

Collected Short Stories: Volume III  
by  
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## 107 Degrees Fahrenheit

Kissing his sister goodbye in the lobby of the Bonanza Bus Terminal, Nicholas Holyfield was blind-sided by a wave of emotions. He hadn't seen the tears coming, didn't even have time to avert his puckered, soggy face. "Sorry."

Mary Beth only smiled and wiped the wetness away with the heel of her hand. The visit to Providence lasted two days. The bus to Boston was boarding now. She pulled him close for a final hug and said half-jokingly, "If you meet a pretty coed at college, bring her along next time." She nuzzled his cheek with her lips, turned and limped away, swinging her crippled, left leg in a sweeping arc as though the errant limb had a mind of its own.

Nicholas boarded the bus and sat next to a fat black woman, poorly dressed and smelling of body odor laced with Jean Naté. As he slumped down, the woman, who had been reading, looked up and smiled. One of the front teeth was capped in gold. Nicholas leaned slightly forward and peered out the window. Mary Beth was a good two hundred feet down the road headed in the direction of the East Side, her body bobbing up and down like a cork on rough, tidal water. The way she moved gave the false impression she was careening at a diagonal when, in fact, her forward progress was straight ahead.

More tears came and, this time, Nicholas couldn't shut the spigot. Like a toddler bereft of its mother, he was sitting on a Boston-bound bus crying inconsolably. His shoulders heaved, the breath caught in jagged spasms. The black woman glanced up curiously, opened her mouth but then closed it without saying anything. She turned her attention back to a pamphlet printed on cheap, grainy stock. The driver shut the door and threw the shift into reverse. Moments later, they were leaving Providence, Rhode Island, heading north in the direction of the interstate. Nicholas felt something soft and fluffy rubbing insistently against his wrist. The black woman pressed a Kleenex into his hand and discreetly turned away.

The bus passed the statehouse exit; the ivory dome of the capitol building materialized and was gone in a blur. They entered Pawtucket with its grimy factories and mills. The mayor had been indicted for extortion and racketeering the previous year and was now somewhere out of state at a country club prison for white-collar criminals. His biggest regret wasn't betraying the public trust but being careless enough to get caught. "My sister was hit by a car." Nicholas spoke, not so much from a need to unburden himself, but to justify his lack of restraint.

"Dear God!" The black woman threw the pamphlet aside and stared at him. Her sympathy, though slightly theatrical, was genuine, not driven by idle curiosity. "She isn't in a coma or on life support?"

Nicholas frowned and felt the skin on his cheek draw tight where the salty moistness had evaporated away. "No. The accident occurred last winter while jogging. A car skidded on black ice. Broke her leg in three places."

"Driver drunk?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Not hardly. Just an old lady returning from church at twenty miles an hour in a residential area. The car skidded on the frozen road. No one was at fault."

The black woman directed her eyes at her hands which were large and formless, devoid of jewelry except for a simple, gold band on the third finger of her left hand. "Why was your sister jogging in the middle of winter?"

Nicholas reached into his breast pocket and located a wallet from which he removed a newspaper clipping. Underneath a picture of Mary Beth dressed in a sweat suit with a medal hanging from her neck, the caption read: Collegiate track star places in first, NCCA professional meet. "That's my sister."

The black woman took the tattered paper and held it to the light. For a woman with hands like Stillson wrenches, she was remarkably gentle with the parchment-thin clipping. "I'm trying to recall," she chuckled, "last time I was that thin, but my mind don't travel quite that far back." She handed the article back to him. "Where'd she run?"

"The track meet was in New Jersey - East Rutherford. Fifteen hundred meters."

Nicholas had been to East Rutherford in February of 1990. He was twelve years old but still remembered the competition vividly. The athletes, especially the runners with their unwieldy, long legs - calves hewn from rock maple, bulging, muscular thighs. Glistening, sexless, sinewy bodies primed for one task: outpace the echo of the starter's pistol from the sprinter's block to finish line. Mary Beth's curly brown hair was tied back with a single strand of blue ribbon, a matter of convenience rather than aesthetics. Her tanned, lightly freckled face pivoted to one side as the women settled into their respective lanes. On your mark! Get set!

"Mary Beth didn't actually win. She came in third behind the Romanian, Doina Melinte, and Mary Slaney. The Romanian ran the 1500 meters in four minutes, seventeen seconds and set a new world record. My sister was only 8 seconds off the winning time."

"Eight blinks of an eye!" The black woman said with a earthy grin. "Since the accident, she don't race no more?"

"No," Nicholas said softly, "she can hardly walk much less run."

"My nephew, Delroy, got a club foot." She held her paw of a hand up with the fingers skewed stiffly at an odd angle. "Like this."

Looking at the stubby fingers made Nicholas slightly nauseous, and he regretted sitting next to the garrulous woman. "The bum leg taken aside," the black woman rushed on, oblivious to Nicholas' distress, "Delroy done good with his life. Works in an upholstery shop. Got married

a few years back and has two healthy children.” She smoothed the front of her dress with the massive hands. “What does your sister do now she ain’t racing?”

“With the money from the insurance settlement she doesn’t have to work.”

Mary Beth turned professional in January, three months before the accident. Negotiating the size of the financial settlement, her lawyer estimated potential earnings (including commercial endorsements) at half a million dollars. The insurance company balked, arguing that, in her short-lived career, she hadn’t won any major races, and it was unclear whether the young woman would fulfill her athletic promise. For every Doina Melinte, there were half a hundred also-rans. Mary Beth’s lawyer threatened to push for a jury trial.

Check. Checkmate.

Despite all the legal maneuvering, the final settlement proved rather modest. Mary Beth paid her lawyer and invested the remainder in stocks. A month later, she moved to Providence, Rhode Island and took a studio apartment on the East Side.

“I meant,” the black woman clarified, “what does your sister do with her free time now that she can’t run anymore.”

“She makes custom wedding albums from fabrics and lace and also takes small orders for decorative brochures.”

When Nicholas arrived at the bus terminal on Friday, his sister was there to greet him. He hadn’t seen her in six months, since the fall when she moved south. Mary Beth had aged. Nothing dramatic. It wasn’t the smattering of gray hair or crow’s-feet dimpling the eyes. Rather, her wiry body had gone soft and sedentary. The hard-edged posturing was gone; she no longer looked like a competitive athlete. Worse yet, she didn’t care.

“Little brother!” she hugged him close and lead the way out of the bus terminal in the direction of her 89 Nova. Turning onto North Main Street, she shot up College Hill. Though the temperature was hovering in the low nineties, Mary Beth wore dungarees. She always wore pants or long dresses to hide the scars and ravaged muscles on her left leg. When she was leaving the hospital, an orthopedic doctor suggested further ‘cosmetic’ surgery, but she nixed the idea. “Leave well enough alone.”

A group of college students with backpacks and tanned faces passed in front of the car. “That deep sea diver remark,” Nicholas said, directing his words at the dirt-streaked windshield, “hurt Mom’s feelings. She cried for half an hour.”

The previous month, Mary Beth’s mother visited Providence. It had been six months since they had seen each other. Mrs. Holyfield was a short, round woman with close-cropped, dark hair. The short hair made her look heavier; to compensate, she wore loose-fitting shifts and baggy dresses which only compounded the problem. “Why do you cloister yourself away, avoiding family and friends?”

“Think of me as a deep sea diver coming up for air as slowly as possible so I don’t go get the bends or go crazy,” Mary Beth replied cryptically. Taking her mother’s hand, she squeezed it gently. “Don’t know how else to explain it.”

Mrs. Holyfield saw no connection between the question asked and the answer proffered. The remark frightened her. It was the first thing she talked about, returning home after the visit. “If your father were alive,” she confided petulantly to Nicholas, “he’d make Mary Beth go see a

counselor.” “A psychiatrist!” she added just in case her son failed to grasp the magnitude of the problem.

In late March of the previous year, Mary Beth returned home from the rehabilitation center. Having run the 1500 meters in just over four minutes, it took half as much time to hobble sideways, one riser at a time, up a short flight of stairs to the second floor landing. She refused to answer the phone, would not go outdoors except to sit in the back yard staring morosely at the empty bird feeders. If neighbors appeared, she retreated back into the house.

A week passed. Mrs. Holyfield took Nicholas to the K-Mart near Beacon Circle and bought bird food - 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. “Hard to believe,” she said, letting the feathery-light thistle sift through her fingers, “there’s nourishment in such tiny seeds.”

Mrs. Holyfield stuffed the feeders to overflowing and placed a wedge of peanut butter suet in a rectangular, wire cage. “Except for the most common varieties, people don’t know their birds; the hard part is learning the differences among species - the downy woodpecker, let’s say, from its close relative, the ladder-back.” Mrs. Holyfield launched into an unsolicited and rather long-winded description of each bird’s physical attributes, distinctive markings, size and habits. She picked up a single thistle seed - an eighth of an inch long and the thickness of several sheaves of papers - and let it roll off the tip of her finger. “Or a goldfinch from a pine siskin. That’s a bit harder. But still, where’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,” Nicholas said warily, “your analogy’s a bit thin.”

“Yes, but you understand what I’m trying to say.”

Nicholas shook his head. He did, up to a point, understand the implicit message.

The next day when Mary Beth went to sit in the yard, her mother joined her. It was forty degrees, the ground muddy and lifeless. “A pair of cardinals were here earlier. A male and his brown mate. They only stayed a short time. I think the jays scared them off.” Mary Beth shrugged noncommittally. “And all the goldfinches have lost their color. The bright, lemony yellows have faded to greenish brown. It may be a seasonal thing - like deer molting in the spring.”

“Yes, probably,” Mary Beth said dully.

“Don’t stay out too long or you might catch a chill.” Mrs. Holyfield went back in the house, sat down at the kitchen table and began to cry. Upstairs in his bedroom, Nicholas placed a pillow over his head to drown out the sounds of his mother’s private anguish.

After supper he went to his sister’s room, knocked and let himself in. Mary Beth was lying on the bed with her hands wedged between her thighs in a modified fetal position. She didn’t bother to look up. The color was bleeding out of the evening sky, causing familiar objects to blend and blur. “Tell me what to do?” he whispered.

In the kitchen Mrs. Holyfield was drying the last of the supper dishes and humming a melody from the church hymnal:

Lamb of God, You take away  
the sins of the world.  
Have mercy on me.

“Tell me what to do to make your pain go away.”

Mary Beth continued to lie quietly on her side. A half hour later the spongy, gray light congealed into total darkness and Nicholas trudged quietly back to his own room.

After Mary Beth relocated to Providence, Mrs. Holyfield began talking in code. She would say peculiar things like, "I talked to *Providence*,..." when she could have just as easily said, "I spoke to your sister, Mary Beth, earlier and ...". Was she trying to transform the infirmity into an abstraction? To restore her daughter through linguistic alchemy?

The night before Nicholas went to see his sister, Mrs. Holyfield came into the room and sat quietly on the edge of the bed. The latest issue of The Audubon Society magazine nestled in her ample lap. Nicholas was packing. Not that there was much in the overnight bag - a change of underwear, socks, a disposable razor, toothbrush and Sony Walkman. He pulled the zipper shut and placed the bag on the floor.

"What're you wearing?" Mrs. Holyfield asked. Nicholas pointed to a pair of cotton slacks and a navy shirt draped over a chair. "Yes, that will do nicely." She drifted to the open window and looked out into the back yard. The bird feeders were empty. She never filled them after the middle of April. "Did you know," she tapped the magazine lightly against the window sill, "that in winter, a black-capped chickadee can raise its body temperature to 107° Fahrenheit?"

Mrs. Holyfield was constantly collecting fragments of incidental trivia from the various birding magazines and newsletters she subscribed to. Familiar to her melodramatic pronouncements, Nicholas stared at his mother with a dumb expression. "Their bodies become feathery furnaces, internal combustion systems to ward off the extreme cold." She came away from the window and sat down again on the bed. "At night while they're resting, their temperature can drop as much as thirty degrees - a survival mechanism to preserve energy for daytime foraging." Mrs. Holyfield smoothed Nicholas' navy blue shirt with the palm of her hand. "When you're in Providence, don't say anything that might stir up bad memories." She waved a finger preemptively. "Not that I doubt your good judgment in all such matters."

*All such matters.* Nicholas had no idea what his mother meant by the odd remark and strongly doubted that she did either. "No, Mother, I won't say anything that might upset Mary Beth."

The previous winter on the third of February, two feet of snow fell through the day; a wicked, bone-chilling nor'easter sent the wind chill plunging to fifteen below zero. Nicholas, at his mother's insistence, dug a path out to the bird feeder and filled the trough with fresh seeds. Only the chickadees - apparently, hunger took precedence over fear - were brazen enough to feed while he was standing there adjusting his gloves. With Nicholas a mere twenty feet away, they flew up to the lip of the feeder and pecked away at the ice-covered corn and sunflower seeds.

But where were the larger, normally more aggressive birds? The red-winged blackbirds? The crows with their lacquered, silver-green necks? The bedraggled mourning doves, the woodpeckers, jays and cardinals? Nicholas took a step closer. Several chickadees flitted away but were quickly replaced by a fresh batch of voracious birds. He moved closer still. The diminutive birds never flinched. Another two steps nearer; he was ten, perhaps only eight, feet from the feeder and, with the powdery snow swirling up around their black heads, Nicholas could see the birds in fine detail. The patch of white stretching from the eye around the side of the face; the narrow, gray edging on the wing feathers.

Nicholas turned and stared at the house. In the upstairs bedroom window Mrs. Holyfield was gesturing frantically, imploring him to come in from the cold. For a fleeting instant,

Nicholas had the impulse to hunker down in the soft, insular snow and, if only for an hour or so until the light seeped totally out of the western sky, renounce humanity. But by then the birds would be gone. Even the chickadees had better sense than to remain exposed through the bitter night. A blast of frigid air caught Nicholas under the rib cage, knifing through his parka and flannel shirt. He picked up the shovel and empty seed pail and trudged back to the house.

Mary Beth pulled up at a traffic light, reached out with a free hand and tousled his hair. A wistful melancholy swept over her face only to be replaced by a good-natured grin. "About the deep sea diver remark - it was meant as an allegory. I didn't get the bends or go crazy." Turning onto a side street, she pulled over to the curb in front of a three-story, wooden structure and got out of the car dragging her foot stiffly. "How do you feel about sleeping on an inflatable mattress?"

Nicholas shrugged. He wasn't quite sure what to say - or feel. "All that money in mutual funds and you can't afford a sleep sofa?"

"It's a studio apartment," Mary Beth quipped. "Where the hell am I going to put a sleep sofa? On the goddamn fire escape?" All bitterness dissipated; the spell was broken. They went into the building.

The apartment was, indeed, quite small. A room with a bay window that fronted on a gentrified, tree-lined street served as a combination living room-bedroom. A tidy kitchenette and bathroom were connected at the far end. The furnishings were meager - a twin bed with a maple headboard, two end tables and a cheap stereo - vintage, Salvation Army decor. Despite the monkish austerity, the apartment had a cozy, lived-in feel. Nicholas went into the bathroom and threw cold water on his face. When he came out of the bathroom, Mary Beth said, "We'll get something to eat and then feed Elliot."

"Who's Elliot?"

"She grabbed her keys and headed for the door. "You'll find out soon enough."

Most of the artsy college types had cleared out for the summer leaving a mishmash of locals and diehard, summer students. A saxophonist with a goatee and dark sunglasses was playing *Up Jumped Spring* in a breathy legato at the corner of Thayer Street; a hat with dollar bills lay at his feet. In his sister's presence, Nicholas had always felt a sense of reverence bordering on the mystical. At first, he associated the feeling with her athletic success, but, following the injury, realized that he had always felt that way. He experienced it now sitting opposite her in the restaurant. "Do you miss running?" As soon as he spoke, Nicholas realized the blunt foolishness of his remark.

Mary Beth's head was cocked to one side. She was still listening to the saxophonist in the street. The player ran a series of dissonant, polytonal progressions then deftly modulated into another bebop tune. "I still compete, after a fashion. At night, in my dreams, I run a mean quarter mile. And that's without the rigors of daily training!" Glancing up, she saw that Nicholas was flustered, his lips moving inaudibly. "The best kept secret in track and field," she continued impassively. "is that East Rutherford was my high water mark. It was a fluke; nothing more. I peaked and was already past my prime."

"You had some good races after that," Nicholas protested.

Mary Beth's features dissolved in a dark smile. "Half the races I never even placed, and in the few that I did, I was too far off the winning time to be considered competitive." She put

her hand under his chin and lifted his face so their eyes met. "It's over, Nicky. Except in my dreams, I don't run anymore."

Walking back to the apartment, Mary Beth detoured through a park. She knelt down beside a scruffy plant with a thick stem and wide oval leaves. Withdrawing a jackknife from her pocket, she cut the stem, and a viscous, opalescent liquid resembling Elmer's Glue bubbled out, staining her fingertips white. "Milkweed," Mary Beth replied in response to Nicholas' probing eyes. She put the jackknife away and they retraced their steps.

On the porch in the rear of the apartment, was a cardboard box. The sides had been cut away and replaced with a screen mesh. Inside was a caterpillar, its bulbous body ringed with yellow and black stripes. "You raise caterpillars?"

"Butterflies," Mary Beth clarified, lifting the top of the box. "Monarchs. The caterpillars are just a means to an end." She removed a wilted stem - most of the leaves had been chewed away to nothing - and lowered the fresh offering into a container of water wedged at the bottom of the box. She pivoted the plant so several leaves from an adjacent stem were touching - a bridge from one diminished food source to the next. Replacing the cover, they went back into the apartment.

"Where did you find your little friend?" Nicholas asked.

"In the same park where we got the milkweed. Two, white eggs, no bigger than a grain of salt, were stuck to the underside of a leaf." She went into the bathroom. When she emerged, Mary Beth was wearing pajamas and a bathrobe. "There's a second caterpillar; it's already in a cocoon and should be emerging soon. Perhaps you'll get to see it before you go."

She handed him the air mattress and Nicholas began inflating it with a bicycle pump. The sun having gone down, the heat in the cramped apartment was finally beginning to abate. Only now when she removed the cotton bathrobe, could Nicholas see his sister's left leg. The deformity wasn't as bad as he feared. Some tissue missing, the lower portion below the knee twisted, ever-so-slightly, out of alignment. "What's the purpose," he asked "of raising butterflies?"

Mary Beth was smoothing her brown hair with a rather expensive-looking, ivory-handled brush. The brush and butterflies appeared the only extravagances she allowed herself. "Marauding insects and harsh weather often destroy the eggs. Raising them in captivity helps even the odds they'll survive to adulthood and reproduce." She pulled the brush through her hair, the bristles tugging the tight curls to full length before springing back to hug her scalp. "There's even a wasp that bores tiny holes in the monarch cocoons, injecting her own eggs in the growing host. The eggs eventually hatched and devoured the half-formed butterfly. When the cocoon split apart, the wrong insect, depending on your point of view, emerges."

The mattress fully inflated, Nicholas laid it on the floor next to his sister's bed. She got some sheets and a light blanket. "I doubt you'll need that," she said pointing to the blanket.

"No, I shouldn't think so." Nicholas went into the bathroom, showered and changed into his pajamas.

"Anything else I can get you?"

He lay down on the thin mattress. It was surprisingly comfortable. "No I'm fine."

Mary Beth flicked out the light and rolled over on her side away from him.

Despite the muggy, midsummer weather, the tiny apartment was reasonably airy. An occasional car passed in the street, accompanied by the incessant drone of crickets. The studio apartment felt infinitely comfortable; it offered safe passage through the predicament of present



uncertainties. Stripped of all worldly luxuries and material excesses, except for an ivory-handled brush, it helped 'even the odds'. "A mausoleum," Nicholas said without prefacing the remark, as though in response to a conversation already in progress. "Mom made a goddamn shrine of your bedroom."

Mary Beth groaned and lay flat on her back. "She put all your medals and trophies on a shelf," Nicholas confided. "Even had the snapshot of you with Doina Melinte blown up and hung on the wall. It's so God-awful morbid!"

Mary Beth stretched her hand over the edge of the bed until it came to rest on his face. The feathery touch went through his body like a benediction. "She can't help it." The hand brushed him a second time and disappeared. Shortly, he heard his sister's regular breathing. She was sound asleep.

*Tell me what to do to make your pain go away.*

In late March, the day Nicholas visited Mary Beth's room and found her lying on the bed with hands sandwiched between her thighs, his best intentions counted for nothing. All his furtive prayers produced no benefit. During those sullen, wintry days, he could do no more to help his sister than his mother with her blustery chatter. Now this pilgrimage to Providence - but for what purpose? A social visit? An act of atonement for having done so little at a time when so much was required? Before dozing off, a phantasmagoric image flitted across Nicholas' fading consciousness. He saw Elliot rear up vertically, while gripping the milkweed stem with the rear portion of his body. Like an automated, spring-loaded mechanism, the caterpillar launched his jaws kamikaze-style at the leathery leaf, hardly bothering to masticate the soggy pulp before swallowing. Chop. Chop. Chop. The attack was grim, relentless.

In the morning Mary Beth showed Nicholas the chrysalis. Mint green and wrinkled like a bloated raisin, the cocoon hung by a single thread in the topmost corner of the butterfly box. Elliot had shifted from the shriveled milkweed stalk to the fresh offering and was weaving and bobbing at the meaty leaf like an overweight, punch-drunk fighter. The caterpillar had grown noticeably overnight. "The larvae feed on the milkweed plants and produce a bitter alkaloid that's distasteful to other birds and predators. Each fall the butterflies migrate south to Florida and Mexico."

"Here's the tricky part." She replaced the lid, taking special care not to jostle the green sack. "The slightest trauma and the butterfly emerges deformed."

"Deformed," he said, wondering if she caught the implicit irony. "How long do they live?"

"Two years."

At ten o'clock there was a knock at the door. A young woman with blonde hair and dishwasher-blue eyes stood in the doorway. Mary Beth brought her into the kitchen, sat her down at the table and handed her a manila folder from which the woman removed a pamphlet slightly larger than a small book. The pages were wrapped in a stiff, expensive looking covering - eggshell white with flecks of blue and reddish purple. A single strand of crimson floss ran through the spine holding the contents intact. "Shall we say 200 copies?" The blonde woman seemed pleased.

"I'll have them ready in a week."

“About the price,... ”

“I quoted you a fair price,” Mary Beth parried the remark deftly. “My costs are the same no matter whose poetry I bind.”

“Two hundred copies,” the blonde repeated without further quibbling and went out the door into the bright, morning light. Mary Beth made a note on a slip of paper and placed it, along with the manila folder, in a drawer. Later that morning at a graphic arts store near the municipal court building, she purchased supplies for the blonde woman’s pamphlets. On the ride home, she stopped at a bridal boutique on Wickendon Street. The owner had sold two satin, wedding albums over the weekend and placed an order for several more.

After lunch they assembled 50 of the pamphlets. Using a paper cutter, Mary Beth showed Nicholas how to trim the decorative coverings to size. “The unusual blue and purple flecks are seed husks tossed into the mush before the paper is cold-pressed to its proper thickness and left to dry.”

Running a length of linen thread through a ball of beeswax, she demonstrated how to sew the booklet signatures together, pushing the needle through the paper from the innermost fold to the back. Mary Beth creased the individual pages with a bone folder and collated while Nicholas used a carpenter’s awl to punch holes in the spine. By three in the afternoon a hefty pile of poetry was scattered over the length of the table. “Enough for today,” Mary Beth announced throwing the bone folder aside.

Later that night, Nicholas said, “If you’d tripled the price, the woman would have placed the order.”

It was almost midnight and pitch dark; the crickets were in rare form. “Yes, I suppose so.” Mary Beth giggled at the queer notion, her soft, musical laughter rolling out of her throat and resonating in the blackened corners of the tidy room. A group of Brown students returning from the last show at the Avon Cinema passed by their window, hooting and jeering. They were intoxicated - not with liquor, but the warm weather and their own, unquenchable youth.

“Mother has her birds to look after,” Nicholas said, “and you have Elliot.”

By now the Brown students had disappeared down the street, their joyful exuberance swallowed up by the rowdy crickets and steamy, night air. “Maybe that’s what it’s all about,” his sister murmured. ‘Looking out for each other, evening the odds.’

“I’m going to tell Mom to dismantle the shrine,” Nicholas said, the last, few words catching awkwardly in his throat. “And I’ll explain that the deep sea diver remark was a figurative slip of the tongue.”

“Yes, do that.”

“The picture with you and Doina will go up in the attic.”

“Or, preferably, out with the trash,” She was leaning far over the side of the bed. Though he could not see his sister’s face in the darkness, Nicholas could feel her warm breath on his cheek. “What I’m doing her in this apartment,...it’s not a life,” Mary Beth whispered. “It’s only a beginning and nothing more.” There was a long silence. “A person must start somewhere.”

In the morning before leaving, Mary Beth said, “Mom’s birthday is next month. I thought I’d surprise her and come up to Boston for a week. Is there anything she could use?”

“She dropped her binoculars last week and cracked the lens.” Mrs. Holyfield owned an Eagle Optics model featuring nitrogen purged fogproofing.

“Say no more!”

Nicholas went out onto the porch to say goodbye to Elliot. A goeey puddle stained the lower left-hand corner of the butterfly box - an afterbirth of sorts. The cocoon was in tatters and an orange and black monarch, its moist, newly-formed wings closed together, was resting on the topmost leaf. Oblivious to everything, Elliot continued his eating frenzy.

Mary Beth removed the lid and placed her hand under the butterfly's slender legs. "Problem is, we don't know how long he's been free of the cocoon. Once the wings dry he'll have the urge to fly, so we need to get him out of the box." The insect stumbled onto an outstretched finger. She lifted him gently from the enclosure and went down the backstairs into the sun-drenched yard.

"Did you want to hold him?"

Nicholas shook his head. He was too shocked by the transformation. The butterfly, which was easily three times the length of the wispy chrysalis, flexed its moist wings several times, laying them flat on a horizontal plane. Another five minutes passed. The insect hardly moved as the wings gradually dried and stiffened. Suddenly, in a frenetic burst, it flew straight up in the air and was gone from sight.

"If you come again," Mary Beth flashed her low-keyed, convoluted smile, "I can't promise such a spectacular ending to your stay."

Nicholas had a dream.

He was in the mountains west of Mexico City. The trees were painted reddish brown with millions of monarchs. Shimmering showers, molten firestorms of burnt umber and black. His head rocked forward, eyes opened. Just as abruptly, the millennial dream came to an abrupt end. Nicholas had dozed off on the black woman's fleshy shoulder. "Excuse me."

"You looked so tired, I didn't have the heart to wake you," she said. The gold-capped tooth caught a burst of noonday sunlight and flamed in her mouth like spontaneous combustion.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "My sister raises monarch butterflies." He told her about Elliot and the butterfly they released earlier in the day. The bus passed through Sharon and Canton on the Massachusetts south shore. The Blue Hills loomed into sight. Another half hour and they would be entering downtown Boston. Nicholas couldn't stop talking about the butterflies. The black woman was an eager listener. She shook her head, asked intelligent and thoughtful questions and even laughed when he described how the newly hatched insect rested quietly on Mary Beth's finger. "Well, imagine that!"

"The longest recorded flight for a tagged adult is eighteen hundred miles from Ontario to the American Southwest."

"Eighteen hundred miles!" The black woman exclaimed, stunned by the improbable statistic. "Wherever did you learn such a thing?"

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## Gandhi's Goat

A line ad appeared in the classified section of the San Francisco Gazette: *Night clerk wanted for small motel. Mission District. Inquire in person.* A half dozen applicants interviewed for the position. I was the third choice and only got the job by default when the others decided not to accept. "What sort of a night are we having?" asked Mr. Chowdhary, the manager and

owner of the Bay View Motel. A stocky man, his coffee-colored skin was pock marked below bushy eyebrows.

“Three-quarters full with two reservations pending.” I had been there a month already, checking in the late arrivals and showing the guests to their rooms. When a lodger needed extra towels or a light bulb changed, I doubled as room service. If the motel filled up - which hardly ever happened - I turned on the 'no vacancy' sign and usually had little else to do but answer phones.

“Good! Very good, indeed!” The more guests, the friendlier and more expansive Mr. Chowdhary’s mood.

Behind the front desk of the Bay View Motel was a large, rectangular box sectioned off into twenty four smaller slots for spare keys and mail. A water cooler stood near the door along with a display rack stuffed with brochures describing tourist attractions in the Bay Area. A bronze statue of an Indian goddess rested on an end table in the far corner of the room. Three feet tall, the statue depicted a well-endowed, Indian woman perched in a lotus position; the goddess had three separate sets of arms and a coil of venomous snakes writhing on her forehead. The faint smell of incense - patchouli or sandalwood - emanated from the spot where the statue stood.

“After college, what will you do?” Mr. Chowdhary asked.

I had mentioned that I was taking courses at the local community college. “Haven't decided yet.”

“Not to worry. In time, everything will become clear.” Mr. Chowdhary raised his voice several decibels and waved a finger in the air. “My son, Subir - for years, he drifted about aimlessly from one job to the next. A regular job gypsy!” Mr. Chowdhary grinned at his clever choice of words. “Now he works for the Bay Commission. Decent pay, good benefits. Such a lucky man! “He rubbed his pock-marked chin. “And my oldest daughter, Bidyut, is married. Her husband’s in textiles.” Mr. Chowdhary smiled even more broadly showing his straight, white teeth. Thinking about his successful children made him very happy. “And, of course, you’ve met my other daughter, Terry.”

“The girl who works here,” I replied.

Mr. Chowdhary’s smile faded rather abruptly. “I love all my children equally, but that one - she will send both her parents to an early grave.”

One of the guests, a late arrival, came into the lobby. He checked in and went off in search of his room, dragging a medium-size Pullman down the corridor. “My wife’s people,” he continued, “came from Cochin. The city is slightly inland from the Malabar Coast. There has always been a large, Christian community in south-western India since as far back as the first century. My dear wife is a devout Catholic. After giving the two other children traditional names, she decided to name our youngest daughter after Saint Theresa, the Little Flower of Jesus.”

Mr. Chowdhary made a disagreeable face. “Even as a child, Terry had more in common with Attila the Hun than her 19th century namesake.” “And how she eats!” Mr. Chowdhary lowered his voice as though what he had to say was a mortal embarrassment. “My voracious daughter - that’s what I call her. Not to humiliate the girl or hurt her feelings. God forbid! I do it only to remind her that there is a problem.”

“But your daughter isn't fat.”

“Not yet.” Mr. Chowdhary shook his head and the corners of his lips puckered in a bittersweet smile. “No matter. Despite her faults, Terry is a good girl. Her life will fall into place and everything will work out for the best.” He looked up at me with an affectionate grin. “Just as it will for you, my friend.”

Mr. Chowdhary's youngest daughter wasn't fat, certainly not by conventional standards. Fat was two hundred pounds on a 5-foot frame. Fat was when a woman walked across a solid oak floor wearing high heels and left a dimpled trail from one side of the room to the other. In her early twenties, Terry Chowdhary was a plumpish woman with a modestly good figure. I had first noticed her working in the main office alongside her father. Or sometimes she tended the bed of flowers - mostly marigolds, petunias and pansies - that her mother had planted near the motel entrance. A prominent, hooked nose did nothing for her aesthetically but was not overly large, certainly not out of proportion with the rest of her features. And she had inherited her father's dark skin tones.

Granted, her face had begun to flesh out, to lose definition and her body was beginning to go slack in certain critical areas - the valleys rising up to meet the peaks, so-to-speak. She hardly ever came by the lobby at night and, on those few occasions, had nothing to say. Most often, she wore a sullen, disinterested expression as though she found the universe too crass for her high-minded sensibilities and was living her life under protest.

One night after I had worked at the motel for several months, Terry wandered into the lobby. "Quiet" she asked in a flat voice. The hooked nose set against the high cheeks lent her a haughty, almost arrogant expression. A thin, silver cross hung from her neck. She lifted her head but did not actually look at me. Rather, her eyes seemed to slide obliquely over my features without touching my face.

"Yes, very quiet. Only three guests. A couple of businessmen and a family touring from New England." A bunch of large bananas lay in a basket on the counter. Terry took one and placed the peel on a napkin. She stuffed the banana in her mouth and the fruit went down her throat like a garbage disposal. It didn't appear that she even bothered to chew.

"Would you like one?" she asked. "They're quite fresh."

"No, thank you. I just ate." She shrugged and began peeling another.

"The guest in room twenty four thought he saw a cockroach, but it was just a dead water bug from the pool. He was still upset so I switched him over to twenty-six."

"Any prostitutes?" Terry asked. "Sometimes businessmen bring women back to their rooms." Mr. Chowdhary never mentioned prostitutes. Was this an oversight, I wondered, or did he and his daughter have differing views on the subject? "If that ever happens," Terry continued without waiting for my response, "give them their money back and tell them to go elsewhere. Prostitutes bring trouble. Trouble brings police."

"How do I know," I asked watching her nibble away the top of the second banana, "that the woman in question is a prostitute and not some bimbo with a trashy taste in clothes?"

"The first time she comes to the Bay View Motel with a man, she's his wife. No matter she's wearing stiletto heels and tassels on her breasts." Terry deposited the peel of the second banana on the napkin. "If she shows up the next night with someone else, she's a prostitute."

"I'll try to remember that."

"When they try to check in, I usually say, 'We don't rent to prostitutes. Go away.'"

"Very succinct."

"No reason to waste words." Terry slid her hand across the counter and began toying distractedly with the third banana, picking at the topmost portion of the peel with a thumbnail.

"Are you going to eat that one too?"

"Did you want it?"

“No, It's just that I've never seen anyone eat three bananas.”

“I wasn't going to eat it,” Terry said self-consciously and pushed the fruit away. “You've been here a while now,” she said speaking in a harsh, almost accusatory tone. “What are your plans?”

It was the same question her father had posed, though slightly more diplomatically. “I don't know. I haven't decided what I want to do.”

“Well, for what it's worth,” Terry said with a faint tinge of sarcasm. “I don't know what I want to do with my life either.”

Not that she wasn't attractive in an exotic, fleshy way, but her gruff stoicism was too much! At one point during our conversation, I caught a glimpse of the bronze, multi-limbed snake goddess over Terry's left shoulder and, for a fraction of a second, it seemed as though the motel owner's daughter and her metaphysical counterpart merged into one, all-powerful superwoman. “But you have your work here at the motel.”

“That's not the same thing,” she replied less caustically and went back out into the warm night.

After the New Year, Mr. Chowdhary's older daughter, Bidyut, had a baby. A month later, he came to me and said, “The christening is next Saturday. If you could work the day shift, I'll pay you time and a half.”

“That's not necessary.”

“It's the weekend,” he said with soft-spoken firmness, “and you would be doing me a favor.”

I had an ulterior reason for taking the work: In addition to earning a few extra dollars, Terry might drop by. I had begun to look forward to those rare visits when she sauntered into the lobby unannounced - like some visiting, foreign dignitary - sampling the complimentary fruit and stare at me with her chocolaty brown eyes. She reminded me of a nut - not the psychiatric variety, but the edible seed. A walnut or, more specifically, a Brazil nut - hard as hell on the outside, yet deliciously meaty within. Not that I had any desire to make a play for her. Our present relationship - transparent and uncomplicated - suited me just fine. “Yes, I'll work the day shift.”

The following Saturday, Mr. Chowdhary, dressed in a gray, sharkskin suit, a misplaced relic from the late fifties, escorted his wife and his family off to church. An hour later, they returned with a crowd of several dozen relatives. The women, many dressed in traditional Indian clothes, set up a buffet on aluminum tables around the concrete patio. It was off-season and the few guests registered at the motel had little use for the frigid pool.

An hour passed. A coarse-looking man - extremely fat and drunk - wandered into the lobby and came directly to the front desk. Placing his drink on the counter, he smiled piggishly. “Do you know who I am?” He said with exaggerated self-importance.

“One of the guests at the christening,” I said stupidly.

The man howled as though it was the funniest thing imaginable. “Yes, one of the guests!” He looked at his glass and, seeing that it was empty, rushed off. A minute later, he was back with a fresh drink in either hand. “Where were we?”

“We weren't anywhere,” I said making no effort to mask my discomfort.

The fat man shook his double chin and managed an inhospitable grin. Smelling of body odor and sloe gin, he leaned over the counter an inch from my face. "Tell me, how much profit does this shit-hole produce in a year?" His eyes were suddenly clear, limpid.

"Are you planning to buy the motel?" Before the words had left my lips, I realized the impropriety of the remark.

Not that it made a difference. Again, the fat man threw his shoulders back and laughed wildly. He took a swig, draining the frothy, pink liquid almost to the bottom of the glass and smiled scornfully. "Not anytime soon."

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a thick wad of money. Peeling the topmost bill off the pile, he waved a hundred dollar bill in front of my nose. "Everyone wants to be rich, but the more they whore after mammon, the further it eludes their grasp." The fat man staggered around the room clutching vainly at the air - his monstrous flesh heaving with oceanic force - in a parody of his own words. "They don't understand the relationship between character and wealth, the businessman's carnal instincts and the financial bottom line." He spun around on his heels and almost toppled over. "You'd like to be rich, wouldn't you?"

"Comfortable," I replied warily.

"Then you'll die a pauper!" He shouted with an air of finality. "Poor as your ne'er-do-well employer!"

The fat man held the drink six inches above his head and let the remaining drops dribble off the lip of the glass onto his protruding tongue. Wiping his mouth with the back of a hand he said, "You don't like me, do you?" The tone was more playful than angry which made the remark all the more confusing. "You're a goddamn damn bigot. You hate dark-skinned people and think you're better—"

"Sukamar, what are you doing in there?" A large-boned woman, every bit as imposing as the drunken man, lurched into the room and began hauling him away. "Come back to the party immediately!"

The fat man tore free of the woman just long enough to retrieve his second drink. "Yes," he whispered in a lethal monotone, "you are a lily-white, Anglo-Saxon bigot!"

After he was gone, I sat down and tried to collect my nerves. An hour later, the party was winding down. Most of the guests, including the drunken fat man and his wife, had left, and the women were cleaning up. Mrs. Chowdhary, dressed in a sari, entered. She was carrying a large dish. "A sampling of Indian foods for our favorite night clerk!"

"Your only night clerk," I noted.

"What should we have done if you hadn't filled in today? My poor husband would have been forced to work, and the blessed event would have been ruined. We owe you a debt of gratitude!" She pressed my hand passionately. "These," she gestured toward the center of the plate, "are pastries. You ought to save them for last."

Three weeks passed and I saw nothing of Terry. One evening shortly after eight, she entered the lobby. Removing the receiver from the phone, she flipped the 'no vacancy' sign on and said, "Come with me."

"And leave the motel unattended?"

"What will happen if you do?" she said acidly. "The sky fall down... the universe come to an end?" The sun had gone down and only a small sliver of moon lit the ground. She lead the way to the back of the building where a pile of rubbish, building materials from a recent project,

had been thrown in a heap. Terry fingered a cracked cinder block. In the murky gloom, I noted a scattering of cedar shingles, several windows with broken glass, random lengths of oak flooring and a metal shower stall.

“What are we looking for?”

No reply. She sifted through some framing lumber - odds and ends - and struggled to lift a slab of sheet rock. The board broke apart splattering her blouse with soggy gypsum. “Over here!” She was trying unsuccessfully to dislodge a 16-inch, split-rib cement block from the debris.

I grabbed the 40 pound block with both hands, lifting straight up, and hurled it onto the soft grass. “What’s this all about?”

Terry climbed down from the pile and escaped into the darkness. I could hear the muffled patter of feet racing frantically back and forth across the length of the yard. She tripped and fell down, got up and hurried off in a new direction. Finally she returned with a rusted wheelbarrow. “Put the block in here and come with me.”

She led the way around to the front of the building, past the office in the direction of the street. In the gutter near the entrance to the Bay View Motel was a brown and white tabby, its hind legs crushed. The cat's eyes were closed but its chest was heaving fitfully. Blood mixed with urine coated the pavement. Bracing her legs against the side of the wheelbarrow, Terry tried to lift the cement block but it wouldn't budge. Only now did she turn to me, her face weighed down with a terrible misery.

“I'll do it.” Lifting the block, I held it chest high over the cat's skull. “I can't see a thing.”

Terry put her hand on my shoulder and sighted straight down through the rectangular hole in the center of the block. “Bit more to the right,” she said. I repositioned the block. “Higher.” My arms ached; I felt sick to my stomach. “Let go!” I dropped the block and promptly threw up all over myself.

On impact, the block split in two. Terry pulled the pieces away, dragging them back onto the sidewalk. The cat was dead. Back in the lobby I washed up as best I could, turned the “no vacancy” sign off and placed the phone back on the cradle. Half an hour later, Terry reappeared. “I put the wheelbarrow away,” she said in a dry, gravelly voice.

“And the cat?”

“Yes, that too.” I didn't bother to ask what she had done with the remains. “Thanks for your helpfulness.” She went away.

Attila the Hun. I remembered what Mr. Chowdhary had said about his youngest daughter. Yes, there was something 'Hunlike' in the way she savaged the pile of building materials and rushed about the darkened yard. Would her namesake, Saint Theresa, have been up to the task? Could the eremitic Little Flower of Jesus have ended the cat's mortal anguish? When my shift ended, I went back to the spot where the animal died. The cat and the broken block were gone, the blood and urine washed away with a garden hose.

One Sunday in July, I was finishing up the paperwork before going off duty. Wearing a tan dress with off-white pumps, Terry entered the lobby. A pearl comb clung to the left side of her straight, black hair. Her expression, as always, was remote, impenetrable. “My father will be down to relieve you. He is getting dressed now.”

“No hurry.” I glanced at her briefly. Even dressed nicely, there was something coarse, dissatisfying about her. Of late, I had begun having X-rated, sexual fantasies about this



outlandish Indian with her dour disposition and eating disorder. But that was all. Even if I had a crush on her - which I didn't - romance would have been out of the question. I'd been that route often enough to recognize the symptoms: the perpetual sighing and palpitations; the blurring of etheric boundaries so you no longer knew where the lover left off and the beloved began. No, it was none of that bathetic mush. "Why are you all dressed up?" I asked.

"I'm going to church. The eight o'clock Mass."

"Would you like some company?"

"I didn't know you were Catholic."

"After a fashion," I hedged. Actually, I hadn't been to church in over a year but saw no need to share that minor detail.

"Yes, I don't care."

"Didn't ask if you cared," I said with mild irritation. "Only if you'd like me to join you."

The corners of her lips turned up in a wan smile. "As you like."

"But what do you like?"

Tucking his white shirt into his pants, Mr. Chowdhary appeared in the doorway. "Yes," Terry said, "I would like you to come with me."

Saint Marks was located three blocks east in the direction of the harbor. As we neared the church, Terry said, "If my father gets irritable and makes a fuss, you shouldn't take it personal." I might as well have been walking on the opposite side of the street, the way she kept her dark eyes straight ahead. "Whenever business falls off for a day or two, he thinks it's a dreadful omen."

"Like yesterday." The previous night there had been only two lodgers and Mr. Chowdhary stormed around the lobby short-tempered and sullen.

"The motel produces little profit but we always manage to muddle through." Terry went up the front steps and into the church. Locating a seat near the rear, she knelt in prayer. The pearl comb caught the soft, variegated light from the stained glass windows, flinging it back in a miniature spray of colors. Lips moving silently and head bowed, she resembled an ancient Hindu goddess from the Bhagavad-Gita. Finished with her prayers, Terry crossed herself, removed her rosary beads from a small, leather pouch and sat back in the pew. The service moved along at a brisk pace.

"Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us peace." During Communion, Terry held her hands clasped just under her chin; head bowed, she followed the line of parishioners back to the pew. Again she knelt down and became lost in prayer.

"Thanks for coming." We were standing outside on the sidewalk. The reverential glow of the religious zealot had evaporated. With a peremptory nod, she turned and sauntered off, her ample hips swaying energetically from side to side, in the direction of the Bay View Motel.

In the fall, I bought a ten-speed bike and began touring the city. Each day I set out in a different direction and increased the distance traveled. Sometimes I would pedal west on 20th Street until I hit Guerrero, then head north to Market Street. From there, it was a straight run through Union Square and the financial district out to the San Francisco Bay. Or, on other occasions, I cut off at Van Ness Avenue and biked the four miles straight out to Fisherman's Wharf. At a wooden structure no bigger than an outhouse, tourists queued up all day long to buy excursion tickets - hour-long boat trips into the harbor to view the prison at Alcatraz and the Bay

Bridge. My stamina was improving every day and, if I had trouble making the hills, I walked the bike up from where my legs gave out and coast down the far side.

After one such trip, I got back to the Bay View Motel shortly before dusk and chained my bike to the metal railing outside the main office. Entering the lobby, it was clear something was wrong. A grim-faced Mr. Chowdhary sat on a stool behind the counter sorting through a folder of bills. Terry was at the far end of the counter, a magazine and small paper bag of pistachio nuts in front of her. She looked no happier than her father and neither bothered to glance up when I appeared.

“How's business?”

“Not good. Hardly any guests,” Mr. Chowdhary said. Terry slid out from behind the counter, leaving the magazine but taking the nuts.

A brooding hard-edged melancholy swept over his face as he watched the traffic pass out in the street. “The last guest to check into the motel was a young woman attending a trade show for semiconductors. I asked how business was and she replied, 'We did thirteen million last year.’” Mr. Chowdhary stared blankly at the far wall. “I don't even know what semiconductors are, but a woman half my age can sell thirteen million dollars worth.”

“You're considering a midlife career change?” I was trying to make light of the situation but he chose not to see the humor. Instead, Mr. Chowdhary smiled sheepishly, like a man who discovers that society and its unruly stepchild, technology, have surged off, helter skelter, in a new direction. “I met Gandhi,” he said abruptly, steering the conversation off in a new direction; his thoughts seemed fragmented, uncharacteristically disjointed. “Gandhi and his goat. My father and I marched with him from Ahmadabad to the Arabian Sea; that was in nineteen thirty during the struggle for independence. I was only a little boy then - no more than eight years old.”

“I must tell you that, initially, the goat made more of an impression on me than the Mahatma. It was only after I came to America that I realized the man was far more important than the silly goat.” He pushed the ledger book to one side and toyed uncertainly with the fountain pen. “Sometimes it seems I've spent my life chasing after Gandhi's goat.” “My daughter,” Mr. Chowdhary changed the subject abruptly, “You can't imagine the grief she causes me!”

“I don't really feel comfortable -”

“There was an untimely and rather grotesque death in the family,” Mr. Chowdhary blurted, ignoring my protest. “A relative on my wife's side. He was not such a nice man. A boorish oaf, you might say. But still, when a man dies and under such bizarre circumstances, one tends to overlook his faults.”

“It's not really necessary -”

“So anyway,” Mr. Chowdhary rushed ahead with his story, “My wife stopped by the funeral parlor earlier to pay her respects, while I went in the afternoon with my daughter.” The phone rang, an inquiry about lodging. Mr. Chowdhary gave the caller the rates and hung up. “Where was I?”

“Something about a funeral.”

“Not a funeral, a wake,” Mr. Chowdhary corrected. “At the wake, a friend of the family says, 'Such a nice person. So sorry for your loss.' And what does my heartless daughter say?” Mr. Chowdhary's voice was rising both in pitch and emotional intensity. “Can you possibly imagine?”

I stared at the man, who, slouching forward, placed a hand over his eyes. It was unclear whether he had either the desire or will to proceed with his story.

Terry returned and was leaning against the door jamb fishing pistachio nuts from the brown, paper bag. “What I said,” She picked up the thread of her father's narrative while continuing to munch nuts, “was that the relative in question was a nasty drunk and a bully, who didn't deserve a fancy wake much less anybody's sympathy.”

Dead silence. With my only avenue of escape - except for the windows - blocked, I could only look back and forth between Mr. Chowdhary and his daughter. “You heard with your own ears! I am disgraced by such a rude child!”

Terry was cracking the last of the pistachios, fishing the whole nuts out from among the empty shells at the bottom of the bag. “Isn't it so, Father, Uncle Sukamar was a drunk and a violent bully?”

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Chowdhary spoke immediately without giving the question any deep consideration. “His vices were common knowledge, some would say legendary. But is this any way to treat the dead?”

*Sukamar. Where had I heard that name before? Of course! The foul-mouthed fat man who badgered me mercilessly the afternoon of the christening.* “If you don't mind my asking, how did your uncle die?”

“Boiled alive,” Terry replied.

Mr. Chowdhary frowned disapprovingly at his daughter. “A horrible accident! He'd had too much to drink and fell asleep in the Jacuzzi. Thirty-six hours. It was not a pretty sight when they found the poor man.”

Asleep in the Jacuzzi. I tried to imagine Uncle Sukamar lying in a tub of swirling, super-heated water, a gin fizz clutched in either hand - his sightless eyes glazed over, the swollen tongue protruding obscenely between fleshy lips. Boiled alive. Yes, God was fair and equitable!

The pistachio nuts gone, Terry crumpled the bag into a tight ball and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. “I won't apologize and I have only one regret,” she said, “which is that I accompanied you to the foolish wake in the first place.” With that, she wandered out into the warm night, leaving us to our own, private reflections.

The next evening less than an hour into my shift, a man and a woman entered the lobby and requested a room for the night. The man smelled of liquor and was so fat that his belt buckle had turned completely upside down to accommodate the excess flesh. His necktie hung limply to one side. The woman, a tall brunette dressed like a high school cheerleader minus the pompoms, I recognized immediately. She had registered earlier in the week with a much younger fellow. “We'd like a room for the night,” the man said.

I paused for a fraction of a second, just long enough to consider options. “We don't rent to prostitutes. Go away.”

Turning the color of a well-cooked, Maine lobster, the man with the pendulous gut began sweating profusely; he spun around unsteadily and staggered toward the screen door.

“Shit!” The woman in the cheer leader's outfit muttered, trailing after him. “Goddamn shit!”

Around seven o'clock, the phone rang. “Have you eaten?” Mrs. Chowdhary was on the other end of the line. I told her I was ordering pizza. “No need. We just finished supper and so

much curried chicken is left over.” There was a slight pause. “You do like curried chicken, don't you?” I said that I did. “I'll fix you a plate.” She hung up the phone.

A few minutes passed and Terry entered with a dish wrapped in aluminum foil. Her straight, black hair, which normally cascaded down her neck almost to the small of her back, was tied in a tight bun. She wore jeans and a University of California sweat shirt with cutoff sleeves. Peeling back the foil, an aromatic steam rose up from the dish. “There's white wine and scallions in the sauce; curry powder and pineapple chunks, too.” I mixed some white Basmati rice with the sweetly pungent sauce.

“Since the unfortunate incident at the wake, my father won't talk to me,” she said petulantly. “And when I enter the room, my mother sighs and looks away. I've become a pariah in my own home.”

I fished a plastic fork from the drawer. “Please, help yourself.”

She stabbed at a sliver of chicken, twirling it methodically in the sauce, and we ate from the same dish. “A young priest at the wake said so many flattering things about the deceased, I wanted to vomit!”

“It's just a eulogy,” I said weakly. “I'm sure wonderful sentiments were expressed at Joseph Stalin's funeral, too.” I tapped her lightly on the forearm. “Did your father ever mention a trip to Ahmadabad?”

“Ahmadabad? That's in the state of Gujarat. No, he never spoke of such a trip.”

“He went with your grandfather to see Gandhi.”

“If my father had mentioned such a thing, I would have remembered.”

“A prostitute came to the motel earlier this afternoon.” I told her what happened.

Terry sat quietly studying the white prongs on her fork. Finally, she reached across the counter, cupped my face in her slender, brown hands, and kissed me with such tenderness my knees buckled and brain went numb. Finished with the kiss, she pressed her hand lightly against my chest, pushing me away at arm's length. “When I enter the room,” she spoke plainly, “your eyes glaze over like some moonstruck character in a Kahlil Gibran poem.”

I could think of nothing to say. The kiss had overwhelmed me - disoriented my tongue, paralyzed my mental faculties. “You hold back,” she continued, “because you're a coward, in the romantic sense. A woman understands these things; I don't hold it against you.” A dirty brown moth fluttered against the screen door. It thrashed about vainly in search of the domestic warmth and brightness within; after a half dozen passes, it plunged to the ground. “Yes, you are a coward,” she said flatly, “and it's my great misfortune to have fallen in love with a man who won't say what's in his heart.”

Terry wandered to the far end of the room and brushed a finger over the Hindu goddess' venomous crown. “I never kissed a man like that before,” she said wistfully. “Didn't even know I was capable of such a thing.”

The conversation lapsed. The brown moth returned and ricocheted crazily off the screen a number of times making dry, scraping sounds and sending up a puff of powdery scales. “Do you own a bike?” I asked. Terry shook her head. “Why not?”

Smelling of sandalwood laced with pineapple juice and curry powder, she came back to where I was standing. “What sort of question is that?”

I grabbed her hand which lay on the counter, and she made an effort to pull away, a reflexive gesture, but I held firm. Terry stared dispassionately at her captive fingers, like so many small animals languishing in a snare. Dusk faded to darkness. I reached under the counter and flipped the switch turning the motel's neon sign on. “This weekend, I'm going to buy you a

bike,” I said. “Ten-speed, all terrain. We’ll ride out to the harbor and lunch at one of the dockside restaurants.”

Terry’s eyes clouded over. “Even a cheap bike could run fifty dollars.”

“Consider it an investment in the future.”

“Whose future?”

Thrust and parry. At the core of the sexual sparring, concealed behind the inane banter, lurked a cockeyed logic that caused the moist breath to catch in my throat. Whose future? That of a woman with insatiable appetites and emotional excesses; an erratic creature who blasphemed the dead yet regularly attended Mass and knew all of her devotional prayers by heart. A soul infinitely more dangerous, devious and desirable than the Hindu snake goddess! “Too soon to tell,” I replied, without further elaboration. “Are we on for the weekend?”

Terry undid the bun and shook her fine, dark hair out, a shimmering shower of blackness, onto her bare arms. “Have to check my social calendar,” she replied, collecting the plate and fork. She kissed me lightly on the cheek, brushing the wetness away with her fingertips. “Though I ate the better portion, I’ll tell Mother you were crazy for her curried chicken.”

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## Six Catholics and an Atheist

Kirsten Hazelton, the discharge planner at Saint Elizabeth’s Hospital, was sitting alone in a rear pew of the prayer chapel, when Dr. Wong entered and slid down on the polyurethane oak next to her. “Strange place for a patient conference,” the osteopath noted. Despite his round, boyish face the stocky, middle-aged man was old enough to be her father.

“The chapel was closer to the wards than my office.” She didn’t bother to state the obvious; except for a few diehard Catholics, hospital staff seldom ever visited the somber prayer room. “Mrs. Edwards is leaving us tomorrow.” The elderly woman with the lantern jaw and bedraggled mop of gray hair had tripped over a frayed rug two weeks earlier and fractured a hip. Surgery was uneventful, the patient already up and about with the aid of a walker.

“She’s being released to rehab for a few weeks before going home,” the doctor confirmed.

“Yes, that was the original plan.” Kirsten was staring at a picture of the Holy Mother alongside a gold crucifix that adorned the altar. “Did you know she plays cello in the local civic symphony?”

“You don’t say!” The surgeon was clearly impressed.

“A notice appeared in the local newspaper that the orchestra needed players to round out the string sections. None of the younger musicians wanted to play the less-demanding second or third parts.”

“Mrs. Edwards has no illusions,” Dr. Wong interjected, “of becoming the next Yo Yo Ma.”

“She was just happy to participate at any level.”

“What were they rehearsing?”

“Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony and an entr’acte from a Verdi Opera.”

“Impressive stuff!” “Barring complications, there’s no reason,” the doctor observed, “that she couldn’t return to the orchestra in time for the fall season.”

“Yes, that’s her plan.” Kirsten conjured up an image of the petite woman with her spindly legs wrapped around a cello, energetically stroking the strings. “However, her son, Brandon, apparently wants his mother placed in a nursing home so he can put the house in the hands of a real estate broker.”

Dr. Wong listened impassively. “But you just said -”

“The patient wants to return home,” Kirsten finished the doctor’s sentence. “Naturally. Mrs. Edwards is quite upset... distraught.”

The osteopath rubbed his chin. “Have you thought about asking Father McNulty to intercede... plead the elderly woman’s case with the family?”

Kirsten’s features cycled through a series of unflattering contortions. “Father McNulty would be my last choice.”

In his later sixties, Father Evan McNulty was a hellfire and brimstone ideologue with no social graces to speak of. The skinny cleric suffered from rosacea - the cheeks, nose, chin and eyelids mottled with spider-like blood vessels and chronic eruptions. The priest much preferred the challenge of defeating evil in the abstract to the mundane banalities of parish life.

“Yes, I know what you mean.” The doctor leaned back in the pew extending his legs beneath the velour kneeler. “Mrs. Edwards is only in her seventies. Once the bone mends, that woman’s got another decade of active years ahead of her.”

“Which is just my point: she doesn’t belong in some geriatric facility playing bingo and trying to make small talk with residents who can’t recall what day of the week it is.”

Dr. Wong smiled and patted her hand reassuringly. “I’ll drop by Mrs. Edwards’ room later today and make sure she doesn’t get bullied into making a bad choice.” The older man seemed momentarily lost in some private reverie. “You get solace from your faith?”

“Yes, of course. Don’t you?”

“I’m an atheist.”

Kirsten burst into a fit of laughter, which quickly ebbed away to nothing when she realized that the physician was not responding in kind. “You’re serious?” He shook his head. “But you work at a Catholic hospital.”

“What difference does that make? Doctor Shapiro is orthodox Jewish and the chief of oncology; Dr. Watanabe, is a practicing Buddhist. Being godless doesn’t imply a lack of morals.” He rose to his feet. “Maybe I better speak with Mrs. Edwards before the son badgers her into giving up her independence.”

The following day Kirsten ran into Dr. Wong eating lunch in the hospital cafeteria. No sooner had she sat down, the physician’s cell phone twittered. He spoke briefly and hung up. “My daughters are coming home for the holidays, and my wife is already frantic about the preparations. What are you doing for Thanksgiving?”

“Keeping my options open,” Kirsten replied evasively. She had been dating an intern since the summer, but the relationship fell apart, when the doctor was offered a position at a hospital in Connecticut. Her parents were unaware of the breakup and the notion of going home alone was terribly unappealing.

What Kirsten needed was a younger version of Dr. Wong - not that she was the least bit attracted to the roly-poly physician. But still, at least he golfed on weekends, accompanied his

youngest daughter to figure skating lessons at the Lynch Arena in Pawtucket and baked homemade breads. Perhaps a brief ad in the personals section of the local paper might jump-start a new romance, get Kirsten's pitiful social life back on track:

*Thirty-something female looking to meet devout Catholic with no major vices, social diseases, sexual aberrations, fetishes or incurable neurosis. Must be family-oriented, compassionate, love children, not be married to the workplace and appreciate the effusively intoxicating love sonnets of Pablo Neruda. Smokers need not apply.*

"I spoke with Brandon Edwards," Dr. Wong said, interrupting Kirsten's private reveries, "and informed him that ultimately his mother should choose what's in her best interest... even waved a Patient's-Bill-of-Rights form under his nose."

A few years back, Kirsten used a similar ploy with another dysfunctional family. It was nothing more than a bluff, a hollow show of bravura. "And what was his response?"

"He promised to honor his mother's wishes." Dr. Wong leaned across the table and tapped Kirsten's forearm. "Problem is, I don't trust that shlub. He gives me the creeps."

The discharge planner briefly met the son, who only visited his mother twice while she was recuperating at the hospital. The day of his mother's surgery, Brandon never even made an appearance and only resurfaced a week later. "And do you believe that malarkey about honoring his mother's wishes?"

"No, but there's only so much the hospital do." "Somewhere back in my college years," the doctor shifted the conversations, "I stumbled across a clever creation myth. According to the Blackfoot Indians, it was the Spider God that fashioned the universe."

"But you don't believe in divine spirits."

"Just because someone doesn't believe, doesn't make him ignorant of other people's traditions or heritage." "Everything worked out fine," he resumed, "except for the humans."

"Running true to form," Kirsten noted, "they always gum up the works."

"Of course, so the Spider God threw down a fire ball and burnt the earth and everything on it to a crisp... a regular Native American Armageddon. Then the Spider God started over... rebuilt the universe from scratch." The doctor sipped at a cup of tepid coffee. "No luck! The human species mucked the planet up a second time worse than ever. But the Spider God was far too busy with other celestial tasks to worry about the human dilemma. By the third go round she pretty much gave up on two-legged creations and left the Homo sapiens to sort things out as best they could." Dr. Wong grinned sheepishly and made a wry face. "Which is a convoluted way of saying that a few Brandon Edwards will always slip through the cracks."

"He's evil... the devil incarnate."

"That's a bit simplistic," Dr. Wong replied. "To be sure, Mrs. Edward's son is badly flawed... a dysfunctional jerk."

Kirsten agreed wholeheartedly with the doctor's dour assessment of Mr. Edwards. The fellow had a distracted, morose manner, responding to the discharge planner's light banter with monosyllables. Kirsten slit open a packet of creamy poppy seed dressing and drizzled it over her garden salad. "I've been researching atheism," she deflected the conversation.

The doctor looked up with mild surprise then grinned good-naturedly. "And what have you discovered?"

"A meager two per cent of the world's population identify themselves as godless."

"Yes," Dr. Wong replied, "that's absolutely true, but in the Scandinavian countries, those numbers are inverted." His tone was more instructive than argumentative. "In Japan upwards of sixty-five per cent of the populace don't believe in God at all, and in the Nordic countries such as Sweden the figure climbs to eighty-five, just a few percentage points lower in Denmark, Norway and Finland."

Kirsten inadvertently stumbled across similar statistics when she Googled the topic on the internet. Among the intelligentsia, belief in personal gods or a heavenly afterlife were at an all-time low, the implication being that more educated and cultured individuals felt no compelling need to fill the churches. Similar findings had been duplicated in studies dating back to the late nineteen twenties, establishing an inverse correlation between IQ and religiosity. "In the U.S., those communities with the highest percentages of atheists tend to have the lowest murder rates," Dr. Wong mused, "while in rural communities where people are the most religious, violent homicides are considerably higher than average."

Kirsten speared a cucumber wedge and raised it to her lips. She had no desire to debate the issue. Dr. Wong's logic was rock solid, any opposing position indefensible. "Less than one per cent of the prison population is made up of non-believers while atheists are historically more tolerant toward women and homosexuals. We also beat our children less often and tend to donate more to charitable causes."

"Ouch!" Kirsten raised her hands in an attitude of capitulation. "Okay, I'm throwing in the towel!"

"No, please don't!" "Unlike that gasbag, Father McNulty, you're one of the *good* Catholics. The church need you more than we do," he parried the humor like a tennis ball across a sagging net. "I just wanted to make the point that we non-believers aren't ogres."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night Kirsten babysat her eight year old nephew, Wilbur. Her sister, Alice, had a PTO meeting and her husband was away on business.

"Tell me a bedtime story," the dark haired boy insisted as she was settling him under the covers.

"What would you like to hear?" Kirsten drifted over to a bookshelf crammed with illustrated offerings - Junie B. Jones, Grimm's Fairy Tales, the Richard Scary series and a mishmash of Disney picture books.

"No, I don't want any of those. Make one up."

"Off the top of my head?" Kirsten settled into the rocking chair alongside the single bed and sat thinking for the longest time.

"I like the crazy ones," Wilbur insisted. Over the past year, as her personal life caromed further and further out of control, Kirsten's impromptu stories had become equally offbeat and bizarre.

*"Penrod and Sarah Smithers lived all by themselves. Totally, completely and utterly alone. And that's the way they liked it. Penrod was twelve years old; Sarah turned eight on June 6th. It was a smallish but very pleasant birthday party. Just Penrod, Sarah and their pygmy goat.*

"What was the goat's name?" Wilbur demanded.

"Lambchop."



*Exactly a year, three months and twelve days earlier, their parents decided to vacation in Africa. The Smithers wanted to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in northeast Tanzania and shoot a few elephants, crocodiles and water buffalo. It never occurred to them that certain African animals might be endangered or that Penrod and Sarah were 'endangered' in a different sort of way.*

*"There are exactly thirty-five TV dinners in the freezer," Mrs. Smithers counseled as she piled the luggage into the trunk of the Volvo. The Smithers always bought Volvos. They were very safe and reliable autos and, when it came to family transportation, you didn't want to take unnecessary risks. "The TV dinners should last a while, and we put some extra money in the dresser drawer under your father's silk underwear. But that's only for emergencies."*

*Mr. Smithers wagged a finger under his son's nose. "Don't squander the money."*

*"If you get sick and tired of TV dinners and want a pepperoni pizza," Mrs. Smithers added, "that's perfectly OK."*

*The parents were only suppose to be gone a week. How many water buffalo can a person shoot? And how many dumb snow-covered mountains can you climb before the stupendous, African safari vacation becomes boring with a capitol B?*

"What's a Papist, Auntie Kirsten?" Wilbur blurted.

Kirsten stared at the child in disbelief. "Why do you ask?"

Rolling over on his stomach momentarily, he punched the pillow, propping it up against the headboard. "My daddy calls you the Papist,... the goody two-shoes Papist, so I was wondering..."

Kirsten felt her cheeks flush. She knew her brother-in-law had no use for religion - not that he held any sophisticated, teleological convictions similar to Dr. Wong's - but this was too much!. "A Papist is a Catholic, but it's not a particularly nice term." "Do you attend church on Sundays?"

"Can't"

"Why not?"

"Interferes with soccer practice." The boy wiggled his rump under the covers. "You can continue with the story now."

*Well, a week passed and then a month. The folks sent post postcards and tons of colorful pictures. One showed Mr. Smithers sitting on top of an elephant. The elephant was lying on its side with its mouth open and a big red tongue hanging out. Its eyes were open but the lumpy beast didn't seem to be focusing on anything in particular.*

*"That's one saaaad looking elephant," Sarah said, drawing out the vowel for dramatic effect. "Do you think it's just sleeping?"*

*Penrod studied the picture for the longest time. He stared at the huge gun his father slung over his shoulder and the crisscrossed cartridge belts full of hollow-point bullets draped around his neck. "Sleeping," Sarah's brother confirmed. "Definitely taking a mid-morning snooze."*

*In another picture the parents were standing at the top of a mountain looking down through hazy clouds - yes, the clouds were below them - at a huge African plain.*

*Well, the Smithers were having such great fun they simply forgot to come home. They sent pictures and flowery postcards but that was pretty much it. But Penrod and Sarah didn't*

*mind. They grew comfortable in their parentless solitude. They looked after each other, which is what brothers and sisters are supposed to do.*

*When one of the super-duper, nosey neighbors said something like, "Haven't seen your folks around lately," Sarah would reply, "Oh they're very busy people." The children never lied. That would be wrong. They omitted a few minor details but never ever told a lie.*

*Now you might think that a couple of children abandoned by their selfish, good-for-nothing parents would be scared to death, but not Penrod and Sarah Smithers. Heck no! From the day their parents waltz out the door on their glorious African safari, Penrod had a plan. "I'll cook and you clean," he told his sister. "We'll be just fine. Who needs parents anyway? They just boss you around and act more irresponsible than a bunch of dopey kids."*

*"We'll be just fine," Penrod repeated with a confident wave of his hand. "This is the beginning of an awesome, stupendous, splendiferous adventure."*

*"Splennndiferous," Sarah repeated in a soon-to-be-fourth-grade, singsongy voice.*

A gurgling snore cut the narrative short. Wilbur was sound asleep. Kirsten shut the light off, drifted into the kitchen and fixed herself a cup of coffee. An hour later she recognize the purr of her sister's Honda CRV as the car crawled up the driveway.

"How was Willy?" Alice slipped off her high heels.

"He's never any problem." Kirsten was trying to decide whether to confront her sister with her husband's crassness. "Do you know any atheists?"

. "No, why do you ask?" She teased a pearl drop earrings from a fleshy lobe then withdrew its mate

"There's a well-respected doctor over at the hospital who doesn't believe in God."

"I'm not surprised," Alice countered. "Modern life has become too hectic. Organized religion's optional,... a luxury."

"Not for us goody two-shoes Papists," Kirsten muttered.

"Excuse me?" Alice loosened the buttons on her cuffs. "I didn't catch that last remark.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following week, Kirsten swung by the Braintree Rehabilitation Center. "I'm looking for a patient...Dorothy Edwards."

"Second floor, room twenty-eight," the receptionist replied.

Kirsten rode the elevator up one flight and found the white-haired woman sitting by herself in the solarium. She greeted Kirsten warmly but looked haggard. "There's been a change of plans." She pulled the hospital-issue bathrobe up around her wrinkled throat. "I'm transferring to Briarcrest Nursing Home next Tuesday."

Kirsten felt her brain grow numb. "But I thought - "

"My son, Brandon feels it's for the best."

The fight had gone out of her. The vibrant woman, who attended college and raised three children after her husband died, had been reduced to disposable chattel. "What do you want, Dorothy?"

"I'm an old woman."

On the table lay a pair of bifocal glasses and pile of sheet music – Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, third cello. Kirsten scanned a blur of sixteenth notes that cascaded to the middle of

the topmost page before petering out in a slackening of tempo and key change. "Your son bullied you into changing your mind, didn't he?"

"My best years are behind me." Her voice cracked but, through an effort of will the widow maintained a semblance of composure. "It's time to move on."

*My best years are behind me. It's time to move on.* Mrs. Edwards was talking a cryptic, Morse code. Her son, Brandon, in all likelihood, had gotten himself into a financial mess and needed to sell off his mother's estate in order to set his own pathetic house in order. No matter that Mrs. Edwards lived out her final years sharing a cramped, sardine-can-of-a-room with mental defectives who talked gibberish and crapped the bed every five minutes! Brandon required financial liquidity. He didn't have a pot to piss in. His mother's property represented a disposable asset.

Around midday, Kirsten slipped out of her office and visited the hospital chapel. The room smelled faintly of incense. Except for a handful of votive candles and a solitary row of track lighting near the front, the room was dark and utterly still. She prayed to the Holy Mother asking her to watch over Mrs. Edwards - to make sure that the elderly woman got a reasonably spacious room with a scenic view plus a roommate equally alert and pleasant. Then she prayed to the Sacred Heart of Jesus that He help her make sense of the ludicrous farce that was her personal life. For good measure, Kirsten followed the petitions with a dozen Hail Marys. Slouching down in the pew, she closed her eyes and finished her prayers.

As she was rising to her feet, the door opened, and Father McNulty shuffled into the prayer chapel. "Miss Hazelton," the priest greeted her with an unctuous smile, "what brings a young professional here so early in the day?"

"Do you remember Mrs. Edwards?"

"The older woman with the broken hip."

"Her son is putting her into a nursing home." Her tone was leaden.

The priest removed his glasses and rubbed the side of his thin nose. The rosacea was particular bad today, the cheeks streaked with dark purple. "Yes, well, at her age,..." the priest began philosophically but never bothered to finish the thought.

"At her age what?" When there was no immediate response, Kirsten rose from the pew, lunged forward and stuck her head up under the priest's mottled chin. "You're an insipid dolt, Father McNulty." The man staggered backwards. "Has a disgruntled parishioner ever told you such a thing or do you assume that, as God's divine emissary, everything you say or do is above reproach?"

If he was taken aback by the outburst, it didn't take the priest long to regain his composure. "This is the house of the Lord. Leave the chapel and don't return until you have properly atoned for this disgraceful behavior!"

"Yes, I'll leave," She retreated several steps, "but that changes nothing. You're still an insufferable blockhead."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I ran into Father McNulty." Dr. Wong tracked down a despondent Kirsten Hazelton in the lobby drying her puffy eyes. "He said you became irrational, foulmouthed, ... emotionally unhinged." The doctor shared the observation with a flippant smile, implying that he didn't put much credence in the priest's account. "By his reckoning, you belong on a locked ward over at

the IMH." The Institute of Mental Health was where the most incorrigible mental defectives were warehoused once less drastic resources had been exhausted.

"We had a difference of opinion," Kirsten sputtered, "and I told the crusty old fart things no one else ever had the nerve to say."

"Apparently that didn't go over very well."

Kirsten grinned weakly. She was grateful Dr. Wong hadn't demand specifics. The soft-spoken physician had done his best to safeguard Mrs. Edward's dignity and would have been devastated to learn the truth about the son's treachery.

"What are your plans for the holiday?" Dr. Wong asked.

"Not much. I'm just staying home."

"An emotionally unhinged coworker with nowhere to go on Thanksgiving." Pulling a pen from his pocket, he scribbled an address on a slip of paper. "We live over by the Brandenburg Community Center... seventy-five Aspen Drive. It's a slate blue colonial with white shutters."

"I can't impose -"

"Show up around noon. I'll tell my wife to set another plate at the table." Dr. Wong hurried off down the corridor.

The next day, Kirsten did her makeup and pulled her hair back in a tight bun which she fixed with an ivory pick. She opted for low heels and a lavender dress that showed her figure to best advantage without being in the least bit provocative. Arriving at the Wong's house, she was ushered into the vestibule by a chubby woman a year or two younger than herself. "So there you are!" Dr. Wong rushed over and, with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, wrapped her in a bear hug. "Here, let me introduce you to my family, and I must warn you from the outset, I'm feeling quite outnumbered."

Any reservations she might have experienced were blown away by the combination of savory aromas and festive faces. "Outnumbered in what way?"

My wife's family is originally from Nanjing Province on the Yangtze River in southern China."

"Which means nothing to me."

"For centuries, foreign missionaries spread their religions through the coastal routes. A recent census suggested four million Chinese Catholics, but the true figure is much closer to fourteen." The man gestured at the oriental women gathered together in the next room putting the final, decorative touches on the table. "Four daughters and a wife - all devout Catholics."

Mrs. Wong, a short round woman, looked up and smiled slyly. "Even my son has gone over to the enemy camp, attending Mass over at Saint Andrews!" He led the way into the main dining room as a tall, well-built man in his mid thirties came down the stairs from the upper level. "Joshua, let me introduce you to Miss Hazelton, the discharge planner at our hospital."

"We'll be eating in a moment," Mrs. Wong announced.

"Perfect timing!" The doctor led Kirsten to a seat alongside his son. "Did I mention that Joshua, like his illustrious father, is an osteopath over at Beth Israel?" He shook his head up and down energetically, as though in answer to his own question. "Well, at any rate, he can bring you up to speed on that." The man retreated to the far end of the room.

Joshua leaned forward. "I've been dying to meet you."

"How's that?"

"My father's always rather close-lipped... hardly ever has anything much to say about the people he works with, but he's been singing your praises all morning." He raised a bottle of Chablis. "Would you like some?"

Kirsten raised her empty glass. "Yes, I don't mind if I do."

At the far end of the table the elder Dr. Wong had just cracked a joke and was laughing his fool head off.

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## Loveliest Girl

Among the Old Orchard Beach *cognoscenti*, Cassie Moffat was considered the town slut. Whether her lurid reputation was justified wasn't really open for debate. Huey Spencer, the craggy-faced old fart who ran the air-brushed T-shirt concession, bragged that he bedded Cassie only a week after the young girl's arrival on the pier boardwalk. A short distance away, Freddy Smithers, who sold fruit coolattas - banana, coconut, mango and blueberry - never confirmed one way or the other that he slept with Cassie, but when the girl's name was mentioned, Freddy sniggered and made obscene gestures that left little to the imagination. Even the Guatemalan who spoke English as a second language and manned the henna tattoo booth claimed bragging rights, finessing Cassie into the sack after sketching a multi-colored cartoon devil brandishing a pitchfork on her derriere. So when the trashy girl with the impertinent smile showed up at the Scenic View Inn unannounced at one in the morning, Reese Donaldson knew perfectly well what to expect.

"Hey, Reese, let me in!" After the third knock Cassie hollered, "I see light under the door so I know you're there." Reese took a deep breath and eased the door open. "Hi, Cassie."

She brushed past him. "What is this... a freakin' broom closet?"

"An old storage room," he corrected, "converted into an efficiency apartment."

"Not very efficient," she chuckled at her own humor and promptly flopped down on the bed. She was wearing dungaree mini-shorts and a skimpy halter that resembled a maroon tube sock with the toe section cut away. The chubby girl was passably cute in a vulgar sort of way with a round face, dark eyes and hair. She possessed a pretty, kissable mouth, and most times her lower jaw hung slightly ajar showcasing a set of strong teeth. Even in repose the girl's fluid features settled quite naturally in an impudent grin – a slack-mouthed, in-your-face smirk that implied 'I'm not going anywhere soon so get used to it'. The cheeky nerve of her got under your skin but not necessarily in a bad way.

Reese, who did maintenance and odd jobs at the motel, first met her at the clothing boutique over by the amusement park where she worked. The store sold souvenirs, cheap jewelry and sweatshirts with tacky slogans like:

*If you think I'm an asshole,  
You should meet my parents!*

"What's that?" Cassie gestured toward a card table littered with scraps of lined paper.

"I'm writing the great American novel." He tried to sound cavalier, but the tone was decidedly apologetic.

Cassie pointed to a wastepaper basket brimming over with crumpled sheets. "Doesn't look like the project is going so hot." She lay back on the unmade single bed throwing her fleshy arms up over her head. "Maybe you need a break to stimulate your brain... get the creative juices flowing."

Reese didn't think the woman had his literary needs in mind when she used the word 'stimulate'. She was so blasé about sex that he wasn't quite sure how to react. "Writers need compelling plots and dynamic characters," he noted. "Unfortunately, I've got neither."

Cassie pursed her lips suggestively. "I'm an interesting character."

Reese smirked inwardly. How often had a flamboyant, fictional character like Cassie Moffat caused a minor insurrection, by running amok with a plot line he was struggling to write? More often than not, the Cassie Moffat characters proved more intriguing, and irresistible than the one-dimensional stick figures that populated his writing. Reese glanced at the clock. "You can't stay here."

"And why not?"

"The boss doesn't allow guests. I could lose my job."

"And where's the tight-ass boss right now?"

"She lives over in East Biddeford."

"Does she ever stop by this late at night?"

"Not unless there's an emergency."

Cassie rose up on her elbows. In one deft motion, as though she had practiced the lewd maneuver a thousand times, the girl pulled her maroon halter, what little there was of it, up over her head. Lying back down, she reached out with both hands, beckoning for him to come and lie on top of her. Strangely, there was no great sense of urgency, the gesture being more perfunctory than wanton.

"If I take the rest of my clothes off, does that qualify as a bona fide emergency?" Reese eased down on the mattress and began kissing the side of her neck. Working the button free, he wriggled her dungaree shorts down around her knees. "Now that's better." A hand came up around the back of his neck. "You can always return to the great American novel first thing in the morning."

Actually, he wouldn't return to the writing for another sixteen hours. One of the housekeepers, a Russian girl visiting on a temporary work visa became homesick and had to be sent away. Along with his regular chores, Reese was now cleaning rooms and changing linen until the boss could hire and train a replacement - not that he felt any great compulsion to share the Scenic View Inn housekeeping agenda with Cassie Moffat.

"About your literary masterpiece..." It was two-thirty in the morning. Cassie pulled her sweaty body away. The claustrophobic room was never intended as an accommodation, and now, even in the middle of the night, the temperature hovered around a steamy eighty-five degrees.

"There is no literary masterpiece," Reese explained. "I write a few pages, throw them away and start from scratch."

Cassie plucked a crumpled sheet from the floor and began smoothing the paper with the heel of her hand. The cursive script ran to the bottom of the page but was illegible, every word eradicated by a blunt pencil. "How long has this been going on?" When there was no immediate reply, she drummed her fingers on his chest then gestured with a wag of her head in the direction

of the wastepaper basket. "Your scribbling... you agonize then throw it in the trash and start over. It's no different than what I do." Cassie's lips parted in a roguish smile.

"Your logic eludes me." He wanted to kiss her again but resisted the urge.

"The D Street Projects where I grew up is a lovely working-class, Irish-American neighborhood," she said. The tone was self-mocking.

"Yes, I know. You already told me." Cassie moved up to Maine from the Dorchester Heights, West Ninth Street section of South Boston. The federal government tried to integrate Boston's public schools back in the nineteen seventies by bussing underprivileged black students in from the nearby ghettos of Roxbury and Dorchester, but that didn't go over so well. Many of the schools in 'Southie' were atrocious, far worse than those in the poorest Negro sections!

"Half the goddamn tenants are underemployed; the rest draw welfare checks or deal drugs. Nothing ever changes. I came to Maine looking for something... I don't know what."

"*Tabula rasa*," Reese offered.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It's a Latin expression. You wipe a slate clean then start from scratch."

Cassie nodded. "Yeah, that sounds about right. Every time I sleep with some Prince Charming wannabe, it's like you with your writing. The romance fizzles. I shrug it off and start over again."

Reese considered the mixed metaphor but let it slide. "So where's it get you?"

A guttural sound welled up in her throat. Cassie leaned forward, her sweaty breasts coming to rest on his chest. "That part I haven't figured out yet." "Your literary masterpiece," she deflected the conversation elsewhere, "what's it about?"

"Historical romance," Reese responded vaguely.

"Which tells me nothing."

In a pond bordering the rear of the motel a chorus of bullfrogs filled out the bass tones in an a cappella choir of crickets and assorted nocturnal creatures. "The plot takes place in colonial times."

With a flick of her stubby neck Cassie indicated the discarded pages scattered about the room. "Judging by the number of failed attempts, you might do better picking a topic you actually know something about."

Reese felt the urge to argue the point, but his usually nimble brain balked, his thoughts congealing in a gooey mass. The hour was late and he felt too exhausted to match wits with this infuriating night owl. "If you were in my predicament, what would you write about?" he finally managed. "What's your area of expertise?"

Cassie laughed sharply making a gruff, snorting noise through her nose. She jutted her jaw, glanced at him impudently before rolling over and lying supine. "Rats... I have more than a passing familiarity with the filthy rodents." She nuzzled his ear playfully with her lips. "When I was nine years old, I spotted a hairy bruiser with a leathery tail out in the snow. It was the day before Christmas, and I almost peed my panties."

"What was he doing?"

"Not much... just nosing around the garbage bin with his pointy snout searching for food."

Outside in the Maine darkness the atonal cacophony of bullfrogs and crickets continued without letup. "A noise must have startled the rodent, because he skittered off down the alleyway in zigzag fashion. The heavy tail cut a deep furrow in the snow from the garbage bin to the alley." Cassie blew out her cheeks. "It was ugly as sin!"

“What else,” Reese pressed. “What else do you know that’s worth writing about?”

“My brother, Jack worked nights at O’Malley’s Pub. The dive was just down the street from where we lived, and I used to bring him dinner when he worked late.”

As she described it, O’Malley’s was a shabby affair. The bar stunk of stale beer, pretzels and cigar smoke. For many of its regular patron bathing was a luxury at best. In the rear booth a cluster of elderly regulars played dominoes well into the night, nursing their watery drinks and ignoring the more fractious characters. Cassie shook her head fitfully and the corners of her lips drooped in a decidedly bitter smile. “The clientele was mostly local yokels, a handful of winos and assorted riffraff.”

“Jack doubled as bouncer. Some nights when things got too rowdy, he’d grab a troublemaker like so.” She formed a tight fist with her left hand, palm facing down, then made a similar fist with her other hand, palm up. “He’d grab the offending party by the collar and seat of the pants and rush him out the door at a gallop.” Cassie made a motion of heaving a heavy object up in the air. “By closing he’d tossed a dozen stumblebums out in the street.”

A humid breeze snaked through the room but did nothing to relieve the oppressive warmth. A tractor trailer lumbered passed the motel in the direction of the amusement park and carnival rides. “I know it’s late,” Reese prompted, “but you’re gonna have to leave.”

“Yeah, the East Biddeford biddy.” Cassie rose up on her hands and knees straddling him. Her full breasts hung down like udders. “I’m the town slut, you know.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Well it’s true.” She rolled over on her back again. “What are you doing in the fall?”

“Studying at Boston College.”

A sliver of light from the rear window sluiced across the room, outlining her Rubenesque body in silhouette. “The snooty, Ivy League professors are going to teach you how to write like Shakespeare?”

“More like Raymond Carver,” Reese corrected.

“Never heard of him.” Cassie smelled of rancid sweat and some equally pungent musk oil she slopped on like deodorant. She wasn’t bright, had no class whatsoever. But Reese felt drawn to her. For no good reason and, against his better judgment, he had a soft spot for the chunky girl with the questionable morals.

“Raymond Carver...he publishes in the New Yorker. Everybody wants to write like Raymond Carver.”

She reached down and flicked his limp genitals playfully with a poised thumb and forefinger. “And what about Reese Donaldson - does he want to write like Raymond Carter?”

“Carver,” he corrected, “and, no, not particularly.”

In the neighborhood around the motel the foot traffic had grown quiet. All the vacationers were bedded down for the night. A solitary light burned in the main office where the night clerk was hunkered down watching late-night TV or playing video games. “You can’t stay the night,” he repeated a bit more forcefully. Cassie clearly was in no hurry to leave the Scenic View Inn. Reese, who had been drifting into a netherworld of sleepiness, lifted up on his elbows. “I’m giving you the bum’s rush. You got to go home now.”

Cassie crawled off the side of the bed and threw her clothes on in less than a minute. Then she came back and kissed him on the lips in that breezy, unhurried, infuriatingly distracted manner that made Reese’s head spin and let herself out without another word.

\* \* \* \* \*



In the morning, Mrs. Fitch, the owner of the Scenic View, stopped by Reese's room before breakfast. "Another Russian's flown the coop... ran off with a Canadian guests." She was a dour woman, emaciated with pale skin and platinum-colored hair so light that it made her look as though she had gone prematurely white at forty-five. "For the next week or two, I need you to clean rooms full time. My daughter, Felicia, will be helping out until we set things right."

*Set things right...* Did that mean sending away for more Slavic girls on work visas or would she try her luck with the Cassie Moffats of the world? Reese wasn't sure which was the lesser of two evils.

"What's with the mess?" She gestured at the overflowing wastepaper basket.

The question caught Reese off guard. "I'm trying to write something."

"Which tells me nothing at all." The tone was abrasive - tactless and dismissive all in the same breath.

"Creative fiction."

"And how's that going?"

"Not well."

She glanced about the room in a distracted manner. Mrs. Fitch was always rushing off to impromptu staff meetings or cloistered away in the office with motel suppliers. "Why don't you use a computer?"

"I don't own one."

"Well, at any rate," the older woman noted shifting gears, "until further notice, you're working housekeeping with Felicia. My daughter has a list of rooms to be cleaned first. Also, the pullout sofa in suite seven is broken and needs replacing." Without bothering to say goodbye, she spun around on her heels and rushed off.

Mrs. Fitch's daughter, Felicia, who was married and had a young son, was nothing like her mother, neither physically nor in temperament. Tall and lanky, she wore dark-framed glasses. A mop of jet black hair was styled in a page boy. The girl's face was pleasant, but the economical features seemed thrown together in such haphazard fashion that there was nothing terribly distinctive.

Between the relentless heat and drudgery of cleaning dirty apartments, the day proved brutal. They vacuumed beach sand off forty-three rugs, changed upwards of a seventy-five beds and hauled away a mountain of soiled linen. Another housekeeping crew, what remained of the Russians, was working its way towards Reese and Felicia from the opposite end of the motel.

A strange thought occurred to Reese. The shrimpy Russian girl with the pallid complexion had run off with a Canuck, a French Canadian from the Province of Quebec. If the star-crossed lovers left Maine and crossed over into Canada, then the girl's legal status was now in jeopardy. What would she do in a few short weeks when the temporary work visa expired and she was supposed to fly home?

Reese and Felicia finished work late into afternoon and then a scheduling glitch surfaced. The receptionist inadvertently placed a newly-arrived party of five in the room with the damaged pullout sofa. When they opened the bed the bottom portion flopped down on the floor like a maimed animal. Reese had to scare up a replacement sofa from a vacant room. By the time he switched furniture, the sun had dropped below the horizon.

"Come with me." It was the insufferable Mrs. Fitch gesturing imperiously with a crooked index finger.

"I'm off-duty," he muttered.

"This won't take long." Without elaboration the gaunt woman hurried off. In the rear of the motel was a storage shed. Mrs. Fitch undid the security bolt and threw the double doors open. A heap of broken computers lay in a corner along with an Epson, continuous feed, dot matrix printer and mishmash of decrepit furniture that even the Salvation Army would have rejected. Further toward the rear and nesting on top of rusting propane tank was a black laptop computer." The woman grabbed the device and thrust it into Reese's arms. "It's an older IBM Thinkpad model... Window's Millennium edition. You can't run Microsoft Office on it, because the operating system is too primitive." The gaunt woman averted her eyes as she spoke. "But it contains a decent word processing software with spell-check."

"I can borrow it?"

"Keep it," the older woman said harshly as though delivering a reprimand rather than a gift. Scurrying back out of the shed, she fixed the padlock in place. "It's yours to keep," she repeated with such brutal finality, that Reese didn't quite know whether to thank the woman or ask what was behind her uncharacteristic generosity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later, the nightmare began.

Reese woke up Sunday morning with blotchy yellow stains soiling the front of his jockey shorts. Reaching out tentatively with a poised finger, he tapped the moist cloth. "Cripes!" There were two ugly blotches, one to the right and the other directly below his male member. It wasn't urine. He never dribbled or wet himself during the night. Reese examined his privates. A viscous, yellow discharge was oozing from the tip of his penis, but he felt no discomfort. Maybe it was just a strain from lifting the sofa bed the previous day. As a precaution, he washed his privates with soap - not just any soap but an antibacterial, PhisoHex scrub that the office provided the housecleaning staff.

When he peed earlier, Reese had noticed a dull burning sensation, but the urine passed freely and the discomfort went away almost immediately. Funny, he mused, how a person never gave his body a second thought when it functioned properly. He could go days without even being marginally aware of the unassuming appendage languishing unappreciated between his legs.

There was a knock at the door. "Reese, are you there?" Felicia asked. "I'm going to Len Libby's to buy chocolate, if you want to come along for the drive." Len Libby's was a famous tourist attraction on route one a few miles up the road in Scarborough. Back in 1997, the owner of the candy store commissioned an artist to fashion a seventeen hundred pound, life-size moose. Sculpted from milk chocolate, the antlered beast was constructed on site in four weeks. From when they opened the doors at nine a.m. until closing, the store ran a video showing visitors how the chocolaty animal came to life.

"Yeah, just give me a second." Now what? He would need to change underwear and switch to heavy dungarees just in case the unthinkable happened. But then maybe it was all in his head. Reese felt himself. No, everything was perfectly dry now. False alarm! It was just a strain.

"I almost forgot to tell you," Felicia blurted as they pulled out of the Scenic View parking lot. "A girl, Cassie Moffat, came by to see you last night, but you were out."

Reese cringed. "Was there any message?"

"No, but she's stopping by again later today."

At Len Libby's a clerk was handing out samples of homemade fudge. Felicia grabbed a piece but Reese waved the salesgirl off. "She had a very nice way about her."

"Who did?" he replied absently.

"That girl who came to see you. She has the loveliest smile!" Reese shrugged. Cassie Moffat certainly had a very engaging way about her, the lovely smile quite possibly her greatest asset. "Is she your girlfriend?"

"What's that?" Reese couldn't organize his thoughts for more than two seconds back to back.

"The Moffat girl... are you dating?"

"Not in this lifetime." Felicia stared at him confusedly but let the matter drop.

Len Libby featured dark chocolate prepared with pure butter and heavy creams. The display case held a huge selection of truffles stuffed with real fruit. There was marzipan honey almond, pecan buds, butterscotch squares, peanut brittle and a butter cream concoction laced with brown sugar. The girl behind the counter recommended the toffee molasses chips and Bordeaux dark nougat. Felicia bought an assortment of chocolates, taffy and fudge.

"I'll be back in a minute." Reese hurried to the men's room and locked the door. He had to pee real bad. Hovering over the urinal for the better part of a minute, nothing emerged. The whole front of his underwear was a gooey, golden mess. His plumbing was busted! Another thirty seconds petered away. Still nothing. Then, just as he was getting ready to zip up his fly, the urine dribbled out in a fitful broken stream, and Reese began pissing molten lava in five different directions. The searing, white hot pain - it felt like Roto-Rooter had just reamed out his urethra.

"You don't look so hot." They were back out in the parking lot.

"No, I'm Okay."

"Here, this should perk you up." Felicia snapped off a huge chunk of peanut brittle.

Peanut brittle, the drug of choice for gonorrhea. Just what Reese needed! "Yeah, that tastes great. Thanks a million." He could feel his legs going rubbery as he slid into the car.

Reese hurried back to his room and called a doctor. "I'd like an appointment."

"New or regular patient?" the receptionist asked.

"New."

"Nature of the visit?"

"An infection."

"Where exactly?"

Reese considered his options. "It's a venereal disease."

"Tomorrow at two," the woman spoke in a nasally monotone. "You'll need to arrive fifteen minutes beforehand in order to fill out paperwork."

Reese hung up the phone and began to cry. He cried because, in the better part of twenty years, his gonads had never let him down. They always performed properly, kept their own counsel and never gave him an ounce of grief. And what did he do? He copulated with the town whore and, in the bargain, bartered away his otherwise perfect health. Idiot! Moron! Cretin!

Moral degenerate! Well, the great American novel, which wasn't getting written any time soon, would have to wait just a little bit longer.

*What was it Felicia told him at the motel just before they drove to Len Libby and the seventeen hundred pound chocolate moose?* Cassie might stop by later. Reese wasn't going anywhere special. He wouldn't let on to anything. When the timing was just right, he would let the fat whore from South Boston's infamous D Street Projects know exactly what he thought of her debauchery. And the prissy Mrs. Fitch was no better. Never a kind word, she ran the Scenic View Inn with an autocratic, iron fist. The motel was shorthanded. When Reese pulled a double shift the previous Tuesday, the cantankerous woman never even paid the mandatory time-and-a-half much less thanked him for his loyalty. Life sucked. There was no hope for humanity. Nothing was ever what it seemed to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Earlier that morning before his shift started, Reese traipsed down to the beach. An adolescent was skim boarding on the bubbly outgoing surf. Throwing himself down on the warm sand, he scanned the shore. A bunch of sooty terns were wading about in the shallows. Much smaller and darker than the gulls, they scrupulously avoided the noisy tourists and more aggressive birds.

*Caw! Caw! Caw!* Far more numerous were the gulls. Reese spotted herring gulls, a scattering of ring-billed terns and a solitary black-legged kittiwake. All the herring gulls sported a blotch of bright red on the underside of their bottom beaks at the furthestmost tip. How come he had never noticed that distinctive anomaly? Describing nature - a writer was supposed to report what he saw not what he imagined. The herring gulls' tails were porcelain when observed in flight out over the ocean, but once they set back down on the sand, the topmost tail feathers were decidedly gray. Everybody thought they knew what a herring gull looked like, but much of what they imagined was slightly off-kilter, just a tiny bit askew.

And oddly enough, sea gulls weren't really *sea* gulls. They had no salt regulation glands and needed to return to land to obtain fresh drinking water. The birds were scavengers and in the Old Orchard Beach area increased their numbers by feeding on human garbage dumps. Reese had learned these things from reference books at the Scarborough Public Library and shooting the breeze with some of the local residents.

Rising from the white sand, he pulled off his sandals and began walking in the surf toward the pier in the far distance. Cassie - a.k.a. Typhoid Mary with the lascivious grin - would be just settling into work at the boutique about now. She could infect the entire boardwalk with pestilence and never lose a minute's sleep. How had he missed all the cues? She was crass and vulgar. In the course of a single week, she could fornicate with a dozen men and still find time to spread the creeping crud to yet one more unwitting soul. At face value, Cassie Moffat seemed the sweetest thing, but as with sea gulls that didn't really live off the sea, first impressions counted for nothing.

*Smoke and mirrors. Nothing was ever what it seemed to be.* When they exited the Len Libby Chocolate store, Felicia said, "I want to show you something precious." Reese was preoccupied with his soggy crotch. He wanted to go straight home to die or rot away to a pus-covered heap of nothingness. But he followed Felicia across the parking lot to a stand of huge willow grasses bordering the rear of the candy store. "What do you think?"

"The plants," he mumbled morosely, "resemble those tall reeds with the brown seed pods that grow in marshy bogs."

"Yes, but this is a grass," Felicia protested. "See how it's gone to seed at the top?"

Each slender green stalks rose ten feet or more in the air to a sandy-brown plume of fuzzy seedlings. "Why are you showing me this?" His penis was beginning to throb again and his underpants felt ridiculously wet. Did he have to pee? Would there be another profusion of needle-sharp blades slicing his urethra to a tattered mess that vaguely resembled the elegant plant's tasseled crown?

"Oh, I don't know." Felicia turned back in the direction of the car. "It's such an astonishing plant. I thought you might find it interesting."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie never returned. He sat in his room waiting for the clandestine showdown with the female Antichrist but the girl never resurfaced. By now his genitals were a muddled mess. He wrapped a wad of toilet paper around the offending party in an effort to staunch the flow of putrid pus. Peeing was abject torture followed by a solid ten minutes of residual, scalding agony. Eventually the pain subsided but only until the next episode.

His freshman year at college, Reese minored in psychology. One day toward the end of the semester Reese asked the professor about treatment for character disordered personalities. "There is none," the professor shot back sardonically. "The underlying pathology is structural... like a load-bearing wall in a house. Remove the two-by-fours and the whole goddamn structure topples down on your head." The professor was describing Cassie Moffat.

"Reese, let me in." An insistent pounding at the door announced Cassie Moffat's belated arrival. The digital clock on the night table read one in the morning. He opened the door, and the girl brushed past him as though she was a long-term resident of the Scenic View Inn. "We gotta talk."

"Funny you should mention it."

"I got this little problem." She rushed ahead without waiting for a response, "It's a gynecological thing...Chlamydia." She sat down on the bed but almost immediately jumped up again. "I'm almost a hundred percent cured now, but my doctor says that anyone I slept with in the last month ought to take precautions. Just follow the directions on the label."

Only now did Reese notice the white paper bag in her left hand. He took the bag and removed a plastic container. Ciprofloxacin.

"You sure are a mess!" Cassie was ogling the mass of yellow blotches peppering his underpants. Reese slumped down in a chair and began to cry. "What's the matter?"

"I'm sorry," he blubbered.

"For what?"

"For damning you to hell,..for being a holier-than-thou shithead."

"I give you the clap and you're apologizing to me?"

"You said it was Chlamydia."

"Same difference," Cassie brought him up short. The girl wandered over to the card table where the IBM Thinkpad lay closed. "Looks like you're making progress with the book."

"How's that?" He wiped his cheeks dry with the heel of a hand.

Cassie gestured at the wastepaper basket. "No crumbled sheets."

"Nothing's really changed. I switched over to the laptop."

Easing down on the bed, she draped an arm over his shoulders. "I'm not a bad person," she said softly. "I just do things that ain't a hundred percent kosher. There's a difference."

Reese was still having trouble catching his breath. "I'm only just beginning to figure that out."

"Maybe next time around I'll hit the jackpot and meet a swell guy like you." The girl brushed his cheek with her lips and slipped quietly out the door. Reese filled a cup of water from the sink and shook a green pill into the palm of his hand from the cylindrical container. First thing in the morning he would call and cancel his appointment with the doctor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first week in August, three new housekeepers were hired and Reese went back to general maintenance full time. Cassie's antibiotic knocked down the infection within the first three days to the point where he noticed no more pain or pussy discharge. His 'little friend' was back to normal. All was right in the world. Felicia stopped by his room one night after work. Her mother wanted to know if he could help out with a pool party planned for the weekend. "I want time and a half."

"Really?" Felicia's normally deadpan expression lightened. "She doesn't indulge me with overtime and I'm her daughter." Noticing the outdated laptop computer, she ran her thin fingers over the keyboard. "My mother gave you this?" Reese nodded. "It was my brother's. Two years this November, Joel was killed in a car accident." The somber expression deepened several shades. "My mother hasn't been the same since."

When Felicia was gone, it occurred to Reese that nothing was ever quite what it appeared to be. Cassie pulled herself out of the D Street gutter only to land face down in a similar pile of effluvia several hundred miles north in Old Orchard Beach. And yet, the ever-resourceful girl still managed to find a doctor and bring Reese the medicine. That took guts!

Mrs. Fitch blustered about the Scenic View Inn like some crotchety bitch on a stick. Who knew the woman was heartbroken? Grieving? It flew in the face of logic, not to mention every law of nature, for a mother to bury her child.

Labor Day was approaching. Toward the end of August, Reese made his way down to the boardwalk. He found Cassie just finishing her shift at the sweatshirt boutique. "This is for you... a little, end-of-summer, going away present." Reese reached into a bag he was carrying and pulled out a slab of Len Libby dark chocolate. Breaking it in two he gave her the larger piece. "It's from the store with the life-size, chocolate moose."

"That's so sweet!" She raised the chocolate to her lips. Using her top teeth for leverage, Cassie snapped off another piece of the dark chocolate. "This is really good stuff - not like that cheap sugary crap they sell on the boardwalk." "How's the writing coming?"

"About the same." The Ferris wheel fifty feet away was spinning at a dizzying clip. Reese stared at a T-shirt with a naked woman sitting in a martini glass. "Do you remember," Reese deflected the conversation, "the dark haired girl you spoke to at the Scenic View?"

"The skinny one with the dark glasses?"

"Felicia said you have the loveliest smile." Reese watched the Ferris wheel gradually lose speed as the ride wound to an end. The cars at the top swayed abruptly backwards when the

machine finally creaked to a stop precipitating an outburst of childish hoots, giggles and squeals. "The loveliest smile," Reese repeated. "Those were her exact words."

Cassie led the way down the causeway leading to the ocean. A young boy nibbling on a cone of cotton candy scampered by. The tide was out, but a handful of families with small children clustered close by the foamy surf. Reese felt her body leaning into him, but there was nothing suggestive in the act. A young father was teaching his daughter how to ride a boogie board in the shallows as they approached the ebbing surf.

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## A Chinese Bar Mitzvah

Mr. Chen took his dog for a walk in the park bordering the athletic field. The Shih Tzu, Wei-shan, seemed out of sorts, sitting listlessly on her haunches with a befuddled expression as Harry strapped on the harness. Fifteen minutes later as they passed a slender birch near the Little League diamond, the dog's front legs buckled. The hindquarter shuddered spastically - once, twice - before the body went limp and Wei-shan lurched forward on her chest. The bulgy, dark brown eyes remained open, while the pink tongue drooped perversely coming to rest on the fresh-cut grass.

Mr. Chen crouched down beside the stricken animal and laid a hand on the dog's turgid belly. The fur was still relatively warm but then, it was late summer with the temperature edging up on eighty degrees. No movement, no sign of life whatsoever, the dog was gone. By now a crowd had gathered. Slumped over the dog with his hands pressed to his eyes, Mr. Chen was crying softly. "What's happened here?" An off-duty policeman umpiring second base, pushed through the crowd. "Do we need an ambulance?"

"That won't be necessary," Ida Goldfarb confided in a hushed voice. The sixty-eight year-old widow, who power walked the scenic trails each morning after breakfast, was nearby when the dog collapsed. "His dog died."

"Tough luck!" The cop rubbed his crotch. The home plate umpire, who had temporarily suspended play when the commotion occurred, blew a sharp blast from his whistle and resumed the game.

Mr. Chen pulled himself together. He washed his face at the water bubbler. A sympathetic bystander offered him a wad of Kleenex so he could blow his nose. "The attack,, it seemed so sudden." It was the same woman who spoke to the off-duty police officer.

"The dog was always so healthy and full of fun." Mr. Chen's composure deserting him a second time, the man paused until he could speak again. "I'll have to make arrangements to dispose of the body."

"There's a lovely pet cemetery overlooking Narragansett Bay in Tiverton," Ida noted. "Each grave has its own tombstone or marker, some or more elaborate than others." The woman's overly solicitous tone only compounded Mr. Chen's misery. Ida took a step closer, placing a hand on his shoulder. "My brother-in-law cremated his collie, Rusty; he keeps the remains in a brass urn over the fireplace mantle."

"I appreciate your kindness." Given his rather limited financial resources, Mr. Chen would opt for mass burial.

Ida made a fretful face. "I don't usually talk to strangers." Actually," she continued in a confidential tone, "I don't hardly talk to anyone, because of my condition."

"What condition?" Mr. Chen didn't really know what he was saying anymore.

"I clam up around people... go verbally catatonic. But when I saw you all torn up over your misfortune - " Ida took a deep breath and released the air in short puffs as she studied the carcass of the prostrate animal. "Anticipatory fright... that's what a psychiatrist called it - a high-class, twenty-five cent term for an irrational fear of nothing in particular."

Did he really care about her free-floating anxiety and childhood angst? Harry Chen desperately wished that the chatterbox with the saggy jowls and neurasthenic personality would evaporate like the early morning mist.

"Hey, mister." A freckle-faced boy wearing a Tedesco's Supermarket T-shirt was slouching near the home plate backstop, a catcher's mitt wedged under his armpit. The youth was gesturing frantically. "About your dog... she ain't dead no more."

Sure enough, Wei-shan was sitting upright with her grizzled chin resting on the manicured lawn, the pinkish tongue having retreated back behind the crooked front teeth. The animal, which still wasn't stirring or doing much of anything, was very much among the living. Placing a hand under the dog's stomach he cradled the dog against his chest. Wei-shan hardly flinched, nestling on his forearm like an inanimate object.

Maybe it was the late-summer heat that caused the unfortunate episode. Domestic pets were just as vulnerable to bad weather as humans. But the way Wei-shan keeled over, like an over-the-hill, punch-drunk prize fighter kayoed by a crunching uppercut, didn't suggest heat stroke or any fleeting ailment. "The dog should see a doctor."

Mr. Chen stared at his hands morosely. "I'm rather strapped for cash."

The dog grunted and ran a pink tongue over its bristly lips before drifting back off to sleep. "Well then, maybe this is your lucky day."

Mr. Chen gawked at the flabby woman with the designer jogging suit and Sony Walkman. "My son's a veterinarian with very liberal payment plans for people in a financial bind."

"I don't take charity."

"No, I wouldn't think so," Ida pointed at the dog, "but what about her... does she take charity?"

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Ida Goldfarb called her son, Robert, at the animal hospital. "I met an oriental man, Mr. Chen, in the park. He has a sick dog but can't take the animal for treatment, because he's living on a fixed income and hard up for cash."

"What breed?"

"A Shih Tzu - jet black with a wispy gray goatee. Very cute." There was a slight pause. "Aren't you going to ask the dog's name?"

"I was getting to that."

"Wei-shan, which means 'great and benevolent' in Mandarin. It's a male name but Mrs. Chen, who passed away a few years back, never confirmed gender before choosing."

"What's wrong with the dog?"



Mrs. Goldfarb described what had happened. "Have your friend bring the dog by the office tomorrow in the late afternoon."

"He's not my friend. I hardly know the guy." She hung up the phone.

The following day, Mr. Chen arrived at the Brandenburg Animal Hospital in the late afternoon. Robert placed a stethoscope on Wei-shan's narrow chest. "Dog's got a heart murmur... about a three."

"Three what?"

"Three out of six ... a moderately-severe heart murmur." He handed the instrument to Mr. Chen, while continuing to hold the metal disc in place.

*Kathunkish. Kathunkish. Kathunkish. Kathunkish.* Yes, sure enough, tailing away from the diastole was an ominous, raspy sound that didn't belong. "Three out of six," Mr. Chen handed the stethoscope back.

"The condition's manageable with medication." Robert placed the dog on a digital scale and waited until the numbers settle. "Dog's got to lose weight and I'm giving you some medication. Also, we will need to see Wei-shan back here in two weeks for blood tests to check chemistries and bilirubin." Robert scribbled notes in a manila folder and then brought medication from an adjoining room. "This pill," he held a pale yellow tablet not much bigger than the head of a pin in the palm of his hand, "is Salix, a diuretic to drain excess fluid. A half hour after you give her the pill, the dog will need to go outside to pee, so plan accordingly."

"And the other?" Mr. Chen took the plastic container from the doctor's hand and held it up to the light.

"Enacard – it's an ACE inhibitor to regulate pulse." The older man seemed muddled by the technical jargon. "The medication lessens the workload on heart muscle and decreases fluid retention. Wei-shan gets a half tablet of both twice daily." Rummaging about in the supply cabinet, he located a surgical scalpel fitted with a rounded, number fifteen blade. Robert shook one of the pills out onto the counter. Placing the blade across the score line on the tiny pill, he pressed down gently and the chalky tablet spilt apart into equal portions. "There's a month supply, sixty pills."

Mr. Chen scooped Wei-shan up in his arms. "My social security check doesn't come until the beginning of the month."

"I'll bill you," Robert lied.

"And the pills?"

"The cost will be included in the statement." He would forewarn the receptionist to 'dead file' Mr. Chen's billing invoice and write the expense off as a tax loss. "For now, the dog can stroll about the yard as best she can. As her strength returned, Wei-shan might become more adventuresome but no more trips to the park." He ran his fingertips over the dog's abdomen and around the hips kneading the roll of excess flesh. "Two tablespoons of moist food twice a day - that's all she gets until the weight comes off."

"How much is she now?"

"Eight pounds four ounces," Robert replied. "The dog needs to slim down to seven-two."

"Over a pound ... that's almost a tenth of the dog's body weight."

Robert shrugged and glanced away. "Until the workload on the heart is reduced, there's always the chance of another attack like the episode the other day." Hypoxia - that was the textbook term for what happened to Wei-shan at the athletic field. The dog's stressed-out heart couldn't pump sufficient oxygen to vital body tissues and the pet collapsed, fell momentarily

unconscious until the condition stabilized. “One more thing... every time you feed table scraps, you’re just killing her with kindness.”

“No. I won’t do that anymore,” Mr. Chen said remorsefully.

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Harry Chen, who for thirty-five years managed the Kowloon Oriental Restaurant, was a rabid history buff, a fact which Robert discovered on the Chinaman’s third visit. “The thirteen American colonies never intended to come together as a nation.” Every April Mr. Chen participated in a reenactment of the historic battle between the British Redcoats and local militia in the Minute Man National Forest just north of Boston in Lexington. Harry Chen assumed the role of a British soldier “When the first Continental Congress met on October 26th, 1774, none of the colonies intended to join together as a nation. Each region wanted to protect their economic interests... the New England colonies with their fish, timber and whaling, the southerners trading rum, cotton, tobacco and slaves.”

“Interesting.” Robert placed the dog on the scale. The animal was rather frail but stable. There had been several severe coughing fits, which was symptomatic of the condition, but no repeats of the grotesque incident at the park.

“By the time the Second Continental Congress met a half year later, the Battles of Lexington and Concord were already well underway, but even then, the colonists were still seeking reconciliation with England.”

Robert ran the stethoscope over Wei-Shan’s slender chest. The heart badly compromised, it was doubtful the pet would survive the year. “After the war everything changed,” Robert offered.

“No, not really.” Mr. Chen objected in his soft-spoken, understated manner. “The Congress of the Confederation met from 1781 straight through to 1789. Under the Articles of Confederation, they had little power to compel individual states to comply with any of their decisions.” Mr. Chen chuckled humorlessly. “More and more prospective delegates elected to the Confederation Congress declined to serve in it, the leading men in each state preferring to serve in their own state governments. The Continental Congress frequently couldn’t even establish a quorum. Only when the Articles of Confederation were superseded by the Constitution of the United States, did congress take the upper hand.”

Robert handed the dog back to his owner. “We never learned any of this in high school.”

Nodding somberly, the Chinaman nuzzled the frail dog with his chin. “What we have now two hundred years later,” the Oriental spoke in an offhand manner, as the facts were common knowledge, “is a plutocracy not a democracy.”

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A week later Robert's sister, Naomi, visited unannounced. He had just showered and was getting ready for bed. A stout, brown-haired woman with bowling pin calves, Naomi had been reasonably pretty once. Just barely. Sandblasted with a profusion of freckles, her middle-aged, fleshy face had lost its earthy appeal. In its place was a callow harshness that set Robert's nerves on edge. “I stopped by Mom’s apartment earlier.” Naomi’s tone was acidic. “She was in the living room when I arrived sipping that Bigelow English breakfast tea she favors.

“That’s nice.”

“A Chinaman, Mr. Chen, was sitting on the sofa also drinking tea with his ratty little dog curled up on the Persian carpet.”

“Wei-shan.”

“What’s that?”

“The dog’s name... it’s Chinese. He didn’t offer the English translation.”

“Mother ran into Mr. Chen in the park and invited him back to her condo.” Naomi glanced distractedly about the apartment her hazel eyes never coming to rest on any particular object. “The Oriental didn’t feel comfortable leaving the decrepit beast cooped up alone in his muggy apartment with no air conditioning, so mother graciously suggested that he bring the pet.”

“The dog’s quite sick.”

Naomi scowled with her head tilted at a sharp incline. Robert noted that, over the years, his sister’s freckles had grown more pronounced, resembling an epidemic of chocolaty liver spots. In the kitchen the dishwasher shifted from wash to rinse cycle. Robert wanted desperately to go to bed, to be fresh for morning surgery. He had an operation - a beagle bitch riddled with mastitis - scheduled for eight o’clock. The biopsy came back benign, nothing more than a massive invasion of fatty lipomas. He would open her up from the pelvic area to the top of the sternum and clear away everything on the left side, wait a few months and repeat the process on the right. It was a gamble. Even though oncology proved negative, the root problem could be hormonal, since the dog had never been spayed, and that sticky issue would also need to be addressed.

The previous week he sliced a cauliflower-like papilloma from the left leg of an eighty pound mastiff. The tumor was situated just below the skin. The dog would be sore for a week or two. The pit bull with aggressive rhabdomyosarcoma on Monday wasn’t so lucky. A hopeless case, the animal had to be put down only hours after the exploratory surgery. “I just read a biography of the English writer, William Somerset Maugham,” Robert deflected the conversation. “Are you familiar with Maugham’s novels?”

Naomi, who taught ninth grade English, stared at her brother dully, trying to decipher his intent. “*Of Human Bondage, The Razor’s Edge...* I don’t see what that’s got to do with the Don Juan Chinaman.”

Robert sat down on the bottom riser of the stairs leading to the upper level. “Mother’s morbidly shy. Even when we were children, she could never hold her own in social situations. Before Dad died she hadn’t any close friends outside his social circle.” Robert spoke in a plodding, unhurried manner, such that it was unclear whether he was addressing his sister or carrying on a interior monologue. “W.S. Maugham was socially inept. He stuttered and felt inadequate in public. His homosexual lover, Frederick Haxton was an extrovert, a glib and witty conversationalist. Without Haxton’s clever tongue, Maugham probably would have ended up a social recluse.”

“I certainly hope you’re not suggesting...”

“When an agoraphobic, sixty-year-old woman invites a poor widower for tea, it’s a mitzvah, a worthy deed, not reason for sordid speculation.” Naomi winced violently. Her blotchy, bloated face morphed through a series of unflattering grimaces. He could have said more, but Robert’s sister looked like she might deposit her supper on the living room rug.

“He’s after her money. You read about these things in the tabloids every day. Some emotionally vulnerable widow fritters her life savings away on some silver-tongued Romeo.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“Snuff the life out of this bathetic farce before it ends in tragedy.” Retreating to the front door, Naomi flashed her brother a dirty look. “And for the record, that W.S. Maugham remark was a cheap shot.”

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The following Tuesday Mr. Chen returned with Wei-shan. The dog had dropped a half pound and was stronger but only marginally so. “She gets out of breath easily.” He held the pet against his chest protectively. “And every morning has the coughing fits, but other than that...”

Robert listened to the heart. The murmur hadn’t gotten much worse. “You’re giving her the pills twice daily?” The older man nodded. “I’ll be back in a moment.” He took the dog into an adjacent examining room and drew two vials of blood. “Are you familiar with acupuncture?” Robert asked when he returned.

Mr. Chen ran his fingers through a limp mass of thinning hair. “No more than most people.”

“I recently treated a Saint Bernard with epilepsy. The dog suffered crippling seizures on a daily basis. Anti-convulsive medicine didn’t worked.” He reached out and scratched Wei-shan behind the ear. “A colleague just down the road was using acupuncture in his holistic practice. I thought he was a crackpot, but out of desperation referred them there.”

“And?”

Robert smiled sheepishly. “By the second acupuncture treatment, the grand mal seizures disappeared. The dog has been symptom free.”

“Can he cure heart murmurs?”

“Unfortunately it doesn’t work that way.”

Cracking the examining room door, Robert accompanied Mr. Chen back to the waiting room. The Oriental pointed at a twenty dollar bill with Andrew Jackson’s stern, chisel-chinned image staring out from a metallic framed hanging from the far wall. “Our seventh president... not the nicest human being that ever walked the planet.”

As Wei-Shan’s devoted master explained things ‘Old Hickory’ expanded the spoils system during his presidency to strengthen his political base. During the Nullification Crisis he declared that states did not have the right to challenge federal laws. He singlehandedly destroyed the national bank by vetoing the renewal of its charter, championed the Indian Removal Act, forcibly removing thousands of Native Americans to the Indian Territories of Oklahoma. “Because of his treachery and ruthlessness in battle, the Seminoles nicknamed him ‘Sharp Knife’”

The door opened and a brunette dragged an uncooperative bulldog into the foyer. Only eight weeks old, the cream-colored puppy with tan markings already weighed four times more than Wei-shan. The bulldog would ultimately top out at half a hundred pounds. She was lovable, lethargic, pigheaded, disagreeable and indiscriminately slobbered over anyone who extended a hand in friendship. “He kept slaves,” Robert noted.

“Over his lifetime, he owned upwards of three hundred.” The Chinaman lowered Wei-Shan to the floor and the two dogs began to sniff each other. “During Jackson’s time many slaves escaped bondage in Georgia and Alabama, running off to live with the Seminoles in Florida. Descendants of those original runaways established a peaceful farming community around an abandoned Spanish fort deep inside the territory. Jackson took an army of Southern whites illegally into the territory, attacked the free black community, murdered 270 men, women and

children and then took the rest back to Georgia and Alabama and gave them to any whites claiming to be descendants of the owners of the original runaways!"

"High crimes and misdemeanors," Robert muttered. Mr. Chen's historical musings were always entertaining, but he had to get back to work. The bulldog nuzzling his left leg needed a distemper shot and then there was the Chihuahua in the adjacent room with loose bowels. "And for that we elect him to the highest office."

"Twice!" Retrieving his pet, the older man who every Patriots' Day dressed up in full Redcoat regalia with musket and powder horn – the only British soldier of questionable parentage - disappeared into the parking lot.

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Summer petered out in a final blast of bone-wearying humidity coupled with scorching heat. One Sunday in mid-September, Robert stopped by his mother's apartment. Mrs. Goldfarb was watching the evening news. "Did you get the invitation?"

The question caught him momentarily off guard. "Joel's bar mitzvah. The third week in October." Naomi's youngest son, decked out in prayer shawl and yarmulke, would be reciting the ceremonial Hebrew verses and reading from the torah.

"Hungry?"

Robert shook his head in the negative.

Mrs. Goldfarb lowered the volume on the TV several decibels, rose and went to the kitchen. A minute later she returned with a glass of black raspberry soda and plate of coconut macaroons. "Too bad you didn't come a half hour earlier." She handed him a sticky cookie and napkin. "Mr. Chen and Wei-shan were visiting."

Strange! Robert had been to visit his mother on at least a dozen occasions since running Wei-shan's blood work, and she never mentioned either the Oriental or his hairy companion. "And how's the dog doing?"

Mrs. Goldfarb shrugged noncommittally. "No better or worse than the rest of us. The dog coughs her fool head off whenever she gets overly excited and still has to be carried up and down stairs."

"That's to be expected," Robert replied. The lapdog's thorax was an anatomically claustrophobic space, no bigger than a one-bedroom, efficiency apartment for the animal's most precious organs. Wei-shan's swollen heart was pressing on the lungs. As she slept, fluid built up, leading to the coughing-retching episodes. Sometimes, in worse case scenarios, the delicate trachea collapsed from physical duress, the lungs hemorrhaged. But Robert had no intention sharing that morbid bit of incidental trivia with either his mother or Wei-shan's master.

"Harry is a history buff," Mrs. Goldfarb said.

"Yes, I know." Robert couldn't linger. He had to get home. His daughter was taking skating lessons and he needed to shuttle her to the rink. "The dog is doing reasonably well, then?"

"She hasn't had any more fainting fits, if that's what you mean." Mrs. Goldfarb fidgeted with her stubby hands, glanced at her son briefly and looked away. "Regarding Joel's bar mitzvah, Mr. Chen will be accompanying me."

"Okay." Robert was having trouble visualizing the scene. There would be the traditional ice sculptures, a chopped liver pâté, a sea of Semitic faces, the bearded, ultra-conservative Rabbi Jacob Goldstein decked out in an ornate robe and the widower, Harry Chen.

"What about Wei-shan... is she on the guest list?"

"I already told your sister," Mrs. Goldfarb ignored the silly banter, "and, needless-to-say she didn't take the news very well."

"When did you speak with her?"

"A half hour ago."

Robert did some mental calculations. Either there would be a shrill message waiting for him on the answering machine or, more likely, Naomi would show up unannounced as he was preparing for bed and harangue him for the better part of an hour with her paranoid conspiracy theories.

"Bringing Mr. Chen... it's non-negotiable," Mrs. Goldfarb picked up the thread of her previous remark. "At my delicate age, a woman does as she pleases."

"Naomi seems to think Mr. Chen has ulterior, pecuniary motives."

"Yes, she told me so in rather graphic terms."

Robert could picture his sister – a female version of Old Hickory - haranguing the mother with scandalous accusations. "And what do you think?"

"Mr. Chen is an old man with a sick dog."

An old man with a sick dog...

Wei-shan's breathing was labored, too shallow, too rapid - the flailing heart too weak for the extravagant, insatiable demands of the flesh. Studying the animal's rheumy eyes over the past year, Robert witnessed physical distress, hopelessness and fear. He also sensed an abiding love for the frail Chinaman who carried her into the examining room.

When Robert finished the medical workup and the visit was over, the elderly widower lifted his dog in a scrupulously efficient manner. It was the sort of thing only a savvy animal breeder or vet would ever notice. Harry Chen grabbed the animal rather forcefully by the scruff of the neck, curled the free hand around the dog's hind quarters slipping the splayed fingers beneath the belly. Lifting with both hands in a deft, choreograph motion, he cradled the torso across the length of his left forearm. The other arm immediately engaged the rib cage forming a perfect cradle - a warm and comforting bed of flesh. The dog was an invalid; any awkward or jarring motion an affront to the infirmed. Only a man who had rehearsed that move a hundred - no, a thousand - times could pull it off with such effortless aplomb. The animal's suffering congealed in a solid lump of heartache that played itself out in the corners of Mr. Chen's thin lips along with lingering moistness in the corners of his eyes.

Robert's sister called Mr. Chen a conniving lothario, a gold-digging, slant-eyed charlatan. She never saw how he lifted his best friend, never witnessed the intimacy, the commonality, between the Chinaman and his damaged dog.

On the landing Robert waited for the elevator.

Ding! A bell sounded softly and the lift arrived just as the door to Mrs. Goldfarb's apartment creaked open. "Mr. Chen will be accompanying me to Joel's bar mitzvah," the older woman stated in a terse, no-nonsense tone.

"Yes, I heard you the first time."

"If Naomi continues to make a hullabaloo, I simply won't attend."

Robert stepped into the elevator but leaned back out just as the door began to close. "Neither will I, Mother."

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## The Moribund Moose

At 8 p.m., Ruth Ostrowski cracked the bathroom faucet and began filling the tub at a lazy dribble. Except for a slight limp, the aftermath of hip surgery, the pear-shaped, soft-bellied woman moved about the cramped bathroom with the somnolent ease of a tai chi master. Before the bath was half full, a rust-pocked Subaru with a blown muffler rumbled into the driveway. Her five-year-old grandson, Clyde, trudged up the brick walkway, a bulging pillowcase slung over his shoulder. The dark-haired boy wore a tattered, flannel jacket, too short at the wrists and flimsy for the frigid, late December weather. Noticeably underweight with knobby knees and ankles, the child exuded a feral wariness as he sidled, like an under-aged convict assigned a new cell block, toward the house. The boy's mother watched from the car. A minute passed before the noisy engine fired up and she was gone.

Hustling Clyde into the bathroom, Ruth methodically stripped him naked. Straight black hair framed an economical mouth and walnut-colored eyes. The skin glowed pallid, almost ivory, below an unruly mop of dusky hair. "I'll be just a moment." She carried the soiled clothes and underwear to the front door and flung them outside on the frosty stoop. In the bathroom, she fished a container of Kwell from the medicine cabinet and began pulling a fine comb through the child's black hair.

"Ain't got no nits this time, Nanna."

Putting the comb aside, she kissed the boy's neck. "A precautionary gesture." Ruth felt the words congeal in her throat along with a decade of unanswered prayers.

Clyde poked distractedly a scab on his leg. "Mommy's sending me a postcard from Muscle Beach."

Ruth's husband, Fred, wandered into the bathroom and sat down on the toilet seat. An easygoing Taurus by temperament, he was a big-boned, slope-shouldered man. "Melba flying to L A?"

Ruth adjusted the chrome lever and increased the flow of warm water. "Smitten by wanderlust and an ex-con named Ralphy." She ran the soap between Clyde's toes and the clear water clotted over with a dingy film. Bending over the tub, she dowsed his fine hair with avocado shampoo. "Do me a favor," she said without looking up. "There's a pile of dirty clothes outside the front door. Put them in the washer along with the contents of the pillow case and run everything through the light-load cycle."

"Detergent?"

"Arm and Hammer... on the counter by the light switch. Half a cup should suffice."

Fred went off to see to the laundry but returned a minute later. "Found this at the bottom of the pillow case." He held a tattered library book. Six months overdue, the slim volume chronicled a boy's trip to an island off the coast of Indonesia to visit the Komodo dragons.

When he returned, Fred intercepted his wife just outside the bathroom door. He rubbed his stubbly chin. "You had that appointment yesterday. What'd the doctor say?"

Ruth Ostrowski's midlife crisis - if that's what it truly was - hadn't come in the normally prescribed manner. Rather, it snuck up on her incrementally, one negligible tribulation after another; it bushwhacked her with night sweats and terrors, sent her caterwauling toward

menopause and the outer rim of her twilight years. And now, compounding her inner blight, the first frost, like a silver-haired, uninvited guest, blanketed the New England landscape. “Psychiatrist,” Ruth corrected. “It’s okay to use the ‘P’ word.”

She waved a pair of slightly dingy underwear in the air. “Clyde’s waiting.”

“He can wait a minute longer,” Fred said gently. “What’d the shrink say?”

“Dr. Shulman says I’m suffering an involuntional depression, a sadness that simply wells up from inside. I fall to pieces for no apparent reason. Which is to say, I am a fraud, phony, dissembler, emotional charlatan, impostor - a woman who hasn’t even earned the right to her foolish misery.”

“What else?”

“The depression’s just a symptom, not the root cause. He gave me some pills and billed my insurance for a hundred-fifty bucks.”

Fred shrugged. “Take the medication; we’ll worry about ‘root causes’ later.”

“I flushed the pills down the toilet before breakfast. The entire bottle.”

Fred groaned. “Cripes!” Even when upset, an evenhanded sympathy undercut his sarcasm. He eyed his watch. “We’re low on milk. I’m going to the market. Might as well pick up some extra fruit and cereal.”

Ruth nodded, her lips stretched thin with impatience. “We’ll be just fine.” He kissed his wife on the cheek and disappeared out the back door.

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Clyde cupped his hands together, a familiar ritual. From under the sink, Ruth produced a can of Palmolive shaving cream and squeezed a spiral mound onto his outstretched hands, and the boy smeared the foam on the sliding shower door - impromptu finger paint. Twenty years earlier, she had done the same for Clyde’s mother. The ritual could last upwards of half an hour, depending on the child’s ingenuity; the cleansing of body parts was only a small - in some ways, insignificant - aspect of the whole.

“Momma don’t bathe but once a month,” Clyde said. Ruth had let the water down and the boy was slithering back and forth on his belly in the last, few inches of tepid water. “Says it robs a person of their natural, body oils.”

“That’s an old wives’ tale,” Ruth replied, gathering her grandson in the plush folds of a terry cloth towel.

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On the living room mantel was a picture of Clyde’s mother in her early teens - sunburned, lithe, svelte, and drug-free. Now a dozen years later when Melba came to visit, her cellulite-encrusted buttocks spilled over the sides of the rattan, kitchen chair, causing the woven seat to sag like a hammock. The woman never bothered bras.

Melba, the maternal moron, the frumpy, wild-eyed woman with the IQ of Brussels sprouts and none of the redeeming virtues - twenty-four years ago she was baptized into the Christian community. Not that month-old infants consciously participated in the sacrament. The year following her confirmation, she stopped attending Holy Communion and confession. At fourteen, she was collared for shoplifting - a pocketful of candy bars, eye shadow, lipsticks and lubricated condoms - at the CVS two doors down from Ro-Jack’s Supermarket.



Later that same night, Ruth hovered just outside her daughter's room. Melba was lying fully-dressed on top of the disheveled bed reading *The National Enquirer*. "About what happened earlier today ..."

"I stole a few shitty things." Melba picked at an inflamed mosquito bite on her elbow. "Five dollars-worth of crummy merchandise. Nail me to the goddamn cross, why don't you!"

"It's the principle." Ruth felt her conviction faltering.

"Yeah, the sacred principle." Melba was clearly bored with the conversation.

"Unfortunately it *is* the principle." Ruth rose to her feet. Her hip was beginning to throb. She had an appointment scheduled with an orthopedic surgeon for the middle of the week. Without another word, she limped from her daughter's room.

God had played a cruel trick on Ruth Ostrowski, placing Melba under a spell. Or perhaps it was the Devil - with God's tacit forbearance - who beguiled her daughter. Even Ruth's Biblical namesake, the Moabite widow and daughter-in-law of Naomi, eventually remarried and lived happily. With no wealthy landowners waiting to make an honest woman of her, Melba's prospects weren't nearly as promising.

Recently, Ruth had begun to dichotomize, to think of Melba as two separate entities: the good child (leading up to but not including adolescence) and the demonic beast possessed of evil urges and equally sordid intentions. Melba, who at twenty was having sex for money in the back seat of cars on Potters Avenue in South Providence, who passed bad checks and pawned stolen jewelry.

Melba didn't need psychotherapy so much as an exorcist.

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Ruth watered the living room plants then took the can upstairs to the bedroom to freshen the ferns and coleus. When she returned to the living room, Clyde was sitting on the sofa, his legs dangling a foot above the carpeted floor. "Your house is weird."

"We must do something," Ruth replied humorlessly, "to expand your vocabulary." She rubbed at a patch of eczema on her elbow. "And what, exactly, is the matter with my house?"

Clyde scrunched up his face. "It's too clean."

"Thank you, Amy Vanderbilt."

It was after eleven before Clyde settled in for the night. Crawling out from under the covers he curled up in his grandmother's lap. "What's wrong with your nose, nana?" Clyde asked when Ruth bent down to adjust the waistband on his pajamas.

"Nothing," she replied. "It's just shaped a bit differently."

As a landscape artist, Ruth understood the vagaries of form and line, how an otherwise pleasing sketch could be structurally undone by one unseemly flaw. In her particular case, a clear, milky complexion did little to enhance an otherwise unremarkable face. The wide, pulpy nose proved a disconcerting focal point, drawing attention away from a strong chin and full mouth. Age had only deepened the chasm between modestly pretty and disconcertingly plain.

"Did you know, Nana, Komodo dragons can grow ten feet long and 300 pounds?"

*Only a fifty pounds heavier than her flabby daughter.* "Imagine that!" Ruth eyed her grandson uncertainly.

“The lizards, which inhabit several tiny islands off Indonesia,” she read from the illustrated book, “run swiftly, swim, dive, dig, walk on their hind legs and climb trees. Unlike other reptiles, their body temperature remains constant day and night and they can survive up to six weeks without water.”

“Like camels,” Clyde interjected.

“The tongue is forked like a snake’s,” Ruth continued to read, editing as she went, “and, used for both taste and smell, can locate rotting carrion over five miles away.”

Clyde nuzzled his cheek against her forearm. “You left out the part where the dragon kills a water buffalo.” Ruth had purposely avoided reference to the water buffalo, fifteen times the dragon’s body weight. The dragon slaughtered the dumb animal by literally thrashing it to death with its muscular tail. Thump! Thump! Thump! In addition to water buffalo, the dragons supplemented their diet with domestic goats and an occasional villager or two.

*What sort of nitwit gives a five year-old such books?*

When Melba was the same age as Clyde, Ruth stocked the bookcase with Winnie-the-Poo, Beatrice Potter Classics (The Tales of Benjamin Bunny, Jemima Puddle-Duck, Jeremy Fisher and, of course, Peter Rabbit), Curious George, Ticki Ticki Tembo, and the Madeline series:

*“In an old house in Paris covered with vines,  
Lived twelve little girls in two straight lines....”*

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In the morning, Ruth sorted through the summer-weight clothing and quickly discovered nothing suitable. When she returned to the bedroom, Clyde had kicked his sneakers off and flung the socks into the far corner.

“Stupid socks!” He stuck his tongue out and made a razzing sound.

“What’s wrong with your socks?”

“They’re stooopid! Stoop, stoop, stooopid. The most ridiculous socks in the world. Even stupider than ...”

Ruth stared at the boy trying to decode the convoluted message implicit in his theatrical tirade. “That will get you far in life.” The woman located another pair of faded socks and bent forward but the child pulled his foot away. Grabbing the ankle, she fitted the sock over the toes, but Clyde stabbed the air violently, slingshotting the clean sock into the far corner of the room, bursting into hysterical laughter.

“This is getting tiresome,” Ruth muttered peevishly.

“Too small! All my socks are too small,” Clyde blubbered through a fog bank of tears then slumped against his grandmother’s chest and began sucking his thumb.

Only now, did Ruth actually look at the orphaned sock barely half as big as the child’s foot resting in her lap. The heel petered out around the instep, the remaining material, including trim, just barely covered his ankle. “How foolish of me,” she whispered. “How very, very foolish!” She kissed Clyde on each of his toes. “We’ll go to the mall and get you new clothes,” she spoke in a conciliatory tone. “What do you say?”

“I want my mommy.”

Ruth heated the car for ten minutes before bustling the boy off to the Emerald Square Mall. Four-toddler - all of the bedraggled clothes Clyde brought over were a full size or more too small. In the children's section of Sears Roebuck, Ruth located everything she needed. An hour later on the way back to the car, Clyde pulled up short and said, "The old socks were stupid. Stoop, stoop, stoop, stooopid!" He mouthed the words like a talisman, a verbal charm which, if invoked with sufficient sincerity, could ward off an army of evil spirits.

Back in the kitchen, Clyde wriggled his toes luxuriously in plush, new socks which rode halfway up his slender calves. "Let's color.."

"Haven't any crayons," Ruth replied, "but I know something that's even more fun." She brought the boy into the den. On an easel near the window was the crude draft of a painting she had begun months earlier, shortly before her mother's death from liver cancer.

For twenty years, Ruth Ostrowski worked at her oil paintings - mostly folk art motifs in the American primitive tradition - colorful and carefree New England land and seascapes done in a simple, unadorned style. Despite modest success, she always considered herself a pretender - more dilettante than serious painter. Not that she wasn't accomplished in the technical sense, but her mother's funeral and recent emotional upset had sapped her strength, paralyzed her will.

Clyde selected a china bristle brush, a hard-to-find, wedge-shaped beauty which Ruth had special ordered from an art supply house in New Jersey. Stabbing at a mound of vermilion paint, he smeared it on the canvass. A flock of grayish-brown whimbrels bobbed easily on the calm water. In the distance, stiff plume grass and salt spray roses bloomed safely beyond the reach of the child's outstretched arm. "Nice choice!" Ruth clapped her hands, a robust pitter-patter.

Anticipating Clyde's artistic excesses, the grandmother began mixing some of the more extravagant colors - neon purples, aquamarines, blood oranges and lemony yellows - leaving them scattered in glistening globs on the pallet.

"Does your mother ever color with you?"

"Mmmm." Clyde was too absorbed in his brushwork to give the question any weighty consideration. The child swirled thick, gooey paint over the top right corner of the painting and watched it drip to the bottom of the canvass eradicating a marshy wetland where phragmites grass rose four feet out of the water on elegant, plumed stems. The prickly grasses quickly disappeared, buried beneath the onslaught of dripping sludge. Clyde leaped in the air and pirouetted. "So beauuuutiful!"

Ruth took the paintbrush, cleaned it with a rag dipped in mineral spirits before handed it back to the child. Clyde sniffed the bristles before settling on a lime green which he mixed with ochre, producing an uneven blend of gray-green and sickly orange. He scraped the wet brush across the sky, and the weather grew abruptly overcast, menacing.

"Every night I play Candy Land."

"How nice! Your mother -"

"No, I play alone," he interrupted, anticipating his grandmother's thoughts. "Sometimes I get Queen Frostine and that makes me happy. But last night I drew the plum card and had to go back to the beginning."

Queen Frostine. From her own experience as a young mother, Ruth knew that the card with the sweet-faced, blue fairy transported the lucky player to the far edge of the Ice Cream Sea, within spitting distance of a winning card. "That always made me happy, too."

The phone rang. Ruth went into the bedroom and picked up the receiver. “Would have called earlier, but there was a slight problem.” Fred was on the other end of the line. “One of our commercial accounts, a restaurant, is without heat. Ignition transformer blew... had to get a supplier in Westerly to messenger the part up to us. What a nightmare!”

Though Ruth had no interest in such matters, her husband always described mechanical problems in graphic detail. An aquastat was circulating cold water; sediment build up was clogging a Watts Regulator—as if mentioning the brand made an appreciable difference in her understanding. “It creates a hotter spark, like the coil in a car.”

Ruth gazed out the window. In the yard a black poplar stood naked to the rough wind; the spade-shaped leaves and feathery gold catkins tinged with raspberry had long since blown away. The wind had picked up, hurling a fistful of maple leaves soundlessly against the window. Another week or so and the maples, too, would be stripped bare. “What does?” Ruth asked.

“The transformer,” Fred said. “How’s Clyde?”

“He’s painting in the other room.”

“I’ll check back in a few hours,” he said and hung up.

“Great-grandma went to live with the angels,” Clyde said without looking up when Ruth returned.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“In heaven.” Clyde shook his head with the brashness, the false bravado unique to egomaniacs and very young children. A half hour later, the beach south of Chappaquiddick was gone, washed away in smeary tsunami of psychedelic hues; all the foliage and birds had been annihilated, caught up in a cyclone of fantastic color, buried beneath the soggy rubble of paint several layers thick.

Clyde stepped back, placing the ruined brush next to the palette. “All done!”

Ruth knelt down, kissed the child. “From Grandma Moses to Jackson Pollock in ten minutes... the abstract expressionists have nothing on you.” She put the paints away and went off to check the mail.

When she returned, Clyde was in the living room admiring a picture in a beige frame - a print of the French actress, Jeanne Samary. Ruth had purchased it during a Renoir retrospective at the Boston Museum of Fine Art. “Nice, isn’t it?”

“Pretty woman!” Again the ingenuous certitude.

The lustrous skin tones along with the artist’s clever use of chiaroscuro intrigued Ruth. She admired the seamless melding of impressionist and traditional styles, the artist’s ability to paint a single figure and make the subject infinitely interesting - aesthetically irresistible. “I went to the museum hoping to break through my creative impasse ...” Ruth knew that what she was doing - talking to a child this way - was foolish, but she couldn’t help herself. “To jump-start my moribund muse.”

“Yes, I understand!” the young boy hadn’t a clue what his grandmother was talking about.

“Now I’m feeling even *less* inclined to pick up a brush.”

“Don’t be sad, Grandma,” Clyde urged with genuine sympathy.

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Ruth's mother died the week before Easter. The day she passed away, Ruth drove through a blinding thunderstorm to Our Lady of Fatima Hospital in North Providence and rode the elevator to the third floor. In a room at the far end of the hall, an old woman with sunken cheeks lay sleeping. A feeding tube taped to the side of her nose hung limply on the pillow; another transparent catheter trailed alongside the mattress, draining its content into a half-filled plastic bag.

"Good morning, mother." She kissed the woman but there was no response. Her pale skin felt clammy. The silvery hair was rather long and lay neatly about her forehead. "Aunt Theresa stopped by last night and asked for you." She scanned her face for any fleeting signs of recognition.

Her mother's metastatic liver cancer spread from a distant cancerous organ, and yet it was the recently diseased liver that was killing her. The disease was twenty times more common than hepatocellular liver cancer, four times more frequent in men than women - not that these obscure, oncological facts offered Ruth much solace. From November through March, her mother lost thirty pounds. When they brought her for testing the admitting doctor reported, "She's quite anemic. Ascites are pooling in the abdominal cavity."

"Ascites?"

"Serous fluids," the physician explained. For all his technical expertise, the doctor's tone was unnervingly dry, businesslike. "We'll need an MRI and needle biopsy for tissue confirmation."

*MRI. Needle biopsy.* Ruth felt utterly wrecked inside. "You don't seem terribly optimistic."

The doctor looked at her flatly. "Short of miracles, these cases don't produce many happy endings."

A dark-skinned nurses aide entered the room. She took the woman's pulse and blood pressure, scribbling some notes in a manila folder. "Was my mother awake at all today?" Ruth asked.

"Earlier when we bathed her." She fluffed the pillow and straightened the covers. "Doctor upped her medication so she don't hardly feel no pain." The aide disappeared out the door.

"I brought some poems," Ruth said, drawing a paperback from her raincoat. The spring afternoon was still light but with the false brightness that precedes a quick fading to dusk. She opened the book at random. "The one we read yesterday about the meadow mouse was awfully nice, don't you think?" Ruth directed her words at the aluminum bed rail; a steady trickle of urine eased down the tube into the collection bag. "Of course, the second half of the poem, when the mouse climbed out of the shoe box and ran off, was a bit unsettling." Her voice trailed away. Ruth momentarily closed the book, resting it on her stomach, and slumped in the chair.

Yesterday, she read straight through for half an hour in a hushed, singsong voice. Had her mother heard, grasped the symbolism, the literary allegory, the author's evanescent stream of consciousness? The presence of mind required to grasp a Roethke poem - had this been bartered away for so many extra milligrams of Demerol? Besides the bruised flesh, what was left of Ruth Ostrowski's mother?

The black aide stuck her head in the doorway. "I was going to bathe your mother, but if you'd rather I come back ..."

Ruth swallowed hard. "What's your name?"

"Andrea."

"Give me five minutes, Andrea."

"Okay." She went away.

Coloreds - that's what they called black people when Ruth was coming of age. You said 'colored people' - the connotation not nearly as nasty as it sounded at face value - and relatives smirked - not scornfully, not in deprecating rage, but rather, as though at some private joke to which young children were not privy. Now this soft-spoken black woman with a gracious smile was doing for Ruth's mother what hardly anyone else in the family possessed either the stomach or presence of mind. Ruth opened the book again and thumbed through to the end of the slim volume. "Moss-Gathering... one of your favorites..."

*To loosen with all ten fingers held wide and limber  
And lift up a patch, dark green,  
the kind for lining cemetery baskets,  
Thick and cushiony like an old-fashioned doormat,...*

When the poem was done she regretted the unfortunate reference to cemetery baskets, but her mother never stirred, and Andrea had returned with an armful of towels and washcloths. A full two-thirds of the light had drained out of the late afternoon sky. The aide flicked the florescent lights on. Ruth placed the book of poems underneath her mother's folded clothes in the nightstand and left.

After the funeral, Ruth felt her mother's absence like a phantom limb - a wedge of her soul gouged away, a brightness diminished. Forever. When you reached a certain age, Ruth mused, you didn't replace such losses; rather, they reconfigured your life or what little was left of it.

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At six o'clock, Ruth gave her grandson a light supper, bath and put him to bed. Clyde rose to pee. Fifteen minutes later, the child came shuffling into the kitchen. "A bedtime story."

Ruth led him back to bed and tucked the child under the covers. "Don't know any."

Clyde sat straight up and tugged at Ruth's sleeve. His dark hair smelled sweetly of herbal shampoo. "What about the moose? The mori, mori ... moribund moose."

Ruth felt the breath momentarily snag like a jagged bone in her throat. Her features slouched in a self-effacing smile. "Yes, I'd almost forgotten." Fluffing the spare pillow, Ruth eased down on top of the covers. "The moribund moose," she turned the disjointed syllables over in her mouth like flat stones. "Once upon a time in a far away land over the mountains and beyond the river, lived a moribund moose, Natasha by name."

Clyde lifted up on pointy elbows. "I've a friend at school named Natasha."

Ruth put an arm around the child, pulling him lightly against her breast. "Yes well, same name different genus. One day an evil witch put a spell on her, changing the beast into a chronic worry wart and prophetess of doom."

Clyde shifted on his side. "Screwed-up moose!"

"Complicating matters was Natasha's cosmetic anomaly: an utterly shapeless, nondescript snout... a nose you wouldn't wish on your worse, four-legged enemy. Not that the

other animals in the forest particularly cared since, by nature, moose are solitary, reclusive creatures, and even the most extroverted hardly ever join civic organizations.”

“You talk crazy!” Clyde tittered and rolled off the side of the bed. He fingered a spot on the flannel pajamas where the collar chafed his neck. “Something’s wrong.”

Ruth lit the light. Examining the material, she got a pair of scissors and snipped the cloth tag. On the remnant in fine print was written:

*Hecho en Bangladesh.*

*Ver Al Dorso Para Cuidado.*

Below the Spanish was the English translation. Ruth dropped the multiethnic tag into the wastepaper basket. “How’s that?”

Clyde swiveled his neck back and forth. “Much better!”

On the maple dresser lay two, triple-packs of children’s underwear - six T-shirts and underpants - plus a week’s supply of winter-weight socks. Two flannel shirts, a turtleneck pullover, corduroys and a wool hat. Melba might call in a day or so, but Ruth wouldn’t bother to tell her about the new clothes. Hecho en Bangladesh. Ver al dorso para cuidado

“The story,” Clyde interrupted her reveries. “Did you forget the story?”

Ruth turned the light off and returned to bed. “Natasha, the moribund moose, wandered the forest seeking a sorcerer, a fairy godmother, a benevolent sprite - a kind-hearted and gracious spirit with magical powers to break the witch’s spell.”

A car turned the corner. A beam of light sluiced through the window, panning the far wall before the room faded black again. “Queen Frostine has a crown and magic wand,” Clyde said.

Crooking her arm, Ruth peered at an imaginary watched strapped to the back of her wrist. “It’s seventy-nine, eleven. Very late.”

“The Candyland queen can fix everything!” Clyde insisted.

“Queen Frostine,” Ruth said. “Really?”

“Yes, of course,” the child cooed soothingly. “Queen Frostine has a magic wand; she’ll break the evil witch’s spell and everything will be super-duper in the morning.” He wriggled his rump burrowing deeper into the mattress.

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At three in the morning, Fred rose to pee. Ruth waited until her husband settled himself back under the covers and leaned closer. “When Melba was still a baby, I bought a children’s edition *Lives of the Saints*. Do you remember?”

“A slim paperback,” Fred confirmed, “with an ecstatic nun on the cover.”

Turning over on her side, Ruth fluffed her pillow. “So many wonderful stories to choose from: Christopher, the Christ bearer and patron saint of travelers; Edward, the first Christian king of England; the scholarly Jerome, who lived in a desert cave; Stanislaus Koska, the nobleman turned beggar turned Jesuit novice; Saints Philip Neri and Mathew and Louis and Robert and Augustine.” Ruth thumped her husband playfully on the chest. “As I remember, Melba favored Sebastian, the Roman army captain tied to a tree and shot full of arrows by his fellow soldiers.”

Fred chuckled, a hollow, rasping sound. “A saintly pincushion.”

Two doors down, Clyde whimpered, a soft, keening sound. “What are we going to do?”

“Don’t know.” Fred put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. “Melba’s hopeless, but, if we could cut our losses and save the boy, that would be something.”

After a while, Ruth could hear her husband’s regular breathing. In the spare bedroom, Clyde let out mournful yelp like a mortally stricken animal and the house fell silent. “Save the boy,” Ruth murmured. Save the boy. Save the boy. Save the boy.

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A week after Clyde’s arrival, Ruth sat down with her lawyer. “I want sole custody of my grandchild.”

“Which implies you share custody presently with your daughter,” the lawyer replied.

“Unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

“You want to become the child’s legal guardian?” The lawyer drew an elaborate daisy on his legal pad with a gold-nibbed fountain pen. “Tell me about the mother.” Ruth told him everything. As Ruth listed her concerns, the daisy gave way to a carpeted lawn with trees, verdant shrubbery and an assortment of wildflowers. “Melba’s soliciting and prior drug arrests count for nothing,” the lawyer observed. “Clyde is Melba’s biological child and, as such, you *have* no legal claim or status.”

Ruth glanced out the window. A squirrel was foraging its way haphazardly across the spring grass in the direction of a scraggly alder. “She’s an unfit mother,” Ruth blurted out, continuing to follow the squirrel’s higgledy-piggledy journey.

“That’s not for you or me to say,” the lawyer replied tersely. “A worse-case scenario: you report your debauched daughter to DCYF; they investigate, take the child away and put him in a foster home more disagreeable than his present living arrangement.”

“I came here for help. This isn’t what I expected.”

By way of reply, the lawyer simply drew another ornate flower. Leaning back in the chair, he threw the fountain pen aside. Ruth waited for the lawyer to signal the meeting’s end. Instead, he smiled glacially and rubbed his jaw. “Melba’s erratic... out of control. Your best course of action may be to let her self-destruct three thousand miles away then move ahead opportunistically.”

Ruth felt a fierce clamoring in her chest. “I’m not sure I’m following you.”

The lawyer rose, as though his last remark was the anticipated farewell, and ushered her out the door.

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Later that night, Ruth was prodded awake by an insistent, bony finger. Clyde stood quietly beside the bed. “I had a bad dream.”

Hardly a night passed when the boy didn’t cry out in his sleep - rebukes, recriminations, justifications and denials of wrongdoing. But mostly, he repeated the same two words - ‘not bad’ - an unconscious act of contrition for his ravaged childhood. “A nightmare,” she confirmed.

“Uncle Ralphy was yelling and calling me names.” Ruth lifted the covers and gathered him onto the bed. “When Uncle Ralphy comes to visit, he don’t wear no pajamas to bed.” The boy shook his head, confirming the utter truthfulness of his reportage. “He’s a noodis. Even goes around naked in the morning, too.”

*When Uncle Ralphy comes to visit, he don’t wear no pajamas ...*



Uncle Ralphie - prematurely bald, with the letters D-E-A-T-H and P-R-I-C-K etched crudely in India ink across his hairy knuckles was clearly one of God's less perfect creations – a botched effort. As though a search light had suddenly flooded the room, Ruth mashed a hand over her eyes and stifled her teacherly instinct to correct the double negative. “And your mother?”

Clyde yawned and draped an arm over her neck. Ruth removed his hand and kissed the palm. Fred stirred; he was awake but resting quietly with his eyes closed. “When Uncle Ralphie visits, she's noodis, too.”

Ruth felt her husband flinch, an involuntary gesture. Before dozing off, Fred would digest this latest abomination: the image of his beloved Melba flouncing *au naturel* around the cramped, two-bedroom apartment like an extra in a low budget, porn flick. He would digest then excrete the image from his body, mind, and universe.

“You ought to know,” Ruth spoke deliberately as much for her husband's benefit as the child's, “that nudists go about naked for reasons of health, never convenience or crass laziness.”

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A week passed. No word came from Melba - not so much as a picture postcard of the body builders, roller-skaters, musicians, dancers, jugglers or nutcase firewalkers on the Venice boardwalk. Ruth found day care - the same one she used the last time Melba ran off on short notice - to take Clyde. She rose an hour early and prepared omelets with mushrooms and onions which she sautéed separately and folded into the thickening egg batter along with grated cheddar cheese. On weekend she heated the waffle iron, moistening the lumpy batter with yoghurt or kefir. She cut the waffle into bite-sized nuggets, slathered it with whipped butter and maple syrup before handing Clyde a fork. Evenings, sometimes she fixed oatmeal - the original, steel-cut, coarse-grain not the quick-cooking variety. The oatmeal burping like a volcanic lava pit, she splashed a quarter inch of milk into the bowl; to this she added a generous dash of light cream, brown sugar and sliced banana.

*Joyful. Sorrowful. Glorious.* For Melba's sake, Ruth prayed the rosary nightly, focusing on the solemn mysteries of Christ's life. On the fifth bead following ten Hail Mary's, she always added the Fatima Prayer:

*O my Jesus, forgive us our sins,  
save us from the fires of hell  
and lead all souls to heaven,  
especially those who have  
most need of your mercy.*

The Fatima Prayer was optional, but she favored the inclusive language and, in spiritual matters, it always paid to hedge one's bets. At the end of the rosary on the gold-lacquered medal that connects the beads, Ruth recited the Hail Holy Queen, the perfect counterpart to the more pragmatic Fatima Prayer. The Blessed Mother would accept the sinner's misdeeds, forgive and cleans.

Saturday morning Melba called. The trip had hit a snag. “Ran out of money and the creep kicked me out.” Ruth bit her bottom lip. Where Melba was concerned, she always felt like the

attendant with a short-handled broom trailing the elephants during a parade. "I spent last night at a homeless shelter and need cash to fly home."

"Want to speak to your son?"

"Clyde's not the issue."

"Clyde's never the issue," Ruth muttered. "I'll consider your request." She hung up the phone.

Ruth took Clyde to the Capron Park Zoo. They watched the zookeeper feed the smelly, unkempt lamas, then craned their necks in the tropical rain forest and studied fruit bats dozing in the artificially mist-shrouded trees. In the playground just outside the park, Clyde pulled himself, hand over fist, up a rope ladder to a platform with a corkscrew-shaped slide. His legs still bowed rickety like a cowboy's with too much saddle time, but the upper body was filling out nicely, the face less gaunt. Twenty feet in the air, he hurried into the mouth of the plastic slide and reappeared shortly at the bottom.

Ruth pictured her daughter sleeping in a homeless shelter surrounded by winos, welfare types, runaways and mental defectives. In the morning a simple, no-frills breakfast, if she was lucky, then back on the street until sundown. The image produced a sharp surge of regret but no guilt. Clyde came running up breathless. "I want a white shark sherbet."

Twenty feet away, a Hispanic girl with a runny nose was slurping on a frozen treat shaped like a fish on a Popsicle stick. "A white shark sherbet," Ruth repeated as they headed off in the direction of the snack bar.

Thursday night at three a.m. the phone rang, bludgeoning Ruth from a sound sleep. "Hi, it's me. I'm in a bind."

"A bind," Ruth repeated absently. In the background she could hear a typewriter clacking away. An Officer O'Rourke was being paged over a staticky intercom. "What do you want, Melba?"

There was another nasally request for Officer O'Rourke to report to the squad room. "Some goddamn money would be nice!"

Ruth lowered the receiver into her lap. The profanity and screaming that ensued was barely audible with the receiver nestled firmly into the folds of her cotton pajamas. On the bed next to her, Fred was snoring soundly; he never heard the phone. Through the open doorway twenty feet away, Ruth watched Clyde resting under the covers. Arms splayed back over his head, the child slept slack-jawed, lips slightly parted. "Opportunistically," Ruth murmured into the darkness as she eased the receiver quietly back on the phone and lay back down to sleep.

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## Fun with Dick and Jane

"Let's make it a short night," my wife, Irene, suggested as we turned onto the Cunningham's street.

Tuesday afternoon, she ran into Jane Cunningham in the supermarket. The software firm where her husband, Dick, worked had just put him in charge of a lucrative, overseas contract and the couple wanted to share the exciting news with friends. We didn't consider either one of them friends in the conventional sense, but I could hardly get angry with my wife. Jane comes on like a jackbooted Nazi storm trooper, and, after a while, you would jump off the Mystic-Tobin Bridge into Boston Harbor in the dead of winter just to be rid of the boorish beast.

"With that squat body and turned-up, snout of a nose, it's painful sitting in the same room with her."

"People can't help how they look," Irene replied.

"It would kill the woman to brush her teeth once a week?" The last time we visited, Jane reeked of halitosis and a grimy ridge of greenish-yellow gunk rimmed the gum line. And how she belittled her husband! She sniped at Dick, making snide comments about his nerdy appearance, the fact that he didn't know how to wash a load of laundry and similar such nonsense. One time in mixed company Jane sniggered, "Dickey wouldn't remember to wipe his pimply ass, if I didn't keep an extra roll of *Charmin* extra-soft on the vanity." Granted the woman had already downed three martinis, but if my wife ever talked to me like that, I would whack her upside the head with a pressure-treated two-by-four then debarked to a warmer climate.

"Hi, guys!" Dick ushered us into the living room. Thin with a sunken chest and pencil moustache, his brown hair flopped down over watery blue eyes.

"So what's all this exciting news?" Irene asked.

"It's not that big a deal." He smiled self-consciously. "Our corporation is opening a European division."

"What he conveniently omitted," Jane joined us from the kitchen, "is that management handpicked Dickey to oversee the new contract."

"I'll be flying to Munich for a couple of weeks around the end of the month," he confirmed. Irene gave him a brief hug and when she pulled away the guy was blushing, literally turning red in the face.

It was still light out and we went out on the deck. The weather was a balmy seventy degrees. A black swallowtail butterfly flitted among a messy overgrowth of wildflowers in the rock garden. On the far side of the fence, a neighbor was grilling T-bone steaks while his young sons kicked a soccer ball about the manicured lawn. Jane brought a cheese ball with an assortment of crackers from the kitchen. The cheese, which was dusted with crushed walnuts, tasted like sawdust. Guests seldom got anything decent to eat when they visited the Cunninghams. In addition to her other faults, the woman was stingy as hell.

"When Dickey caught wind of the position, he immediately signed up for a crash course in conversational German." Jane smeared an orangey wad of cheese on a whole wheat cracker and stuffed it in her mouth. "As long as we been together, he never showed an aptitude for much anything, neither hobbies nor vices." She erupted in a malicious, cackling laugh. "But none of the other programmers could speak a stitch of German," Jane glanced at her husband dismissively, "so it wasn't like he had much competition."

Jane stuck her pudgy face up under her husband's nose. "How you going to survive in *Deutschland* without a nanny to read you a bedtime story and tuck you in at night?" Jane cuffed him playfully on the side of the head, and Dick had to grab his horn rimmed glasses before they went flying off his ears.

"You'll want to visit the red light district," I quipped, more to rattle his obnoxious wife. Irene shot me a dirty look.

She could see where this was going, but before I could get up a head of steam, Jane interjected. "Tell them about the *Topic-a-Day* teaching method, while I get some more ice tea."

The sun, which had been hiding behind a cottony wad of late-afternoon clouds, reemerged to spraying the deck with a soft, luster. "Mrs. Steiner, the language instructor, picked a new topic each day - clothing, weather, sports, colors, food, politics, and so on - along with a hundred essential words,... just enough to get us by in social situations."

"And grammar?" I asked.

"We had basic text books for that plus a newspaper... a page or two, written on the level of what second or third graders might understand."

"How ingenious!" Irene noted. "Such a clever way to learn."

"Let me give you an example." Dick cleared his throat. "One day we were covering the four seasons along with the types of weather that - "

"Did he tell you about the German comic strips?" Jane suddenly returned, dragging the conversation off in a totally different direction. Dick slumped forward, his eyes growing dull and sipped at his drink. Somewhere in the house, a telephone rang and he went off to answer it.

"That milquetoast is gonna be the death of me!" Jane confided once her husband was out of earshot. "I've been worried half to death that, when he gets to Munich, those damn foreigners, are gonna eat him up alive."

"They're not foreigners," Irene noted.

"How's that?"

"Technically, Dick is travelling to *their* country."

"You know what I mean," Jane shot back in her gruff, take-no-prisoners tone. "In social situations, Dickey's clueless ... doesn't know how to hold his own." "If I'm not there to run interference, he stands around like a cigar store Indian."

Did Jane really think that, left to his own devices, her husband might show up his first day in Munich dressed in leather lederhosen with red suspenders, knee-length socks and an Alpine-style feather cap? Granted, the guy was unassertive, but in a quirky sort of way he got things done. Jane was all mouth - all fluster and bluster with nothing tangible to ever show for all her whacky pronouncements. Strangest of all was the woman's delusion that somehow she was the driving force, the brains in the relationship. "He learned a difficult foreign language in a short period of time and won the promotion on his own merits." I couldn't resist the impulse. "I think you're selling your husband short."

"Yeah, well I live with the nebbish and know his limitations." A disagreeable sound welled up in Jane's throat, never quite reaching her lips. "And, of course, Dickey's gonna need a decent wardrobe so I'm taking him shopping later today."

"At the mall, J.C. Penny and Filene's have a nice men's selection," Irene offered.

Jane rolled her eyes. "You can get the same crap at the bargain outlets for half the price."

"Sorry for the interruption." Dick returned. "So what did I miss?"

A half hour later, Jane brought Irene into the back yard to inspect the vegetable garden. "Want a beer?"

The question caught me by surprise. I always imagined Dick a teetotaler. Or at least that's what we had been led to believe never having seen him sipping anything stronger than a cup of Columbian coffee. "Beer would be nice."

He went and got a couple of Heineken longnecks, and we sat watching the women eighty feet away mucking about the pole beans and cherry tomatoes. "One day toward the end of the fifth month," Dick confided, "it hit me that I was no longer fumbling for words but actually thinking in a foreign language. Someone would ask a question and I answered in German... spontaneously, without hesitation or uncertainty."

As he spoke, Dick was absorbed in the process of peeling the green label from the front of the amber bottle. He really wasn't that goofy once you got him away from his castrating wife. I could imagine some sensible-minded woman might even find the man attractive in a phlegmatic sort of way. "The final week of class, the instructor handed out a short story written by a famous German writer."

Something in his demeanor abruptly changed.

The man sitting next to me wasn't Dick Cunningham. I don't mean to suggest that he had gone weird on me. Even to this day, I still don't comprehend what really happened. We were just sitting there sipping beers in late June with the goldfinches flitting about the shaggy hemlocks bordering the property, a lawnmower sputtering in the distance.

"A mild mannered apothecary marries a shrewish woman, a regular fishwife, who constantly berates her husband. The fellow goes off one Sunday morning on the pretext of purchasing the newspaper but never returns. Instead he travels to the port in Marseille and takes the ferry across to North Africa where he promptly joins the French Foreign Legion."

"All this in a German short story?"

"Would you like another Heineken?" We had only been by ourselves a few minutes but his beer was gone and he ran off to retrieve another. "Ten years later, the apothecary-turned-soldier-of-fortune returns home dressed in camouflage fatigues with a gun strapped to his hip. He's sunburned, twenty pound heavier, muscular and covered with dust."

"And how did the reunion work out?"

"Just as you might expect... at first the German hausfrau was so overjoyed to have her husband back, she showered him with kisses and platitudes." Jane waved at us from a row of bell peppers. Dick stared at the woman with mild indifference. "She even baked this huge strawberry shortcake to celebrate the homecoming."

"And then?"

"And then she started in again with the nagging. 'Where the hell were you all this time? The picket fence needs painting. Get rid of that moronic uniform!'"

Two-thirds of Dick's second beer was already gone as he positioned the rim up against his lips, upending the bottle. Glub. Glub. Glub. Glub. "The estranged husband jumps to his feet. Wrenching the revolver from its holster, he aims the muzzle at his wife's forehead and pulls the trigger."

"He kills her?"

"No, at the last second, he lowers the barrel and releases a round into the strawberry shortcake splattering his wife with whipped cream. The woman screams and faints dead away."

"And then?"

"He goes away never to be seen again."

"Nice story."

The waning sun ran up against a velvety cloud and was swallowed whole. "It's an allegory." A fleeting sliver of a smile creased his mouth. "More like an epiphany."

"Yes, I can see that." The women returned to the deck.

Later that night when we were lying in bed, I confided, "Dick is going to Germany on the pretext of setting up the new division; he isn't coming home." I told her about our conversation.

The room grew very still. "Dick Cunningham will do just fine." Irene finally broke the silence. "It's Jane that's gonna end up in a straight jacket on a locked ward at the *Institute of Mental Health*." Reaching beneath the covers, she patted me on the thigh. "Are you horny?"

"Too tired. Maybe tomorrow night."

"Goodnight." She rolled over on her side, and less than a minute later, my wife was snoring softly.

Back in the late nineteen-sixties, my parents were among the last batch of American children to sound out words using the *Fun with Dick and Jane* reader. Blonde-haired Jane, resplendent in her pink frock and Dick with his brown shorts and pale blue, wrinkle-free polyester shirt racing giddily down the street - they epitomized youthful innocence. And of course there was their darling puppy, Spot and playful, fluff-ball-of-a-kitty, Puff. *Fun with Dick and Jane* - I found a tattered copy of the reader in a drawer of my mother's personal effects after she passed away.

*Fun with Dick and Jane*. Jane Cunningham couldn't deliver the goods. She threw a sobering pail of ice water on any attempt at rambunctious fun.

Dick wanted fun.

He had no dog.

He had no cat.

No Spot. No Puff.

But he had a plan.

See Dick board the plane.

See Dick fly away.

Far, far away.

Bye Jane.

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## The Chiropractor's Assistant

A week before the poet, Gregory Stiles, was to read from his award-winning collection at Brown University, Elliot Slotnick threw his back out changing a flat tire. He almost had the wheel free of the axle with one rusty lug nut frozen tight. Setting his feet firmly on the asphalt, he gave the tire iron an extra twist and felt the icy burst of pain approximately eight inches up

from the base of his tailbone. Lumbar three. At least twice a year, he did something whacky, injuring the same part of his back.

The next afternoon he was lying on his stomach in the chiropractor's office, his mouth and nose protruding through a strategically placed hole in the leather-padded examining table. The pain in his back was miraculously gone, replaced by a dull, achy soreness. He recognized the soreness from previous injuries and luxuriated in the promise of restored health. Dr. Edwards, the chiropractor, had gone off to tend to the next client. His assistant, a zuftig blonde on the front side of middle age, spread a cold gel on his lower back; a moment later, she was massaging the area with an electronic device that made his skin tingle.

"Does that feel better, Mr. Slotnick?"

"Yes, it does, thank you." Sad to think this was the closest Elliot had come to female companionship in the past six months. "Yes, that feels much better!"

From his prone position Elliot's field of vision was extremely limited, but he could picture the attractive, white-frosted woman in his mind's eye. The way she walked with her wide shoulders thrown back and chin held erect. The cheekbones were high offsetting a pair of thin but delicate lips. Elliot had spent the better part of his adolescence well into young adulthood lusting after erotic goddesses like her. Was there a brain in that gorgeous head? What were her interests and hobbies, her aspirations, her dreams? He peered down at the floor through the hole in the table and watched a dust bunny no bigger than his fingernail drift aimlessly across the linoleum.

The assistant left the room so he could put his clothes on. As he buttoned his shirt, Elliot studied himself in the full-length mirror. Upon his arrival a half hour earlier, the right shoulder sagged two inches below its mate. A sublaxation of the lower spinal column, Dr. Edwards pointed that disconcerting fact out to him during the initial examination. Now both shoulders were more or less aligned.

"Is this yours?" The chiropractor's assistant had returned and was holding a blue flyer, which she fished out from under the table.

"It's just a notice for a poetry reading." Elliot was mildly embarrassed. So few people had any interest in poetry. Even among his students at Brown where he taught comparative literature, he would be shocked, pleasantly so, to see more than one or two familiar faces in the meager crowd.

"A poetry reading?" There was a hint of awe mingled with envy in her tone. "It sounds so refined."

"Well yes, I suppose." Elliot folded the flyer into a compact square and buried it in his pants pocket. "If the poet has a bad night or the material he chooses isn't up to par, it can be a huge bore."

"I wouldn't care," she replied.

"How's that?" His bushy eyebrows edged up a fraction of an inch.

"My last reading was tarot cards and tea leaves." She flashed him a sick grin and began straightening up the examining room.

Elliot rubbed his chin thoughtfully and lowered his eyes. The light banter was drifting off in an unexpected and potentially troublesome direction. He could let the conversation lapse, die a natural, painless death, and that would be the end of it. On the other hand, if he asked her to join him, it wouldn't be a date per se. The woman had never been to a poetry reading and Elliot, without any ulterior motive or devious intent, would simply be accompanying her.—a literary tour guide, so to speak. The fact that she was outrageously attractive was an incredible stroke of

good luck, an act of serendipity like winning the lottery or getting an unexpected promotion, and nothing more.

"You could come with me, if you like."

Unable to call them back, he watched the words fly stupidly out of his mouth, and, before he could even consider the consequence of what he had done, the chiropractor's assistant said, "Yes, that would be nice."

Elliot Slotnick's Grandmother, Esther, came to America from Kiev in the Ukraine. She arrived as a young girl in 1912. There had been a pogrom, a massacre of Jews, in the town where she was born close by the Dneper River. One night during an unusually cold winter, the Cossacks rampaged through the Jewish quarter waving their swords in the air and screaming for blood. It was the week before Passover. Three people died. A dozen chickens and a brown cow were stolen, several buildings burnt to the ground. After the incident, it was decided that the family, which had relatives already firmly established in America, would emigrate.

When Elliot was a little boy, Grandma Esther sang a whacky song in Yiddish - a lilting, repetitious ditty that she learned from her own parents as a young girl not much older than Elliot. She sang the song during the day as she kneaded the dough to make her sugar-glazed, apple and cinnamon strudel; over and over she repeated the absurd refrain as she sprinkled lemon and orange rind, black raisins and honey onto the paper-thin crust. Later in the evening, she hummed the minor-keyed melody, however inappropriately, as a lullaby to send her favorite grandson off to sleep

*Shiker ist a Goy,  
und nichter ist a Yid.  
Geht a Yid  
in Bet Hamikdash arein,  
und habt er dort a kaddusha...*

The Christians are all drunkards  
and the Jews are all sober.  
The Jews go to the Synagogue  
and say their prayers,  
while the Christians ...

As he grew older, Elliot could not remember the final verse. It was lost to him along with his grandmother's cock-eyed, superstitious logic and secret recipe for strudel. But he imagined that the Christians acted much like the Cossacks who had terrorized his not-so-distant relatives - running amok, raping, pillaging, and murdering righteous Jews.

If Grandma Esther were alive and knew Elliot was attending a poetry reading with the chiropractor's assistant, an idol-worshipping *shiksa* and veritable heathen, she would have recited the Prayer for the Dead and sent the Golem, medieval Jewry's version of the Frankenstein monster, to hunt Elliot Slotnick down and tear him limb from repulsive limb.



Marilyn Moneghan. That was the woman's name. She reminded Elliot of another Marilyn - the one who, in the early 60's, was romantically linked with President Kennedy - not so much in face but in her generous bosom and milk-white, translucent skin. The jutting breasts and immaculate, baby-soft skin were right up there with those of her glamorous, Hollywood namesake.

On the night of the poetry reading, Elliot drove cross town to a tidy, two story tenement in the working-class, Silver Lake district. When he arrived at the apartment, Marilyn opened the door and stepped out onto the landing. "There's a problem," she said in a pinched tone.

She wore a fashionable, print dress with low heels and a pair of teardrop, pearl earrings. The effect was stunning. "My daughter is giving me fits. She doesn't want to stay home alone."

"Bring her along, then."

"You're sure it's all right?"

"It's not unusual for people to bring children."

"I'll be just a minute." Marilyn disappeared back into the apartment. A moment later, she reemerged with a young girl, a physically underdeveloped version of the mother but with a taciturn expression. "Chrissy, this is Mr. Slotnick." The girl, who pushed her lips out in a petulant scowl, glanced vaguely in Elliot's direction while taking special precaution not to make direct eye contact or alter her expression. She was wearing a Black Sabbath T-shirt and jeans with a tear in one knee. "Should I have her change into something more formal?"

"No, she looks just fine."

"About tonight's reading," Elliot said. "Gregory Stiles is something of a legendary figure among the West Coast, beat poets." Marilyn was sitting next to him in the front seat with her hands folded neatly in her lap. Chrissy was slouched down in the back at such an angle that Elliot could not locate her in the rear view mirror. "In the mid-sixties he bummed around the Bay Area, working odd jobs and writing some amazingly good poetry - mostly about his childhood." Elliot turned onto Broadway heading east toward the downtown area. It was already quite dark out. They passed a number of tall buildings with intricately carved, gingerbread trim in Victorian style.

Gregory Stiles was considered one of the young lions, a literary prodigy, whose first book of poems, a small collection of no more than sixty pages, was noteworthy for, among other things, its simple, uncluttered language. There was at least a dozen new books over the next ten years, and the author became a fixture at writing seminars and college workshops throughout the country. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way from journeyman poet to literary lion, the wellspring of Gregory Stiles' creative juices ran dry; his writing lost much of its crispness and verve. In his prime, the man had written some first rate poetry; if the material which followed didn't quite measure up, Elliot saw no reason to share this unpleasant detail with the woman sitting next to him.

The poetry reading was billed as a retrospective, but for some reason Gregory - a thinly elegant man with bifocals and a thick head of unkempt, silver hair - chose to open with ten poems from his most recent publication. He read with a renewed passion and sincerity that caught many of the listeners off guard and left the audience hanging on every poignant image and jaggedly sculpted verse. A half hour into the reading, the author shifted to a work-in-progress, a series of haiku-style, shorter poems which, while not as interesting as the earlier material, was still quite remarkable.

On the ride home, Elliot glanced at Marilyn. Again, her hands were folded demurely in her lap, a contented smile coloring her lips. Chrissy had moved to the front seat wedged between her mother and the window. The scowl was gone, replaced by an expressionless, neutral mask.

When they reached the apartment, Chrissy nodded, almost but not quite cordially, and vanished into the apartment. "Thank you so much, Elliot," Marilyn said. "I can't remember when I've had such a wonderful time." She leaned forward, cocked her head to one side and kissed Elliot full on the lips. The kiss was generous and lingering; she was in no hurry to give it up. And yet, the gesture was perfectly discrete.

Elliot's first wife, Nadine, had been an effusively wet and sloppy kisser, one might even say an hysterical kisser. Even before their marriage, her emotions careened haphazardly all over the place. She favored the shotgun approach to sexual bonding, spraying her affection (and her rage) like buckshot pellets. Marilyn Moneghan's approach was totally focused and deliberate - like a hunter with a single-shot, high-powered rifle. There was nothing random or arbitrary about the woman.

The following Saturday, Elliot took Marilyn on an outing to Horseneck Beach. Before they left, she asked Elliot to stop at her church. The request caught Elliot off guard. But then, so many unusual things had happened in recent days that he simply shrugged and replied, "Yes, of course," as though it was the most ordinary thing to do.

At Saint Mary's, Elliot followed her up the stone stairs and waited in the foyer as Marilyn lit a candle and knelt

briefly in prayer. The church smelled of incense and musty hymnals. In an alcove was a statue of the Virgin Mary, one hand poised gracefully over her heart, the other extended in a supplicating gesture. Elliot, who associated statues of any kind - even plastic lawn ornaments - with idol worship, moved several feet to the right so that he was no longer directly in front of the Holy Mother. When Marilyn finished her petition, she crossed herself and came out to join him.

"You pray to the statues?" Elliot indicated a row of decorative, plaster images - apostles, angels and saints - that lined the far wall of the church.

"I pray through, not to them," she corrected. Standing there in the entry of the church with her thin, chiseled lips and high cheek bones, there was a pristine, almost spiritual elegance about her. "I ask the Holy Mother to intercede for me and grant my prayers."

Elliot had studied Jewish law: the Talmud, Shulchan Aruch, Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, the Torah and its various commentaries - even some of the esoteric, otherworldly works of the Hassidim - but his approach to God was more pragmatic than devotional.

Marilyn dipped her fingers in a porcelain bowl of holy water and touched her hand to her forehead. "Do you believe in prayer?"

"Half-heartedly," Elliot replied. "I've never been terribly sure that God hears my prayers or cares enough to act on them."

"Sounds more like a politician than a supreme being."

In lieu of a formal response, Elliot shrugged.

"I've been having some pain in my hip," Marilyn said, turning the waistband of her skirt inside out to reveal a small patch of red velvet no bigger than a postage stamp, which had been attached to the fabric with a small safety pin. "My mother gave me this piece of cloth. She brought it back from a pilgrimage to a shrine in Southern France." She let go of the waistband and the cloth disappeared back under her skirt.

"It's going to cure your hip?"

"Certainly can't hurt."

"And if the pain doesn't go away?"

"I'll let Dr. Edwards have a crack at it."

Elliot scratched his ear and stared at the statue of the Madonna. The benevolent, enlightened eyes and outstretched hand seemed less imposing. "You believe that silly little piece of cloth can heal your hip?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," she replied, ignoring his sarcasm. "My mother believes in the miraculous powers of the cloth." She showed him the red velvet patch again. "It was cut from a much larger piece of material that was blessed and touched to the base of the shrine. The cloth has special, healing powers." Though she said this with childlike innocence, there was nothing frivolous or naive in her demeanor.

He reached out and grabbed her right hand and studied the long, slender fingers with the pale red nails. "When you crossed yourself after saying your prayers, your hands were so lovely." He released his grip, and they headed back in the direction of the car. Elliot picked up Route 195 East a short distance outside of the city and, a half hour later, crossed over the Mount Hope Bay. When they reached Fall River, they turned south on Route 88 and rode the highway straight to the ocean.

They had been dating a month and Elliot told Marilyn he wanted to make love to her. They were driving home from the movies. She edged closer to him on the seat. "I can't sleep over," she cautioned. "We have to be discrete." It was a dry, clear summer night with a multitude of stars. "On Saturdays, Chrissy takes flute lessons at the Conservatory. If I'm not home when she gets back, she won't think anything unusual."

For the sake of modesty, Elliot went about the apartment drawing the shades, but for some crazy reason, all the lights - even his 200-watt reading lamp - were burning when Marilyn arrived and began peeling her clothes off. First the blouse, then the bra. Wriggling out of her panties, she dropped them near the night table and stretched out on the bed sheets. Elliot was more shocked by her nonchalance than seeing her in the buff. He quickly undressed and lay down beside her. "Aren't you going to turn the lights off?" she asked in her gravelly monotone. He threw the switch and, as he turned back to face her, was met with a kiss and tangle of arms and hair.

Afterwards, Elliot had to admit that it wasn't what he had expected. Despite her libidinous good looks, Marilyn was basically a meat-and-potatoes romantic, a sedate and comfortable lover. There were no animalistic excesses, no kinky eccentricities. The sex was far more perfunctory than funky. "I'm going to take a shower now," she said when the lovemaking was finished. With her flawless, ivory-colored breasts swinging gloriously from side to side, Marilyn Moneghan sashayed out of the room.

Around the middle of the following week, Elliot called. "There's an art exhibit on the East Side Friday night."

"It's no good. I'm spending some time with my parents."

"Well, what about Saturday?"

"Sorry, that's out, too. I've already made plans."

There was a short, uncomfortable pause. "What sort of plans?"

"I've got a date."

"With who?" Elliot felt a tightening in his throat.

"Just someone I met, that's all."

"I see." Elliot didn't really see anything at all. He was blinded by resentment. "Have a nice time," he said and hung up. Why was he wishing her a nice time? He didn't want her to enjoy herself with some sex-starved lothario. Short of sodomy and food poisoning, he wanted Marilyn Moneghan to have every woman's worse nightmare of a date - the quintessential date from hell.

Over the remainder of the week, Elliot slipped into a disagreeable funk. On Sunday morning rather than call, he drove over to Marilyn's apartment with a dozen warm bagels and a small container of whipped cream cheese with chives. Chrissy showed him into the living room.

"I didn't know you were stopping by," Marilyn said.

"Thought I'd surprise you," He said, affecting a flippant tone and handed her the bag.

"Truth is, I don't much like surprises." They went into the kitchen and Marilyn began slicing the bagels.

"So, how was your date?"

"We went out to eat, that's all."

Chrissy wandered into the room and sniffed at the food. The word 'Hootie' was etched on the back of her neck in two-inch high red and black letters. "I hope that isn't permanent," Elliot said.

"It's just a rub-on," Chrissy replied. "I got it at a novelty shop."

"What's it mean?"

"Hootie and the Blowfish. They're the hottest group in rock." She tore a sesame bagel in half and smeared it with a thick glob of cream cheese. "Their debut album, Cracked Rear View, sold 13 million."

"I don't know," Elliot countered testily, "that it justifies using the back of your head as a billboard for some obscure rock group."

"When you sell 13 million albums, there's a certain amount of name recognition," Chrissy said drolly and left the room.

"You know what I mean," Elliot said turning to Marilyn.

"It's not the sort of thing you or I would do, but so what?" Elliot made an unintelligible sound by way of protest. "She's 13 years old. Can't you remember what it was like to be that age?"

Unfortunately, Elliot did remember. At 13 he was barmitzvahed. His face was covered with pimples and he was obsessed with the female genitalia - a subject about which he possessed absolutely no first-hand knowledge.

"Hootie and the Blowfish. I'll have to remember that name." His thoughts reverted back to Chrissy but for a different reason. He wondered if the girl knew that her mother had been out with another man. He felt foolish, humiliated.

Marilyn set the toaster oven on top brown and placed several bagels on the metal rack. When the bagels were done, she arranged them on a small serving tray. "Coffee or tea?"

"Tea's fine." Elliot took a tentative bite. "So are you going to see this fellow again?"

She put the kettle aside and stared at Elliot with a fixed expression. "I appreciate your driving over here with the bagels. That was a sweet gesture. But I don't like being put on the spot because I did something you don't approve of." She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and

scowled at the floor. "If you get bent out of shape because I have a date, it's your problem, not mine."

Elliot, who thought he had hit rock bottom when he discovered Marilyn's quasi-infidelity, slid another few notches down into crushing worthlessness. They ate in silence. "I don't think we should see each other for a couple of weeks," she said as she was walking him to the door.

Elliot heard the words filtered through the numbness of his gloom. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"No. That's not it." Marilyn placed a hand on his shoulder and kissed him with a casualness, an unassuming briskness, that only added to his misery and confusion. "Things are getting a bit too intense."

Everything was falling to pieces. His self-serving ploy with the bagels had been exposed for what it was - a transparent sham - and blown up in his face. "All right," Elliot mumbled. He turned to go but lingered uncertainly in the doorway. "What should I do, then?" he asked like a contrite child.

"Call me in a couple of weeks."

"Fourteen days?"

"And we'll pick up where we left off."

"That sounds fair enough." Actually, it didn't sound fair at all. She might as well have chained Elliot to the wall in the basement and beat him nightly with a pressure-treated 2 by 4. That would have been preferable to the Chinese water torture of a two-week wait.

Elliot called the following Sunday.

"I thought I said two weeks."

"Yes, but I wanted to hear your voice. What's the harm in that?"

"The harm is you didn't fulfill your end of the bargain."

"What bargain?"

"You agreed to wait until the second Sunday. I was quite clear about the length of time."

"So I'll hang up and call back in seven days." Elliot could feel the insane panic gurgling up from his bowels into his chest. Or was it flowing in the opposite direction? He couldn't be sure about much of anything these days.

"Two weeks is two weeks," Marilyn said evenly. "We'll start from scratch. Call back two weeks from today."

"Two weeks from today," he could just barely manage to keep the hysteria in his voice under control, "will be three weeks if you count the time that's already passed."

"We had an agreement. Don't you dare call me for another 14 days."

She hung up and that's when Elliot began to cry. He stormed about the apartment kicking at things, throwing books and magazines, banging his fists against the hardwood table until the knuckles ached and his hatred of Marilyn Moneghan and the entire Christian community became slightly more manageable.

Two weeks. A British fortnight. Elliot had to survive the next 336 hours - 21,160 minutes - and hope that, between now and then, which would put him into the middle of June, Marilyn Moneghan would not become formally engaged and with-child. Elliot was crushed, demoralized; the idea of anyone else putting their grubby hands on her body made him physically sick.

Shiker ist a Goy, und nichter ist a Yid. Drunken Cossacks rioting in the streets. That had been his grandmother Esther's reality. Here Elliot was, less than a century later, fawning over a

devout Catholic with breasts the size of melons, a woman who dated other men, humiliated and degraded him with her unwavering edicts.

At the end of the two-week hiatus, Elliot and Marilyn picked up where they left off with no apparent damage to the relationship. There was no further mention of the other man, and Elliot had the good sense not to bring the matter up again. In the bedroom, he might have wished for more variety, but there was something comfortably engaging in Marilyn's blunt, no-nonsense approach to sex. When the lovemaking was over, Elliot would stare at her lovely body, the ivory skin lathered in a thin film of sweat, and count his blessings. The sight of her with her wide shoulders thrown back and hips rocking gloriously from side to side as she glided naked about the room, took his breath away.

"How can you stomach that awful nonsense!" Friday night they were sitting on the sofa at her Silver Lake apartment. Marilyn was watching *The Wheel of Fortune*.

She turned and stared at him with mock indignation. "It's just something to pass the time."

Vanna White had just revealed another letter. Marilyn, her lips moving silently, was cycling through a series of words that might unravel the phrase on the game board. She leaned forward, momentarily tuning Elliot out. "I hate these shows. They drive me nuts!"

"Would you like me to turn the volume off?"

She reached for the clicker, but Elliot grabbed her hand. "No, that's not necessary. I just don't grasp what you see in it."

"I could say the same about some of the books you read." She lifted a hard-cover volume from his hands and, fixing her eyes on a paragraph midway down the left-hand page, began to read out loud:

*"Deconstructive fiction is parallel to revisionist history in that it tells the story from the other side or from some queer angle that casts doubt on the generally accepted values handed down by legend. Whereas metafiction deconstructs by directly calling attention to fiction's tricks, - "*

She stopped reading but kept her eyes glued on the printed matter. "You obviously like this stuff or you wouldn't waste either your money or your time on it."

Elliot could feel his ears burning. She handed him back the book, lowered the volume on the television by half and settled in with what was left of her game show.

"How's the stiffness in your hip?" he said shifting gears. "You never mentioned it after the trip to Horseneck Beach."

"Everything's fine now."

"You went to Dr. Edwards?"

"There wasn't any need. The pain went away."

Elliot ran his finger over the spine of his book. "The red cloth miraculously healed your leg?"

"I'm sure it helped," she said in an offhand manner.

Elliot was more put off by her blind faith, her pig-headed guilelessness, than by the fact that something inexplicable might have occurred. "But there's no proof that anything happened."

"The stiffness is gone." Again, her tone was bland and unquestioning.

"Perhaps it went away of its own accord. A spontaneous remission."

"Yes, that's also a possibility." Her mind was like a body of water flowing easily and smoothly around an immovable object.

"Shiker ist a Goy, und nichter ist a Yid."

"What was that?" Elliot told Marilyn the story of his Grandma Esther.

After he had finished she kissed him on the cheek and said, "Now I understand why you are such a doubting Thomas."

Tears glistened in his eyes, which he made no effort to hide. "I was thinking," he said in a choked voice, "of asking you to marry me."

If the abrupt shift in both his tone and mood caught Marilyn off guard, she revealed nothing. "When were you planning to do that?"

"In a month or so." Elliot rose and went to the window. There was a warm breeze. The smell of summer barbecues and fresh mown grass hung sweetly in the humid air. "I was wondering what your answer might be."

"Hard to say. A month is a long way off and a lot could happen." Marilyn took an elastic band from her pocket, gathered up her hair and secured it in a cropped ponytail. "I suppose that, if things continue as they have, I'd agree to marry you." She rose and joined him by the window. "A word of advice, though. Between now and then, you might want to work at improving your delivery."

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## The Divined Comedy

Monday afternoon a relentless, soaking rain whipped the vacant streets and business at the Texaco Gas Mart died away to nothing. In the office Ava Frick teased a Kierkegaard reader from her handbag, flipping to a page flagged with a scrap of torn paper.

*What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain knowledge must precede every action...*

A metallic blue, Dodge Caravan pulled up to the full-service pump. "Oh, crap!" Ava groaned. "Not this asshole again!"

Throwing a windbreaker over her shoulders, she trudged out in the sleeting rain. Ava worked second shift at the Gas Mart two blocks up from the Brandenburg Public Library. When the three-bay repair shop closed down around five p.m., the pumps stayed open until midnight. Since leaving high school, Ava drifted through a series of odd jobs before settling in at the gas station. It wasn't that she particularly liked pumping gas and cleaning fly shit off of windshields; the work was simply less offensive than the other jobs she was fired from or quit on short notice.

The driver rolled down the window. "Fill it with regular." The middle-aged man was dressed in a black tuxedo. Through the open window, she could see an electric piano and pair of Xantech speaker columns stacked on the floor of the minivan." He quickly rolled the window shut.

With the rain slashing her face, Ava held her ground until the tank was full. "Could you also check the oil?" His eyes grazed her sternum never quite reaching the face. The glacial smile hinted at what was to come.

Ava lifted the hood. Pulling the dipstick from the crankcase, she wiped it clean and returned the narrow finger of metal back into the engine block. "You're down a quart."

"Yeah, well... I'm in a bit of a hurry," he responded with an ingratiating smile, "so why don't we take care of it next time?"

The rain, which had momentarily abated, suddenly picked up again. Ava rested her elbow on the window, dripping rivulets of water into the car. "You wouldn't want to blow a piston over a silly quart of motor oil."

"No, that's okay." He thrust an American Express Platinum credit card at her and leaned away from the wetness. "I'll just take a rain check, no pun intended."

*Was he being intentionally sadistic?* "That's what you said last time." Ava pulled her soggy arms free of the car.

The musician screwed up his face and jutted his chin indignantly. "What was that?" She went off to process the payment.

Back in the station, Ava rubbed her stringy hair dry with a wad of paper hand towels. This was the fifth time the pianist had pulled the check-my-oil-but-don't-add-a-single-drop ploy. Never once had he purchased a quart. Ava was certain that the stingy louse had a case of Valvoline 5w30 neatly stacked in his garage. In the morning, after a cup of mocha latte cappuccino with a hint of cinnamon and a flaky, buttered croissant, the limp-wrist bastard would sashay over to the garage and, without even bothering to inspect the level, add a quart of motor oil.

*What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain knowledge must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do: the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die. ...*

Ava wrestled with the Kierkegaard reader but lost interest after only a few, meager paragraphs. Her cell phone twittered. "Do you need anything?" Ava's father sputtered in a gravelly monotone.

"Like what?"

"Weather's pretty crappy. Maybe I could swing by with a spare raincoat... dry shoes."

"Actually I'm in pretty good shape," Ava lied, "but thanks just the same."

Click. Mr. Frick hung up. The man never said I love you or resorted to mushy sentiment. That wasn't his style. Rather, he would drive cross town in a driving rainstorm with a plastic bag full of dry socks and rain gear, throw them down on the counter, grunt some unintelligible farewell and hurry off.

Around eleven, the rain picked up again. A young man with hair down to his shoulders and a wispy beard that petered out over his freckled cheeks filled his gas tank, bought a half



dozen, instant-win lottery tickets and a can of Skoal chewing tobacco. “That stuff causes cancer,” Ava noted shoving the round, metal container across the counter.

“Gotta die of something.” The man scraped the tickets with the edge of a nickel. A minute passed. No luck! He crumpled the stiff papers in a ball, tossed them into the trash and made a run through the pelting rain toward a rusty Subaru docked at the farthest pump.

When he was gone, Ava noticed suede, pea-green pouch sitting next to the cash register. The bearded man set it on the counter while scratching his lottery tickets. She lifted the pouch, which was about the size of a small book and shook it. A metallic tinkling sound filled the room. Ava shook it a second time and the musical clatter repeated. “Strange!” She tossed the sack into a bottom drawer labeled ‘Lost and Found’ just as a Ford pickup truck pulled into the station.

When she got home later that night, Ava was too wound up from the crazy weather to sleep. She fixed herself a burrito in the microwave and settled in with the Danish philosopher.

*Humans cannot think our choices in life, we must live them; and even those choices that we often think about become different once life itself enters into the mix through pure subjectivity. Instead, they find it through passion, desire, and moral and religious commitment. These phenomena are not objectively provable—nor do they come about through any form of analysis of the external world; the type of objectivity that a scientist or historian might use misses the point...*

Ava understood that she was doing a relatively poor job ‘living her choices’. She had put her education on hold so she could pump gas in a driving rainstorm while ‘normal’ people hunkered down at home doing sensible things and structuring their lives in a manner that, like a well-managed stock option, provided the maximum return on investment.

Eight o’clock the next morning, Ava Frick’s father shuffled into his daughter’s bedroom, eased down on the comforter and whispered, “The wallpaper hanger is steaming the vinyl paper from the sheet rock in the living room, so don’t go wandering about in your underwear.”

There was no immediate reply. Ava was resting prone under the covers, a pillow propped over her head. Though she couldn’t physically see her father, the girl could smell his tart, Old Spice cologne. Nathan Frick, whose salt-and-pepper hair was thinning away to nothing on the top, would be wearing an ivory, brushed cotton, Van-Heusen dress shirt with khaki, polyester slacks. The pants were a bit out-dated, but with eighteen months to retirement, there was nobody in the business community the man needed to impress. Mr. Frick rested a hand on the small of his daughter’s back. “You got in late last night.”

“Trucker pulled in at quarter to twelve. After he topped off with diesel fuel I still had to cash out and close up.”

Her father lifted the pillow. Leaning forward, he kissed Ava on the nape of the neck then placed the pillow back again. “See you later.” He disappeared out the door.

From the early sixties, Ava’s father sold washing machines for Sears Roebuck. He won salesman-of-the-year awards back-to-back more than a dozen times. The man was honest to a fault, never exhibiting the slightest compulsion to lie, exaggerate or misrepresent the product line in order to close a shaky sale. During the Vietnam War, he wrote letters to the presidents –

first to Lyndon Johnston then later Richard Nixon, demanding that they bring American troops home from Southeast Asia.

Ava vividly remembered ferrying envelopes with the sixteen hundred Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C. address down to the mailbox. “You really think that fascist jerk is gonna read your stupid letter?” The fascist jerk Mr. Frick’s teenage daughter was referring to was Richard Milhous Nixon. Ava was going through a difficult adolescence. Everyone over the age of forty was a bona fide jerk; thirty-somethings weren’t much better.

Mr. Frick’s anti-war, protest letters were quite verbose, sometimes running three pages single-spaced and typewritten on an old-fashioned Smith-Corona electric model. Ava read through several in which her father argued passionately against the domino theory, suggesting all of Southeast Asia would fall to Communism once the puppet regime in South Vietnam collapsed. The war was unwinnable, American soldiers cannon fodder for a lost cause.

Mr. Frick churned out, on average, two protest letters a week. And that didn’t include the endless barrage of postcards mailed to congressmen, senators, and Joint Chiefs of Staff. The soft-spoken reformed Jew with the chicken neck and graying sideburns protested the war while raising a family, selling Kenmore-Maytag appliances and teaching aerobic exercise Thursday evenings at the Brandenburg Community Center. Following the freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Mr. Frick petitioned his records from the federal government and discovered that his subversive activities during the Vietnam War had been closely monitored as ‘a potential domestic threat’ by both the FBI and CIA.

*Subversive activities. Potential domestic threat.* Did the government imagine that, when he wasn’t selling top-loading washers at the department store, Nathan Frick was hurling Molotov cocktails and inciting civil unrest? “If J. Edgar Hoover comes for supper,” Ava quipped one night when her mother was still alive, “do we put out the good China or go with everyday dishes?”

After her father went off to work, Ava never budged. She could hear a radio tuned to a country and western station purring softly in the living room. In a creaky falsetto, the wallpaper hanger was crooning along to a Kenney Chesney ballad. Ava drifted back off to sleep. An hour and a half later she finally threw the covers aside. Pulling a sweatshirt over her head, she wriggled into a pair of jeans but couldn’t negotiate the button on the waist. No matter - the baggy sweatshirt would hide her late-night escapades with pasta and breadsticks.

Truth be told, a nineteen year-old women with a little extra flesh on her bones was more voluptuous than slovenly. Her olive skin was still flawless, the breasts and hips in perfect working order. Ava dabbed *Origins* Winterbloom number-two eye shadow on her upper lids, applied a fine dusting of hypoallergenic powder over her throat to merge the real chin with its significant other and shuffled into the living room. “Good morning.”

The wallpaper hanger, who had his back to her, was pressing the flat surface of a steamer up against the far wall. Lowering his arm, he pulled the tray away from the paper and a burst of scalding steam puffed up toward the ceiling. The man was tall and wiry with a droopy moustache and wire-rimmed glasses. The slender nose arched with an aristocratic flair. Like a rust-pocked car where the odometer has seen the hundred-thousand mile mark come and go, the face was pleasant enough but well-traveled. “I’m Rufus,” he smiled, turning back to the work at hand.

“Can I get you anything?” Ava offered.

He reached up with a putty knife separating a swatch of soggy paper from the wall. The sheet lifted away in a jagged heap. “Cup of coffee would be nice. Milk no sugar.”

Ava headed toward the kitchen but pulled up short.

“You remind me of someone, a writer from the psychedelic sixties by the name of Richard Brautigan. You’re his spitting image.” In high school Ava had read Brautigan’s *A Confederate General from Big Sur*. With the droopy moustache, lanky, angular body and bittersweet smile, Rufus, the wallpaper hanger, was a dead ringer for the minimalist author who was all the rage when Ava’s father was still a relatively young man. “Unfortunately,” Ava added as an afterthought, “Brautigan was a hardcore alcoholic who drank himself to death.”

The man repositioned the steamer at the highest point where the wall and ceiling converged and leaned slightly forward, trapping the steam against the paper. “I got plenty of vices,” Rufus drawled cryptically, “but liquor ain’t one of them.”

Ava retreated to the kitchen, where she fixed herself an asiago bagel with chive cream cheese. When the coffee was ready, she poured two cups and went back out to the living room. “Your timing’s perfect.” Rufus pulled the plug from the wall outlet and removed the cast iron venting plug from the top of the steamer. “The water’s pretty much run out so I have to break anyway.” He sipped at the coffee.

“What branch of the service were you in?” Ava was staring at a tattoo on his right arm.

“Grunts. US Army infantry.” He eased his rump down on a step ladder and nestled the coffee between his wide, calloused hands.

Ava nibbled at the bagel. The pungent aroma of the asiago cheese titillated her senses. “Where were you stationed?”

“Afghanistan... a godforsaken dump called Helmand Province in the southwest of the country. It’s the world’s largest poppy-producing region, responsible for forty-two per cent of the world’s total heroin production. We actually pay the local war lords not to grow the goddamn stuff.”

“It’s always nice to know how government manages our tax dollars.”

Rufus grinned darkly but had nothing more to say on the matter. Putting the coffee aside, he went and filled a bucket with cool water from the kitchen tap. Funneling the liquid into the steamer, he put the bucket aside when the water gauge read full. The wallpaper hanger plugged the electric chord back into the outlet and, while the metal plate was heating, moved about the perimeter of the room stuffing trash in a plastic garbage bag. “Got discharged from the army a couple years back but developed some problems associated with the war, so I had to go for counseling.”

“What sort of problems?”

Rufus grabbed a pile of sticky paper and wedged it at the bottom of the bag. “Anger management.”

She nodded her head up and down digesting the information. The stoop-shouldered man who resembled Richard Brautigan seemed utterly harmless, like an overgrown teddy bear. “But you’re okay now?”

“Oh sure! Once I got to the root of the problem, it was just a matter of a few minor adjustments,... tweaking my psyche, so to speak.”

“Such as?”

The steamer was beginning to sputter fitfully now, alternately dribbling then spitting small streams of tepid water from the vent holes. Rufus ran a palm over the orange rubber tubing feeling for the steaming as it crawled blindly through the coiled hose in the direction of the perforated metal tray. “With the help of Dr. Jacoby over at the Veterans Administration Hospital,

I learned about my problem and how to cope.” Rufus reached into a leather tool bag and pulled out a foot-long brush with stiff black bristles.

“Ten months of therapy taught me that I am basically an incorrigible misanthrope who relates much better to things than people.” He shared this in an affable, low-keyed drawl. “So I subsist off my veteran’s disability check, do odd jobs under the table, and pretty much sidestep the rest of humanity.”

Ava kept to her room for the rest of the morning. Around one in the afternoon, Rufus tapped lightly on the open door. “I’m finished stripping the paper. Going to grab lunch.”

Ava nodded. “Okay.”

“When I get back, I’ll size the walls and spackle any cracks or holes. Get everything ready for tomorrow.” Ava gazed down the hallway. All the old wallpaper had been stripped away and neatly bundled in trash bags. “You live here with your father?” he asked.

“Yeah. Grew up in this house. I work second shift over at the Gas Mart on County Street.”

“The one with the blue and white sign?”

“That’s right. I was planning to go to college last September, but then my mother died and I decided to take some time off.” The gangly man smiled and scratched his earlobe. He would have been modestly handsome ten years earlier, Ava mused. Rufus still wasn’t bad looking for a working stiff in his late twenties.

“What were you planning to major in at college?”

“Philosophy.... existentialism mostly.”

“That’s out of my league.” Rufus yanked his car keys out of his pocket and headed for the door.

After lunch, the paperhanger ran a bead of dark blue masking tape around the baseboard and with a fine-nap roller began coating the walls with sizing. An hour later, Ava came back into the living room dragging a Hoover carpet cleaner behind her. “I was trying to steam the runner in the entryway, but the machine doesn’t work right.”

Rufus put the paint roller aside, dropped down on his haunches and inspected the undercarriage. “There’s your problem,” he said, indicating a flat piece of plastic which extended across the front of the vacuum. “Someone must have whacked the front carriage and loosened the screws holding the squeegee plate in place.”

“Can it be fix?”

The man ran a thumb and index finger over his droopy moustache. “Just tighten the screws or drill pilot holes on either side,” he tapped the plastic unit where the new holes needed to be positioned, “and that should do the trick.” He rose to his feet. “If you got an electric drill and small drill bit I can save you the bother and take care of it right now.”

Ava got down on her hands and knees. Now she could see the problem along with the potential solution. Without the plate wedged firmly against the floor there was no suction to pull the sudsy grime out of the rug. Her brother, Gary, had borrowed the machine a month earlier to clean his rugs. Did Gary know the machine was broken yesterday when he returned it? Probably. He had a disconcerting habit of borrowing things without asking and returning them damaged, empty or otherwise nonfunctional. “No, I’d rather do it myself.”

Rufus’ face melted in a broad smile. “Like I said earlier, I’m real good with machinery and dead things. It’s just people I can’t manage.”

With a Phillips head screw driver Ava fixed the carpet cleaner.

She didn't need to drill pilot holes as Rufus suggested. Locating a container of stubby, sheet metal screws under her father's work bench, she simply replaced the rusty old screws, firming them hand tight. The new fasteners pulled the faceplate into proper alignment and, when she brought the machine back upstairs from the basement, it worked like new, sucking the wet sludge into the waste tray. Ava washed the front hallway runner and entryway rugs before heading out to work.

*The thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die. ...*

Ava didn't know if fixing the carpet steamer qualified as a sublime truth that she could structure her life around, but it certainly made her feel a little more in control of things. Later that night around two in the morning, Mr. Frick got up to use the bathroom. Seeing the light on in his daughter's room, he stuck his head in the doorway. "How was work?"

Ava put the Kierkegaard reader aside. "A lot drier than yesterday."

"Your brother stopped by."

"Yeah, I know. He dropped off the rug steamer."

Mr. Frick shook his head. "Gary came back again earlier this afternoon." He pawed at the oak floor with a leather slipper. Ava noticed that, since her mother's death, her father looked frailer, withered and parched as an autumn leaf. "Apparently, your brother, the investment counselor, made some bad decisions in the bear market and needs to borrow money."

Ava cringed. "How much?"

"Quite a bit," Mr. Frick remarked opaquely. "Problem is, I love your brother dearly. I just don't trust him. Never did. I told Gary no... he would have to look elsewhere."

"And what was his response?"

Mr. Frick's features contorted in a melancholy grimace. "Not to be denied, he wanted me to take out a home equity loan... sort of a cash advance on his share of the inheritance."

Ava felt a tightening in her chest. Her breath was coming in shallow, choppy gasps, and the young girl had to pause while the rage subsided before she could respond. "The man has no shame."

"In my will," Mr. Frick spoke with brutal authority, "you're the trustee... power of attorney. Her father cleared his throat. "You also the sole beneficiary, since I'm leaving you everything - the house, furnishings, whatever remains from investments and retirement savings."

Ava stared at him in disbelief. "Is that fair?" She wasn't thinking so much of Gary, the scheming *schmoe*, but rather her sister-in-law and two nieces, the oldest of which was just entering middle school.

Hoisting his flannel pajama bottoms up higher on his skinny waist, Mr. Frick gazed at his daughter somberly. "*Du weiss nit fun kein hochmas.*"

The boiler clicked on in the basement and Ava could hear the water pump pushing the heat through the house. "Unlike your brother," the older man translated, "you don't know from any funny stuff". "Gary, the high-roller, drives a Cadillac Seville, vacations in Acapulco twice a year and wears custom-tailored suits," he added coldly. "Let him reevaluate his present circumstances and learn to live within his means." The widower trudged back to bed. When he was gone, Ava breathed in deeply and let the air stream out of her lungs in a barely audible groan.

The other day when her troublesome brother returned the rug cleaner, Ava was fixing herself a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich. He looked distraught, utterly exhausted. "When the hell are you going to get a real job and move out on your own?"

"Nice way to open a conversation." Ava smeared mayonnaise on the bread then arranged the cheddar cheese and tomato slices. Since the late fall, native-grown tomatoes were hard to come by and prices had skyrocketed ridiculously. Ava paid seventy-nine cents for the plump, vine-ripened beauty she was positioning on the sandwich. She only needed half. Her father could chop what remained in a salad with his supper.

"Well it's true," he shot back petulantly. "You're almost twenty years old and act like some shiftless eccentric."

"Lacking focuss doesn't imply dishonesty," Ava replied. "Shiftless people may be lazy freeloaders and hopelessly ineffectual. Being shiftless doesn't automatically make them disreputable."

Gary squirmed uncomfortably and gazed out the window at the bare trees. A blue jay was picking through the empty seed husks on the metal feeding station in search of the last few bits of edible protein. Ava kept a stash of sunflower seeds and cracked corn in the basement, replenishing the feeder on a weekly basis from late November through March. "A person can be shiftless," she continued, "and still maintain his personal dignity. Of course that presupposes the individual in question does nothing flagrantly dishonest." Ava watched as a pad of butter melted on medium heat. She lowered the sandwich into the Teflon pan and pressed down with a spatula. "Exactly how much of Mrs. Sardelli's retirement savings did you squander?"

Earlier in the week, an article appeared in the Community Section of the *Brandenberg Gazette*: *Local investment advisor indicted for misappropriation of client's funds*. Gary had covertly moved an elderly woman's entire life savings from government-backed securities to a high-risk hedge fund that relied aggressively on selling short, leverage, swaps, derivatives and arbitrage. Three weeks into the transfer, the fund tanked and investors lost everything. Now the district attorney was indicting Ava's brother for fraudulent misappropriation of funds.

"Does dad know?" He brushed her original question aside.

"Not yet." She flipped the sandwich over and pressed down with the spatula again. Gary sat down and massaged the back of his neck distractedly. "You could sell your house," Ava suggested, "and try to negotiate with the authorities for a reduced sentence."

"And where the hell are my wife and kids gonna live?" He whined with unfocussed rage.

Ava wasn't about to suggest that he move back home. The disgrace would kill her father. And anyway, adding Gary, the flimflam artist, and his nuclear family to the mix would turn their idyllic existence upside down. Try as she might, Ava couldn't muster a grain of sympathy for her brother. "I'm the job Gypsy," she muttered.

"What's that?"

She removed the sandwich from the pan and sliced it at a diagonal. Placing a dill pickle on the side of the plate, she brought the meal to the kitchen table. "When I finished high school last year and couldn't find steady work, you used to ridicule me. 'Ava's a brain-dead, job gypsy... can't settle down, score a husband, make a normal life.'" "I'd rather be a shiftless job gypsy living at home with my widowed father," she observed, raising the pickle to her mouth, "than a two-bit crook."

In the morning, Rufus arrived early and began cutting the wallpaper into seven-foot strips. With an aluminum square, he marked the pattern repeats, trimming the paper at a right angle. Using a plum bob, he determined the placement for the first sheet. “How did you make out with the carpet steamer?”

“Great!” Ava was sitting on the third riser of the stairs leading to the upper level, nursing her morning coffee. “Once I got that vacuum plate screwed down, it worked like new.”

Rufus rolled a sheet of prepasted wallpaper inside out and submerged it in a plastic tray of lukewarm water. Beginning in a corner near the picture window, he positioned the sheet against the wall. Mr. Frick had chosen a sedate fruit pattern in pastel green and gold hues. The cream-colored background caught the early morning light brightening the room while creating the illusion of more space.

“Nice choice,” he said with genuine enthusiasm. Rufus brushed the wet sheet out with the bristle brush, smoothing in both directions from the middle toward the outer edges. When the first piece lay flat against the wall, he ran a small tool with a serrated, metal wheel over the bottom edge trimming away the excess and pressed the paper snug against the baseboard molding. “These older houses,” Rufus noted, “got character. The high ceilings and ornate cornices – you don’t see that anymore.”

“Yes, the place has special warmth.” The girl was still in shock over recent, domestic developments. Ava and her father had their own, separate agendas. Mr. Frick never questioned what Ava was doing with her botched-up life. For sure, her father was going through his own dark night of the soul since losing his wife. Days could pass without seeing one another, and yet their mutually exclusive lives intersected in random, unforeseeable ways. Which is to say, they loved each other at a safe and manageable distance.

*Du weiss nit fun kein hochmas.* The pithy, Yiddish adage left nothing unsaid. Ava would get everything, while Gary received a lengthy prison sentence and the Bronx cheer. “Are you familiar with the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard?” Ava asked.

Rufus chuckled in a gruff, throaty manner. “I quit high school in the eleventh grade. Outside of an occasional Playboy or Hustler, I haven’t read a goddamn thing since then.” He grabbed up a second sheet and soaked it in the tub. “Why do you ask?”

“Since high school, I have been trying to structure my life around Kierkegaard’s guiding principles.”

“And how’s that going?” Rufus eased the dripping sheet in place, butting it firmly up against the first.

“Hard to say. It’s not the sort of thing where you go to sleep in a metaphysical quandary and wake up the next morning thoroughly enlightened.” The wallpaper, as it inched across the room, left to right, was coming nicely. “Hopefully, before I’m carted off to a nursing home in geriatric diapers, things will fall into place.”

Ava went to the market. When she returned Rufus had already finished two walls and was trimming the paper over the fireplace. “My father left a check for you. I’ll place it on the dining room table, if I leave before you’re finished. Rufus, who was balancing on a ladder, grunted something unintelligible. “You’re doing a swell job!” Ava waited a discrete interval, but there was no reply.

In December the weather turned sharply colder with temperatures dipping well below freezing in the early morning hours. Ava began dressing in layers. At the Emerald Square Mall just over the town line in North Attleboro, she bought a pair of fleece-lined snow boots, thermal underwear and a week's worth of heavy-duty, woolen socks.

Snow descended the first week in January. From the relative warmth of the gas station office, Ava watched the fluffy whiteness envelope the blacktop. An hour later with the snow already several inches deep, a metallic blue Dodge Caravan pulled up at the last row of pumps. Ava traipsed out to car. The driver didn't even bother to roll down the window. Rather, he cracked it open, an infinitesimal sliver, and barked, "Fill it with regular... check the oil."

Thump! The hood of the minivan lurched upward as the driver pulled back on the latch release. Ava loosened the gas cap. She topped off the tank, raised the hood vertical and pounded on the driver's side window with a gloved fist. "We need to be clear about something."

Reluctantly, he lowered the window. The man's pleated tuxedo shirt was outfitted with shiny black studs, a cummerbund encircling his waist. "Is there a problem?" The tone was shrill, petulant. "I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Problem is, you're always in a hurry." Ava leaned her elbows into the van depositing a clump of dry, powdery snow in the man's lap, "As I recall, every time I fill your gas tank you ask me to check the oil but never purchase anything else. If I didn't know any better ..." She didn't bother to finish the sentence.

The man shoved a credit card through the window. "Forget about the stupid oil."

Ava processed the card and brought it back to the car. The fellow mumbled something angrily under his breath. "Excuse me?"

"Just close the hood so I can get back on the highway."

Ava gazed out across the whiteness. The dry cold didn't bother her. The new woolen socks and fleece-lined work boots kept her feet toasty warm. If anything, the crisp, early-season snow was invigorating. She bent down and stuck her nose up against the frosty glass. "Not this time." She strolled back to the office, turning around in time to see the Caravan fishtailing crazily out of the gas station.

A steady flow of customers passed through the Texaco Gas Mart up until dusk, when the streets became completely deserted except for an occasional snow plow. In the cramped office, Ava flipped the space heater on high to take the chill out of the air. Around eight-thirty a foot of snow was already blanketing the ground. A lone pickup truck skidded around the corner and pulled into the station. Rufus, wearing a stocking cap and green plaid jacket, slogged through the packed snow toward the front of the building. "Any of that wallpaper fall down yet?" the tall man inquired with a sly smile. He had a face like a lopsided, weather-beaten pair of shoes, the heels worn away at a perverse angle.

"It's still where you left it," Ava grinned back at him.

"Hell of a night to be pumping gas." Rufus arranged himself in a chair and extended his damp boots toward the heater.

"I might not be long for this job." She told him about the musician floundering around in the snow.

Rufus made several vulgar references regarding the piano player's parentage then cracked his knuckles. "That Danish philosopher you mentioned the last time I saw you..."

"That would be Soren Kierkegaard."

"What would Mr. K say about the bonehead in the blue Caravan?"



Ava thought a moment. “Think of a hospital where the patients are dying like flies. Every method is tried to make things better but it’s no use. Where does the sickness come from? It comes from the building; the whole building is full of poison.”

“Society is morbidly sick, and the piano player is Typhoid Mary.”

“In a matter of speaking, yes.”

Rufus let loose a throaty chuckle, the steamy air floating toward the ceiling. “At least you turned the tables on the creep by refusing to do his bidding.”

“If he complains to the boss, I could lose my job.”

“Do you care?”

Ava grinned brazenly. “No, not at all.” A car pulled into the station and the girl went out to pump the gas. “Why did you come here in this awful weather?” she asked when the customer was gone.

“I liked talking to you.”

“But you hate people. You’re a self-proclaimed misanthrope.”

“True enough,” Rufus returned, “but you’re the exception that makes the rule.”

“I’ll take that as a backhanded compliment.” Ava slid open the ‘Lost and Found’ drawer and pulled out the velvety, pea green pouch. “What do you make of this?” She emptied the contents on the table.

Rufus stared at a ratty-looking book, the cover of which had been completely torn away, and three brass coins. The three coins were about the size of quarters but thicker with square holes in the center. The surface of each was inscribed with an exotic script. “Are these subway tokens from another planet?”

“This,” Ava picked up the frayed manuscript, “is a copy of the I Ching, the ancient Chinese Book of Change, and the coins are used to predict the future.” She told him about the fellow with a penchant for lottery tickets and chewing tobacco who ran off in the rainstorm. “A week ago Tuesday, was the two-month anniversary so I decided to open the bag and take a peek.”

Rufus gazed out the window. The snow was leveling off now with no additional accumulation; like a Frost poem, the pristine whiteness exuded a certain picaresque serenity. “Do you understand how it works?”

Ava held one of the queer coins up to the light. “Assign the value ‘three’ to each head result, and ‘two’ to each tail, and then add the values. The total will be six, seven, eight or nine. A chart in the back of the book explains how to interpret the numbers and construct hexagrams from the bottom up.”

Rufus picked up the book and thumbed through the tattered pages at random. “Have you tried it yet?”

“No, but my brother got himself in a legal mess. My family has been going through a difficult time lately, so I thought I might give it a whirl.” Without further explanation, Ava reached for a switch on the wall and the huge, fluorescent display sign over the diesel pumps went dark, shrouding the entire front lot in silvery shadows. “My boss called just before you showed up. He said I could close early with the snow.”

She threw a separate switch that killed power to the individual pumps then reached for the three coins. “What do you think, Rufus?”

The man smoothed his droopy moustache in a repetitive, soothing gesture. “Oh, why the hell not!”

Ava tossed the coins up in the air and watched them clatter onto the Formica surface of the counter. She added up the numbers, which came to six, took a piece of paper and drew a broken line.

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“Old yin.” Ava threw the coins four more times and each throw produced another broken line.

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“Strange!” Rufus muttered. “How come everything keeps coming out the same?”

Ava shrugged. “I keep getting six or nine,” she explained, “which is a broken line.” On the final throw, the coins added up to seven.

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Ava ran her finger down a glossary of all sixty-four symbols in the front of the book until she reached the twenty-third. “The Po hexagram indicates,” she read from the accompanying text, “that it will not be advantageous to make a movement in any direction whatsoever. The first six divided, shows one overturning the couch by injuring its legs. The insult will go on to the destruction of all firm correctness, and there will be evil.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Rufus growled.

Ignoring the questions, Ava returned to the text, but all the remaining broken lines leading to the top held an ominous message. Finally, she pointed at the topmost solid line. “The undivided line becomes the prominent or principle one,” she was reading from a separate commentary printed in smaller script toward the lower portion of the page. “*Decay or overthrow has begun at the bottom and crept up to the top. Small men have gradually replaced good men and great until only one remains; and the lesson for him is to wait. The power operating against him is too strong.*”

Agitated, Rufus rose to his feet. “For God’s sakes, what question did you ask?”

Ava’s face was ashen, her lips compressed in a tight band. “Can’t say.” She slammed the book shut and returned it to the suede pouch along with the brass coins. Putting her hat and gloves on, she said, “I’m going home now.”

“Did you get the right answer?”

“Right answer, wrong answer... you don’t necessarily get what you’re looking for,” Ava replied evasively. “The I Ching doesn’t work that way.”

Rufus held the door open for her. "Would you mind if I stopped by again some time?"  
"No, not at all," she replied, pulling the door shut and checking to make sure it was properly locked, "though, like I said, it's a contradiction in terms, for a misanthrope to want to spend time with anyone."

Around two in the morning Ava called Rufus. "You got home safely in the snow?"  
"It was a little icy, but other than that... How'd you get my telephone number?"  
"It was on the wallpaper receipt. Would you like to go out with me?"  
There was a short pause. "What did you have in mind?" he stammered.  
There's a Brazilian film playing all week over at the Avon Cinema on the east side of Providence. The movie is in subtitles."  
"Yeah, I'd like that."  
"I'm finished messing around with the I Ching," Ava blurted, almost stumbling over the words. "Caput! I'm returning the green pouch to the Lost and Found drawer."  
"Okay." Rufus seemed mildly confused by her persistence. "Whatever you think is best."  
"I brought it home and, about an hour ago, flipped the coins one last time."  
"And how did that work out?"  
"A hell of a lot better."  
"So you got an answer you liked?" It was the same question Rufus raised back at the gas station, just worded differently.  
"I asked two completely different questions," Ava qualified so it's not a fair comparison. "Let's just say I'm rather pleased with the way things turned out in both instances."  
There was a protracted silence. Ava had the distinct feeling that Rufus was mulling over what she had just told him. "More recently," he pressed, "what question did you ask?"  
"It's a long story. Tell you about it when I see you."

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## Small Favors

As though struck by a battering ram, the bathroom door flew open. "Toilet Paper!" a raspy female voice bellowed. "I need a fresh roll, ASAP!"

From his vantage point thirty feet away in the den, seventeen year-old Lenny Berman could see the chunky woman hunkered down on the toilet with a copy of the *National Inquirer* spread discretely across her broad lap. A pair of shapeless, tan panties nestled around her ankles. "Who's out there? Is that the Berman boy?"

The raucous outburst blindsided sixteen year-old Marcie Callahan, caught the woman's daughter totally unawares. "Yes, it's Lenny." Turning beet red, Marcie staggered to her feet. In the hall closet she located a fresh roll of Charmin extra-soft. Her mother unraveled a handful of sheets, positioning the plump roll on the floor next to the bathtub. "Hi, Lenny!" Mrs. Callahan tittered. "You caught me in a compromising situation, if you know what I mean."

The boy, who wasn't sure about social protocol, nodded. Lenny and Marcie were reviewing notes for an upcoming English test. *To Kill a Mockingbird* - over the past three weeks the junior class had slogged through the Harper Lee classic. The test was on Friday.

A moment later, Marcie returned to the living room, her eyes fogged over with tears. "Do Jewish mothers defecate with the bathroom door wide open?"

"It wasn't that bad," Lenny affected a mollifying tone.

Actually it *was* that bad and worse. The woman clearly had no sense of privacy or personal boundaries. Mrs. Callahan wore every vapid emotion on her sleeve like a badge of honor. Privacy was a four letter word with every bit of family business, gossip, scandal and tittle-tattle in the public domain. Scrunched together in a modest, three-bedroom cape far too small for a family with six siblings, the Callahan clan subsisted like bees in an overcrowded hive. The children, even the oldest, were doubled up in bunk beds and the line outside the bathroom at seven-thirty in the morning stretched down the hallway with considerable squabbling and discontent especially from the younger set.

"My family," Marcie seethed, "they run around the house in their freakin' underwear and leave the bathroom door wide open; they belch and fart and do all sorts of gross and disgusting things." She whipped around and stuck her soggy face up under his chin. "Do you know what it's like living in a sordid freak show like this?"

Lenny was getting frightened. Shutting the door so no one would hear, he put a hand on her arm but she sloughed it off. "It's like those goddamn illiterate, dirt farmers in the Harper Lee novel. The Ewell clan... Mayella and Bob. Those inbred, hillbilly morons who don't have a stitch of class, culture, brains or social graces... that's my folks, if you care to know. So what do you say to that, huh?" Marcie tilted her pretty-ugly, tear-stained face at a sharp angle. "What do you say to that, Lenny Berman?"

Lenny gawked at the maudlin mess that was his best friend since middle school. She had dirty blond hair cut short, a broad fleshy nose and eyes the color of the Atlantic Ocean on a staggeringly sunny day in late August as viewed from the pearly sand dunes of Cape Cod's Horseneck Beach. "I don't care about your debauched family," Lenny replied. "I'm crazy about you." Slipping an arm around her waist, he kissed her on the mouth. Nothing tentative, he kissed her a second time even more insistently. When the kiss was done, Marcie flopped down on the sofa.

"I don't just want to be friends anymore." Lenny touched the side of her face with his fingertips. "I want you for my girlfriend."

Marcie considered the request. "I'll be your girlfriend, sweetheart, sex slave... anything you want, but I need a small favor and it's a bit complicated."

After she explained herself, Lenny said, "Okay, that's fine... what about Harper Lee and *To Kill a Mockingbird*?"

"It's been almost five minutes," Marcie observed. "I'm sure my lovely mother is finished moving her bowels; we should be able to study without further distractions."

*Yes, I'll be your girlfriend, sweetheart, sex slave... anything you want, but I need a small favor.* After the flurry of kisses, Marcie Callahan told Lenny that she desperately needed to understand how 'normal' families functioned.

Lenny tried to explain that all families were dysfunctional, but Marcie wouldn't hear it. The Jewish holidays were the following week. She wanted to spend time with a family that neither belched nor farted, people who didn't have to tie a string around their index finger in order to remember not to do gross, lewd and disgusting things when they crawled out of their simian cave each morning.

Later that night after supper, Lenny approached his mother as she was clearing the table. "There's this girl from school, Marcie Callahan."

Lenny's sister, Elsie, wandered into the room. Dark-haired with a pear-shaped physique and wide, mannish jaw, she was a year younger. "Yes, a girl from school," Mrs. Berman repeated absently.

"Could I bring her to Passover Seder?"

"Who is this girl?"

"Marcie Callahan... she's in my English class."

"A frumpy blonde with a family of knuckle-dragging buffoons right out of the stone age," Elsie interjected. "The father stops by here at least once a week."

"How's that?" Mrs. Berman placed a chafing dish in the sudsy sink and turned to face her daughter.

Either Elsie did not hear the question or was in too much of a rush to share additional damning gossip. "An older brother got suspended for bringing liquor to a high school football game last year."

Lenny cringed. This was vintage Elsie. Given the choice to say something nice or run a serrated bread knife across Marcie Callahan's guileless throat, she always opted for the latter. "Marcie gets good grades and is president of the French club."

Elsie made an ungracious, snorting sound through her beaky nose. "Better hide the silverware and anything else of value."

"A disadvantaged child joining us for the holidays," Mrs. Berman weighed the request. "Consider it *a mitzvah*, an act of charity."

"She's not disadvantaged, at least not in the way you're thinking."

"If she earns good grades," Mrs. Berman continued, "the girl shouldn't squander her potential. She needs to expose herself to enlightened values."

"Expose herself?" Elsie erupted in another fit of shrill laughter. "Such an interesting choice of words!"

Mrs. Berman began scrubbing the chafing dish with a dishrag. "Just have Marcie's mother call to confirm and I'll set another place at the Passover table."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Just have Marcie's mother call...* Would Mrs. Callahan be calling on a cell phone from her strategic vantage point in the bathroom, door ajar and latest edition of the scandal sheet spread across her mountainous thighs? Later that night after her shower, Elsie padded into her brother's bedroom. Her fresh-washed hair was wrapped turban-style in a crimson towel. "The Callahans... they're trailer park trash, the whole lot of them. They got no class, no pedigree."

"Dogs have pedigree," Lenny corrected. He was lying on top of the comforter reading near the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird* where the townsfolk, intent on lynching the black man, Tom Robinson, converge on the jail.

"You damn well know what I mean," Elsie hissed. "Her freakin' father drives a garbage truck. Why are you hanging around with the likes of her?" Lenny stared at his sister. Elsie was the sum total of everything Lenny detested in humanity and it was his great misfortune that, by some sardonic quirk of fate, she was his sibling.

"Can you keep a secret?" Elsie lowered her voice several decibels. She snugged the towel wrap more firmly on her wet hair. "'Joel' and Miriam are getting divorced."

"What?" Joel was their older brother. After completing his residency at medical college, he married Miriam Rabinowitz, an intern. The newlyweds were living in Upstate New York.

"They been fighting like lunatics. The marriage is over, kaput... *fini la comédie.*"

"They've been together less than a year!"

"Well, the novelty wore off, and now they hate each other's crummy guts. There was a horrible fight and Joel gave her a black eye. The police came and removed him from the condo. Dad had to send money so Joel could rent a room at the local motel until he finds more permanent lodgings."

"When did he hit her?"

"I dunno. Over a month ago... maybe two. What's the difference?"

"How come nobody told me?"

"Because you're an asshole who invites trailer park trash to the Jewish holidays, that's why."

"They're not coming for Passover?"

"Only Joel. The folks will make up some tawdry excuse... say that Miriam's sick with a sinus infection or that she flew to India to visit the Dali Lama or some other mindless nonsense. Whatever you do, don't mention anything about the missing sister-in-law. Just act like everything's normal... hunky dory." Without further elaboration, Elsie adjusted her ruby red turban and shuffled noiselessly from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joel and Miriam Berman's wedding reception the previous summer was held in the *Georgian Ballroom* of the Boston Park Plaza Hotel. The ritzy landmark boasted floor-to-ceiling windows, two-story Baccarat crystal chandeliers and white glove service. Prior to the fancy-schmancy wedding, the female entourage attended a complimentary private menu tasting and bridal tea with ivory, floor-length linen and matching napkins. Lenny heard about it secondhand from Elsie who went absolutely gaga over the swanky extravaganza.

But the proverbial train ran off the rails several days later at the gazillion-dollar wedding reception when an electric transformer at a substation on the Charles River blew, effectively shutting down the air conditioner. Temperatures in the ballroom soared to ninety degrees. The bride, a petite dark-haired sparrow of a woman, stormed about the lobby in her wedding gown and floral tiara, threatening to sue the hotel. An obdurate petulance lingered about the cupid bow lips. As the woman aged and became more settled in her ways, the harshness might gain the upper hand, but for now she was a pint-size package of feminine perfection.

"This is the happiest day of your life, Miri darling." Rabbi Hurwitz, an emaciated man with a wispy beard, tried to calm the bride. "*Baruch Ha'Shem!* Don't let a minor inconvenience spoil the sacred moment," he cooed.

*Baruch Ha'Shem!* Praise God!

The man was in the habit of repeating the salutary phrase over and over when he was unable to contain his emotions. Rabbi Hurwitz grabbed her left hand, raised it to his lips in a theatrical flourish and kissed the bulbous diamond on her finger. "*B'Tabaat zu, art mikoodasheet li.*" "With this ring," the rabbi translated, "you are sacred unto me." He wrapped his arms around the despondent bride. "*Baruch Ha'Shem! Baruch Ha'Shem!* What you do is this; you concentrate on all the happiness that awaits a new bride and forget about the silly air conditioning." The rabbi threw in a few more *Baruch Ha'Shems!* for good measure and kissed the newly-minted Miriam Berman on either cheek.

The hotel lobby grew silent.

Miriam took a step back in her designer wedding gown purchased from *Priscilla's of Boston*. The Melissa Sweet, one shoulder, silk Garza gown with ruched waist and clusters of beaded floral appliqués on the bodice had cost well over five thousand dollars. "Enough already with the *Baruch Ha'Shems!*" Miriam screeched. "I want the fucking air conditioning fixed, or I'll have the maitre d's testicle on a platter!"

The rabbi sighed, shook his head and hurried away without further conciliatory remarks. Fifteen minutes later an emergency generator in the basement of the building got the air conditioner, which was on a separate circuit, running again. As the temperature in the ballroom gradually settled back into the low seventies, Miriam was transformed – in true Jekyll-and-Hyde fashion – from bride-from-hell to blissful soul mate.

Following the wedding, the couple honeymooned on an island off the coast of Greece. "What a firecracker!" Lenny's father chuckled the following morning at the bridal brunch. "The maitre d's testicles on a platter," he repeated Miriam's vulgar threat, and the guests howled, hooted, jeered and laughed hysterically. Even Elsie considered her new sister-in-law's gauche antics priceless. But now that Joel had assaulted his wife and been thrown out of the house without even a year of marriage to show for the lavish wedding, Lenny didn't know what to think.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are Joel and Miriam doing?" Lenny asked in the morning before leaving for classes.

"Good," his mother replied. Did he detect a slight tightening of the vocal cords, causing her tone to drift upwards in pitch? "Why do you ask?"

"I dunno. He hasn't called in a while."

"Well he's busy with his medical practice and new wife," his mother replied.

What new wife? He beat her up. The police came and evicted him from the goddamn, luxury condo! "So he's coming for Passover?"

"They're coming," his mother corrected. "By the way, I spoke to Mrs. Callahan."

"Yes, I know."

"Such a sweet woman!" Mrs. Berman, who was repotting an aloe plant that had outgrown the decorative ceramic bowl, looked up. She sprinkled water over the vermiculite. "A bit intellectually limited but a perfectly decent sort."

"There are a few things you need to know before coming to Seder," Lenny cautioned. They were sitting in the living room of the Callahan house. Marcie had three older brothers and

twin sisters so there were constant throngs of young people traipsing through the house at any given moment. Initially, the bedlam stood Lenny back on his heels, but over the years he had become inured; at a deeper level he may have actual begun to look forward to his regular visits.

Were the Callahans tacky? Yes. Were they loud and crass? Absolutely! Were they kind, boorish, fun loving, ignorant, gracious, ill-bred and welcoming? Well, yes again.

Just the other day, one of Marcie's older brothers, who played defensive end on the varsity football team, tiptoed up behind him. The muscle-bound goofball cuffed Lenny playfully on the side of the head with the flat of his hand. "There's pepperoni pizza in the kitchen, but you better hurry 'cause it's going fast." Lenny glanced warily at the husky teen. There was nothing mean-spirited in the physical act. It was just the way the Callahans were - direct to the point of raunchy inappropriateness.

"The Botox smile," Lenny counseled. "When you first arrive at Passover Seder, you will notice everyone smiling nonstop as though they just returned from the gates of heaven or a plastic surgeon."

"You're not even remotely funny," Marcie replied sourly.

"The reason for the euphoria," Lenny ignored the remark, "is they're all covering for my brother's marital problems. Nobody's supposed to know any of this so we 'pretend' everything's peachy keen."

"Will Joel's wife be there?"

"No, Miriam will not be coming for Passover and don't mention her name or draw attention to the fact that my brother is alone."

"And I thought my family was weird!" Marcie patted him sympathetically on the wrist. "What else?"

"My sister Elsie has a vindictive streak and will assault you with an endless barrage of catty remarks. It's what she exists for... her life calling. Don't take it personal."

"Anything else?" Marcie was beginning to look frazzled.

"Yes, one last thing: *Goyim*, non-Jews, are grossly inferior. It's their manifest destiny to never quite measure up. Essentially pagans and idol worshippers, they drink to excess, cheat on their spouses and their morals are so badly flawed as to be virtually non-existent."

"What about your brother and his foulmouthed, estranged wife?"

At the opposite end of the claustrophobically small house, Mrs. Callahan was hollering for someone to fetch a fresh roll of toilet paper. Out of the corner of his eye, Lenny caught sight of one of the twins bolting down the narrow hallway. "Oh no," he shot back flippantly, "that doesn't count. Joel and Miriam are the exception that makes the rule."

"Well then," Marcie replied, "I'll see you tomorrow night."

\* \* \* \* \*

The following day at Brandenburg High School, Lenny cornered Marcie Callahan in the school cafeteria as she was sitting down for lunch. "My brother's bringing Miriam to Seder."

"But I thought -"

"Apparently the lovebirds reconciled and are trying to salvage their shitty marriage, so try to act normal."

"I don't get it."

"Nobody's supposed to know my brother beat his wife up or that they were living apart."

"I thought Jewish men didn't hit their wives."



"Just try to act normal, that's all."

"That's the second time you told me," Marcie observed soberly.

"Told you what?"

"To act normal."

Marcie arrived for the Passover Seder dressed in a blue frock and low, patent leather heels. Before the ceremony began, Mrs. Berman explained the symbolism of the various delicacies spread across the dining room table. "This blend of apples, nuts, wine and spices," she pointed to a small bowl, "is called *charoset*. It reminds us of the mortar the Jewish slaves mixed in their servitude." Next to the charoset was a dish of parsley to be dipped into salt water, representing the tears of the Jews exiled from their ancestral homeland. "When we dipped the greens in the water," Mrs. Berman explained, "we share in the bitterness and suffering of that Biblical time.

*Baruch atah Adonai,  
Ailochenu melech ha'olem...*

Once Lenny's mother had finished explaining the symbolism, Mr. Berman recited the blessing for the wine. Twenty minutes later after reading the Four Questions, the ritual Passover meal was served. As appetizer, a glistening heap of gefilte fish was passed around along with a separate dish of horse radish. Mrs. Berman and her daughter-in-law shuttled the steaming platters of baked brisket, beans, potato and lokshen kugel from the kitchen.

"This is absolutely heavenly!" Marcie waved her fork over a spicy meat dish. "What are the flavorings?"

"Sweet potatoes," Mrs. Berman replied, "carrots, a dozen or so pitted prunes, raisins, brown sugar and cinnamon. The concoction is simmered in a cup of orange juice for the citrusy tartness. Some people substitute diced pears and apricots along with a large sweet onion."

Lenny surveyed the room. Mr. Berman, who drained several glasses of Manischewitz wine before the ceremony got under way was feeling no pain whatsoever. Joel looked constipated. Sitting to his left, Miriam exuded a glacial, haughtiness. Whatever festive joy she might have felt lost traction, degenerating in diffuse indifference. She was clearly attending the family gathering under protest. Acting like she was hopped up on amphetamines, Mrs. Berman talked nonstop. Elsie was just plain old Elsie.

Around eight-thirty, Lenny approached his mother sorting leftovers in the kitchen. "I'm walking Marcie home."

"Such a lovely girl! I'm so glad she came." Mrs. Berman seemed overwrought, almost manic with relief that there had been no unpleasantness. Nobody mentioned the maitre d's testicles, Joel's fisticuffs or Miriam's predilection for obscenity-laced temper tantrums.

"Are Joel and Miriam getting divorced?"

"Bite your tongue!" Mrs. Berman hissed. "Why would you suggest such absurdity?"

Lenny was dead tired. He felt like a bit player in an off-Broadway theater production after the final curtain had descended and the actors rushed off to their respective dressing rooms

to shed costumes and makeup. "I'm gonna walk Marcie home," he repeated, ignoring the question.

"If there was some misunderstanding between your brother and his wife," his mother spoke a bit too quickly, running all the words together in a frenetic heap, "it's all in the past now and everything's back to normal."

Elsie lugged the last of the dirty dishes into the kitchen, setting them on the counter before drifting back into the dining room. "No it isn't," Lenny blurted.

Mrs. Berman eyed her son nervously. "It's getting late. I gotta take Marcie home."

When they were two blocks from the house, Lenny pulled up short. "I'm sorry about the Passover Seder."

"It's not your fault," Marcie noted. "Not everyone can have a perfect family like mine." She grabbed his face in both hands and kissed his mouth. "We're probably going to spend the rest of our lives together."

"Yes, that's fairly obvious," Lenny held her close. Somehow the endemic heartache he associated with his own cracked-egg-of-a-family, merged; it comingled and morphed into a sublime presentiment. "But we will need to create a new world order, a community of like-minded individuals."

Marcie paused a moment, considering the task at hand. "Something midway between Scout, Jem and Atticus Finch."

"With a smattering of Boo Radley thrown in for good measure." Lenny nuzzled her cheek with his lips.

"Yes, I totally forgot about Boo." Her arms snaked up behind Lenny's shoulders, holding on for dear life.

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## Failure to Launch

"What if you had to choose between two, patently unethical propositions?" Fred Linden posited in a slapdash, disorganized fashion.

The middle-aged man was sitting behind his desk in shirtsleeves, the paisley tie dangling askew at his throat. Short and broad - more muscular than flabby - a shock of unkempt sandy hair drifted haphazardly over his blue eyes. The fair skin tones were offset by ruddy cheeks and a fleshy nose. The general impression was that of a mischievous adolescent trapped in a man's body, Peter Pan masquerading as a middle-age, hospital administrator replete with designer shirt and thirty-dollar, silk tie.

Collin Abercrombie entered the office and hastily closed the door "How serious are the issues?"

"Enough to wreck a professional career."

The melodrama was vintage Fred Linden. You thought the meeting was to discuss case management issues - some eighty-year-old Alzheimer's patient complaining that the skinny-as-a-

rail, home care aide stole her size 38, double-D bra - and Fred walloped you upside the head with some totally unrelated, incidental nonsense.

"I'm not following you." Collin glanced over his shoulder. Yes, the door was shut, the muffled sounds in the hospital corridor dampened away to nil. "I'd need more specifics."

"An aide in the home care unit, Gwen Santos, hasn't attended a single continuing education workshop all year."

"I'm not surprised." The home care worker was caring for an eighteen-year-old paraplegic woman injured in a car accident. Split shift seven days a week, Gwen ministered to the invalid, who had been discharged from a rehab facility eight months earlier and lived in handicapped housing. She cleaned the colostomy bag, bathed and dressed the cripple before transferring her to a motorized wheelchair. Early on, Collin visited the home to do the activities-of-daily-living assessment. In her late thirties, Gwen never called out sick. In the dead of winter with a foot of fresh-packed snow on the ground, the caregiver fishtailed down the ice-strewn, Route 95 interstate in her beat-up Subaru with bald tires and a blown muffler to bath and feed the paralyzed woman.

"If the department of health checks personnel folders, they could cite Gwen for non-compliance," Collin noted. "Revoke her license."

Fred pushed a messy clump of papers across the desk. "Which is why I forged her signature on all ten, CEU attendance sheets."

Collin felt a cramping sensation in his stomach. When Fred Linden finally raised his eyes from the desk, the perennial jokester wasn't smiling anymore. "So which is the lesser of two evils?"

*The lesser of two evils...* A young girl with withered legs, spastic bladder and no control whatsoever over the lower portion of her body forfeits a devoted caregiver, because the state, in its bureaucratic wisdom, mandates that Gwen Santos sit in a classroom learning what she already knew from ten years earlier!

Collin rubbed his chin and made a disagreeable face. The latest DOH inspector, Rita Fogelman, was an anal-compulsive brute, who during a recent visit peppered the department with a fistful of frivolous discrepancies. If Ms. Fogelman had stumbled across Gwen Santos' file during the previous audit, she would have discovered the lack of continuing education credits. The aide would have been sanctioned and promptly stripped of her license. In the collateral damage the paraplegic teenager would have lost the only reliable helpmate she ever knew. But that troubling detail would never factor into the equation.

"I duplicated the signature from Gwen's employment application... forged signatures on all ten attendance sheets." Fred thumped the topmost form with a stubby forefinger. "Judging by the old-fashion, cursive 'r's and bulky 'G's, I'm guessing Gwen attended a parochial school run by ninety-year-old nuns in black habits and wimples."

Gathering up the papers, he tossed them in a manila folder alongside an ICD10 coding manual as thick as a Bible. The cumbersome volume was heavy enough to use as a doorstop. "But that's not really why I called you here." He pointed at a laptop computer lying on a workstation near the window. "There's a database program I'd like you to look at."

Still frazzled by the earlier revelation, Collin sat down at the workstation and reached for the mouse. "Where's the cursor?"

"*Professional File System* is a forty-year-old database that predates the mouse." Fred replied, "It doesn't even know what a Window's operating system is much less a desktop icon."

For the second time in less than five minutes Fred Linden rendered the younger man mildly disoriented. Collin pulled his hand away from the keyboard and studied the scruffy laptop. "This isn't your regular computer."

"I got it out of mothballs from hospital storage. The program won't function on any software program newer than Windows XP

"What about USB ports?"

There aren't any."

"So how -"

"Floppy disc," Fred interjected, anticipating Collin's question.

"How do I navigate the main menu?"

"Up and down arrows in conjunction with the Enter key."

Collin depressed the down arrow and the screen came alive. Tapping lightly on the Enter key, the prehistoric program navigated to a crude search menu with four, separate options.

"The program resembles a hobbled horse with blinders," Fred noted. "It limps along unable to take in much of anything except what's directly within its restricted frame of vision. But that's the beauty of it. The program does next to nothing, but it does it exceedingly well."

"With all the sophisticated database applications on the market," Collin protested, "why use such a limited program?"

"We need it exclusively for one application: updating client invoices."

"What about Microsoft XL or one of the hospital spreadsheet programs?"

As the administrator explained the dilemma, he had already sampled a dozen similar programs, each of which contained a fatal flaw; either they couldn't perform multiple field searches or the complex, design templates resisted modification. "What we have here is an absurdly obsolete computer program that does exactly what we need, quicker and more efficiently than anything else on the market."

Collin shrugged. "So what's the problem?"

"Most college professionals would balk at such a shabby product." Fred's massive face dissolved in a conspiratorial smirk. "That's where you come in. I want you to learn PFS and show one or two enlightened souls in your department how this stone-age, relic works. That way, if I'm out sick or away on conference, there's no break in continuity."

The older man rose and reached for his jacket. "Have you had coffee?" Collin shook his head. "Let's grab something, and over lattes I'll review the particulars."

\* \* \* \* \*

A mile from the hospital they passed the town library and a Goodyear tire shop. A few minutes later on the left-hand side of the road a Tim Horton's with a parking lot full of customers loomed into view, but Fred continued along at a moderate clip. When they reached Brandenburg center, Fred swerved into Ryan's Diner. "Changed my mind," he blurted. "Forget coffee. I need breakfast... a full meal."

Once inside, the older man chose a booth near the back of the restaurant. They ordered breakfast specials, and the waitress, a plump brunette with a pear-shaped torso, hurried off to fetch drinks. When the meal arrived, Fred reached across the table and thumped Collin playfully on the forearm. "How's your love life?"

"Temporarily on hold."

"I thought you were dating that freckle-faced X-ray technician?"

"Only briefly. Didn't work out," he muttered noncommittally.

"Ever think about settling down?"

As with everything else, the question materialized out of nowhere. "Without a soul mate, it's all wishful thinking."

Fred waved a fist vaguely in the direction of the main counter. "How about that one over there? Could you picture yourself married to that cute blonde?"

Fifty feet away, a waitress dressed in a white uniform leaned against the Formica counter. Slouched at an angle, she peered out the window with a sultry expression, her frizzy hair tied back in a pig tail that petered out about the nape of the neck.

"She's probably already got a husband."

"That doesn't answer my question."

The smell of maple syrup and fresh-perked coffee drifted from the next booth where an elderly Hispanic was demolishing a stack of blueberry pancakes. Collin gazed intently at the pale-skinned woman a second time. "Despite the fact that I don't even know her, I could fantasize all sorts of intriguing possibilities."

Fred took a final swig of coffee and rose to his feet. "Don't go anywhere."

Lumbering to the counter, he tapped the waitress on the shoulder and began a rather vigorous monologue. Nonplussed, the girl seemed to be only half listening. Fred Linden gestured with both hands as he flicked his eyes in the direction of the booth where Collin was sitting, and the blonde gave him a perfunctory once over before turning away. After a series of animated exchanges, Fred returned to the booth.

"Saturday night... a dinner date followed by movie of her choosing." He paid the bill, placing the tip separately to one side. "Dress to impress and make formal dinner reservations so you're not kept waiting to be seated."

Collin gawked again at the blonde. She was still rooted in the same place, peering out the window with a look of haughty indifference. "That waitress agreed to go out with me on your recommendation?"

By way of response, Fred Linden flashed his goofball, little-boy smile. "I don't even know the woman's name, where she lives or telephone number," Collin protested.

"No matter," Fred rose to his feet and was already half way to the door. "Her father can supply you with the miscellaneous information."

\* \* \* \* \*

Fred Linden and his daughter, Alison, were not on the coziest term, which is why when they entered the diner the father purposely chose a booth away from the front. "Ali was valedictorian of her senior class," Fred boasted on the drive back from Ryan's Diner. "She studied at Brandeis on full academic scholarship... got her degree two years ago."

"So why is she waiting tables?"

"Perfectly reasonable question," Fred pulled up at a stoplight. The hospital was three blocks down on the right.

"Does your daughter have some mental aberration?"

"Bite your tongue!" Fred wagged his head emphatically from side to side. "With Alison it's..." He snapped his fingers repeatedly, trying to conjure up the proper term. "Failure to launch... arrested development. I don't know the technical jargon. Alison's been in an emotional

holding pattern since completing her studies." In the hospital parking lot, the stocky man turned off the engine and sat pensively for the longest time. "There are still third world countries where parents find suitable matches for their children."

A cardiologist Collin recognized pulled into a parking space several rows down. "You're not my father," Collin protested, "and we don't live in a third world country."

Fred grinned sheepishly. "My daughter's a good girl... no bad habits or vices that a sympathetic spouse couldn't learn to ignore."

Collin cracked an amused expression. "Where does romance factor into the grand scheme?"

"Two perfectly nice people meet and get familiar. Where's the harm?" Fred blustered. "In August my wife and I celebrated our silver wedding anniversary. At some point in a marriage you move beyond puppy love and goopy sentiments... become best friends, helpmates, spiritual confidants." Fred Linden suddenly reached out and patted Collin on the shoulder. "I got a good feeling about this... a real good feeling."

Collin stared out the window at a cloudless sky. A blast of icy late October rain had stripped the last remaining leaves from the maples and oaks. Collin wrenched his beleaguered brain back to the business at hand. "What did your daughter study in college?"

"Philosophy with a minor in comparative lit."

"Four years of Schopenhauer and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and now she waits tables in a greasy spoon?"

"Not to worry!" Fred undid the seatbelt and reached for the door. "Saturday night, Allison will bring you up to speed." "Take the laptop home over the weekend," he said, shifting gears. "You can familiarize yourself with the PFS database program. I'll bring you up to speed on print drivers as we get closer to payroll."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday late morning, Alison Linden paid Collin a visit at the hospital. "My father put us both in an awkward situation the other day."

Collin, who was updating client rosters, leaned back in the swivel chair. The woman was rather pretty with a rough-cut, unpolished appeal. The family on the mother's side was of Dutch origin, which would explain the generous, full-lipped face, fleshy nose and watery blue eyes. "You're not obligated to go out with me if you don't want," she added tersely, making no effort to mask her disdain for her father's meddlesome antics.

Collin balked momentarily. "I already made dinner reservations... the *Blue Grotto* on Federal Hill. Seven o'clock." He cleared his throat and looked her full in the face. "You've had a change of heart?"

"No, not at all," Alison blustered. "It's just my father's got this nutty notion that we're going directly from the desert menu to the marriage altar."

Turning the computer off, Collin stepped out from behind the desk. "Come with me." Poking his head in an adjoining cubicle, he informed a coworker he was taking a short break and, with Alison Linden in tow, headed for the elevator.

Three blocks down a small park snaked through a wooded grove of densely packed silver birch, willows and aromatic pines. Directly ahead an older woman was walking a brown and white shih-tzu. The dog, which was off leash, scampered erratically among the dead leaves and

pine needles. When they reached the gravel footpath, Collin turned to Alison. "Your father has been forging signatures so one of our home care aides doesn't lose her accreditation." He told her about the incident with the continuing education workshops and counterfeited signatures. "The Department of Health doesn't give a rat's ass if a paraplegic teen wallows in her own body waste. All they care about are a hodgepodge of state-mandated, training regulations."

It had been a wearisome New England fall and everyone they passed seemed buoyed by the sun and unseasonable warmth. "What would you have done?" Alison asked.

"I don't follow you?"

"About the missing credits."

Collin made a disgruntled face, blowing out his cheeks in exasperation. "I would have drawn the shades and locked the door to my office. Then I'd wedge the back of a sturdy chair under the doorknob as an added precaution before forging the missing signatures." The jaunty little Shih-tzu with the pushed-in face and pronounced overbite doubled back to where they were standing. Collin squatted down on his haunches and scratched the dog behind the ear. "The good news is that in the future your father won't be put in such an untenable bind."

"How that?"

"Employees who can't attend in-house training can still gain credit by viewing medical videos, if an administrator countersigns the paperwork." The shih-tzu suddenly lifted a hind leg and peed into the leaves. Standing no more than four inches off the ground, the diminutive dog with the pushed-in face scampered off again, his massive head held perfectly erect and plumed tail arched over the barrel-shaped rump. "I already put together a packet of medical videos that I'm mailing out to Gwen Santos this afternoon. I'll meet with her sometime next month to quiz her on the topics and collect signatures."

When there was no immediate response, Collin added, "Your father wants me to marry you in the worst way."

"He's not terribly subtle with affairs of the heart." Alison cracked a wan smile. "What else did my father tell you about his dysfunctional, disaffected daughter?"

"He said," Collin chose his words diplomatically, "you were still finding your way in life."

Alison flinched and quickly glanced away. A gust of wind sent a pile of dead leaves swirling in a funnel before scattering noiselessly to the ground. Cresting a hill, just beyond a tangle of nettles and briars a small pond loomed directly ahead. A solitary mallard was feeding at the far edge of the water. "This girl my father forged the signatures for... what's she like?"

Collin pulled up short and watched as the duck dipped precariously forward, the orangey webbed feet flailing in the air. "Gwen's been married twice. All she's got to show for it is a heart of pure spun gold and three minor dependents on her W-4 federal withholding." For a second time the mallard upended its torso in search of succulent vegetation. "Gwen's a hard worker... honest to a fault."

They made a loop of the pond and headed back toward the entrance to the park. "Then my father did the right thing," Allison murmured.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday night the phone rang. "Regarding the new invoicing program..." Fred Linden was on the other end of the line.

"It's almost midnight," Collin grouched. "I'm getting ready for bed."

“The F-1 key opens up a series of ‘help’ boxes with step-by-step instructions.”

Collin was standing barefoot on the kitchen tiles. “You called to tell me that?”

“How did your first date go?”

“Why don’t you ask your daughter?”

“Already did and she referred me back to you.” When there was no immediate reply, Fred demanded, “Are you asking Alison out again?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“In a day or so.”

Dead silence. “There’s no help menu, in the conventional sense.” Fred’s over-stimulated brain seemed to be in free fall. “When confusion arises, you’ll need to navigate to a place in the specific submenus before depressing the F-1 tab.”

“Goodnight, Fred.”

“Alison’s a sweetheart, isn’t she?”

“Goodnight.” He hung up the phone.

Collin lay down on the bed but couldn’t sleep. Sitting up in a full lotus position he arranged the laptop on his thighs and brought up a navy blue main menu. Arrow up, arrow down, enter and F-10 to save information - that was it, the whole kit and caboodle. It was so simple the process bordered on the idiotic. But the Neanderthal, database program was infinitely more coherent than any other for organizing client data. A case in point: Gwen Santos cared for three other homemaking clients in addition to the paraplegic girl. The PFS program allowed staff to print pay slips by assigned worker, so Gwen got all her client invoices printed on continuous feed forms in one uninterrupted run before proceeding on to the next worker straight through the alphabet, A to Z. It seemed logical enough, but no other modern-day program could negotiate the multiple-client stumbling block.

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## Mustard Fields

"Can I borrow your husband?" Maddie Timberland was standing on the front stoop of the neighbor’s house directly opposite her split-level ranch.

"Well, that sounds rather obscene," Kimberly Osborne tittered. Maddie had always considered the woman a latter-day Stepford wife - a *gynoid* designed to look the part but with few if any feminine virtues. For the third day in a row the temperature was already hovering in the high eighties, but the svelte blonde with the tepid smile seemed unaffected by the heat wave.

"My lawn mower keeps sputtering and dying out," Maddie explained.

Maddie wished Kimberly would call her husband, but she just stood there gawking at her like she was a Jehovah Witness prospecting for fresh converts. Kimberly aggravated the hell out of her, but what could she do? The woman’s husband was a regular wizard with anything mechanical, and Maddie hadn’t had a spouse in the picture for the past five years. Not that Jake, had he still been around, would have known what to do. Finally, Kimberly stepped out on the front stoop. The woman was dressed in a snazzy pair of spandex shorts and *Adidas* sneakers. In



her right hand was a mug of fresh-brewed tea with a slice of lemon bobbing up and down. "I was just going for a walk."

Going for walks - that's all Kimberly Osborne ever did. It was her all-consuming passion. Other woman raised families, held careers, nursed chronically ill relatives, volunteered at the local library or taught English as a second language. Kimberly fixed herself a cup of Bigelow's English breakfast tea with a dollop of wildflower honey, which she leisurely sipped on the short ride in her twin-turbo BMW328 with the retractable hardtop to the Brandenburg Athletic Field where she power walked around the track a dozen times or so. Sometimes she brought small weights which she pumped furiously in order to raise her metabolism and burn extra calories. After the exercise regimen, she ate a buttered croissant and swigged a second cup of tea at the Honey Dew Donut shop in the center of town. Then she went home and formally started her day, which consisted of not much of anything.

Maddie didn't know what to think. Even though Kimberly had always been decent to her in a deferential sort of way, the insipid creature freaked her out. And here Maddie was standing on the Osborne's front stairs ingratiating herself, begging for small favors.

Well, maybe Maddie was just a tad jealous.

Not that she had any reason to be.

She had a reasonably good figure, but you would never know it by the way clothes hung on her angular frame. Maddie's hair was dark and straight. 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, cool—not like Tinker Bell in 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. And, within the last year or so, her breasts had begun to sag, enough so to precipitate an anxiety attack bordering on full-blown despair. By comparison, Kimberly's perky little breasts would do what they were meant to do with or without the supportive services of a sports bra; that taken together with the high cheekbones, willowy legs and hazel eyes made the woman a complete knockout.

Trevor, who had been cleaning out the gutters in the back yard, came around the side of the house. "Maddie's lawnmower is busted," Kimberly said. "Perhaps you could take a look."

He stepped closer and the musky scent of English Leather pervaded the humid air. With his ruddy complexion and Vandyke beard, Trevor exuded a relaxed competence. The man stripped off a pair of rawhide work gloves. "Let me grab some tools."

When he was gone, Kimberly added, "He's a real nutcase when it comes to his Toro self-propelled. Every spring he does a complete tune-up... even sharpens the mulching blade by hand with a metal rasp." She giggled, a breezy, adolescent laugh. "Don't know what I'd do without him." Maddie wasn't quite sure what she would do without him either, but, as a slightly horny, unattached female, it didn't seem appropriate to share that intimacy with Kimberly.

The previous winter when a nor'easter dumped a foot and a half of snow in Maddie's driveway, Trevor slogged across the street with his Ariens two-cycle snow thrower and cleared the icy mess away inside half an hour. He had purchased the super-deluxe model. Big as a Sherman tank, the bright orange monster registered an apocalyptic roar when he fired up the engine. The sixteen-inch, serrated steel augur tossed the snow effortlessly fifty feet onto the side

lawn. Maddie didn't ask Trevor to do it. He never even rang the bell, just cleared all the snow away and went home - chug, chug, chug - guiding the machine, like a docile beast, in low gear.

"Your lawnmower died?" Trevor was unscrewing a tin lid on the left side of the two-stroke engine. "Let's have a look-see." Maddie dropped down on her haunches and tried to make mental notes in the event the temperamental machine went on the fritz again.

Trevor pulled the metal cover away and gestured with a finger at a wedge of yellow, spongy material. "That's your air filter." He pulled the soft block free of the compartment and washed it clean with the garden hose. "Dirt or grass clippings can block the passageway and foul the fuel mixture." After thoroughly cleaning the filter, Trevor screwed the lid back in place. "Are you aware that a groundhog is devouring your garden?"

Maddie glanced over her shoulder. In the far corner of the yard, a burly ground hog had wriggled under the wire netting and was feasting on a row of carrot tops. "That's Burt ...a regular visitor. We've agreed to share the harvest."

Trevor's blank expression eased into a lukewarm grin. "You grow vegetables... what does the rodent contribute?"

"He's quiet, stolid... a creature of few, pithy words and very indefinite wants. We have this understanding." Maddie waved her arms up over her head - once, twice. The groundhog scurried along the perimeter of the garden, which was overgrown with crabgrass and noxious jimson weed, before disappearing into the underbrush. By the wry look on his face, her neighbor had picked up on the not-so-veiled allusion to Maddie's former spouse but opted to let it pass.

"I just finished the novel, *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather," Maddie noted. Trevor was an avid reader. It was the one hobby the neighbors shared in common and when, on the few rare occasions that Maddie had the man to herself, she enjoyed the intellectual tête-à-tête. "The National Organization of Women was recently advising members not to patronize her works."

Trevor tipped the mower up on its side and was checking the blade and undercarriage. "And why was that?" Setting the machine back down on its wheels, he examined the choke adjustment.

"At the end of the novel, the heroine marries and chooses to live on a farm."

"And the radical feminists viewed that as a cop-out?" Maddie nodded once. "What's your take on Ms. Cather's fall from literary grace?"

"Asking you to help me with the broken-down lawnmower puts me squarely in the enemy camp."

Trevor, who seemed reasonably sure the choke was working properly, rose to his feet and stepped around to the front of the machine. "My daughter, Melissa, was accepted to Northeastern for the fall semester." The Osborne's had two children. The oldest boy was in his last year at Boston College, studying engineering.

"Congratulations!"

"I'm serving Kimberly with divorce papers."

"Excuse me?"

He fitted a silver socket onto a ratchet and, pulling the spark plug wire free of the copper tip, seated the tool over the slender, ceramic stub. "Next week. I'm moving into an efficiently apartment in Foxboro. I can't live with the woman anymore." Five flicks of the wrist and the badly corroded spark plug wobbled free of the engine block. He stood up straight, glanced at her absently and looked away. "You divorced Jake and with good reason, so you know how it is."

Maddie's husband was a thirty-five year old adolescent trapped in a man's body. He didn't need a wife as much as a nursemaid or nanny. And Trevor's wife wasn't much better. The man wiped the blackened deposits away from the tip of the sparkplug then ran a piece of bluish-black Emory cloth over the sooty mess. After a moment the abrasive cut through and the metal arm began to shine. "That should do it." He fitted the sparkplug back in the engine and snugged it hand-tight with the socket.

"She doesn't know?"

The man shrugged. "I'm planning to break the news over the weekend. In all likelihood, she'll sell the house and go live with her mother. The old lady will help her over the worst of it. Kimberly... she's not like you - resourceful and self-sufficient."

He paused to wipe a bead of sweat that was gathering on his forehead. "I'm not leaving Kimberly for another woman." He looked Maddie full in the face and held her eyes for a solid five seconds before turning away. "I've never cheated on my wife. Not once." He primed the engine then gave a tug on the starter cord. The mower fired up on the first try. "You're good for another hundred thousand miles." Trevor collected his tools and sauntered back across the street to the home with the double garage, in-ground pool and perfectly manicured lawn that he would be shortly vacating.

\* \* \* \* \*

The temperature rose another five degrees, bludgeoning Maddie's brain into a state of vegetative torpor as she groomed the lawn. Dragging the weed whacker out from the shed, she trimmed around the bricks framing the front walkway, as though sprucing up the property might somehow tidy the neighborhood as a whole.

Two thoughts came to mind. When her spouse, Jake, cleared out, a subtle settling process took hold. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. All the white noise of his endless finagling, scheming, angling and parasitic machinations fell away. The din dissolved instantaneously in blissful silence. Maddie bathed in the lush tranquility, luxuriated in the rich nothingness of total peace. No more bah, blah, blah. Maddie wandered about the house with a shitty grin, looking as though she had lost her sanity. But she lost nothing. Rather, the woman had regained her fundamental essence.

One day in late October after her divorce, Maddie drove to the outlet stores in Kittery, Maine and walked the malls. She made the two-hour drive alone in the late fall with the windows rolled down and a chilled breeze stinging her cheeks. The season long over, nobody was there other than a few diehard tourists. It didn't matter. Maddie felt a rush of sublime serenity. On a whim, she took the interstate 95 north straight through Boston, slicing across the lower edge of New Hampshire up around Rye Beach and Portsmouth. She could have never done such a thing when Jake was around.

Actually, that wasn't totally accurate. She could have taken him along for the ride, but then there would be the endless prattle, the mindless nattering that sapped her spirit - the blustery blather of a lost, clueless, unsalvageable soul. Independence had its downside. Maddie still suffered bouts of loneliness and self-recrimination; or maybe it was guilt for going against the grain, thumbing her nose at social convention. But that didn't last long.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finishing the yard work, Maddie went indoors to pack. After supper, she was taking her daughter, Angie, for a Cape Cod weekend getaway. They had a cousin's cabin through Sunday - a mini-vacation in Mashpee. Climbing the stairs, she entered the girl'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 rawhide string.

"Is that required reading, or are you off on another spiritual odyssey?"

With the breakup of the marriage, Angie developed a spiritual wanderlust. A short flirtation with Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Scientists played itself out in trips to a musty reading room on Huntington Avenue and an occasional Sunday service. That lasted a sum total of three months. Later Maddie found several Hari Krishna brochures wrapped in a furry tangle of dust bunnies under her daughter's bed. 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 fix me a Mexican omelet?"

In the kitchen Maddie 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. "Mr. Osborne is leaving his wife."

"Cripes!" Angie bellowed, making a sarcastic snorting sound. "At the rate we're going, there won't be a married couple - happy or otherwise - within a five-mile radius."

"That's a bit extreme." Maddie added a dash of salt and pepper; when the vegetables were sufficiently caramelized, she slid them directly from the pan into the egg and then poured the batter back into the pan. Drizzling cheese over the egg, she topped the concoction with a layer of pepperoni. When the egg began to sizzle, she added a splash of water and covered the pan, poaching the extravagant omelet. Steam - that was the trick. The bottom never burned and it came out perfect every time.

Maddie lifted the lid. A cloud of sweet smelling moistness floated toward the ceiling. Folding the sides of the omelet toward the middle, she added another tablespoon of water then lowered the lid. "Everything's on the hush-hush. The wife apparently doesn't know yet." Maddie slid the egg onto a plate, placed a dollop of sour cream on top of the omelet then rounded off the concoction with a splash of mild salsa.

Finding a seat at the kitchen table she watched as her daughter ate. The two shared little physical resemblance. 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. "This is wicked good!" The girl 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. "I wouldn't mind a guy like Mr. Osborne for a step-father."

"Well that's not going to happen," Maddie shot back just a bit too insistently.

"Why not?"

"For God's sake, the poor slob isn't even separated much less divorced! More to the point, his wife doesn't know that her husband's moving out." Maddie was feeling queasy; as though she might need to lie down to clear her head. "About that weird book," she pressed, shifting the conversation elsewhere.

"It's no big deal!" Angie replied. After a moment she added, "Swami Muktananda got disillusioned with the material world, so he took a vow of silence."

"Language being corrosive to the spirit," Maddie added. How many times early on in the marriage had Maddie wished Jake had taken a similar vow?

"At first he communicated by scribbling brief messages on a chalk board. Then, after a couple years, the swami announced that he would put away the board 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."

Maddie squirted a stream of dish detergent into the sink and let the water fill. "You're not planning -"

"For God's sakes," Angie exploded, "it's just some dopey book!"

Maddie tapped her daughter on the wrist. "Are you packed for the trip?"

"All set." Angie rose from the table and began putting food away. The women were only taking bare necessities - a couple changes of underwear, towels, sheets and no cosmetics. There was no one Maddie had to impress on the island. Rather, she had planned the trip as down time - a chance to decompress, recharge her emotional battery.

\* \* \* \* \*

The drive to Cape Cod was uneventful. Few people were heading south. The sugar maples and oaks gradually gave way to scrub pine rooted in bleached soil. A huge hawk sat far up in a scrawny pine 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 super-heated air. "Your father's stopping by to see you Tuesday," Maddie 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 Cape Cod Canal in record time. Halfway around the rotary, they picked up route six that meandered all the way to Hyannis, where the Kennedys lived and, still further north, to Provincetown.

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 staccato, chirping whistle filtered down to the marshy wetlands.

"Osprey nest." Maddie replied. With their white breasts and bellies, Ospreys were one of the largest birds of prey in North America. The wingspan alone could reach well over five feet. The Ospreys fed almost exclusively on fish. "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.

Maddie shook her head. The species had gone into a steady decline since the early nineteen fifties 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. Easing passed the pole on the thin slip of roadway, they found the cabin a short distance nestled between a row of holly and slender birch trees. What little light remained quickly bled out of the sky and the New England night arrived serene and darkly beautiful. From the upstairs bedroom Maddie 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. "Why doesn't Mr. Osborne love his wife anymore?"

"I don't know."

"Does he have a girlfriend?"

"No. He said he wasn't cheating and I believe him." Maddie sighed and pulled my daughter close, rubbing the nape of her neck."

She squeezed her mother's hand. "I'm tired. Goodnight."

*A thousand questions in search of a thousand and one answers.* It was an old Arabic saying Maddie read somewhere, possibly in college, the implication being that a person, no matter how sincere and earnest, can search a lifetime and still come up short. She listened to her daughter's steady breathing – deep and serene. The sleep of youth with little to no excess emotional baggage. As tired as Maddie was from the drive south, she hovered on the edge of sleep but could not slip across the threshold. Was there some bit of unfinished business?

Why was Trevor Osborne leaving his wife? Kimberly wasn't a bad person. There was nothing inherently wrong with her. But neither was there very much of anything right about the woman. She was a trophy wife, a meaningless appendage. Kimberly Osborne was Jake in drag.

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In the morning they watched the harbor master cruise up the channel from the breakwater. During the summer he checked permits for anyone digging clams. 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 tiger 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. Maddie pulled off the road onto the stiff marsh grass so they could get a better view. "Osprey eggs seldom hatch at the same time," she explained. "There could be a lapse of five days between first born and the last chicks." As Maddie explained it, the older chick dominated the younger ones. If hunting was good, there's no problem among the chicks. But if food was scarce, older ones wouldn't share even to the point of starvation. The women craned their heads far back but all they could see was the huge basket-shaped nest fashioned from twigs and branches.

The twosome ate breakfast at a bagel shop near the rotary then drove out to South Cape Beach. The beach was empty except for an occasional surf caster and older couple searching for

polished sea glass. The bluefish had been running since late June and sea bass were also still plentiful.

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 reed 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," Maddie 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 went 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." The young girl 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," Maddie said, "by moving their hands."

Angie 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," Maddie thought on the walk back. Angie was skipping about in the tumbling surf. "When something goes wrong with the routine, you adjust the line or check the metal kite frame. With human nature it's not so simple." Maddie glanced over her shoulder at her daughter bringing up the rear. Angie looked up and smiled - a quirky, darkly beautiful expression that pulled 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 alimony, but it wasn't meant to be."

Angie put her hands inside the pouch on her windbreaker. "Why didn't you ask dad directly?" Maddie had asked Jake on several occasions - more like begged. But she had no desire to tell her daughter. "He doesn't get it, does he?" Angie said, anticipating her mother's unspoken thoughts.

"No, I guess not."

*Monkey syndrome.* That's what Maddie called Jake's affliction. Baby monkeys developed at the same rate as humans up to a certain fixed point. Then the primates hit an intellectual brick wall and stopped learning. Jake was a conniver, an ace at using the system to beat the system, but as a parent his potential petered out shortly after his daughter was born. Now, strangely enough,

Angie had come into her own and, in myriad ways that Jake could never comprehend, outstripped her father.

They hung back to the left of the surfcaster, watching him heave the monofilament line out over the water. "Any luck?"

"Not today." He kept jerking at the rod with a spastic pumping action to simulate an injured minnow on the end of the line. "Too windy... 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?" The young girl 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. Maddie imagined Jake carrying his latest romantic quarry back to the domestic nest in similar fashion but kept the cynicism 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," Maddie spoke in a confidential tone. "Show up to school on Monday morning with a chalkboard on a string."

"And how exactly are you going to teach eighth-grade English?"

"Don't know. Haven't thought that far ahead yet."

A chalkboard and a string. Maddie 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, sixteen-penny nails, did the mystic possess any practical skills? Could he teach eighth graders how to conjugate a verb? Navigate a fifteen year old through life's mind fields? Maddie 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 whiskers.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Sunday morning a damp chill gripped the air, but the sun quickly rose over the bay nudging the temperature up to a comfortable eighty 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 bordering the wharf, they found a few boutiques open early but came away empty handed. But for the colonial New England architecture and oak trees, 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.



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 pug. The dog had a face like an exploded cigar with dark, spiky hairs sprouting in a dozen different directions. The pooch wore 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,” Maddie 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 was delightful and it felt wonderful to get away. Two doors down was a store with a blue awning. The sign over the door read Cape Cod Collectibles. Maddie stepped over the threshold. Metal sculpture and small statuettes in various medium rested on tiered displays. Wash in a soft sheen of track lighting, glazed pottery and an assortment of porcelain figurines rimmed the far wall. 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 just 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!

Maddie budgeted everything. Now, without that extra twenty-five bucks from Jake, 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 ballerina, 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 bringing the figure to life. “They’re three-dimensional,” he added. “Each image has depth despite the thinness of the metal.”

The garrulous owner knew Maddie and her daughter had no intention of buying anything but didn’t seem to care and Maddie appreciated that. To meet someone without an agenda or ulterior motive was refreshing. He handed her a business card. “Feel free to stop in any time.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The winter that Maddie dumped her husband - the decision was unilateral - Jake was making regular pilgrimages to the social security office on Cooper Avenue, angling to get on medical disability for an old back injury. A herniated disc in the lumbar region - that was the provisional diagnosis. "Why don't you lose some weight and try physical therapy?" Maddie offered.

"I was hoping you'd support me on this." Jake's face assumed that hurt, little-boy expression that in recent months caused Maddie to flinch inwardly and avert her eyes. "When we married, you were out on workman's compensation."

Jake had tripped over a bunched rug in the lobby of the Libby Fruit Processing Center. A bunched rug - he milked that one for a year and a half until the medical board autocratically ordered him back to work or out on the streets. Three years later, Jake argued with his immediate supervisor at the plant over vacation pay and finessed the squabble into sixteen months of unemployment benefits. Now, with his latest get-rich-quick scheme, he hobbled around the house wearing an elaborate back brace.

"What if they offer you a desk job?"

"Yeah, well... that hasn't happened and I need a paycheck."

The company couldn't offer Maddie's husband a desk job. He lacked both the personality and tact to oversee other people. The saddest thing of all, perhaps, was that Maddie felt absolutely no empathy for her soon-to-be ex-husband. He wasn't a bad person. He was just... Well, what difference did it make?

Buyer beware! Let Jake Timberland become someone else's burden. Maddie endured his vacuous pipedreams for eight years. Enough was enough!

\* \* \* \* \*

A week after they returned from the Cape Cod mini-vacation, Trevor Osborne's slate blue Toyota was gone from the driveway across the street. The following month a 'For Sale' sign went up on the front lawn. Kimberly abandoned the property to a real estate broker and went to live with her mother.

Five years passed. The new owners were dark-skinned Hispanic, quiet unassuming people who always greeted them with a friendly wave. Maddie never heard from Kimberly, but a neighbor two streets over, who was also a fitness buff, reported that, within eight months of the final divorce decree, she married an orthodontist on the rebound, so to speak, and was living in a mini-mansion south of Boston.

Maddie had this schizoid fantasy of Kimberly Osborne power walking down the aisle while in the background, a massive pipe organ was belting out the opening fanfare to Mendelssohn's Wedding March. The well-toned, middle-aged woman was decked out in eggshell white, just like the first time around but with one minor deviation from social decorum: in her left hand was a mug of steaming Bigelow tea drizzled with honey and a slice of lemon.

With this ring, I thee wed. Of course the former Kimberly Osborne would have to shift the cup to the other hand in order to receive the wedding band, but that was just a minor inconvenience. The woman had devoted her life to doing as little as possible. Her college degree in elementary education was probably moldering in a storage box crammed under the crawl space in her palatial new digs. She had never worked a day in her life, not even as substitute teacher, and, in the end, everything had worked out splendidly.

\* \* \* \* \*

In June a small bubble envelope arrived in the mail.

*Found this paperback in the 'remaindered' bin at the local bookstore, and, after reading it, immediately thought of you.*

*All my best,*

*Trevor*

Maddie didn't know why the flimsy note – less than two dozen words all taken together - upset her so, but her hands were trembling when she laid it aside and reached for the well-thumbed paperback. *The Field of Mustard* by A.E. Coppard.

Who the hell was A.E. Coppard?

Placing the book on her bedside table, Maddie went out to do the grocery shopping. Later that night she read the title story then drank half a bottle of Chardonnay to settle her nerves. Over the next week or so Maddie read through the other stories. Then she went back and reread *The Field of Mustard*. Five more times she read it.

*"On a windy afternoon in November they were gathering kindling in the Black Wood, Dinah Lock, Amy Hardwick, and Rose Olliver, three sere, disvirgined women from Pollack's Cross."*

What could an unsuspecting reader say about an author who opened a story with such a sentence? They were all 'disvirgined' - Maddie included Trevor Osborne in the mix as well - by life's vicissitudes. To become disvirgined has little to do with the human anatomy; in Coppard's grasp of the vernacular, it meant losing one's sense of the astonishing.

Sere – such a strange word! Maddie hadn't a clue what that meant and had to pull out her cherry red, *Webster New World College Dictionary* for a proper definition of dried up, shriveled, withered. Such a nice way to describe the fairer sex!

Tuesday evening Trevor called. "How did you find Mr. Coppard?"

"I liked him just fine." Maggie was thinking about Dinah Lock and her best friend Rose, two country women who had loved the same man, each in their own special way. All this took place in the textured fabric of a fairy tale fiction that felt more real than everything else. "Rufus Blackthorn, the gamekeeper... was he a good guy or a lothario?"

"He cherished women," Trevor answered without hesitation. "Rufus was a decent sort."

"I thought so," Maggie replied, "but just wanted to be sure, that's all."

"Would you like to get together?" Trevor interrupted her bookish reveries.

"Yes, I'd like that very much."

"How's this weekend?" he pressed.

"Why wait? Come now."

"Even better!"

Once things were settled, the conversation about A.E. Coppard rambled doggedly on a bit longer. Maggie especially like *Dusky Ruth*, the tale about the traveler who slept with a bar maid but never quite got around to consummating the act. Trevor thought *Arabesque - The Mouse* was far and away the best of the bunch. No writer had ever described a mother weaning her child by

squirting breast milk into a sizzling hearth. And then, of course, there was *The Higglers*. Both agreed that the peddler's story, which opened the volume, was a masterful work of art.

The queer thought occurred to Maddie - a half hour passed and they had spoken only about make-believe characters from an obscure text written in the early nineteenth century. Five long years had flown by and she hadn't thought to ask about Trevor's children or personal affairs.

"Why wait?" Maggie didn't realize that she was repeating herself. "There's no reason that you shouldn't come over now."

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## Judith the Obscure

"You gotta basketball-size swarm of honey bees needs removing?" A scruffy, middle aged woman with an angular jaw stood on the stoop just outside the front door. She wore a pair of faded dungaree several sizes too large for her skimpy frame and a blue-checked cotton blouse. A moment passed. The affable grin abruptly faded to enigmatic blankness. "Maybe I got the wrong house."

"My folks are away on vacation." Judith Nussbaum ushered her into the living room. Alone for the weekend, the girl's parents were on a three-day junket at the Foxwoods Casino, just over the state line in Connecticut. Her mother favored the slot machines, while Mr. Nussbaum flitted back and forth between the black jack table and gaming parlor lounge until he became low on funds. "I went to retrieve the newspaper this morning and heard this unnerving sound... like the hum of a jet engine."

"Jet engine with fifty thousand pairs of wings." The gray-haired older woman's fluid features relaxed in a bland smile. She glanced out the bay window where thirty feet away a huge mass of insects hung precariously from a low-slung hemlock tree. "I'm Francine Franklin," she blurted by way of introduction. Judith didn't bother to introduce herself.

"Let's have a look." Pivoting on her angular hips, the woman headed for the door.

Crossing the yard, Francine stopped within a few feet of the boiling mass. "Italians... that's what you got... fifty maybe sixty thousand Italian honey bees." A blur of insects that momentarily broke free of the tight cluster swirled overhead within inches of her wrinkled forehead, but the garrulous woman appeared unruffled, in no great hurry to give ground.

"How would you know their nationality?" Judith's sardonic humor was unintentional.

"The yellow and black banding." She wagged a taut index finger at a portly straggler. "Italians are very docile... gentle. They're good workers but have insatiable appetites, so, when settling my girls down for the winter, I always put extra honey aside anticipating the winter dearth." "Myself, I favor Russians or Carnolians."

Judith had no clue what Francine was talking about. Without further explanation, the woman retreated to a green van parked near the mailbox and removed a six-foot ladder, pair of long-handled shears, a white bee suit and leather gloves. Slipping the suit over her clothes, she pulled the veiled headset down over her face.

"Might need a little help here," Francine announced once the ladder was set alongside the branch.

“I’ve no protection,” Judith blurted, retreating another ten feet back from the swarm. Despite the throbbing, bass-register hum, the bees showed no interest in the humans. Francine repositioned the ladder within a few inches of the swarm.

“I’ve got no protection,” Judith repeated a second time with a more pronounced sense of urgency.

“Okay... here’s the deal.” Francine ascended the ladder and was tentatively exploring the far end of the branch with her gloved left hand. Reaching across she slipped her right hand under the swirling mass and grabbed the portion of branch closest to the tree. “Get the shears,” Francine counseled, “and cut the limb an inch from my pinky finger.”

“You can’t be serious.”

The woman’s arms splayed out parallel to the ground as she leaned precariously over the top of the ladder. Ping! A solitary bee bounced off the dark mesh veil covering her face. She never flinched. Rather, she hefted the sagging limb gingerly, and, in response, the droning bass tones emanating from the swarm crescendoed by half. “Before swarming, bees gorge on honey. They have no brood to protect so they’re in a mellow, blissfully passive state.” When there was no reply, she added, “Just snip the branch and step away. I’ll take care of the rest.”

*Just snip the branch and step away. I’ll take care of the rest.* Judith gawked fixedly at Francine’s backside. Finally, she picked up the shears and positioned herself just behind the ladder. Reaching up, she slipped the curved blade around the limb. Judith squeezed gently until the blades contacted the soft pine then increased pressure severing the limb from the tree. Again there was a disconcerting uptick in noise as a hundred or so mutinous bees broke away from the main ball, encircling it like a myriad of moons orbiting a honey-drenched planet. Francine descended the ladder. Arms still extended, she lugged the bees back to the curb. With a deft, downward flick of the wrists she shook the insects into a cardboard box alongside the curb and quickly sealed the top with a lid. Stripping off her gloves and bee suit, the beekeeper folded the ladder and stashed it away in the back of the van along with the shears and swarm box.

“What about them?” Judith indicated a motley collection of several hundred bees still negotiating the empty space that the severed branch previously occupied.

“They ain’t going nowhere,” Francine explained tersely. “Probably fly off in a day or two when the queen’s hormonal scent dies off.”

“The queen’s in the box now?”

She glanced affectionately at the container in the rear of the car. “In the box and off to her new digs.” A handful of stragglers who never quite made it into the container flitted about the interior of the car but Francine paid no attention. “Gotta get these girls home before they dehydrate. Thanks for helping. Couldn’t have pulled it off without the extra set of hands.”

When Francine Franklin and her stash of fifty thousand Italian honey bees departed, Judith craned her neck, peering up into the scraggily hemlock tree, where a fiercely loyal contingent was tracing an endless series of elliptical trajectories around the phantom branch. Their queen was gone – kidnapped, shanghaied, hijacked, pirated away to parts unknown by a craggy-faced, gray-haired woman driving a rusty van with a blown muffler.

Judith wandered back in the house. Nerves on edge, she fixed herself a cup of chai laced with light cream.

Ten minutes later, a key clicked in the lock and the front door creaked open. Judith's father deposited a Pullman suitcase in the foyer. "How was the casino?" Judith inquired.

"Lost a bundle," Mr. Nussbaum didn't seem particularly concerned, "but your mother broke even."

Mrs. Nussbaum, a squat middle-aged woman with frizzy brown hair, brought up the rear. "What's new?"

"Nothing. Everything's just fine." She didn't bother to mention Francine Franklin or the swarm that only moments earlier vacated the premises.

"The prime rib at the casino was out of this world," Mr. Nussbaum noted, rubbing his ample paunch. He lugged the suitcase into the bedroom and began unpacking.

Judith slipped out to the back yard and stared up at the tree. The bees that had broken free from the original cluster continued their frenetic, circular flight to nowhere. Francine having absconded with their beloved queen, all that remained was a delicious, hormonal after scent.

The swarm was a blight, a pestilence that flipped the universe upside-down.

Judith fingered a bushy dahlia plant. The previous day five buds, like tightly closed fists, reached high as her thigh. A thunderstorm drenched the yard overnight. In the morning five blood-red blossoms fluttered drunkenly in a warm breeze. Had she ever witnessed anything so glorious – the blizzard of dusky, emerald leaves with crimson blossoms teetering on stalks as fragile as flamingos' legs?

Phhhht!

Judith felt a sharp pinging sensation – not a sting, just a momentary jab as a disoriented, low-flying insect ricocheted off her forehead, careened precariously close to the ground before ascending to join her doomed comrades. Judith rubbed his head. No, the insect hadn't stung. Her flight path had gone awry. No harm done.

\* \* \* \* \*

*'Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.'* Helen Keller

Judith stumbled across the quote earlier in the week while researching a term paper for a sophomore English class. Security was myth, a grandiose pipedream that didn't exist in nature. Avoidance was no guarantee of safety. Life was either a daring adventure – like capturing a fifty-thousand-strong swarm of feral honey bees – or nothing at all.

The other day in the college cafeteria Judith was bellyaching about a lousy grade.

"It's just a stupid test," a classmate replied, but the mollifying tone only set Judith off on an acerbic rant.

"Now," the classmate shot back, "you're beginning to remind me of one of those morbid Victorian characters... Jude the Obscure." After a brief pause she added, "Make that Judith the Obscure."

A flurry of hoots and jeers swept through the dining room. Judith blanched then turned ten shades of burgundy. Her lower lip trembled but she let the caustic critique pass without

further commentary. The girl who offered up the clever repartee wasn't a smart aleck. Nothing mean-spirited was concealed in her words. Truth be told, Judith *was* a chronic malcontent, worrywart – a diehard fatalist who stumbled through life in a chronic state of high anxiety.

*Jude the Obscure, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native* - Judith Nussbaum, aka Judith the Obscure, had slogged through all of Hardy's major works. Each ended badly. She could relate to the author's bleak *weltanschauung*. Life was unpredictable, iffy, dicey, an existential crapshoot at best – an interminable progression of impending calamities. And yet, wasn't all that world-class literature supposed to illuminate higher truths not muddle and befuddle?

Recently, Judith had begun indulging a bizarre fantasy. In her adolescent dreamscape she dropped out of college and moved to a rooming house. She took a job that just barely paid the rent and lived a Spartan, no-frills existence. Conspicuous consumption be damned, she sold her Honda Civic in favor of a three-speed bike. A work in progress, Judith had been embellishing the minimalist tapestry of her goofy fantasy for the better part of a month. In one bathetic encounter her parents visited her at the rooming house.

"This is a life?" her father threw his stubby arms out in a despairing gesture.

"Come home," her mother begged her weary voice numb with grief. "All is forgiven."

"I wasn't aware of having committed a crime," Judith replied.

Mr. Nussbaum removed his glasses and massaged his eyes. "Humiliating your parents should be a punishable offense."

*"Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba b'almadi -v'ra chirutei, v'yamlich malchutei b'chayeichon."* Near the end of the bizarre scenario her father began reciting the Jewish prayer for the dead.

At a deeper level Judith understood that the maudlin melodrama was just that – so much Walter Mitty, self-indulgence. What was missing from her life was an all-consuming passion, fervor on the scale of Don Quixote flailing at windmills or Ahab pursuing his white whale.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wanna sandwich?" Later that night, Mr. Nussbaum was fixing a late night snack. His wife had purchased a panini maker when the gadgets were popular the previous spring, but Mr. Nussbaum commandeered the electric gizmo and now boasted a half dozen, gourmet sandwiches – Reubens with sauerkraut and Russian dressing, grilled cheese and tomato, turkey with cranberry sauce and a honey mustard sauce - he could whip up from scratch.

"Not hungry." Judith slid into a chair at the kitchen table. Her father lowered havarti cheese on top of a slice of pumpernickel bread then added several layers of chipotle-spiced chicken.

"The white man's fly," Francine ventured, "Ever heard the term?"

Mr. Nussbaum brushed the marbled bread with olive oil. Laying the sandwich on the grill, he lowered the metal arm. "Can't say as I have. Enlighten me."

"It's what Native Americans called the honey bees."

"A peculiar choice of language." Mr. Nussbaum peeked under the grill and lowered the lid.

"Before the settler's arrival, honey bees were unknown to Native Americans. In his memoirs, Thomas Jefferson wrote that honey bees were called white man's flies, because they were associated with the arrival of Europeans."

“Imagine that!” When the sandwich was done, Mr. Nussbaum cracked open the grill, nudged the food onto a plate and came to join her at the table.

“The Indians noticed that, whenever colonies of honey bees appeared, white settlers were seldom far behind.”

“Where did you learn all this?”

“It’s not important” Judith deflected the question. “On the trip across the Atlantic, colonists brought the bees, along with sheep, cows and chickens. Once here, the bees were able to increase their range by migrating into new territory. By 1776 when they signed the Declaration of Independence, honey bees had swarmed their way into Michigan. In the next twenty years, they made their way to Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Wisconsin.”

Mr. Nussbaum looked up abruptly “Any potato salad in the fridge?” He had hardly heard a thing his daughter said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the summer months passed in a humid, sun-drenched fog. Early September Judith visited the Brandenburg police station. “I called to report a swarm of bees”

“Recently?”

“No, two months ago.” The officer behind the desk stared at the girl opaquely. “I need to contact the woman who came to our house.”

“You got another situation?”

Judith shook her head. “Just wanted to inquire how the bees were doing.”

The officer frowned. “It’s a bit unusual.”

“Francine... Francine Franklin,” Judith sputtered. “That was the beekeeper’s name.”

The officer crooked his head to one side and his face assumed an even more disagreeable expression. Drumming his fingers on the desktop for an interminable period, he finally scribbled a handful of digits on a slip of paper and pushed it across the desk toward her. “Anything else?”

“No, nothing.” Judith smiled thinly and hurried away.

In the parking lot, she dialed the number from her cell phone. “I was wondering if I might stop by to visit with the bees.”

At face value, it seemed like a silly thing to say, but Francine seemed genuinely pleased to hear the young girl’s voice. “They’re a very sociable bunch. The girls will be thrilled to see you again.”

The beekeeper lived on Marlin Ave, three miles south of the center of town in a rundown section of three-decker tenements and shabby bungalows. A propane tank pitted with rust rested on a concrete slab alongside a row of weathered shingles tilted at a cockeyed angle where several nails had torn loose. A large contingent of Hmong refugees settled the area in the late sixties as the Vietnam War wound down. In recent years, a wave of coffee-colored Hispanics and Haitians also filtered into the community.

Francine showed her into the back yard and indicated a long wooden box with a cinder block holding the plywood lid in place. The older woman grinned good-naturedly. “There’re your bees.”

A steady stream of workers flooded from the hive opening. The aerial traffic reminded Judith of Grand Central Station during rush hour. Many returning bees were weighed down with



saddlebags of pearl-colored pollen, causing them, like B-52 bombers still loaded down with heavy weaponry, to drunkenly miss their mark as they glided toward the landing ramp.

“Most of the pollen you see coming in is Clethra...sweet pepper bush.” Francine pointed at a small shrub with white blossoms near a ramshackle shed. “It’s a rich source of protein for developing brood, but, unfortunately, most wildflowers are all played out this late in the season and there won’t be any decent forage until the ragweed... goldenrod blooms.”

“When does that happen?”

Francine rubbed her wide jaw. “Middle of September, I reckon.” Her weathered features scrunched in a thoughtful expression. “Of course, asters can also bloom late into the season, but that don’t amount to a hill of beans.”

Judith watched a bee loaded down with ivory saddle bags lumbering toward the hive. “That’s still a good month away.”

Francine dropped down on her haunches and loosened the latches on a wooden shutter that ran the length of the hive. Behind the hinged panel an observation window was recessed into the side wall.

Judith stuck her nose up against the glass. The hive’s interior overflowed with inch-thick honey combs that stretched from the roof of the structure to the floor. All interior surfaces were carpeted with bees. Bees, bees and more bees – a myriad of industrious insects. On the outermost comb they had assembled a teardrop-shape scaffold, each honeybee building out a tiny segment of the burgeoning, wax structure. Near the center a chain of bees dangled precariously upside-down, each insect gripping the hind legs of the insect below. “Brood is situated here in the front.” Francine rapped the top of the box with arthritic knuckles. “Stores of pollen and nectar extend up to the midpoint. Everything on back to the rear is pure honey the colony will need to survive the winter.”

The image of the bustling colony scattered about the inside of the hive was seared into Judith’s brain. “They figured everything.”

““At times,” Francine shot back dryly, “it seems the insects possess a better handle on life than we do.” She led the way to the rickety shed. In the far corner, a mishmash of Langstroth hive boxes in varying states of disrepair was stacked to the ceiling. A stationary belt sander and drill press lay buried under piles of hive tools and orangey frames impregnated with wax foundations. The woman raised the blade on a Ryobi, ten-inch table saw and set the rip fence within a fraction of the blade.

“What are you doing?”

Francine removed her hand momentarily from the power switch. “Bees draw out comb to different specification depending on what they’re using it for. Brood comb is relatively thin. Honey combs toward the rear tend to be much thicker. I place quarter-inch spacers between the bars so they have a tad more room to work with building those thicker honeycombs.” Reaching for a pine board, Francine flipped the switch. The motor fired up with a sharp whine and the carbide-tipped blade dissolved in a dull blur. She sliced a dozen strips. A blizzard of blond, feathery-light sawdust flew up in their faces as the board was reduced to a thin sliver.

When they finished installing the spacers, Francine said, “Remember what I told you about ragweed?”

“The weeds won’t bloom for another few weeks yet and the bees could go hungry.”

Francine led the way into the house. From a kitchen drawer she removed a small packet of dried petals and stems, which she sprinkled in a bowl. “Flowers of chamomile, dandelion, valerian, stinging nettle and oak bark.” she transferred a teaspoonful into a metal tea infuser and

lowered the content into a pan of water heating on the stove. Twenty minutes later when the brew sufficiently cooled, she added three cups of sugar and poured the syrupy mix into a Ziploc storage bag. "It's a strengthening tea with vitamins insects benefit from when foraging in the wild. Sugar is a poor substitute for the nectar, but it'll tide them over until the ragweed blooms."

In the yard Francine removed a half dozen topbars at the rear of the hive and slid the plump sack into the hive. With a razor she poked slits in the top of the plastic. A few drops of gooey slush oozed out, but the bag retained the bulk of the liquid nourishment. Within seconds, the bag was rimmed with hungry bees, their stringy tongues fully extended toward the droplets of sweet broth that leaked from the plastic. "By tomorrow morning every drop will be gone," Francine observed, "and the plastic bag will lie flat as a pancake."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Judith's sister, Sophie dropped by for a visit. The parents were away at the casino again. A dark-haired vixen with a pert figure and equally sassy personality, she threw herself down on the bed. "I went to see the honeybees today," Judith announced.

"What bees?"

"From the swarm earlier this summer."

"I don't remember nothing about a swarm." Sophie waved her left hand in the air dramatically, displaying a rather smallish wedding ring. "Don't say anything about this to the folks. I ain't got around to telling them yet."

"You married Phil?" Her sister's head bobbed up and down. Phil managed a cellular phone kiosk at the Emerald Square Mall. They met at a dating bar shortly after Easter, and Sophie moved into his studio apartment a month later.

"WE flew to Vegas on a lark last Saturday and got hitched at a swell wedding chapel. Phil chose a blue Hawaii Elvis theme."

*"Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it..."*

On a whim, Sophie could leap Niagara Falls in a metaphorical barrel and emerged from her adolescent escapade a mile downstream unscathed and dry as a communion wafer. "I went to visit the bees earlier," Judith mumbled. "The colony already doubled in size."

"Yeah, you told me just two, shitty seconds ago." She waved the skimpy ring in her sister's face. "Here, I come and tell you the swell news and that's all you got to say?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The following week Judith made a second visit to Marlin Ave. Francine was screwing metal mouse guards over the entrances of her hives. "As the weather gets colder small rodents will be looking for a comfy place to hunker down." With a pocketknife she snipped a wedge of honeycomb from a top bar. "Take a taste."

Francine bit into the wax and her brain was bathed in sweetness. She bit down again and felt the dizzying ambrosia drizzle over her tongue. "Will you harvest the honey?"

Francine shook her head. "Not until spring. I'll take some then, if the girls survive the cold. No way telling how much they'll need to suffer through the big chill."

"How's the pepperbush holding up?" Francine asked.

“Gone... dried up. All that’s left this season is a handful of linden trees and the ragweed, which should peak in another week or so.” Francine pulled a dingy handkerchief from her pocket and blew her nose. “I’ll feed strengthening teas every day or so between now and then.”

Judith pointed at an inverted container filled with clear liquid resting on a maroon base over by the shed. The base was littered with a scattering of smooth rocks and pebbles. “What’s that?”

“A chicken feeder.”

Judith scanned the yard. “Where are the chickens?”

“Sold them a while back. I use the contraption as a watering hole for my girls.”

Because the bulk of the insects were workers not drones, Francine always referred to the bees as her girls. Sure enough, several dozen thirsty bees were scurrying about the rocks lining the chicken feeder in search of a crevice where they could crawl down to the water line. The scene was reminiscent of something out of the Wild West - a barroom full of thirsty cowboys just returned from a dusty cattle drive cozying up to the bar at the local saloon.

“Speaking of liquid nourishment, would you like a drink?” The older woman led the way back into the house. Though the exterior was ramshackle, the interior of the home was tidy in an austere sort of way. Francine poured lemonade into cups. They wandered back outside and settled into a pair of cedar Adirondack chairs.

“Those colonies, “she gestured toward a pair of Langstroth hives fifty feet away, “overwintered just fine, but the one further back starved out in late March.” Francine delivered the news matter-of-factly.

When temperatures dropped below freezing, bees no longer left the hive. From January on, Francine monitored the cluster with a stethoscope shifting the flat disc about the perimeter of the wooden boxes searching for the thrumming throb of life. In late March after a freak snowstorm that downed power lines trees, Francine trudged through two feet of snow to the hive. She placed the stethoscope against the three-quartered-inch pine. Nothing. Not even the slightest sound. Opening the hive the following month, a three-inch-deep mound of frost-covered bee carcasses littered the bottom board.

“Winter clusters form when ambient temperatures reach fifty-four to fifty-seven degrees.” She sipped at her lemonade and continued. “The bees clustered near the center of the hive. On the far side of the comb that had played out was a frame with eight pounds of pristine, untouched honey. The nourishment might as well have been in mainland China, because the temperature was too cold for the insects to break cluster and migrate the few inches to the new food source.”

Shifting in the rickety chair, Francine observed a newborn bee which, upon emerging from the hive, had come to rest on her wrist. The insect trotted across her leathery palm before flitting off the pinky finger into the air. The baby swirled helicopter fashion over the hive entrance a half dozen times before disappearing inside. “The colony starved out,” she noted with a sardonic, bitter-sweet smile, “a hairsbreadth from salvation.”

Francine gestured toward the landing strip where, under the collective weight of their flimsy bodies, several workers were dragging a larger drone from the hive. “Eviction notices being served,” Francine noted with a morbid chuckle.

The drone with bulgy, oversized eyes that extended around the side of his head momentarily broke free and dashed back toward the hive entrance, but a quick-footed worker

blocked his way. Negotiating the hapless male toward the edge of the ramp, the bees gave him the bum's rush toppling the drone over the edge and onto the crabgrass below.

"Drones exist for one purpose... to inseminate the queen," Francine explained. "They're gluttons and, given the opportunity, would gobble up all the honey stores. Every September, in preparation for the winter, male bees are banished from the hive." No sooner had she finished saying this, a feisty worker emerged hauling a second, uncooperative male, which she mercilessly booted off the platform.

*'Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature,...*

"I want... I want," Judith stuttered. Her jaw was chewing up the humid, late summer air like a garbage disposal, but no coherent words issued forth.

Francine stared at her uncertainly. "Excuse me?"

"I want what they have."

"What the bees have?" The older woman was trying to decipher her intent.

"I want you to teach me everything about the bees," Judith was struggling to organize her fractured thoughts. "I want a hive of my own."

Francine did not reply immediately. Rather, she sipped leisurely at her lemonade until the glass was empty. "It's too late in the season to order a fresh package of bees." A steady stream of newborns was emerging from the darkened, womblike sanctuary of the hive. The babies glistened with a moist sheen, reminiscent of afterbirth. Their head bobbed up and down, while their hairy legs tapped out a delicate pitter-patter, an intricately choreographed dance to nowhere. "Technically," the older woman continued, "the swarm I captured on your parents' property is as much yours as mine, so there's no reason we can't..."

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## The Way Station

Jason Devlin called Clarice 'Mrs. Copparelli', by force of habit, even though the middle-aged woman was no longer married and had been alone since she moved into the neighborhood eight years earlier. She wasn't conspicuously ugly but neither was she particularly pretty. Close-cropped black hair framed a pettishly economical mouth, sharp nose and brown eyes. The skin, far and away her best feature, was olive complected and flawless as a young girl's even though the woman was on the back side of thirty. Clarice could have easily parlayed that silky skin and Mediterranean earthiness into an exotic mystique, but she never bothered to capitalize on her natural assets, scrupulously avoiding makeup and jewelry.

As far back as last March when he started doing odd chores for Clarice, Jason sensed that the single woman might seduce him. The seventeen-year-old boy just didn't know when or how or where it would occur or the likely circumstances. Soon, he hoped. She was always considerate toward the boy who mowed her lawn each summer and shoveled away the snow and ice from December straight through to spring. But, on occasion, a hungry look shrouded her dark eyes, an emotional neediness that played itself out in certain furtive movements and guttural inflections.

Clarice was married once but not for long. She had a poodle named Victor, who was arthritic and forgetful. The woman was slavishly indulgent toward the dog with the cherry eye and pointy snout, who wandered about the kitchen with a befuddled expression. Sometimes Victor barked for no apparent reason, and other times the normally docile creature snapped at his mistress as though he hardly recognized the woman.

"What's wrong with Victor?" Jason had stopped by Saturday morning to mow the lawn. The thermometer topped out at ninety degrees by ten-thirty. Once he finished, Clarice invited him in for a cold drink.

The woman swept the dog up in her arms and nuzzled the pooch's forehead with her dusky cheek. "Victor's over ten years old and getting quite senile." She pointed at the far side of the door. "Did you notice how he waits by the hinge not the knob? That's a dead giveaway. The animal is confused and can't remember where the door opens." She kissed the dog and scratched him soothingly behind the ear. With his own family life falling to pieces, Jason wished someone would treat him with a similar measure of unbridled affection.

Clarice brought the dog outside so he could do his business. "Some days Victor forgets to eat," she reported in a matter of fact tone, "and I have to feed him by hand. When the pet went on a hunger strike in late March, Clarice did away with store-bought dog food altogether and prepared her own by hand. Boiled chicken thighs, sweet potato, pasta shells, string beans and diced apples - she tossed it all together in a large bowl, storing individual portions in freezer bags. "What do you hear from your mother?"

Jason flinched inwardly.

Mrs. Devlin walked out on the family around the holidays - run off with a coworker, leaving his father and two sisters to fend for themselves. By Saint Patrick's Day the sisters opted to go live with their mother and new boyfriend. "She calls most weekends," he replied guardedly. "I went to visit last Sunday."

Victor did his business and Clarice removed the debris with a plastic bag. "How did that go?"

"Awkward." Jason cleared his throat. "Her boyfriend's a creep."

The dog was standing listlessly on rickety legs near the back steps. Again, the woman scooped him up. "Well, she's still your mother."

Back inside, Clarice paid him for cutting the lawn, then, without warning, pulled him close, wrapping her brown arms around his waist. "She's still your mother," she repeated. Relaxing her grip, she stepped away. Was the effusive gesture a prelude or nothing more than a display of maternal sympathy? Victor looked back and forth between the two; the muddled mutt clearly couldn't read the emotional cues any better than Jason.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday afternoon, Jason walked over to Clarice's house. "I need a favor." She stared at him with that stolid, inscrutable expression. "I was running a load of laundry and the hose on our washing machine gave out. I was wondering-"

"Where's your father?" she cut him short.

Jason blushed scarlet. "Gone to spend the weekend with Mona Tapinsley."

"And she is?"

"His new girlfriend," Jason replied humorlessly. "When my mother left, he didn't waste any time evening the score." "Mona lives off Commonwealth Avenue in Brighton. You can see the Prudential Building in downtown Boston from the living room window."

He watched Clarice processing the information.

Everyone in Jason's family was living a tragicomic, fractured existence. Victor wandered into the living room and eyeballed them both suspiciously. Were they guests or interlopers? "Get your laundry and we'll run a load." As he turned away, she added, "Have you eaten?"

"Just a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. My father had to work late and didn't get a chance to do any shopping."

"I've got leftovers from the evening meal... meatloaf and mash potatoes."

"That sure would be nice."

Clarice warmed the food before going downstairs to throw the laundry in the machine. An hour later after the clothes had been run through the dryer, she shuffled into the living room with a laundry basket tucked under her arm. Dumping the contents on the sofa, she began folding the boy's undershirts in neat squares and stacking them one on top of the other.

"My mother had a midlife crisis."

"It's usually hormonal." She smoothed the front of a T-shirt with the palm of her hand, folding the material in thirds.

"From as far back as I can remember, she was always temperamental... hard to get along with."

Finishing with the T-shirts, Clarice placed them on the living room table and began sorting his boxer shorts. "You're not much younger than my mother," Jason added as an afterthought. Clarice's face dissolved in a muted, close-lipped smile. "If it's any consolation, menopause is a few years off yet. I don't intend to flip out or do anything rash."

"But how can you be so sure?"

"What would Victor do," she answered his question with one of her own, "if I ran off and deserted my four-legged friend?" Finishing with the underwear, she began matching the boy's socks, tucking the mates together. A moment later, Clarice waved a pair of mismatched socks in front of his nose. "Two orphans!"

"I don't want to go home to an empty house," Jason muttered softly.

Clarice consolidated all the fresh-smelling laundry in a heap on the living room table. "And what do you suggest?" She sat down on the sofa, cuddling the dog on her lap.

"Maybe I could sleep here."

"I'll have to make up the spare bedroom."

"With you," Jason quickly added, "in your bed."

Clarice continued to pet the dog staring vaguely at the pile of laundry on the far side of the room. After a while she rose and fed the dog from her prepackaged homemade stash. She rinsed the water bowl before refilling it with fresh water from the tap. The woman locked the front door and turned off the lights in the kitchen. "Victor's got cataracts."

"What?"

"He kept bumping into things and falling down so I took him to the vet. If he was human he'd be tapping his merry way down the street with one of those collapsible, white and red walking sticks. I made an appointment with a veterinary ophthalmologist."

Jason stared at the beleaguered beast. Only now did he notice the scaly, milky discoloration spreading across both eyes. "I'm truly sorry."

“Go upstairs. Take your clothes off and get into bed, while I get Victor settled for the night.” Fifteen minutes later, Clarice quietly entered the bedroom. She stripped methodically arranging the blouse and slacks on hangers in the closet. Undoing the clasp on her bra, she let it fall on the floor before sliding under the covers next to the boy. Then she reached out and pulled him on top of her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jason and Clarice had a tacit understanding.

He came to her weekends. She fed him. They took bubble baths together. They never spoke openly about what they were doing. He was going away to college in September - University of Vermont at Burlington, where he would be studying English. Some days the dog forgot to eat and Clarice had to feed him by hand, tearing dark-meat chicken into edible portions and twiddling it under the poodle’s beaky nose until recognition kicked in and he finally began nibbling at the bite-size chunks. It was like priming a pump. Once he remembered how to eat, the dog polished off the contents of the bowl with minimal assistance.

Clarice Copparelli never initiated the lovemaking. Rather, the woman gave herself to him with a hushed exuberance that almost frightened him. She was undemonstrative, said little to nothing afterwards. Once or twice she moaned when she came and that was it.

Clarice had little use for the 'outside world' as she called it. "I'm a misanthrope. I don't especially like people," she said, refusing to elaborate.

"But you like me?"

She cupped his face in her smallish hands. "No, I love you. Victor and Jason are the exceptions to the rule." No matter that she mentioned him last - the dog had medical issues and was in failing health.

Tuesday night after work, Clarice took piano lessons from an elderly gentleman, Mr. Mossberg who lived near the rotary in Foxboro center. Studying a year and a half, she was still in the beginner’s book. Lately, she was learning Chopin's *Fantasy Impromptu* on her small upright. She fingered the lilting melody in the right hand, the broken arpeggios resonating in the bass. It was nothing more than a stripped down version of the classic melody, but when he left the house on Sunday morning, Jason carried the beginner-book waltz in his heart-of-hearts through the morbidly lonely week until he could sit in the living room again with Victor snuffling near the ottoman while his mistress negotiated the lovely melody.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the middle of August, Jason's mother rented a U-Haul and cleared all her belongings from the house. The following week she invited her son to lunch at Papa Gino's. Jason hadn't seen the woman in six weeks. Out in the parking lot, Mrs. Devlin burst into tears, smothering him with sloppy kisses. "I want you should get to know Eddy and his children by his first marriage." She had gained considerable weight. Jason remembered her as one of the prettier mothers on the block, but now her stylish, blonde hair appeared frizzy and unkempt. "So what's new?"

"Nothing, really." Jason didn't think she was interested in hearing about Clarice Copparelli. His mother chattered away distractedly. Nothing she said explained why she needed to reinvent herself after eighteen years as his mother. Worse yet, Jason didn't know what he felt

anymore for the middle-aged train-wreck of a woman sitting across the table. A lost soul, she couldn't bear to be alone with her own thoughts for two minutes back to back.

"I got to drive to Burlington next weekend for freshman orientation."

"School doesn't start for another month yet."

"They show new students around the campus and firm up freshman dorm assignments."

"Your father's taking you?"

"Yeah," he lied. Mr. Devlin had a prior commitment with his 'significant other' so Jason would drive the 495-interstate until he reached the Massachusetts Turnpike veering west toward New York. If he left at dawn, he would reach the college in plenty of time.

*Number thirty-eight - your food is ready!* Jason approached the counter and retrieved the pizza.

"What're you reading?" His mother gestured at a paperback jutting from his coat pocket. "A White Heron - it's a collection of short stories by Sarah Orne Jewett."

"Never heard of her." Mrs. Devlin teased a slice of pizza from the round pie, sliding it onto a paper plate.

"She doesn't really write conventional stories," he explained, "so much as brief character sketches."

"Who does?" Mrs. Devlin bit into the crust but the cheese was too hot and she had to chew carefully. A double chin had emerged along with a blotchy ripple of sagging flesh under her eyes.

"Sarah Orne Jewett... the lady who wrote the book."

"Pass me the salt, please, Jason." She stretched her hand across the table. "I always get this nutty craving for extra salt when I eat pizza. I know it's plenty salty enough and sodium wrecks havoc with your blood pressure, but I just go wacko with the salt shaker every time."

"A White Heron... it's considered her most famous short story." Jason watched his mother eat. "The tale has been anthologized in quite a few publications."

"I love the food here. It's so much tastier than Pizza Hut or that other Italian chain down on Armistice Boulevard." His mother slid out from the booth. "We're going to need more napkins. Can I get you anything... another drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday night, Jason went downstairs in the basement with his father. The stocky man had removed the mulching blade from the Toro, self-propel lawnmower and was securing it between the jaws of a metal vise. "How come you don't use the bench grinder?"

The man shrugged and ran a thumb and forefinger over a bristly moustache. "The metal gets too hot with a stone. This way I can proceed at my own speed." He reached for a flat file. One side of the tool was a rough-textured wood rasp, the other sported a finer, cross-hatched surface. Mr. Devlin ran the file over the dull blade. "How did the meeting with your mother go?"

"Good, I guess."

After a couple of tentative strokes, the man changed angles and began sharpening in earnest. A silvery sheen emerged where the cutting surface was previously scarred with nicks and burrs. "Is she happy?"



Jason hesitated. "No, I don't think so." When there was no reply, he added. "You can only accomplish just so much with a hand file."

"The goal is not to make the tool razor sharp like a chisel or planer blade." His father ran a thumb over the blade and, satisfied with the results, flipped it end-over-end in the vise. He reached for the file a second time. "As long as it *cuts* rather than rips the grass, that's all that matters."

Mr. Devlin finished securing the blade and stood up. "I've seen water-cooled machines called wet grinders that can reshape and sharpen almost any cutting tool you own. They get the job done without the risks of overheating and blueing tool steel, and you can't burn up the metal with a wet grinder, because its slow speed and constant water bath keep the tool cool." He pulled the file down at a diagonal. "There are no flying sparks or superfine grinding-wheel dust to worry about either."

Jason watched the metal filings accumulate in a grayish mound directly below the vise as his father put the finishing touches on the restored surface. "I'm reading this swell book,... A White Heron."

"A White Heron," his father repeated absently. He was reattaching the sharpened blade to the bottom of the lawnmower with a ratchet and half-inch socket.

"The woman who wrote the book was a teenager in the eighteen sixties during the Civil War."

"Imagine that!" The blade was not seating properly on the undercarriage. Mr. Devlin removed the heavy metal bushing and brushed some dirt from the threads.

"Sarah Jewett's father was an obstetrician, and the author used to bunk school and travel around rural Maine with him on house calls when she was a little girl."

"Hand me that terrycloth towel," his father brought him up short, "so I can get a decent grip on this blade without cutting my hand when I tighten the nut."

\* \* \* \* \*

One night shortly after they had gone to bed, Jason thumped Clarice lightly between the shoulder blades. "Yes, what is it?" Wakened from a sound sleep, she sounded grouchy.

"A sheriff visited the house earlier today. My mother had my old man served with divorce papers." He spoke in a plodding manner. "As upset as I am about the divorce, that's not what really bothers me. It's the sordidness,... the way my mother's gone whacko, a caricature of her former self, and now my dad hooked up with some gay divorcé." Jason blew the air out of his lungs making a snorting sound. "It's like some trashy soap opera."

"Your point?"

"My folks screw up their pathetic lives and then, in the process of fixing what's broke, make thing ten times worse."

She kissed her fingertips then placed them over his mouth. "It's late. Go back to sleep."

"What about us?" Jason pressed. "What are we doing?"

After a brief pause, she said, "Think of me as a way station... a place to rest and lick your wounds before moving on."

*A place to rest and lick your wounds before moving on.* Was that how she understood their relationship? Jason was stung by the woman's callousness. "I like it best here with you and Victor."

"A way station," Clarice repeated what she said a moment earlier. "You're leaving for college in a few short weeks. Victor needs surgical implants to correct his vision. Everything changes. That's just the way it is."

The room fell silent. Jason fluffed his pillow and lay back down. "We read this short story by Sarah Orne Jewett in English class last fall... no more than a handful of pages."

"Never heard of her."

"She lived in the late eighteen hundreds." He recounted everything he previously told his parents about the obscure author. "A little girl goes to live with her grandmother on a farm. She meets a young ornithologist seeking to find a rare bird that has been spotted in the area."

"Where does the story take place?"

"On the coast of Maine."

With a nod, Clarice indicated that he should continue the narrative. "The man offers a large sum of money to anyone who can lead him to the heron's nest so he can shoot the bird and add it to his collection."

Clarice brushed a strand of black hair out of her eyes. "Well, does he get the bird or not?"

"No. The girl climbs the tallest tree in the forest so she can view the entire countryside. She finds the heron just where she was sure it would be but, even though the girl and her grandmother are desperately poor, refuses to share the information with the hunter and he goes away empty-handed."

"Such a beautiful story!"

"You're my white heron," the boy said. He placed a hand on her thigh and felt the hips reflexively rock backwards. "My refuge."

"And I'm a middle-age woman who needs her rest." The orneriness in her raspy voice was undercut by far too much tenderness to do any lasting damage as Clarice pushed his hand away and shifted on her side.

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## Supermarket Sadhu

Foot traffic was brisk at the ShopRite Supermarket Saturday afternoon straight through until seven-thirty when the relentless flow dribbled away to a handful of stragglers most of whom made a beeline for the twelve-items-or-less, express register. "Sometimes in India, after a man marries and raises his family, he puts his worldly affairs aside to become a wandering mystic." Returning from break, seventeen year-old Fanny Jackson blurted the unsolicited musings all in a jumbled heap then, by way of clarification, added, "I've been reading up on eastern religion."

Fanny was working the cash register at aisle three with Bert Weiner bagging groceries. A retiree who lived off social security, Bert worked part time at the supermarket. The widower owned an olive cape with white shutters off Hathaway Street just a half mile down from Fanny's house. Sometimes when their schedules coincided, Fanny and Bert carpooled.

"Yeah, I heard something of the sort." Bert rubbed a hairy earlobe. "I was never big on all that mystical malarkey."

“You’re Jewish,” Fanny said. “What do your people say about heaven and hell?”

“Not much.” The older man removed a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose rather loudly. When he was done he surveyed the end result before crumpling the cloth in his liver-spotted fist and putting it away. “Main thing is you gotta take care of business in the here and now. The next world – the one with all the celestial mumbo jumbo and enraptured souls – takes care of itself.”

To be sure, no self-respecting Sadhu would be caught dead bagging groceries in a backwater town like Brandenburg. Paper or plastic – such inanity did nothing to facilitate one’s spiritual unfolding. Fanny had seen a potpourri of colorful pictures accompanying a *National Geographic* article featuring the wandering mendicants of Bombay and Calcutta – religious zealots who made pilgrimages to the various holy sites.

*Sadhu* or *sanyasi* – those were the terms the magazine used to describe the holy men. Some resorted to extreme measures like sleeping on beds of nails, taking lengthy vows of silence, bathing in icy streams or standing motionless on one leg for prolong periods to rid themselves of material cravings and merge with the divine essence. Others smoked hashish and cannabis – not that Fanny was about to share that miscellany with straight-laced Bert Weiner. They painted their faces with outlandishly garish designs, let their hair grow down to their waists or roamed about buck naked!

Many had led sedate, conventional lives before turning to the spiritual path. They held jobs, joined civic organizations, paid taxes and participated in local government. Only after their own children were grown did they turn their backs on the material world. And yet, not all Sadhus were straight shooters. Wallowing in debt, rotten marriages or dead-end jobs, some older men took on the yellow mantle of the religious zealot as a pretext for deserting their wives and family obligations.

The outside lights blazed, flooding the parking lot in a mellow, amber glow. “You’re graduating in June?” Bert Weiner asked shifting gears.

“Yes, this is my senior year.”

“Heard yet from any colleges?” Mr. Weiner was leaning against the checkout counter. He wore a pink, ShopRite Supermarket smock plus a nametag with a happy face that looked a bit silly on such a slight man.

“No. Not yet.”

“How’d you do on your SAT’s?”

“Twenty-one fifty,” Fanny replied.

“You don’t say!” He shook his head up and down appraisingly. “That should get you into most Ivy League colleges.”

“So I’ve heard.” Though she had effectively left her classmates pawing in the dust, the brittle numbers meant nothing to Fanny. SAT’s were just a cunning shell game with each private college raising the ante, charging exorbitant tuition and dorm fees for the privilege of attending. A young woman negotiated a shopping cart up to her register. Fanny flipped on the conveyor belt and the endless parade of brown eggs, butternut squash, TV dinners and fresh vegetables crawled toward the scanner.

Mr. Weiner waited until the first few items collided at the far end of the checkout counter before raising his eyes. “Would you prefer paper or plastic?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fanny left work a little after nine. Bert had already gone home a few hours earlier. She drove out of the parking lot and was passing through the center of town when she saw her brother, Norman, coming out of a 7-Eleven with a soft drink. She recognized him not so much from his physical features, which were obscured in shadows, as from his slouching, rubbery gait. The lanky youth, who had a hooded sweatshirt pulled up over his head, scurried across the street at a diagonal, disappearing into the Veterans Park that bordered the downtown area. At the next traffic light, Fanny caught sight of Norman again seated on a bench next to the Vietnam memorial and talking energetically on a cell phone. Pulling over to the curb alongside a slender elm, she killed the engine.

The park was empty, shrouded in muddied darkness except for a row of lamps bordering the street. Five minutes passed. A slovenly youth in his early twenties ducked into the park from the far side and approached. Sporting a scraggily goatee and torn jeans, he dropped a backpack he was carrying on the bench. The twosome bantered back and forth for a while. Norman handed his friend an envelope; the man jerked upright, disappearing into the darkness. Pulling an unfiltered cigarette from a pack, Norman lit the smoke and inhaled deeply then, reaching over with his free hand, he tugged the backpack firmly up against his hip.

The previous spring, Fanny's brother was caught selling two ounces of marijuana to an undercover police officer in the west end of the city. As a first offense, he received a year's probation. By the size of the backpack, Fanny estimated Norman had bought at least two pounds of weed. For sure, he would divide the twigs and leaves into thirty-two, one-ounce packets, skimming a modest amount from each bag for his own, recreational use. "Nothing ever changes," Fanny muttered. Turning the engine over, she put the car in gear and eased away from the curb. In the rearview mirror she could see her brother still sprawled out on the bench with his legs askew, a cloud of smoke snaking from his nostrils.

Fanny went home, took a shower and washed her hair. At eleven o'clock she flicked on the TV and settled down in the den with the evening news. A roadside bomb in Iraq had killed three American servicemen; a second bomb exploded outside a Sunni mosque shortly after evening prayers. "There's never any good news." Fanny's mother shuffled into the room and slumped down next to her daughter. She had a cup of tea in one hand and an asiago bagel slathered with chive cream cheese in the other. "How was your day, sweetheart?"

"Pretty good." The front door opened and Norman glided down the hallway without bothering to acknowledge anyone. Out of the corner of her eye, Fanny caught a fleeting glimpse of a blue, Adidas backpack trimmed with silver piping.

So now the drugs were in the house, putting everyone in the family at risk. Not that a blithering idiot like Norman would recognize a causal relationship. Why should he? It wasn't like the emotional derelict had any intention of ever working an honest job. When the news faded to commercial break, Fanny got up and wandered down the hallway to her brother's room. Norman lay on an unmade bed, his bare feet dangling over the side. "What's up?"

"Nothing." Stepping over the threshold, Fanny noted that the shades, which had been raised earlier, were drawn. A pile of candy wrappers was scattered about the floor close by a wastepaper basket and clot of dirty underwear thrown in a heap near the closet. The air reeked of rancid body odor shot through with marijuana; a half-smoked roach balanced tipsily on a porcelain saucer called into service as an impromptu ashtray.

He brushed a mop of greasy brown hair away from his eyes. "You need a lift to the supermarket tomorrow?"

"No, Mr. Weiner's gonna swing by." Norman wiggled his rear end and farted – intentionally and loud as he possibly could. Fanny was unimpressed. "When are you going to get a real job?"

"I got some irons in the fire." Reaching over, he grabbed the roach, raised the weed to his lips and lit the end with a cigarette lighter. "Wanna toke?" Fanny shook her head. The 'irons in the fire' nonsense was nothing more than a stock phrase, a knee-jerk reaction. Norman hadn't done much of anything since flunking out of *Rhode Island Junior College* in the second semester of his freshman year. More to the point, he hadn't been on a serious job interview in over eight months.

"They're looking for help at the market."

"Yeah, thanks a million. Maybe I'll put in an application." He took a second hit, sucking the sweet drug deep into his lungs and holding it there until his breath ran out. "That horny old widower ever try to get fresh with you?"

"What?" Fanny couldn't follow his fractured logic.

"Old man Weiner ... when the two of you are driving to work, does he ever try to put his hands - "

"Oh, for God's sake! Bert's the nicest guy in the world," Fanny fumed. "A goddamn saint!"

"Awesome!" Norman reached for the joint a third time, but thought better of it and lay back prone. "So this old geezer who bags groceries at the supermarket is really an enlightened master. Bert Weiner with his baggy, polyester trousers and Izod shirts is living his life under false pretenses." Her brother began to giggle uncontrollably; she couldn't be sure how much of it was the dope, how much a byproduct of limited intelligence. Fanny waved her hands, a futile gesture, trying to conjure up a reasonable response. She had resigned herself to the unsettling fact that Norman was a boob, an intellectual cretin. The evidence was irrefutable. She heard through a friend-of-a-friend that Norman recently acquired a personal stash of high-grade Maui-wowi. The glassy eyes and supercilious expression suggested that he may have gotten a tad more than he bargained for.

"Maharishi Weiner," Norman quipped, bursting out in another paroxysm of giddy hysterics. He grabbed up what was left of the wilted weed, ran a flame over the blackened stub and waved the crumpled roach in the air as his sister reached for the door. "Tomorrow night, be sure to give the Enlightened One my regards."

"Two pieces of mail were addressed to you," Mrs. Jackson noted, when Fanny returned to the living room.

"Yes, I know."

The woman pressed her lips together and studied her daughter with cautious ambivalence. "You didn't open them?"

"No, not yet." On the news the Mayor of North Providence, Rhode Island, was being interviewed over a brewing scandal. Retired firefighters were still receiving hefty clothing allowances even though they no longer actively worked for the town. The mayor seemed morally outraged that anyone would question the matter, and when the reporter demanded to know why tax payers should buy clothing for retirees with cushy union pensions, the mayor interrupted with a barrage of nonsensical rebuttals.

Fanny could picture her brother two doors over groping about for some discrete place – under the bed, the top shelf in his closet, beneath the soft porn magazines in his dresser drawer - to hide his latest stash of drugs. “The mail ... it could be important, you know,” Fanny’s mother pressed. Mrs. Hazelton left the living room momentarily and returned with the unopened mail which she slid onto the arm of the sofa next to her daughter. “The letters are from colleges you applied to.”

Fanny opened the first letter, read it and did the same with the second. “Boston University and Brandeis accepted me for the September, freshman class,” she announced in a flat monotone, handing the letters across to her mother. On the television, Senator Rangel, the democratic from New York had just resigned his position on the house finance committee due to ethics violations, the Greece economy was near collapse and Israel announced the building of sixteen hundred Jewish apartment units on occupied territory in Arab East Jerusalem.

“Which school are you planning to attend?”

Fanny balked at the question. She could play it coy and study ‘liberal arts’, but what the hell were ‘liberal arts’ and could anybody on planet earth explain the value of a four year education in nothing-in-particular? “Neither,” Fanny muttered without looking away from the television.

A brief, uncomfortable silence ensued. Mrs. Jackson bent over and kissed her daughter on the cheek. “You had me going there,” the woman blurted with obvious relief. “I forgot that you’re still waiting to hear from Colby and Simmons College.” She picked up the empty dish and retreated to the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Look what I found while cleaning out the basement.” Later that night Mrs. Hazelton shuffled into her daughter’s bedroom as Fanny was turning down the covers. In her right hand was a shiny silver object with a round disk fused to a metal stem. A frayed and discolored string was loosely wrapped around the center post.

“My old gyroscope.” Fanny set the gadget on her dresser. When her mother was gone, she lay under the covers but was too agitated to sleep. Ten minutes later Fanny relit the lamp and crawled back out of bed. She threaded the worn string through the eye on the gyroscope post, winding it neatly in a tight coil. Gripping the mechanism by the gimbal, she gave a fierce tug on the tattered string. The gyroscope gave off an energetic hum that fed sympathetic vibrations up her forearm halfway to the elbow. She placed the stem upright on an outstretched finger. Half a minute later, as the rotor lost strength, the device began to wobble drunkenly and eventually toppled into her outstretched palm. Fanny set the gyroscope aside on the dresser and climbed back in bed.

The National Geographic article she had been telling Bert Weiner about featured a full-page picture of Sufi mystics in sacred dance. The bearded dervishes whirled faster and faster around a central axis in search of spiritual transcendence. They pivoted on one leg, while thrusting with the other to gather speed and momentum. Round and round they spun like human gyroscopes where the human gimbal pivoted effortlessly about an axis on its own plane. Round and round they twirled in search of some ineffable equilibrium.

*The main thing is you gotta take care of business in the here and now. The next world – the one with all the celestial mumbo jumbo and enraptured souls – takes care of itself.* Like the hard-core mystics, Mr. Weiner was sublimely centered; he always could be counted on to do the

right thing. Whether it was offering paper or plastic or a sappy joke, the slope-shouldered man with the hairy ears remained imperturbably balanced. He never disappointed.

Before returning to bed, Fanny drank a glass of juice. Norman's fingerprints, literally speaking, were everywhere in the kitchen. A fresh loaf of sourdough bread lay abandoned on the counter, the individual slices fanned out like a deck of playing cards. Alongside the uncovered bread were a serrate knife and mound of breadcrumbs. A second knife smeared with raspberry jam and peanut butter – her brother never bothered with separate utensils – was abandoned near the dishwasher with a lengthy streak of red jelly dribbling across the Formica. On the kitchen table, a plastic cup with milk residue lay on its side. He couldn't bother to put the soiled cup in the sink.

If Fanny wrapped a cord around Norman's chest and spun him like a gyroscope the man would blow a series of fetid farts and, like an incendiary device, immediately implode. He was a person with no hub, nucleus, middle, focal point, foundation, boundaries or essence. Once in a fit of anger Fanny shouted, "When you move your bowels, do you even bother to wipe your butt hole or just wait until your monthly shower?" The question elicited a howl of delight but little else.

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday evening, Mr. Weiner called Fanny shortly after supper, requesting a ride to the social security office. "My left front tire's flat and it's too late to call a repair shop."

"When is your appointment?"

"Tomorrow morning, nine o'clock."

Fanny had a free period first thing followed by gym. She could shuttle Mr. Weiner to his appointment and still get to school with time to spare. "Sure that's no problem."

In the morning Fanny picked Bert up around eight-thirty, and they were standing outside the social security office with fifteen minutes to spare. He tried the handle, but the front doors were still locked. "I've already got a scheduled appointment so it shouldn't be long," he noted apologetically. "They loused up the survivor benefits after my wife passed away. Once the bureaucrats sort out the mess, I'll receive the money in a lump sum."

"Well, that's nice." Though Mr. Weiner rarely spoke of his wife, his voice was always tinged with muted reverence. Strangely, there were no images of the woman anywhere in the house. A vacant spot on the wall near the fireplace where a large picture had hung was lighter than the surrounding wallpaper. Fanny conjured up a wedding portrait in muted sepia tones dating back to the Vietnam War gracing the wall.

The front door of a car parked in the corner of the lot opened. A middle-aged man wearing a *'Dizzy Gillespie for President'* T-shirt climbed out and sauntered toward the front door. Inside the building people were scurrying about as a row of fluorescent lights lit up the reception area. An oriental woman wearing a mint green, floral print dress hurried around the corner of the building dragging a much older woman, presumably her mother, by the wrist. They were speaking an Asian dialect with an endless barrage of 'n's' and 'g's' that sounded like Chinese but Fanny couldn't be sure. The oriental woman glowered at them as, head bowed like a brown-skinned battering ram, she bullied her way to the front of the door, causing both men to back off several paces. Mr. Weiner had been unceremoniously bumped to second and the fellow with the funny T-shirt dropped back to third.

Neither woman acknowledged the existence of the other visitors waiting in line; when the security guard finally stepped forward with the key, they stampeded through the door and hurried to the service desk. Mr. Weiner took a number and sat in the waiting area. The security guard approached. "Any weapons, firearms or knives?" He gestured indicating Fanny's purse.

"No, nothing."

"I still have to look." She handed him the bag which he unzipped and examined with a bored expression before returning. "Thank you."

A rather disheveled, middle-aged woman with gray-streaked hair and a jumbo cup of coffee entered. A teenage boy dressed like a skinhead was bringing up the rear. "No food or drinks." The guard pointed at a sign strategically placed over the facing wall.

The woman went out, disposed of the coffee and returned to where the guard was standing. "Where do I sign in?"

The man gestured toward the help desk. "Just give them the last four digits of your social security number and wait with the others until they call your name."

"It's for him not me." She indicated the boy.

"Then give his social security number."

"Don't know it." She exploded in a hacking, smoker's cough.

The guard gave her a dirty look. "You don't know his number?"

The woman just shrugged and screwed up her face in a dull-witted frown. He turned to the boy. "What's your social security number?"

The boy bit his lip and cocked his head to one side. "I dunno."

"Last name?"

"Corrigan." The guard disappeared down the corridor.

At the service desk a worker was getting the Orientals squared away. "Who's applying?"

"My muddah." The woman in the floral dress yanked the equally dour-faced, older woman closer to the window.

"Does she speak English?"

"No English! No English!"

"Has your mother ever worked or collected taxable income since arriving in the United States of –

"No work. No taxes," the angry mama-san sputtered.

Fanny leaned closer and was about to say something when Mr. Weiner's name was called. "This won't be long," he assured her and disappeared down the hallway.

Fanny glanced around the reception room, which was filling slowly. With the exception of Mr. Weiner and the Orientals, most of the people were quite young. The security guard reappeared and approached the young boy and scruffy woman. "You're all set. Take a seat and they'll call your name."

The twosome sat down next to Fanny. The dull-witted woman, who wasn't the boy's mother, reminded Fanny of the welfare recipients who flooded the market after the first of the month with their food stamps, AFDC and welfare vouchers. They loaded up on TV dinners, ice cream, over-priced junk food, peanut butter, bologna and pastas. When the manager, out of a sense of misplaced altruism, put one of them to work at the market, she seldom lasted much beyond the first paycheck. Viewing work as an avocation - something you did for amusement or under protest for short duration; they used the system to beat the system. In many respects they reminded Fanny of her brother, Norman, who smoked dope, frittered and farted his self-indulgent life away.



“I ain’t got no goddamn clothes,” the skinhead said, turning to the woman. Fanny noted a metal ring in the youth’s left nostril and matching silver hoop dangling from his top lip. “Maybe I should shoot by the house... get my stuff.”

“Okay,” the woman replied hoarsely.

“What if my old man called the cops?”

“Why would he do that?”

“Trespassing.”

“Hadn’t thought of that.” The woman seemed stymied. “Tough call.”

“Hell, it’s not like I did anything wrong,” he sputtered weakly. “Not really.” The mystery woman, who taxied him to the social security office, shrugged noncommittally.

Fanny rose and went to wait outside until Mr. Weiner finished his meeting. Ten minutes later they were back on the highway heading home. “How’d it go?”

“The administrator was very helpful.” He seemed genuinely pleased. “I’ll know more in a day or two.”

“Those two Orientals ... Why should a foreigner who never worked a stinking day in her life here and can’t speak English collect benefits?” Fanny made a hard right onto Commerce Ave.

“Beats me,” he replied.

“And that teenage boy with the black leather jacket and body piercings – the one who didn’t know his own social security number ... He isn’t even in high school yet. Why the hell’s he getting benefits?”

The older man chuckled softly and shook his bald head. “Ask me something easy – say, quantum physics or Einstein’s theory of relativity.”

“Is it like this all the time?”

“No,” Mr. Weiner replied. “Sometimes it’s worse.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday morning Fanny was sipping tepid coffee with Sally Bicknell in the employee lounge. Sally was a floater, who filled in for cashiers who called out sick or couldn’t finish their shift. The willowy, bean pole of a girl might have been passably pretty but for a pulpy lower lip that hovered a good half inch below its mate. A year younger than Fanny, Sally was a jittery, train wreck of a bleached blonde with a twitchy left eye. “I got this wicked paper cut.” Sally held an index finger in front of Fanny’s face and squeezed the fleshy tip with her free hand. A microscopic cut no more than a thirty-second of an inch wide puckered faintly. “It was bleeding profusely an hour earlier.”

Fanny had her own rather elaborate theory about Sally. Sixty years from now, when three-quarters of her contemporaries were moldering in the grave, Sally Bicknell would still be pissing and moaning about paper cuts and free-floating anxiety. Despite all her bellyaching, the woman would be remarkably unfazed by the passage of years. And Why? Because obscure and extravagant maladies, inoperable brain tumors, terminal parasites and pathogens were her *raison d’être*. On her deathbed at the age of a hundred and ten, as the priest was reading Sally Bicknell her last rites and anointing her with holy water, the woman would be showing the soon-to-be-bereaved the scar from her bogus paper cut.

“That Bert Weiner is a swell guy,” Sally gushed “I was telling him about my problems... you know, with my nerves.” Though there was no intrinsic merit whatsoever to her endless

kvetching, Sally panicked imagining all the morbid, ill-defined things that might go wrong with her otherwise uneventful existence.

“You were telling Mr. Weiner about your problems,” Fanny tugged Sally gently back to the topic at hand, repeating the ditsy girl’s words back to her. Up until this week apparently Bert Weiner was the only member of the ShopRite staff unaware of Sally’s emotional excess baggage.

“Yeah, I’m telling him all about my nervous condition, and Bert stares off into space with this demented smile. Then out of the clear blue, he starts jibber jabbering about Helen Keller, the deaf and dumb woman who couldn’t - ”

“I know who Helen Keller was,” Fanny interrupted peevisly.

“He starts telling me how Helen Keller said that security was really just superstition and that it didn’t exist in nature.”

“Bert Weiner said that?”

Sally’s head bobbed up and down and her left eye likewise fluttered like a trap door a half dozen times in rapid succession. “Oh, he went on and on talking a blue streak how avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than confronting things head on and that life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.”

“Bert told you all that?” Fanny couldn’t believe that the same elderly man, who never said diddly-squat to her, would open up to an emotional goofball like Sally Bicknell.

“Well, he was just parroting back what Helen Keller said after she grew up and got famous. But still, it sure was nice of him to share that stuff.”

Fanny was still trying to digest what she had heard when Sally leaned across the table giggling like an idiot and thumping her on the wrist. “Miss Goldberg in the pastry department’s got the hots for Bert.”

“What else is new?” Fanny had spotted the squat, older woman an hour earlier in the cosmetics aisle purchasing a box of L’Oreal hair coloring and wrinkle cream. Everyone was aware that Edith Goldberg had more than a passing interest in the frail elderly man who bagged Fanny’s groceries. A rumor was making the rounds that she invited him over for supper on at least a half dozen occasions, but each time Bert declined with vague excuses.

“I don’t think the feeling’s mutual.” Fanny noted.

“No, Mr. Weiner doesn’t have any romantic interest in that frump – not even for a casual role in the hay.” Sally leaned still closer across the table. “Edith met Bert’s wife, though. They volunteered together at the library. You know, stamping books out and filing returns back on the shelves.” “Mr. Weiner quit his job and took early retirement so he could care for the woman after her stroke.”

“Where did you learn all this?”

“Miss Goldberg. Once that woman gets going, she don’t hardly come up for air.” Sally seemed to take great pleasure divulging information that only she had been privy to up until now. “Anyway, the hospital wanted to ship Mrs. Weiner off to a rehab center, but Bert closed down his accounting firm so he could take her home.”

“Geez!”

“I know, ain’t it swell?” Sally sighed, a drawn-out, if somewhat theatrical gesture. “Can’t imagine anyone doing that for me.”

“What else?” Fanny pressed.

“Edith went over to visit in late May a month after the woman left the hospital. Mrs. Weiner was all scrunched up in a wheelchair. Bert brought her out on the back deck so she could

enjoy the fresh air.” Sally reached up and brushed an errant tear from the corner of her eye. “He had his wife all bundled up in a flannel blanket and was feeding her Motts applesauce right from the jar with a plastic spoon. The poor invalid... She couldn’t talk or nothing. Just sit there like damaged goods.”

Suddenly and without warning, Sally let her mouth go slack, scrunching up her nostrils and jutting her lower jaw to the right at an oblique angle. She held the grotesque mask for a solid five seconds before allowing her features to relax. “The stroke – it paralyzed all the muscles on the right side of her face; if Bert wasn’t there every minute with a Kleenex, the poor creature would slobber and drool all over herself like a freakin’ mongoloid.”

“I didn’t know any of this,” Fanny said.

Sally sucked air sharply into her lungs and sighed. “Three years.”

“Three years what?”

“That’s how long he nursed his wife and then one day she up and died in her sleep in the hospital bed right next to him - the poor son of a bitch!”

“Sally Bicknell says you’re a goddamn saint.” Fanny threw this out in an offhand, acerbic manner as soon as she returned from break

“Really?” Mr. Weiner chuckled lightly. Five minutes – that’s how long I spent commiserating with her and now I’m sprouting wings and a halo.”

“How come you never told me about Helen Keller?” Fanny demanded, sidestepping his previous remark.

“I only told Sally because she was all lathered up.” Mr. Weiner replied. “And, anyway, you make high honors and score in the two thousands on your college boards. You don’t need any dopey advice from some two-bit amateur psychologist.”

\* \* \* \* \*

On Wednesday they carpooled. Fanny called Mr. Weiner on her cell phone. “Be ready fifteen minutes early. I need your advice on a personal matter.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He hung up the phone.

When they drove passed the golf course and were turning onto South Main Street, Fanny said, “Two colleges accepted me for the fall semester.”

“Congratulations!”

“I’m not attending either.”

“Okay.” The older man stared out the passenger side window.

Fanny smiled grimly. “Thought I’d take a year off,... maybe join the French Foreign Legion.”

“North Africa’s can be muggy this time of year.” He scratched a silver tuft of hair that peeked out from behind an earlobe. “I graduated high school in nineteen fifty-eight. The class valedictorian was a brilliant Swedish kid - Lars Something-or-other. I can’t recall his last name. He went bonkers... had a nervous breakdown and spent the next few years on the locked ward at Bridgewater State Hospital.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know,” Mr. Weiner replied. “Life’s a crap shoot. Go to college. Don’t go to college. Join the goddamn French Foreign Legion. What difference does it make? At some point, hopefully before you’re wearing geriatric diapers and slipping away into second childhood, you figure out what you want to be when you grow up.”

The market loomed directly ahead. Choosing a parking space a healthy distance away from the front door, Fanny scanned the lot to make sure nobody else was close by. Reaching into the rear of the Subaru, she grabbed a navy blue backpack off the floor and placed on the seat between them. “Open the top flap.”

Mr. Weiner eyed her uncertainly. “What’s this all about?”

Without waiting, she tugged on the zipper and held the bag under his nose. A sweet, aromatic odor not unlike fresh-mown hay immediately suffused the car. Mr. Weiner poked about among the transparent, cellophane bags. “Is that what I think it is?”

Fanny told him about her brother, Norman. “I’ve considered everything from dropping a dime on the idiot to handing the knapsack over to my parents.” She pulled the zipper shut and flung the pack into the rear of the car. Fanny gestured with a hand toward a metal container near the loading dock at the side of the building. “Of course, I could just as easily throw the drugs in the dumpster and that would be the end of it. What do you think I should do?”

The elderly man sat with his hands folded in his lap and head slumped forward on his chest. “Hard to say. Don’t know what to tell you.”

Fanny reached out and flicked the master lock securing all four doors. Folding her arms across her chest, the girl stared sullenly at the steering wheel. “Not good enough.”

A minute passed and then another. Five minutes later Mr. Weiner cleared his throat. “Okay, if I was in your situation, kiddo, this is what I would do.” When he finished speaking his mind, Fanny unlocked the doors and they went to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour into her shift, the store manager approached with Sally Bicknell in tow. “Your brother’s on the phone. Says it’s a family emergency. Sally can manage your drawer until you get back.” He shut the light down over the register to discourage any additional shoppers from queuing up in the aisle.

In the office, Fanny picked up the phone. “Yeah?”

“I’m missing something,” the voice was frantic, borderline hysterical. “I was wondering if you - ”

“I got your stupid backpack.”

“Got it where?”

“Not to worry. We’ll talk when I get home later tonight.” She hung up the phone.

At nine-thirty, Fanny returned home and went directly to her brother’s bedroom. She tossed the Adidas backpack on Norman’s bed. “I saw you in Veteran’s Park buying this crap the other day so I know what you’re doing.” Her brother ripped the pack open and examined the content. Satisfied that nothing was missing, he stared at her warily. “After considering options, I’ve decided in favor of a hands-off policy.”

“What the hell’s that mean?”

“Sooner or later, the cops will catch up with you again. As a repeat offender, you’ll get prison time and that will be the end of it.” She turned and left the room.

Later that night before going to bed, Fanny replaced the worn string on the gyroscope with a fresh length of cord. Setting the rotor in motion, she balanced the toy on the tip of a pencil then, flipping it end over end, stood the gyroscope upright on a taut piece of twine which she anchored between the bedposts. Where human nature proved both erratic and unpredictable, the laws of physics produced consistently replicable results

A decision was reached.

Fanny would become a supermarket Sadhu, traveling about the country, visiting religious shrines and holy places. Well, not really. She could work in stores where the grocery chain had outlets, while sharing an apartment with roommates. She would ask the admissions department at Boston College to hold her spot in the freshman class for one year, alluding to some vague family crisis. Perhaps Norman would be safely tucked away in a federal penitentiary fabricating Massachusetts license plates - his first real job. The money she squirreled away over the past few years for college – Fanny would leave that in the bank gathering interest.

Of course, most Sadhus made the break much later in life, but this was a finite yearlong sabbatical. In this the year twenty-ten, the universe was in deep flux. Retired Rhode Island firefighters grabbed generous clothing allowances so that when their forty-inch waists mushroomed to fifty, they wouldn't look totally foolish; US soldiers were being blown to smithereens in the lush poppy fields of Afghanistan; Chinese women, who looked like they just floated into Boston Harbor on a sampan, applied for social security, demanding benefits with such galling tenacity that an army of native-born bureaucrats were stood back on their heels.

But none of this mattered. Maybe the new frontier, the untamed wilderness, was situated between her ears. It was a pristine state of mind, not some topographical, x-marks-the-spot smudge on a roadmap of North America. It had more to do with some foolish claptrap purchased second hand from a deaf, dumb and blind woman about life being a wondrous adventure or nothing at all.

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## The Wayward Nun

Entering the vestibule of Mount Saint Rita's Abbey, Rachel Mathews sniffed the air. The monastic community was famous for their baked breads, homemade milk chocolates, jams and jellies. Like edible incense, the confectionaries permeated every permeable object. A thin nun in white habit with matching headdress was standing behind a display case. A navy scapula covered the front of her ivory habit. "Currants and baked goods won't be ready for another half hour or so." She spoke in a feathery soft voice that got little usage.

"I just drove six hours from Bangor, Maine to be with my sister, who I haven't seen in twenty years," Rachel announced. "She's staying at the abbey."

In the late sixties, at the height of the psychedelic revolution, twenty-two-year-old Alice Mathews ran off, disappearing like a chalky blip on a radar screen for three years. Then a picture postcard arrived from Tucson, Arizona. Nothing more for a decade, then another colorful missive

featuring a broad expanse of deciduous forest in the foreground offset by snow-capped mountains – Nome, Alaska in late Autumn.

By definition, a vagabond was a person who led an unsettled or disreputable life, wandering aimlessly without any fixed home. Alice qualified in all respects. Most recently, she had been working with a traveling circus. When they passed through Brandenburg, she abandoned the troupe and came to stay at the abbey.

The nun came out from behind the desk. "Sister Claudia manages the retreat center. She's over at the chapel." She indicated a gothic looking structure surrounded by massive oak trees a hundred yards away. Rachel wandered back out into the bright New England sunshine, where the smell of candies was replaced by that of pungent marigolds and knotty pine. Rachel passed into the chapel foyer. To the left, in a sanctuary, a dozen nuns seated on rough-hewn maple benches were chanting Gregorian melodies.

In a room no bigger than a broom closet just off the chapel, an older sister seated at a desk was writing in a ledger book. The slender woman, who stood just barely five feet, squinted distractedly through thick bifocals. Sister Claudia had the fastidious features of a gray squirrel. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Rachel Mathews. My sister, Alice, is staying here."

The nun closed the ledger, putting the fountain pen aside. "Yes, such a sweet soul." The affection was unforced. "She was with us almost a month doing spiritual retreat. Then just yesterday, Alice announced that she was leaving the abbey... moving on."

"Moving where?"

"Didn't say?" The older woman smiled benevolently. "She paid her bill and left after the evening meal."

The chorus in the other room followed the outline of a pentatonic scale. "From three-ring circus to a Cistercian Abbey," Rachel muttered. "How does your religion make sense out of this?"

The grizzled nun cocked her head to one side. "Our faith doesn't offer answers, just courage." Sister Claudia took a step closer and pressed the girl's hand.

"I drove all this way non-stop for nothing. I'm so goddamn tired!"

The nun sat down beside Rachel and placed an arm around her shoulder. She made no reference to the foul language. There was a break in the music. In an adjoining room, someone was repeating Hail Marys in a breathy monotone. A tall priest entered the chapel and gestured to Sister Claudia. The nun went and spoke with him briefly before returning. "Your sister has a gentle spirit."

"She was a social misfit who thumbed her nose at conventional society!" Rachel shot back no longer masking her annoyance.

In the adjacent room, someone blew a reedy tone on a pitch pipe, and the nuns, who had paused momentarily, shifted to a new hymn in a minor key. Sister Claudia led the way back out into the garden skirting the abbey. "I'm truly sorry you missed your sister."

"I'm not driving back today." Rachel pulled her car keys from the purse. "Could you recommend a hotel in the area?"

"There's a Marriott a mile up the road from here." A group of visitors were coming and going from the monastery store. A little boy was chewing on a huge chocolate bar. "Our faith teaches us to believe that all souls are inherently good and redeemable, but that's theological hogwash. There are good souls and the other kind. Despite her 'unconventional' habits, your

sister was a delight. I'll remember Alice in my prayers." Sister Claudia's pokerfaced expression never softened as she turned and hurried back to the chapel.

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*Mount Saint Rita's Abbey* - Rachel had researched the religious order on the internet before leaving Maine. According to their founder, Sister Catherine McDonald, the nuns instructed the ignorant, counseled the doubtful, admonished sinners, forgave offenses willingly and prayed for both the living and the dead. In addition to their cottage industry breads, jams and chocolates, they served in emergency shelters, prisons, treatment and detention centers. Rachel noted sardonically that, given her sister's appetite for the 'unconventional', Alice had probably passed through all four. Over the course of a lifetime, dealing with her sister was like picking at a scab, an ulcerated, necrotic sore that never showed the least inclination to heal and give ground to healthy tissue.

Rachel didn't get back to the hotel until well after five. Throwing herself down on the queen-size bed, she massaged her eyes with her fingertips. After a brief nap, she showered and washed her hair. As Rachel was buttoning her blouse, there was a knock at the door. Sister Claudia was standing in the hallway. "Just happened to be in the area...."

Despite her pristine habit and serene demeanor, there was something skewed and out of kilter about this seemingly beneficent Cistercian. "I'm on my way downstairs to supper," Rachel replied.

"We take our meals quite early at the convent, but I wouldn't mind joining you for a cup of tea."

Rachel led the nun back out onto the landing, and they made their way to the elevator. In the hotel dining room, the waitress showed them to a table. "On second thought," Sister Claudia announced as she scanned the menu, "I might eat a little something... a light appetizer, perhaps." When the waitress returned, Rachel ordered the baked scrod with mashed potatoes and a garden salad.

"The Cajun catfish wit Creole seasoning sounds interesting." The petite nun, whose tiny feet just barely touched the rug, folded the menu.

"That selection isn't for the faint of heart," the waitress cautioned. "It's seasoned with green onions, jalapenos, garlic pepper, and a sharp Monterey jack cheese."

"Yes, I'll go with the Cajun catfish." Sister Claudia relinquished her menu and leaned back with a satisfied expression. "What do you have on tap for dark beers?"

"St. Pauli Girl," the waitress replied.

"Yes, bring me a mug."

As the waitress was turning away, Rachel said, "On second thought, I'll have a gin and tonic."

"Were you aware that your sister was an animist?" Sister Claudia blurted.

"Last I heard, she was a practicing Unitarian."

"Prior to the circus, Alice spent time on a Blackfoot Indian reservation... got caught up in their mythology and folklore."

*Yes, that would be just like Alice, the contrarian, the rabble rousing iconoclast. Animists worshiped nature. It wasn't a kinky religion, per se, just a tad gauche.* "I'm getting confused. What was she doing at a Catholic retreat center?"

The nun pursed her lips but had nothing further to add. "This is for you." She pushed a rather tattered slip of paper across the table. "I found it tucked away among belongings your sister left behind."

*Sometimes a man stands up during supper  
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,  
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.*

*And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.*

*And another man, who remains inside his own house,  
dies there, inside the dishes and in the glasses,  
so that his children have to go far out into the world  
toward that same church, which he forgot.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Rachel jutted her chin in disdain as she skimmed the handful of lines. "Alice was always big on just this sort of vapid esoterica. There was another similar snippet by the Persian poet, Rumi she was keen on... something about an invisible door between the two worlds." Rachel snickered disparagingly. "My dopey sister latched on to every cockamamie notion, twisting the metaphysics to suit her own convenience."

Sister Claudia's eyes brightened noticeably. "The Rilke poem... yes, I think I remember that lovely allegory from the days of my novitiate."

"Well, I couldn't make any sense of it."

The air conditioning kicked in sending a wave of chilled air scudding across the room. "What do you do," Sister Claudia nudged the conversation elsewhere, "for a living in Bangor?"

"I'm a receptionist for a psychiatric practice."

As she explained things, Rachel had been with the psychiatrist five years, scheduling appointments and managing the office. "Tell you a funny story," she confided, leaning halfway across the table and lowering her voice even though nobody was seated close by. "One of the longtime patients was a wife abuser. Got soused every weekend, came home and beat the wife. After three years of therapy he stopped drinking and never laid a violent hand on the woman. "

"Well that's good," the nun replied."

"Not really because, once the drinking was under control, the man developed a gambling problem. He just exchanged one vice for another." Rachel tucked the Rilke poem into her breast pocket just as the waitress brought their drinks. Sister Claudia seized the frosty mug in both hands and took a tiny sip - no more than a thimbleful of the brownish liquid - then repositioned the glass on its coaster and wiped her wrinkled lips. Twenty sparing sips later the food arrived, and the dark beer had been reduced by two-thirds. The Cajun Catfish platter looked menacing, but the gray-haired woman with the outlandishly huge cross dangling from her scrawny neck tucked a napkin under her chin and reached for her fork.

Rachel squeezed the slice of lime into her drink and watched as the oily liquor melded with the fruit and lighter tonic. "My sister was precocious. By the second year of middle school, Alice was already dabbling with sex." She took a sip and was pleased that the gin wasn't overpowering. "By high school she wasn't dabbling anymore."



"Precocious," Sister Claudia seemed unruffled by the direction the conversation was taking. "Was she precocious or promiscuous... there is a subtle difference?"

"A bit of both," Rachel replied. "She loved sleeping with men... finding new and innovative ways to fulfill her carnal needs." She waved a hand distractedly in the air. "I saved myself for marriage... church wedding, pearl-colored wedding dress. What a freakin' joke! The marriage lasted a sum total of two, shitty years."

Rachel brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and reached for the gin. "My sister once described good sex as a five-star, gourmet meal. By those standards, I've been subsisting on stale bread and water since my jackass husband flew the coop."

"Oh, dear!" With a flick of her eyes, Sister Claudia indicated a party of two entering the dining hall. "My worst nightmare!"

Rachel immediately recognized the gangly cleric who dropped by the chapel earlier in the day. The man had seemed rather autocratic and full of himself as he commiserated with Sister Claudia. "That's Father Mahoney," she whispered under her breath, "and his housekeeper, Miss Walters."

Noticing Sister Claudia, Father Mahoney, immediately approached. After exchanging pleasantries, the priest went off to join the housekeeper sitting demurely at a small table in the corner. The waitress approached and the nun waved her empty mug in the air. "Another glass of prune juice, please." Eyeing her uncertainly, the waitress meandered off in the direction of the bar.

The hotel dining room had filled up with a steady flow of dinner guests. From a pair of Bose speakers situated near the bar, Chet Baker's jazzy trumpet was running through the chord changes to *My Funny Valentine*. In the far corner, portly Miss Walters was tittering at something Father Mahoney was saying.

"Well at least he isn't buggering the altar servers," the nun muttered under her breath reaching for the beer.

There was no pretense anymore about sensible sips. Sister Claudia's eyes were beginning to glaze over and her speech slur. In addition to the liquor, she was making excellent progress with the catfish, having reduced the platter by half. She raised a potato wedge flecked with orangey chili sauce and pale green chives to her lips. "If I ever found myself stranded on a tropical island with that hellfire and brimstone blowhard, I'd grab a jagged shell and slit my throat rather than listen to his mindless prattle." Depositing the food on her tongue, she began to chew at an odd angle. Only now did Rachel notice the flawlessly perfect, false teeth.

Sister Claudia nudged her plate several inches forward indicating that she was finished. Lowering her eyes, she stared at the ravaged platter. "I'm going to order one last beer before heading back to the convent, if you don't mind."

Ten minutes later, the third beer was drained almost to the dregs. "Do you understand the definition of *a priori* truth?" When there was no immediate response, Sister Claudia continued, "A priori truth emanates from knowledge based on theory rather than observation or experience. You don't have to get up off your couch and go outside to examine how things are in the physical world." The nun tipped the glass at a steep angle, emptying the contents into her gullet. "The tenets of the Catholic religion are based on unassailable, a priori truth. You either believe or choose not to."

"And what do you believe?"

"What do I believe?" A glossy sheen enveloped her half-closed eyes. "I believe in Saint Pauli Girl draft beer, Cajun catfish, common decency and little else." There was nothing defiant or argumentative in the nun's tone. She was simply stating an a priori truth of her own choosing.

"How long did you know my sister?"

"Three weeks and six days. We became bosom buddies"

"In the corner of the room Father Mahoney was playing footsie with the corpulent woman who cleaned the rectory and serviced his lascivious instincts. "Three weeks and six days... in the end, you probably got to know Alice quite intimately."

The waitress placed the bill on the table along with chocolate breath mints and retreated back to the kitchen. "Yes, we palavered quite a bit toward the end." Unwrapping her mint, Sister Claudia appeared in no great hurry to return to the convent. The nun leaned back comfortably in the chair. "Let me share my impressions of your sister and her imprudent journey across the doorsill where the two worlds touch."

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## The Invisible Hand

Claudia Lanni was stripping the bottom plate from a Hoover WindTunnel II vacuum cleaner when a customer stepped over the threshold of *Vacuum World*. The man, who was in his late thirties, dangled a smallish rubber belt between a thumb and indexed finger. The band had ripped apart in a jagged line with a shiny black burn mark where it had run off the metal shaft.

She took the belt, turning it over in her hands. "Orek XL two-thousand?"

The fellow nodded. Claudia rose from where she was hunkered down with the various parts of the vacuum cleaner splayed out across the floor. She approached a display near the cash register. At six foot one, her torso wasn't fat so much as doughy. A person standing in front of Claudia didn't see hips, breasts, shoulders or thighs. They saw a bleary-eyed, thoroughly unremarkable woman with a weak chin and flaccid lips that lacked contour or definition. Makeup might have helped but she never bothered with any – not even a hint of blush to brighten her pallid skin tones. The woman wore lumpy corduroys that hung shapelessly on her skinny waist and flannel shirts that were always clean but seldom ironed. The unfashionable, wire-rimmed granny glasses were a throwback to the hippy-dippy psychedelic sixties.

"Give me a couple belts," the man said.

"Need bags?"

The man shook his head. "No, I got plenty, thanks."

She rang up the sale and made change. The customer had already picked his way to the door when she spoke again. "What's that you're reading?"

He pulled a tattered paperback from a back pocket, waving it in the air. "*The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith."

Having just separated the rug beater from the undercarriage, Claudia put the Phillips head screwdriver aside. "Most economists consider that to be his most influential work, but I always preferred *Theory of Moral Sentiments*."

The middle-aged man balked and stood frozen in space. Then he closed the door and came back to where she was sitting on the floor. His dark hair was thinning at the temples, the nose was rather long with a pronounced hump. “You studied economics?”

“No, not really. I’m a bit of an intellectual dilettante.” In college Claudia pursued an eclectic program, favoring philosophy and business theory. She got a degree in neither. Nothing of a practical nature held her interest for more than two seconds back-to-back. “*Theory of Moral Sentiments* was where Smith first referred to the ‘invisible hand’.”

The man was standing directly next to Claudia, who was digging a clot of hairballs, yarn, crumpled paper and assorted debris from the intake hose in the bottom of the machine. “And what exactly is the invisible hand?”

“The benefits to society of people behaving in their own interest.”

“That’s strange! A passage describing a similar concept appears in the editor’s preface.” The man thumbed through the first few pages of the paperback until he found the paragraph he was looking for.

*It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.*

“The invisible hand—yes, that’s it!” Claudia reached out with a taut index finger and repositioned the wire-rimmed glasses which had slid down on the bridge of her slender nose. Without bothering to look up from her work, she added “Conscience arises from social relationships.”

The customer pursed his lips and seemed lost in thought for a brief moment. “Which is to say that mankind can still form moral judgments, in spite of a natural inclination toward selfishness.”

Only now did she bother to look him full in the face. A wan smile creased her lips. Claudia began reassembling the scattered pieces that lay on the floor. The customer with the broken drive belt sat down on a folding chair alongside an impressive display of spiffy vacuum cleaners.

Vacuum World serviced other models but sold Hoovers exclusively. The display that ranged along the entire front of the store featured the top-of the-line Platinum Collection Cyclonic bagless, the WindTunnel II upright, the Anniversary self-propelled Model and a host of lesser expensive, stripped down models with price points a tad under two hundred dollars.

"Society, according to Adam Smith," Claudia picked up on the thread of his previous remark, "is the mirror in which one catches sight of oneself, morally speaking."

“Yes, that’s vintage Adam Smith,” He rose from the chair and rubbed his face distractedly with the palm of a hand. “Are you doing anything later tonight?”

Having finished the repairs, all that remained was to stretch the decorative rubber molding around the base of the machine. Claudia’s unlovely face betrayed no emotion. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

\* \* \* \*

Lawrence Lanni took the call from his mother in his office at Brandenburg Mental Health Services. She was crying – blubbering hysterically and making little to no sense. Claudia had gone mental, suffered a nervous breakdown or some similar form of acute psychological derangement. Could Lawrence stop by the house after work and please not to tell anyone about his sister’s emotional collapse? “You’re going to have to set things right,” his mother sobbed. “Put things back the way they were.”

*Put things back the way they were.* Lawrence didn’t know if that was such a great idea. As he understood his mother’s account, his sister, who had led a morbidly safe and predictable existence over the past twenty years, went out for drinks with a customer she met earlier in the day at Vacuum World and slept over the man’s apartment. “Where is Claudia now?”

There was a brief pause as though his mother didn’t understand the question. “She’s where she always is – at the freakin’ store.”

“So she didn’t really fall apart?”

“No, she’s at work, fixing broken motors and selling Hoover vacuum cleaners.”

Lawrence glanced up at the clock. His ten-thirty appointment, a paranoid schizophrenic with a Jesus complex would be waiting downstairs in the lobby collecting faults and injustices. “So she’s not in any immediate distress.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Mrs. Lanni hedged.

“Besides the sexual escapade, what other crimes did Claudia commit?”

His mother’s voice trailed away to an embarrassed whisper. “Nothing I care to discuss over the phone.” The line went dead. A moment later the intercom buzzed. Lawrence’s next appointment was waiting impatiently for his fifty-minute counseling session.”

\* \* \* \*

Lawrence arrived at his parent’s house shortly after seven. His father, who looked haggard, opened the door and ushered him into the living room where his mother was curled up on the sofa clutching a box of Kleenex in her lap. “Where’s Claudia?” Lawrence asked.

“Gone out,” his father said in a flat monotone.

Claudia seldom went anywhere after work. She watched the evening news; she read; she did needlepoint and macramé. Outside the immediate family, she had no personal life. “Gone where?”

“That’s what we need to discuss,” Mrs. Lanni replied, dabbing her swollen eyes with a tissue. As his mother explained things, Claudia had gone off to work Tuesday morning but never showed up for supper. She came home the following morning and then only to take a quick shower and change her ratty clothes. “I asked her,” Mrs. Lanni continued, ‘Where were you all night?’, and she says, ‘I spent the night with a customer catching up on lost time.’”

“That’s a euphemism,” Mr. Lanni picked up the thread of his wife’s conversation, “a polite way of saying that Claudia - ”

“I understand,” Lawrence interrupted, “perfectly well what mother was saying.”

In his practice as a clinical psychologist, Lawrence met woman who were pathologically promiscuous, hedonistic in the extreme. Some tried to pass their sexual gluttony off as a form of libertarian fervor. This is the way I choose to live my life, and it’s none of your goddamn business! That was all well and good as long as the carnage and collateral damage was minimal. But of course, none of this applied to Claudia. She had always lived a reclusive, staid, stolid and utterly prudish existence. For the past fifteen years she went to work every day at Vacuum

World. She attended Mass with her parents on Sundays; she subscribed to the *Atlantic* and the *New York Times Review of Books*. Claudia played on the tennis team in college. A few years back she joined a tennis club but after injuring her groin attempting an overhand lob, that, too, fell by the wayside. “Who is this guy she slept with?”

“That’s the problem,” his father said. “We know nothing about him.”

“Claudia and the horny bastard who took advantage of her naiveté—apparently they share a common interest in economics.” Mrs. Lanni seemed frightened, dazed. The older woman tapped her forehead with a taut index finger as though trying to recall some tidbit of incidental trivia. “Your sister was prattling on and on - some crazy nonsense about invisible hands and eighteenth-century, English mercantilism.”

Yes, that would be vintage Claudia!

Lawrence massaged his eyes and stared out the window. Across the street, the Hispanic neighbor was running a noisy riding lawnmower along the perimeter of his property. The Morales family – they emigrated originally from Guatemala. Nice people. Very sedate and proper. Not like the Lannis, whose nymphomaniac daughter was whoring herself out to every Tom, Dick and Harry who needed a replacement drive belt for their vacuum cleaner.

“I’m going to fix myself a cup of tea.” Mr. Lanni edged toward the kitchen and, with a flick of his eyes, indicated that Lawrence should join him. When they were safely out of earshot, the older man said, “Your sister’s always been the frugal, business-minded sort.” He put the water on to boil and set a teabag in a cup alongside the sugar bowl. “Less than ten years after buying the Vacuum World franchise, she’d squirreled away enough savings to buy the building outright.”

His father wasn’t telling Lawrence anything he didn’t already know. “What’s your point?”

Mr. Lanni removed a spoon from the drawer and laid it next to the teacup. “No one’s ever shown any romantic interest in Claudia. A parent can’t help but worry that this fellow – whoever the hell he is – might be some conniving gold digger taking unfair advantage of your sister’s loneliness and emotional vulnerability.”

“You’re using the term incorrectly.” Lawrence stared at his father in mild disbelief. Gold diggers are usually treacherous women who flimflam men.”

Mr. Lawrence waved both hands over his head in exasperation. “You know perfectly well what I mean!” The water had come to a boil and he removed the kettle from the heat. “Claudia’s acting out of character. Something has to be done to protect her.”

Put. Put. Put. Put. Through the side window Lawrence could see Mr. Morales puttering along the portion of his property that bordered the street. His youngest daughter, a chubby, chocolate-skinned girl with Mayan features, was sitting on his lap, clutching a doll. “And what the hell am I suppose to do?”

“Go visit Claudia. See out what the hell is going on with this shady character. What’s his *modus operandi*?”

“In addition to mental health,” Lawrence grouched, “now I’m a private investigator?”

Mr. Lawrence patted his son on the shoulder. “Do it for your mother’s sake.”

Lawrence was tired. After listening to other people’s problems for eight solid hours the last thing he wanted was this. He often thought of Brandenburg Mental Health as a veritable Pandora’s Box of human anguish and nuttiness. Many of the clients, like the paranoid fellow zonked out on stellazine he met with after his mother’s phone call, were incorrigible. No, that

was a poor choice of words. Crooks and pathological liars were incorrigible. The mental patients reminded Lawrence of characters in a Greek tragedy where their miserable fate was preordained.

But what to do about Claudia?

Mr. Lanni removed the teabag from the dry cup and returned it to the carton in the oak, raised-paneled cabinet. He put the spoon, cup and saucer away. He hadn't wanted anything to drink. It was just a ruse to get Lawrence alone, subterfuge of a benign sort. "I saw your sister for a few, brief minutes earlier tonight before she ran off to spend quality time with her mystery man."

"And how did she seem?" Lawrence asked.

"Insanely happy! Her eyes sparkled and cheeks were flushed. She was brimming over with ..."

"Passion?"

Mr. Lawrence grimaced. "Not necessarily my first choice of words but, yes, that too."

\* \* \* \*

When the children were young, Lawrence's eighty year-old maternal grandmother came to live with the family. Grandma Sylvester hated her son-in-law. She always felt that her daughter could have done better and told anyone who cared to listen that the marriage was a disappointment, an unfortunate lapse of judgment and common sense that could only be rectified by divorce. No matter that the Lannis got along just fine. Knowing how she felt, Mr. Lanni ignored his mother-in-law. When the incessant nagging got unbearable, Mrs. Lanni would scream, "Shut up you insufferable witch!" But the woman, who was crippled with rheumatoid arthritis and navigated the house in a motorized wheelchair - courtesy of her hated son-in-law - was fearlessly outspoken. She actually enjoyed the strife.

"Every time she does something hateful," Claudia observed mirthlessly, "Grandma acts like she's having multiple orgasms." After each spiteful harangue, the girl noted how the elderly woman smiled gleefully and seemed more physically animated.

"What's an orgasm?" Lawrence asked.

"You'll find out soon enough."

Grandma Sylvester viewed Claudia as a major disappointment. "It's a shame you're not pretty like your mother."

Claudia winced but caught her emotional second wind and replied, "You say something wickedly cruel and offensive, and then you smile at the victim of your abuse. That's sadistic."

"Well it's perfectly true. Just go look in the living room mirror if you have any doubts." The simpering expression faded noticeably.

"I have no illusions about either one of us," the young girl shot back. The old woman stared back at her with unbridled malice.

One day Grandma Sylvester was badmouthing Mr. Lanni in front of the children when Claudia muttered, "Let's go for a little ride." The girl was thirteen years old at the time, Lawrence two years younger. She wheeled her grandmother out to the curb next to the trash barrels and pulled up the rubber brake pads firmly against the slender wheels. Claudia dropped down on her haunches and stuck her nose in front of the decrepit woman's mottled face. "I dragged the trash barrels out to the street earlier this morning." She pointed to a green container

resting no more than a foot from the woman's right elbow. "Some animal must have ripped the plastic bag apart, because there's about a million and a half maggots crawling around under the lid."

"You're full of shit up to your eyebrows," The grandmother hissed.

"Really?" Claudia removed the plastic lid. She grabbed the handle and tipped the barrel at a forty-five degree angle. A swarm of white, frothy worms were writhing along the inner surface of the putrid container. "I'm going to leave you here so the sanitation engineers can haul you away with the rest of the smelly garbage."

Mrs. Sylvester began to cry and whimper and moan and make queer little animal sounds that were painful for Lawrence to hear. "This isn't funny, Claudia," Lawrence cautioned. "I don't like what you're doing."

She grabbed her brother by the shirt collar and dragged him back into the house. "It's June. Seventy degrees with bright sunshine. The old coot isn't going to shrivel up and die."

Lawrence began to cry. He went and looked out the window at his grandmother slumped over, her scrawny shoulders heaving up and down with despair. His father was at work. Mrs. Lanni had gone to Stop & Shop for groceries and wasn't due back for another half hour. "You can't just leave her out there."

"Shut up!"

A blue Toyota cruised by and the driver waved at Mrs. Sylvester. At the far end of the street the car pulled up at the stop sign before continuing on its way. "What if a neighbor sees her and calls the police?"

"For as long as I can remember, that horrid woman has been saying cruel and hurtful things. Now she gets a dose of her own medicine."

Five minutes passed. Claudia went out to the curb and retrieved her grandmother. "If you say a word about this to anyone," the girl said in a perfunctory, offhand manner, "I'll come into your room late at night and hold a pillow over your pus-ugly mug until all the hatefulness is choked out of you." The woman who harbored a vindictive slight for every occasion, seemed in a fog. "I'm only ugly on the outside," Claudia added as an afterthought. "But you wouldn't know anything about that."

Thirty-five minutes later Mrs. Lanni returned home. "Children, go get the groceries from the car." She turned to the listless, subdued woman in the wheelchair. "You seem a bit peaked. How are you, mother?"

Mrs. Sylvester wet her lips. She crooked her neck to one side and stared pensively out the bay window toward the curb where the noisy diesel-engine garbage truck had just pulled up alongside their house. A dark-skinned man deftly lifted the thirty-gallon, plastic barrel dumping the contents – maggots and all - into the rear. "I'm fine," she croaked. "Everything's just swell!"

Later that night, Lawrence shuffled into his sister's bedroom and stood by the night table. "I don't think you're ugly."

His sister reached out and grabbed his slender wrist. Pulling it close, she planted a wet kiss in the palm then closed the fingers one-by-one in a loose fist. "I am rather homely," Claudia said, "but there's infinitely more to life than fashion and glamour."

"I wouldn't love you a tiny bit more even if you looked, danced and sang like Hannah Montana," the boy said haltingly. There was no reply. "Would you have suffocated Grandma Sylvester if she told on us?"

“For all her hatefulness the woman is basically a coward,” Claudia came at the question obliquely. “After that business with the maggots, she would never risk finding out how psychotically demented I am.” A moment passed and Claudia began to giggle.

\* \* \* \*

Lawrence said nothing to his wife about Claudia’s one-night stand or the visit with his parents. He wanted to think things through, process the information. But what information was there? His forty-three year-old sister, who up until the previous Tuesday was undoubtedly an unsullied, pure-as-the-driven-snow virgin, was having a raunchy sexual escapade. What was it his mother had said earlier on the phone? You’re going to have to set things right. Put things back the way they were. His brain balked at the notion of tampering with Claudia’s eccentric lifestyle.

Lawrence’s wife entered the bedroom, her damp hair wrapped in a terrycloth towel. “How were your parents?”

“Good,” Lawrence replied absently. “Just fine.”

He never really felt sorry for Claudia. Back to elementary school, she had always been an odd duck. Not crazy or pathological or mentally defective or troublesome. His sister viewed the universe from her own quirky perspective. That’s why she never accomplished a damn thing with her education. She wrote a master’s thesis on some abstruse concept in Keynesian economic theory, but bought a vacuum cleaner franchise rather than share her formidable, intellectual gift with the academic community. Still, Claudia had made a life – a life apart – and who was to judge the intrinsic worth of the decisions and choices she made along the way. By comparison with the rogue’s gallery of personality disorders and mental defectives who plodded through the Brandenberg Mental Health Clinic on any given day, Claudia Lanni could serve as poster child for a mature lifestyle.

Well, at least up until a week ago last Tuesday.

\* \* \* \*

Wednesday in the late afternoon, Lawrence swung by Vacuum World after leaving the clinic. He called ahead to tell Claudia he was stopping by. The ‘CLOSED’ sign was hanging in the front door but his sister’s maroon Audi was still parked near the dumpster. He went and rapped on the plate glass door until she finally came out from the back room.

“I was wondering who was making all that fuss,” she said with a relaxed grin. Claudia led the way to the rear of the store where she had a small office. On the computer screen a software program was cycling through a series of administrative tasks. “Every so often,” she said by way of explanation, “I have to purge dead files from my bookkeeping program or the software slows down to a zombie-like crawl.”

Lawrence stared at the screen, which offered a statistical readout every so many seconds of which obsolete files were being cleaned from the hard drive. “You look different somehow.” It certainly wasn’t the clothes. His sister still dressed like a geeky, over-the-hill tomboy and her wedge-shaped suede shoes exuded a distinctively klutzy, unisex aura. No, it was something more subtle.

Claudia looked utterly radiant.



Her skin glowed. She was smiling – something she only did rarely and with minimal enthusiasm. Her pale blue eyes twinkled with a luminous fire, and she was breathing differently, too. Lawrence had never been aware of his sister’s body as anything other than a passive, non-participating lump of flesh. Now with each joyful gesture and flash of emotion, her chest heaved and nostrils flared. “Must be the company I’ve been keeping lately,” she shot back coyly. “I’m seeing someone.”

“Yes, I know. Mother is rather upset. She thinks you lost your mind.”

Claudia pursed her lips and cracked a mischievous grin. “You’re the mental health professional. Do I need psychotropic medication or a straight jacket?”

“That depends,” Lawrence replied evasively. He didn’t want to match wits with his sister. She was smarter than him. Always had been. Claudia’s brain could process information deftly, with a blinding clarity that left him in the dust.

The computer had finished purging documents. Half a gigabyte of memory had been freed up. Claudia scrolled through the statistics then ran the figures on the screen through the printer. “I need a favor.”

Lawrence sat down on the edge of the desk. “I’m listening.”

“I’m closing the business for the entire month of August and going backpacking though Europe with Fred.”

Fred. This was the first time he heard the man’s name. “Have you ever even been outside New England?”

“I need you,” she sidestepped the question, “to run interference for me with the folks. They will assume that I’m acting irrational.” She stuck a flash card in a USB port on the front of the computer, backed up her files and turned the machine off. “I need you to plead my case.”

“It’s all very sudden, don’t you think.” Lawrence spoke in a neutral tone. He had no desire to resort to mind games. That was his mother’s specialty.

“Fred had already planned a backpacking adventure through Europe with a side trip to North Africa from last winter. Bought the Eurrrail pass and set aside plane fare. Last night he asked me to join him.”

Lawrence wandered over to a file cabinet. A row of bottles containing inks – solid black and the three primary colors was arranged alongside a collection of syringes and hypodermic needles. Picking up a syringe he tapped the needle with the fleshy portion of an index finger. It drew no blood. The sharp end had been trimmed away and lay perfectly flat. Claudia used them to inject ink into her DeskJet printer cartridges. At the business supply stores, a single replacement cartridge cost thirty-five dollars. She could refill empties for less than a twenty-five cents. So she drilled tiny holes in the plastic lids, squirted a syringe full of ink into the porous lining then sealed the top with electrical tape. A month later when the printer ran dry, she repeated the process.

“Like I said,” Claudia picked up on the thread of her previous remark, “I need a small favor...”

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## The Sympathetic Squirrel

During her lunch break Leslie Carter visited the park where two hundred feet away a middle-aged man was talking to a gray squirrel. The squirrel sat up alertly on its haunches, arms outstretched, and every so often the man tossed him a peanut from a paper bag. The rodent efficiently stripped away the outer shell and munched on the succulent kernel as the lunatic blathered away incoherently.

Leslie settled back comfortably on her own bench. The black woman had nothing to fear. The older, gray-haired man, who looked to be in his late fifties, paid no attention to any of the other visitors. He seldom raised his voice except when driving home an impassioned point. His only focus was the solicitous squirrel.

But today was different. A light, persistent breeze was blowing in an easterly direction, carrying the man's pedantic monologue across the two-hundred foot void, allowing the woman to hear pretty much everything being said.

"So, where did we leave off yesterday," the man asked, "before the torrential downpour interrupted our conversation?"

*Interrupted our conversation...* Leslie noted that the term 'conversation' tacitly implied a reciprocal and reasonably balanced give-and-take between both parties in the dialogue. Did he realize he was talking to a gray squirrel? The black woman removed a sandwich from a small bag and splayed the wrapping across her lap to reveal a corned beef sandwich with sauerkraut and kosher dill pickle.

"I was telling you how I lost my job and ended up on a twenty-year treadmill to nowhere." The man stared pensively at the animal. "Or perhaps you'd prefer something more sanguine?"

The squirrel shook his head vigorously from side to side and cut loose with a series of high-pitched squeals.

"The software company where I worked designed business payroll programs." The crazy man tossed the squirrel another peanut, which he deftly caught and deposited in his right cheek for safekeeping. "An employer filled in the number of hours worked for each person in his company. The software calculated deductions, gross and net pay."

The squirrel took a step closer, crooked its silver-gray head to one side and appeared to be listening intently as a small girl accompanied by her mother approached from the main entrance. "Mommy, that man is talking to the furry squirrel!"

The woman steered her child in a wide arc away from the paved path. "That's none of our business," she replied tersely.

"Does the squirrel understand what he's saying?"

"Of course not!" the mother insisted. "Animals can't talk or reason."

"But every time the man says something the squirrel responds. It's like a real conversation."

*Chirrup. Chirrup. Chirrup. Chirrup. Chirrup.* Just as the young child noted, the squirrel erupted in a series of barks, grunts, bird-like chirpings and unintelligible chitter-chatter following each of the man's comments, creating the outlandish and utterly implausible impression of meaningful dialogue.

“Dear god!” The flustered mother yanked the child off at a sharp angle and hurried out of sight beyond a grove of weeping willows.

“A year and a half ago I discovered a flaw in the software program,” the crazy man picked up the thread of his narrative. “Insufficient memory in one of the design modules caused the computer to seize up and stop working.” “The program was rendered obsolete after only a few years usage and the customer obligated to purchase an upgrade... a new and improved version.”

“I spoke to my supervisor about the problem,” the man continued his soliloquy, “and suggested increasing the storage capacity by several gigabytes.” “He said that my request was not unreasonable and would look into the matter.” The squirrel smacked his paws together, a repetitive gesture, as though he was applauding the upper echelon, corporate decision. “But nothing came of my request. One day six months later, in a fit of exasperation, I told the supervisor how I felt... that the unnecessary upgrade was nothing more than planned obsolescence - legalized extortion that forced unwitting customers to shell out money for products they didn’t really need.”

“The supervisor fired me on the spot. No notice. No severance package. No nothing!”

“What did I learn from the experience?” The squirrel blinked several times in rapid succession then, crouching to one side, scratched his left ear with a hind leg before settling back down in an earnest, listening mode. “Earning a modest living is for chumps, dopes, deadbeats and ne’er-do-wells. Money. Money. Money. Money. Money. Consumerism cannibalizes its own. Expedient self-interest is its own justification.”

The squirrel interrupted with a high-pitched squeal, suggesting that he perfectly understood the speaker’s quandary. The shrill howl set Leslie’s nerves on edge.

Sipping from a bottle of mango fruit juice, Leslie gawked at the despondent lunatic, whose hands were flailing desolately in the air. He was carrying on an energetic and dispassionate conversation with a rodent and yet a certain crystalline logic was embedded in his rather one-sided tirade. The squirrel, who had been holding a peanut in its right paw for the longest time, seemed far too engrossed in the subject matter to crack open the nut.

The young man suddenly leaned forward, placing his lips alongside the rodent’s left ear. “Couldn’t find work for the longest time and finally settled on a series of mindless, entry-level positions... Janitor in a paint factory, short-order chef, clerk in a shoe store.” “After losing the job, I had no appetites for working with computers. I took to drink and, when the unemployment checks eventually ran out, my wife left me. I became a recluse, misanthrope, misogynist... well maybe not a misogynist but I wasn’t doing all that well with women either.”

The squirrel hadn’t budged an inch despite the man’s proximity. He still clutched the uneaten nut in front of a bristly nose. “Five years I stumble-bumbled from one pathetic mishap to another – a veritable job gypsy – and what did I take away from the soul-numbing ordeal?”

Like a sailboat in a turbulent windstorm, Leslie felt her body list in the direction of the impassioned confession. She folded the remains of the corned beef sandwich in its wrapper and placed the refuse in the bag with the empty juice bottle. “A consumer society cannibalizes its own. It devours everything in its path with carnivorous glee.”

As if on cue, the squirrel cut loose with a high-pitched tittering. The black woman shook her head, an involuntary, reflexive gesture, trying to clear her brain. Was the feral creature agreeing with the lunatic or offering a dissenting opinion? The man finally fell silent. A brief

moment passed. The squirrel spun about on its heels and hopped away in an erratic zigzag fashion. Reaching a wide oak tree near a shallow pond, the critter scurried up the trunk, disappearing among the leafy branches.

“Excuse me.” Leslie approached and stood in front of the man with hands on hips. “You understand that a squirrel hasn’t the ability to understand human speech?” Her words emerged more as a question than bona fide statement of fact.

“Of course not!” He sounded offended. “It’s got a brain the size of a pea and lives by instinct rather than reason.”

“Then why talk to it?”

“If I commiserate with rodents, it’s a victimless crime.” He cracked a bittersweet, self-effacing smile. “Catholics attend church. They sit in a confessional and recount their sins. I come here and vent to a gray squirrel, who coincidentally is an excellent listener.”

Leslie lumbered off in the direction of the entrance to the park but abruptly pulled up and returned to where the man, clutching the half-eaten bag of peanuts, was sitting. “I’m Leslie Carter. I own a kosher delicatessen over by the library.”

“You don’t look Jewish.”

“It’s a long story,” she observed dismissively, thrusting a hand in front of his chest.

He took the hand and pumped it up and down energetically. “Jason McDougal... I’m clerking over at the Dairy Mart.”

“That’s two blocks down from my place.” He shook his head in the affirmative.

\* \* \* \* \*

Was it the disgruntled, former software programmer or the quirky squirrel that intrigued her? Leslie couldn’t be sure. The woman intended to return to the park the following day, but the October weather was unsettled with the rumblings of thunder eventually giving way to a steady pitter-patter of warm, late-summer rain. The weekend arrived and with it a number of familial obligations and it wasn’t until the middle of the following week when she found herself back on the bench, but the disaffected Jason McDougal was nowhere to be found. Leslie unwrapped her lunch revealing an aromatic slice of brisket wedged between thick slabs of dark rye with a thousand island dressing.

“Well, hello there!” She had just begun nibbling at the crust when the squirrel resurfaced and picked its way to the further bench. “Your friend’s not here today and, unfortunately, I haven’t any nuts.” Five minutes passed. The squirrel continued to bide his time waiting for Jason McDougal. Finally the animal came to where Leslie was sitting. “I don’t suppose you’d care for this spicy meat.” Ten minutes later, the black woman had finished her lunch, emptied the juice container and stowed the wrappings in a velour tote bag. The squirrel continued to linger, sitting back on its haunches with the paws clasped together in a prayerful gesture.

*Chitter. Chitter. Chitter. Chitter. Chitter.* When Leslie slung the bag over her shoulder and made a motion to stand, the squirrel stepped closer and expectantly tilted his head to one side. “You want me to bare my soul? Emotional diarrhea was never my forte. I’m more the stoic, grin-and-bear-it type.”

*Chit. Chit. Chit. Chit. Chit...*

Leslie blew out her cheeks and groaned loudly. “Leslie Carter... I’m sixty-eight, Afro-of American and owner of a kosher delicatessen in a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon

community.” She brushed a strand of kinky hair out of her eyes. By way of warning, the woman added, “You really want to hear this?”

The squirrel inched closer, wiggled its nose and fixed the woman with a decidedly kindhearted expression. Leslie glanced over her shoulder and then swept the grassy knoll with her walnut-colored eyes from right to left. The park was empty. “Forty years ago I was living on Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester, Massachusetts.”

“Jew Hill Avenue... that’s what we called it, because of all the Russian and Polish Jews that resettled there following the Second World War.” “During high school I took a job in a kosher delicatessen. Max’s Deli... the owner was this balding Lithuanian Jew. With hairy ears and a pushed-in nose, Max Mendlebaum stood barely an inch over five feet in his birthday suit.”

“Six months I split my time between scrubbing dishes, waiting tables and food prep behind the counter.” “The clientele, mostly Eastern European Jews, spoke a hodgepodge of guttural German, Yiddish, Russian and – when all else failed – butchered English.”

The squirrel made a series of birdlike incantations before allowing Leslie to continue. “From the 1950’s Jewish immigrants flooded the area, but by 1960 more than half of the ninety thousand residents deserted Boston – a mass exodus, white flight, call it what you will – heading south to the middle-class suburban communities of Canton, Milton, Randolph and Sharon. Low-income blacks were flooding north from the Deep South in search of jobs and a better life. But along with their good will and best intentions, they brought broken families, drugs and gang violence as part of the new order.”

\* \* \* \* \*

One day in her third year working at the deli, Leslie approached the owner. “Try this.” She handed him a platter of silver-dollar size pancakes along with a dollop of sour cream laced with chopped scallions.

“Whatchoo got dere?”

“Potato latkes... a new and improved recipe.”

The squat Jew stared at the platter with a dour expression. “No gut!”

“And why not?”

“It’s the wrong texture.” He screwed his features up in a disgruntled grimace. “You have to shred the potatoes and onions not run them through a goddamn food processor.”

“Yes, I realize it’s not traditional,” Leslie countered, “but just taste.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Just try... one little latke.” Leslie would not be denied.

Max seized a diminutive pancake between a thumb and forefinger, mashed it into the sour cream and tossed the morsel into his mouth. “Not bad!” He grabbed a second helping.

“There’s a distinct advantage to feeding the vegetables through a blender, since the preparer doesn’t waste time forming individual patties.” Leslie paused just long enough to insure that she had his full attention. “You drop the batter into the hot oil from a large spoon or measuring cup. It saves both time and manpower.”

“You put in the eggs?” the owner pressed.

“Yes, of course.”

“The flour, salt, pepper, baking powder?”

“Just like the original recipe.”

Max Mendlebaum thoughtfully rubbed a stubbly chin. “Tomorrow we add a new item to the menu... Leslie’s silver-dollar latkes.”

On another occasion, Leslie pulled the owner aside. "The mixer doesn't work."

"You check the fuse box?"

"Yeah, nothing's blown."

With a pair of pliers, Max loosened several bolts on the metal housing and lifted the lid. An acrid odor permeated the air. "Drive belt snapped." He extricated the broken belt and handed it to Leslie. "Take this down to the hardware store on Christopher Street and have them match up a replacement."

"Why not just call a mechanic?"

"*Meshuganah!*" The roly-poly Jewish man balled his hand into a fist and rapped the knuckles gently on the girl's forehead. "A mechanic might not get here until late afternoon and what would we do for bread and sandwich rolls in the meantime?"

When Leslie returned a half hour later, Max said "Good! Now go fix the broken machine."

"I'm not a mechanic."

"Before the belt broke, you were a deli worker." the man handed her an adjustable wrench and slotted screwdriver. "Now you're a mechanic."

Back in the kitchen Leslie lifted the cover on the commercial mixer and nestled the new rubber belt over the larger of two wheels, but the band fell far short of its mate. "Now what?"

"Loosen the bolt on the chrome housing," Max instructed, indicating a thick nut centered in the spindle. The girl made two turns with the wrench and the wheel began to wobble unsteadily. Pushing forward, she eased the band over the smaller wheel and, while Max held the unit firmly in place, secured the bolt hand-tight.

"Moment of truth!" The owner flipped the switch and the mixing paddle began revolving in typical fashion.

"Next time a belt breaks, what you gonna do?"

"Leslie grinned embarrassedly. "Not call the owner."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eleven years into her job at Max's Deli the owner took her aside one day.

"You heard what happened yesterday?" Leslie, who was slicing meats, stopped what she was doing and looked up. "Rabbi Zelermyer... they threw acid on him." Max morosely rubbed his eyes with an undulating gesture. "The *farshinkener* bums... gut far nuttin' hoodlums. The cops got em."

The tacit understanding was that the youths who brutalized Rabbi Zelermyer, were black, but the owner was too discrete to say so. "What's gonna happen now?"

"Nuttin'," Max grunted hoarsely. "The rabbi don't want no trouble wid your kind. Things are bad enough as they are." The older man paced back and forth with his stubby hands in his pockets. Finally he said, "The deli's been robbed three times this year alone and it ain't even summer. Enough is enough! I'm retiring... end of the month." My wife and I... we put a down payment on a condo in Coral Gables. I'm gonna sit on the beach and watch the pelicans and pretty goils. Dat's what I'm gonna do."

"What about the business?" Leslie asked.

"Want a kosher deli? It's yours. I'll sell it to you for a dollar... one crummy buck!" When there was no immediate response, Max added, "Take the commercial cooking equipment,

furnishings and inventory. Relocate to a safer community on the South Shore and reopen under a new name.”

She shook her head violently. “A Jewish delicatessen run by a black woman.” Leslie was thinking out loud.

Ten years you been wid me,” he countered. “You know the business inside-out... better than all the other employees taken together.” “And anyway,” he blustered indignantly, “gut food is colorblind.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The day after Max so cavalierly offered her the business for a crummy buck, Leslie stopped by the Franklin Park Zoo. A plaque at the entrance explained how Franklin Park, previously known as West Roxbury Park, was renamed in honor of the Boston-born patriot, Benjamin Franklin, who in his will wished that a portion of his estate be given to a worthy cause, one that would provide rural scenery, a woodland preserve and recreation areas.

Leslie sometimes visited the Long Crouch Woods, the location of the historic Bear Dens, where she could better collect her thoughts. Once the focus of the zoo, the Bear Dens was designed in 1912 and were planned to house a small collection of domestic animals. The original grounds featured a grand staircase leading to a large courtyard, framed by several large bear cages, one of which featured a detailed stone sculpture of bears and the city of Boston crest.

Plans to expand the Long Crouch Woods never came to fruition. As the grounds deteriorated, the Park Department neglected many of the most basic needs and the Bears Den became too expensive to maintain. Now, as Leslie sat on a moldy wall, the grounds were littered with piles of trash and empty liquor bottles. She viewed the crumbling bear sculpture as emblematic of the surrounding community. The tarnished structure was a stark metaphor for how *not* to live one’s life.

A few months back, Leslie visited a neighborhood friend who moved thirty miles south to Quincy to distance herself from the ever-growing blight and petty crime. The suburban community was clean and vibrant. Young blacks, whites, Hispanics and Asians were darting in and out of trendy shops and modern office buildings. If Leslie relocated Max’s Deli to such a stylish location, she would need to rebrand the restaurant. The Quincy clientele would demand a more sophisticated atmosphere in order to satisfy their yuppie palettes.

*Leslie’s Eatery!* Drop the Deli. Tweak the menu.

Leslie glanced up a second time at the eroding sculpture – a pair of massive bears rearing up on their hind legs on either side of the Boston crest. She had just entered kindergarten when her parents brought her to the Bears Den. The magnificent, sand-colored structure filled the six year-old girl with unutterable wonder. Now, the crumbling structure reminded her of a desecrated plot in a paupers’ burial ground.

Up and down the length of Hancock Street modern buildings with elaborate facades and condominiums were replacing dilapidated, turn-of-the-century wooden structures. Gentrification – that was the new normal. *Leslie’s Eatery* would keep all the traditional foods – the quality meats, cheeses and specialty items that branded the restaurant as a cut above the competition. The potato and apple kugels, lox and cream cheese spreads, meat and cheese stuffed bakes knishes, chopped liver and so on – she would change nothing! For customers with more conventional tastes, they could offer burgers and hotdogs.

Early in life Leslie Carter found her calling. She was a cook. Herbs and spices were her passion. Pungent and exotic flavorings came as natural to her as nuanced words to a poet. Max Mendlebaum, the most unlikely of mentors, had passed the torch and there was no going back.

And yet, Leslie felt cut adrift, a solitary island unto herself. She was a twenty-seven year-old black woman working in a Jewish delicatessen. When she cooked up a tray of sweet fragrantly pungent knishes stuffed with ground meat, sauerkraut, onions, cheese or kasha, she experienced a bliss bordering on the mystical. But it placed her in another paradigm or parallel universe.

\* \* \* \* \*

A coffee-colored black woman pushed a baby stroller around a bend in the road heading toward the Bears Den. Decker out in a maroon colored dashiki trimmed with an eggshell lace, the woman, whose hair was done up in cornrow braids, was strikingly pretty. "Leslie Carter," the mulatto called out when the twosome were fifty feet away.

Leslie stared at the woman uncertainly. "Angela Simons... I sing in the chorus at the Mount Zion Church with your mother."

"Oh, yes. I remember." Leslie approached and peered into the carriage. Every bit as pretty as the mother, the infant stared back at her with a dreamy-eyed innocence.

"I attended high school with your brother, Waldo. How's he doing these days?"

"Waldo got a job at a gas station in Cleveland Circle. Started out pumping gas, but now he does brake jobs, tune ups and front end alignments."

"Mechanics," the woman observed with a shrewd grin, "never go hungry."

After Angela Simons and her lovely daughter departed Leslie remembered how, the day before her fifteenth birthday, Waldo, brought his adolescent, kid sister to a Black Panther rally in Copley Square across from the Boston Public Library. Leslie vaguely remembered raising a clenched fist and chanting "Power to the People!" until her voice became hoarse. A week later she took the job at Max's Deli and shortly after that Waldo was hired in Cleveland circle. Now the Black Panthers were little more than a distant memory for both siblings.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the deli it was the mid-afternoon lull. Business had petered away to a handful of customers and the dinner crowd wouldn't straggle in for another couple hours. After taking inventory of meats and cheeses in the refrigerated display case, Leslie phoned her supplier with the order and around six left the assistant manager to close up.

Upon reaching home she filled the bathtub, poured a generous scoop of Calgon bath beads into the steamy water and watched as the frothy bubbles multiplied. Leslie lit a scented candle, dimmed the lights and lowered her weary body into the soothing water. Middle aged was accompanied by a myriad of transitory aches and pains. A minimalist at heart, scented bubble baths were one of the few luxuries she treasured.

When the water rose above her chest, Leslie shut the spigot, lay back luxuriating and stretched her limbs. What had she learned from her visits to the park? Among other things, the crazy man who talked to squirrels wasn't necessarily nuts.



*Déjà vu.* When she was processing payroll the week before Thanksgiving, a message cropped up on the computer screen.

*Warning!*  
*A data cache has reached maximum capacity.*  
*Please upgrade your software package!*

Leslie contacted the company and spoke to a technician, who offered a hundred and fifty-dollar fix for the problem. “What’s the alternative?”

“Well you might be okay for a while if you don’t add additional staff,” he replied glibly, “but at some point the program will reach overload.”

“Overload,” Leslie repeated. “That certainly doesn’t sound encouraging.”

“Which is why, as a courtesy, we’re notifying all our valued customers.”

The smart aleck was talking ragtime, but what recourse did she have? The company had her over a barrel. If the software seized up and the computer went down, no one got paid. Leslie could write checks by hand, but then, how could she figure state and federal taxes, benefits and other deductions? It was just like the would-be whistleblower, Jason McDougal, in his impassioned diatribe suggested – big business sodomized the public on a daily basis. Money. Money. Money. Money. Money.

Leslie fished her wallet out of her purse. “Can I pay over the phone?”

“We accept all major credit cards.” The technician was smooth as silk.

\* \* \* \* \*

The water temperature had dropped a few degrees.

With her right toe Leslie deftly flicked the hot water on and positioned a moist washcloth over her eyes. All in all, the owner of Leslie’s Eaterie had nothing to complain about. She had loyal, dependable help plus an ever-burgeoning throng of enthusiastic customers.

The middle-aged woman blew a frothy heap of bubbles away from her face as a fleeting image of her mentor flitted across her brain. What was that silly nickname Max Mendlebaum called Leslie all the way back to her teenage years?

*Shayna punim...* yes that was it!

One day she cornered him near the soda dispenser. “That weird term, *shyna punim...* what’s it mean?”

The owner kissed her on either cheek then rubbed the wetness away with the heel of his hand. “It’s a Yiddish term. The first word is German, the second Hebrew. *Shayna punim...* pretty face.” He chuckled in a rhythmic bass, as though at some private joke. “It takes two languages to describe a girl as precious as you.” He smiled mischievously. “Now ain’t that something!”

The Lithuanian Jew loved her like a daughter. Not that he ever said as much. But from an early age, Leslie was clever at reading body language. Her female intuition was spot on. From the day the mixing machine broke and he sent the girl to the hardware store, Max Mendlebaum was grooming her to take over the business. And that was a full three years before he retired to Florida.

The suds in the tepid bathwater had all but dissipated. Leslie reached for a bar of lavender soap, slathered her limbs and torso then made a mental note to tell the squirrel about the semantic

derivation of the Yiddish term, *shayna punim*, the evils of corporations that hawked computer software programs and the circuitous route her life had taken. Only now was the woman beginning to understand Jason's twisted logic. You confided your sacred, inner most secrets – what resided in your primordial heart-of-hearts - to a scruffy squirrel, because most humans lacked the innate capacity to understand anything out of the commonplace. A squirrel, on the other hand, proved a dispassionate sounding board. He reflected the elemental truth regarding the randomness of the human condition.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening Leslie drove cross-town to the Dairy Mart and eased her Toyota alongside a gas pump. "Twenty dollars... regular." Leslie slid the money across the counter. Jason, who was loading a roll of lottery tickets onto a spindle, looked up. "You're the woman from the park."

"Could we speak a moment?" Leslie asked self-consciously

Another clerk was helping a customer at separate register. Jason spoke briefly to the man and came out to join her at the pump. "You didn't visit the park today."

"One of the day clerks called out on short notice and I had to work a double shift."

When the gas flow shut off, Leslie removed the nozzle and replaced the cap. "I had a lengthy, rather one-sided conversation with our mutual friend." She told Jason in graphic detail about Blue Hill Avenue and its colorful denizens.

"Between my harangue last week and yours today," Jason's features dissolved in a wry smile, "it's a wonder the squirrel didn't suffer a nervous breakdown."

"Or seek less dysfunctional companionship."

Jason grabbed a squeegee from a plastic pail and began cleaning the car's windshield. "My manager just got transferred to a store in New Hampshire, and they bumped the assistant manager up to fill his position."

"That's nice."

He flipped the tool a hundred and eighty degrees and began clearing away the dirty water. "I'm taking over for the assistant."

"A promotion?"

Jason grinned a second time. "Better pay and benefits." He returned the squeegee to the rack. "I know what I said the other day about the evils of consumerism, but it sure feels nice to get ahead and see a little daylight." A steady stream of customers began trickling into the Dairy Mart, and he made a motion to leave.

"I was wondering," Leslie blurted the words in a disjointed heap, "if we could share."

"Share what?"

"The squirrel with the cropped ear."

Jason considered the odd request. "I could go every other day."

"Or better yet, we could sit together on the same bench."

"This is all new to me... uncharted territory."

Unable to decipher his intent, the black woman pursed her lips and stepped closer. "Are you referring to me or the rodent?"

"Both."

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