy’s shy, ... doesn’t know how to approach woman ... socially challenged.” Grace stared at her daughter in disbelief. “You been divorced a year and it’s not like any hot prospects are breaking down the door to ask you out on a date.”

“You have such a succinct way of putting things.”

“Which isn’t an answer,” Angie shot back petulantly.

“Carl may be well read and a gifted woodworker, but he’s also a custodian at the school where I work.” She blew out her cheeks in despair. “I’d be the laughing stock of Brandenburg Middle School.”

“This is America, not India. Carl’s not some grubby pariah.”

A fleeting image of the yogi with the chalkboard flash in front of Grace’s eyes. “No, you’re right, but still ...”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” They were home. She set the shift in park and flicked off the ignition. “I’ll think about it,” Grace replied weakly.

“No you won’t,” her daughter made no effort to conceal her disgust. “You always play it safe. You lost the key to paradise when dad cheated. You’d rather hide behind allegories and metaphors than risk something to get it back.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Later that night, Angie followed her mother into the bathroom and sat pensively on the toilet while she got ready for bed. “Those curvy boxes we saw over at Mrs. Shapiro’s house were designed by a woman.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Grace put the toothbrush away and reached for the dental floss. Before they left the house, Mrs. Shapiro had insisted that Carl show them a new piece he was working on. The box was similar to the one Grace had seen in the boiler room. “It’s not my design,” Carl admitted in an offhand manner. “There’s a woodworker, Lois Keener Ventura, from Pennsylvania. She came up with the original design. These are just reproductions.”

Lois Keener Ventura had an artistic vision. A vision of sumptuous boxes that would mimic the shape of fish, plants, whales, even boa constrictors. Like the ingenious, brass wire sculptures in Hyannis, Ms Ventura sketched her improbable designs out on paper first, then transformed the whimsical doodles into exotic and voluptuous forms with names like boa, surf, minnow, whaleplay and leaf.

Carl showed them a half dozen other boxes, all faithful, meticulous reproductions. One tall box Carl nicknamed the ‘Koa boa’. Fashioned from a slab of greenish gold, Hawaiian koa, it

curled in a sinuous series of 'S' patterns. A lethal reptile frozen in wood. "A woman," Angie spoke softly, "can do just about anything she sets her mind to."

Grace nodded in the affirmative. It didn't matter that Carl borrowed the design. The workmanship was his as was the clever idea to decorate the drawers with amboyna burl. "A woman woodworker." Grace ran the floss behind an upper molar then tossed it in the trash. "Now that's something special!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Friday morning Grace met with Ed Gray at Adam's Diner. He wanted to discuss the school's poor performance in the English portion of the MCAS test over breakfast. It wasn't a formal meeting. That would come later, include everyone in the English department and tediously drag on through the remainder of the school year. Ed was mildly paranoid; he didn't trust many of the ELA teachers. They harbored dangerous ideas. This meeting was more a pep rally, an effort to brain storm and set an early agenda.

"Poached eggs with rye," Ed handed the menu back to the waitress. "Lightly toasted, not too much butter."

"And to drink?" The cloying smell of maple syrup and hash brown potatoes sifted through the restaurant.

"An Earl Grey tea with honey."

"We're fresh out of honey," the woman replied.

Ed scowled and fidgeted in his seat. "Coffee... decaf with skim milk."

Grace glanced at the menu. All the breakfast entrees were named after popular dances. There was the Charleston - two eggs, with hash browns and a slab of Canadian bacon; the Viennese Waltz - similar but with smoked sausage as the meat; the Hokey Pokey - blueberry pancakes slathered with whipped cream; and the Last Tango in Paris. Grace had used this unusual offering as her basis for the 'crazy omelet'. She ordered the Charleston with a cup of coffee.

"Now there's a work in progress," Ed interjected, gesturing with his eyes toward the entryway. A painfully thin, disheveled man had just wandered in and sat down on a stool at the counter. "That fellow comes here every day," Ed said in a hushed voice, "A burnt out drunk. He's off the sauce now - or at least that's what he says. Lives over by the YMCA in subsidized housing and gets a disability check."

"And how do you know all this?" Grace asked with an amuse expression.

Ed Gray removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "It was my great misfortune to be sitting at the counter one day when he arrived for breakfast." Sure enough, the reformed drunk latched on to the ear of the fellow sitting next to him and began haranguing the customer with a long-winded story. At one point he laughed, a deep-down, straight-from-the-gut raucous belly laugh. Grace observed that four or five teeth on the top were missing - punched out, rotted away or sacrificed in a drunken fog. "What a blowhard!" Ed seethed.

Grace smiled inwardly. She could picture Ed Gray, a captive audience, sitting next to the reformed drunk as he held court. A court of fools.

"About the test scores," Ed ran his fingers through a tuft of thinning hair, "Brandenburg is down fifteen points over last year. Nobody's happy."

All the staff was in a similar bind. A math teacher could no longer just teach basic algebra any more than a history teacher could focus on the Civil War or Great Depression. Compelled to

teach to the test, they had no control over what the pundits in Boston chose from one year to the next. The end result: the brightest students received endless praise; average kids were made to feel like dopes and dunces - a motley collection of ineffectual losers; and the marginal students cursed the day they ever set foot in a public school. It was an insidious blame game. Teachers blamed the students for not trying hard enough or, worse yet, downright laziness; parents pointed an accusing finger at the school; the superintendent, taking the bureaucratic high road, conveniently reprimanded all concerned. "I saw the social studies test." Grace said.

Ed Gray made a face and cracked his knuckles one at a time. "What do I care about social studies?" He spoke impatiently, as though the remark was totally irrelevant to the conversation.

Grace leaned forward across the table. "The eighth grade textbook covers the history of western civilization from Roman times through the Middle Ages. Pope Innocent the Third, Thomas Becket, Henry the Second, Papal Indulgences and Justinian Codes ... It's a college level curriculum scaled down to middle school. Eighth graders just barely handle puberty. They can't digest that much information."

"I don't see where ..."

"Does anyone really give a hoot," Grace pressed her point, "that the Visigoths invaded Spain toward the end of the Roman Empire?"

"Let's talk about English," Ed said peevishly, "and let the barbaric Huns and Visigoths sort themselves out. Or perhaps you'd rather travel back in an Orwellian time machine ten years or so when the ultra-liberal anarchists were trampling public education into the ground."

"That was a cheap shot," Grace said.

Ed Grayson was referring to a regrettable period in American education when the progressive establishment tossed traditional teaching out the window in favor of an enlightened approach. Since rote memory skills were considered old fashioned, the Dick and Jane primer was abandoned. No one needed to learn vowels or consonants, at least not in the conventional sense. First graders could sound out and spell words with an improvisational flair. It didn't matter if a sentence was technically correct. The children would grapple with proper spelling, phonetics and grammar as they progressed through the higher grades.

Rules of language. Roolz uf Langwage. Ruels off Lainkwuch. Over time, the first graders' Tower of Babel would eventually sort itself out. Young learners would blossom into educational free thinkers.

At least that was the grand design.

In reality, kindergarteners taught the 'enlightened' educational model frequently emerged in later years functionally illiterate and desperately needing remedial help to repair the damage done by 'progressive' education. The utopian dream proved more a pipe dream - make that pieyup drrreeem - than the real deal.

Grace felt her enthusiasm draining away. She had come to the meeting with an open mind, but Ed Gray lived in a world of tattered novels and bureaucratic niceties. Given the option, he'd probably prefer working with the bureaucrats in Boston than teaching the children. The waitress brought their food. Grace spread strawberry jam on a slice of toast. "Last year the English test focused mostly on vocabulary and punctuation."

"Don't forget the composition portion," Ed added. "That counted for thirty per cent of the overall score."

The reformed drunk suddenly rose from the counter and, moving unsteadily, careened off in the direction of the rest rooms. As he passed their booth the man leaned over and stared at Ed

Gray “Hell, I know you,” he crowed. “You got some fancy pants, high fallutin’ job over at the elementary school.”

“Middle school,” Ed corrected stiffly. “I work at the middle school.”

“Ooooooowee! You’re girl friend’s one hot tamale!” The man dropped down on his haunches beside Grace. “I never would have taken you for a lady’s man, but what the hell do I know.” Giggling like a recalcitrant schoolboy, he staggered to his feet again and disappeared into the men’s room.

“What an asshole!” Ed lowered his voice to a faint whisper. “A totally useless waste of humanity!” He suddenly reached across the table and tapped Grace lightly on the forearm. “About that unfortunate business with the janitor’s helper...”

The remark caught her off guard. Ed was smiling at her but the expression was pinched. “The man was ill informed. Writers in Pushkin’s time were very mannered. There was a conventional romantic formula. They all used it.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Grace didn’t know what to say.

“Alexander Pushkin was a brilliant writer but no different than the rest.” He pushed his glasses up on the brim of his nose. It wasn’t just a casual statement. A reply was expected.

“Yes, I suppose.” Grace cringed inwardly. What Ed was telling her simply wasn’t true. Pushkin was different from all the rest - a literary heretic! Ed Gray was probably telling everyone at Brandenburg Middle School that Carl was a fraud, but that was just damage control. A clever PR job.

The burnt out drunk had returned to the counter and was acting real crazy now, flailing his arms and talking gibberish. One of the cooks, a burly man wearing a soiled apron tied around his thick waste and a Red Sox baseball cap emerged from the kitchen. He bent over the counter and whispered a handful of words in the man’s ear and, without waiting for a reply, retreated back to the grill. The ex-drunk who lived in subsidized housing and got by on his disability check never opened his mouth through the remainder of his meal.

An epiphany! Grace suddenly realized who the unkempt loudmouth reminded her of. Sure, there was Dwight Goober ten years down the bumpy, dysfunctional road of life. He would be living off the dole at taxpayer’s expense and wrecking havoc in a slightly more sedate, middle-aged fashion.

“I’ll get the check,” Ed waved a hand at the waitress.

\*\*\*\*\*

A week after Thanksgiving temperatures plummeted. There was no more talk of Indian summer or winter reprieves with sunny days in the high fifties. A thick film of frost on the windshield greeted Grace when she went out to warm up the Volvo. The finches, chickadees and hummingbirds had long since departed for more temperate regions. Only a handful of diehard cardinals, pine siskin and blue jays presented themselves at the feeder.

At Brandenburg Middle School, vocabulary lists had been inflated to twenty-five words per week amid grumbling and groans from the students. Information overload—too much homework, too many facts to digest, not enough hours in the day. Schoolwork as drudgery! Sisyphus, king of Corinth, doomed to roll his rock up the steep mountainside on a daily basis. Worse yet, Ed’s new strategy, which was no different than the old strategy, produced the

opposite effect. Test scores continued to plummet. Now parents were in open revolt, and the chairman of the English department's only response was to hold firm.

Shortly before lunch, Grace found a handwritten note in her mail slot.

Mrs. Shapiro called. Please  
stop by later today after work  
regarding an urgent matter,  
an emergency. P.R.

Pam Riley, the office secretary, took the message. If she made the connection between the old woman with the funny accent and Ruth Shapiro, Grace was in serious trouble. The administrative secretary was an insufferable news bag, a one-woman rumor mill, who would let everyone in the school know the latest dirt. Actually, Grace wasn't quite sure what exactly Pam Riley might do with the information, but it wouldn't be anything flattering.

Later that afternoon, Grace baked breaded scrod with mash potatoes. When the meal was done, she left Angie to clean up and drove out to Mrs. Shapiro's house. Carl's car was not in the driveway.

"You mentioned an urgent matter, . . . an emergency?"

"Emergency?" Mrs. Shapiro shrugged. "What a strange choice of words!" The woman was dressed in a white blouse and blue skirt. Grace followed her into the living room. Again she favored her left side, dragging the injured leg in a sweeping arc, an accommodation to the illness. "PTO meeting at the school tonight," Mrs. Shapiro noted absentmindedly. "Carl has to close up so he won't be home until late. Too bad. He would have enjoyed your company." The room was growing dark and she flicked on the Tiffany light. The bulb was weak and only dimly lit the area around the recliner. "Poor man! He doesn't enjoy much of a social life."

Grace let the remark die a natural death.

"Weather has been so cold lately." She settled into the recliner, wiggling her rear end until she was quite comfortable. Her withered left hand curled inward toward her chest in a limp ball. "We were spoiled by the warm weather. Now winter is here with a vengeance."

Grace took a seat by the mahogany table. Why had Mrs. Shapiro invited her here? Certainly not to discuss the weather. "You lived in Israel," Grace deflected the conversation in a new direction.

"Seventeen years. We were Zionists, nation builders back then." The old woman tucked her crippled hand in the crook of her arm and smiled wistfully. "I was twenty-five and living on a kibbutz, a communal farm, in the upper Galilee. The Golan Heights rose snow-covered to the east, the biblical cedars of Lebanon due north." A nostalgic, bittersweet reminiscence tugged the corners of her lips gently upward. "I worked in the poultry barn, but mostly we harvested apples, oranges and grapefruit for export."

Grace tried to picture Ruth Shapiro as a young girl, petite with dark hair and eyes—a fastidious little bird of a woman. A Jewish settler, brimming over with pioneer fervor in the land of milk and honey. "But you left."

"Too many hate mongers," the old woman replied, "on both sides of the ethnic fence." She fell silent. In a distant room, a grandfather clock struck eight o'clock. Only when the last chime had rung did she pick up the thread of conversation. "There was a handful among us who still remembered the tradition of *haskalah*."

"Which was?"



“An outmoded, 19th century notion that all people could live together in peace and brotherhood. The father of modern day Zionism, Theodore Hertzl, was a proponent of *haskalah*, but few people remember that utopian gibberish today.” Her final words trailed away in a self-mocking tone.

Grace didn’t know what to say. Snowing was falling outside, the ground peppered with a lacework pattern of fragile whiteness. The small room where they were sitting exuded an austere, monastic economy as though in her final years this well-traveled woman was slowly shedding the unwieldy trappings of the material world.

“The Magic Mountain—I don’t suppose you read it in the original.” Grace shook her head. “So much gets lost in translation.” She pursed her lips and stared at Grace for the longest time before proceeding. “The main character, Hans Castorp, visits a friend at a TB sanatorium. He falls sick and ends up a patient himself.”

“Yes, I remember,” Grace replied. “The boy remains at the mountain until he is well enough to leave.” She was getting used to Mrs. Shapiro’s scattershot tendency to talk in free associations. One disjointed thought melded into the next with little or no forewarning. But there was a method to the madness. Conversations careened in a dozen random directions, ricocheting off her nimble mind, but, whatever it might be, the cagey woman never lost sight of the central theme.

“The book’s ending is left intentionally vague. Not your typical bildungsroman, where a hundred loose ends are neatly tied up and everyone ecstatically happy.”

“But you didn’t call me here to discuss German literature,” Grace observed.

“I see no ring on your finger. You’re divorced?”

“A year now.”

“Seeing anyone special?”

Outside an inch of snow blanketed the ground. “I’m not in the market for romance at this stage in my life.”

“That’s too bad.” The old woman waited a discrete interval before continuing. “You remind me of Hans Castorp.”

Grace laughed. “We’re discussing a fictional character from a previous century who, coincidentally, happens to be a man not woman. It’s just a beautiful story.”

Mrs. Shapiro shrugged off the remark. “At the Zauberberg, The Magic Mountain, many patients were terminally ill. They got no second chance at life. Don’t become one of them.”

Grace rose. “It’s getting late and I have to be up early.”

“But you can’t leave just yet,” Mrs. Shapiro protested, half rising from the chair. “We haven’t even discussed the reason I called you here.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Grace was so distracted on the ride home that she almost missed the hulking figure lurking behind the bushes at the far end of the driveway. She flicked the high beams on to get a better view and Dwight Goober, like some nocturnal predator, slid away behind the foliage.

She entered the house. “Why are all the lights off?”

Upstairs in the bedroom, Angie was huddled on a rocking chair, a blanket draped over her shoulders. She threw her arms around her mother and burst into tears. “Dwight’s been out there for over an hour now. He knew you were gone because there was no car in the driveway.”

Grace gently held her daughter at arm’s length. “Stay here.”

“Where are you going?”

“To have a little one-on-one with the Village Idiot.” Grace rushed down the stairs and out the front door. Eight inches of powdery snow now covered the ground with the temperature bottoming out in the low twenties. No one in their right mind would be milling about on a night like this. No one in their right mind. Grace had no game plan, no idea what she was going to do. Dwight was standing under a streetlight on the opposite side of the street.

“Go home, Dwight.” The boy just looked at her with an oily smirk and shifted back and forth on the balls of his feet, a percolating mass of primal flesh. “It’s ten o’clock at night and there’s school tomorrow.”

“School but no curfew for minors,” Dwight shot back in a gravelly voice, “and you can’t do shit.” Dwight’s face was all blotchy, an unsavory mishmash of acne and freckles. Never a particularly attractive youth, the teenage years had been particularly unkind.

In response to increased crime, homeowners in Brandenburg wanted a curfew for teens, but the ACLU got involved and squelched the petition before it ever came to vote. Kids - good kids, that is - worked or participated in late night activities. Why punish them? The pending legislation raised too many complications. You couldn’t trample on people’s basic freedoms, even if the people included neighborhood bullies, drug addicts, hoodlums and thugs.

“There’s school tomorrow, and the day after that, too,” Dwight was enjoying the repartee. It was a sadistic game. This is what he lived for. Other kids played on the varsity football team or acted in the tri-region musical theater. They collected stamps or skated or took gymnastic lessons or joined 4-H club. Dwight Goober hid behind bushes and terrorized the Bovey street neighborhood.

“Want a smoke?” He pulled a pack of Marlboros out of his pocket and lit a cigarette with a butane lighter. Inhaling deeply, he luxuriated in the smoke, then crumbled the empty box in his fist and tossed it over his shoulder.

A light went on across the street and a neighbor’s head emerged in the open doorway. Grace felt a surge of confidence, but just as quickly, the light was extinguished and - Thump! - the door slammed shut.

“Hey, look who’s here!” Dwight knelt down as a small beagle sidled up to them, huffing and puffing in the frigid air. The neighbor had only let his dog out to pee. “That mean Mrs. Paulson doesn’t like, Dwighty, but you sure do.” The dog’s tail was whipping the air in frenzied joy. Dwight scratched the dog behind the ear. “Her stupid bitch of a daughter ain’t got no use for me neither so you’re my only girl friend—the love of my freakin’ life.” Flicking his cigarette up into the air, he grabbed the dog forcefully by both ears and planted a sloppy kiss on its snout. The beagle broke away and, with its stiffened tail tucked firmly between its hind legs, ran off down the street, yelping like a banshee.

“Where are your friends, Dwight?” There were plenty of kids Dwight’s age in the area, but the incorrigible oaf had no friends. Well, that wasn’t really true. There was a kid off of Lancaster Boulevard that he chummed around with, but he was locked up at the juvenile training center for a string of robberies. The other teens kept a wide berth. They knew what Dwight Goober was capable of.

“I got plenty of friends.” He picked at a scab on his chin. “But maybe your daughter, Angie, might want to come out here and spend some quality time with me.”

Grace could feel the control slipping away. As soon as he mentioned her daughter, the hoodlum gained the unfair advantage. “Goodnight, Dwight. There may not be any curfew, but if you’re not gone in five minute’s I’m calling the police.” She went back in the house.

Grace turned all the lights on in the lower level, an act of defiance. Climbing the stairs, she went into the second floor bathroom and peered out the window. Dwight hadn't moved a fraction of an inch since her ultimatum. Five minutes later she called the police. "I want to report a rather large youth loitering on my street."

"Address please." The officer sounded bored. Grace gave him the particulars. "There's a patrol car in the area. I'll send him right over."

"Thank you." Grace turned back to the window. Dwight Goober was nowhere to be seen.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ruth Shapiro hadn't invited Grace over so she could play matchmaker.

The previous week, Angie stopped by the middle school after classes to see Carl. She wanted him to teach her how to make elegant boxes like Lois Keenan Ventura's. Carl said no. She was too young. Power tools were dangerous. More to the point, since everything from the four-inch belt sander to the Delta drill press belonged to Mrs. Shapiro, it wasn't his decision to make.

The next day Angie returned. "Teach me how to make boxes like that lady woodworker from Pennsylvania." Carl, who was spreading rock salt on the front walkway, told her to go home. The issue was non-negotiable. Out of the question. A no-brainer. On the third visit, Carl threw his hands up in the air and growled, "I'll ask Mrs. Shapiro. Depending on what she says, you would still need your mother's permission."

Grace cornered her daughter after supper. "I met with Mrs. Shapiro."

Angie eyed her uncertainly. "I figured as much."

Grace ran her tongue over her lips. "Okay. Go make boxes with Carl. Just don't cut your lovely fingers off."

Angie threw her arms around her mother's neck. "I was so sure you would -"

"Perhaps you could make me a nice chest with a separate compartment for my chains." She held her daughter close and nuzzled her neck. "A light wood like maple or white oak would be nice."

What Grace conveniently forgot to mention was that, before leaving Mrs. Shapiro's home on the snowy evening, she had reached her decision, and it was non-negotiable. Angie would not, under any circumstances, be spending time with Carl Solomon churning out woodchips and endless piles of sawdust. But halfway home, she had a change of heart. It wasn't anything thought through in a logical, coherent fashion. Curiously, Mrs. Shapiro remained totally neutral and hadn't tried to influence Grace one way or the other. No, it wasn't anything quite so obvious. Maybe it was the rarified air at the summit of the Magic Mountain where young people languished, their most precious dreams fading away unfulfilled. Grace decided, just this once, to put her cogitating mind on hold and let some other, ephemeral organ run the show.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the morning, Grace left the house a half hour earlier and drove up Lexington Boulevard to the police station. She entered a small vestibule but there was no one to talk to. A sign on the wall next to a black phone said:

**SPEAK INTO THE HANDSET TO RECEIVE ASSISTANCE.**

Grace lifted the phone. "Hello? I need to speak to someone."

“Is this an emergency?”

“No, not at all. It’s a personal matter.”

The phone went dead and a burly patrolman with a red face and moustache opened the door a crack. “What’s this in regards to?”

“A teenager on my street is causing problems.”

The officer brought her into a room in the rear of the station and closed the door. She told him about Dwight Goober. “Yah, I know the kid,” The officer said. “Been to his house a half dozen times or more.”

“Maybe you could talk to his parents about -”

“Mother,” the officer cut her short. “There’s no father in the picture. Just the old lady and, in answer to your question, talking won’t do a damn bit of good. The woman’s a screamer. Any time there’s a complaint against her beloved Dwighty, Mrs. Goober, starts hollering like a locked-ward lunatic.” He shook his head and pressed his lips together in a disagreeable fashion. “There’s no reasoning with that woman.”

“The kid’s prowling outside my house at ten o’clock at night.”

“There’s no curfew. He’s completely within his rights.” A voice came over the intercom requesting the a.m. crew report to the roster room. “Look, the snot-nosed punk’s on probation,” the officer said. “My advice is to go down to district court and speak with his probation officer or even the clerk of courts. They might be able to strong arm the little creep.”

“The little creep is six foot tall.”

“I was thinking,” the officer replied drolly, “more in terms of mental capacity rather than height.”

\*\*\*\*\*

On Saturday morning Angie was scheduled for her first lesson, but Carl called and told her to meet him at the lumberyard in the Marieville section of town. “I’ll drive you over there,” Grace suggested, “and then you hitch a ride back with Carl.”

At the lumberyard, Carl was waiting out front besides a Chevy pickup truck. Grace kissed her daughter and made a motion to leave. “You can join us if you like,” Carl said.

Grace killed the engine and slid out of the car. They went inside. A plump man with a red beard and plaid flannel shirt reached across the counter and shook Carl’s hand. “Didn’t you women see the sign on the door? No females allowed unless they’re swinging 30-ounce Estwing framing hammers.”

“Don’t mind Fred,” Carl explained. “He missed his calling in life as a standup comic.”

A contractor plunked a cellophane bag bulging with sheetrock nails on the counter and went off in search of something else. Fred weighed the nails on a scale and wrote the price on the outside of the bag with an felt-tipped marker. “If you’re looking for cherry, you’re out of luck. We got an order from an overseas, Asian firm. They bought up our entire first grade cherry for a massive, building project in Japan. Paid a small fortune for the lumber.” Fred shook his head thoughtfully. “All we got left is low-grade seconds.”

“Maple and walnut are fine,” Carl said. “Mind if we go up into the loft?”

The contractor reappeared with several tubes of clear caulking and a Forstner, flat-bottom drill bit. Fred started ringing up the order. “Watch your step, ladies. Stairs are narrow and it’s a long way down.”

They headed back outside. The temperature was frigid and Grace could feel the icy air burning her lungs. Crossing the lumberyard, the threesome passed row upon row of neatly stacked lumber - two-by-fours and pressure-treated decking, thicker boards for roof trusses, floor joists and decorative lattices. A forklift pattered by with a stack of cedar fencing. At the far end of the yard was a huge shed with a steep flight of stairs leading up into a darkened loft. Grace peered up the stairwell but the landing was invisible from where they stood.

Carl led the way up the narrow stairs, which ascended twenty feet before reaching the second level where more wood was stacked on pallets up against the walls. He flipped a light switch on. "It's colder up here than it was down below," Angie said between chattering teeth.

"Here's some maple." Carl gestured toward a stack of cream colored boards. He pulled a six-foot, coffee colored plank off an adjacent pile and stood it up on end. "This hickory's beautiful but hard as nails. You'd run through a dozen sanding belts just trying to shape one box." He moved on to the next flat. "Ash is a bit softer but brittle with an open grain and hard to finish."

"And I thought wood was wood." Grace made a tent over her nose and breathed out forcefully trying to warm the flesh. Judging by the pins and needles shooting up her calves, her feet were growing increasingly numb.

"What's this?" Angie asked, indicating a reddish brown board with a smooth, textured grain.

"Honduran mahogany. A mature tree can reach 150 feet high with a trunk diameter upwards of six feet. It's still very plentiful over there," Carl explained. "Unfortunately, most of the exotic, South American timber is seldom replanted so it's becoming endangered."

"This wood," Carl ran a hand over the Honduran mahogany, "is grown on tree plantations; it's a renewable, resource." He turned to Grace. "Remember the Beetles?"

"The rock group from the sixties?"

"Ringo's drums were made from mahogany. The wood produces a very warm, resonant tone. It's also great for guitars."

"Some of the finest musical instruments - violins, pianos, basses, and cellos - were originally made from European hardwoods. Native American spruce found in the old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest, where the trees grew taller and straighter, was also greatly prized. The straighter the grain, the richer the tone."

"That metal beast over there," he gestured at a huge machine that took up most of the left side of the room. "is an industrial grade planer. When contractors needed lumber sized to a special thickness, they run the wood through the machine, which thins the lumber in tiny increments."

Carl finally pulled up in front of a pile of coarse boards. No one had bothered to trim the bark; the slabs were random thicknesses and lengths. Unwanted, mismatched orphans and ugly lumber ducklings.

"Gross!" Angie turned up her nose.

"Gross and just what we are looking for." Carl grabbed the roughest plank, which was a solid inch thick and handed it to Angie. "Watch out for splinters. It's still got most of the bark on the back side."

"What's so special about that one?" Grace asked. The pins and needles in her toes were beginning to crawl up her ankles and she stomped her feet on the floor to get the blood flowing.

"This homely slab of black walnut is drop dead gorgeous, but its true character is hidden away under all the bark and dirt." He flipped the board over. "Look here." Angie and Grace

stepped closer and stared at a section near the top of the board where the rough, scaly bark had been trimmed away. The chocolaty grain swirled in glorious unpredictable patterns. “We can buy this board for half the price of the others, trim the bark and mill the finished wood ourselves.”

Carl picked over several other rough-cut boards then sent Grace and Angie down the steep stairwell. When they reached the bottom, he brought the lumber down from the loft, one unattractive plank at a time. Paying for the lumber, he loaded the boards in the rear of his truck then went back inside. Fred was at his post behind the cash register. “Got any exotics?”

“See for yourself.” Fred gestured with a flick of his head. “Just stay away from the pear and butternut. It’s all wormy.”

Carl led the way into a backroom cluttered with broken picture frames, sharpening stones and carbide-tipped router bits. Up against the wall was an odd collection of smallish lumber, some cut at jagged angles. Carl pointed to a dark brown board with brilliant swirls rippling through the grain. “Morado from the mountains of Chile.” He grabbed Angie’s hand and pressed the heel of her palm up against the wood. “Morado belongs to the rosewood family. There’s so much natural oil in the wood, you don’t even need to apply a finish. You can polish the surface to a high gloss with nothing more than your bare hand.”

He steered Angie’s hand in a figure-eight and the surface of the chocolaty wood soon began to glow with a subtle richness. “I want some of that,” she whispered.

“Perhaps next time.” He reached for a thin board, light as skim milk and shot through with orange highlights. “Tulipwood. Also from the rosewood family.” Carl took a small penknife and peeled a paper-thin shaving from the board. A pungent, sickly sweet perfume wafted through the room. He showed them an unusual African mahogany flecked with gold and a dark wine colored board with the peculiar name bubinga. There was a small bar of bluish black wood no longer than a Louisville slugger, baseball bat - kingwood. Even with a crack down the middle, the scruffy ‘bat’ was worth fifty dollars. And a tiny scrap of ebony—black as coal and twice as hard. Angie lofted the absurdly heavy wood in her hand. When she put it down again, her fingers were smudged with a blackish soot.

\*\*\*\*\*

Later that night, after Angie showered, Grace held the blow-dryer while her daughter combed out her thick, wheat-colored hair. “So what did you learn today?”

Angie lifted a tuft of hair in the back. Her mother waved the dryer over the wet strands, causing them to flutter and spread like a golden fan. “Woodworking resembles the Catholic Church with its endless, repetitive rituals.”

“Such as?”

Angie explained how each jewelry box required a set number of pieces all cut to exact specifications. The poem boxes, which were really quite simple, contained eight individual sections, but each had its own unique dimensions. Before any of the intricate joints or decorative elements could be added, the pieces had to be properly sized. “You know that industrial planer we saw up in the loft at the lumber yard?” Angie switched from the hairbrush to a wide-toothed comb and began untangling the bangs. “Carl has a similar tool but smaller.”

“How nice!” Grace was admiring the look of her daughter’s skin, the way the freshly washed hair caressed the bronze neck and fleshy shoulders. “What else did you talk about?”

Angie curled her lips and tossed her mother a questioning look. “Wood,... we talk about making things from wood.” Grace backed off one setting on the dryer and began working the

front of her face. “To make an heirloom quality box requires humility—the humility to fail a dozen times and keep plugging away until the artisan’s flawed skills overtake his inner vision.”

“Carl said that?”

“He’s a little bit queer in the head like Mrs. Shapiro. They both talk in riddles.” Her daughter relieved Grace of the blow-dryer and directed the warm air over the side of her scalp, lifting the hair between her fingers to exposed the last few damp strands. “For an older guy he’s really in great shape. Probably good in bed, too.”

“Angie, for God’s sake!” Grace sputtered and fidgeted with her hands.

“Anybody who’s that passionate about woodworking -”

“I think your hair is sufficiently dry.” Her mother kissed her daughter’s cheek and hurried from the bathroom.

Back in her own room Grace couldn’t get the image of Carl Solomon out of her mind - the undisguised look of reverence that seeped from his hazel eyes when he ran a hand over a plank of mottled hickory up in the frigid lumber loft. When was the last time anyone had looked at her with that much honesty?

With Stewart, everything was about possessions, social status and image. When the marriage fell apart, they tried marriage counseling. What a joke! Stewart conveniently never bothered to show up half the time, and the psychologist branded her husband a phallic character disorder. Grace thought it rather crass and unprofessional for the man to share such damning details, but the counselor wasn’t telling her anything she didn’t already know. Stewart only cared about himself. An incorrigible, phallic character disorder, the man driven by enlightened self-interest - what’s in it for numero uno!.

\*\*\*\*\*

Every Saturday and two afternoons a week Grace dropped Angie off at Mrs. Shapiro’s house. If they were still busy in the basement when she returned to retrieve her daughter, Grace would sip a cup of Twinning’s tea and keep her company. By now she was used to her eccentricities, the way her thoughts floated off in a dozen unrelated directions. The perpetual streams of consciousness - it all made sense after a while, because there was always that gossamer thread that held the disparate ideas together.

“Are you religious?” Mrs. Shapiro asked. Grace noticed that the old woman’s hands trembled later in the day as her physical strength ebbed.

“No, not at all.”

“An atheist?”

“More like an agnostic,” Grace hedged her bets.

The old woman became strangely animated and wrenched her crippled body up straighter in the chair, “There’s a theory that Jesus Christ was a member of a secret organization, The *Kat Yam Hamelech*, the Dead Sea Sect. They broke with traditional orthodoxy, believing that Jewish religion had become too rigid with all its formal laws and ritual. Because elitist rabbis held all the power, there was nothing terribly democratic about religious life for the common Jew.”

“Like the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages.”

“Yes, a hundred times yes!” For the moment, her hands stopped shaking and her face took on a youthful, almost radiant glow. “The Dead Sea Sect believed that the brain was grossly overrated. The *nefesh* – human soul or whatever you chose to call it - could lead a person closer to God in a heartbeat than all the stultifying rituals in the Talmud or *Shulchan Aruch*.”

“You love someone and treat them kindly,” Mrs. Shapiro continued, “that is all the wisdom a person needs to live in harmony with the universe.”

“I thought you said you weren’t religious?” Grace challenged.

“And I’m not,” the woman tossed the words out defiantly. “I haven’t set foot in a synagogue in thirty years.”

In the basement the sawing and planning had died down altogether. Carl and Angie were sweeping sawdust and putting hand tools away. “There was a medieval rabbi who couldn’t find it in his heart to believe in a traditional God.” The tremors in her hand had returned and now extended through the forearm causing the delicate China cup to clatter in the saucer she was holding. “He scoffed at the notion of a Jewish deity with a flowing white beard shaking his patriarchal fist in divine wrath. Self-righteous malarkey—that’s what he called it.”

“A Doubting Thomas of the Jewish persuasion,” Grace said.

Mrs. Shapiro collected her thoughts before replying. “Refusing to worship God in the conventional manner, the heretic rabbi proclaimed, ‘the scent of a rose is proof enough for the existence of God!’”

“The scent of a rose,” Grace repeated softly. “How beautiful!” She was thinking beyond the medieval rabbi, remembering how Carl sliced the paper-thin membrane of tulipwood and the bittersweet fragrance wafted like a benediction through the back room in the lumberyard.

\*\*\*\*\*

After her personal life fell apart, Grace turned away from religion altogether. Father Callahan, the priest where they attended as a family, was a staunch advocate of hellfire and brimstone. If he had lived in the fifteen hundreds, Grace was convinced the good father would have burned the books of Erasmus and Thomas Moore while, in his spare time, waging holy wars against the Huguenot infidels.

According to Father Callahan, original sin was endemic, a virulent plague for which there was no cure. Each Sunday the priest demanded parishioners acknowledge their sinfulness. His piercing eyes always sparkled with righteous indignation.

Indignation or hubris, stiff-necked spiritual pride?

If Father Callahan came out of the rectory one morning and found his Jeep Grand Cherokee up on cinder blocks, would he be so magnanimous and forgiving toward a Dwight Goober? And then there was Stewart. Because of his marital indiscretions, Grace was compelled to kneel alone patiently in the pew while the ‘faithful’ received Holy Communion.

One Sunday during a particularly prickly homily, Grace leaned over and whisper in her daughter’s ear, “Phony baloney!” It didn’t seem right to attend church regularly and harbor such vile feelings toward the church, so the following Sunday morning Grace told her daughter, “Get dressed. We’re going to Adam’s Diner for breakfast.”

“What about Mass?”

“Church is for God-fearing Christians and true believers.”

“And what are we?”

Grace thought a moment. “What we are right now is hungry. Let’s get something to eat. Unless, of course, you’d rather check out the Episcopalians.”

Angie’s face dissolved in a toothy grin. “Let’s eat!”



\*\*\*\*\*

The first Tuesday in December, Principal Skinner cornered Grace between classes. "Test scores are in the toilet. I'm soliciting suggestions." Earlier in the day, Grace had noticed Ed Gray sitting in the principal's office. Neither man was smiling. An ugly rumor was filtering through the school; if trends continued on their downward spiral, the state could withhold the district's education funds or, worse case scenario, put the entire program into receivership.

Many of the English faculty were afraid of Principal Skinner. A large-boned hulking figure, he swilled Maalox as though it was a soft drink and kept a roll of antacids, unashamedly in full view on the top of his executive desk. "What does Ed suggest?" Grace asked.

"He's pushing for a full revamping of the curriculum to shadow last year's MCAS."

"Teach to the test." The principal nodded politely and waited for her response.

"It won't work."

"No?"

"They're eighth graders and their hormones are out of control." She spoke impulsively without bothering to edit her remarks. "The children are already overwhelmed by the increased workload."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know." Grace shrugged. Principal Skinner rubbed his chin and a disgruntled noise welled up in his throat. "Well, at least you didn't try to humor me."

"And you didn't shoot the proverbial messenger."

"Sordid business earlier today," he said changing the subject.

"Sordid and unsavory," she wasn't quite sure if she should smile or assume a more serious expression, "but I think you handled it well."

Around ten o'clock shortly after first period, the librarian, Miss Curson, caught Benny Finnegan thumbing through a glossy magazine, *Slatternly Sluts and Brazen Bimbos*. The boy with the floppy ears and goofy, Alfred E Newman smile was hunkered down at a table near the reference desk ogling the centerfold, when Miss Curson sidled up behind him. The librarian dragged Benny straight to the office where, after reviewing its content, Pam Sullivan slipped the girlie magazine in a manila envelope. "Benny Finnegan is here to see you," she said delivering the envelope to Principal Skinner.

The secretary went back to where Benny was sitting. "What exactly is a slatternly slut?" Pam asked with a menacing edge to her voice. "Enlighten me."

"I dunno," Benny whined. In a daze, he seemed unable to properly collect his thoughts. "It's just some stupid stuff. I dunno nothin' at all."

"Bimbo," Miss Curson accentuated the first letter of the word with an explosive burst of air. "Can you even spell the word?"

The boy muttered something unintelligible, crooked his head to one side and began biting distractedly at a fingernail. "Speak up!" Miss Curson shouted.

"I only memorize the words on Mrs. Paulson's vocabulary list. Bimbo ain't on the list."

The two woman eyed each other in disbelief. "No, I shouldn't think so," Pam said frigidly. Her brow furrowed and she leered at him suspiciously. "Something funny?" The boy shook his head violently. "Then why are you smiling?"

"When I'm scared," Benny spoke haltingly, "I smile a lot. It's a nervous habit."

“Well,” Miss Curson noted, “judging by the look on Principal Skinner’s face when he opened the envelope, your cheek muscles are going to get a real good workout today.” Hearing this, the boy, who was snuffling and wiping his runny nose with the back of his hand, began to wail despondently.

He was still sobbing when Grace was summoned to join Principal Skinner for the formal inquisition. Pacing back and forth in front of Benny, Principal Skinner had the look of a man on the edge. At six foot five, two hundred and fifty pounds, even some male staff were intimidated by the hulking bear of a man. "This is how you reward Mrs. Paulson, a woman who dedicated her entire life to educating young minds?"

Benny Finnegan continued to make unintelligible snuffling sounds. "Where did you get this filth?" the principal demanded.

"Under my father's bed."

"Which is where it should have stayed," Grace noted dourly.

"You tell my old man I took his magazine, he'll kill me," Benny moaned and bent double with his fists balled up under his soggy eyes.

Now that the initial shock had worn off, Grace was beginning to collect her thoughts. Benny Finnegan was a C student at best. A goofy, lovable dope. But in his defense, he seldom caused trouble, and his father was as much to blame for leaving the dirty magazine lying about. In all likelihood, Mr. Finnegan would whack his son a half dozen times when he found out what happened. Then he’s take a short drive to Parker Street in the city’s south end where, in a back room off the shabby Convenient Mart, he would purchase the latest, December edition of Slatternly Sluts and Brazen Bimbos.

Principal Skinner continued to pace about the office for another minute or so waving the manila envelope fitfully in the air. He didn't seem particularly angry anymore but the boy was too upset to notice the difference. "Normally I'd call your parents for an indiscretion this reckless, but I'm going to give you a break. Just this once and against my better judgment."

He momentarily left the room. When the man returned he was lugging a small paper shredder, which he set up in the far corner. "You will sit here," he pointed to a chair next to the shredder, "and remove all staples from the inside binding. Then you can feed your father's girly magazine into the shredder, one perverted page at a time."

"What do I tell my dad," Benny Finnegan’s voice was cracking, "when he asks what happened to his favorite magazine?"

"Great question," Principal Skinner patted Benny playfully on the head, "and I'm sure between now and when you get home this afternoon, you'll figure out an equally clever answer."

Grace left the room and went back to class. Twenty minutes later, Benny Finnegan shuffled into the room wearing a haggard, beaten dog expression. The other children eyed him uncertainly but soon lost interest. Ten minutes later when the bell rang, Benny bolted for the door, but Grace pulled him up short. She waited for the other children to empty out of the classroom. "Tough morning, huh?"

Benny kept his eyes lowered waiting for permission to slip away. "You did something pretty dumb today, but that doesn't mean you're stupid." There was no response. His face frozen in a sour knot, the boy was going catatonic on her. "How's your sister?" she asked, changing the subject altogether.

Benny raised his head. "Which one?" There were four Finnegan sisters in all.

"The bow-legged girl." It was, admittedly, a peculiar moniker to hang on someone, but the Finnegan's were a queer lot. The mother, a stout woman who suffered from chronic roseola, dominated her husband, who was a hair taller than a dwarf with a receding chin. When they came to the parent-teacher conference in October, the couple reminded Grace of the culturally challenged hillbillies in the movie Deliverance.

"Nadine. She's okay now, I guess."

Grace remembered a painfully thin girl in hand-me-down clothes. Where Benny was awash in freckles, Nadine's complexion was pale and flawless. She was a stick-thin beauty with jet black hair which she seldom bothered to comb, translucent, pearly skin and buttery almond eyes. The ungainly limbs were ridiculously long for the emaciated body and her pebbly teeth, which looked like they belonged in a toddler's mouth, were separated by neat little spaces. The legs, like spring saplings, bowed perversely. Nadine Finnegan was damaged goods.

"Tell Nadine Mrs. Paulson was asking for her." Grace removed a small envelope from the desk drawer and handed it to Benny. "I wrote a short note to your parents, explaining what happened today. I told them that you were properly disciplined by Principal Skinner and terribly sorry for the foolishness." She peered at him intently. "You are sorry, aren't you?"

The boy grunted sheepishly and averted his eyes. "I suggested that your father find a more suitable place to store his adult reading material and not punish you anymore. What's done is done."

Benny Finnegan swallowed hard and his Adam's apple did a fleeting little jig bobbing up and down. "Gees, Mrs. Paulson, you're a peach." The boy mumbled something else under his breath but the words were unintelligible.

"Excuse me?"

"Mrs. Sullivan ain't half as nice as you," Benny growled. "She's just a plain old nasty bitch on a stick."

Grace smiled. Yes, Pam Sullivan, the office manager, is a sadistic, castrating bitch, who would spend the rest of the school year regaling the teaching staff with her personal account of Benny Finnegan's fall from grace.

"Bitch on a stick." Grace turned the phrase over on her tongue, savoring the colorful imagery.

\*\*\*\*\*

The geeky young man at Home Depot who helped Grace with the light switch was named Reginald Worthington. Grace reached Reginald at the number on his business card. "I want to wallpaper my living room."

"No problem. Come by the store before closing and I'll get you situated. How'd you make out with the light switch?"

"After I remembered to shut the electricity off at the junction box, it was a piece of cake."

Grace spent twenty-nine dollars and thirty-five cents. She bought a wide brush for smoothing out the wet paper, a utility knife with a set of snap-off blades, a seam roller, scoring tool and five-gallon pail of wall primer. Reginald discouraged Grace from purchasing the plastic water tray. "Just roll the sheets inside out and soak them in your bathtub."

\*\*\*\*\*

“Where’s the repeat?” Grace held the roll of flowered wallpaper up alongside a fresh cut piece. Angie slid the two sheets back and forth until the patterns meshed.

“That looks about right.” Two halves of a leaf fit snugly together. She penciled a mark on the paper and laid an aluminum square across the sheet. Her mother gave her a questioning look.

“I square up lumber with Carl. It’s the same process.” Angie cut the top then measured down six and a half feet and trimmed the bottom away from the roll. “Moment of truth.”

They let the paper soak in the bathtub for half a minute then checked for dry spots. Grace climbed up on the step ladder, easing the damp paper up against the wall along a vertical line they had drawn earlier using a plumb bob. She ran the bristle brush straight down the middle of the first sheet then, in a sweeping motion, flattened the paper against the wall brushing from the center toward either side. Angie crimped the bottom around the baseboard and trimmed the excess away with the utility knife.

“One down, twenty-eight to go,” Grace grinned and reached for the second sheet. At noontime they broke for lunch. The rear wall and half of one window was finished and, with the exception of a small patch under the window sill, they encountered no major problems.

“What the heck!” Angie gestured ominously toward the kitchen window. Dwight Goober was sitting on the rusty, backyard swing staring through the window at them eating their lunch.

Grace felt violated. She pulled on her coat and, grabbing the utility knife, wedged it in the pocket. “For God’s sakes, don’t do anything crazy!” Angie tried to restrain her mother, but Grace was already out the door.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Dwight just stared at her through bleary eyes. The bluish-red welts from his acne stood out in bold relief in the midday sun. “I ain’t bothering you.”

“You’re on my property, you idiot.”

Dwight rose and glowered at her, a cold-blooded, vindictive expression. She’d never seen such a look. The burnt out alcoholic at Adam’s Diner was physically repulsive; he had a foul mouth and violent disposition, but there was a critical difference between the two: the older man had a soul. Dwight’s eyes were dead - like looking into the soul of a monster, utterly satanic.

His feet remained firmly planted on the frozen earth while his upper torso twitched and twirled in a spastic dance. Grace felt her mind unraveling. She reached for the knife, placed her thumb on the plastic nub and, while still concealed in her coat pocket, extended the blade full length. “Get off my property.”

“Okay, bitch.” He rose from the swing and, in no great hurry, shambled off in the direction of the main street. “Wait a day or two. We’ll see who’s the idiot.”

Grace went back indoors. “What happened?” Angie pressed.

“Nothing. He just went away.”

“So why are you shaking?”

Her whole body was shimmering like jello. “I’m just cold, that’s all,” Grace said petulantly. “It’s getting late. Lets hang the rest of the paper before we lose the light.”

\*\*\*\*\*

In the morning Grace called in sick to work and went over to the courthouse. A line in front of the red brick building stretched down the granite stairs halfway to the Dunkin’ Donuts. “What’s the problem?”

A boy with a stud in his nose and chipped tooth glowered at her. “Everyone’s got to pass through security.” Fifteen minutes later Grace made it to the front door.

The security guard ran her purse through a scanning device. “I need to speak to someone in probation.”

“Juvey or adult?” the guard asked.

“He’s a minor.”

“Second floor, turn right at the elevator.”

Grace took a seat on a wooden bench next to the Magistrate’s Office and waited for the window to open. Built in the late forties, the courthouse was quite elegant in its day; now the building was just a creaky old dinosaur with a cracked marble façade and faded wainscot. A good thirty people were already milling about, all inner city types. Teenage boys with garish tattoos on their necks and body piercings sprawled on benches next to a motley collection haggard, middle-aged women. No adult men accompanied any of the youths. No fathers. None at all.

A girl in her late teens took a drink from the water cooler. A silver hoop dangled from her nostril and her punk hairdo was dyed orange. The chesty girl wore stiletto heels and a tank top. Where her nipples mashed up against the thin, stretch fabric, a matching pair of nubs protruded.

“A tank top in early December,” Grace mused. “Very apropos!”

“Great news!” A balding man in a dark blue suit rushed up to the girl. “Judge tacked another year onto your current probation. Finito!”

“No jail time?” the girl pressed.

“Zippo!”

The girl’s mother leaned closer. “We ain’t paying no goddamn restitution!” Her brown hair was streaked with grey, the horsy teeth caked with a grungy yellow film. Despite a sallow complexion, she wore no makeup.

“No financial restitution. No jail time.” The lawyer waved a hand dismissively in the air. “Let’s go sign papers.” They marched off triumphantly toward a paneled door and disappeared into the judge’s chamber. The steel grate on the magistrate’s window rose with a metallic clatter. Grace approached the window. “I need to speak to someone in probation.”

“The youth’s name?” The man was in his sixties with blond hair and a pleasant smile.

“Dwight Goober.”

“Tall kid, ... awful complexion.”

Grace nodded.

“Your son?” Grace looked horrified. “You’re out of luck.”

“What?”

“Dwight Goober turned seventeen a little over a month ago. He’s no longer technically a minor so he’s off probation.” Grace groaned and put her head in her hands. She told the officer what had happened. “You could get a restraining order,” the magistrate counseled, “but then it’s nothing more than a civil process. The bum gets a slap on the wrist and you’re back to square one.”

“I have a teenage daughter.” Grace was emotionally worn out, tired to death. Nothing made any sense. “This kid is terrorizing my family, running amok, and nobody cares.”

The older man stared at his hands with a sober expression. “Next time Dwight screws up, he’s off to the big house.”

“Next time?” Grace laughed convulsively, making a snorting sound through her nose. “It’s the next time that worries me.”

The man stared at her blankly. "He's a nasty creep, but it's out of my jurisdiction."

Grace went out onto the courthouse steps. As she exited through the metal detector at the front of the building, the grey-haired mother and her daughter with the protruding nipples came skipping down the courthouse steps. They looked absolutely triumphant, delirious with joy. No jail time. No restitution. Grace was curious to know what crime the sluttish little felon committed but didn't think either one would readily volunteer the information. The feisty, in-your-face defiance of both women was vintage Dwight Goober. The glacial eyes and brazen sneer that played at the corners of the lips branded them kindred spirits. At the bottom of the stairs the mother paused to light an unfiltered cigarette. She breathed in deeply blowing the white smoke out her nose in a thick plume. The woman offered her daughter a cigarette from the pack and lit it from the burning ash of her own butt.

Grace felt defiled, physically unclean. She would have to soak her weary bones in a shower of scalding water for at least a week to wash away all the fetid crud from a morning at the Brandenburg District Court.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the winter progressed, Mrs. Shapiro obsessed with feeding the few remaining diehard birds. She sent Carl regularly to the feed and grain store to purchase supplies - a mixture of black sunflower seeds, cracked corn and millet for the jays and cardinals, thistle for the finches plus blocks of greasy suet for the woodpeckers and other, insect feeders. She occasionally asked Grace to help her restock the feeders. "Hard to believe," the old woman said, letting a feathery-light thistle sift through her fingers, "there's nourishment in such tiny seeds." Mrs. Shapiro tended to stuff the feeders to overflowing.

"Except for the most common varieties, people don't know their birds," Grace said. "Recognizing the differences among species - the downy woodpecker, let's say, from its close relative, the ladder-back or a goldfinch from a pine siskin - that's a bit harder. But still, what's the pleasure of bird watching if you don't know what to look for? It's like giving a house party and not bothering to remember your guests' names."

"I think," Mrs. Shapiro protested warily, "your analogy's a bit thin." She pointed out the window in the direction of a tall pine tree in the back yard. "A pair of cardinals were here earlier. A male and his brown mate. They only stayed a short time. I think the hungry jays scared them off."

Grace placed blocks of peanut butter suet in a rectangular, wire cage then wiped the greasy mess from her fingers. "Did you know that in winter, a black-capped chickadee can raise its body temperature to 107° Fahrenheit?" Grace was constantly collecting fragments of incidental trivia from various birding magazines and newsletters she subscribed to. "Their bodies become feathery furnaces, internal combustion systems to ward off the extreme cold.." She took a sip of tea and put the cup aside. "At night while they're resting, their temperature can drop as much as 30°, a survival mechanism to preserve energy for daytime foraging."

A loud din floated up from the basement. "I think the planer blades are getting a bit dull," Mrs. Shapiro said. "Your daughter already knows how to set the thickness gauge, so Carl tells me."

"She's a quick study," Grace replied.

An aluminum walker was positioned next to the recliner. The elderly woman had fallen several times over the summer, and Carl purchased the device from a durable medical company. “The foreign film, *Dersu Uzala*, is coming to the Avon.”

“Never heard of it.”

“A true classic. It makes the rounds every so often.” Mrs. Shapiro’s head bobbed up and down, an affirmation of some distant memory. “The Russian film is forty years old, but every time they bring it back, the theater sells out.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“Three times. Once with each husband.” She played with the rail of the walker. A pair of yellow tennis balls had been cut and pressed onto the rear legs so that the device wouldn’t mar the floor. “Forgive my impertinence; I thought you and Carl might like to go. The Avon’s just over the state line in Providence, if you were feeling self-conscious about anyone from school seeing you together.”

The basement door opened and Angie, covered with sawdust, approached. “I’ll think about it.”

“Think about what?”

“Nothing,” Grace shifted gears. “How’s it going downstairs?”

“Come and see for yourself.”

The workshop was surprisingly small, but Carl had arranged the machines in an ingenious fashion. All the large power tools—the drill press, band and miter saws, router table and jointer were pushed up against the walls so that the space in the center of the room remained empty. Whenever Carl needed to use a particular tool, he lugged it into the middle of the room, made his cuts and pushed it back against the far wall. Though it seemed like drudgery, as Carl explained, he eventually got use to positioning the tools and could set up the cuts rather quickly. When everything was situated at arm’s length, there was little wasted effort.

“You’re finished for the day?”

“Just sweeping up,” He grabbed a push broom and began coaxing the sawdust that spread a gossamer film like dry snow the length of the workspace into a pile. “Feel free to look around.”

Angie was stacking small wooden parts on a bench. The shelves above the bench held a collection of projects in various stages of completion. “Are these poem boxes?” Carl nodded and reached for a dust pan.

Grace opened a box. A dainty haiku by the Japanese master, Kotimichi, was rimmed by a scaly, emerald-colored wood. “Sassafras,” Carl said. He took the box from her hand, rubbed the green wood with a piece of 220-grit sandpaper and raised it under her nose. A sweet, perfumed fragrance flooded her brain. The next box contained a pithy verse, translated from the German, by Rilke. There were two love poems— a sublime verse by Pablo Neruda and another from the Persian mystic, Rumi. Offerings from the French feminist, Anais Nin and e e cummings lay side by side.

“This is precious,” Grace murmured. Carl put the broom aside and glanced over her shoulder. The author insisted that people lived their existence dogged by a whimsical fate. Avoiding danger was no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Security was a superstition that did not really exist in nature. The final stanza implied that life was either a daring adventure or nothing.

A daring adventure or nothing.

“Helen Keller,” Grace spoke so softly the words were almost inaudible. “Who’d have ever though ...”

She felt the corners of her eyes burn and swallowed hard. Suddenly she was lightheaded, mildly disoriented. Grace turned to her daughter. "Go upstairs and say goodbye to Mrs. Shapiro," she said. "I'll join you in a minute." When Angie was gone she turned to Carl, "There's a foreign movie playing at the Avon in Providence. I was wondering if you'd like to go."

"That would be nice." Carl picked a block plane off the table. Turning the thumbscrew clockwise, he retracted the blade below the bottom edge and laid the tool on its side. "Its not a problem for you?" The lanky man was talking in an oblique code.

"A problem for other people, perhaps, not for me," Grace replied.

On the way home Grace told Angie about the foreign movie. "A date?"

"According to Mrs. Shapiro," Grace parried the question, "Akira Kurosawa is one of the finest Japanese film directors."

"Carl asked you out on a date?"

"No," her mother corrected. "I asked him." Angie slid down on the seat with an idiotic smile plastered across her face, her knees rammed up against the dashboard. She didn't stop smiling the rest of the way home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Carl picked Grace up in his battered, Chevy F-10, pickup truck. They drove across town, located the interstate just outside of Seekonk and reached the Rhode Island line in ten minutes.

He pulled off the highway in Pawtucket, an old mill town that had seen the cloth trade gobbled up by overseas markets. At the far end of Hope Street they passed Brown University. Many of the residential tenements, which were protected by the Providence Historical Society, sported decorative trim and gingerbread molding. Homeowners couldn't even change the color of their property without permission, insuring that the choice was in keeping with local preservation ordinances.

The film, *Dersu Uzala*, was over thirty years old yet, just as Mrs. Shapiro had predicted the line at the ticket window wound down the street and around the corner to where a dark-skinned street vender was selling falafel wraps and humus from an open air kiosk. The crowd was mostly Brown University students, dressed in raggedy, torn jeans and funky tops - kids whose parents earned salaries in the comfortable six figures. "Les miserable," Carl chuckled. "We should be so lucky." There was no malice in his tone. The ticket counter opened and the line surged forward.

The previous summer, Grace went to the movies on a blind date. The science teacher fixed her up with her cousin, also recently divorced. The guy seemed perfectly nice when she talked to him on the phone and on the ride to the theater acted perfectly normal. He sat quietly through the coming attractions then began pawing her five minutes into the main feature. On the pretext of using the restroom, Grace escaped to the lobby where she experienced a massive anxiety attack. A taxi brought her home. The boorish oaf never even bothered to find out why Grace had gone AWOL on a blind date.

The movie, which described the friendship between Dersu, the hunter, and Arsenyev, the explorer, was in subtitles. Midway through the film, the two men were stranded on a barren plain, when the weather turned bad with a violent wind storm and snow. They built a makeshift shelter from twigs, leaves, fallen branches and anything else they could find in the frozen



Siberian landscape. Grace glanced at Carl. He was sitting with his lips slightly parted, lost in the pathos of the scene.

Afterwards they strolled over to the East Side Pancake House for dessert. The waitress took their orders and returned shortly with coffee and pastry. “Angie mentioned a neighborhood kid who’s been causing you grief.”

Grace added a teaspoon of sugar and stirred her coffee. “How much did she tell you?”

“Enough to know this troublemaker isn’t going to join the Peace Corps or become a model citizen any time soon.” Carl sliced a wedge of apple pie and leaned forward. “There’s a bar a couple miles down the road on Federal Hill called The Ironhorse Tap. If you have a problem with a worthless punk, you go see one of the patrons, . . . preferably a middle-aged man who wears several pounds of gold chains around his 20-inch neck and rings on either pinky finger.” Carl’s tone was flippant. “You bare your soul, tell the man how much you’re willing to spend to make the problem go away. And then you drive home and forget all about The Ironhorse Tap”

Grace had an intimation of what Carl was talking about. Federal Hill in Providence was synonymous with the Mafia. People like the mob king, Raymond Patriaca and his near-do-well son, Ray Junior, ran the underworld. Tough guys with names like Buckles Mancini and Frankie the Moron Mirabelli - they ran prostitution, drugs, numbers and protection rackets. During the Feast of Saint Anthony, they strong-armed local merchants and extorted money from the street vendors. God help the enterprising fool with the pepper and sausage cart who didn’t plan to cough up the dough!

And if some troublesome dimwit like Dwight Goober was raining on your parade, you arranged a meeting with one of the regulars, some gentleman in good standing at the Ironhorse Tap social club, and they made the problem go away. No questions asked. It was curbstome justice at its finest.

“What’s in it for me?” Carl finished his pie then extended his cup while the waitress freshened the coffee. “That’s all these hoodlums understand. Freud’s pleasure-pain principle.”

“And whacking somebody on the kneecaps with a lead pipe,” Grace interjected, “falls into the latter category.” Carl cleared his throat as though he was going to say something but thought better of it.

The door opened and more college students crowded into the restaurant. Grace brushed a strand of hair away from her face. “Since Tuesday, we have been studying Gray’s Elegy. A masterpiece, for sure, but the kids can’t relate.” She broke into an impromptu recitation:

*’Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,  
Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove;  
Now drooping, woeful wan,  
like one forlorn, Or crazed with care,  
or cross’d in hopeless love.*

Carl shook his head in disbelief. “The poem’s three hundred years old,” Grace groaned. “These kids are into MP3 players, Britney Spears and gangster rap. Old English isn’t exactly their cup of tea.”

A college girl at the next table pulled a new sweater from a bag and showed it to her friends. The sweater was knitted from a bulky, moss-colored yarn. Grace had seen similar designs in the upscale boutiques on Newbury Street in Boston. Imported from Ireland, you couldn’t touch them for under two hundred dollars. “I’m copying a verse from Gray’s Elegy on

the blackboard. When I turn around, a girl in the front row is picking her nose. I'm explaining the subtleties of Gray's Elegy and this ditsy girl with braces and a training bra is balancing a moist bugger on the tip of her finger."

"So I got this whacky idea," Grace rushed on, "what if I pilfered some verses from your poem boxes - the haiku by Kotimichi, that amazing Helen Keller quote, some Kahlil Gibran - and taught that instead."

"Well, I suppose -"

"There was a romantic poem by Pablo Neruda," she cut him short, "something about boundaries merging."

Carl lowered his eyes and thought hard. "I love you," he repeated from memory, "because I know no other way than this. Where I does not exist nor you."

"So close," Grace picked up the next line, "that your hand on my chest is my hand."

"So close that your eyes close," Carl delivered the final verse, "as I fall asleep."

Now that the noisy table of college students had paid their bill and left, the waitress began clearing the plates. "Well, I don't know," he added thoughtfully. "Neruda might be a little too intense for eighth graders with training bras."

He shook his head and began to chuckle as though at some private joke. "You're asking me, a janitor, for advice. I'm sure Ed Gray would get a kick out of that."

"Ed Gray is a horse's ass!" Grace impulsively leaned across the table and kissed him on the lips, a generous, unhurried gesture. "It's the Neruda poem," she said by way of explanation. Her chest was heaving with emotion. "I seem to be having a real problem with personal boundaries. Yours and mine."

It took Carl a good minute to catch his breath. "I'd kiss you back," he said softly, "if it wasn't for the audience." Several customers, including a busboy and the waitress who was clearing the nearby table, were staring curiously at the couple.

Whatever else Grace had in mind to say about Gray's Elegy evaporated with the kiss, flew out the window of the East Side Pancake House on gilded wings. They spoke little during the ride home. Grace could feel her body glowing. When they were a mile from home Carl finally turned to look at her. "Remember when I refinished your classroom floor?" His expression was sober.

"That was over a year ago."

"It still looks good, don't you think?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"Acrylic doesn't hold up as well as polyurethane but it's still a nice product." He spoke in a flat, distracted monotone. "You were sorting papers and I was moving chairs around washing one portion of the floor at a time."

He leaned over and brushed her cheek with a feathery kiss. "That was when I first realized I was in love with you." Carl said nothing more for the remainder of the ride home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Angie had already gone to bed and was fast asleep when Grace got home. The mail was in the kitchen piled neatly on the counter. A couple of sales flyers from the mall, the telephone bill and a notice for jury duty. On top of the pile was a crumbled potato chip bag. Lays Onion and Sour Cream. Grace found the plastic bad crammed into the mailbox earlier in the day. The word "BICH!" was scrawled across the front in ink. A gift from the illiterate Dwight Goober.

The youth had begun throwing empty Marlboro cigarette wrappers on the front lawn along with soda cans and, most weekends, beer bottles. Not that anyone ever saw him. The debris was manageable. Problem was, Grace couldn't see where his petty hatefulness was going.

Grace had a theory. She called it the 'Theory of Misplaced Altruism'. Watching the Labor Day Telethon with Jerry Louis every September, her heart broke for the poor unfortunates, the children with muscular dystrophy twitching spastically in their high-backed wheelchairs. The courageous parents who devoted their lives to sick children were modern day saints. Grace called in her pledge and said a fervent prayer to the same inscrutable God she ignored through the rest of the year.

She had no similar sympathy for that motley collection of freaks and losers in the juvenile section of Brandenburg District Court. The Dwight Goobers of the world, the sluttish girl in the revealing tank top and her mother with the horsy teeth - they threatened to rip her world to pieces with their chaos and depravity. They used the system to beat the system just like the loud-mouthed drunk who held court every morning at Adam's Diner. The implicit message: live a thoroughly despicable life, wreck your health then go on the dole.

Grace was reminded of a TV segment on 60-Minutes earlier in the week. A bully was terrorizing a small-town, Southern community - a redneck Dwight Goober beating up neighbors, vandalizing their property, making obscene and salacious remarks to their womenfolk. The town fathers held an impromptu meeting and decided to get rid of the bully. They shot him in the head five times and left him to bleed to death in a drainage ditch. Then they went home to their evening dinners, bowling leagues, Sunday morning church and choir practice. The crime was never solved even though everybody knew who did it. Things quieted down after that. Got back to normal. No more bully.

No more Dwight Goober.

After the 60-Minutes segment, Grace fantasized about buying a gun. Something high caliber, where the soft lead slugs would heat upon impact with flesh and expand as they tore through the body. She would hide in the back yard until her nocturnal nemesis arrived. No need to berate the bastard. No outbursts of self-righteous indignation. Grace, the mild-mannered English teacher, would morph into dispassionate executioner, a cross between The Terminator and Dirty Harry. Call it a cold-blooded act of revenge. No, not revenge. Retribution. Most people thought of retribution as punishment, but, properly understood, retribution was a commodity given or demanded in repayment. A dozen years from now, Grace rationalized, Dwight Goober would have amassed a small fortune in uncollected debts. Why wait?

\*\*\*\*\*

"Mom?" Grace drifted into her daughter's bedroom. Angie was sitting up in bed now. "So, how was your date?"

Grace smoothed the comforter up around her daughter's throat. "I guess we'll have to learn to share."

It took a while for her mother's remark to register. "Figured as much."

"How so?"

"By the radiant look on your face." Angie smirked. "I haven't seen you this happy since last summer." Grace was trying to recall what spectacular event her daughter was referring to. "Our wilderness trip," Angie clarified. "The Appalachian Trail."

\*\*\*\*\*

The summer following her divorce, Grace Paulson and her daughter hiked the Appalachian Trail, the longest continuously marked footpath in the world. Not the two thousand miles stretching from Maine's Mount Katahdin down through Springer Mountain in Georgia. No, nothing so daring. Rather they would start at the beginning (or the end, depending on your place of departure) and spend a week exploring various spots along the way.

"Well, I guess it's just us girls," Grace said. She was loading provisions in a backpack, the lightweight frame propped up against the refrigerator. 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 and retrace our steps."

Angie handed her mother a stack of wooden matches sealed in a watertight metal tube. "How high?"

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

"Twelve feet less than a mile."

"A linear mile." Mrs. Grace smiled laconically. "Only if you zoom straight up, vertically, 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. 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," Mrs. 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 particular 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," her mother corrected, indicating the serrated points arranged symmetrically across the leaf. "From the genus, *populus*. Throughout high school she had dreamed about becoming a botanist or, perhaps, an ornithologist. Plants and birds. Somewhere she got sidetracked.

"The flattened leafstalks," She held it up for her daughter to see, "make the leaves tremble at the slightest breeze. A very noisy plant." 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 trail 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 pouchy 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 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 light bled out of the sky. The temperature had dropped a few degrees, but it was still warm. "We'll camp here for the night," Grace 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 a canteen 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 and 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 aide and his left hand trembled when he rested it in his lap, but 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. Angie no longer noticed the huge gaps between the teeth that were and the teeth that might have been, as they rested by the campfire. 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. She 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?”

Her mother reached out and brushed the girl’s cheek with her fingertips. The gesture felt like a benediction. “Angie, you are a precious child. And I’m proud to call you my daughter.”

A few minutes later, Grace could hear her daughter’s steady breathing. Somewhere deep in the woods an owl let looses with a prolonged, resonant hoot deep as a foghorn. The crickets and frogs were unimpressed. Mr. Anderson was probably also fast asleep, dreaming about his lost youth and all the wonderful adventures that still awaited him on the A.T..

In the morning Angie woke to find her mother’s sleeping bag empty. Grace returned before her daughter had wrestled her hiking boots on. “Come with me!” She dragged Angie down the trail past the stream, then down a narrower footpath. At the bottom of the gravelly 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 food to feed an army.”

“Or a 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; not that she ever used her attractiveness to gain an unfair advantage.

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 up against her calf as she waded into the shallows.

They reached the base of Mount Katahdin in the early afternoon, but the weather had 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, a 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 with relentless force. “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 pitch 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.

Angie began to cry but nobody noticed. They didn’t notice because all the hikers were soaked to the bone and her tears just looked like so much extra precipitation. Here we are in the middle of nowhere. We can’t even go to a motel because our stupid car is twenty stupid miles

away. We're gonna have to make do with salami and cheese and sugar cookies. How appetizing! A regular gourmet spread!

A half-hour later, Grace returned. She managed to pitch the tent beneath a large fir. 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 and 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 and when she 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 old age," 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.

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 plants 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 said, "I would tell how much I love you, 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."

## Part II

“We’re going to try something a bit different today,” Grace announced. Already off to a bad start, she had inadvertently slipped into ‘the voice’, that stilted, high-pitched inflection that drove her daughter crazy.

Okay. Take a deep breath and start again.

“I want everybody to come and sit here on the floor in a circle. Right now. Let’s move, move, move!”

That got their attention. The class rose from their seats and sashayed toward the front of the room. “Take a look at this box.” Grace held up one of Carl’s latest creations, a poem box done in contrasting light and dark woods. “Samantha,” she turned to a tall black girl with cornrow beaded hair, “Lift the lid and tell us what you find inside.”

The girl propped the box on her lap and opened it.

“We are each of us angels with only one wing  
And we can only fly by embracing one another.  
Luci... Luci ...”

“Luciano de Crescenzo,” Grace refused to get bogged down in incidentals. She waved a fist in the air. “What’s the lady with the exotic name trying to tell us? She scanned the room. “Samantha, what does the poem mean to you?”

“I dunno.”

A commotion erupted in the hallway. Grace could hear Principal Skinner reprimanding a student late for class. What if he burst into her English class and found the class scattered on the floor? “We are each of us angels with only one wing.” Grace stomped back and forth like a wild woman. “What good is a deformed angel?”

There are no takers. I’m losing them. This is worse than Gray’s Elegy. A blade of terror shot through Grace’s viscera. She had the momentary urge to cut and run, bolt for the classroom door and never look back. “Come here!” She grabbed the black girl by the arm and yanked her to her feet. “Raise your left arm straight out. You’re damaged goods,... a wounded bird”

“Rebecca.” She gestured toward a freckle-faced girl with braces. “Stand here.” She positioned her to the right of the dark-skinned girl. “Did you feel that?”

“Feel what?” the freckle-faced girl looked muddled.

“A hunter just mistook an angel for a mallard and blasted your left arm,... wing with buckshot. You’re in worse shape than Samantha.”

“Teacher’s losing it,” somebody whispered amid nervous giggles. Resurrected from the dead, the class was actually paying attention.

“Now put your broken wings around each other’s waste, and let’s see if we can’t fly from here to the coat rack.” Grace started waving her own arms up and down pantomiming an injured bird in labored flight, as she moved off in the direction of the coat rack at the rear of the classroom. The twosome followed, tripping over their feet, fluttering their free arms and laughing like fools.

“Pair up! Pair up!” Grace commanded, insisting that the class choose partners. “Picture yourselves as the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk.”

“Wright Sisters,” Samantha cried and shot off in another direction with her lopsided partner in tow.

Five minutes later when the hysteria died down, Grace sent them back to their seats. “Alright, so we had a little fun, but what did you learn about the human condition?” Grace



pointed at a boy in the front row wearing an Adidas sweatshirt. “We are each of us angels. What’s the underlying message?”

The boy crooked his head to one side and tapped a pencil listlessly on the desk. “Angels are special. Everyone, not just rich people or movie stars, is unique.”

Grace raised her right arm and fluttered it back and forth. “In the poem everyone is missing a wing. What’s going on here?”

“People, ... all of us,” a girl with her blond hair tied back in a French braid, responded, “are imperfect, ...mortal.”

“Mortal. I like that word. Nobody’s perfect. We all have failings and shortcomings, but if we band together, embrace each other, we can do amazing things.” Grace drifted over to the blackboard and in cursive script wrote: SYNERGY.

“Synergy - the interaction of two or more agents so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of the individual parts.” Several students were copying the definition off the blackboard. The poem had finally hit them where they lived, blossomed and come alive.

“Since we’re on the subject of angels”, Grace glanced up at the clock. In ten minutes the bell would send them scurrying to their next class. “The Talmud is a book of Jewish wisdom, clever sayings, advice and teaching. It’s written in the Talmud that every blade of grass has an angel that hovers over it and whispers, Grow! Grow!”

The children were staring at her with rapt expressions. This wasn’t school. It was pure magic. Educational sorcery with no Kenny ‘the comedian’ Kirkland to ruin the moment. “I need a blade of grass,” Grace bellowed. “Grass? Grass?” A tentative hand lifted chest high. The boy, Lester Boswell, was small in stature and rather scrawny. Because of a pronounced stammer, he was seeing both the speech therapist and school psychologist, Dr. Rosen. “Lester, come sit here in the front of the room.”

“Okay, class, forget about your former classmate. Lester Boswell doesn’t exist anymore.” A barrage of laughter rumbled through the room and several boys hooted. “What we have now,” Grace ignored their foolishness, “is a single, solitary blade of grass. According to the Talmud every single blade of grass has its own angel to nurture and protect, and I, coincidentally, just so happen to be a grass angel. “Grow!” she chanted. “Grow! Grow! Grow!”

The children picked up the incantation which, quickly swelled into a thunderous wave of unsolicited affection. Midway through the chorus, Grace raised Lester Boswell to his knees, full height and, finally, up on his toes in a symbolic gesture. Everybody cheered. Bedlam ensued. The bell rang. In the far corner of the room, abandoned and shoved up against a slightly bedraggled coat rack on the refurbished, wheat-colored floor lay Carl Solomon’s box.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the morning when Grace went out to retrieve the Sunday paper the house was covered with egg. The slimy yolk and brittle shells reached as high as the second level with an ugly yellow streak smeared across the picture window. She went back in the house and called the police. A patrol car drove up ten minutes later. The officer was the same man she had spoken to at the station.

“What a mess!” The officer tilted his neck so far back his mouth hung open. “Any idea who might have done this?”

“Does the name Dwight Goober ring a bell?” Grace was staring at the officer’s leather gun holster. It hugged a small caliber revolver with a leather strap over the firing pin. A pair of silver handcuffs was seated in a leather pouch close by the lacquered nightstick.

“Did you see him actually throw the eggs?”

Did I see the Village Idiot egg my house? As a matter of fact, I was coming home from a date, my first romantic soiree since my moronic ex-husband gave me the boot, and there was Dwight Goober, standing in the middle of the street with an egg in each hand. They were locally grown, native brown eggs not the white-shelled variety normally sold in the supermarket. I saw what he did and I’m willing to swear to it on the King James Bible, Koran, Old Testament, I Ching and anything else readily available. I’ll even take a freaking lie detector test if necessary to put the creep behind bars where he belongs.

“I know it’s that pimply-faced bastard, but I didn’t see him throw the eggs.”

The officer shook his head. “You’re gonna need an extension ladder to clear that mess.”

“What about Dwight?”

“It’s your word against his.” The officer scratched an fleshy earlobe. He had taken out a small pad and pen but put them away without writing anything down. “You know, there’s this guy who installed surveillance equipment for the school district. He also does residential. Fenton,... Yah, Hubert Fenton. He might be able to help you out.”

Grace was beginning to understand why mild-mannered Walter Mitty types suddenly went postal. The guy who never owned a BB gun much less a hunting rifle buys an AK47 and turns his workplace into a carnival shooting gallery. “You’re telling me to put a surveillance camera on my house.”

“Cameras,” the officer qualified. “You’ll probably need more than one.” The thickset man heaved his belt higher up on his hips. The gun and the nightstick rocked back and forth, a small container of mace, which Grace had overlooked, nestled firmly in a rear compartment. “You got an extension ladder?” The officer asked.

Grace once owned a shiny 30-foot extension ladder stored under the crawlspace. It had a deluxe, heavy-duty nylon rope for height adjustments and extra-wide rungs. Stewart took the ladder when he packed his belongings. “Yes,” Grace lied, “I have a ladder.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Saturday morning a pelting, wind-driven snow punished the city. The plows, which had been out since before dawn, were still struggling to keep up with the treacherous black ice. By ten o’clock temperatures eased up a few degrees and the snow shifted over to freezing sleet with a thick scum of slush clogging gutters and sewer drains. “Why aren’t you dressed?” Grace asked.

Angie was curled up in bed with the blanket over her head. “Carl cancelled. Said he had to go somewhere.”

A half hour later a familiar pickup truck pulled up in front of the driveway, an extension ladder lashed to the bed with bungee cords. “Heard about your late night visitor.” He released the tension on the cords and lifted the ladder from the truck. Raising the outer track until the top rested against the gutter, he secured the guideline. “Quite a mess.”

A plow turned onto the street driving the icy sludge ahead of it. “Should you be climbing in the snow?”

Carl walked back as far as the curb to assess the damage. "If this rain freezes, you'll never get the crud off before spring." The ladder was tilted at a cockeyed angle. A thin flagstone borrowed from the walkway remedied the problem.

"No, that's not an option." The thought of her house looking like a pigsty through the remainder of the winter took all the fight out of her. Angie fully dressed came out and stood next to her mother. "You knew?"

The girl smiled weakly and averted her eyes. "I told him what happened. Didn't know he'd take it so personal."

Carl was already halfway up the ladder and rubbing a rag, which he had soaked in some mysterious solvent, against the siding. The yellow goo hardly budged. He climbed back down and went to the truck. Rummaging in a toolbox, he returned carrying a small chisel. "If this tool can trim rock maple, egg yolk should be a breeze." He climbed back up the ladder and ran the blade gently against the siding and a section of egg yolk curled away in one long strip. Carl grabbed the tail end of the egg between a thumb and index finger then released his grip and watched the gossamer fluff float down to the ground. "Progress!"

Three quarters of an hour later he lowered the ladder and secured it in the bed of the truck. "The jerk who did this to you, does he have a name?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Just curious."

"Dwight Goober," Angie blurted.

The wind was blowing fitfully lashing the sleet at a cruel angle. "Does Mr. Goober live close by?"

Grace grabbed him by the forearm and steered Carl toward the front door. "Why don't you come in and dry off. I'll put the coffee on."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Did Carl mention the craft fair?" Angie asked. They were seated at the kitchen table. Carl's coat and baseball cap was spinning in the dryer.

Grace looked up. "What's this?"

"After someone builds half a hundred or so boxes," Carl replied, "they have to sell them. There's a craft fair over to Mansfield next month and I rented a booth. If it's alright, I thought Angie could come and get savvy on the business end."

Grace inched a box of oatmeal cookies across the table. "Only if her mother can chaperone." She was still thinking about the egg. Carl's high-powered cleaner proved useless, but with the tiny chisel he managed to scrape away every strand of yolk and egg white. The house was restored back to its original state. The yellow mess was gone and her universe restored to a modicum of harmony.

"You've done this before?"

"Mansfield's my fifth show. Didn't do so hot the first couple."

"Poor sales?"

Carl grinned sheepishly. "Poor salesmanship. I just sat in the back of my booth wearing a grumpy expression and playing the tortured artist. Probably scared half the customers away."

"Weirrrrd!" Angie was peeling off her ice-covered socks for a dry pair.

“The guy next to me had a line of handmade leather belts. Nice stuff but nothing to write home about. He was up on his feet, schmoozing with the customers, cracking jokes and selling belts like crazy. I put two and two together. Decided I needed a major ‘poisonality’ overhaul.”

“I can’t picture it,” Grace said in a mocking tone.

“No really,” he protested. “I pulled a Jekyll and Hyde. Went from antisocial recluse to salesman-of-the-year. Well, it wasn’t quite so dramatic, but I did figure out how to warm up to the customers.”

“Tell you a funny story.” Carl reached for an oatmeal cookie. “There was this potter at the last fair. Her parents owned a gift store in rural Tennessee. This local Indian, a Chickasaw woman, sashays into the store one day. She weaves baskets with tribal designs.” “The owner asks, ‘How much do you want for the baskets?’ and she says ‘I don’t know. Maybe five or ten bucks depending on size.’ So she starts selling her handmade baskets in the gift store.”

Carl bit into a cookie and washed it down with swig of coffee. “Here’s where it gets interesting. A couple years go by. A tourist from Boston visits the store one day and buys a basket. Six months later the Chickasaw basket business goes hog wild. Baskets are selling like crazy. The Indian woman can’t weave them fast enough, and the inventory is literally flying off the shelves.”

“Come to find out, the tourist was a curator at the Harvard Museum of Natural History in Cambridge, where he placed the basket on exhibit as Native American folk art. Now the Indian woman is no longer just a basket weaver; she’s an artisan – no, make that a Native American artiste, whose medium is reeds and natural dyes. The price mushrooms through the roof. People are paying two hundred, five hundred, a thousand dollars for a single basket!”

“And then what?”

“And then the Indian woman, who was in her seventies, drops dead. Rumor has it that many of the townsfolk, local yokels with no great appreciation for art, have squirreled Chickasaw Indian baskets away in their attics or put them up for sale for a dollar or two at garage sales and flea markets. With every new twist the story gets nuttier.”

Grace swept up some cookie crumbs in the palm of her hand and threw them in the trash. “And they originally cost a couple of bucks.” The plow, which had struggled up to the cul-de-sac, was making its return run with the slushy mess gurgling and frothing ahead of the blade. “Let’s see about your coat,” Grace rose from the table and led the way down stairs. The dryer was still spinning, but when she pulled the coat and hat out they were toasty warm and dry.”

Grace folded herself against the man’s chest and his arms came up behind her. He kissed her on the lips. “Carl, what’s happening?”

“Hard to say.” There was long pause before he finally spoke again. “Ed Gray is head of the English Department.”

“That’s right.”

“So technically, he’s your boss.” Carl kissed her neck. “The other day we passed in the hallway and he sneered at me. Apparently, your boss still harbors a grudge.”

Grace had little trouble picturing Ed Gray sneering at Carl Solomon. Five minutes into the burnt-out drunk’s tirade at the diner, Ed’s nose had begun to twitch, an uncontrollable nervous tic, while his upper lip curled half way to his eyebrows. Grace didn’t bother to tell Carl about the PR campaign to reclaim his damaged credibility. “Ed Gray lives in a world of musty books he can’t even begin to appreciate.”

“But he could make your life miserable.” Carl released his grip and stepped back, putting his dry jacket back on.

Grace was trying to remember the Helen Keller quote, but her brain fogged over - something about living with uncertainty, danger being the natural state of animals in the wild. "Yes, the neurotic turd can make my life a living hell," Grace smiled, a defiant challenge, "but I'm counting on you setting everything right again." Before he could respond, she lifted up on her toes, planting a kiss on a bristly cheek. "And I'm coming to the Mansfield show whether you like it or not."

\*\*\*\*\*

Tuesday before class Dr. Rosen, the school psychologist, stopped by the classroom. The psychologist 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. "Lester Boswell's mother says you're a saint," Dr. Rosen threw the remark out in an off-hand manner. "She told me about what you did in the poetry class, ... getting Lester actively involved."

"The class got a kick out of it."

Lester Boswell hadn't started the year in Grace's class. He transferred from Charlotte Anderson's home room in early October. Charlotte was menopausal and taking it out on the class. When her hormones were crashing, teachers could hear the hysterical outbursts from three doors down. Lester, the quiet little gnome with wire-rimmed glasses and a speech impediment, frequently bore the brunt of her feminine angst. After an angry call from the Boswells, Principal Skinner pulled the curtains shut and hunkered down in his office with Dr. Rosen. A week later, Lester was quietly transferred to Grace's eighth grade class. Charlotte Anderson promptly chose another child, Roberta Tolbert, to replace Lester as black sheep and worthless runt-of-the-litter. Fortunately, Roberta was more resilient than Lester; the teacher's snide tirades rolled off her thick shoulders like so much briny water off a seagull's back.

"Whatever you did," Dr. Rosen continued, "made Lester feel special."

"He is special," she murmured as an afterthought. "That was the underlying theme of the two poems we read."

"When she comes to grips with her midlife crisis," the psychologist said dryly, "be sure to share that bit of wisdom with Charlotte." Glancing at his watch, Dr. Rosen rose to leave.

"That was me a year and a half ago," Grace blurted out just before the psychologist reached the door.

"Excuse me?"

"Charlotte Anderson. It's her season to crash and burn. A year ago last December I wasn't much better, what with my marriage in shambles."

"But you're doing better now," the psychologist remarked.

"Yes, Lester Boswell and I are having a reasonably decent year."

\*\*\*\*\*

The week before Christmas Mrs. Shapiro caught the flu. Carl drove her over to the emergency room at Bayberry Hospital. A nurse took her blood pressure and pulse then clipped a device that looked like a high tech clothespin onto the tip of her index finger "Blood oxygen's a bit low."

The doctor wanted to admit her but the cantankerous woman wouldn't cooperate so they negotiated a compromise. The hospital pumped two bags of electrolytes into a knobby vein in her arm and sent her home with a prescription for cough syrup with codeine and a week's worth of antibiotics to manage the sinus infection. Grace cooked up a pot of homemade chicken soup with escarole, celery, carrots and basmati rice and, while Carl and Angie were downstairs building jewelry chests, she kept the invalid company.

"I don't know what all the fuss is about." Mrs. Shapiro's frail body was racked with a broadside of uncontrollable coughing. Propped up in bed with a pillow under her head, her dark hair was matted against her forehead in pasty ringlets." Why are you looking at me like that?"

Grace placed the bowl of soup on the bedside table and waited for the convulsive fit to subside." Like what?"

"Like if you turned your back for five minutes, you'd find me keeled over stiff as a board."

"That's not likely."

"Why not?"

Grace fluffed an extra pillow and positioned it behind the woman's scrawny shoulder blades. "Rigor mortis doesn't set in for at least two hours after a person passes away. And that's a medical fact."

"I'll remember that the next time I'm planning to drop dead." She wiped her mouth and the tissue was smeared with putrid looking greenish phlegm.

"You look a mess," Grace replied calmly. "And you probably belong in the hospital."

"So now I'm inconveniencing you?" She groused pugnaciously. "A poor old woman wants nothing more than to die with dignity in the comfort of her own home, but you can't be bothered."

"Eat the soup," Grace counseled, handing her a spoon, "and cheat death."

"Cheat the devil's more like it." She sipped listlessly at the broth and pushed the bowl away. "So, I heard this improbable rumor. Utterly ridiculous nonsense."

"Which was?"

"No, no! Nothing even worth mentioning." Grace raised a skeptical eye and the old lady continued, "That some mentally unbalanced English teacher was dating the school janitor."

"That sounds about right."

"Anyone else know?"

"Not yet. We're dating and it's no secret. Sooner or later someone from the school will see us out in public. Then we'll deal with it."

"A month after he came to board with me," the old woman abruptly shifted gears, "Carl asked for something to read. I said, 'Why don't we take a look in the den.'"

In the rear of the house, Mrs. Shapiro's third husband, Oscar, had converted the den into a private library. Putting his carpentry skills to good use, the man designed custom, floor-to-ceiling, mahogany bookcases. The shelves were stocked with literature in various languages, philosophy and poetry. "Something to read," Mrs. Shapiro sighed. "What would you offer Rousseau's noble savage or one of the captives in Plato's hypothetical cave?" There was nothing condescending or sardonic in her tone. "I suggested Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Carl plowed through Steinbeck in a week. I offered him Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illyich*. He devoured the novella the same day. A collection of Chekhov's short stories went down like an hors d'oeuvre."

"Last month Carl discovered Wittgenstein, the linguistic philosopher. An English translation of the *Tractatus* was squirreled away on an upper shelf in the den. He insisted that I

explain the epistemological limitations of spoken language.” The old woman had to breathe through her mouth now, her sinuses swollen shut. “A person kisses the picture of an absent loved one. How do we understand the gesture? Is the kiss symbolic or can it be understood at a deeper level? Such actions may simply be the spontaneous expression of an inner need - or no need at all.”

Grace felt her usually nimble her brain balk at the odd concept. “Where kissing is concerned, lately I prefer Neruda over the linguistic philosophers.”

Mrs. Shapiro either missed the oblique humor or chose to ignore it. She shook her head and blew out her cheeks in exasperation. “Even for a seasoned academic, Wittgenstein’s theories are daunting.” The room grew silent. The old woman seemed momentarily lost in thought staring at the flowered pattern on her bed sheet. Finally she glanced up with a blank expression and said, “Perhaps you would like to check on your daughter.”

“Yes, I think I’ll go downstairs.”

In the basement Carl was cutting a thick slab of wood on the band saw. The block seemed to be moving through the quarter-inch, vertical blade in slow motion following the markings on a paper outline masking-taped to the top. Grace waited until he shut the machine down and stepped away from the tool before entering the work area. Angie was off in a corner spreading glue on small sections of wood.

“What are you making?”

“Ring boxes,” her daughter replied, smearing yellow glue with the tip of a finger over a mitered joint. The box contained six sides. She stood them up on edge, nudging the joints together in a lopsided hexagon. “Hand me that rubber band,” Angie said. The young girl stretched a band around the perimeter of the box. The sides bowed and twisted, but when the band was firmly in place, the wood settled into a perfectly symmetrical hexagon.

Grace handed her daughter another band which she secured over the bottom of the box. “Very clever.” Carl flipped the band saw back on again, which was Grace’s cue to head back upstairs.

Mrs. Shapiro was lying in bed with a pensive expression. “Are there many stupid teachers at the school?”

Grace was momentarily, flustered by the odd remark, but the sick woman rushed ahead without waiting for a reply. “Oh, such a rude thing to say! Forgive my impertinence.” Despite her protests, she didn’t seem the least bit contrite. In fact, she was smiling wickedly now, staring off into space through squinty eyes. “There’s an old spinster who lives three doors down from here, a retired teacher. She was planning a trip to visit the Grand Canyon over the summer. The woman took the MBTA red line train into Boston so she could apply for a visa. Someone had to explain to Elsie that Colorado was halfway across the country but still located within the continental United States.”

Elsie Davenport. Grace had worked with her at another school several years back. Even then, the woman’s foolishness was legendary. Worse than legendary, common knowledge. The superintendent tried to fire her for gross incompetence, but the teacher’s union dug in solidly behind Elsie. In the end it would have cost five times her annual pay to litigate the case in court so the school committee allowed dopey Elsie to muddle through to retirement.

“Imagine,” Mrs. Shapiro suddenly reached out and, grabbing Grace by the wrist, pulled her close, “that you are working at a menial job and no one values what you do. You are smarter and more sensitive than three-quarters of the dummkopfs who pass you in the hall without so much as a backward glance.”

“Carl is in love with you,” Mrs. Shapiro said abruptly. “What are your intentions?” For the second time that afternoon, Grace was caught off guard.

“He told you?”

“No, not in so many words. But then words aren’t a terribly trustworthy commodity.”

“My intentions,” Grace picked up the thread of Ruth’s previous remark, “are no different than anyone else’s.” She placed her free hand on top of Mrs. Shapiro’s gnarled knuckles gently massaging the mottled skin. “To find a key to paradise.”

“I ask a straight question and you answer in riddles,” Mrs. Shapiro replied. “So you want a key to unlock the gates to paradise? Right now I’d settle for another cup of tea.” Grace got up and reached for the bowl. “Leave the soup. I still haven’t decided yet if I want to live or die.”

In the kitchen Grace found the Earl Grey black tea, the selection with natural oil of bergamot that the old woman favored. She waited for the water to boil, added a spoonful of honey and glanced out the window. In the yard, the jays and a handful of crows were laying waste to the sunflower seeds, scattering the torn shells all over the ground.

So, I heard this improbable rumor. At school, Grace and Carl avoided each other. He stopped eating in the faculty lounge altogether. They passed in the corridors without so much as a nod or casually greeting. That would come later. Once word got out that a mentally unbalanced school teacher was dating the janitor, vitriolic tongues would wag. Ruth Shapiro was no fool. She was simply playing the devil’s advocate, baiting Grace with what was sure to come. She’d been through three husbands on several continents. She understood Grace’s dilemma. A public middle school was a hothouse, a steamy incubator for outrageous gossip and innuendo.

Back in the bedroom, the soup bowl was empty and all that remained of a piece of sourdough bread was the unbuttered crust. “Carl never speaks about his past.”

The old woman stirred the tea and placed the spoon on the saucer. “Carl’s mother died when he was still a baby. The father couldn’t cope. He ran off somewhere so the state placed the child in foster homes.”

“I figured something of the sort.”

In the basement, the electrical motor that powered the jointer turned over with a smooth hum. Mrs. Shapiro began to sneeze fitfully. Grace handed her a Kleenex. She dabbed at her swollen nose and her eyelids drooped. The old woman grew quiet. Grace could smell the honey and oil of bergamot in the few remaining drops of sweetened tea. Mrs. Shapiro’s breath turned smooth and regular as she slept and, for a fleeting instant, Grace caught a glimpse of a young girl barely out of her teens, a beautiful wisp of a Semite with black hair and a book of poems jutting out of a back pocket. She was raking piles of rancid chicken shit into smelly piles, there on the kibbutz in the rugged hill country of the Upper Galilee.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Mansfield Craft fair was in its tenth season. A hundred and twenty exhibitors were assigned spaces in the main ballroom of the Mansfield Sheraton Hotel. With dozens of minor details to sort out, Carl had packed everything up the previous night after working all day at the school.

Grace and Angie arrived around eight-thirty. “There he is,” Angie ran ahead to greet Carl, who was spreading an emerald green cloth over a long table. He hadn’t put any jewelry boxes out on display yet.



Grace scanned the room. In a finely choreographed bedlam, crafters were bustling about arranging tables and positioning displays full of jewelry, ceramics, paintings and blown glass. "Somebody's not happy," she whispered and pointed several tables down in the large function hall, where a blond woman in her late thirties was going toe to toe with an older man.

"The masking tape on the floor,... that what you paid for." The man struggled to keep his emotions under control, but every time he objected to something, the feisty blond fought back, raising her voice by a half dozen decibels.

"I paid good money for this spot and you can't tell me -"

"Lady, look at the tape," the man fumed. "You're grabbing twice the space of anyone else." He jabbed his finger at a clipboard. "We got you down for a ten-by-ten. That's all you paid for. You can't make up the rules to suit your convenience."

The blond woman got up in his face and hissed. "Any of these fine people complaining, huh? Is my setup taking business away from them? I'm perfectly within my rights to set up my displays as I see fit!" The older man stared at her with a constipated expression and was about to launch another frontal assault, but a woman wearing an ID badge grabbed him by the arm and hauled him away on some other business.

"So what was that all about?" Grace asked.

"I've seen Blondie at other shows. She's a fraud." Carl began spreading merchandise out on the table, large boxes on pedestals, smaller pieces positioned to the front. "She doesn't make any of her own jewelry. It's all BS."

"Bull shit!" Angie grabbed a necklace box and placed it strategically on a riser near the center of the table.

"That too," Carl chuckled without any malice toward the blonde woman. "But in the crafting trade, BS stands for buy/sell."

Grace's face clouded over. "I don't follow you."

"The rings and pendants are manufactured in third world countries - China, the Philippines and Taiwan. It's all cheap imports... junk. Nothing handmade. But she passes it off as the real deal and gullible customers don't know the difference." "Once they open the doors," he added, "pay close attention to Blondie. She might be a con artist but she's got a smooth delivery." Carl flashed a sly grin but didn't bother to elaborate.

At quarter to ten, Grace wandered down the length of the hall to size up the competition. No other woodworkers were booked. A woman near the far wall was hawking twenty varieties of homemade, organic salsa. She had laid out free samples in Styrofoam bowls along with several trays of tortilla chips. Scooping a healthy portion of dip from each bowl, a heavyset man was enjoying an early lunch at the salsa lady's expense.

"So what's the connection between munchies and fine art?" Grace turned to see a pallid, willowy thin woman sitting on a folding chair next to a collection of water colors.

"Funny, I was asking myself the same question," Grace replied.

"This stinks," the woman said in a humorless tone. "Customers will stuff their faces with freebies and ignore our crafts."

"Your paintings are very nice," Grace said. She didn't think the woman's artwork was particularly remarkable, but didn't want to hurt her feelings, especially since the artist was already upset about the salsa lady's unfair advantage. Truth be told, her water colors were rather commonplace and the scenes pleasant enough though not terribly original.

"It's my first show," the woman confided. "I quit my day job to pursue a career in the arts." She smiled a slightly wilted, ambivalent expression. Drifting the entire length of the table,

the heavysset man finished sampling the last container of salsa and promptly bought three jars of dip. The salsa lady stuffed the money in a granny pack strapped to her waist. The fair hadn't even technically opened and she'd already rung up her first sale!

The water color artist blew out her cheeks. "Salsa belongs in a whole food store," she hissed, "not an art fair."

"Well, good luck." Grace wandered off.

So what was the lady with twenty varieties of homemade salsa doing at a craft fair? It made no coherent sense to Grace. But then further down, sandwiched between a potter and vendor with blown glass flowers was a woman hawking Mary Kay cosmetics. As soon as the droopy-faced painter sight of the perfumes, emollients and ultra gloss lipsticks, Grace mused, the woman probably would have something scandalous to say about commercial cosmetics.

Grace went back to where her daughter and Carl were waiting patiently. Five minutes later, the doors burst opened and a hoard of customers flooded into the hotel ballroom. The first wave of shoppers drifted past, some eyeing the boxes and stopping to chat with Carl. A middle-aged woman who was looking for a present for a nephew promised to return after she toured the hall. "Blondie's killing the competition," Carl said tongue in cheek. "That despicable BS artist is putting us all to shame."

Sure enough a crowd three-deep had gathered around the jewelry booth where silver bracelets, pendants and rings were flying off the table. "Yah, that's a one-of-a-kind... No I don't personally make a thing. My Uncle Sid from New Jersey is the creative genius. He designs every piece. A regular Picasso with precious metal! ... Yes, everything's on sale. I can let those go two for \$25. A steal at that price!"

"What did I tell you," Carl chuckled. Smaller clusters of shoppers were gathered around various booths. The salsa lady was alternately refilling empty tortilla chip bowls and ringing up sales. Everybody was grabbing the free samples. A handful of customers floated past Carl's boxes but didn't stop or show much interest.

Finally an older married couple strolled by. "Hey, Ralphy, look at these splendiferous boxes." The pudgy woman wore thick, glasses and a slap-happy grin. She stood with her hands on her generous hips studying the merchandise. "Ralphy, get a load of this neat stuff!" Her husband, scowled and moved away to examine a collection of handmade soaps and body lotions. "You make these boxes?"

The woman clearly had no intention of buying anything but that didn't seem to bother Carl. "Me and my mother." He smiled and cocked his head to one side. "You know my mother,... Mother Nature. She does the hard part. I just throw it all together."

The woman reached out and stroked the surface of a ring box. "Gorgeous stuff you make. I can't hardly believe my freakin' eyes!" She turned impatiently and shout at her husband. "Ralphy, for crying out loud! Come over here and get a load of this guy's fancy shmancy jewelry boxes." The husband, who was stout and balding in the rear, rushed off even further down the hall. The woman bent far over the table, "My husband makes boxes, too, but he only uses cheap pine and a quickie coat of varnish. Nothing like yours." She wandered off in search of the man who had disappeared in the crowd.

At ten-thirty, Carl made his first sale, a poem box done in cherry and quarter sawn oak. A half hour later another woman bought a large band sawn box and a man's valet with a sliding tray. He put the money in a small cash box and turned to Grace. "I'm going to bathroom. You're in charge."

"What about customers?"

“Take their money and give them a box.” He walked off in the direction of the lobby. Grace looked at her daughter. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“No, not really. But how difficult could it be?”

Five minutes later a gaunt man in his early thirties ambled up to the table and stared at one particular box with a queer intensity. He bent over at the waist so that his ferret like eyes were no more than an inch from the wood and continued to gawk at the keepsake box. Then, without straightening up or even bothering to look at either one of them he growled, “Take it off the table.”

“Excuse me?” Grace stammered.

“Take ...the box...off the table,” he repeated in a furtive, clipped tone, “and put it out of sight.” Only now did he straighten up and look directly at Grace. “It’s a present for my daughter. She’s over there with her mother.” He indicated a teenage girl with dark hair a few tables away.

Angie eased the small box off the table and secreted it into a gift bag. The thin man all but threw the money down on the green cloth and rushed off spastically as though fleeing the scene of a crime.

“So what was that all about?” Angie looked at the crumpled bills in her fist. Three twenties. The fellow never even waited for his change.

“I haven’t a clue,” Grace said. Her first sale! She tried to gauge her feelings but nothing registered. She felt mildly disoriented, like when she got lost one time in Boston driving back and forth over the Charles River, unable to find her way home. Carl returned and they showed him the money.

“Every sale’s different, I guess,” he replied philosophically and handed the money back to Angie. You keep it. Gives you a hankering for corporate greed.”

Angie stuffed the money in her jeans then pasted Carl with a wet, sloppy kiss on the cheek. “Hey,” he cautioned, “don’t mix pleasure with business!”

In the late afternoon, Grace went off to check on the competition. The flow of customers had dropped off considerably, but the blond whose fictitious Uncle Sid from New Jersey supposedly hand-crafted every bracelet, pendant and ring was still doing a brisk business. The spunky street fighter gibber jabbered with every customer, cracking an endless stream of corny jokes and frolicking her way through the final few hours. The homemade soaps were still selling well; the twenty varieties of homemade, organic salsa display looked like it had taken a direct hit from a nuclear weapon. Empty Styrofoam bowls and broken tortilla chips littered the floor. But the salsa lady was still chatting it up with a few stragglers. Diagonally across from the salsa lady the water color artist was sitting on the folding chair with her hands folded limply in her lap. All of her artwork was neatly arranged against the wall. All of it.

“I didn’t sell a damn thing.” She looked like one of her flowers after a prolonged drought. “If I earned a tenth of what that woman did with her crappy salsa, the show would have been a modest success.”

Crappy salsa. Grace wasn’t sure if the painter’s assessment was based on an actual taste test or an indictment of the process. Self loathing and despair oozed from every pore in her body. “Well, for what it’s worth, I like your paintings.”

The woman glanced at her suspiciously. “Yah, but that’s what everyone says, and I’m going home broke.”

Grace edged away. Maybe she should have told the woman that her droopy, tortured artist demeanor was a liability. While the tortured, water color artist sat morosely waiting to be discovered, Blondie was whooping it up, engaging everyone from frumpy housewives to an

elderly woman with nasal oxygen and a portable tank strapped to her waist. Grace remembered the Chickasaw Indian woman with her woven baskets. Humility, talent plus a smattering of self-deprecating humor - not necessarily in that order - was what the flower lady lacked.

At a booth on the far side of the hall, Grace bought some tea from an effeminate man who ordered leaves through an Asian wholesaler and mixed his own unique blends. "Bags? God forbid!" the man, who spoke with a pronounced lisp, seemed mildly horrified. Teabags were bleached. Bags were blasphemy! They adulterated—that was the word he used—the true taste of the delicate leaf. The ambrosia was perverted, desecrated, defiled. Would you take a bath in lye? All his selections had to be steeped in metal strainers. Before she left, the fellow loaded Grace up with free catalogues and samples. She would bring the teas to Mrs. Shapiro and, while they indulged their taste buds, recount the story of the overly sensitive tea salesman.

"What a surprise!" Pam Sullivan, the office manager, was fingering a selection of alpaca wool sox imported from Mexico. "What brings you here?"

"A good bargain," Grace shot back, momentarily regaining her composure.

"I just bought these crazy socks," Pam boasted. "The dye is all natural. Natives soak the wool in a vat of crushed beetles and boiling water. Isn't that a hoot!"

"Yes, I know." Grace had spent some time talking with the vender earlier in the day. The red dye was extracted from the pulverized bodies of the female cochineal beetle. The insects were soaked in hot water to remove a waxy residue then dried in the Southwest desert sun. Seventy thousand female beetles were sacrificed to produce a single pound of cochineal powder. Because the organic dye was absolutely non-toxic, it was widely used in cosmetics, food coloring and soft drinks.

Grace studied Pam's selection. The socks were ugly. The young couple manning the alpaca sock booth had fair skin and hair. They didn't look like they'd jetted in overnight on a redeye flight from New Mexico. More buy/sell.

"Did you see who's here?" Pam said leaning closer. "Carl Solomon's got a table over by the main entrance."

"Yes, I know."

"How utterly absurd!" Pam tittered. "He's hawking a bunch of tacky boxes that you couldn't unload at a flea market."

Grace cringed. "That bad?"

"The guy should stick to taking out the trash and general maintenance." Pam rolled her eyes and made a motion to leave.

"I don't suppose you actually got a look at any of Carl's boxes?"

Pam's features clouded over but she left the question hanging. "A woman's holding scented candles for me three tables down. I gotta run." Pam wandered off.

When Grace returned, Carl was beginning to pack up some of the smaller items. She grabbed one of the prettier boxes off the tiered display. In response to Carl's quizzical look she barked, "Don't ask!"

\*\*\*\*\*

"Marquetry. It's an ancient skill dating back to the 14th century Italian Renaissance." Grace was standing next to Pam Sullivan. The secretary was writing out a check while the candle maker wrapped her merchandise. Grace thrust the slender bracelet box under the secretary's nose. "Each piece is hand-fitted to create an intricate pattern, a mosaic in rare woods."

“Well, I don’t see where -”

“And these aren’t just hinges.’ Grace flipped the box over. “No, no, no! They’re precision, fine-tuned Brusso hinges that hold the lid open at exactly 95 degrees. You’d have to visit the posh galleries and boutiques on Newbury Street to find such lavish, high-end quality.” Grace slid the box out from under Pam’s nose. “Or a shrewd shopper could buy direct from Carl Solomon.”

When Grace returned to the booth, Carl and her daughter were breaking down the table. “How’d we do?”

“Four hundred and eight-five dollars.” Her daughter pulled out a wad of bills. “Carl let me keep what I sold.”

“What was that all about?” Carl asked.

Grace told Carl about Pam Sullivan. Then she put her arms around him and kissed him on the mouth.

“Mom!” Angie shook her head in disbelief.

Grace kissed him a second and then a third time. “One last question. If all the products at a craft fair are suppose to be handmade by the local artisans, how can they peddle alpaca socks imported from Mexico or Mary Kay cosmetics?”

“The Mansfield fair wasn’t juried,” he replied. “Pretty much anyone who filled out the registration form was accepted. No questions asked.” Carl explained that Blondie with the fake silver jewelry probably wouldn’t know a soldering iron from a blow torch. All her inferior goods were purchased on the cheap from overseas markets. There was nothing original about her product line just as Uncle Sid from New Jersey was nothing more than a figment of her cunning imagination.

The same for the Gringo sock merchants. While their products were made in Mexico, Guatemala, Chile or God-knows-where and colored with beetle juice, the vendors had no part whatsoever in the design or manufacture. Even the Salsa lady was suspect. “So she cooks up a five-gallon vat of salsa on her kitchen range,” Carl argued, “She’s a glorified cook not an artisan. Why should she be hawking dip at a craft fair and taking business away from serious crafters?”

Grace thought of the droopy water color artist, sitting with her hands folded in abject resignation. Would this first craft fair ultimately be her last? Perhaps she would try one more only to be sandwiched between the phony baloney blonde sales dynamo and the Caucasian couple pushing south-of-the-border footwear. The water color artist’s worse nightmare!

“The next fair will be different.” Carl said. “It’s juried, which means they only accept serious crafters. No buy/sell. No imports. No Avon or Mary Kay cosmetics. If somebody sneaks in under false pretenses, the management will refund their money and throw them out.”

“What about the Salsa lady?”

“She can come to buy my original artwork,” Carl was laughing now, “but she can’t sell her funky salsa.”

\*\*\*\*\*

In the morning when Angie went out to retrieve the newspaper, the mail box was smashed. Obliterated. The metal pole was bent double, the box flattened like a pancake and unceremoniously hurled into the bushes. When Angie tried to straighten the pole, it snapped off in her hand.

“The Village Idiot.” Grace put a pot of coffee on and called the police. The same officer who took the report when the house was egged pulled up in a blue cruiser.

“Did you see who did it.” “No. I didn’t see a thing.”

The officer pawed at the dirt with the toe of his shoe. “Too bad you didn’t have a surveillance camera. Could of nailed the little bastard.”

“Tall, ungainly bastard,” Grace corrected, “with a bad complexion.” The officer threw his hands up in a gesture of exasperation and left.

Hubert Fenster. Fernwall, Feinstein. Fenton, that was it! The name of the electronic whiz who set up the surveillance equipment at the high school. Grace found him in the yellow pages under the security heading. She called and left a message on his answering machine.

Dwight Goober was a one man wrecking crew, a destructive, insolent, psychopath, and nobody could touch him. He spent his days locked away in a ‘special-ed’ classroom at the regional collaborative and, like a prisoner on work release, scurried back to the community in the late afternoons. He needed to be taught a lesson, Grace thought. No, the wording was too antiseptic. He needs to be hurt really bad—pulverized like the mailbox, fractured and splintered like the ruined metal pole. Everybody knew about the goons on Federal Hill. The lugs who would rearrange somebody’s anatomy or tap dance on a spinal column for a few thousand dollars, no questions asked. A simple business agreement without a binding contract.

It was curbstone justice at its best. The way things got done before the era of criminal rights, ACLU and all that libertarian hogwash. What frightened Grace more than the smashed mailbox was the revelation that she had entertained the notion of stopping by the sporting goods store at the Brookville Mall to checking out the offerings. What gauge weapon would you recommend for hunting wild game. Something, say, in the two hundred pound range. A dull witted, feral beast with chronic acne and a compulsive inability to leave decent, law biding citizens alone?

Hubert Fenton, a middle-aged man with bushy eyebrows, stopped by the next night after supper. Grace told him about the mailbox and the eggs. “Latchkey brats,” Hubert said gruffly, “they’re taking over the universe.”

“I thought maybe a camera in the front of the house might work.”

Mr. Fenton shook his head. “Soon as he sees the solitary camera up on the front, he’ll just target the sides or rear. These kids aren’t stupid.”

“Actually he is quite stupid.”

Hubert Fenton ignored the remark. “I wouldn’t go with anything less than four cameras. One on each corner of the house.” He pulled out a blank form and began scratching some figures. “You’d need a router to send the video signals from the various perimeter locations directly to your computer hard drive. You’ll also require a set up with night vision capabilities.”

Grace bit her lip. “Sounds expensive.”

Hubert looked up. “We’re looking at four thousand depending on how much trouble we have running cables. Some of these older houses can be tricky.”

Grace’s brain shorted out. She didn’t have that kind of money to throw away on Dwight Goober. Four thousand dollars would replace the mailbox a hundred times over. How many Dirty Harry-type, long-barrel magnums could you buy for that kind of money? Hubert Fenton left a detailed proposal on the kitchen table. The paperwork described all the scintillating bells and whistles, the electronic gadgetry with the stipulation that additional installation fees would ultimately effect the final cost.

When Hubert Fenton was gone, Grace called Carl and launched into a maniacal rant cursing Dwight Goober and threatening the thug with all sorts of outlandish abuse. Grace was just venting, blowing off steam. She could no more stop Dwight Goober from vandalizing her property than the police or ineffectual courts could. At the end of her tantrum Carl only mentioned that Mrs. Shapiro was feeling much better since the bronchial infection and, in his low-keyed unhurried manner, added, "Replacing the post and mailbox is no big deal. I'll come by over the weekend."

Neighbors on Bovey Street cursed Dwight Goober through the previous summer. Every time he trashed their lives and property, they shook an impotent fist in the air, hollered and cursed until they were blue in the face, nearly apoplectic. But they never did squat. No one ever sued the family or confronted the insolent fishwife of a mother. They never even called the police or confronted the youth face to face. No, it was all empty posturing and hot air. They were afraid of retribution pure and simple. They waxed philosophical. Oh, he'll just grow up and move away from Bovey Street or get sent to the ACI for some major offense. Better to be longsuffering and wait it out.

What the neighbors never counted on was the possibility that their diabolic nemesis might hunker down on Bovey Street for the next twenty years, finding new and ingenious ways to torment them well into their doddering old age.

Carl was a loner. Unlike the frightened neighbors, he studied a problem, whether a delicate bridle joint or a pimply-faced punk, and didn't worry about extraneous details. That worried Grace.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mentally Unbalanced English Teacher  
Romantically Involved with School Janitor!!

Pam Sullivan might as well have broadcasted the late breaking news over Brandenburg Middle School's public address system. Ed Gray stopped by her classroom at the end of fifth period. "I heard a rumor,... totally absurd, but I thought I owed you at least the courtesy of -"

"Courtesy," Grace cut him short, "Interesting choice of words. And, yes, the rumor is true."

"You're dating the school janitor?"

"This has nothing to do with Carl's position here. You're in a snit because he caught you with your academic pants down."

"You," Ed Gray shook a finger menacingly in her general direction, "are totally out of line." His eyes glazed over with rage. "Insubordinate!"

"What I do with my personal life is none of your business."

He made a motion to leave but turned back almost immediately. "You're not the least bit embarrassed? It doesn't bother you that the other staff at Brandenburg understand what's going on?"

Grace was sorting a pile of test that she would grade at home over the weekend. "Those teachers who care about me will wish me well and perhaps take a genuine interest in Carl. The rest can go to hell."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sunday Carl replaced the mailbox. He dug out the old pole down below the frost line and wedged a four-inch, pressure-treated post in the hole. Emptying a bag of Quikrete into the pit, he flooded the gray powder with water. Satisfied with the way the cement was curing, he spread a thick layer of straw over the ground covering the hole.

“What’s that for?”

“Keeps the cold out so the cement can cure properly.” He leveled the post making minor adjustments. “It’s just a precaution. Don’t want the mix to freeze overnight.”

Short of attacking it with a chain saw, no one, not even the demented Dwight Goober, was going to destroy the four-inch post. “Put your tools away and come in for a while.” Grace put a pot of coffee on while Carl washed up. “Our little secret isn’t so private anymore.”

“Figured as much.” Carl picked a strand of loose straw off his flannel shirt. “Teachers who never knew I existed, are all goggle-eyed.” He chuckled in a deep bass. “You’re blue-collar boyfriend’s assumed celebrity status.”

Grace straddled him on the chair. “Dr. Rosen stopped by my classroom Friday.” The psychologist looked in shortly after Ed Gray stormed off. “He talked in circles, smiled a lot and went away.” Grace could feel Carl’s arms come up under her sides. “Moral support, I figure.”

“Where’s your daughter?” Carl was kissing her neck.

“Spending the weekend with her father.” Pushing him away momentarily, Grace reached into her pocket and laid a small gift-wrapped package no bigger than a pencil on the table.

Carl picked it up and turned it over in his hand. “For me?” She nodded and settled back comfortably in his arms. He pulled the paper off carefully. The toothbrush featured soft nylon bristles and a rubber flossing pick.

\*\*\*\*\*

With the cement curing under a six-inch bed of straw, they went upstairs and took their clothes off. They made love quickly and quietly then, for good measure, did it again. In the morning the couple rose early and ate a leisurely breakfast. “When is your next craft fair?” Grace pushed a plate of buttered raisin toast across the table.

“Two weeks on a Saturday. That’s the juried show.”

Carl was sitting at the kitchen table in his underwear, his strong lean body hunched over the food. Nothing could have seemed more natural. Grace stared at him intently. “Are you nervous?”

“There will be artists who display regularly in expensive galleries.” He fidgeted in the chair. “Maybe I’m just kidding myself.”

She came up behind him and draped her arms over his chest. “Or maybe like the unassuming Chickasaw basket weaver, you’ll knock them all dead.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A week past and life at Brandenburg Middle School drifted back to normal. Teachers who had treated Grace like her bra was on backwards, greeted her pleasantly enough now and even made small talk between classes. Ed Gray was in a habitually foul mood and held impromptu daily meetings with Principal Skinner in the hallways or the administrative office. Pam Sullivan seemed contrite, almost apologetic - not that such a woman would ever give Carl



Solomon the right time of day much less credit for having a reasonably endowed brain lodged between his ears.

When Grace arrived at school on Thursday morning, Pam muttered, "Principal Skinner wants to speak with you ASAP. I sent an aide over to cover you class through first period." She glared at Grace haughtily before turning her back.

So this was it. Out of sheer spitefulness, Pam Sullivan had spilled the beans to the principal about her office romance. Or maybe Ed Gray had given him an earful describing behavior unbecoming a professional educator. Insubordination, rash and reckless—

"Grace, would you come in please and close the door." Principal Skinner was waving at her from behind his desk. The cap on the Maalox bottle was lying on its side, a moist, pink ring circling the inner edge. He rose and, with his back to her, stared morosely out the window. "WJAR Channel Ten weather team is calling for snow tomorrow. Two to four inches on the ground by daybreak." He pivoted on his heels and picked up a football that was perched on a shelf. "Less than half a foot of snow by dawn. Do we close the school and tack another day on at the end of the year? Decisions. Decisions." Without warning he lobbed the ball to Grace. "Nice catch!"

"This bad weather, it's not a storm, per se," he rambled on. "Nothing like the nor'easter we had last December. What would you do?"

Grace rubbed the raised surface of the ball with her finger tips. Football mementos plus several rows of varsity championship trophies littered the office. "Close the school. It's not worth the risk. But you didn't call me here to discuss the weather."

On the far wall hung a picture of a trim and robust Principal Skinner in full varsity gear with his college squad. A mop of shaggy brown hair fell down over the handsome, young man's ears. Principal Skinner gestured at the football in her hands. "Did you notice the inscription?"

Grace glanced at the writing on the side of the ball. "Sorry, but I don't recognize the name."

"Roosevelt 'Rosie' Greer. Played for the Penn State Nittany Lions. All pro with the New York Giants then went to first string right tackle with the LA Rams."

"The bruiser weighed over 300 pounds," the principal took the ball from her hands and returned the pigskin to its place of honor on the far shelf, "but always went out of his way to avoid injuring another player. Rosie had a unique hobby. Needlepoint. Use to stitch on the sidelines toward the end of his career while he was still an NFL, first string player."

"Well, that's very nice—"

"I visited the art museum last month when they featured the local artisans. Carl Solomon's box was on display. Meticulous handiwork." He cleared his throat. "Ed Gray gave notice yesterday. He's leaving the Brandenburg school system by the end of the month. Two weeks to be exact. You're my first choice for Chairman of the English Department."

Grace's head was spinning. She couldn't connect the dots; nothing the man was saying made any sense. She stared at the principal like he had been speaking in tongues. "Ed took another job?"

Principal Skinner reached for the pink liquid and filled the plastic cup to the brim. "The turncoat deserted to the enemy camp." He put the cup to his lips and tilted his head back. Principal Skinner wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. "Took a position in Boston working with MCAS."

\*\*\*\*\*

“Let’s take a ride,” Carl said.

Angie just arrived and hadn’t even removed her jacket. “Where to?”

“Providence,” he replied without elaborating.

“My mother’s upstairs with Mrs. Shapiro. Can she come?”

Carl grabbed his coat and headed up the basement stairs. “Sure thing.”

They drove down Cottage Street and hooked up with the highway heading south. There was no place to park downtown so he found space on a side street off College Hill and plunked four quarters in the meter. They backtracked to North Main Street. Carl pulled up in front of the Rhode Island School of Design Store. A girl standing in the doorway was wearing a blue military coat with epaulets and brass buttons. Her boyfriend sported a spiked Mohawk and his tongue was pierced. Each time he spoke, a silver ball danced up and down in his mouth. Angie tugged at her mother’s blouse. “Why is everybody dressed weird?”

“It’s RISD. The school attracts a lot of artsy types.” She turned to Carl. “I didn’t know they sold woodworking supplies here.”

“They don’t,” he confirmed. Sauntering into the store, he cornered a salesgirl. “Handmade papers?”

“Over there by the bookbinding supplies.”

On a six-foot high rack, row after row of handmade papers with different themes and textures were neatly hung. “I need a new look for the Boston show. Something totally original that will knock the gallery owners’ socks off.”

“You got the amboyna burl veneer,” Grace countered.

Carl smiled faintly. “And that’s all I’ve got. Except for the bird’s-eye maple, none of the other woods look half as nice.”

Angie fingered a paper that was tissue thin and covered with dried leaves and stems. One of the gossamer leaves, which extended above the surface of the paper, broke off in her hand. Carl immediately grabbed a similar sheet off the rack and placed it to one side. “You can’t replace wood with paper.”

“Why not?” Carl shot back. “Artists experiment with new techniques all the time. Some mixed media work. Some don’t. Until you actually take the leap of faith, you’ll never know.”

“But,” Grace said hesitantly, “that paper’s much too thin. I can see right through it.”

Carl seemed momentarily stymied. A pad of writing paper was sitting abandoned on a shelf. He grabbed the pad and held it underneath the decorative, handmade offering. “You’re going to use plain white paper for a background?” Angie said incredulously.

“Substrate not background,” Carl countered with a defiant smirk. “It’s sounds more professional.”

“You know,” Grace observed, “against the pale, eggshell white, it’s really quite attractive. But how do you protect it from stains?”

Carl was pulling other sheets off the rack. “Don’t know. I haven’t thought that far ahead.” He bought five sheets of paper plus an assortment of acrylic paints and sable brushes. When asked about the paint supplies, he shrugged and changed the subject.

The following Tuesday afternoon when Angie arrived, Carl had already glued up a half dozen pieces of scrap wood with an assortment handmade papers. “You do the honors.” He handed her a block of wood with the transparent tissue glued to a white background. Angie loaded a carbide round-over bit into the chuck and tightened the collar on the router with a

wrench. Turning the motor on, she eased the bearing snugly up against the wood. A blur of wood chips flew up in the air. The engine grew louder as she navigated the cutter freehand around the perimeter. Finishing a second pass, Angie pulled the router away from the wood and killed the motor. “Nice,” she murmured, surveying her work. “Except over here on the far side where the blade was cutting across the grain.”

Carl glanced over her shoulder. The cut was clean and silky smooth. “Where the cutter pulled the paper up a little, we can tack it down with glue.”

After the success of the leafy tissue, the next offering was a bust. The paper was far too thick and pulpy. The whirling blade threw puffs of cottony fiber all over the room. To strengthen the sheet, Carl sprayed the surface with lacquer, but the chemicals bled through to the front creating a series of ugly blotches and stains.

Angie wagged her head from side to side. “Think wonders, shit blunders. It’s hopeless.” She flung the soggy mess into the trash.

The next sheet boasted delicate magenta flower petals along with flecks of dark green leaf stems peppering the deckled, ivory surface. The blade bit into the wood trimming away the topmost edge but the spongy paper tore at a jagged angle as she negotiated the final corner moving against the grain. A patch the size of a grain of rice had ripped away. “What a shame!” Angie set the router aside.

Carl stared at the damaged surface for the longest time then foraged about in a drawer and removed several tubes of paint he had bought at the RISD store. “Can you paint?”

Angie scrunched up her face. “Had a paint-by-numbers kit when I was in fifth grade.”

“Which is all the skills you’ll need.” He handed her a magnifying headset. “Here, put this on.”

Angie placed the device over her forehead and tightened the band. Carl squirted a glob of reddish paint onto a scrap of wood. “It’s too bright,” Angie protested. “The colors don’t match.”

Handing her a fine sable brush, Carl placed a dab of gray paint next to the red. “If you look closely, the flower petals are two, separate colors. Mix a little of the gray in with the red, but let both colors show.”

Angie lifted a gooey drop of gray paint and deposited it in the center of the red. Both colors melded together in a streaked, purplish glaze. “Don’t mix the paints. That’s the look you want.” Carl reached up, grabbed the visor and lowered the magnifying lens over her eyes. “Now paint a tiny petal over the torn paper and hide the defect.”

Angie pulled away from the table. “What if I screw up and ruin everything?”

“For cripes sakes! It’s not the Mona Lisa; it’s just a piece of scrap wood.” Carl nudged her forward. “Don’t agonize. Put your brain on automatic pilot. Just do it.”

Angie took a deep breath and blew all the air out of her lungs. Propping her left arm on the table for added support, she lowered the feathery bristles. The girl ran the brush over the paper. Three quick strokes. The ersatz, magenta petal was indistinguishable from the rest. Perfection. Angie removed the magnifier, and dabbed the salty moistness from her eyes with a paper towel.

“Was it something I said?”

“Shut up!” She muttered gruffly, the tone more benediction than reprimand.

\*\*\*\*\*

Grace hadn't noticed the police sirens blaring in the distance. Even when the first cruiser pulled onto Bovey Street the noise made no impression on her.

"Something's wrong." The urgency in her daughter's voice finally hit home. An ambulance careened onto the street trailed by two more police cars, their red lights and sirens turning the quiet evening upside down. Grace threw on her coat and ran outside. A shrill caterwauling arose from the far end of the street. Like the death throes of a mortally injured animal, the sound rippled through the cold night air, died away to nothing before repeating with renewed intensity. Grace could see the ambulance, doors ajar, abandoned in the middle of the street at an odd angle. Now another sound, a woman's shrill voice joined the first in a chorus of bedlam.

Grace edged down the darkened street. A policeman was methodically scouring the shrubs on a neighbor's front lawn with a flashlight. "What happened?"

"Local kid got beaten up. Real bad."

The medics suddenly emerged from a wooded area in back of the property with a body on a stretcher. "My baby! My darling baby boy!" Dwight Goober's mother fought her way through the crowd of onlookers and threw herself on the stretcher, smothering the boy's blotchy face with kisses. An officer had to physically restrain the woman while the medics loaded Dwight into the rear of the ambulance. The distraught mother collapsed on the ground, moaning loudly. "Who could do such a thing to my darling baby boy!"

The swirling strobe lights on the roof of the cruisers illuminated the street with an eerie glow. Another officer approached from the woods balancing a soggy bag of potato chips between a thumb and index finger. It was the same policeman who had responded when Grace's house was egged. "Dwight Goober's last solid meal," he said with an inscrutable poker face.

"What's that?"

"In addition to other injuries, he's got a broken jaw," the officer stomped his shoes, which were caked with mud, on the ground. "Did you call Hubert Fenton?"

"Yes I did. He stopped by on Wednesday to give me an estimate."

The officer crumpled the bag - Lays Sour Cream and Onion - in his fist before stuffing it in a pocket. "Hope you didn't sign a contract."

"No, not yet."

"Good. Keep the money you were going to give Hubert in the bank and let it collect interest. Judging by the extent of injuries, Mr. Goober is going to be out of circulation for a very long time." He scraped the heel of his shoe against the curb.

"What's that awful smell?" Grace felt nauseous, sick to her stomach.

"We had to haul his waterlogged carcass out of that filthy swamp back in the woods. My shoes and sock are covered with muck." The wooded area the officer was referring to lay at the end of the cul-de-sac. The builder who owned the land originally wanted to put up new housing units, but the environmental protection agency objected. They claimed the fifty acre plot was wetlands and vital habitat for migrating birds and other indigenous animal. The EPA insisted that the swampy wooded area be left in its pristine, natural state.

"Any idea who did this," Grace asked.

"No, not a clue." the officer didn't seem overly concerned at the prospect of an unsolved crime. He pointed to a spot in the snow where several plain clothes detectives were huddled together making notes. "Someone jumped Dwight over there and knocked him to the ground. The assailant dragged him through the snow down to the wetlands."

"Maybe it was a gang."

The officer shook his head vehemently and rubbed more crud off the sides off his shoe. Acrid clay was mixed in with the dirt. “There’s only the trail of Dwight’s body being hauled, feet first, down to the swamp. The attacker left no prints, because the body obliterated his own tracks. Only one set of footprints emerges from the woods. Just one.” The officer blew into his clenched fist to warm the frozen fingers. “The assailant threw him in the middle of the swamp, face down in a foot of freezing water. It’s a miracle the creep survived.”

Dwight Goober just got beaten within an inch of his life and I feel ... pleasantly surprised. Exhilarated. Relieved!

And Grace didn’t feel even a smidgeon of sympathy for the slobbering shrew of a mother. Retribution provided a sense of completeness. It balanced every offense with an appropriate punishment. Dwight Goober had vandalized and terrorized the community for years. Now some community-minded bounty hunter had broken his jaw and left the youth for dead in a pool of frigid water. That seemed fair enough. It balanced the ledger books. Maybe Father Callahan or the enlightened yogi with the silly chalkboard wouldn’t agree, but rich people and God-crazed holy men didn’t generally have to contend with the likes of Dwight Goober. Case closed.

Grace rushed home and found Angie cuddled on the sofa. The lights were off. A chill slithered through Grace’s belly, the same numbing fear that she felt when confronting Dwight on the backyard swing. “I told Carl,” Angie confessed in a faltering voice.

“Told him what?”

“The Village Idiot followed me home from school Tuesday. He said, ‘You and your scumbag mother better grow eyes in the back of your heads.’”

“He threatened you?”

Angie pulled her legs up under her chin and began to whimper softly. “I was scared. I told Carl what Dwight said.” Her chest heaved spasmodically. “We were working on one of those large black walnut chests with the beveled sides and paneled lid. We drilled pilot holes for the hinge pins.” The commotion in the street had died away as the last cruiser pulled onto the main highway. Everyone, even Dwight Goober’s hysterical mother, had gone home. “The lid was too tight so we brought it over to the belt sander and trimmed a sixteenth of an inch off the right side. Then Carl muttered something so soft I hardly couldn’t make it out.”

“What did he say?”

Angie slid down and dropped her cheek into her mother’s lap. “Eyes in the back of his head.”

Five minutes later her daughter was sleeping peacefully. Grace placed a blanket over Angie’s shoulders and raised the thermostat. Then she went to the phone and dialed a number. “Hello, Mrs. Shapiro, this is Grace. Is Carl there?”

“He hasn’t come home yet.”

“Perhaps he’s working late.”

“Not that I know of.”

Grace hung up the phone. Dwight Goober had a dislocated shoulder, smashed jaw and a broken leg. The cartilage in his nose had been reconfigured and several teeth chipped. She had learned this from one of the neighbors. The woman was walking her dog and heard someone hollering for help. Dwight told the medics that he was half a block from home, minding his own business and woke up in frigid water three hours later.

The doorbell rang. Grace peered through the peephole. Carl was standing on the front stoop. “Where’s Angie?”

“Sleeping.”

“Give this to her.” He handed her a black walnut jewelry chest with beveled sides. The pearly textured lid medallion was cut from ice curl maple. “Tell her I used the micropolymer wax instead of tung oil so the maple wouldn’t take on an amber tint.”

“Did you want to come in?”

“No, not tonight.” He turned and started to walk leisurely toward his truck but turned back. “How was your night?”

Grace turned the question over in her mind for the better part of half a minute. “Uneventful.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Grace and Angie arrived at the Hynes Auditorium in Boston around eleven o’clock in the morning. They drove in on the Southeast Expressway, took the Mass Ave exit and, with Symphony Hall directly ahead, veered left onto Huntington. The juried craft fair was open to the public from late morning, but Carl opted to set up his booth the night before and stay over at a nearby hotel.

Grace made a quick tour of the show. “Quite a difference!” The Salsa lady with her twenty varieties of homemade dip was nowhere to be found. No Mary Kay cosmetics; the fair-skinned couple with the cochineal-dyed socks was a no-show.

Traffic was thin but buyers appeared upscale, cosmopolitan. A portly fellow wearing a badge and a blue uniform with gold trim approached. “Fire Marshall. I’ll need a cloth sample.” Carl rummaged in a cardboard box and produced a piece of material the same color and texture as his booth display. While an assistant stood by with a fire extinguisher, the marshal struck a match and held it under the cloth. The fabric scorched, then turned black but never burst into flames. “All set.” He handed the blackened piece back to Carl and proceeded on to the next booth.

“Got to wash up.” His hands were covered with soot from the charred cloth. “Be back in a second. Don’t talk to anyone while I’m gone.” He rushed off down the hallway in search of a bathroom.

Diagonally across from their display was a young oriental couple. Earlier, Carl wandered over to introduce himself and trade business cards. The husband spun bowls and urn-shaped vessels on a wood lathe, while the wife embellished the hardwoods with intricate, oriental motifs. Several of the larger pieces were spun from green, fresh-cut lumber. As the moist wood cured, it bowed, twisted, cupped and curled into fanciful shapes enhancing the overall effect. The larger bowls, some decorated with sumptuous, filigree patterns, were cleverly arranged on separate display pedestals and bathed in a soft sheen from banks of overhead track lighting.

Grace tapped her daughter on the shoulder. “I know that fellow.” An elegant looking man in a pinstriped suit was standing on the opposite side of the aisle, staring at Carl’s booth. He was medium height with thinning hair. “But where do I know him from?”

Yes,” Angie agreed, “he does look awfully familiar.”

“Nice craftsmanship.” The man, who had closed the distance, was standing in front of them. “I’ve never seen free-form marquetry patterns on jewelry boxes. Meticulous workmanship!” The man extended a well-manicured hand toward a box but didn’t touch the surface. “The finish,... is that catalyzed lacquer?”

Don’t talk to anyone while I’m gone.

“Well, yes. Lacquer over tung oil. When the finish cures, a protective coat of beeswax is applied with a buffing wheel.” That was safe. Grace hadn’t done anything wrong. Carl always preferred a natural finish. He boasted how oil resins always showed wood tones to best advantage.

Rubbing his chin, the man looked slightly confused. “My mistake,” he apologized, “Lacquer finishes are generally sprayed over bare wood. I should have known better.”

Grace felt her legs go wobbly.

“Can I help you?” Drying his hands with a paper towel, Carl came up the aisle.

“I had a question about your merchandise, but your assistant was quite helpful.” The man smiled genteelly and meandered over to the next booth.

“I think,” Grace grabbed her daughter by the arm, “we’ll do some window shopping at the Prudential Center and stop back later in the afternoon.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The lobby of the Hynes Auditorium had been turned over exclusively to painters and a handful of sculptures with oversized piece that wouldn’t show well in the main ballroom. Where the Mansfield show felt like a raucous, three-ring circus, the juried fair was low-keyed and dignified. Well-dressed people strolled about, lingering to talk in courteous monotones with artisans before moving on.

Earlier in the week, Grace asked Carl how the organizers of the Boston event weeded out cheap imports. “At high-end shows, the judges frequently requested digital photos of projects in various stages of completion. Let’s say Blondie tries to pass off a pair of bogus, imported earrings as handmade.” “New earrings are always hung on smooth, straight wire before it’s bent to the pendant’s final shape. An earring that’s been tampered with - taken apart to create the illusion of a work-in-progress - would be easy to spot, even for a novice jewelry maker. It’s a no brainer!”

Grace stopped in front of a portrait done in metallic tones. The artist, a black woman dressed in a fashionable dashiki smiled pleasantly. All of the woman’s paintings had the same limited tonal range but the effect was mesmerizing. Angie tugged on her mother’s sleeve. “Cape Cod,... Hyannis.” The girl had a crazed, slightly hysterical look plastered across her face. Grace peered at her daughter trying to decipher what she was saying. “Wire sculptures, Kennedy Compound, catalyzed lacquer.”

“Oh God!” Grace moaned and bent double placing a hand over her eyes. The man in the pin striped suit was the owner of the Cape Cod Collectibles Art Gallery. She hadn’t recognized him earlier because he had dressed casually in the store. She spun around, heading back to the main ballroom.

“You’ll only make things worse!” Angie yelled, but Grace had already barreled through the double doors and was gone from sight. She scanned the entire room only to discover that Donald Carrington had returned to Carl’s booth.

“I’ve a confession,” Grace stumbled over her words, her voice breaking.

“Catalyzed lacquer,” Mr. Carrington interrupted, anticipating her thoughts, “is the Rolls Royce of finishes, but it’s harmful to the environment and terribly wasteful. Natural oils and resins are a far more practical choice, don’t you agree?”

“Well, I don’t really know,” Grace blustered. “Truth is, I don’t understand the first thing about woodworking.”

“No harm done.” Mr. Carrington shook hands with both of them and nodded amicably. “I’ll be in touch, Carl.” Folding a slip of paper in thirds, he slipped it into a pocket and wandered off.

“Do you know who that was?”

“Donald Carrington,” Carl replied. “An art dealer with galleries in Hyannis, Martha’s Vineyard and Newport, Rhode Island.” He scratched an ear leisurely and grinned. “Mr. Carrington just placed an order for five thousand dollars.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Carl stopped by later that night. He sold a little over two thousand dollars to retail customers. They weren’t looking for gifts. They bought larger pieces as collectibles - personal investments, not unlike stocks or mutual funds that would appreciate in value over time. Carl also took a second, substantial gallery order. “There’s enough work to keep me busy nonstop for the next six months.”

“How can you meet deadlines while working at the school?”

“I’ll cut back my hours or quit altogether and find part-time custodial work.”

“Between the woodworking and a new job, I’ll hardly see you anymore.”

“Not necessarily..” Carl reached into his pocket and removed a diminutive box. Not the sort of box he was in the habit of making. No, this was clothbound with polished chrome edging. Very small. Not terribly practical. Just the right size.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)