

Collected Short Stories: volume IV
by
Barry Rachin

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Two Zen Monks

Two Zen monks climbing a hill on their way to the monastery, notice a geisha waiting by the side of the road. A rain storm the previous night has transformed the street into a minefield of slippery mud and puddles, so that the woman is unable to reach the tea house without soiling her pretty kimono and shoes. "The older monk tells the geisha, "Climb on my back and I'll carry you up the hill". She agrees and off they go. A few hundred yards up the mountain, the older monk lets the woman down in front of the tea house. The geisha thanks him profusely and the monks continue on to the Buddhist temple. Just before they enter the shrine, the first monk turns to his friend and says, "'About that Geisha..."

"How is it that you are still carrying the woman," the older monk replies, "when I left her at the tea house five minutes ago?"

Anonymous

"Got a map of Maine lying about anywhere?" Sarah Portman asked. They had just returned from the market and the older woman was shelving groceries.

"There's a New England roadmap in the glove compartment," her husband, Rob, qualified. He passed a green pepper to his wife who deposited it in the vegetable bin. When no further information was forthcoming, he added, "Are we going somewhere?"

"No, not exactly." she pulled the freezer door ajar. "Hand me the sherbet."

Later that evening Sarah spread the tattered map on the bedroom comforter and ran an arthritic finger up the interstate in a northerly direction. A short woman with watery green eyes, Sarah's auburn hair began sprouting silvery roots from an early age. In recent years she bought dye. The color didn't make her look younger but rather like a woman on the front side of seventy refusing to grow old gracefully, so she stopped using color and let her reddish-brown locks bleed gray.

“What are you looking for?” Her husband pressed.

“Unity... Unity, Maine.”

Rob located the rustic hamlet on the directory nestled near the upper, right hand side of the page then ran his eyes up the map past Lewiston, Augusta and Waterville before veering off to the east. “Who do we know in Unity, Maine?”

“The Stevenson’s granddaughter, Bethany, is studying conservation law at the local college. She wants to be a game warden, park ranger... something of the sort. The college offers courses in environmental science, marine biology, bear tagging and a hodgepodge of sustainable agriculture programs.” Sarah pursed her lips. “A couple weeks back Bethany was eating lunch at a pizza place in the center of town and spotted Midge Parker leaving a rooming house.”

“A rooming house?” Rob shook his head in disbelief. “That doesn’t sound like Midge Parker.” He scratched a hairy earlobe pensively. “What’s it been... five, six years since she moved away?”

“More like eight.” Sarah corrected. “Thought I might drive up there,” She said vaguely.

“That’s a four hour trip. You’d need to spend the night.”

“Hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

“Driving through Boston, you risk getting mired in rush-hour traffic,” Rob added. “The route 128 loop would be preferable.” When there was no reply, he asked, “When were you planning to go?”

“Tomorrow...early.” She scanned the map uncertainly. The region seemed desolate. Huge empty tracts of virgin country pockmarked by tiny villages, each separated by forested expanses once travelers ventured off the freeway.

“Don’t like you driving that distance alone.”

“I don’t mind,” she protested.

“With the cataracts,” her husband shot back, “and night blindness you can’t see for crap once the sun goes down.”

“I’ll just be gone a day and won’t drive after dark.” After a tense pause, Sarah said, “This is something I have to do.”

Edging up behind her, Rob slipped an arm around her waist and pulled his wife close. “Of course, I could stay at the motel thumbing through musty back issues of National Geographic,” he offered with a dry inflection, “while you wander the boondocks of central Maine in search of your long lost friend.”

The soft-spoken offer was what she would have expected. A Taurus through and through, the man was practical, slow, plodding and slow to anger. The latter trait frequently infuriated his emotionally impetuous spouse. Her poor vision notwithstanding, Rob would never let Sarah travel unaccompanied so far from home. Since the children married and went off to pursue their own lives, the Portmans did most everything together. It was a package deal, a bittersweet revelation that old age evolves into a comingling, a communion of like-minded spirits on a final journey.

Sarah rested her hands on a boney wrist. “Perhaps we better start packing.”

* * * * *

The last time Sarah had seen Midge Parker the two women spent a summery day at Horseneck Beach on Cape Cod. On the drive south the lanky woman with the weather-beaten features cracked jokes and spoke sparingly about personal matters.

Midge's husband had passed away of a heart condition six months earlier. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – that was the technical term. For reimbursement purposes, every disease required a diagnostic code. The code for the heart ailment was J449. From the outset Midge noticed the innocuous coding on all medical bills. A half year later when her husband of forty-five years suffered a fatal coronary embolism, COPD had set her retirement finances back to the tune of eighty-five thousand dollars and thirteen cents.

So what happened to the couple's neatly ordered universe? As Midge explained with a sardonic smile, life had a nasty habit of intruding at the least opportune moments and mucking things up. Out of a sense of decorum she substituted an 'm' for the ubiquitous 'f'.

As they approached the ocean, a hint of salt flavored a humid breeze. The suburban landscape had been replaced by an endless expanse of scruffy pines and slender birch trees rooted in sandy soil. "How's your daughter?" Sarah asked.

"Last April Elsa reconciled with her estranged husband," Midge replied in a humorless tone, "but that doesn't appear to be going particularly well." "When their marriage fell to pieces, she borrowed a considerable amount of money," Midge confided with a papery thin smile. "Now that they're back together, she wants more."

Strangely there was nothing judgmental in her assessment of Elsa's romantic tribulations. Sarah remembered the daughter as a 'difficult' child through her formative years. Now, as Midge described her, Elsa had evolved into a dysfunctional, ne'er-do-well, train wreck of a middle-aged woman.

"I don't particularly like my daughter," Midge blurted in an offhand manner.

"You love her, though," Sarah qualified.

"Tolerate would be more a more candid choice of language... it's the best I can manage."

Sarah stared at her friend uncomprehendingly. The observation seemed crass and mean-spirited. "That's awful!"

"I'm just being honest."

Later that night over a cup of chai sweetened with buckwheat honey, Sarah tried to imagine how she might feel if she had given birth to a conniving, utterly thankless daughter like Elsa, and her disdain mysteriously evaporated.

* * * * *

"Moby Dick... did you ever read the book?" Midge asked. They were sprawled on beach chairs on the wet sand twenty feet from the incoming tide. A toddler a few feet away in the foamy surf was draping seaweed necklaces around her plump shoulders, while an indulgent mother looked on.

Sarah shook her head sharply. A junior in high school, she just barely read up to the scene in the opening chapter, where the narrator meets the harpooner, Queequeg, at the sailors' inn. From that point on she relied heavily on the CliffsNotes study guides.

"There's this scene," Midge continued, "toward the end of the novel, where Melville describes the sperm whale's sexual habits in graphic detail." The older women watched as a lanky adolescent, skinny arms splayed out in front of his lithe torso, body surfed into shore then ran back out to catch another cresting wave. The infant with the seaweed necklace draped a band of vegetation on her head – slimy, moss-colored dreadlocks.

“The younger whales are quite randy... horny bastards,” Midge picked up the thread of her conversation. “They swim about with a harem of cows, impregnating each female as she reaches fertility. Fidelity doesn’t factor into the equation.”

Sarah, who clearly relished the topic of over-sexed, misogynous whales, grinned wickedly. “Just like humans.”

Shortly after Sarah and Rob moved into the neighborhood, they were invited to block parties through the late summer. The festivities began innocently enough, but by the end of the night intoxicated husbands were telling racy jokes and tossing neighbors’ wives into the swimming pool. All harmless fun - a healthy expression of free-thinking libertarianism - until rumors of infidelity sprouted like late summer weeds and the ‘For Sale’ signs appeared.

Sarah and Rob only attended a handful of the raunchy parties before drifting away. That sort of lewdness didn’t play well into middle age, especially when the shenanigans got totally out of hand, turned mean-spirited and crass.

“What were we originally talking about?” Midge, who had momentarily lost her train of thought, dug her toes in the briny sand.

“Moby Dick whoring his way across the seven seas.”

“Yes, well at some point in middle age the white whale reconsiders his debauched ways, abandons the harem and wanders off alone. From this point until death he leads a hermetic existence.” Midge wagged her head emphatically. “No more female hanky-panky, no nothing.”

She settled back in her chair, surveying the cloudless expanse of cerulean sky. In the distance, a cargo ship was chugging out to sea. Arm in arm, a teenage couple strolled past in the bubbly surf. The dark-haired girl wore a French-cut bikini, the bottom portion little more than a thong that left little to the imagination. “I’m selling the house,” Midge announced.

Sarah felt her brain lurch in freefall. “You’re downsizing?”

“Not exactly. I’m selling and moving away.”

“What about a one-bedroom condo or flat in a senior complex?”

“That’s just more of the same old same old, the status quo.” When there was no reply, Midge added, “Since my husband’s medical bills, the finances don’t add up. There are a few modest investments, but car repairs and real estate taxes are eating me up alive. I can’t make ends meet.”

“But have you considered -”

“This isn’t some spur of the moment decision,” Midge upended her friend’s protest. “I’m not some addled-brained, disaffected hippy from the 60’s.”

The way the conversation ricocheted from one fractured thought to the next, a stream of consciousness with no logical destination left Sarah uncomfortable. Along with the raucous gulls an array of smallish seabirds, mostly plovers and dark-headed terns patrolled the shoreline searching for scraps of discarded food. Brushing a dusting of powdery sand off her thigh, Midge gestured in the direction of the toddler with the seaweed headpiece. The child was babbling in a singsong monotone, an obscure incantation of total bliss. “We’ve slogged through the better part of a lifetime... finished with raising children and finding our own way in the world. Why can’t we be that happy?”

“I hope that’s a rhetorical question.” Sarah was still trying to digest the recent news about her friend’s impending departure.

“No, seriously.” Midge leaned closer, patting her forcefully on the wrist. “I can remember in middle school racing about town on a three-speed bike that my father picked up at the thrift store. No matter that it was secondhand and showed more rust than chrome on the handlebars.”

“The neighborhood kids fastened a baseball card to the front wheel fork with a clothespin to make that crazy, flapping sound.” Midge continued. “It reminded me of a blown muffler. We sometimes used small balloons, but they wore out after a while. The baseball cards weren’t nearly as loud but more dependable.” Midge fell silent for a moment savoring the poignant memory. “I rode that ugly bike to the ends of the earth and then went home, ate supper and fell off in a drugged sleep. It was total joy.”

“But what’s your point?” Sarah spoke petulantly. She recalled moments of childish rapture back to her own youth. Fishing trips with an older brother. She did little or no fishing but simply lay in the grass along the river bank watching the dragonflies and butterflies – mostly monarchs and darkly beautiful, blue swallowtails drawing sustenance from the wildflowers.

“Perhaps,” nudging Sarah out of her nostalgic reverie, Midge spoke with a more strident sense of urgency, “like the white whale, we need to shake things up.”

* * * * *

Around three they packed the car and headed home. “There’s a clam shack just up the road a piece if you’re hungry,” Midge noted. They were only a short distance from the beach headed back in the direction of Fall River.

“Yes, that would be nice.”

At the diner a clot of beachgoers snaked in a raggedy line, placing orders at the window of a small structure sided with weathered cedar shingles. Sarah bought a hot dog and French fries. She assumed that the hot dog would be grilled but the soggy meat was boiled and tasteless. Midge ordered a cup of white chowder and clam cakes. “Want one?” She pushed a fried clam cake the size of a golf ball across the tray, an edible peace offering.

“Thanks.” Sarah nibbled at the morsel. They ate in silence.

Midge wandered off in search of a bathroom. Ten minutes later when she didn’t return, Sarah located her friend in a clearing at the rear of the clam shack. “What a delight!” Midge gestured with a broad flourish at an expanse of goldenrod in late summer bloom. The field stretched the length of a football field, the mustard colored blossoms covered with thousands of honeybees. A lesser number of bumblebees were interspersed among their smaller cronies.

“Last opportunity for the girls to gorge themselves before the fall dearth,” Midge said, indicating the agile honeybees darting from blossom to blossom. By comparison the stodgy bumblebees seemed to be flying in slow motion.

“Why do you call them girls?”

“Only females collect pollen and forage for nectar.”

“And the males?”

“The drones only exist for one purpose to impregnate a new queen if the old one dies or becomes infertile.”

Sarah surveyed the field, where bees flitted from plant to plant, spawning an audible, throbbing hum. “And where did you learn all this?”

Midge reached out with a poised index finger and stroked the backside of a diminutive insect. The bee hardly paid the woman the slightest interest as it continued gathering food. “My

grandfather was a beekeeper... kept thirty Langstroth hives. I tagged along when he inspected the frames.”

“It will be slim pickings once this goldenrod dries up.” The honeybee Midge had been fondling flitted off further into the sea of gold. “Pepper bush and linden blossoms seldom make it much past late August and all that’s left is sedum, late summer asters, mums and maybe a few woodbine.” Midge took one last, wistful glance at the goldenrod. “My grandfather claimed honeybees were divine messengers... empirical proof for the existence of God.”

The remark caught Sarah off guard, less so because of the peculiar choice of language than the fact that her friend always boasted of being an unapologetic atheist. Overhead a hawk was circling the bay riding an updraft of ocean breezes.

Honeybees were divine messengers... empirical proof for the existence of God. Was Midge Parker talking inscrutable code? Deciphering her intent was like trying to read the soggy tea leaves at the bottom of a fortune teller’s cracked cup.

* * * * *

Later that night Sarah showered and packed her overnight bag. Downstairs she found her husband sitting at the kitchen table. Two rectangular stones and a large kitchen knife were laid out on the table along with a small can of machine oil. “Are you packed?” she asked.

“Threw some stuff together while you were bathing.” Reaching for the can, Rob ran a bead of transparent oil across the surface of an orangey stone then positioned the blade over the gritty surface. “I checked driving directions on the map.”

“There’s GPS on my cell phone.”

He lowered the blade until it was almost flat to the stone and pushed the metal through the slippery slush. “We could lose internet service up in the hill country of central Maine and then what?”

Sarah blinked and felt the breath catch in her throat. “Hadn’t thought of that.”

Rob eased the blade across the stone a half dozen times before flipping the knife and working the opposite side. Testing the edge gingerly with a thumb, he reached for the second stone, which was grayish white and considerably smoother.

He snaked a bead of oil over the new stone and repeated the process, lowering the angle several degrees. “I was in Boston near Copley Square the other day. Coming out of the subway not far from that Gothic church near the public library, I caught sight of a disheveled, fair-skinned guy with thinning blonde hair careening toward me. He was babbling to himself... some unintelligible drivel.”

Rob suddenly laid the knife on the table and stared bleakly at the back of his mottled hands. “When I graduated high school fifty-two years ago, Lars Nilsson, was our high school valedictorian. The blonde-haired brainiac, was a straight-A student and president of the honor society. He won a full academic scholarship to Brandeis...was voted most-likely-to-succeed.” “Over the years I heard rumors that he’d gotten weird... dropped out of college in the second semester of his junior year... was arrested for barbiturates.”

“The deranged fellow you saw in Copley Square...,” Sarah interjected.

Rob nodded. “Somewhere between Brandeis and downtown Boston, Lars Nilsson sailed his perishable dinghy a tad too far from shore and fell off the edge of the known world.”

“And you’re telling me this now because...”

“Maybe you should brace yourself in advance of what you’ll find in Unity.”

“You think my friend’s gone bonkers?”

“Not necessarily,” Rob backed away from the damning prospect. “Perhaps a bit eccentric.” “Regardless,” he cautioned, “you best keep an open mind. The Midge Parker hunkered down in the backwoods of Maine may not even remotely resemble the urbane creature from your college days.”

Finished with the sharpening, Rob began stropping the edge by pulling the blade backwards. Every so many pulls, he reversed direction honing the opposite surface. Satisfied with the look of things, he held a strip of paper between a thumb and index finger and lowered the knife until it made contact with the sheet. The blade glided through the paper effortlessly. “It’s just a weird scenario... the way Midge chucked all her worldly attachments and is travelling incognito... flying under the radar.”

“You think I haven’t considered that?” When reminiscing about her friend, the image of Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, flitted across Sarah’s mind. In later years the author of the Tao had vanished, gone off in seclusion to seek nirvana, contemplate his navel and pursue whatever it was that blissed-out, otherworldly types did in their twilight years.

But Midge Parker was an inveterate, suburban housefrau, a woman who shopped the local mall and visited the hair salon at least once a month. And then, there was that unsettling remark about Moby Dick, when they were sprawled in the surf at Horseneck beach. Was it an ominous metaphor, a subtle hint of impending psychic upheaval?

Rob ran the water in the sink, rinsed the stones clean and patted them dry with a paper towel. “Let’s get some rest. We got a long trip in the morning.”

* * * * *

Traffic north was minimal. Forty-five minutes into the trip, they spotted a Paneras and pulled off the highway. Approaching the entrance to the restaurant, Rob lagged far behind. Sarah noticed that her husband of forty years walked considerably slower these days. Where only a few years earlier the man was still quite limber, now he dawdled along with a shuffling, herky-jerky gait.

Ordering a spinach soufflé, Sarah glanced about the restaurant. Those diners who weren’t preoccupied with their breakfast were fiddling with cell phones, laptops or iPods. Everyone seemed caught up in their insular universe. “Are you familiar with the parable of the two monks?” she asked. In recent months Sarah had developed a fondness for tidbits of Eastern trivia – Zen koans, Sufi sayings, haiku, and Persian aphorisms.

Her husband’s features dissolved in a closed-lipped smile. “Never heard of it.”

She recounted the story, sipped at her tepid coffee then added. “There’s a hidden message, but I’ll be damned if I can wrapped my brain around it.”

“We all carry tons of excess baggage,” Rob ventured. “Trick is figuring what to do with all the mental trash.”

“Yes, that sounds about right.” Eating in silence, they were back on the road in twenty minutes.

How is it that you are still carrying the woman, when I left her at the tea house five minutes ago? Sarah felt her face flush hot with an odd mix of shame and moral indignation.

When exactly had Sarah slipped into the untenable role of younger monk to Midge's unencumbered free spirit? Even back to their college days, Midge always exuded an air of false bravado. No – that wasn't terrible accurate. In her twilight years, having pared away her wants and needs to a bare minimum, the aging widow was travelling light. She would exit this world much as she entered.

How many of Sarah's friends and relatives had squandered their best years, lived mired in regrets and shackled to an unforgiving past? Midge's husband died young. The medical bills upended her sedate, middle class existence. Rather than become embittered, she used the tragedy as an opportunity to reinvent herself, in the late December of her years to embrace act two of the bittersweet adventure. As Hal alluded to in his terse, no-nonsense commentary, most people drown under the suffocating weight of accumulated, excess baggage. Midge side stepped the emotional debris. She went incognito, disappeared into the solitary wilderness of central Maine.

As they sped north the landscape altered, maples and oaks replaced by hawthorne, elm, and occasional bitternut willow. A mile outside of Augusta they pulled into a rest area. Sarah noted that the trash barrels were covered with heavy steel lids; a sign tacked to a pine tree warned visitors against leaving food unattended. There was no mention of bears, but the underlying message was unmistakable. The country had grown desolate. A solitary farm gave way to five miles of empty space, a scraggily, rock-strewn riverbed and forested ravines. Every so often a 'Moose Crossing' highway sign appeared. They sped past a dozen or more signs but never a solitary moose.

Leaving the interstate, they cruised east on a narrow road. The traffic petered away to nothing. The road zigzagged in a roundabout manner so that they had no idea what direction they were actually heading. Thirty minutes later a small sign on a faded, wooden placard tilted at a cockeyed angle plaintively announced 'Unity five miles'.

* * * * *

"The rooming house where Midge lives is just up the street." Sarah was pulling on her walking shoes. They had checked into the bed and breakfast and hauled their luggage into the room. "I thought I might pay her a brief visit before we settle in for the night."

Her husband was staring out the window at a main street no more than three blocks long before fading off into wooded fields. "I'll be here when you get back." After the tedious, drawn-out journey Sarah felt conflicted abandoning her spouse, but the trip was neither vacation nor personal lark. Without further discussion she left the room, cracked the front door and stepped out into the sultry autumn afternoon.

Sarah crossed the street, veered sharply to the left and struck out down the pebbly sidewalk. A group of young girls dressed in cotton skirts that stretched far down to their ankles and sleeves that buttoned at the wrist passed on the far side of the street. Sarah had heard about Amish farms and settlements in the region. She slowed in front of a dilapidated, three-story wooden structure. The slate blue paint was peeling profusely. Checking the tenant directory, Midge Parker's name was prominently displayed three rows down. A wave of weariness bordering on panic shook the legs out from under her. Sarah blew out her cheeks sharply and slumped down on the topmost step.

What if, what if, what if...

What if Midge Parker had experienced some belated midlife crisis and morphed into Lars Nilsson, a drooling, glassy-eyed android who barely recognized her former friend? Sarah waited a few moments until her breathing became steadier, rose and climbed the rickety stairs to the third floor.

“Can I help you?” A massive black woman with a silver ring embedded in her left nostril was staring back at Sarah.

It took her a moment to collect her scattered wits. “I’m looking for Midge Parker.”

“She ain’t lived here for six months.” The woman replied tersely and made a motion to shut the door.

“But her name’s on the directory downstairs.”

“Landlord never bothered to remove it,” the black woman muttered. “That lowlife don’t do much of anything around here.”

“She’s an old friend and I travelled quite a distance to find her.”

“Well, you’re out of luck, cause she’s gone.”

Her weary brain in freefall, Sarah felt the blood throbbing in her ears. “Gone where?”

“Don’t hardly know. You’re the second person come looking for Ms. Parker.” The black woman, whose stony expression never wavered, slipped out into the dimly lit hallway. “About a year ago Midge’s daughter come for a visit, but that was a bust.”

“How so?”

“Seems like the daughter was experiencing major cash flow problems.” The woman sniggered wickedly. “What a mooch!”

“What happened?”

“The woman started a ruckus... using foul language and threatening the mother, but Midge held her ground, and after a while the bitchy daughter went off in a snit.” The black woman seemed to derive great pleasure recounting the story. “The daughter... she never come back.”

“You don’t know where Midge moved?”

“Cleared her stuff out over a snowy weekend in late February and I ain’t seen her since.” The black woman rubbed her fleshy nose with a taut index finger causing the silver hoop to bob up and down. “Felt sorry for your friend... a rickety old lady living alone with hardly no friends and an ungrateful, loud-mouth daughter who come around only looking for a free meal.”

“Midge wasn’t that old.”

“That so?”

“She’s only in her early seventies.”

The black woman scrunched her face as though enjoying a private joke. “My grandmother just turned sixty-two so your buddy ain’t no spring chicken.” She stared at her pudgy fingers. “Last winter before I moved here I was living down the hallway and took sick with the flu. Couldn’t attend any of my classes over at the college. Midge Parker brought me soup and sandwiches every day until I was well enough to fend for myself.”

“What are you studying?”

“Conservation Law. Be getting my degree in June.”

“Well that’s nice!” Sarah tried to imagine the burly black woman with the slangy speech gussied up in a park ranger’s uniform, a broad-brimmed hat tilted at a jaunty angle over the squat face. Would they allow her the luxury of the nose ring or would the exotic jewelry be deemed politically incorrect?

“When I took sick, Midge come by every day around noon,” The black woman continued, “with hot food. Wouldn’t take a freakin’ cent for the groceries. Sometimes that old woman talked in circles... all manner of silly-ass gobbledygook that didn’t hardly make no sense. But then... I dunno.

“What did you talk about, when she came to visit?”

“Nothin’ special. Mostly she talked books.”

“Books?”

“Moby Dick... she liked that one the best.”

“So she told you about the whale.”

“No, she hardly never mentioned the whale but once or twice. She told me how Queequeg got deathly sick after going down in the hold to find the oil leak. The harpooner feared dying at sea so he had the ship’s carpenter build a coffin, but then the fever broke and he got well. When the whale smashed the boat all to pieces, Queequeg drowned but Ishmael climbed into the coffin and floated away to safety.”

The black woman smiled and nodded a nappy head peppered with cornrow braids emphatically. “Midge Parker sure was nice,” she reminisced.

Midge Parker certainly was a benevolent if somewhat cryptic creature, and when Sarah’s odyssey was over, she would have travelled eight hundred desultory miles round trip to learn that unremarkable truth. She made a motion to turn away, but the black woman suddenly grabbed her wrist with both hands. Her fleshy lips screwed up in an attitude of intense deliberation. “Just remembered somethin’.”

* * * * *

“So, tell me,” Rob insisted, “how you finally hunted Midge Parker down?” They were travelling south on the Route 95 interstate just north of the New Hampshire state line.

“As I was leaving the rooming house, the black woman remembered that Midge volunteered at the Unity Public Library.” Up ahead a bridge spanning the Piscataqua River connecting Portsmouth with Kittery came into view. “The reference librarian had taken her mother in to live with them when the older woman took sick with a stroke. The mother hung on a couple of years in failing health. After the funeral the family was looking to rent out the in-law apartment, and because Midge seemed such a dependable sort, they offered it to her.”

“It’s just a single room with bathroom and shower, but Midge has kitchen privileges so she can cook and store food.” “Not,” Sarah added as a giddy afterthought, “that she would ever take advantage. The woman always ate like a bird.”

Rob shook his head and smiled wistfully. “If the black girl hadn’t remembered that Midge volunteered at the library, the trip would have been for not.” “She still drive that Volvo?”

Sarah shook her head. “Sold it and bought a three-speed bike with a straw basket strapped to the handlebars.” They passed a meadow overgrown with white trillium. “She had a falling out with her daughter. Elsa wanted a cash advance on her inheritance, but Midge told the ingrate to wait until her name appeared in the obituaries.”

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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 with her free time now she ain't racing?"

"With the money from the insurance settlement she doesn't really have to work."

Mary Beth turned professional athlete 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 fashions 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 led 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 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 shrilled 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 recognizing 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 visit his sister, Mrs. Holyfield came into the room. She sat quietly on the edge of the bed with the latest issue of The Audubon Society magazine nesting 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 tidbits from the various birding magazines and newsletters she subscribed to.

Familiar with her melodramatic pronouncements, Nicholas stared at his mother with a dumb expression. "Their bodies become feathery furnaces, internal combustion systems to ward off 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 ten 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 five, perhaps only three, 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 eyes 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 as 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 prowess, 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, creating 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 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 dishwater-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, that 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 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.

Nicholas went out onto the porch to say goodbye to Elliot. A gooey 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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A Work in Progress

Glancing up from an inch-thick pile of invoices on her desk, Tawana Saunders recognized the middle aged fellow standing in the doorway as a reporter with the Brandenburg Gazette. Back in April, he had written a few paragraphs on the ShopRite Supermarket when they donated food to the local soup kitchen on the south side of town.

"Eudora Grossberg working today?" the reporter asked.

Peering over the reporter's shoulder at an oblique angle, Tawana could see the beanpole of a girl stuffing butternut squash in a plastic bag. Favoring dark-framed glasses that were forever sliding down on the bridge of her narrow nose, she reminded Tawana of the rubber-necked Olive Oil in the old Popeye cartoons. And then there were the wrinkled cotton blouses haphazardly thrown together with frumpy, mismatched skirts that looked like they were bought, sight unseen, off the bargain rack at a consignment shop. Eudora Grossberg was a grotesque—a physical train wreck of a woman with no polish or pizzazz. "Checkout aisle three... she's bagging groceries."

He fished a fountain pen and small pad from a shirt pocket. "Mind if I borrow her for ten minutes?"

The black woman pushed her seat away from the desk. "For what purpose?"

"We received a letter from the senior editor of the Yale Review. They published one of her short stories in their hoity-toity literary quarterly this past February, and now the piece is being anthologized. There may even be a book deal in the works." The reporter was noticeably pleased at the young grocery clerk's good fortune. "Our newspaper wants to do an article in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday edition on a local, up-and-coming fiction writer."

“Yes, I don’t see why not. Spend as much time as you need.”

The reporter made a motion to leave but turned back. “Do you know how many unsolicited manuscripts the Yale Review receives in the course of a month?” Tawana shook her head. “Hundreds if not thousands, and that includes a smattering of established writers with national name recognition.”

“And they chose our own Eudora.”

“Chose her twice - once when they printed the story and a second time when the editorial staff recommended it to the anthology.”

When the man left the office, Tawana craned her neck staring up over the flat panel computer screen. The reporter was gibber-jabbering away with the lanky girl who never even bothered to pause from sorting the customer’s groceries as she fielded his questions. Eudora positioned a bulky, twenty-five pound bag of Purina dog food on the bottom rack of the metal cart along with a jumbo pack of toddler diapers. Fifteen minutes later Tawana looked up again. The reporter was gone. Eudora had shifted over to aisle five, where an older cashier, who was painfully slow and prone to mood swings, was ringing up an order.

By noon everyone in the store knew about the reporter and Eudora’s short story, but that wasn’t the girl’s doing. Gail Crowley, the bigmouth gossip from customer service, collared the reported as he was leaving and extracted a blow-by-blow description of what was going on. “We got a regular Shakespeare among us!” the tubby blonde crowed. Gail, who probably hadn’t read anything more challenging than the *National Inquirer* in the last dozen years, waddled off to tell the workers in fresh produce about Eudora’s newfound celebrity status.

Back in her office, Tawana checked her calendar. In the morning, she had to be in district court. A seventeen year-old Negro was caught shoplifting the week before Thanksgiving. At his arraignment, he pled ‘no contest’. An incorrigible thug, it was his sixth offense, and Tawana had to appear in court Tuesday morning representing the market as plaintiff. The previous month the perpetrator had been a fourteen year-old Caucasian, a bleary-eyed, latchkey brat from one of the inner city subsidized housing projects. Before that, an unwed Latina on AFDC. Driven by poverty, stupidity and enlightened self-interest, they came at you from multiple directions, in all ethnic varieties, sexes, shapes and colors.

In the parking lot, two plain clothes detectives nabbed Reginald Owens as he was unlocking a metallic blue Cavalier sedan. They handcuffed him and threw the black youth in the back of an unmarked police car but not before relieving him of his stash of stolen meats. A small crowd gathered, watching from a discrete distance.

A black kid ripping off fillet mignon in the meat department - what must they be thinking? The fourteen year old boy, who was caught in a similar bind in October, became so unhinged when the police collared him that he wet his pants. The urine dribbled down the front of his dungarees reaching to the cuff. That was a good thing. At least, at some primitive level, the under-aged crook grasped the severity of his predicament. Reginald Owens was too thick-skinned. When the cops pulled him aside, he smirked brazenly and affected the hollow-eyed indifference of a hardened felon.

* * * * *

“Congratulations!” As she was leaving work for the day, Tawana bumped into Eudora running down stray grocery carts in the ShopRite parking lot.

“It’s no big deal.” She jabbed at the bridge of her glasses with a taut index finger, pushing the frame up on her nose, but they immediately careened back down coming to rest at a cockeyed angle.

A grocery cart began rolling away and Tawana positioned it back in the stack. “What’s your short story about?”

“It’s creative fiction,” the girl replied.

“Yes, I understand, but where do you get your ideas?”

Eudora stared at the black woman then waved her bony hands in the air. “That’s a bit hard to explain.” She leaned heavily into the train of stacked shopping carts that ran a good twenty deep and inched the mass forward toward the front of the store.

Tawana felt her face flush hot. Of course Eudora would conveniently sidestep both questions. Properly understood, creative fiction was meant to be read not served up like a platter of exotic pastries at a coffee klatch. “I just read a wonderful book.” For some inexplicable reason, the store manager was tripping over her words. “Maya Angelou’s collected poems.”

By way of response, Eudora snorted making a disagreeable sound. “You don’t like her poetry?”

The unlovely girl studied her bony hands which were chapped and raw from the cold. “Robert Hayden... now there’s a decent poet.”

“Never heard of him,” Tawana replied.

Eudora swallowed and her Adam’s apple bobbed up and down in typical Olive Oil fashion. “Hayden wrote a poem, *Those Winter Sundays*.” Lowering her eyes, she recited the poem from beginning to end in a lilting singsong cadence.

*Sundays too my father got up early
And put his clothes on
in the blueblack cold,...*

When the poem was done, she raised her head and noted, “A poet could spend a life time laboring at his craft and never create anything quite so perfect.”

A flurry of icy wind caught up a pile of dead leaves and sent them swirling in a brittle, orangey funnel. The poem was devastatingly beautiful. Tawana could feel her heart pounding in her ears. “Yes, that was quite amazing.”

A freckle faced boy and his mother passed by with a load of groceries, mostly junk food - potato chips, frozen pizzas, ice cream, three quarts of cream soda plus a carton of cigarettes. Tawana had a compulsive habit of psychoanalyzing customers by their purchases. “I’ve wanted to write something for quite a while but don’t seem to get anywhere.”

Eudora smiled opaquely. “And what’s the something you want to get down on paper?”

“That’s the problem,” Tawana replied with an embarrassed frown. “Perhaps I should join a local writers’ group.”

“In all likelihood, you’ll end up with some MFA graduate student.” The thin girl pulled her collar up around her throat, but the flimsy coat was of the early fall variety and much too thin for a blustery December. “A snooty misogynist, who filters your prose through his male chauvinist biases.”

Eudora collected the shopping cart that the freckle faced boy had abandoned, adding it to her collection and pushed off toward the front of the building. “Bring me a few pages of your writing and I’ll take a look at it.”

“Yes, I’d appreciate that.” She watched the girl struggling with the absurdly long wagon train and had to stifle an impulse to help Eudora negotiate the carts toward the front of the building. But then, store managers were obligated to maintain a certain professional decorum.

* * * * *

Later that night, Tawana told her husband, Ellis, about the Brandenburg Gazette reporter and her odd encounter with Eudora in the ShopRite Supermarket parking lot. “If she’s so bright, how come the woman’s bagging groceries?”

Déjà vu. Tawana had asked herself the very same question. By assuming an entry level position and showing no inclination to improve her circumstances at the supermarket, Eudora Grossberg had effectively turned the American dream upside down. The girl was hardworking and honest; she got along well with coworkers and scrupulously avoided the endless, petty gossip and intrigues endemic to such businesses.

A low profile oddball, Eudora never flaunted her eccentricities. She brought her lunch plus a piece of fruit to work in a brown paper bag and drank coffee from a thermos rather than indulge herself with a café mocha, cappuccino or any of the Green Mountain deluxe blends they sold by the cup at the deli counter. The girl seemed intent on earning the least amount of money possible while subsisting on a pauper’s salary.

Was it a masochistic act of penance? Denial and self-flagellation worked well for medieval nuns and half-naked religious zealots contemplating their navels in Himalayan caves, but at the ShopRite Supermarket such austerity was neither fashionable nor chic.

Tawana knew friends from college who were active in social causes. The class valedictorian ran off and joined the Peace Corps where he served in Kenya for a year and a half doing God-knows-what. Then he returned from the Dark Continent, enrolled in law school and later earned a fortune as a six-figure ambulance chaser in the medical malpractice racket. The last time they met at an alumnus function there was no more talk about hybrid, high-yield grains or crop irrigation systems in underdeveloped, third world countries. The social activist had morphed into an insatiable braggart with an equally revolting ego to match.

“That lovely poem Dora recited from memory... there were well over a dozen stanzas.”

“Impressive!” Her husband chuckled. “More to the point, how are you doing with your writing?”

“What writing?” Tawana rolled her eyes. “I’ve got an outline that’s little more than a mishmash of fragmented ideas - three pages that go absolutely nowhere.” Tawana had gotten the notion into her head that she would write a book. Something with an ethnic flavor—spunky black woman climbs the corporate ladder to claim her niche in the American business community. Horatio Alger with an Afro-American, chick-lit twist.

Think wonders, shit blunders.

A great idea in principle, her manuscript never emerged from the embryonic drawing board. For all her determination, Tawana Saunders couldn’t finesse the project off the ground. Chalk it up to writer’s block, brain freeze, anticipatory fright—she began the literary undertaking eight months earlier and had absolutely nothing to show for it except a new computer with all the fancy bells and whistles.

In the den she sat down at the computer and Googled Robert Hayden. Yes, there it was—the sublimely precious pearl-of-a-poem Eudora shared with her in the frigid parking lot.

*Sundays too my father got up early
And put his clothes on
in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather
made banked fires blaze.
No one ever thanked him.*

*I'd wake and hear the cold, splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,
speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
Of love's austere and lonely offices?*

Tawana read the poem through a second time and then a third. Yes, it was a masterpiece—a *cri de coeur* as poignant and resonant as any full-length novel. A simple and unadorned poem written by an unassuming black man over half a century ago! No flowery rhetoric or purple prose, just a sixteen line barrage of innate wisdom.

“That lovely poem Eudora Grossberg recited... I just found it on the internet.” Tawana was lying in bed next to her husband. “The imagery was so beautiful it took my breath away.”

“That’s nice.” Ellis had been fading off to sleep.

“A casual reader would never imagine that an Afro-American had written the poem.”

“Your point?”

“Robert Hayden came from the ghetto. His parents fought constantly throughout his childhood.”

“How do you know all this?”

“After finding the poem, I researched his bio on the internet.”

Throughout childhood, the poet's home was filled with the ‘chronic angers’ and violence he hinted at in his poems. Nearsighted and short of stature, Hayden was ostracized by his peers at school and suffered debilitating bouts of depression.

“From such a life he fashioned exquisite poetry.” In the street a dog barked setting off a cacophony of yips and yaps as far as several streets away. There were other considerations Tawana meant to share with her husband, but a snuffling sound followed by the man’s steady breathing indicated Ellis had drifted off to sleep.

*What did I know, what did I know
Of love's austere and lonely offices?*

What did it take to write a sentence half that beautiful?

Perhaps she would consult Eudora Grossberg, who dressed like a bag lady and chased down runaway shopping carts in the ShopRite Supermarket parking lot. Yes, she must make a mental note to do just that. No, better to get up out of bed right this very minute and scribble a brief reminder - something, anything to jog her memory so that in the morning when she was rushing about getting her daughter's breakfast together, feeding the dog, washing the early morning dishes ...

Before she could put a period to the sentence, Tawana Saunders had slid off the shelf of consciousness and joined her husband in sleep.

* * * * *

In the morning, Tawana reviewed work schedules for the coming week. Myra Dobbins from the dairy department was going out on maternity leave, and one of the meat cutters slashed a finger to the bone the previous Wednesday trimming a pot roast. When Eudora Grossberg took coffee break at ten forty-five, the store manager slipped the girl a small manila folder. "Some recent writing. Mostly character sketches and dialogue."

Eudora took the folder and laid it on the table next to her food. "Give me a day or two."

"One question." The store manager smoothed the front of her dress with the flat of her hands. "You are obviously an intelligent woman. There are conservatively a dozen positions here at the market you'd qualify for, if you wanted to earn a bit more money."

"And if I didn't know any better," Eudora replied unscrewing the cap on her thermos, "I might imagine you playing Henry Higgins to my Liza Doolittle." There was no trace of resentment in her tone. The My Fair Lady quip was self-mocking.

Tawana chuckled and shook her head. "Touché. I was totally out of place."

"No offense taken."

Tawana sat down on the chair next to her. "I hunted down the Hayden poem on the internet."

Eudora crooked her head to one side and winked at the store manager, a conspiratorial gesture. "Doesn't get much better than that."

"No, it certainly doesn't."

* * * * *

Where's Eudora?" Tawana asked early Monday morning.

"Called out sick," Gail said. "She's got that twenty-four hour bug that's going around. Poor kid! Couldn't stop coughing in the message she left on the answering machine." She leaned over the counter. "Did you read that article about her in the Sunday paper?"

"Yes, it was quite amazing," Tawana replied. A New York literary agent had noticed Eudora Grossberg's story when it first appeared in the Yale Review and, on the merits of the single work, offered her a book deal. A collection of short stories and poetry was scheduled for release in the spring. "Where does Eudora live?"

"Buckley Place." Lois replied.

Tawana drummed her fingers on the Formica counter. "That old mill complex that was renovated into apartments?"

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Over by the railroad tracks, Buckley Place was a grimy, low-rent residence, mostly tiny efficiency apartments. Tawana went back to her office, closed the door and called Eudora at the number listed in her personnel file. An answering machine picked up. She replaced the receiver on the phone without leaving a message. Around four in the afternoon, she made her way to the deli counter. “What are the soups?”

“Beef barley and chicken escarole,” the man behind the counter replied.

“Give me a bowl of each.”

Tawana left work early and drove across town to Buckley Place and parked her Toyota Celica in a lot marked ‘visitor parking’. The building, which had been given a cosmetic face lift only a few years earlier, already exuded a down-at-the-heels shabbiness. The lobby was dimly lit making it next to impossible to read the tenant directory.

“Got a cigarette?” Like an apparition from the nether world, a disheveled, middle-aged man with a lumpy, disfigured nose lurched out from an open doorway. He smelled of rancid body odor and his shirt pocket was torn away in a useless flap.

“Don’t smoke.” Tawana edged away and, while still eyeing the man, groped for the doorknob leading back out into the street.

“Who’re you looking for?” The fellow’s eyes, bulgy and jaundiced, never strayed from her face.

Tawana took a tentative step backwards but the queer fellow immediately closed the gap and was hovering so close she could feel his sour breath on her cheek. “Eudora Grossberg,” she mumbled still fumbling for the illusive doorknob. “I brought her some soup.”

The man swayed back and forth as though in a drug-induced stupor. “Dora? She’s up in 3B.” Turning away, he hurried to the far end of the foyer and jabbed the elevator button several times. “Dora’s sick bad... threw up twice last night. Can’t keep nothin’ down.”

When the elevator door opened, the strange fellow stumbled in and held the door open for her. “Say, you wouldn’t have a cigarette to spare? I’m just about crapping my pants for a butt.”

Tawana was feeling light headed. “You already asked me a moment ago, and I told you I don’t smoke.”

Looking muddled, the man scratched an earlobe. “Funny, I don’t remember.”

The carpet on the third floor landing was torn and one of the fluorescent lights recessed into the ceiling flickered erratically. He shambled down the unheated hallway a short distance and knocked at a door.

“Who’s there?”

“Just me,” the fellow replied, “and some fancy-shmancy lady. She didn’t offer no name and I didn’t ask.”

The door opened. Dressed in flannel pajamas and bedroom slippers, Eudora Grossberg squinted myopically out at them. “Heard you were sick so I brought fresh soup from the market.”

If Eudora was shocked to see the store manager standing in the dank hallway, she didn’t show it. “How sweet! Sure, come in.” She held the door wide, and the odd fellow trailed Tawana into the efficiency apartment, flopping down on a chair near the window. “I see you’ve met Dennis.”

The man with the shapeless nose grinned sheepishly, pushing his bottom lip out in a perverse caricature of a smile. “So how you doing?” Tawana asked.

“Hungry as hell.” Eudora removed a couple of spoons and bowls from a cupboard, poured a generous portion of chicken escarole into each, handing one to Dennis. They ate in total

silence. When the soup was gone, Eudora had a mild coughing fit then turned to the man with the unflattering nose. “You didn’t jump out in the hallway and scare Mrs. Saunders, did you, Dennis?”

“Oh no,” he blustered. “Didn’t do no such thing!”

“Actually, he was quite polite,” Tawana protested. “Even told me what apartment you lived in and escorted me up here like a perfect gentleman.” Dennis sat up straighter in his chair and puffed out his lower lip, which was still moist from the soup. Then he rose and, without saying goodbye, wandered out of the apartment leaving the door wide open.

Eudora shut the door. “Dennis, he’s a little ...”

“Yes, I can see that,” Tawana said.

“I had a chance to read through your material.” She lifted the manila folder off a shelf and handed it back to the black woman. “From a technical standpoint, the writing is solid, but unfortunately the author is among the missing.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.” “About the Robert Hayden poem,” Tawana continued. “It took my breath away.”

Eudora put the soup in the refrigerator and rinsed out the bowls. “That visceral quality ... it’s what’s missing in your writing.”

“So what do you suggest?”

Eudora sat down on the edge of the bed. “Stop playing it safe. Write from your private anguish, confusion and darkest fears.”

“Like Hayden does.”

“It’s a good place to start,” Eudora confirmed.”

The apartment was tiny. The bedroom and kitchen merged into one living space with a closet and claustrophobic bathroom near the rear wall. By the window a computer rested on a table. It was a Windows 98 model, a prehistoric relic that backed up off old-fashioned plastic diskettes and couldn’t support any of the sophisticated thirty-two bit software programs that had emerged in recent years. The supermarket had shifted over to the Microsoft XP software in two thousand six and junked all the outmoded machines. Next month they would switch again to the Vista operating system - more elaborate gadgetry, bells and whistles.

“We’re all works in progress.” Eudora Grossberg was sitting up on the center of the bed now in a modified lotus position. There was something transcendently beautiful about the awkward, introverted woman.

Works in progress. Sadly, not all mortal creatures turn out all that well. A fleeting image of a defiant Reginald Owens flitted across her mind. A minute passed. Dennis returned with a fresh cigarette. He sat down at the kitchen table and smoked voraciously, discarding the burnt ash into an empty coffee cup. “This cigarette’s got menthol,” Dennis noted. “I don’t like menthol, cause it tickles my tongue.”

“I want to apologize again for my *faux pas*—the My Fair Lady gaff. Who the hell am I, an upwardly mobile black woman, telling you or anyone else for that matter what the hell to do with their life?”

Eudora exploded in a spastic coughing fit. When it was done and her breathing back under control, she blew her nose and lay prone, staring up at the ceiling. “Myra Dobbins is in her eighth month and fat as a whale,” Eudora spoke in a hoarse, nasally tone. “I’d like a crack at her job unless it’s already promised to someone else.”

Dennis took a final drag on the stumpy, mentholated cigarette. He tossed what little was left of the butt into the cup, rose and went off to panhandle another smoke. “The job is yours.”

Tawana also got up to leave. "I'll post the position as tentatively filled first thing in the morning." She placed a hand on the sick woman's shoulder. "You don't look so hot, Dora. Take the rest of the week off."

Later at home, Tawana sat in front of her fancy new computer staring at an empty white canvas. What was it Eudora Grossberg suggested? Stop playing it safe. Write from your private anguish, confusion and darkest fears.

An hour later Tawana's daughter wandered into the room. "What are you doing?"

"Writing the great American novel."

The girl pointed dismissively at the screen. "All you got is three lousy paragraphs."

Tawana leaned over and brushed the girl's ebony cheek with her lips. "Consider it a work in progress."

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Hieronymus Bosch's American Landscape

Bethany Glaspell approached the first-ever meeting with her great uncle much as a cat burglar might plan his next heist, slipping away surreptitiously and telling neither friend nor family her intentions. She placed the long distance call late Thursday afternoon when no one was home; she even bought her plane ticket on the sly. Now the twenty-five-year-old woman with the frizzy auburn hair and hazel eyes was sitting in a rental car in the middle of the woods just outside Rehoboth, Massachusetts, staring down a badly rutted, gravel driveway that emptied out alongside a cedar-shingled farmhouse.

Forty-two years - that's how long it had been since anyone in the family had seen or heard from the reclusive, Great-uncle Vern. As a young man, he joined the army late August following high school graduation, returning from the jungles of Vietnam three years and ninety-four days later with a sucking chest wound from a Viet Cong bullet and Hmong bride married on a drunken whim a month earlier. Crackpot, kook, weirdo, deviant, social misfit - the newly-minted civilian couldn't hold a job or get along with much of anyone; within the year and to the family's great relief, Uncle Vern and his not-so-new bride promptly moved away. Far away!

Now the computer software firm Bethany worked for was running training seminars in the Boston area, teaching social service personnel a new web-based program. "How many days you gonna be in town?" Uncle Vern inquired in a lumpy voice, when it finally registered who was calling.

Her original intent was to stay at a motel in the Boston area. "A couple of days, that's all," Bethany lied. The seminar extended all week with additional support services straight through the weekend, but she wanted to see how the first visit went before committing to anything long term.

"How's my sister?"

"Grandma Helen had a stroke and died last October."

"Well, that's too bad. I didn't know she married much less had any kids, so this all comes as a bit of a shock." He cleared his throat and paused to collect his thoughts. "We got two empty bedrooms since the kids left. You could stay with us."

"I wouldn't want to impose."

"It's no problem." The uncle, who no one had seen or heard from in forty-plus years, brushed the tenuous objection aside. "From Logan Airport just hop on the southeast expressway and... "

A scruffy tabby cat eyed Bethany warily as the girl ascended the rickety porch. The bell was broken but the front door was unlocked. The odor of ginger, garlic, soy and other unrecognizable oriental spices filtered through the screen door.. "Hello, is anyone home?" She heard someone moving about in the interior of the home. "Helloooo!"

Feet were shuffling toward the interior of the house and shortly an elderly, flat-faced Asian woman was staring out at the visitor through the wire mesh on the screen door. "Bethany?" The gaunt woman didn't seem particularly welcoming.

"Yes."

"Your uncle is in the back yard." She pointed to a narrow path lined with slate-colored flagstones leading to the rear of the house. There was no formal greeting - no wasted effort, gratuitous hugs or small talk. A smallish chicken craned its scrawny neck and peeked curiously at the interloper as Bethany passed a patch of goldenrod. The bird clucked its disapproval then began pecking randomly at the clayey earth. In the back yard, an older man wearing a plaid flannel shirt and dungarees sat on a wooden bench alternately flexing the fingers of his right hand and rubbing the wrist with his left. He looked up when the girl appeared. "Hello there."

"Uncle Vern?"

"Just finished milking the cow." He indicated a dilapidated shed a hundred feet away alongside a massive apple tree loaded with ripe fruit, before resuming where he left off massaging his bony wrist. "Fingers hurt... arthritis. But at least there's plenty of fresh milk for cereal and whatnot." A plastic milk pale three-quarters full rested on a blue-gray flagstone.

Bethany was at a loss for words. The man seemed even less engaging than his close-lipped wife.

"Gotta bed down the chickens for the night before the coyotes make short shrift of the brainless birds." Only now did Bethany notice the odd assortment of Barred Plymouth rock hens, Rhode Island Reds and White Leghorns meandering about the weed-choked lawn.

He stroked his unshaven face thoughtfully then rose to his feet stiffly and, as if on cue, the feathered flock followed him in the direction of a sturdy, if somewhat jury-rigged plywood coop. "Each of the dull-witted critters - even in the same breed - has a different personality and temperament. Some birds are quite aggressive while others, like the rock hens, tend to be more laid back, curious and easygoing."

Bethany traipsed at a distance behind the bowlegged man and watched as he shoed the skittish birds into the coop, securing the gate behind them. "Red-tailed fox broke in over the summer and made a mess of things," he noted in his clipped speech. "Wanna meet Freda?"

"Your wife?"

"The cow," he corrected, taking no offense.

Who ever heard of a Hmong named Freda? Bethany felt her face flush hot."Yes, of course."

In the shed a small, tan cow with graceful legs and creamy white markings around her eyes and muzzle, was munching fresh fodder. "She's a real classy lady. Calm, mellow... don't hardly give me or the missus no grief." The shed smelled of fresh manure but the odor was mild and inoffensive.

"I could have gone with a Dutch Belted, Ayrshire, Guernsey or Dexter, but, to my mind, that Jersey was a sensible choice." Uncle Vern nodded his grizzled head approvingly. "Holsteins go upwards of twelve hundred pounds, consume a heck of a lot more fodder and the milk ain't nearly as rich." He stared thoughtfully at the docile cow. "Now this here Jersey might seem a tad on the small side, but she produces thirty pounds of high-fat milk weekly."

"What do you do with it?"

"Make our own butter, cheeses, cream and yoghurt. What we can't use, we barter away to neighbors." Uncle Vern slapped the cow on the rump sending up a swarm of tiny black flies. "Where's your business meeting tomorrow?"

"Braxton."

They retraced their steps back out into the fresh air. "Braxton... ain't that a rough section?"

"No, I don't think so." In truth, Bethany didn't know a thing about the city just south of Boston. The girl logically assumed that it was a sedate suburb of the metropolitan area.

Her uncle shrugged. "Let's get you settled and then we can see about supper." The sun was setting over the tops of the knotty pines, the temperature becoming downright chilly as the old man with the arthritic hands led the way back toward the farmhouse.

Uncle Vern's wife was Houa, which meant 'cloud' in the Hmong dialect. In her late sixties, the coppery-skinned woman must have been a beauty in her day. "They're not our birds," she said, lowering a platter of cordon bleu on the supper table. "The chickens you saw out back are layers not dual purpose."

Dual purpose - Uncle Vern's wife worried that Bethany might be offended if she thought they slaughtered the fowl on her account. There were no outward displays of affection between husband and wife. Each shifted about comfortably in their own skin. The frail tabby that Bethany had noticed earlier lay curled up on a braided rug along with a blonde poodle. As Bethany helped herself to mashed potatoes and green beans, a weirdly phantasmagoric thought flitted across her brain: Uncle Vern was unaware that his sister died the previous year. That being the case, he was also ignorant of the fact that Bethany's maternal grandmother married and divorced four times! Uncle Vern, the mentally unstable crackpot, managed to stay married to the same woman across four decades. All his faults and shortcomings taken aside, that tidbit of miscellaneous trivia had to count for something!

Aunt Houa pointed at a mound of butter in a porcelain saucer. "Homemade... we churn it ourselves by hand." Bethany bit into a flaky roll slathered with the ivory spread courtesy of Freda, the delicate-legged Jersey hunkered down in the cozy shed. "How did you find us?" Houa asked.

"A friend, who works at the IRS," Bethany explained, "ran Uncle Vern's name along with his date of birth through their database."

After the meal Uncle Vern placed some moist dog food in a dish and cut it up into bite-sized portions, then flopped down on the throw rug next to the poodle. "This one here," he indicated the dog "is getting absentminded. Some days he can't properly remember what dinner's all about, so we have to jog his memory." The man gently pried the dog's jaws open and placed a morsel of food on his tongue. The sensation brought the animal to life, and he sat up on his hind legs now, as Uncle Vern placed a second sliver on his tongue.

"We knew something was wrong," Houa continued, "because the pooch sat for hours at the back door, not where it opens but close by the hinges."

"He couldn't remember which way the door opened," Bethany offered, "or how to find his way outside?"

Houa nodded. "Other times he became frightened and barked for no apparent reason," the Asian woman continued. "We figured he was confused... didn't know where he was anymore."

"Most times he's okay, though we don't let him out much unless he's tethered." Uncle Vern offered the dog a drink from a plastic bowl before feeding him what little remained of the food. "Of course, he can't hardly see nothin' what with the cataracts."

Houa brought the empty dishes to the sink. "I tell you uncle," she quipped, "that someday I'll get flaky like the dog, and he will have to cut my food up and feed me by hand."

"Fat chance," The older man replied, shaking his head emphatically. "Only in your dreams!"

"Mattress ain't lumpy, is it?" Uncle Vern lumbered upstairs around nine o'clock after Bethany had settled under the covers.

"No, it's quite comfortable." Actually, the bed sagged like a hammock, and she could feel several coiled springs that had given up the ghost on the right side near the headboard.

The man chose a straight-backed chair in the far corner of the room and began speaking fervently in hushed tones as though what he had to say represented the continuation of a conversation already in progress. "During the war, my platoon came ashore to reinforce a firebase in the Mekong Delta near Soc Trang. Vietcong were waiting for us with a pair of thirty-caliber machine guns... caught our troops in a crossfire. It was a massacre."

"That's when you got shot?"

"Yeah, but my injury was no big deal. The bullet cauterized the blood vessels as it passed through the flesh and didn't bleed much. Except for the collapsed lung, I was pretty stable. A lot of my buddies - the ones that survived - were a hell of a lot worse off."

"I got triaged at a MASH unit near the firebase before being transported to a naval hospital in Yokosuka, Japan, where they re-inflated the lung and removed shrapnel."

"What about Houa?"

"We were already married several months. As soon as I arrived stateside, I sent her a one-way ticket and brought her to San Francisco." Uncle Vern fell silent. Bethany could see the vague outline of the old man sitting slumped over in the chair, his gnarled, arthritic hands resting on his knees. "In Yokosuka, I had one of the hospital corpsmen bring me a copy of the Stars and Stripes military newspaper. It featured a lengthy account of the ambush in the Mekong Delta."

"The battle where you were hurt?"

The old man's head bobbed up and down in the darkened corner. "The military brass reported the ambush exactly as it happened with one slight difference: the newspaper stated that

we caught the enemy unawares, and the communists had to pull back after suffering horrific casualties."

Bethany felt her brain go numb. "They turned everything upside down."

"Upside down, topsy-turvy, inside out... every other which way but how the events actually unfolded in the real world." The man rose to his feet. "Good night, Bethany."

"Goodnight, Uncle Vern."

In the morning, Houa was sitting at the kitchen table sipping herbal tea. She offered Bethany breakfast, but the girl wanted to get on the road. As she left the house, she noticed the chickens foraging in the side yard. The tabby was lounging on a rock; the senile poodle who couldn't remember to feed himself was tethered to a rope with a water bowl within easy reach.

The southern New England countryside was stunning, fall foliage turning every shade of pastel earth color from rust through bright yellow and orangey-red. She cruised past postcard-perfect farms where silos, tractors and hay ricks were scattered about. Cattle grazed in fenced-off fields. A riding academy with a mix of horses and smaller ponies roaming a spacious paddock loomed directly ahead.

The route to Braxton was uncomplicated. Ten miles due east, the narrow, two-lane road she was traveling bisected the interstate. From there she traveled north another twenty miles, exiting onto a smaller roadway. Only when she reached the outskirts of Braxton did the bucolic landscape noticeably fade. Reaching the gritty downtown area, Bethany spotted a parking garage. Locating an empty space on the third level, she rode the elevator down to the street.

Downtown Braxton resembled a third-world, banana republic.

There were few Caucasians and the people she passed were, for the most part, poorly dressed and clearly in no hurry to get wherever they were going. Many buildings were boarded up or plastered with neon orange signs from the building inspector indicating the structures had been condemned. Every so many feet the sidewalk was torn up with patches of concrete strewn in the gutter. None of the residents looked like they had two nickels to rub together much less a plan, to better themselves.

Horatio Alger was not an option.

Where would money come from to make repairs? Certainly not from the hardscrabble residents milling about downtown Braxton. Directly across the street and sandwiched between two scorched structures that looked like they had been set ablaze for the insurance money, stood a brand new courthouse. An architectural anomaly, the municipal building was lavish in the extreme. Braxton possessed resources sufficient to finance a multi-million-dollar, state-of-the-art courthouse and nothing more.

Bethany located the dowdy, social services office two blocks down.

"Why is the community so..." Bethany wasn't quite sure how to finish the sentence.

"Excuse me?" The thickset woman she was addressing was director of a local food bank.

"Down at the heels," Bethany ventured.

The food bank director stared at her icily. "The country is in a recession, if you hadn't noticed."

Bethany glanced at the director's name tag: Marisol Gonzales. The Hispanic woman had probably misconstrued the remark as a personal slur and now there was no way to make amends.

On the other hand, why should she?

None of the minorities Bethany passed in the street looked like they were gainfully employed. Many jibber-jabbered amongst themselves in staccato, rapid-fire Spanish. Those illegal aliens who *did* work, were probably employed in a murky 'underground economy', paying no federal taxes or social security. Bethany felt her face flush hot as an iron poker held over an open flame and bristled at the notion of apologizing to the fastidious food bank director.

After the training session wound down around four in the afternoon, Bethany hurried back to the garage. Exiting onto a one way street, she quickly became disoriented and pulled over in the parking lot of a Dunkin' Donuts. Everybody in the place looked like they were on welfare or AFDC or just escaped from prison or a loony bin or were receiving a disability check because they exhibited dull normal intelligence. "Where's Laurel Avenue from here?"

The black woman she was addressing stared impassively into space as though Bethany had requested a description of quantum physics. "Dunno," the girl mumbled.

Back in the parking lot, a police siren caterwauled somewhere in the distance. A teenage girl in her third trimester waddled past. Bethany retreated to the safe haven of her car. Two blocks up she pulled into a liquor store with wrought iron bars on windows and doors. A malignant panic metastasizing in her chest, it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep her voice from breaking. "Laurel Avenue... where is it from here?"

"Easiest thing in world!" A short, dark-skinned man, who looked like he might have been Malaysian or from the Indian subcontinent or Pakistani or Yemen squeezed out from behind the counter and stepped into the late afternoon sunlight. "Two streets down... see that brick building just beyond the gas station?" Bethany nodded. "You turn right and keep driving maybe eight or nine blocks until you bump your nose." The pleasant man tapped his scimitar-shaped honker with a forefinger.

"Bump your nose," Bethany repeated softly. "What does that mean?"

"Bump you nose... until you can't go any further," the man elucidated. "Then you take a right and a quick left onto Laurel Avenue."

"Thank you so much."

"It's no problem." The man went back inside the stuffy prison-cell-of-a-building and shut the door behind him.

Three-quarters of a mile down the road Bethany 'bumped her nose' and, after a couple of deft maneuvers, was back on the main thoroughfare heading to Uncle Vern, Aunt Houa, the single-purpose chickens, demented dog, scruffy tabby and Freda, the high-fat-content cow. In a rest area shortly before the interstate, the girl eased the Volvo off the road, killed the ignition and volubly sobbed her heart out. Fifteen minutes later, she wiped her puffy eyes, located an FM radio station with reasonably good reception that featured country and western music and continued her homeward trek.

"There's been a change of plans," Bethany announced later that night at supper. "I'm running additional, training seminars in downtown Boston straight through the weekend."

"Well then," Houa replied, "you will remain here with us and save the expense of a hotel room and all that frivolous nonsense."

"Are you sure -"

Her uncle raised a mottled hand indicating that the issue was not open for debate. "How did you find Braxton?"

"A bit down at the heels." She wanted to say that Braxton resembled one of those surrealistic, satanic scenes straight out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting, that Braxton was the unmitigated toilet of the universe. Shitville USA!

"So I heard." Uncle Vern reached for another slice of meatloaf. "If you came for an extended visit during the summer, we could take day trips to Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard - maybe even view a Red Sox baseball game at Fenway Park."

Houa positioned an ear of sweet corn on the side of Bethany's plate and nudged the crock with Freda's homemade butter closer. Though the woman wore the same pokerfaced expression, Bethany had the distinct impression that the impassive oriental was smiling inwardly. "Yes, I'd like that just fine. I'll come back for an extended stay in the spring."

"Well then, it's settled," Houa announced in a whisper-soft tone. "May is nice around here. June equally so."

"Look out your bedroom window as soon as you rise in the morning," Uncle Vern counseled, shifting gears. "You'll probably see a family of white-tailed deer wandering about the backyard. They clean up the fallen apples before wandering off elsewhere."

"They're also crazy for acorns," Houa noted. "Sometimes I see them over by the oak trees eating their fill of nuts."

After the evening meal, Uncle Vern led Bethany out behind the cowshed and showed his niece his honeybees. He kept five, ramshackle, top bar hives fashioned from rough-sawn poplar. The three-sided troughs were propped up on cinder blocks and fitted with plywood lids. Removing a lid, he gently lifted out a triangular bar with a bloated comb of glistening, amber fluid. "There's ninety pounds of raw honey in this box alone," he noted, "and the bees ain't even finished collecting nectar for the season."

A cloying sweetness flavored the humid air. "When will you harvest the honey?"

He eased the swollen comb back into the box and replaced the rickety lid. When handling the bees, both gnarled hands moved in somnambulistic, slow motion, not unlike a tai chi master. He didn't bother with gloves or veil. The bees seemed perfectly comfortable with their keeper. He represented no threat. "Not till spring at the earliest. They'll need most of it to survive the winter... especially the treacherous tail end in February and March."

He tapped the narrow landing board. "That's called bearding." Uncle Ned indicated the huge clot of bees blanketing the front of the hive. "They camp out by the hundreds in the late summer when the heat gets oppressive."

Somewhere in the invisible darkness an owl hooted. After an interval the bird repeated its low-pitched drone. "My trip to Braxton was a nightmare," Bethany spoke softly with a flat affect, "an absolute debacle."

"But I thought -"

Bethany told her uncle about the confrontation with the director of the food bank and her panic attack on leaving the blighted city.

"Back to the psychedelic sixties when I was your age," her uncle recounted with a whimsical smile, "this country was still a melting pot... things weren't perfect, but we got along

reasonably well, but that's not the case anymore." He studied the entrance to the hive where the bees were settling in for the night. "The Great Society is all washed up... government in Washington's clueless."

Several stragglers returned to the hive along with a huge drone, a male with bulgy eyes that extended around the side of his head. "How many bees in that hive you just opened?" Bethany asked.

"I dunno... fifty, sixty thousand."

"Do they ever fight?"

"No, never... certainly not amongst themselves. They live to serve the queen... for the betterment of the colony."

With the shrill cacophony of police and ambulance sirens still ringing in her ears, Bethany said, "Fifty thousand honeybees can live harmoniously in a wooden crate no bigger than a flower box, but half as many humans can't manage a single night in Braxton without murder and mayhem?"

By way of response, Uncle Ned slapped viciously at the side of his neck. "Speaking of murder and mayhem, mosquitoes are quite troublesome this time of year." He led the way back through the darkness to the house.

In the morning just as Uncle Vern assured her, the deer - a buck with a narrow set of velvety antlers, his doe and two Bambiesque youngsters with speckled pelts - were meandering close by the apple tree, gorging on fallen fruit. "I generally take my vacation the beginning of June." Bethany hugged and kissed her uncle before heading off to Boston on the second full day of her visit.

Houa was lingering at a safe distance, but Bethany approached and kissed her too. The coppery-skinned woman generously returned the favor. "When the worst of the winter is over," Houa said, "your uncle drills tapholes with an auger and we make our own maple syrup. You might enjoy joining us." "We boil down the syrup usually in the spring," Houa explained, "once the sap begins rising through the roots and -"

"Autumn, too," Uncle Vern blurted, lurching awkwardly closer to the driver's side door. "The practice is less common, but there's plenty of sugary sap flowing in these beauties before the New England winter sets in." He gestured at the thickly wooded countryside bordering the farm. "We got plenty of sugar maples but also red, silver and black. Personally, I favor the blacks 'cause of the high sugar content."

"Well then," Bethany eased onto the front seat of her car and smiled mischievously at her newfound relatives. "That changes everything!"

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A Room without a View

When the Richardsons, Melvin, Clarissa and their teenage daughter, Sade, moved into the split-level ranch house on Hemlock Circle, the neighbors were pleasantly surprised. A black family in the community – how wonderful, how deliciously delightful!

Unfortunately, the euphoria didn't last.

By late August of the first year, Billy Ray Hooper, who owned the ranch house that abutted the Richardson's property was ready to burn a cross on the black family's front lawn. In lieu of anything quite that extreme, he simply refused to mow the lawn to the left of his property line, a not-so-subtle way of letting the dark-skinned neighbors know what he thought of them.

The stringy grass grew tall and turned to seed. Dandelions, crabgrass, goldenrod and an assortment of ugly, tenacious weeds predominated - but only on the left-hand side, close by the Richardsons' property. Elsewhere, he added weed killer plus a generous dusting of lime. He positioned petunias, pansies and geraniums in potted plants on either side of the front stoop and trimmed the flagstone walkway with a gas-operated weed whacker. The other side, where the Richardsons resided, resembled a war zone.

Thirteen year-old George Weiner, who lived in the house in back of the Richardsons, watched events unfold with mild confusion. George's seventh grade class was studying the history of western civilization and had only reached the Visigoths. He didn't know if Billy Ray Hooper's feud with the Richardsons was in any way similar to the cataclysmic upheavals he was learning about in middle school. Not that he cared all that much. He got along with black people just fine and was in two classes with the Richardson's daughter.

"Why's Mr. Hooper so mad at your father?" George asked one day.

Sade – the name was African and pronounced Shar-day. It meant 'honor bestows a crown' in Swahili or some other African tribal tongue. "Mr. Hooper was mowing his lawn Sunday morning and my father told him to stop, because that's the Lord's Day, the day of rest." As Sade explained things, Mr. Hooper worked six days a week at the automotive supply store and the only time he had free was Sunday."

They were outside in the driveway of the Richardson's home. Sade's father had bought a top-of-the-line basketball court with spring-loaded rim and transparent, adjustable-height backboard. Tall and big-boned, Sade played center on the girls' basketball team. George went to all the games. "My father lost his temper and called Mr. Hooper a really bad name. That's when all the trouble started."

Billy Ray Hooper had lived in the same split-level house since he was a child, no bigger than George and took over the property when his parents passed away. That was over twenty years ago. The Richardsons moved onto Hemlock Terrace three years earlier. George watched the girl drive to the hoop from the right side and shoot a layup. The ball ricocheted off the rim and landed in a clump of honeysuckle. She tried the same move from the opposite side, dribbling with her left hand as a defensive measure.

"What name?" George asked.

Sade had measured exactly thirteen feet from an imaginary free throw line on the asphalt to the front of the rim and drawn a ragged line with a piece of chalk. She went and stood behind the line, bounced the ball a half-dozen times on the blacktop and took a two-handed set shot. Swoosh! "

Asshole. He told Mr. Hooper he was a boorish asshole with no respect for the rest of the neighbors."

George retrieved the ball. "Your father's a troublemaker."

Sade waved her hand impatiently and he returned the ball. "It's a little more complicated than that." She pounded the ball four, five, six times on the ground and then sent it, with a hint of backspin, sailing toward the hoop. "He's got a persecution complex."

The coach started Sade in the center position because of her height and ability to aggressively snag rebounds even against taller opponents, but midway through the season he moved the girl to power forward. On defense Sade could post up with her back to the basket or worm her way under the hoop in man-to-man, zone defense. Now the coach had positioned her back at center. George didn't understand the half of what Sade was telling him when she talked strategy. He preferred to just sit in the bleachers and cheer when the Wildcats scored points. "How about some one-on-one?" George grabbed the ball and joined her at the impromptu foul line. "First one to reach twenty-one."

A beat-up Chevy pickup truck with a blown muffler pulled into the driveway adjacent to the property and Billy Ray Hooper climbed out. Seeing Sade, he waved and cracked a toothy grin.

Sade waved back. "Hi, Mr. Hooper!"

The man crouched down and raised his hands chest high. "Keep your palms up and knees bent when catching an outlet pass." He winked mischievously and disappeared into the house. Fifteen minutes later George was sprawled out on the grass trying to catch his breath. Twenty-one to eighteen - he had beaten the girl but just barely. When he rose to his feet, she cuffed him on the shoulder and said in a low monotone, "About what happened last Saturday at the reservoir..."

The previous Saturday, George rose early and went fishing at the Brandenburg Reservoir. Technically, no one was supposed to fish or swim in the town drinking water, but the youth had found a cove squirreled away down a forgotten path overgrown with weeds and bramble. The cove was hidden behind a wall of pine trees and dense shrubbery. If he headed out around dawn and cut through the woods at the end of the street, he could reach the fishing spot well before any hikers were up and about.

George snagged largemouth bass and sleek pickerel casting with lures in the shallow waters. Golden perch and bottom-feeding hornpout were equally plentiful but favored worms and juicy night crawlers. For the first hour, he tried his luck with a standard red-and-white lure, casting out toward a clump of water lilies. He hooked an eighteen-inch pickerel and played the brawny fish in close to shore, where the pickerel broke toward a clot of reeds and the monofilament line got hung up on a submerged stump.

Around eleven, the sun loomed over the tops of the surrounding trees and the temperature had inched up into the mid-eighties. A light breeze rippled the surface of the water into glossy ribbons. George removed the lure and switched over to a hook and bobber. Spearing an earthworm on the barbed shaft of an Eagleclaw hook, he cast the bobber far out into the cove. Just as the plastic splashed down, skidding across the placid water, he heard the sound of rustling leaves. A moment later, Sade appeared. She was dressed in shorts and a Wildcats' basketball jersey. "How'd you do?"

She flopped down on a tuft of grass. "It was a rout... thirty-eight to twelve. We killed them."

A painted turtle raised its wedge-shaped snout above the water twenty feet from the bobber. A solitary dragon fly with transparent wings was hovering a few inches above the lily pads. "My parents had a big fight last night," George confided. The bobber was drifting toward a rotted stump. He reeled the line in, steering it away from the wood and placed the rod carefully on the ground. "My father wants to put up a wooden fence bordering the property."

"Who's property?" She splayed out her tawny legs and lay back prone on the warm earth.

"Yours...ours. He's gonna ask your father's permission. My mother's worried your dad will think that we're putting up the fence because we don't like colored people living next door."

There was a prolonged silence. A redwing blackbird flitted out across the brush disappearing into a clump of gnarled birch trees. The painted turtle reemerged for a few seconds closer in to shore. "Yes, that's true," Sade finally said in a neutral tone.

"What's true – that my father's a racist or that your old man's gonna go mental over the fence?"

"A little of both," she replied.

George, who was standing near the water, reeled in the line. The worm had been nibbled away to nothing. He replaced it and hurled the line in a sweeping arc into the middle of the placid water. The sun was directly overhead now with temperatures topping out in the low nineties. He went to where the girl was resting and threw himself down on the rough grass. "I'm reading this novel by an English writer, E.M. Forster." There was no reply. "*A Room with a View.*"

"What's that?"

"The title of the novel I'm reading."

She rolled over on her side and stared at him impassively. "Stupid title."

George couldn't help but notice that she had grown prettier over the past year. Not that the girl was particularly feminine in the traditional sense. Sade's ebony skin was so incredibly smooth and flawless that he sometimes had the urge to reach out and touch her face. "It's not stupid at all," George protested.

The girl tugged a strand of dry straw-like grass from the ground and stuck it between her front teeth. She wasn't the least bit interested in E. M. Forster or any other priggish, turn-of-the-century authors. Her basketball team had just annihilated the competition, stomped them into the ground - run away with the game. "In the story," George continued, "the grownups act silly... like spoiled children."

"Okay," she murmured distractedly. He could tell she wasn't listening. A pasty yellow butterfly flitted past making an erratic path toward the water line; attracted by the vibrant reds and oranges, it finally came to rest on a tiger lily.

"The adults act thoroughly ridiculous throwing temper tantrums and feuding with one another over the most idiotic things."

Sade stared at the bobber. It hadn't moved an inch since George replaced the worm. "Why are you telling me this?"

He leaned in closer to her. "My father and mother were yelling at each other last night over this moronic fence business... just like characters in the Forster novel."

"A fence... it's just a stupid pile of lumber." Sade leaned forward until her face was no more than an inch from George's and then, without warning, kissed him leisurely on the lips. "I'm not interested in *A Room with a View.*" She draped a hand around his shoulder and pulled him close again. "Now you kiss me."

George took her face in his hands and returned the favor. Pushing him gently away, she rose to her feet. "You're a good kisser." George grinned self-consciously.

"My father doesn't like you," she blurted, a total non sequitur.

"Why not?"

"Why do you think?"

George understood perfectly well but held his tongue. After a long silence he asked, "Does your father think black people deserve reparations for slavery?"

"What sort of crazy question is that?"

"A simple yes or no will suffice," George replied testily.

"Yes," Sade replied, "my father thinks white people should pay reparations to every living black person in America."

"And why's that?"

"For all the suffering we've endure."

"But you live in a perfectly nice, middle class community. Your old man drives a Lexus and earns a decent paycheck. Why should white people give him any more money than he already has?"

Sade shrugged. "I liked it better when we were kissing and discussing Ian Forest."

"Forster," George corrected. "E.M. Forster." "Okay, so give me another kiss."

"Reparations," Sade side-stepped the request, "you didn't say what that's got to do with anything."

"It's a long story," George replied evasively.

The previous afternoon, when the quarreling had reached a crescendo, Mrs. Wiener said, "I got a rotten feeling about this fence business. Look at all the trouble Mel Richardson stirred up with Billy Ray Hooper over a stupid lawnmower."

His wife laughed sarcastically. "He's the kind of malcontent who probably thinks his kind deserve reparations for slavery." George was crouched at the top of the stairs listening as the angry tirade filtered up from the kitchen.

"I heard," Mr. Wiener fumed, "the jerk landed a six-figure job with the electric company,". "Mel Richardson will retire with a phenomenal pension and full benefits. What the hell does *he* need reparations for?" When there was no immediate reply, the man added in a less excitable tone, "Maybe Richardson won't care about the fence. It's not like we're asking him to reach into his own pocket and shell out any money."

The squabble had run its course, and George retreated to his bedroom. He pulled a Webster's Collegiate dictionary from the shelf and thumbed through the pages to the back of the book.

Reparations: compensation (given or received) for an insult or injury; Compensation exacted from a defeated nation by the victors; 'Germany was unable to pay reparations demanded for World War I.'

A weird thought occurred to George as he lay in bed waiting for sleep: if anyone deserved reparations, it was Billy Ray Hooper. Mr. Richardson had goaded him for no good reason and then felt doubly indignant when the man retaliated – a passive-aggressive gesture of defiance – by letting the late summer weeds run amok. Still, despite the bad blood between him and the girl’s father, Billy Ray remained perfectly pleasant to Sade. “Keep your palms up and knees bent when you catch outlet passes!” The last image to flit across his mind before George drifted off to sleep was that of Bill Ray Hooper crouched down on his haunches in a defensive posture, elbows extended and all ten fingers splayed at the heavens.

The kiss changed everything and it changed nothing.

Well, no, - maybe that was a bit extreme. It wasn’t like kissing some Barbie doll wannabe with pouty lips and a half pound of velvety eyeliner. Sade was still the female jock, the center on the girls’ basketball team who effortlessly slid in front of the better-positioned defensive players in the key position and snatched rebounds.

They had been friends for three years now, since the parents moved onto Hemlock Circle from Dorchester on the southern outskirts of Boston. Dorchester was a run-down, blighted section pockmarked with three-decker tenements and condemned buildings.

Immigrant Russian Jews lived there half a century earlier only to be driven out - white flight – by uneducated, southern blacks moving north in search of jobs and a decent life. In the late sixties following Martin Luther King’s assassination, riots broke out with looting and arson - not as bad as Watts, but scary stuff none-the-less. Now the more genteel, upwardly mobile descendents of those earlier Afro-Americans were drifting further south to middle class, gentrified suburbs in search of the American dream. So in a symbolic sense, Sade Richardson had been pursuing George for the better part of the past sixty years, and now that the girl with the feathery soft lips and immaculate skin finally snagged him, the boy was in no great hurry to get away.

Later that evening at supper Mel Richardson said, “I’m going mow the lawn.” He was steering a row of sweet peas onto his fork. Mrs. Richardson had cooked scrod dusted with Italian bread crumbs in a lemon dill sauce.

“You already mowed the lawn,” his wife replied.

“Not ours – the idiot’s.” The idiot, of course, was Mr. Hooper and the lawn in question was the eight-foot wide parcel of unruly wilderness on the far side of the property.

Sade raised her fork and shook it at her father. “You go over there, and he’ll call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing.”

Mr. Richardson grinned at his daughter, but the man was all bluff and vacuous bluster.

Sade understood perfectly well that her father was just blowing off steam, a favorite pastime. He would throw back his shoulders, assume a menacing tone; once he had everyone’s undivided attention, he would make a rash, provocative pronouncement. But nothing ever came of it. With Sade’s father, threatening to do something homicidally reckless was more recreational pursuit than clinical pathology.

Melvin Richardson was a handsome black man with boyish, photogenic features. Like his daughter, the skin was smooth and clear with high cheekbones and sensuous lips. Deep-set eyes framed a broad forehead. When he smiled, the man looked ten years younger than his wife who was born the same month thirty-eight years earlier. Mrs. Richardson, by contrast, was light-skinned and rather plain with a nervous, petulant set to her thin lips.

"You shouldn't have called Mr. Hooper that bad name," Sade picked up where she had left off. "You keep saying Billy Ray's a racist and bigot, but up until you started harassing him, the man treated us decent enough."

"Whose side are you on anyway?"

"I'm just saying maybe you should go over there and bury the hatchet."

Sade's little brother, Leon, kept looking back and forth as the conversation progressed. At ten years old, he was still too young to have an opinion one way or the other. "Yeah, I'll bury the hatchet one of these days," Mr. Richardson snickered. "I'll bury it right between his -"

"You seem to be spending an awful lot of time lately," Mrs. Richardson interrupted, "with the Wiener boy."

"George," Sade confirmed. "He's always got his nose buried in a book."

"The Wieners – they're Jewish." She turned to her husband. "*The People of the Book* - that's what they're called, because they're always reading, studying, advancing themselves intellectually." Fetching the coffee pot, she warmed her husband's cup and placed a peach cobbler on the table. "The wife brought a chocolate cake over by way of a housewarming present the week after we settled in. Such a nice gesture, don't you think?" Her husband shrugged noncommittally and nibbled at the dessert.

"He wants to be a writer... a novelist or something," Sade ventured.

"Who does?" Leon finally entered the conversation.

"George. He reads these highfalutin, literary books, gets all excited and tells me about them."

"What books?" Mrs. Richardson offered her husband a second helping of the peach cobbler.

"I don't know. It's all too complicated."

Through the kitchen window, they could see Billy Ray Hooper wearing jeans and cowboy boots sauntering over to his truck. He fired up the engine, pulled out of the driveway and disappeared down the street. "Here's your golden opportunity," Sade said in a good-natured, teasing tone.

Mr. Richardson scowled. He placed his dirty dishes in the sink, went back and retrieved his coffee. "I'll deal with that redneck hooligan another day." He retreated to the den and the evening news. Leon also brought his plate to the counter and trailed away after his father.

After he was gone Mrs. Richardson said, "You take great pleasure aggravating your father."

"Mr. Hooper isn't a bigot. He doesn't care one way or the other about black people. Daddy got him all riled up, and then he had to go and call him an asshole."

Mrs. Richardson usually brought her daughter up short for using foul language, but the woman sighed and stared at her slender fingers. "You know how your father is."

"Daddy doesn't like white people."

"No, it's not that," her mother protested. "He gets agitated... frightened and acts impulsively." She began wiping down the kitchen table with a damp rag. "He shouldn't have said that to Mr. Hooper, but he's got too much pride to admit that he did anything wrong."

A week later on a Sunday morning, George went downstairs for breakfast but his parents were nowhere to be found. He glanced out the kitchen window. Mr. and Mrs. Weiner were standing over by a profusion of straggly lilacs in full bloom, jabbering with the Richardsons. They were breaking the news about the fence. The ‘privacy’ fence – that’s what they had decided to call it. Not an exclusion or security or I-hate-colored-people fence but a sturdy, six-foot cedar stockade that would sit just inside of the Weiner’s property line and give both families a measure of ‘privacy’.

Mrs. Richardson was all smiles. The willowy woman even laughed graciously, her head bobbing up and down in agreement with some point that Mr. Weiner had raised. Mr. Richardson was smiling too, but the expression was anything but congenial. There was much gesticulating plus several loud belly laughs and high-pitched titters that carried all the way across the back lawn and into the kitchen. It was grownups acting silly and totally out of control.

It was pure, one hundred proof, straight-from-the-bottle E.M. Forster!

On the far side of the lawn, Sade’s torso was framed in an upstairs window. She had been watching the freak show from a loftier vantage. When she saw George staring at her, the girl placed her fingertips over her lips and blew George a silent kiss.

No one noticed. They were too engaged in fence diplomacy. It was at that moment that George understood – an epiphany of sorts - that he loved Sade Richardson. Totally. Completely. Utterly. The kiss at the reservoir was shockingly pleasant enough, but this long-distance, whimsical gesture struck him at a far deeper level. Some inchoate thread of intimacy which had been nurtured over the past few years burst into life – like forcing dormant seed with warmth and light to germinate in the middle of a wintry deep freeze. And that, too, was so very E.M. Forster!

He would have to tell her at the earliest convenience – not that Sade would give a hoot. She would roll her walnut-colored eyes and make a snotty remark, suggesting he was a total buffoon. And then she would practice left-hand layups and fall away jump shots, dribble between her chocolaty legs and life would pursue its lopsided, irregular course.

When his parents returned to the house, Mrs. Weiner announced, “Well, what do you think?”

George’s father shook his head emphatically. “Things went as well as could be expected. They know that we’re not hate mongers and that the fence benefits all concerned.”

“I wish you hadn’t quoted Frost’s poem about Mending Walls,” his wife noted. “That was a bit melodramatic.”

Mr. Weiner made a face. “Look, we all got to live together in this goddamn community so you gotta do whatever it takes.”

“There’s no reason for profanity,” Mrs. Weiner’s tone darkened noticeably. Everyone’s nerves were on edge. “It’s over and that’s all that matters. They agreed in principle that a fence is a good idea.”

Mr. Weiner put the coffee on to boil and got a cup down from the cabinet. “I’ll call the fence company in the morning.”

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun, ...*

In the middle of the following week a truck towing a huge auger from the Providence Fence Company pulled up in front of the Weiner's home. With a Stanley twenty-five foot tape measure and can of spray paint, the crew measured and marked the locations of each of seventeen posts. They fired up the noisy, gas-operated auger and drilled down two feet into the rocky soil. By the early afternoon the crew packed up and left. George went out to inspect. The four-by-four posts stood perfectly plumb in a slurry of gravelly cement mix. The chalky gray liquid near the street had already begun to set up and cure. George bent down and scratched the rough surface with a fingernail. It was already hard as rock.

The next day the workers returned to finish the job. The individual sections of stockade fence were fastened in place using an elaborate system of metal fasteners, nuts and bolts. Gradually the rows of wooden slats crept across the grassy lawn dividing the two properties, and by the late afternoon the beautiful cedar fence stretched to the far end of both yards. Each post was fitted with a decorative crown, a graceful, scalloped pattern defining each individual slatted row. Mr. Weiner was very pleased when he returned home from work. "Money well spent!" he announced with an exultant grin.

"Yes, it's a lovely piece of workmanship," his wife agreed.

The following week Sade's Wildcats were playing the Donovan School. George walked a half mile to the gymnasium and sat in the bleachers next to a Cambodian woman, whose daughter was on the opposing team. By the end of the first quarter the Wildcats were winning fourteen to five, Sade having scored half the points and picking off a dozen rebounds. When the buzzer rang, the coach made substitutions and the score became more respectable. After the half, Sade went back in the game, made a series of easy layups and, from that point on, the outcome was never in doubt.

George waited outside the gym for his friend, who emerged after a few minutes still wearing her uniform. Rather than go directly home, they stopped by the athletic field at the end of the street where a soccer match was underway. "There's gonna be fireworks," Sade announced, "and I'm not talking Fourth of July or the Eighteen-Twelve Overture."

George had a vague intimation what was coming. Earlier at the basketball game, Mr. Richardson had walked by the bleachers where George was sitting next to the squat Asian woman. Noticing George, his face puckered in a brusque scowl and the black man glanced away.

"My father's angry as hell over the fence," Sade continued. "He says your dad's a hatemonger worse than Billy Ray Hooper." After saying this she draped an arm around his waist and leaned into the boy with her body.

"But my parents spoke to your dad just the other week and he agreed the fence was a good idea."

"No, he only agreed that they had the legal right to put it up."

"Did he tell my folks that?"

"No, of course not! My father's totally nuts... a crackpot" She said this with unassuming finality.

He felt her grip tighten. He wanted to kiss her – to forget about cedar fencing, folksy Robert Frost poems about mending stone walls, racial reparations and all the other intrinsic stupidity that cluttered his thirteen year-old existence. But then, someone might see George

Wiener kissing an attractive black girl, and he would have to relocate to another part of the country, abandoning scenic New England altogether. “We have nothing in common.”

“That’s true enough.” Sade didn’t bother to look at him. She was watching the soccer game. “But then you talk some moronic nonsense that I’m not even remotely interested in and then maybe a week and a half later, I get to thinking about E.M. Forsner or whatever the hell his name is and it makes me feel as though the craziness in my own family is manageable which, of course, it isn’t.” Only now did she turn and look him full in the face. “I’m warning you. My father’s gonna do something really stupid.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know and don’t especially care.” She kissed him full on the lips, a leisurely, unhurried kiss. Several of the soccer players scrimmaging off to the side of the field gawked at them queerly. “Let’s go home now before we start an ugly scene of our own.”

“How was the basketball game?” Mrs. Weiner asked.

“Good,” George responded absentmindedly. He went upstairs to his room and shut the door.

It was all about muddles.

According to the world’s leading authority on the subject, E.M. Forster, everything that was wrong in society and between people had to do with muddles – states of confusion, bewildering ambiguity, emotional messiness, mystifying jumbles of chaos and perplexing disorder. A hopeless muddle was at the root of most problems, whether it be running a sturdy, hardwood fence across sixty feet of property or settling grievances that dated back to the Civil War. You couldn’t talk it through, since rational conversation offered no solution whatsoever and frequently only made things worse.

When things were going poorly, George felt his brains all in a muddle. There were days strung together, end-to-end in a dismal row, where George felt like a bit player, an ill-prepared character actor in a tacky melodrama not of his choosing. But then Sade came to visit him at the secret cove and the muddle dissolved, evaporated, was blown to smithereens by her infuriating loveliness and utter disregard for what mattered to everyone else.

Each fulfilled an unmet need.

He was the gossamer glue that held her fractured, dysfunctional universe together; she was the Nubian princess who – abracadabra - banished muddles. All that was required was a kiss on the lips from a black girl with hands so strong and malleable that she could palm a regulation-size basketball. Or, better yet, what was needed was a mystical novel of last-minute redemption written by an introverted Englishman born well over a hundred years ago.

A week later, the Wieners discovered the depth of Mr. Richardson’s paranoid rage

George’s mother was in the back yard hanging laundry. Mr. Weiner had fitted the pressure-treated T-shaped poles with an adjustable mechanical device. The far end of the cotton clothesline was fed through a small hole ringed with metal ball bearings. As the line began to stretch and sag from the weight of the wet clothing, a quick tug on the end of the rope would raise the line back to its original height. Mrs. Wiener had just fixed a pair of her husband’s Fruit of the Loom boxer underwear on the line with a pair of wooden clothespins, when she saw a

huge, almond-colored missile sail up and over the fence, coming to rest with a frightening crash among the tiger lilies in her rock garden.

The middle-aged woman's legs turned to mush as she collapsed onto the grass in a terrified daze. Through a chink in the new fence she spotted Mr. Richardson wearing a lime green Izod sport shirt sauntering up the back stairs to his deck before disappearing into the house. The projectile, which he had launched like a shot putter whirling faster and faster in concentric circles, was a metal propane tank that he borrowed from Mr. Wiener at the beginning of July.

Weeping hysterically, Mrs. Wiener abandoned the laundry basket full of damp clothes, staggered into the house and called her husband. "It would appear," she spoke in a faltering falsetto, "our neighbor wants reparations."

Following the propane tank incident, Mr. Wiener went to an attorney and got a restraining order against his neighbor. The legal document stated in terse, no-nonsense language that Mr. Richardson and his wife were not to speak to the Wieners except through proper legal representation; Mr. Richardson could not 'throw, drop, hurl or otherwise jettison any miscellaneous belongings' onto the neighbors' property under threat of civil litigation; and the parents were to 'cease and desist' from making any obscene, inflammatory or threatening gestures when entertaining on their deck. Other than the bizarre incident with the propane tank and a few withering stares, Melvin Richardson had done nothing of the sort, but – like a warning shot over the bow – the Wieners' lawyer threw the last statement in for good measure.

Saturday night Sade shuffled into the bathroom where her mother was blow drying her hair. She overhead her parents talking earlier in the afternoon about the letter from the lawyer, which was delivered certified mail. "Is Daddy going to jail?"

Mrs. Richardson pulled a wide-toothed comb through her damp hair, waving the dryer over the limp strands. "No. He'll just keep a low profile... be on extra-good behavior and things will eventually blow over."

"What he did was stupid as hell." Sade lowered the toilet seat and sat down on the terrycloth lid cover.

"Yes, well your father has a penchant for making dramatic statements without considering the consequences." She repositioned the hair dryer on the opposite side of her head and began to comb out the snarls and tangles. "That's why he needs us women," her mother replied with an undertone of gravitas tinged with humor. "To keep him of the straight and narrow ... to make him realize he's acted really wacky and needs to go into the witness protection program."

Sade had no idea what her mother was talking about except that, since the bizarre incident with the propane tank, her intemperate father had been uncharacteristically meek and obliging. Unfortunately, the eerie calm wouldn't last. Once the crisis had blown over, Mr. Richardson would begin bellyaching about some newly-imagined fault or injustice. "I kissed that Wiener boy."

The girl's mother shut the dryer off and stared at her daughter in disbelief. "You what?"

"He's very weird," Sade ignored the original question. "Always talking about books. Books, books, books. He thinks the solutions to all the world's problems can be found in some musty novel written a thousand years ago."

Mrs. Richardson turned the dryer back on full speed and directed the nozzle at the nape of her neck. The hairs floated lazily on the upstream of warm air. "You and I need to have a little talk."

"About what?" The girl thought a moment. "Oh, yeah, that."

"I don't suppose there's anything in George's moldy books about dealing with irascible, short-tempered black men."

Sade smiled at her mother's backside. "Not likely."

Someone had turned the television on and Sade could hear the theme song from Hannah Montana drifting down the hallway. "I appreciate your telling me about the kiss," there was a note of urgency in the woman's voice. "I hope you will have the good sense not to share that last bit of news with your father."

Sade headed for the open door. "Not in this lifetime."

"You can't go over the Richardsons' house anymore," Mr. Weiner announced in a peremptory tone. They were sitting down to a supper of meatloaf, mashed potatoes and butternut squash. "That crazy black man tried to kill your mother."

George cut a piece of meat with his fork and swirled it in the brown gravy. "Mr. Richardson is a paranoid jerk. He doesn't just hate white people, he hates everybody."

Sade told George that her father referred to Jamaicans as 'Jewmaicans', because, once they arrived from the island with their immigrant-status green card, they started saving up to buy rental property which they promptly let to poor, native-born Afro-Americans.

He didn't especially like Haitians either. The women were all goody two-shoes, religious fanatics who mixed traditional Catholicism with voodoo and animism. Their religious mumbo jumbo was enough to make a respectable, college-educated Negro throw up! That's what Sade told him. Not that George had any intention of sharing any of this with his parents.

"I love Sade Richardson pure and simple. Nobody can keep us apart." George spoke with grim determination.

"Try telling that to the guy who lives on the other side of that fence," Mr. Wiener shot back in a surly voice.

George toyed with his squash. His mother had basted the top with a glaze of brown sugar and honey before placing it in the oven. George laid his fork down next the plate and rose from the table. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" Mr. Wiener's voice sounded childishly hysterical.

"To have a little chat with the neighbor who lives on the other side of the cedar fence."

George walked briskly out the door into the fading light, crossed over to the Richardson's property and rang the bell. "Sade's not here." The wife answered the door. "She's at basketball practice."

"I need to speak to your husband."

Mr. Richardson inched up behind his wife with his moody mug pressed close to the screen door. "You don't get along with my folks," George said, "but that has nothing to do with me." He turned and pointed at the basketball net at the far end of the driveway. "The next time I see Sade outside shooting hoops, I'm coming over to visit. If you don't like it, call the police."

"You got some god-awful nerve!" The man made a motion toward the screen door but his wife blocked his way.

George pointed a second time at the transparent backboard and cotton net. "I'm in love with your daughter," he added stonily, "and in another eight or ten years I could end up being your son-in-law, so we got to get beyond this childish bickering." Mr. Richardson's mouth fell open. He didn't look angry anymore. The expression on his face was one of utter bewilderment. Quite possibly for the first time in his adult life, the man was at a loss for words.

"Yes, George, that sounds fair enough," Mrs. Richardson blurted, although it was unclear what, if anything, she was referring to as she slammed the door shut.

The youth went home and picked up where he had left off with the butternut squash. Mr. Wiener and his wife had finished their own dinner and placed the dirty plates on the counter next to the sink. They sat drinking Bigelow tea while their son ate his meatloaf, mashed potatoes and butternut squash flavored with brown sugar and honey. There was no mention of the Richardson's feud, airborne propane tanks, restraining orders or a thirteen year-old Jewish boy's romantic predilections.

Toward the end of the E. M. Forster novel, one of the main characters, Mr. Emerson, described life as a public performance on a violin in which you must learn the instrument as you go along. Standing there on the Richardsons' front stoop with the parents staring out at him from behind the screen door, George Wiener had flailed away on his flimsy, student-level instrument for all it was worth. At no point did the youth lose nerve. He never felt more alive, in control of his adolescent destiny, as when he was reading Attila the Hun – a.k.a. Melvin Richardson - the riot act.

Later that night Mrs. Wiener entered her son's bedroom and stood stiffly by the night table. "You never mentioned what happened over at the Richardsons'."

In the darkness, George lay back under the covers and considered the question. "That man is still fighting the Civil War." He didn't quite know what else to say about his abortive confrontation. "What he did last week was an act of both historical protest and personal anguish, but I don't think he will be hurling any more propane tanks over the fence."

"Well that's a relief!" Mrs. Wiener turned around and abruptly left the room. George listened but didn't hear his mother's footfalls descending the stairs. Rather, she lingered on the upstairs landing, mulling something over in her mind. Finally she trudged back into the room. "Do you remember the Disney movie Bambi?"

"Vaguely."

"In the early spring, all the animals became 'twitterpated', intoxicated with love. They chose a soul mate, a life partner, and went romping through the fields and meadows." Mrs. Wiener sat down on the edge of the bed. "Puppy love – that's what you're feeling right now for the Richardson girl."

"Sade. Her name is Sade and it's not puppy love," George replied. "Puppy love is a shallow and transient emotion that can evaporate in a fickle heartbeat."

"Yes, that's true." Mrs. Wiener felt stymied, outfoxed by her son's semantic precision. "I stand corrected." Rising from the bed, she left the room and retreated down the stairs.

In the morning, George dug through the compost heap where his parents had been dumping banana peels, eggshells, coffee grounds, fruit and other degradable refuse in a shallow pit. Inside ten minutes he assembled a muddy can full of writhing worms and night crawlers. Around eight o'clock he headed out to the Brandenburg Reservoir. On the second cast he hooked a largemouth bass. Deftly playing the muscular fish into shore, he removed the hook, threading a nylon rope through the gills and back out the mouth before tossing the tethered fish into the shallow water.

Around eleven o'clock Sade appeared. "Come with me," George said flatly. "He led the way back out into an open meadow carpeted with cornflowers, chicory, ivory-colored baby's breath and snapdragon.

"What about the fishing gear?"

George waved the question off. On the far side of the meadow a muddy trail half-buried in undergrowth led back down to the water. "Look over there to your left."

They were standing on a rock ledge extending out over an algae-choked stretch of placid water. There were rotting tree stumps, cat-o'-nine-tails; and a swarm of dragon flies flitting back and forth in the marshy shallows. "I don't see anything."

George raised his hand and indicated a row of blackened stumps jutting out from the murky water. "That flat rock beside the third stump from your left."

Sade's body tightened and the breath caught like a jagged bone in her throat. Involuntarily, the girl took a step backward. Fifty feet away, sunning itself on the granite rock was a medium-size snake. The body was tattooed with brown, tan and gray crossbands. The broad head jutted out distinct from the neck, the snout blunt in profile with the top of the head extending forward slightly further than the mouth. The body had a heavy build, the tail moderately long and slender.

"It's a water moccasin." George's voice hardly rose above a whisper. "I came down here first before going to the cove, but as soon as I saw our friend sunning himself, I immediately left."

"So what do we do now?"

"Leave," George replied. "The cove is a good three hundred feet away, but vipers are strong swimmers and that nasty brute could cover the distance in five minutes without even breaking a sweat."

"I thought snakes were cold blooded."

"You know what I mean." George turned and led the way back to the fishing hole, where he collected his gear. Before reaching the street, the woods emptied out into an open meadow speckled with wildflowers, the honey-colored grass in some places waist high. When they were a reasonably safe distance from the water, George threw himself down on the warm earth and Sade snuggled up next to him.

"You stopped by my house the other day." There was no reply. George was still worrying about the water moccasin. The mature snake looked to be about three feet long, grown strong on a diet of frogs, small fish and carrion. In the future when he fished the cove, he needed to be more vigilant, sweep the grassy shoreline and underbrush regularly with his eyes for uninvited guests. And, of course, he would warn Sade against joining him in the future. "My father says," she interrupted his reveries, "you're the craziest, little shithead he ever met."

George just smiled. A scattering of chickadees careened drunkenly through the early morning sunshine, flitting through the lower branches of the pine trees that rimmed the meadow. "I'm in love with you."

She rolled over in the tufted grass, her cheek resting lightly on his chest. “Now tell me something I don’t already know.” The tone was smug, gently mocking.

George told her about his favorite author’s theory of the ‘muddle’ and how life often resembled an impromptu violin performance. Then he told her that, according to Forster, there was only a certain amount of kindness in the world, just as there was only a certain amount of light. “‘Choose a place where you won’t do harm - yes, choose a place where you won’t do very much harm, and stand in it for all you are worth, facing the sunshine.’ That’s what Forster said.” When the boy finished talking, she snuggled closer draping a leg over his thigh. The sun was almost directly overhead now, the temperature drifting into the low eighties. The sweet aroma of pine sap mixed with wildflowers perfumed the air. “Well?” he pressed.

“Well what?” She rested an arm on his chest, and he brought a hand up around the small of her back.

“Was it worth hearing?”

She caressed his face with a free hand. In no great hurry a turgid bumblebee lumbered by en route to a clump of orangey flowers. “No, like everything else you tell me, it was stupid as hell.” The Chickadees’ chatter was joined by the rhythmic hammering of a woodpecker. A pastel, earth-colored moth was feasting on nectar in a bell-shaped ivory flower.

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Twin Souls

According to Mahatma Gandhi,” Mavis Calhoun announced breathlessly, “society’s coming apart at the seams, collapsing under the weight of technology gone berserk.” Mavis took a quick sip of coffee. “Personal computers, CD-Roms, faxes, supersonic jets - ”

“There were no personal computers with CD-Rom in Gandhi’s time,” Harry corrected. “No faxes either.”

“That’s not the point,” Mavis blustered. “Personal happiness can’t be reduced to a fat bank accounts or income property.”

Mavis and Harry Wong Smith were on ten-minute break, sipping tepid coffee in the Shop Rite Supermarket employee lounge. Twenty-nine year-old Mavis had relocated to Brandenburg, Massachusetts almost a year earlier to the day. She landed the cashier’s job in February. In his senior year of high school, Harry bagged groceries and stocked shelves. “Societies gone bonkers,” Mavis reaffirmed, “and we need to resist the urge.”

“Which urge?”

“To join the unenlightened masses... drink from the well with the crazy water.”

Harry shook his head up and down as if on cue, a bogus gesture. But then, Mavis’ thinking was so outmoded and unfashionable—like something out of the psychedelic sixties, his parent’s whacked-out generation. A culture built on tie-dyed T-shirts, flower power, twenty year-olds chanting secret mantras and waiting for the millennium or Armageddon - whichever came first.

Mavis grew up in Knoxville, on the Tennessee River. Her father worked for a lumber firm, harvesting tulip-poplar, hickory, yellow pine, red and white oak. The summer before she moved East, Mavis and her new husband, Travis, traveled to the Blue Ridge Mountains and climbed Clingman's Dome, at 6643 feet the highest peak in the state. Mountain laurel, redbud and irises rimmed the trail. Mavis saw five wild turkeys and a brood of mottled, brownish ruffed grouse in the bush. The adult male kept up an unearthly drumming sound with its wings trying to frighten the newlyweds away. These were the sort of things Mavis told Harry when he wasn't running price checks on kiwi fruit or chasing down abandoned shopping carts in the supermarket parking lot.

Harry didn't know or particularly care if any of what Mavis was telling him was true. He could listen to her lilting voice for hours - for the better part of eternity. Stare into her cocoa-brown eyes, while watching the pouty bottom lip form syrupy phrases like 'dervish whirling', 'right livelihood', and 'transmigration of souls'. Content was irrelevant. A lecture from Mavis on the intricacies of backyard composting would have left Harry equally spellbound.

Mavis smiled displaying a set of perfectly white, even teeth. Her shoulder length hair was straight and black, the nose compact. Except for the pearly teeth, there was nothing particularly remarkable about Mavis Calhoun. Still, the ditsy woman got under Harry's skin like an itch. Not so much an itch as an irresistible craving.

Harry had his own theory about the woman.

Mavis Calhoun was 'covertly' beautiful. The woman possessed an untapped potential for hidden loveliness - a confused landscape of precious imperfections. Hers was not the fragile beauty of classic line and unblemished texture but, rather, a quality resembling the unpredictable exuberance of wild flowers - of catchfly and purple coneflower; the eagerness and zeal of chicory and yarrow; the scruffy, unassuming ardor of scarlet phlox and Queen Anne's lace.

In a rash moment of over exuberance, Harry once told Mavis something of the sort, but the guileless woman balked, didn't know what to make of the odd remark. Back hand compliment or sincere flattery? Mavis simply rolled her chestnut-colored eyes and spoke of something else. Harry never broached the issue again.

In recent weeks, when Mavis tried to snare him with the metaphysical mumbo jumbo, Harry focused on her teeth. The two, sturdy slabs, top front, so durable and immaculate, were symbolic of the woman's spiritual perfection. Twin alabaster tiles, unblemished by nicotine or periodontal complications.

"What's your husband's take on Eastern philosophy?"

Mavis scowled. "I showed Travis a picture of Gandhi in his white robe; he said the mahatma looked like a flea-bitten faggot."

Travis Calhoun dropped his wife off at work two or three nights a week. A heavysset man, most days he was unshaven and wore torn jeans with a rebel flag sewn on the back of his dungaree jacket. Married at eighteen, they were high school sweethearts. One pregnancy early in the marriage ended in miscarriage. Mavis never became pregnant again. When Harry mentioned the stillbirth, Mavis swallowed hard and looked away. For the remainder of the day, outside of an occasional price check, there was no carefree banter, and Harry had the presence of mind to leave the woman alone. "No, I wouldn't think your husband would be overly interested in Eastern philosophy."

Mavis splayed the fingers of her left hand and studied the wedding ring. The tiny diamond, more like a chip than a bona fide, precious gem, glinted weakly. "That's why," Mavis confided breathlessly, "It's such a blessing to find a spiritual twin soul."

Another of Mavis' cockamamie notions held that Harry Wong and Mavis Calhoun were twin souls. She shared this intimation recently in a mad gush of esoterica and Harry, too smitten with her infuriating loveliness, couldn't disagree. "We really should be getting back," he said and gulped the last of his coffee.

In the late seventies, Harry's parents traveled to Guilin in southern China to adopt a baby girl. The orphanage, which sat at the base of an outcropping of limestone pinnacles rising six hundred feet in the air, offered the Americans a package deal. Six months earlier a boy with a wandering eye was born in a nearby province. The distraught parents brought the child to the baby home. One eye gazed curiously about the lobby while the other eye flitted indiscriminately in space. "Our child has a wicked demon," the mother said and, with her husband, hurried quickly away.

Strabismus: an imbalance of the eye muscle in which one eye cannot focus. A simple operation at Children's Hospital in Boston rid Harry Wong Smith of the ancestral curse. An act of gratitude, the Smiths included the biological parents' last name on the birth certificate. East meets west. Harry Wong Smith - a semantic absurdity. Harry never used his middle name - not on signatures, certainly not in public.

One afternoon in early April, Harry visited the Brandenburg library. "I'm researching Bernoulli's principle."

"Could you be a bit more specific?" The reference librarian was completely bald but sported a thick black beard as though his facial hair had been relocated from the naked skull.

"Bernoulli studied planes,... aerodynamics."

The librarian came out from behind the desk and led Harry up a flight of stairs to the rear of the building. "You should find what you're looking here." He pointed to a row of books at chest height and went back to his post. Harry selected three volumes and took them into the reading room. Daniel Bernoulli - he found a lengthy reference in the appendices of the second book.

The bulge in the upper surface of an airplane wing makes this surface longer than the lower portion. Because the air above moves faster, it exerts less pressure creating an upward imbalance.

Harry began making notes. At the photocopier, he reproduced several diagrams, went back to the table where he had left the other texts and began assembling a bibliography of sources.

Less pressure is exerted by a fluid that is flowing faster than ...

"Fancy meeting you here!" Mavis Calhoun was standing on the far side of the table clutching a sheet of paper in her hand. She wore a summery cotton dress and a string of pearl.

The impish smile tore his heart out, churned his mind to mush. She raised the sheet up over her head like a trophy. "You're looking at the happiest woman in the world!" "That man," she gestured in the direction of the reference librarian, "gave me this list of the one hundred favorite novels recommended by the American Library Guild."

"And you're going to read everyone."

"A to Z!" Mavis grinned. "Problem is, I don't recognize any of the authors. My reading to this point has been somewhat ...erotic "

"Erratic," Harry corrected.

"Yah, that too." Mavis bent over the table and positioned the sheet under his nose. "How's this one?"

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn - Harry's English literature class read the novel in his junior year. "I think you'd like it. It's about this girl growing up -"

Mavis leaned forward across the reading table and impetuously thrust a hand over his mouth. "No, for God's sake, don't say a word! Don't reveal a solitary thing that happens, because I'm going to read it cover to cover. Tonight!"

She ran off in the direction of the fiction shelves. For a solid minute after Mavis was gone, Harry could feel the pressure of her soft fingers against his lips. He should have kissed them - thrown her down on the reading room floor and made mad, debauched love to the young woman with the American Library Guild list. Instead, Harry collected his notes and quietly left the Brandenburg Public Library.

When he reached home, Harry took the three library books into his bedroom and laid them on a desk next to the study guide. The assignment was due in a week. Tomorrow after finishing his shift at the supermarket, he would copy out the rest of the material. Friday he would cobble together the artwork - drawings, graphs and scientific formulas. The science project would be finished with time to spare.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn - it was a masterpiece to be sure. Mavis was probably already lying in bed next to her Neanderthal, redneck husband scanning the dust jacket. Maybe she would slog through the first fifty pages, at best, and then lose interest. Forget fifty! Harry doubted Mavis Calhoun would survive much past the first twenty. Everything with Mavis was slap dash, close enough for jazz. She was a sprinter not an intellectual, long distance runner. The other day at the supermarket, Mavis had gone off on a rant about some newfangled metaphysical theory. Harry couldn't even recall the half of it. He couldn't remember because, when Mavis held court, Harry zoned out. The verbiage fell away and, in its place was a pristine, immaculate silence, a communion transcending the spoken word.

Harry showered and brushed his teeth. After blow-drying his hair, he cross-referenced what he had learned about Bernoulli's principle in the first book with the other two. Yes, everything was under control. When air was put in motion, the turbulent fluid created an imbalance in pressure above and below generating thrust, a forceful shove.

Mavis Calhoun entered the Brandenburg Public library reading room, causing Harry Wong Smith's feet to imperceptibly levitate an infinitesimal fraction of an inch off the ground. It didn't fall under the rubric of aerodynamics and certainly wasn't the sort of thing he could use in a science project, but the phenomenon was every bit as real!

Mavis Calhoun and Bernoulli's principle were all tied up in a metaphysical blur. The woman from Knoxville, Tennessee generated so much emotional thrust that she literally lifted

Harry out of his being, sent him careening into the cosmos like one of those romantically beguiled characters in a Chagall painting.

Flavor-of-the-month. Through the summer, Mavis immersed herself in the German existentialists, Kurt Vonnegut, Baba Ram Dass plus a hodgepodge of Sufi mystics and poets. There was no mention of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn or any of the other offerings on the ALG summer reading list. Regarding her eclectic, literary preferences, Harry had no opinion one way or the other. To witness Mavis' exuberant passion for truth (or whatever else she hankered after) was worth the price of admission.

One day Mavis cornered Harry in front of customer service. "I found this enchanting poem by the Persian mystic, Rumi, but I'm not sure if I understand it." She recited from memory leaning hard on a southern drawl that made the verse sound childishly commonplace:

*Since we've seen each other, a game goes on.
Secretly I move, and you respond.
You're winning, you think it's funny.
But look up from the board now,
look how I've brought in furniture
to this invisible place, so we can live here.*

When she finished, Harry blinked a half dozen times and stammered, "It's beautiful but I haven't a clue what the poet's talking about."

Three weeks later, Harry was restocking yogurt in the dairy aisle. Nellie Higgins from customer service approached from frozen foods. A pear-shaped woman, Nellie pranced about the store on her elephantine frame as though she were auditioning for the Boston Ballet. "A smashed jar of spaghetti sauce in aisle six needs seeing to."

Harry stepped back from the refrigerated dairy case. "Mavis Calhoun's husband just showed up with a dozen roses," Nellie added with a sour smile. "Laid the flowers down with a flourish and left. Just like that! Not a word." Nellie thrust her hands into her pink smock. "Sure wish someone would bring me a dozen roses for no good reason."

"I'm sure he had his reasons - good or otherwise."

"And what's that suppose to mean?"

"Nothing," Harry muttered.

Nellie grinned stupidly. "Don't let puppy love cloud your judgment."

Harry felt his cheeks burn. That he was sweet on Mavis was common knowledge. Still, no one at the supermarket had the right to make fun of their friendship. Not when the cashier at express checkout was having an affair with the assistant manager, a sordid back-alley romance, and one of the meat cutters was dating a fourteen year-old. "I suppose you heard the rumor."

The remark caught Harry off guard. "I got ears. I hear things," he replied noncommittally.

"Mavis' husband worked in a textile mill down south. Got into a squabble with another redneck." Nellie lowered her voice and moved closer. "A lovers' triangle... he killed the guy."

"That's old news," Harry lied.

“Police claimed it was self defense. Never even went to trial.” Nellie picked up a plastic tub of Dannon cherry yoghurt. “Still it’s just hearsay... could be a lot of bunk.”

Harry felt nauseous, light headed. He recalled an incident in early December. Travis Calhoun showed up midway through the afternoon shift, a heart-shaped box of chocolates tucked under his beefy arm. With a boyish grin, he laid the chocolates on the counter, blew an impetuous kiss and hurried away. Mavis pawed at the gift-wrapped box as though it contained an assortment of worthless rocks before stuffing it under the counter. Never once - not even when Travis mouthed the kiss - did he actually look at his wife; rather, his eyes ricocheted aimlessly off the customers, store fixtures, a cardboard display hawking Oreo Cookies at half price.

“What’d he kill him with?” Harry asked.

Nellie put the yoghurt back in the box and shrugged. Even when she was standing still, her unruly hips seemed to be decamping in a dozen, different directions. “Bare hands, a knife, crowbar, gun - what’s the difference? One punk’s rotting in a premature grave, while the other’s playing Don Juan passing out long stem roses.”

A lover’s triangle. Was Mavis, Harry wondered, the unnamed, third party? Or was the adulterous woman the dead man’s wife? Harry stifled the urge to retch. “But it’s just a rumor?”

“Mindless prattle,” Nellie confirmed, shaking her head vigorously up and down. “People run their mouths. Say any fool thing that pops into their demented heads.”

“Aisle six... spaghetti sauce.” He went off in search of a mop and pail.

Through the winter, Harry sent away for college catalogues and admission forms. His father graduated from Northeastern University on Huntington Avenue across from Symphony Hall. Five years in the cooperative studies program earned him an engineering degree plus an offer from one of the more prestigious firms in the student placement program. Harry’s marks in math and the sciences were consistently high, and Mr. Smith was encouraging his son to follow his own example.

In the Sunday supplement to the Brandenburg Gazette Harry read an account of a Wall Street broker who left his two-hundred thousand dollar job to manage a bed and breakfast in Booth Bay Harbor, Maine. “Best thing I ever did!” the ex-broker boasted. A shoe salesman from the Midwest took early retirement so he could devote the remaining years of his life to saving wild horses. “What wild horses?” Harry wondered. And if wild horses live freely in natural surroundings, why did they need saving? But then, as Mavis would say, it was all a matter of ‘karmic destiny’. Engineer, classical musician, supermarket bag boy, rescuer of wild horses, innkeeper - the possibilities were limitless.

Harry dutifully filled out his college applications and mailed them off with the processing fees. His private fantasy was to spend the next thirty years at Shop Rite pricing cherry yoghurt, stocking dried apricots, basmati rice and farm-fresh vegetables. He’d marry a woman like Mavis Calhoun, start a family. To hell with conspicuous consumption! They would live in a tiny matchbox of a house - cramped, but perfectly cozy - drive second-hand cars, scale back their expectations to nil. From Brandenburg center, a 40-minute drive south on 495 brought you to the sand dunes at Horseneck Beach where the all-day parking fee was five dollars. There was the free, bird sanctuary in Norfolk, a children’s playground alongside the zoo just outside the city and a local art museum. You didn’t have to be rich, just frugal. And, of course, you’d need a clone of Mavis. A Mavis facsimile was absolutely essential.

“Doing anything Saturday night?” Mavis asked the first week in November. Harry said that he wasn’t. “Come for supper. I told Travis all about you and he’s dying to meet you.”

The idea of Travis Calhoun, bigoted redneck, adulterer and homicidal maniac, dying to meet Harry Wong Smith was so absurd it demanded an equally absurd rebuttal. “Did you tell him I lusted after you day and night?”

Mavis burst into hysterical laughter. “You’re the funniest boy alive!” She could hardly catch her breath. “I’ll remember that one, for a hundred years.” Harry smiled weakly and went off to check his weekly assignment.

On Saturday late in the afternoon, Harry pulled on his best, wrinkle-free Dockers and a green sport shirt. Smearing Bay Rum cologne on either cheek, he grabbed his windbreaker and headed out the door.

The Calhouns lived at Fox Run Estates, a low-rent apartment complex, three miles north on route fifty-seven. The single bedroom apartment featured a cramped living room and dining area off the kitchen. She was alone when he arrived. On a coffee table was a picture of the couple at their senior prom. Travis Calhoun, macho blond hair curling over his ears and fifty pounds leaner, looked dashing in a white tuxedo. Mavis glowed with an utterly ditsy *joie de vivre*. Peering through the open doorway into her bedroom, Harry could see an antique white dresser and matching bed tables.

“Stove’s on the blink,” Mavis said. “Won’t be fixed till morning. Travis is picking up Chinese food. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Soda’s fine.”

Fifteen minutes later a blue pickup truck with a smashed side door pulled up in front of the building. Smelling of hard liquor, Travis Calhoun entered the kitchen. He went directly to his wife, kissed her on the mouth and placed a brown bag on the kitchen table. “Larry, is it?”

“Harry,” he corrected. Travis grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down a bit too forcefully. Lurching unsteadily to the refrigerator, he palmed two beers, placing one on the table next to Harry’s empty glass. Twisting the metal cap, Travis rubbed the rim of the bottle with a greasy hand and took a deep swig, draining half the contents before he came up for air. “Like music?”

Before Harry could answer, he added, “Shitkicker... that’s what we listen to mostly. Dwight Yokum, Delbert Clinton, Willie Nelson, Clint Black.” He fiddled with the dial until a twangy melody burst through the static. “Country and western. Good-ole-boy music.”

“That’s sort of nice,” Harry said, removing the cap from his beer. He filled the cup three-quarters full and took a sip. “Nice lyrics.” The tune, a rollicking, hillbilly song, told the story of a lovelorn cowboy who loses control and shoots up the jukebox in a bar; it was genuinely funny, as original as it was clever - a silly story told, in verse of a lovesick cowboy’s despair and redemption. Harry took another drink.

Travis opened containers while Mavis set the table and passed out silverware. “Let’s eat!”

When the meal was finished, Travis plucked two more beers from the refrigerator and hustled Harry into the living room. “Mavis’ a gem and I’m the luckiest sucker alive.”

“You’re the luckiest and I’m the second luckiest.” Harry wasn’t sure what he meant by the obtuse remark. The Smith’s were teetotalers. The first beer had softened Harry up; the second

transported him to a state of magnanimous euphoria where he was beginning to appreciate Travis Calhoun as much if not more than his goddess-of-a-wife.

“It’s like I won the lottery when Mavis agreed to marry a worthless skunk, white trash, son-of-a-bitch like me.” Tipping the bottle vertical, Travis nursed the suds at the bottom through the longneck and into his waiting lips. “She don’t ever shut up though... always with the fucking Eastern philosophy.” He placed an arm around Harry Wong Smith’s shoulder and squeezed hard as though they were blood brothers.

“Small price to pay, though.” Harry’s speech was slurred. Was he being too familiar with Travis Calhoun, a man who, except for Nellie Higgins wild accusations, Harry hardly knew?

In response, Mavis’ husband jumped up and got more beer. “A deaf mute,” Travis sniggered. “When I lose my temper ‘cause she’s cackling on and on about some skinny-assed faggot in an oversized-diaper, I tell Mavis that I’m gonna divorce her. Marry some ugly bitch who can’t neither hear nor talk.”

“A deaf mute!” Harry repeated and burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Mavis called from the kitchen.

Again Travis leaped up, but this time rushed into the bedroom instead. When he emerged, he was carrying a revolver. He handed the oversized gun, a Smith and Wesson Model 19 with a blue neoprene grip, to Harry.

“Getting sloppy in my old age.” Travis retrieved the gun, opened the barrel and removed the copper shells one by one. “Three fifty-seven magnum... hundred fifty-eight grain Federal jackets.”

He handed the gun back to Harry just as Mavis entered the room. “For God’s sake, Travis!”

He waved her off. “Gun’s empty, Safety catch’s on.”

“Nice looking weapon,” Harry said.

“Piece of shit. Don’t group the shots. Every bullet flies off in a different direction like goddamn birdshot.”

Mavis sat down on the couch next to Harry. She wore a cotton blouse and tan stretch pants. “Travis took the gun for repairs,” she said “but nobody can figure out what’s wrong with it.”

“Had the slugs checked with calipers. No problem. The hammer cams rearward when the trigger’s released and there’s plenty of mainspring pressure. Cylinder gap had some play to it but not enough to explain why it sprays lead like a shotgun.” Travis took the gun, pointed it at the far window and squeezed off a phantom round. The barrel spun with mechanical precision and the firing pin sprang forward.

“Jeez, Travis!” Mavis wrenched the gun from his hand and returned it to the bedroom.

Travis shook the slugs back and forth in his free hand like dice. “Still, who gives a shit about accuracy? Thief breaks into your house - at a distance of thirty feet you just point and shoot.” Travis fashioned a gun from his hand and index finger, squeezing off an imaginary round in the direction of his wife’s head.”

Mavis returned. “So, where were we?”

Christmas day, the Shop Rite Supermarket sponsored a free dinner for the unemployed and local residents down on their luck. Supermarket staff and VFW members catered the affair which was held at the post hall in South Attleboro. Harry waited tables. Mavis helped out in the

kitchen preparing box lunches for elderly shut-ins. Harry arrived an hour early. Two hundred people had already arrived, an odd assortment of somber souls.

“I don’t see how this makes any difference in the quality of their lives,” Harry grumbled. He was standing near the side entrance as a steady stream of late arrivals filtered into the room. Mavis had just come from the kitchen to join him.

At a nearby table, three men in their late twenties were laughing a bit too loudly, but nobody seemed to care. One of the men, a gaunt, goofy-looking fellow with bad teeth, winked at Mavis. The gesture seemed more childish than brazen and further dampened Harry’s holiday cheer. “The alternative,” Mavis said, “is we don’t have a party, and they all go without Christmas dinner.”

“They can’t help it,” Mavis added, nodding pleasantly to the fellow with the bad teeth. A staticky Jingle Bells burst over the loudspeaker but no one was singing. They were waiting for the main course. You could see it in the grim set of an old woman’s jaw, the impatient squabbling of a dowdy, middle-aged couple. Frig the music! Bring on the goddamn turkey!

The kitchen doors flew open and a column of staff emerged with platters of steaming mash potatoes, green beans and winter squash. The meal was officially underway. “Got to man my battle station.” Mavis disappeared back into the kitchen.

A teenage girl - she couldn’t have been any older than Harry - stank of body odor. Not the usual, day-old variety but the rancid, nose searing stench - a month’s accumulation of sloth and grunge. “Merry Christmas! How’s your meal?” Harry felt no connection whatsoever with the foul-smelling girl. She might as well have been a humanoid from some far-flung solar system impersonating the real thing. No sympathy or compassion. All Harry wanted was to finish out the shift, go home and forget about Brandenburg’s poor unfortunates.

“Another busload’s pulling in,” hollered one of the VFW workers. “Get a headcount and let cookie know how many extra meals.”

“Another busload,” Harry thought. Brandenburg was a relatively small community; how many indigents could there possibly be? With hot food on the table now, the guests were mollified. Not that anyone was singing, but the mood had lightened.

“Drivers are needed to deliver meals to the subsidized housing on Woodward Ave.” Mavis had her coat on and was fishing in her pocket for the car keys. “This was such a joy! I’m going to do it every year.” Mavis stretched, rising up on her toes and kissed Harry lightly on the cheek. “Merry Christmas, Harry!”

Around two o’clock, coffee and dessert were served and the meal was officially over. Harry went into the men’s room to pee. The three men Harry noticed earlier were smoking cigarettes outside the door as Harry brushed by and entered the bathroom. “Ain’t that the Chink waiting tables?” It was the voice of the gaunt, goofy-looking fellow.

Harry positioned himself in front of a urinal and unzipped his fly. “A room full of horny white guys and look who the foxy bitch sucks face with.” Again, it was the infantile winker running off at the mouth. He lowered his voice and, to Harry’s great relief, the running commentary became unintelligible. After a minute there was a raucous outburst of indecent hoots. Harry waited until the threesome had gone back to their seats before sneaking out the back door.

In May Harry was accepted to Boston University. His senior prom was scheduled at the Biltmore in downtown Providence. The Paul Borelli big band would set up in the main ballroom. He didn't have a date yet. Tuesday afternoon when Harry arrived at Shop Rite, another woman was working the middle register. "Mavis never showed," the woman reported flatly. "No call. No nothing."

An hour later, three policemen entered the store and requested, Molly Pruitt, the store manager. They spoke informally near the recycling bins; one officer penciled notes on a loose-leaf pad. Toward six o'clock fragments of second-hand information began to circulate. Mavis was at the hospital. A bad car accident. Head injuries. Broken teeth. The husband was dead.

Harry hurried to the manager's office. "There's been some talk -"

The manager looked up. Her face was pale, expressionless. "Not now," she said tersely and waved Harry out of the room.

Harry cornered Nellie Higgins at customer service and asked about the accident. Nellie looked even worse than Molly Pruitt. "There wasn't any accident. Mavis' husband came home drunk and beat the crap out of her. Busted up her face something awful, according to the cops. She's still at the hospital. Be released home in a day or so, poor woman."

Harry felt his brain convulse, crushed like an animal's paw in a steel-trap. "The husband?"

"Cleaned out their joint bank account and flew the coop. Cops figure he headed south... got relatives and friends down there." Nellie leaned over the counter. "We're taking up a collection... to get Mavis a nice fruit basket and a card."

"Fruit basket," Harry repeated hollowly and groped his way to the men's room where he sat on a toilet with the door closed and lowered his head between his legs.

Some ugly bitch who can't neither hear nor talk. A deaf mute.

Harry remembered Travis' drawling commentary. How he laughed like a treacherous fool, a Judas Iscariot, with Mavis, no more than twenty feet away, drying the last of the dishes.

In the morning, Harry bunked school and headed over to the hospital. Mavis was sitting in the solarium with a hospital-issue robe thrown over her shoulders. Both eyes were smudged black, the sooty discoloration fanning to the delicate lashes, bleeding down the cheekbone like spilled ink. "Travis hits real hard."

Harry gripped the back of a hardwood chair and held on like a drowning man. The two front teeth were gone, snapped off at the gum line, leaving a gap five-eighths of an inch across and half an inch deep. "Why did he do it?"

Mavis folded her hands demurely in her lap. "For the fun of it."

"What's wrong with your eye?"

She patted the side of her face gingerly. "He broke my cheekbone. The eye won't focus." Mavis opened her mouth and pointed. "My medical insurance has a deductible on dental... five hundred dollar. And I'm already in hock up to my ears."

A nurse pushing a wheelchair ahead of her entered the solarium. "Need another X-ray of that cheek."

Mavis transferred to the wheelchair and sat legs askew like a rag doll, slumped at an angle. "It was sweet of you to come." The nurse pushed off, leaving Harry standing in an empty, sun-drenched room.

A week later, Harry heard, through word of mouth, that Mavis was back at Fox Run. Travis Calhoun had been sighted at a cabin his uncle owned in Murfreesboro on the west fork of the Stones River. But when the police arrived he was long gone, driven deep into the rural brush by enlightened self-interest.

Harry went to visit Mavis one night after work. "How're you feeling?"

The raccoon mask had faded to a sickly yellow tinged with olive. "Much better. The double vision's gone."

Both eyes seemed to be cooperating quite nicely. "I had a similar problem with one of my eyes when I was a baby," Harry said. "Any word on your husband?"

Mavis smiled. "Called from a truck stop in Georgia. Apologized half a million times for what he did. Cried like a baby."

"Yes, that seems about right."

Mavis went into the bedroom and returned with the blue-handled revolver. She tipped the muzzle forward and cracked the barrel to reveal a fat, 357 slug in each chamber. "I told him, if he ever showed his face around here, I'd blow his pecker and both testicles off with the defective Smith and Wesson."

Harry ran a finger over her closed lips, inserting it gently into her mouth, navigating the crevice. "After your husband bashed your exquisite teeth in," Harry said, "I asked myself what the immortals would do - Gandhi, Krishnamurti, Hermann Hesse, Jesus Christ, Buddha, Tolstoy... the whole, cosmic crew. All the enlightened masters and morally superior beings. I pictured them munching pork lo mein and chugalugging Budweisers till their spiritually-unencumbered brains were fried; listening to whiny hillbilly music and your husband's sarcastic tirades."

Harry laid an envelope on the kitchen table. He opened it and a collection of bills - twenties and fifties spilled across the surface of the table. "Five hundred bucks to cover the deductible on your dental insurance." He nudged the bills toward her. "To get your mouth fixed."

Mavis collapsed tiredly into the chair and stared at the scattering of money. "This isn't right."

"Trust me," Harry shot back. "Where're the broken teeth?"

On the counter next to the sugar jar, was a piece of Kleenex, bunched together and tied with a string. She brought the impromptu pouch to the table and carefully unwrapped the tissue. Harry flipped the teeth over several times until they lay front-side up. Identical in every respect, the pale enamel on one was obliterated by a wine-colored stain. "Which is which?"

Mavis shrugged. He took the blotchy tooth to the sink, rinsed the blood away and placed it alongside its mate. "Twin souls!"

After awhile, he rewrapped the teeth in fresh tissue and secured it with the string. "Bring this to the dentist on the first visit."

"Yes, I'll certainly do that," Mavis said. "Would you like some coffee?" Harry shook his head. She put the kettle on to boil. While the water was heating, Harry moved into the living room. On the coffee table was a clothbound collection of spiritual verses. A page toward the rear was dog-eared and a short verse underlined:

Since we've seen each other, a game goes on.

Secretly I move, and you respond.

You're winning, you think it's funny...

In the kitchen the kettle sent up an insistent, wheezy drone. Mavis brought the warm drinks into the living room. As they talked, Harry hardly noticed the fading raccoon mask or the intermittent, sibilant hiss as her tongue stumbled and faltered through the breach.

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The Reluctant Bigamist

When Karla Pilsudski stopped by her brother's place, she found Mickey, crouched behind the living room sofa peeking through the curtains. Around his thick neck hung a chain of armor-piercing, machine gun shells. The week after his Army discharge, he bored the quarter-inch holes in the soft, brass casings, later threading the bullets together on a length of rawhide. Like so many golden, shark's teeth, the shells fanned out across a khaki T-shirt with a gash under the left armpit.

Karla placed a grocery bag on the coffee table. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Reconnoitering," he muttered, without turning his head. "A full battalion of VC recently infiltrated the countryside."

A gawky woman with plain features and a thin, residual scar below her nose from a harelip, Karla leaned closer for a better look, almost rising up on Mickey's shoulders piggyback style. In the next yard over, two, oriental girls were building a clumsy, wooden frame with two-by-fours and a bag of 8-penny nails. The rectangular structure lay on the uneven ground. "Your new neighbors are Cambodian, not Vietnamese," she noted.

Tat. Tat. Tat. The older girl, plump and in her thirties, alternately hammered the studs together then tug them apart. The younger, much prettier girl stood to one side wearing a goofy, ineffectual grin. Lost in adolescent reveries, she held the bag of nails against her meager breasts.

"What are they doing?"

"Building a storage shed." Mickey gestured with his eyes at a mound of rubble directly behind the girls. "A squad of enemy sympathizers poured the foundation last weekend."

Karla cringed. "I wish you wouldn't talk crazy."

The girls moved a few feet away and were hidden behind a Scotch pine. Mickey lurched to the next window over. Now the tangled clothesline with its T-shaped poles was blocking his view. He had absent-mindedly left the rope out all winter; having repeatedly frozen and thawed so many times, the cotton cord was ruined. Cracked and discolored, the old-fashioned, wooden clothespins weren't much better. Not that he bothered much with laundry in recent years. A month after they moved in, the Cambodians installed a sleek, umbrella-shaped unit, the metal pole sunk in a foot-deep tub of cement and crushed stone. The clothesline arms folded straight up and out of the way when not in use.

"A friend of mine works at the Providence Housing Authority. He says a Cambodian family in one of their second floor units lined their living room floor with plastic drop clothes, spread a six-inch layer of topsoil and planted rice."

"Preposterous!" Karla eyed her brother suspiciously. "How did management find out?"

“Drop cloth sprang a leak, flooding the apartment below.”

“Racist hogwash!”

“Yeah, well I’ve heard the same, whacky story from three, semi-reliable sources.” Mickey scratched an inflamed hair follicle buried in his scruffy beard. “Drive down Cranston Street. On every dilapidated corner, all you see are Cambodian markets, nail salons and eateries.”

“Blight with a Southeast Asian hue,” Karla interjected acidly, anticipating his train of thought.

“They doubled and tripled-up in single bedroom apartments,” he ignored her sarcasm. “Extended families of grandparents, in-laws, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, and halfwit second cousins once removed.”

“So what’s your point?” Karla pressed.

Mickey reached into his front pocket and fingered a joint the size of an Italian sweet sausage - pure Maui-wowi. Hawaii’s finest. He tested the ends to insure they were twisted tight. “Nothing,” he muttered without conceding defeat. “A simple statement of historical fact.”

It was ninety degrees, the middle of August. In an hour or so, he would pedal his ten-speed bike into Brandenburg Center, sit on an isolated bench in the rear of Veteran’s Memorial Park and get blissfully wrecked. Around two pm, he’d wander over to Bagels and Cream for the luncheon special and a cup of mocha Java cappuccino, then return to his spot in the leafy park until dusk. A perfect day... a no-brainer.

“Goddam nails are too short,” Mickey grumbled peevishly. “The slightest breeze would blow the foolish structure over.”

“It’s none of your business how they build their shed if, in fact, that’s what they’re doing.”

“I wouldn’t build an outhouse with anything less than three-and-a-half inch nails.” Mickey lumbered away from the window and grabbed the grocery bag. “Where’s the Heineken?”

Karla’s expression soured. “Last thing you need,” she said, pointing at a beer gut which resembled a full term pregnancy. Following him into the kitchen, she watched as her brother sorted the groceries.

“You never called my girlfriend. It’s been a month now,” Karla said.

“The gay divorcée?”

She removed an empty beer can from the piano bench. Liquid had seeped through the finish to the porous wood below and left a darkened halo. Most of the furniture had similar, alcohol-induced blemishes. “Betty’s the new deaconess at church. You might have known that if you ever showed up for Sunday services.”

Mickey opened the refrigerator and slid a tub of unsalted butter onto the middle rack. “Her husband ran off.”

“The marriage ended by mutual consent.”

“Then why’d he bail out on the woman?” Mickey pressed.

“Betty,” she said casually, “is a bit of a fussybudget.”

He set a box of pitted prunes in the cupboard. “Which is to say, the woman’s a control freak... an anal compulsive whacko?”

The scar on her top lip flexed and furrowed in a bleak smile. “We’ll put Betty on hold for now.” Karla glanced at her watch. “Kids will be home from school soon. I gotta run.”

She turned to go but Mickey grabbed her arm and gestured in the direction of the Cambodian’s property. “Three, shitty years in Vietnam, and now I got to wake up and look at these slant-eye assholes every day for the rest of my life.”

Mickey glanced distractedly about the bedroom. A cardboard box with empty beer cans lay in one corner. The bed was unmade, the top sheet trailing on the floor. A dust bunny the size of a small rodent peeked out from behind the box. Next to a half-eaten slice of pepperoni pizza, a pile of girlie magazines littered the night table.

Mickey never paid full price. Rather, he bought outdated, remaindered issues - three for ten dollars - the front covers ripped off. Retrieving a carpenter's belt from the floor, he slipped a hammer into the rawhide loop and clipped a Stanley 25-foot Powerlock II tape measure to the leather pouch.

"Excuse me," Mickey hollered, stepping over the property line, "but I couldn't help notice." The heavier girl straightened up and stared coolly at him while her younger sister giggled and looked embarrassedly away. Mickey drew the tape from his work belt and ran the yellow blade the length of the bottom board. "None of these studs are centered."

The older girl edged forward and stared blankly at the metal tape. Mickey pointed to a thin, black line with arrows on either end which bisected the blade every 16 inches and began marking the wood with a flat, carpenter's pencil. "This is where you want the studs for a proper, nailing surface." Fishing a hammer from the leather belt, he struck the base sharply, separating it from the others boards. The pretty girl jumped, scampering toward the house.

"You barge into our yard uninvited," the older girl hissed, "and tear our new shed apart." Squat and nondescript, she had little of the exotic charm usually associated with oriental woman. Using the claw, Mickey began removing the bent nails. "What are you doing now?"

"These nails are too short. They won't hold a shed together." Mickey retrieved one of the ruined nails and tossed it over his shoulder. "Wouldn't build an outhouse with anything this flimsy." He lumbered back to his house and returned a moment later with a pail of framing nails and a 48-inch level.

Ignoring the women, he hammered the wood together, two nails in either end, to form a simple box, then sandwiched the remaining, five studs at equal intervals. Placing the level on the foundation, Mickey lifted one end and checked the yellow bubble. "Foundation's cockeyed. You'll have to shim the front in order to keep the building straight up and down."

"And if we choose not to?" The older girl blustered.

Mickey put his hand in his pocket and fingered the bulging joint. "It's the weekend," He replied ignoring the question. "I won't need these tools until Monday morning. Consider the nails a gift, an unsolicited act of Caucasian kindness." Leaving the tools and nails strewn on the ground, he wandered back to his own house.

Around five, Mickey returned from the park. In the next yard over, the rear and two side walls were standing erect on the foundation which had been shimmed with remnants of cedar shingles to a perfect 90 degrees. "Sonofabitch!" he muttered.

Around eight o'clock, there was a knock at the door. The two, Cambodian sisters were standing on the front stoop with a brown paper bag. "I rang the bell for the longest time," the older girl noted peevishly. Without being asked, she stepped over the threshold and into the house. "I'm Rasmei Butt and my sister's name is Mearadey."

The last person brazen enough to show up unannounced was a Jehovah Witness hawking salvation and back issues of *The Watchtower*. As the zealot was just getting up a head of apocalyptic steam, Mickey went into the bedroom to locate some of his own, illustrated literature, and the visit was curtailed.

“And you are?” Rasmei asked.

Mickey tentatively sniffed the air. “Something smells good.”

“Your name, please.”

“Mickey .” He moved a few steps closer. “What’s in the bag?”

“My family runs an oriental restaurant. We brought you some delicacies.”

Mickey whisked the bag into the kitchen and began opening containers. “Mooshi beef with hoisin sauce,” Rasmei said, indicating a dish with a half dozen, thin, rice flour pancakes, “and shrimp fried lort.”

The sink was full of dirty plates. Along with the oil-stained pizza box, a half-dozen crumpled beer cans littered the counter near the refrigerator. Grabbing a fork and clean plate from the cupboard, she scooped the food onto the dish. “Six treasure chicken.” Rasmei held a selection up to his nose. “Each treasure represents a spice: fennel, anise, ginger, licorice root, cinnamon and clove.” She stared blankly through a torn undershirt at his hairy chest. “It’s the house specialty. Very popular.”

“No fortune cookie?”

“Fortune cookies are reserved for paying customers,” Rasmei replied laconically.

Only now Mickey noticed that the older girl wasn’t really fat - at least not like the slobby hausfraus-turned-soft-porn-queens in the grosser, triple-X girlie magazines. The Cambodian woman was short and compact with wide, almond eyes and a fleshy, pushed-in nose. The skin was dark as chocolate ice cream. An unromantic, no-nonsense face.

“I have a proposition,” she said as he was reaching for a second helping.

Mickey waved a greasy fork in the air. “Barter food for brawn.”

Her wide nostrils flared. The younger girl sat down at the table and stared at her nails which were decorated in an elaborate, multicolored pattern. “Mearadey and I will do the actual building,” Rasmei clarified. “I only need you to straighten things out as you did earlier when we hadn’t spaced the boards properly.”

Mickey pried open a plastic container of golden sauce dusted with bright red flecks of cayenne pepper. He didn’t know what pained him more: the prospect of dealing with the insufferable older sister or supervising the ineffectual Mearadey, with her straight, black hair falling down to the small of her slender back. “I could only help on weekends and, even then, it’d take a good month to get the walls covered, shingle the roof and hang doors. Why are you doing this?”

“It’s a birthday present for our father.”

An image of the sour-faced, ill-humored Mr. Butt flitted through his brain.

Earlier in the week, while changing the oil in his truck, Mickey had met his new neighbor. Lying flat on his back, he had just cracked the nut on the oil pan and was sliding a plastic tub under the chassis when he looked up. An older man with dark features and a sunken chest was staring down at him like a stupid bug. The man scowled, and then walked briskly away without a word or friendly gesture. “Jerk!” Mickey pulled the plug out of the oil pan and felt the scalding oil curl around his thumb like a knife blade. “Weasel-faced, bastard!”

Rasmei drifted to the window and admired her handiwork one yard over. “We could have easily gotten the front wall up, but for two, minor details.”

“Which were?”

“Doors and window.” Mearadey placed an ornately painted hand over her mouth and tittered fitfully.

Mickey closed the containers, took a swig of beer and belched. "In the morning, with your perseverance and Mearadey's moral support, we'll build the front wall." Rasmei gestured to her sister that it was time to leave and the lithe girl, who hadn't uttered a word since entering the house, rose to her feet and padded soundlessly to the door.

As they reached the living room, Rasmei said, "Are you eccentric or just making a fashion statement?"

"I could ask the same of you," Mickey shot back, indicating the loose fitting, wraparound silk skirts that both girls were wearing.

She fingered one of the 30-caliber, shell casing that hung from his wide neck and scowled with a bland, almost clinical detachment. "My dress is called a *sampot*, a traditional Cambodian garment." She scratched her fleshy nose. "You were in the army during the Vietnam War?"

"Three years near Pleiku... at a firebase in the Annamese highlands."

"You made it home in one piece," Rasmei observed. "The war was already over when I graduated from high school."

"Didn't miss much." Mickey shot back. "In 1967, General Westmoreland decided to go after the Viet Cong with US infantry. Operation Fairfax. The goal was to harass and ambush enemy units operating in the countryside around Saigon." It was still light out but the sun was beginning to fade causing familiar images to blend and blur. "We killed 3,000 NVA and Viet Cong troops. Three thousand... a nice round number."

"American casualties?" Rasmei asked.

"Nineteen hundred troops were lost in the operation." Mickey spoke in a dull monotone as though citing historical statistics. "In April, there was another series of bloody engagements. We destroyed a thousand NVA at Loc Ninh, fifteen hundred more further north at Dak To."

"Of course, we were just pissing in the wind. The whole, cruddy war was a fraud, a bad joke played out at our expense."

Mickey spent three years in Viet Nam. When the lieutenant in charge of his unit stepped on an anti-personnel mine, he was promoted to platoon sergeant. His first kill occurred during a routine sentry duty at a firebase in the Mekong Delta. Not that there was anything routine about killing someone.

Two hours into Mickey's watch, a Viet Cong soldier dressed in baggy, blue cotton pants came up over a ridge into the clearing a hundred and fifty yards away. The man, in his early twenties, was lean and muscular. He carried an AK 47 assault rifle and a leather cartridge belt with ammunition clips slung around his neck. Alone, the enemy soldier sauntered towards him at a relaxed, loping gait as though he had no idea there might be any Americans close by. Mickey fixed the man's chest squarely in the crosshair of his scope sight and squeezed off a round. There was a delay between the report of exploding gun powder and its consequence. The man dropped or, more precisely, slumped forward on his face, and did not stir or make a sound. The bullet struck squarely in the heart.

The body just lay there, inert and insubstantial, all the vibrant energy dissipated by the quarter-inch ball of lead. Mickey sat up in the foxhole and looked around. Nothing. The birds, which had fallen silent when the gun erupted, resumed their cheerful chatter. A warm breeze drew the scent of orange blossoms from God-knows-where into his nostrils driving out the acrid scent of burnt powder.

Ten minutes passed. A pastel-colored moth, unearthly huge and ephemeral, flitted over the tall grass before disappearing into the thick brush. The body never moved. Not that he

expected it to, but now the trajectory of his life catapulted crazily off course. A man was dead and Mickey was sitting comfortably in a foxhole surrounded by orange blossoms and a chortling chorus of birds and bull frogs.

For the next month, every young, Vietnamese woman he passed was the dead man's wife or kid sister; every middle-aged couple his mother and father anxiously waiting a triumphant homecoming and, with each passing day, fearing the worse. Other murderous battles would engage his mind; he fought his heart out and counted his blessing to remain among the living. But this first kill was too ordinary and unambiguous. The man in the blue pants came up over the ridge, and Mickey placed a 30-millimeter slug through his heart. The enemy combatant had no opportunity to defend himself - not that war was a gentleman's sport; in retrospect, Mickey felt no obligation, moral or otherwise, to act differently.

The first years following the war, Mickey carried on an obsessive, almost ritualistic, dialogue with the dead man's family. At weird hours of the early morning when his insomnia kicked into overdrive, he would review the circumstances surrounding the Vietnamese soldier's death. He gathered the family members together inside his head - a confluence of sympathetic minds and spirits. Never asking their forgiveness, rather he begged them to understand the insane logic of war.

The scene always played itself out with the same, predictable denouement, his imagination unable to sway - or even marginally influence - the outcome. The dead man's family listened impassively, without the slightest hint of emotion. In the end, they simply turned and shuffled silently away, leaving Mickey to rot in the purgatory of an inconsolable conscience.

Kicking off his left shoe, Mickey removed the sock, and revealed a jagged inch-and-a-half long scar resembling a Rorschach inkblot on the instep.

"How'd that happen?" Rasmei inquired.

"Along with landmines, the VC buried bamboo stakes in the mud and high grass. I caught a punji stick on a routine patrol. Spent the next, three months recuperating at a naval hospital in Yokuska, Japan." Mickey put his sock back on. "Sometimes, the bastards crapped on the sharpened sticks."

Mearadey grimaced and looked away. Her sister never flinched.

"Four years after your war ended," Rasmei said, "the North Vietnamese invaded my homeland and liberated us from Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. I was ten years old. My family fled north along Route 6 to Angkor Wat, then west into Thailand. Five years later, we immigrated to America." Rasmei shook her head thoughtfully. "Perhaps you have bad feelings toward my people because of your experience during the war."

Mickey put his shoe and sock back on. "I'm a misanthrope not a racist," He replied gruffly.

"Then you are just like my father," she said without explanation and walked out into the warm night air, her addle-brained sister following on her heels.

The next morning after finishing off the last of the six treasure chicken, Mickey sidled over to the Butt's back yard. Placing a base and top plate side by side, he marked the openings for the doors and window. Less than an hour later, the fourth wall was plumbed and toe nailed in

place. "We'll need half-inch plywood for the floor and roof. About the siding, do you have any preference?"

"Whatever you suggest," Rasmei replied.

"Texture one-eleven is durable and takes a stain well."

"Draw up a shopping list. I'll have it delivered."

Mickey scratched his crotch and stared at his Chevy, 2-ton pickup truck parked in the driveway. "There are a few small items - joist hangers, hinges, galvanized nails. I'll swing by Home Depot one night after work."

"Let me know; I'll join you." Before he could mount an intelligible protest, she added, "My father is so pleased with his new shed! I don't know what we would have done without you."

On Thursday late in the day, Mickey pulled up in front of the Cambodians' home and beeped the horn. Rasmei hurried out to the truck. "There's been a slight change in plans." As she spoke the front door opened; Mearadey, her father, mother and an elderly woman with a wrinkled face filed onto the front lawn. Rasmei hauled herself up into the cab of the pickup truck and waved at her relatives. "My family will be joining us."

The entourage piled into a metallic blue Subaru. "I don't get it," Mickey grumbled.

"It's a cultural thing. Cambodians tend to go places and make important decisions as a group."

Mickey turned the engine over and pulled away from the curbed. Immediately the Subaru inched up behind him. In the rear view mirror he could see the father, staring stiffly straight ahead. "Your old man, ...does he ever smile?"

Rasmei considered the question briefly. "No, not often."

At the lumber supply store Mickey got a cart and loaded the bottom with twelve-foot, pressure treated two-by-fours. The elderly woman with the wrinkled face said something to Rasmei in her native tongue. "She wants to know what the wood is for."

"The sub floor."

Rasmei translated. The woman pointed to another pile of lumber and spoke again, favoring the n's and g's, in a rubbery, singsong fashion. "She says these boards are less expensive."

"Perhaps," Mickey muttered under his breath, "Granny would like to subcontract the project."

"She's just trying to be thrifty."

"Tell her that these boards are stronger and won't rot as quickly."

Rasmei translated. The old woman's wiry, chicken neck bobbed up and down approvingly.

The next aisle over, Mickey found the metal joist hangers, hinges, door latch sets and 2-inch, galvanized nails. Again, the old woman questioned the nails. "Tell her they're zinc coated to resist rust. That's why they're more expensive." Only Mr. Butt, whose thoughts were engaged elsewhere, appeared less than satisfied with the explanation.

On the ride home Rasmei said, "That went well."

"Sure did," Mickey confirmed and took one last look in the rear view mirror. Rasmei's mother was sitting in the passenger seat gesturing with her hands and laughing heartily. Her husband, impervious to her bright humor, looked thoroughly morose.

“Mearadey bought a cloth, carpenters apron so she will have a place to put the nails and hold her hammer,” Rasmei said.

“Does she know how to talk?”

“Of course she can. She’s just very shy.”

Mickey shrugged. “She’s never said a thing in my presence.”

On Saturday Mickey showed the girls how to evenly space the metal hangers for the sub floor while he snapped a blue chalk line and, with a 7¼-inch, Makita circular saw, trimmed the flooring to fit. Mearadey swaggered about the yard getting little accomplished but looking radiant with her apron full of annular nails, the hammer slung rakishly from her hip. At one point, she went into the house and returned with a pitcher of ice tea.

“According to Rasmei,” Mickey said, “you’re not a deaf mute.” Still holding the empty drink tray, Mearadey looked perplexed. “Say something.”

“What do you want me to say?” she replied

“That’s more than enough.”

An hour later, he left them with a scroll saw to trim the openings and hang the texture one-eleven. “Next week we’ll work on the roof.”

Mickey went home and took a triple hit of adapin - 150 mg - to calm his nerves and fell asleep watching Three Stooges reruns on the cable channel.

Waking late in the afternoon to the muffled sounds of oriental music, he staggered out of bed and peaked through the living room blinds. The Butt family was having a cookout. Mearadey was mooning over a muscular, boy with shoulder-length hair. Meanwhile, an admiring crowd had gathered around the skeletal shed. They pawed at the rough-cut wood, kicked at the sole plate. A young boy hoisted himself up through the naked window opening and hung upside down like a monkey from the top sill.

In a chaise lounge 50 feet away sat the master of ceremonies, stone-faced Mr. Butt. His wife was moving back and forth among the guests with a tray of drinks. But for the difference in ages, Mrs. Butt and Rasmei could have passed for identical twins. She had the same squat physique - face as flat as a Mekong Delta rice paddy, the broad, ill-defined nose thrown on as an afterthought.

The rear door opened. Rasmei, dressed in dungaree shorts and a plaid blouse emerged with a platter of hors d’oeuvres. A man, fortyish and heavysset with dark-rimmed glasses, immediately approached and began following the girl about the yard like an obedient, well-trained dog.

Mickey went to the hall closet, rummaged around and emerged with his mother’s high-powered, birding binoculars. In the bathroom, he sat on the toilet and lifted the Levolor blind a fraction of an inch. Rasmei and the heavysset man were gone. Vanished. Mrs. Butt was bending down to offer her husband a drink. The lens blurred. Pulling back a half turn on the adjusting knob, husband and wife eased into sharp focus. Mr. Butt accepted a glass of pink liquid and, as the portly, middle-aged woman turned away, his features softened, dissolved like wet, potter’s clay spun on a wheel.

“Damn!” Mickey wrenched the lenses away from his eyes. Had the man smiled - ecstatically, with unrestrained joy - or was his medicated mind playing tricks? Either way, the sight of Mr. Butt showing strong affection was more than he could stomach. Mickey went into the other room. He took his clothes off, climbed into bed and pulled the covers up over his head.

Later that night, Rasmei appeared with a bag of food. "Where's your sister?" Mickey asked.

"Went on a date." She brought the food into the kitchen, placed the bag on the table and began opening the containers. "Shanghai rice cakes," she pointed to a pale white, doughy dish. On a separate dish she arranged mint, cucumber, fresh lettuce, bean sprouts, noodles, peanut milk and soft rolls.

Mickey sniffed the mild aroma. "I ate something similar in country."

She went to the refrigerator, cracked open a beer and placed it on the table next to him. "Bee Boong," she indicated the second container... it's a traditional Vietnamese dish." Rasmei surveyed the room. Empty beer cans, four and five deep now, fanned out the length of the counter; a week's worth of Brandenburg Gazette newspapers littered the floor near the back door. "The pigs in my former village had cleaner personal habits."

"Yes, but could they build a storage shed?"

She grinned but then, just as quickly, the humor faded. "We had a barbecue today and a man asked me to marry him." Rasmei tossed the words out in an offhand manner. "For the third time."

Mickey rubbed the rim of the bottle, sipping at the foam. "I assume you refused on both, previous occasions." Rasmei responded with a hollow smile. "Why did you compare me to your father the other day?" he asked.

She sat down across from him and removed a beer can from the arm of a chair. Liquid had seeped through the finish to the porous wood below and leaving yet another soiled ring. "You're both so mistrustful."

"Which tells me nothing," Mickey said.

The sun had set, all the color - reds, blues, yellows and grainy purples - washed out of the evening sky. Through the open window, they could hear the screams and catcalls of the neighbor's children, cannonballing off the deck of their above-ground pool. With the light almost completely gone, the mother begged them, for the hundredth time, to come in for the night. Her request precipitated a fresh outburst of hoots and jeers sending small bodies catapulting into the darkened water. Rasmei glanced at Mickey and looked away. "And you're both so angry."

Sunday they installed windows.

Because it was only a storage shed, there was no reason to insulate the rough openings. Mearadey was gone - quit without notice. Off somewhere with the new boyfriend. Rasmei had discarded her clumsy, wooden hammer for Mickey's steel-shanked Estwing with the 13-inch throw. By now she had learned to let the weighty tool do the work, the power coming from the shoulder rather than her slender wrist.

Whack. Whack. Whack. With three, arcing blows, she set the finished nails flush against the coarse wood. "On the world news last night they reported more fighting in my homeland. People fleeing north to the Tai border."

Mickey was fastening the decorative trim to the left door panel with sheet rock screws. He bent down and positioned the screw gun over the head of a black screw. There was a whirring burst of noise and the decorative white-trimmed pine tightened neatly against the plywood panel. "The bastards can't leave well enough alone."

They hung the other door, installed the latch and stood back to admire the roofless building. "For the crosspiece," Mickey pointed to an imaginary midpoint where the newly-formed doors came together, "we'll go up a couple of feet with scrap lumber, then run a transverse beam. That'll provide enough pitch."

They cut 12 roof joists, angling the near ends to butt up against the crossbeam while the rear bedded comfortably in a notch on the top sill. "What about Mr. Persistence?" Mickey asked. Rasmei looked at him with a dull expression. "The fellow who wants to marry you, over and over again."

"Not my type," she said without further elaboration.

Mickey removed his tool belt and threw it aside. "That's enough for today." He started to collect the smaller tools throwing them into the toolbox. "We'll cover the roof and lay shingles next weekend and your shed will be finished."

For two weeks running it rained throughout the weekend. The shed's bare walls and flooring soaked up the moisture and dried out only to be drenched again. A relentless, unforgiving drizzle was beating down on the roofless shed. The structure reminded Mickey of a fetus, a half-formed, embryo which, in less than a month's time, would come to full term. The Butt family, he mused, would store their riding lawnmower and gardening supplies, their bicycles, wheelbarrow and god-knows what else in the spacious, new shed. With every tool and trinket, they would become less like their fratricidal countrymen and more like ordinary Americans. Whatever the hell that meant!

"What should we do about the shed?" Rasmei's voice on the phone sounded pinched, worried.

It was eight am. Now, even on the off days when she wasn't bringing over the little white boxes, the house smelled like a Chinese noodle factory. "How'd you get my number?"

"You're in the book."

He could hear the oriental inflection - the clipped and brittle precision of English spoken as a second language - in the disembodied voice. "The plywood's held together with waterproof glue. Rain won't affect anything."

After an uncomfortable pause, she said, "What are you doing?"

Mickey was standing barefoot in his underwear. "Now?"

"No, a week from Tuesday."

Her pokerfaced brusqueness stood him back on his heels. No one ever called much before noon; the clattering telephone had jolted him out of a comatose fog. "Nothing. I'm talking to you."

"Why do you dress like every day is Halloween?"

Mickey took a deep breath; for a brief moment, he considered hanging up the phone, peeing his brains out, and going back to bed. "In Vietnam I was a lowly grunt... spent three years in light infantry. Mortars mostly. Short range, high trajectory crap. For thirty-six months I slaughtered people at a polite distance." Mickey paused just long enough for her to tell him to shut up. He cracked his knuckles and farted. "Putting the war behind me has become like a quest for the Holy Grail."

"Holy what?"

His kidneys were beginning to ache with backpressure from a swollen bladder. "The cup used by Christ during the Last Supper."

There was no reply. “The punji stick,” he offered, as though speaking in cryptic code. “I got poked and shit on overseas then came home to more of the same. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Tomorrow, if the rain ends, I will teach you how to cut and lay shingles. If the restaurant business ever goes bust, you can always earn a living as a roofer.”

“Well, goodbye.” She hung up.

Sunday afternoon Mickey’s sister dropped by unannounced. He was in the bedroom hanging wallpaper, all the furniture pushed against the far wall. “Ten years you never lift a finger to fix anything, and now you’re doing major renovations?”

Mickey dampened a sponge in a pail of clear water and dabbed at a loose seam. “Do you like the pattern?”

Two walls were done in a garish metallic plum with mint stripes. Karla ran a hand over the textured paper. “Very classy.”

Mickey rolled a precut sheet with the paste side facing out and went into the bathroom. He wet the paper in the tub, boxing the ends toward the middle. “You wouldn’t believe what this stuff costs retail.”

She followed him back into the bedroom. Mickey stood on a step ladder and raised the sheet into place while his sister unfurled it from below. “A contractor I know got the bid to renovate twenty-five rooms at the Ramada Inn.” Mickey slid the wet paper an eighth of an inch closing the seam. Grabbing a short bristle brush, he began smoothing out the air bubbles and excess paste, working from the center in sweeping strokes. “The guy never was much good with a pencil and paper. Miscalculated two rooms over.”

Mickey knelt down to trim the bulge around an electrical box. “You’re papering the house with leftovers from a motel?” Karla said.

Mickey waved a utility knife in the air. “The Ramada Inn’s a 4-star joint; they don’t scrimp on furnishings.” He ran a crimping wheel along the baseboard and peeled back the excess. Reaching for the brush again, he tapped the bottom edge neatly into place. “Did you see the living room?”

Karla went back into the living room and reexamined the paper, a floral motif offset by a rococo border. “Swanky, very elegant,” she confirmed. “If I didn’t know any better, I might think you were either experiencing a midlife crisis or in love.”

Mickey ran his tape measure across the length of the far wall marking the bare plaster every twenty-one inches. Seven more sheets and, except for the mismatched furniture, there would be no appreciable difference between his frumpy bedroom and a 75 dollar-a-night suite at the Ramada Inn!

“Those Cambodian girls sure proved you wrong,” Karla said. She was standing by the window, staring into the rain-soaked neighbor’s yard.

Mickey was on his knees. He placed a framing square flush against the side of a fresh roll and trimmed straight across with the razor. “Yeah well, who knows. The first good winter storm, the shed might still blow over.”

He retracted the blade back into the knife and joined her by the window. A relentless downpour was punishing the roofless shed. “Two million,” Mickey muttered.

“How’s that?”

“One fifth of the Cambodian population. Two million men, women and children... that’s how many people the Khmer Rouge killed in four, shitty years.” He touched his finger to the misted window and traced a circle then split the middle with a curved line into yin-yang symbols. “No hostile, invading enemy. No civil war. Just a bunch of genocidal gooks killing each other for no good reason.”

Karla stared at her brother in mild surprise. “I didn’t know you cared?”

“It’s no skin off my ass if they slaughter two or twenty million.

“Still,” Karla said, “it’s a nice looking shed.”

When she was gone, Mickey pushed all the furniture against the opposite wall and finished the bedroom. He swept the scraps into a trash bag, washed the floor with a pair of torn boxer shorts, and put the tools away. In the kitchen he dialed a faded number taped to the wall above the telephone.

“Pick up or delivery?” the voice on the other end of the line said.

“Pickup,” Mickey said. “Number two special.”

“One Mexican pizza with hot chili peppers, hamburger, refried beans, diced tomatoes, cheese -”

“Ten minutes,” Mickey interrupted, “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

After supper, Mickey set the bedroom back in order. He showered and changed into a pair of light-colored Docker slacks and a pea green sports shirt with a crest on the pocket, a present from Karla on his 43rd birthday. He had never worn the shirt before.

In the bedroom, he lit a cone of sandalwood incense and watched as a wispy plume of chalky smoke curled toward the ceiling. On the bedroom dresser, he laid out a fistful of diazepam tablets with the distinctive V-shaped design. White, yellow, blue. Placing a blue, 10 mg pill under his tongue, he brushed the remaining pills back into the drawer and flicked the stereo on to 89.7 fm, WGBH. In a mournful legato, Sarah Vaughn was crooning Misty, bending and reharmonizing the tones in ways that only she could comprehend. Sucking in his gut, he stood in front of the full-length closet mirror.

Twenty years. Though the war ended two decades earlier, Mickey was trying to reach even further back, to retrieve some memory of how things felt before the mortars and madness. By the second chorus, the tranquilizer kicked in. The music, sweetly-scented sandalwood, and plum-colored wallpaper all conspired to lull him back through a narrow slip of a time while outside the sheeting rain continued with the same unbroken intensity.

Look at me.

I’m as helpless

as a kitten up a tree...

Psycho. The Bates Motel. In 1960, Mickey and a fellow sixth grader snuck into the Brandenburg Cinema to watch Janet Leigh strip down to her ivory slip. During the shower scene, Mickey dropped his head between his knees and simply waited out the ensuing horror. He visited the movie for Ms Leigh’s milky thighs and a hint of cleavage, not the slash and gore.

On my own,

would I wander

through this wonderland alone ...

Rubic's cubes, dashikis, spam and eggs, Daisy, pump-action bb rifles, Jade East cologne for men. Shoes with stiffened tongues in lieu of laces - tongues which slid back and forth on wire rails. After only a year or two, the style fell out of vogue. Maypo cereal. Brylcream (just a little dab'll do ya). Bell bottom dungarees. Muumuus and tie-dyed shirts. Crook, rum-soaked cigars. Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis and James Brown and Bill Haley and the Comets (or was that earlier?).

Church. An altar boy through junior high, Mickey carried the cross; he held the heavy book as the priest read the convocational prayers, even rang the silver bell during Mass.

*never knowing my right hand
from my left,
my hat from my glove,
I get misty or too much in love.*

When the song ended, Mickey went into the bathroom and filled the sink with hot water. He washed and lathered his face. Twice. With an abandoned, old-fashioned double-edged razor that predated his nostalgia, he shaved his beard.

On Saturday they worked into the early afternoon covering the roof and stapling a protective layer of tarpaper over the bare plywood. Mickey slit open a bundle of gray shingles. Trimming the bottom flaps off several sheets with a utility knife, he nailed the first shingles to the lip of the overhang. Then he showed Rasmei how to alternate rows so the slits formed a broken line leading to the peak. "I'll snap chalk lines on the tar paper so you can see what you're doing."

"You don't trust me?"

"You're fine; it's the shitty shingles I don't trust." He climbed the ladder and threw a 40-pound bag on the pitched surface. Five hours later Rasmei ran a cap across the peak and the shed was finished.

"At Sherwin Williams next to the YMCA, get the top grade, opaque stain," Mickey said. "Any color that matches the house. Two gallons. Tell them I sent you and they'll charge it to my account and give you the contractor's discount." He blew his nose on a handkerchief that had seen better days. "Now tell my why your father never smiles."

Rasmei scowled and folded her hands in her lap. "On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge invaded Phom Penh and drove the entire population into the countryside. We took only what we could carry, some gold and jewelry. In a village 25 miles north near Prek Po my mother died of dysentery. Father, a school teacher, was forced into slave labor, harvesting rice seven days a week. We had very little food and people were disappearing, being relocated, every so many months.

"During the monsoon season, the earth became soaked and began spitting up the bodies of the murdered - political prisoners, school teachers, businessmen, woman and children. It was as though, denied a proper Buddhist burial, their immortal souls were swimming through the

muck to reunite with loved ones. Of course, we, the living, knew better. Cambodia was one, huge concentration camp, the killing fields everywhere.”

“Old news.” Mickey said gruffly. “Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“A year passed. So many men had died, there were two, perhaps three, women for every man. One day a *neery*, a female soldier, came to my father and said, ‘You shall be my husband.’ My father was horrified. The neery was filthy. She could neither read nor write. An AK-47 slung over her shoulder, she smelled like a dung heap. But as a Khmer Rouge fighter, she could choose anyone for a spouse. To deny her meant almost certain death.”

“An unimaginable nightmare. After losing all our worldly possessions and watching my mother waste away, my father was now being forced to marry his tormentor! An unwashed, jungle-bred neery... my future stepmother.

“A month past and a group wedding was arranged. Fifty couples - some willing, others less than enthused about their prospective mates. The day following his second marriage, my father feasted on a bowl of rice gruel spiced with python meat before going back into the paddies.”

“No rest for the downtrodden.”

“A month after they were married, the war in the East heated up and my father’s new bride was sent to do battle with the Viet Cong. We never saw or heard from her again. When the Vietnamese liberated our village, we fled to safety in Thailand and then to America.”

“And the neery?” Mickey asked

Rasmei shook her head. “Dead or hiding in the jungle with the remnant of Pol Pot’s army.”

“Who was the woman sitting next to your father in the car the other day?”

“My mother’s sister. Her husband died during the reign of terror. She fled the country with us after the war; my father thought it only fitting that, to honor the dead, they spend the rest of their mortal lives together.”

“Your father’s a bigamist.”

“Polygamy, she bristled, “was an accepted practice among the rich and upper classes in Cambodia for many centuries. And, anyway, I doubt the neery - even if she were still alive - would contest my father’s third marriage.”

“Which explains why he never smiles.”

Rasmei shook her head gently up and down. “If you’d been through such an experience, would you?”

They were sitting on the peak of the newly finished roof looking out over a half acre of wild flowers and straw-colored grass. Previously a cow pasture, the land lay fallow for several years, the only regular tenant a fat ground hog which emerged at dusk to feed. As the sun slouched toward the horizon, they could feel the heat streaming off the fresh shingles.

A coffee can half filled with stubby roofing nails lay on the roof between them. Rasmei emptied the nails into the pouch on her cloth apron - the same one Mearadey had abandoned - and tossed the can to the ground. “My father bought a new washing machine,” Rasmei said. “A Whirlpool. Dual speed, eight cycles. It even has a hand washable setting for silk and delicate fabrics.”

“Obviously, you studied the owner’s manual.”

“My stepmother doesn’t read English, and Mearadey is too scatterbrained to be trusted with laundry. She mixes whites with darker clothes that aren’t color-safe.”

“There must be a reason you’re telling me this,” he said.

“Near our prison village was a small river. My mother washed clothes, beating them on a flat stone.” The muscles around her mouth twitched sharply but her voice remained even. “It’s the last memory I have of her before she died.” Rasmei sighed and didn’t speak again for several minutes. “Take me out somewhere.”

Mickey’s eyes narrowed. “On a date?”

“Ashamed to be seen with an oriental?”

“I don’t go anywhere. I’ve no social life.”

“Saturday afternoon you go off.”

Mickey laughed, making a derisive snuffling sound that hardly reached to his lips. “I bike two miles down the road to Brandenburg Center. At the Bagels and Cream Delicatessen, I order the luncheon special and a medium coffee. Then I sit in the park and contemplate my navel.” He didn’t bother to tell her about the Maui-wowi.

“It was just a thought,” she said with a tart brevity that brought closure to the issue.

Fifty feet away in the field, there was a disturbance. Near a white dogwood tree, the high grass was thrashing fitfully in the opposite direction to a stiff breeze. A clump of blue columbine shuddered and suddenly dropped from sight like a plastic bobber dragged under by a large fish. Mickey put his hand over hers and squeezed the palm. “If you’re up for it, how about gourmet coffee and an assortment of New York style bagels?” he said just as the ground hog waddled into view from behind a thorny tangle of purple-throated jimsonweed and loganberries.

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Nagel's Bagels

Lugging a tray of gourmet cheese Danish from the bakery proper out to the selling floor, Becky Borelli eased back through the swinging door, gestured to her mother and muttered, “The new kid’s gone totally mental.”

In the far corner of Nagel's Bakery Fifteen year-old Curtis Stedman was slouched over a table sobbing mawkishly. His slender body flopped about like a marionette where some practical joker was jerking the strings causing the limbs to lurch about spastically in an utterly grotesque parody of genuine despair. Just two weeks earlier, the blond haired boy had been hired to work Saturdays plus two afternoons a week.

Mrs. Borelli approached and asked Curtis what was wrong, but the lanky, fair-skinned boy only wailed all the louder, his bony elbows flailing about aimlessly. A metallic blue Camaro eased into a parking space in front of the store, and a platinum blonde, her hair done up in a tight bun with an ebony comb, eased out of the driver’s seat. “Marone!” Mrs. Borelli grabbed Curtis under the armpit, wrestling him to his feet, and navigated the distraught youth to rear of the bakery.

“Can I help you?” Becky smiled stiffly.

“A dozen hermit cookies.”

“Sold out an hour ago. Sorry.” A mournful howl erupted from behind the swinging doors followed by a series of muffled sobs. Becky could hear her mother whispering furtively to Curtis Stedman.

The blonde scrunched up her face, shifting a Vera Bradley handbag to the opposite shoulder. “Forget it.” She hurried out the door.

Becky waited on a steady flow of customers. One elderly Italian lady, whose breath reeked of garlic, placed an order for a birthday cake. Her mother usually handled special orders, but it was nothing fancy, just a flat cake with white frosting and “Happy Birthday, Angelique!”

A half hour later, Becky’s mother drifted back to the counter. “The Stedman boy... he’s gone, thank God!”

“Gone?”

Mrs. Borelli waved her hand, a peremptory gesture barring any further discussion of Curtis Stedman’s employment status. “Your father is whipping up a tray of cannolis and apricot farfalla. What else we need?”

“The hermit cookies are gone. So are the Asiago and cinnamon raisin bagels.”

The new dishwasher at Nagel’s Bagels lasted not even two week. By Becky’s reckoning, Curtis Stedman flung the crumpled apron on the counter next to the pepperoni spinach pies and was out the door—adios, sayonara, bye-bye, aufwiederssehen, shalom—by one-thirty Saturday afternoon. Stranger still, there had been no indication that anything was wrong. Curtis arrived promptly at the designated time. He washed out the doughy mixing bowls and muffin pans that Becky’s father stacked in a precarious heap on the stainless steel sink. Then he swept the tiled floor, bussed tables and polished all five glass display cases with a bottle of Windex.

“I need a new clarinet reed,” Curtis said. He had just finished cleaning a refrigerated display full of cheese Danish and apple squares.

“You play clarinet?”

“Marching band and high school wind ensemble.” Curtis pushed his gold, wire-framed glasses up on the bridge of his nose.

“There’s the music store across the street,” Becky offered.

Curtis peered nearsightedly out the window. Diagonally across Turner Boulevard was a shabby building with a hand-carved sign over the doorway. Music Depot - most of the maroon paint had peeled away and the final letter ‘T’ was missing. A young girl carrying a guitar case that was almost as long as she was tall exited the music store into the bright sunlight. “Rico number two.”

“What’s that?”

“Rico number two. That’s the reed I play.” He picked up the Windex, ran an arc of spray across the glass and began polishing the display. “Maybe I’ll run over on my lunch break.”

Becky slipped out the front door and crossed Turner Boulevard. All lights were off in the music store, the front door bolted tight. “Aw, crap!” She hurried back across the street.

“So why’d he quit?”

Mrs. Borelli slid a tray of hermit cookies into the oven and closed the lid. “None of your business.” Stocky with a swarthy complexion and auburn hair, Becky’s mother was attractive in a matronly sort of way.

“I got an idea what happened.”

“Good!” The woman flung the word in her face like a wet dishrag. “So there’s nothing more to discuss.”

Becky locked eyes with her mother. A high-pitched tinkling announced someone entering the store. “Go wait on the customer and, while you’re at it, put the ‘Help Wanted’ sign back in the window.

Later that afternoon while she was cleaning up, Becky noticed a well-thumbed paperback on the floor near the rest room. *Candide* by Voltaire - the pages on the left were printed in French, mirroring the English translation on the facing page.

In a peculiar sort of way, the debacle was Becky's fault. Not that she meant to intentionally hurt Curtis Stedman – a part-time dishwasher prone to emotional excesses, who read French literature, played clarinet in both the marching band and wind ensemble. Becky was born and grew up on Federal Hill. The place resembled a parallel universe where conventional rules of social etiquette didn’t necessarily apply. One wrong turn could lead you down a loathsome cul-de-sac into a nether world of sordid vice. She knew her way around – not just the physical streets but the gritty, dysfunctional mindset. There were unsavory things you took for granted, shrugged off. That’s just the way it was.

“I know Curtis’ mother from Saint Gregory’s parish. His mother sings in the choir.” Later that night, Mrs. Borelli tossed the words out in an offhand manner not bothering to raise her head from her sewing. “The boy is intellectually gifted.”

“I didn’t know - ”

“The family doesn’t like to make a big deal about his uniqueness, but it just slipped out when we were commiserating one day after Mass.” Mrs. Borelli, who was letting her husband's pants out, held the waistband at arm's length before resuming her stitching. “According to Mrs. Stedman, there are five levels of gifted intelligence ranging from bright to profoundly gifted. Her son falls in the ‘exceptional’ category.”

“Exactly how exceptional?”

“One in every thirty thousand people is exceptional, which places him in the ninety-nine-point-ninth percentile.”

"What's his specialty?"

Mrs. Borelli removed her thimble momentarily so she could snip the thread. "History... ancient history predating the Christian era."

"Okay." Becky felt a slight giddiness welling up in her brain and went upstairs to lie down.

So the boy sweeping confectioner’s sugar and King Arthur flour from the bakery floor was an underage Einstein! But how could she have thought any different? From the first day he arrived at the bakery, Curtis seemed fogbound, loopy, eccentric, spaced-out - just a tad out to lunch. It took the ‘gifted child’ half an hour to figure out how to manage a mop and pail where

he wasn't sloshing sudsy water haphazardly the length the display room floor. Asynchronicity. That was the loopy, twenty-five cent word Mrs. Stedman used when explaining to Becky's mother why her teenage son sometimes seemed ham-fisted or dull-witted, undertaking simple chores. Gifted children developed unevenly, their hypersensitive craniums far outstripping everything else in their genetic makeup. But then, it went with the territory—supposedly all these 'gifted' types were like that. Becky remembered her physics teacher commenting that Einstein didn't speak until he was two.

Earlier in the week on Tuesday, Becky found Curtis sprawled on the bakery floor. "There's a wrinkle in my sock," he groused, waving a sneaker fitfully in the air. The boy ran a probing finger over his instep then slipped the sneaker back on but immediately removed it a second time.

Becky glanced at his foot. "I don't see a wrinkle."

"Well, I can feel it and the damn thing's driving me nuts."

Becky shrugged and went off to wait on a customer. A half hour later, she spied Curtis near the industrial mixer with the same shoe off and turning the offending sock inside out.

On another occasion, she found Curtis at the front of the store fidgeting and glancing over his shoulder at the far wall.

"What's wrong?"

"That moronic clock's ridiculously loud."

Becky gawked at the clock, the same one that had hung over the frosted tarallo and coconut macarons for the past ten years back to when the orthodox Jew, Morris Nagel, still owned the bakery and her father was head baker. In all that time she never found the clock a distraction. Even now, the second hand bumped along inconspicuously accompanied by a whisper-soft ticking. Being in the ninety-nine-point ninth percentile definitely had its drawbacks.

"Is Curtis home?" It took Becky twenty minutes to ride her five-speed bike cross town to Providence's, East Side.

"And you are?" The woman's voice betrayed a lilting, earthy resonance."

"I got a book that belongs to him," Becky side stepped the question.

When Curtis appeared in the doorway, she said, "Candide... you forgot your book." He led the way into a claustrophobically tiny back yard with a scraggly peach tree and rock garden. "I know what happened."

"Your mother promised not to tell anyone."

"Didn't have to. I went across the street. The Music Depot was closed. They're normally open until five on a Saturday. I put one and one together and came up with two and a half."

Curtis stared Becky full in the face. "You knew what they did over there?" His tone was mildly accusatory.

"Everybody on Federal Hill knows what they do over at the Music Depot," Becky replied soberly. "It's Federal Hill, for Christ sakes!"

On any given day of the week, a steady stream of youngsters and an occasional diehard grown up could be seen lugging their instruments to lessons. The Music Depot provided rentals –

trumpets, saxophones, flutes and even an occasional student model oboe or French horn - sold sheet music and instructional manuals. They carried a decent selection of trumpet mouthpieces from the standard Bach 7C to the extra-wide symphonic models. But the owner didn't make his living off instrument rentals and half-hour lessons. The store was a front, a betting parlor that catered to a motley crowd of compulsive gamblers—horses, dogs, college and professional football, whatever.

A loan shark who weighed three hundred pounds, Bernie Antonelli, advanced patrons short-term loans at the perfectly reasonable rate of thirty percent interest. If you missed a payment, interest was compounded along with a late-fee penalty using an accounting method that only Bernie properly understood. It wasn't usury, per se. Unfortunately, if you missed more than one payment, Bernie would call you up and politely request a meeting at the store so that a arrangement benefiting both parties could be consummated.

"I was outside admiring this Selmer clarinet in the storefront window." Curtis fussed with his slender hands as he spoke. "Not some cheap student model but a rosewood beauty with gold-plated keys and custom engraving on the lacquered bell. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see this muscle-bound goon with biceps out to here, smack some old geezer in the side of the head." Curtis spoke slowly, measuring each word. "The goon slugged him here," he pointed to the soft spot just above his right ear, "with a set of brass knuckles. Then, while the guy was writhing on the floor, the sadistic bastard stomped him half to death."

"Nasty stuff like that... it doesn't happen that often."

"Small consolation," Curtis replied peevishly.

The previous year, the owner of the Music Depot spent eight months at a federal prison in Upstate New York. His enforcers were shaking down the vendors at the annual Feast of Saint Anthony for two hundred bucks to insure that their grilled sausage and onions stands didn't end up a pile of splintered toothpicks. Unfortunately, one of the vendors who refused to cough up the protection money turned out to be an FBI undercover agent. A month after the Feast of Saint Anthony, a half-dozen cheap hoodlums and tough guy wannabes were indicted and sent off to prison.

"Come back to work."

"After making a total ass of myself?"

"Come back to work," Becky repeated, grabbing his wrist and squeezing as hard as she could. "I'll teach you the rope so crap like that doesn't happen again. Or, if it does, God forbid, you won't freak out." Curtis stared at her dumbly, a sad smile creasing his slightly parted lips. Becky Borelli was not to be denied. "I'm not leaving until you return to Nagel's Bagels."

Becky's Uncle Harry was a devout Catholic. He attended church every Sunday, observing all holy days of obligation. He even put up five thousand dollars toward the Our Lady of Perpetual Devotion building fund to lay an elaborate mosaic in the church sacristy. A solid brass plaque identifying Uncle Harry as the primary donor would be prominently displayed on the wall once the project was completed.

But several parishioners approached Father Tomasi complaining about Uncle Harry's largesse. A harmless, low-level hoodlum, he had been indicted a half dozen times, spending two short stints at minimum security facilities in Connecticut and New Jersey. Nobody knew where he got his merchandise - the designer jeans and handbags, Rolodex watches, jewelry and, on

occasion, electronics – that he hawked on the fly out of the rear of his minivan. Uncle Harry wasn't registered with the Providence Chamber of Commerce or Better Business Bureau.

Parishioners at Our Lady of Perpetual Devotion objected on moral grounds. No matter how elegant the church mosaic, the money was tainted. Uncle Harry was a conniving hypocrite - a fence who trafficked mostly in stolen jewelry and high-end watches - trying to barter his way into heaven, the five thousand dollars no better than a modern-day papal indulgence.

In the end, expedient self-interest prevailed. Father Tomasi waved all protests aside, depositing the stack of small denomination bills held together by a rubber band in the church's bank account. Paolo and Guido Ricci, gifted artisans who emigrated from Naples in the late eighties, were commissioned to design and build the floor. When the project was three-quarters done, Becky visited the church. The intricate mosaic, constructed from imported, glazed tiles, was breathtakingly beautiful. On the wall directly above a granite bowl containing holy water was a garish plaque with Uncle Harry's name prominently displayed.

"Lie down with dogs; get up with fleas." That was the only comment Mrs. Borelli ever made about her dubious brother and the rapturously beautiful mosaic.

One afternoon a week before New Year's Becky solicited Curtis' opinion about the controversial mosaic. "The Assyrian King, Assurbanipal," The boy said in a thin, wispy voice, "had the walls of his palace decorated with magnificent carvings."

The strange comment caught Becky off guard. She wasn't quite sure what it had to do with the ethical dilemma surrounding Uncle Harry. "One scene shows Assurbanipal and his queen enjoying a picnic in their lush palace garden. The mood is relaxed and elegant. Hanging from a tree branch just behind a harp player is the severed head of a defeated king."

"Why are you telling me this?"

He sipped at the coffee. "Whether it's ancient Mesopotamian or Federal Hill, nothing ever changes

"The Ricci Brothers finished the mosaic." Becky announced. Three months had passed since Curtis' mental meltdown and things were progressing smoothly at the bakery. "The church is just around the corner."

Becky's father, who always arrived at work hours before everyone else, had already gone home for the day and her mother was closing up. "The mosaic built with tainted money?" Curtis reached for his jacket. "Yeah, let's take a look."

Becky told her mother she was taking a break and went out into the March sun. A handful of crocuses and daffodils – just the pale green stems not the flowers yet – had poked through the thawed soil in a flower pot next to the bakery. They hurried down Atwells Avenue, past the high-rise housing for the elderly, Caserta's pizza and the Tuscan Gardens restaurant.

In late December Bobo Maroni, a low-level enforcer was shot dead, execution style, in broad daylight at the Tuscan Gardens. A brief article appeared on the second page of the Providence Journal. Bobo was eating lunch at the bar - linguini with white clam sauce, a glass of Chianti and a small Greek salad, according to the newspaper. At exactly twelve noon, a middle aged man decked out in a stylish, camel hair coat with a dark fedora pulled down over his eyes, entered. The fellow went directly to the bar and disposed of Bobo with a hollow-point slug from a high-caliber handgun.

What went unreported in the newspaper was the fact that, at approximately eleven forty-five - fifteen minutes before his demise - patrons sitting at the bar drifted elsewhere. As if on cue, they discretely vacated the premises. That is, everyone except the marked man. Becky learned this curious bit of incidental minutia from Uncle Harry, who dispensed the tidbit glibly with a poker face. Obviously the luckless slob had offended some Federal Hill bigwig, stepped over that invisible line. Detectives had to fish Bobo Maroni's brains along with feta cheese, anchovies and Greek olives from the half-eaten salad.

"So how do you like it?" They were standing in the entryway to the church staring at a group of dolphins frolicking in a turquoise, stone ocean. The circular mosaic, done in earth tones and pastel hues, ran twenty feet in diameter and was ringed with decorative brickwork.

The church, which was empty except for an older woman over by the confessional, doing the Stations of the Cross. The old woman finished the last devotion, dipped her fingers in a basin of holy water and left the building.

"That particular design... it's not Roman," Curtis said.

"The mosaic?"

He shook his head. "The dolphin theme predates the Roman Empire. It's more Minoan."

Becky glanced up briefly. Curtis' face held that same obsessive, pinched look as when he was trying to smooth the imaginary wrinkle from the underside of his athletic sock. "Minoans flourished around fifteen hundred B.C.. They ruled a vast trading empire, stretching from Greece across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus in Asia Minor." The blond-haired youth tossed these historical facts off as though they were common knowledge. "The Minoan rulers lived in a vast palace at Knossos on the island of Crete, where the walls were covered with colorful frescoes, watercolor paintings done on wet plaster." He removed his glasses momentarily and massaged the bridge of his nose with the tips of his fingers. "The dolphin mosaic probably came from one of those original frescoes."

A priest entered the church, lit several candles near the altar then disappeared out a side door. The air was shot through with acrid, sweet-smelling incense. "You sure are a strange one," Becky murmured, resting a hand gently on his shoulder. "What else should a teenage girl who works in a bakery on Federal hill know about Minoan culture?"

Curtis' cracked a dreamy, introspective smile. "Minoans were shrewd sea traders. Unlike the Romans, their success was based on trade not conquest. Their women had more rights than in most ancient civilizations."

Without warning, Becky lifted up on her toes, snaked an arm around his shoulders and kissed the boy deeply on the lips. "Liberated females – I like that." Curtis' jaw sagged open like a gate on rusty hinges. His thin lips fluttered spastically but no sounds emerged. Becky cradled her head on his chest. "What else?"

Curtis' eyes glazed over. He let all the air out of his lungs in a contented sigh. "Europa the beautiful daughter of the king of Phoenicia was gathering flowers, when she saw a bull quietly grazing with her father's herd. The bull was actually Zeus, king of the gods, who had fallen in love with her. When Europa reached to place flowers on his horns, he suddenly bounded in the air and carried the weeping princess far off across the Mediterranean Sea to the island of Crete. Eventually Europa married the king of Crete and gave her name to a new continent."

Curtis bent down and caressed her neck with a flurry of kisses. "But, of course, it's just a myth," he added as an afterthought. The exceptionally bright boy had that queer, spaced out look that emerged when his well-ordered universe was spinning out of control. Behind his wire-framed glasses, the pale blue eyes held a limpid sheen such that Becky could see straight through to the core of his being.

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Narcissus & Goldberg

Beatrice Goldberg located her son lying on a single bed at the retreat center run by the missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette. The claustrophobically small room reeked of phisohex. A crucifix hung on the far wall alongside a framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pulling up a chair, the big boned woman sat beside the bed. In her forties, Beatrice was still a strikingly attractive woman with a mass of platinum hair tied back in a bun. The boy smiled and kissed his mother warmly when she bent down. "I don't understand what you're doing, Brett," she spoke petulantly, "and need you to explain what's going on in that uncharted territory between your ears."

The young man's ribs were bandaged and, on the left side of his head, a jagged row of nine stitches meandered across a shaven area of the scalp. "There are days when I ask the same question and come up blank," he quipped. The humor falling flat, the young man reached out and grabbed his mother's hand. "I got mugged. They stole my money and a cheap wristwatch. It's not the end of the world."

An hour later, wandering back out into the bright, New England sunlight, Beatrice located Father Nicolas seated on a wooden bench by the duck pond. A good third of the water had evaporated with the intense heat of the previous month, most of the waterfowl and fish having retreated to the middle of the shallow pond. A sooty brown mallard was bobbing for succulent water plants. The funny little bird would alternately tip vertically with its tail feathers jutting straight up to the heavens and beak buried in the muddy bottom then ease back to a floating position. The comical process repeated endlessly. "Father Nicholas?"

Prematurely bald except for a few wisps of brown hair at the temples, the squat man rose to his feet. A brown cassock was gathered at the waist with a leather cord. Despite the doughy face and flabby physique, the middle-aged, Franciscan cleric greeted her with youthful exuberance. "How was your flight from California?"

"Uneventful."

Father Nicolas gestured with a pudgy finger at the throngs of people heading away from the chapel toward an open field. "You came on the busiest weekend of our summer calendar." Every year in mid-July, the shrine held a summer festival with amusement rides, carnival games and entertainment. Even as he spoke, a bus with Connecticut license plates pulled into the lower-level parking lot.

A twenty-foot statue of Our Lady of LaSalette overlooked the entrance to the pond, which nestled just down from the new chapel. A small rock garden bordering the statue contained a scattering of tiger lilies and foxglove with pinkish centers fading away to porcelain white. "When you telephoned," Beatrice said, "you mentioned that Brett has been living here since his mishap."

The priest began strolling slowly around the perimeter of the duck pond. "The boy was severely beaten and robbed. As hospital chaplain, I sat with your son until he regained consciousness." They emerged onto a central concourse leading to the main structure. Taped to a metal stanchion, a placard trumpeted a series of upcoming events:

*Portuguese Healing Service,
Charismatic Mass for the Unborn,
Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament,
Hispanic Right to Life Vigil
Extreme Youth Prayer meeting*

"Brett has been mending nicely, but I don't think he's going to be with us too much longer. They've decided to try their luck elsewhere and travel cross country in another week or so."

"They?" Beatrice became mildly flustered. "He's traveling with someone?"

"The Cambodian girl," Father Nicholas clarified. "A very serene, delicate creature." He shook his bald head thoughtfully. "The twosome are so devoted to one another. Reminds me of that lovely Chagall painting...the Kiss, I believe it's called." Suddenly, the cleric turned a sharp angle and stared at the woman as though seeing her for the first time. "But you didn't travel three thousand miles to listen to my idle blather. Did you enjoy your visit?"

"No, not especially." She had no intention of humoring the chatty cleric. "I'm trying to understand why a boy who graduated top of his class at Princeton was living in flop house on the south side of Providence."

"It's complicated." Father Nicholas had reached the entrance to a building with a line of people stretching twenty feet from the entrance. "Have you seen our collection of crèches from all over the world? It's one of the most extensive displays in the country. There's artwork from Africa, all the South American countries, Europe, Russia... even the Inuit Eskimos sent an offering carved exclusively from walrus tusks and whalebone. As a testament to the faithful, it draws huge crowds from all over New England, especially during Christmas and festival week."

"I'd rather hear," Beatrice dropped all pretense of trying to be civil, "what a nice, Jewish boy who studied at Princeton was doing in a rat-infested, three-decker tenement in South Providence, Rhode Island?"

In an open field behind the duck pond the summer festival was in full swing. Carnival rides for the youngsters had been set up alongside games of chance and a mishmash of greasy food concessions. An adolescent with a wad of pink cotton candy protruding from her lips shuffled past. Only moments ago, they had watched an elderly woman with a shawl over her gray hair light a devotional candle, one of hundreds at the perpetual prayer shrine. From the outset, Beatrice had noticed that the parishioners huddled together near the chapel were more conservatively dressed and infinitely more respectable-looking than the scruffy types strolling about the carnival attractions. "You make it sound, Mrs. Goldberg," the monk responded, "as though somehow we are to blame."

"Did they ever catch the hooligans who beat my son?"

The priest shook his head from side to side. "No. The thugs knocked him unconscious, grabbed his wallet and ran off." Several skinheads wearing combat boots trudged by. One youth with a chipped tooth and shaven head sported an Aryan tattoo on the side of his neck. He burped loudly and flung a lit cigarette butt on the pebbly ground. "Narcissus and Goldmund," the priest said, shifting gears. "Does it mean anything to you?"

"No, not at all."

"A novel by the German existentialist, Hermann Hesse, it was all the rage among hippy-dippy, college kids back in the psychedelic sixties. Brett read Hesse in his junior year at college and felt an affinity for the protagonist, who wandered through Medieval Europe during the Black Plague."

Up ahead a group of fleshy Hispanic girls dressed in halter tops and gaudy jewelry approached. They were speaking loudly in Spanish. The bronze-skinned girl on the far right wore no bra, an exceedingly large derriere squeezed into cutoff jeans.

"This Cambodian girl you mentioned," Beatrice had no interest in the priest's musty esoterica, "where did Brett meet her?"

They were standing next to the Ferris wheel which, grinding to a halt, was letting riders on and off. "There's a large Hmong population in South Providence. They came here after the fall of Saigon. You see their produce markets and nail salons up and down Cranston Street."

"My husband's a lawyer. We thought our son might go on to law school and eventually join him in the family firm. Traipsing around South Providence with Hmong refugees in search of God-knows-what... it's not a life."

"Brett has an inclination to savor new experiences...people, philosophies, religions. " Father Nicolas chuckled as though at some private joke. "There's an elderly monk here at the cloister, a rather timid man, who's afraid to switch shaving creams."

"Very clever," Beatrice muttered sourly. "Clearly, you share my son's fondness for reckless endangerment."

A shrill bell sounded and a row of contestants with water pistols commenced shooting a stream of pressurized water into the mouth of a plastic crown, filling balloons directly above. A few seconds passed and a balloon popped signaling the end of the game. "You're missing the point," Father Nicholas brought her up short. "Brett feels things at a much deeper level."

They had navigated the perimeter of the carnival and the monk veered away from the festivities back in the direction of the shrine, where he showed Mrs. Goldberg a grotto carved into the side of a hill. Nearby, terraced flagstones arranged in wide, stair-step fashion climbed to the summit of a shrine where the devout offered up their petitions. Several nuns near the base of the structure were inching forward on their knees, clutching rosary beads and intoning a singsong mantra of Hail Marys at each, designated Station of the Cross.

A convoy of motorcyclists arrived, rumbling onto the parking lot in a convoy that stretched two hundred yards out onto the main highway. Many of the new arrivals were decked out in full Harley Davidson regalia with biker boots and studded leather trappings. Between the salacious Chicano girls, skinheads, elderly nuns crawling up the incline on their swollen knees, biker broads strutting about like dominatrix queens, somber, salt-of-the-earth, blue collar Catholics and Franciscan missionaries it was the American melting pot gone haywire, a parody of good taste and sensibility. "That book you mentioned earlier... whatever happened to Goldmund?"

Father Nicolas crooked his thick neck to one side, considering the question. "By the end of the story, he was reunited with his friend Narcissus, now an abbot, and the two reflected upon the different paths their lives have taken - hedonistic mystic versus rational contemplative." The priest waved his hand at the throng of religious zealots surging up the blue-black flagstones. "Your classic dichotomy of Apollonian versus Dionysian temperaments."

Beatrice cupped her hands over both eyes and began to cry noiselessly. Misconstruing her private grief as religious supplication, nobody paid the pretty Jewish woman any attention. "The bastard raked a pair of brass knuckles across my son's scalp!"

"Yes, I know. The metal tore an ugly gash clear to the bone."

After a while, Mrs. Goldberg pulled her emotions back under control. "These people frighten me... the nuns doing penance for negligible sins and skinheads who wouldn't seek salvation if this was their last day on earth."

It took them a good five minutes to traverse the last few Stations of the Cross emptying out onto the lower landing. "I thought I might take Brett out to supper tonight. Would you join us?" Father Nicolas blinked several times and stood pigeon-toed with his pendulous gut protruding from the robe. "You've been honest to a fault," Beatrice noted, anticipating his confusion, "and I'll need somebody to run interference when I feel the urge to say something thoroughly regrettable."

The priest glanced at his watch. "What time were you planning to head out?"

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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. With 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 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. "Her son, Brandon, apparently wants her placed in a nursing home so he can put the house in the hands of a real estate broker."

Dr. Wong listened impassively. "What does the patient want?"

"To return home, naturally. Mrs. Edwards is quite upset."

The osteopath rubbed his chin. "Have you thought about asking Father McNulty to intercede... plead her 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 than 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 hospital in Connecticut. Her parents didn't know about the breakup and the notion of going home alone was terribly unappealing.

Her boyfriend used the bedroom to unwind, as a diversion from the strain of twelve-hour shifts and academic studies. For the young medic, romance was a novelty; away from the emergency room he displayed few hobbies or domestic interests. Kirsten somehow didn't see that ever changing and, truth be told, was relieved when Jason took the new job.

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, took 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 and not be married to the workplace. 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 guy. He gives me the creeps."

The discharge planner briefly met the son, who had 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 didn't resurface until a week later. "And do you believe that malarkey about honoring his mother's wishes?"

"No, not really, but there's only so much the hospital do."

Kirsten agreed wholeheartedly with the doctor's tenuous 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 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 saaaaad 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.

* * * * *

Tuesday morning on the way to work, Kirsten swung by the Braintree Rehabilitation Center. "I'm looking for 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."

"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. Somewhere back in her college years Kirsten stumbled across a silly creation myth. According to the Blackfoot Indians, the Spider God fashioned the universe. Everything worked out fine except for the humans – even among Native Americans a handful of Brandon Edwards slipped through the cracks. But the Spider God was far too busy with other celestial tasks to worry about humanity. Properly understood, the Blackfoot deity was neither unsympathetic nor indifferent to human misery. It wasn't so much a flawed theology but human pathology that gummed up the works.

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 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 solarium 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. He 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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The Kidnapped Bride

"Mrs. Snyder, the neighbor who lives over on Bryant Lane, is downstairs in the living room and wishes to speak to you." Paige Bryant's mother spoke with a constipated expression as though the somber woman waiting below was more intruder than guest.

"About what?" Paige Bryant had never passed more than a half-dozen words with Phyllis Snyder. Sometimes she visited the bank where Paige worked, but a year earlier the girl had been promoted to the mortgage department and had few dealings with regular customers.

"Her son, Norman, was in your senior class. The boy has been acting weird, emotionally unbalanced, lately and she thought..." Paige's mother never bother to finish the sentence.

Norman Snyder, class valedictorian and president of the Brandenburg High School scholastic honor society, could have been a lawyer, brain surgeon, nuclear physicist or anything else that sparked his prodigious intellect, but following graduation the nerdy teen imploded and went up in acrid smoke. Failure to launch was the operative term. Accepted to a half dozen Ivy League colleges, he attended none.

Rumor had it the boy was washing dishes for minimum wage at Ryan's diner, had no friends, no social life. When his parents went ballistic over his cataclysmic descent into mediocrity, Norman quietly moved out of the five-bedroom house and into a rooming house just outside of town. "Have Mrs. Snyder come upstairs," Paige suggested. Her mother went off and a moment later Paige heard the creaking of the risers as the heavyset woman trudged to the second floor landing.

Phyllis Snyder, a dour-faced woman with a hook nose and saccharine smile that didn't quite mesh with her cheerless disposition, lumbered into the room. "I see you at the bank," she remarked absently, her almond eyes flitting distractedly about the tidy bedroom. "How's that going?"

For a fleeting moment, the thought occurred to Paige that Mrs. Snyder might want her to find an entry level position at the bank for her discombobulated son, but the woman quickly laid that unnecessary fear to rest. "Maybe you heard... my Norm ain't doing so hot these days." She made a snuffling sound and rubbed her longish nose.

Paige held her tongue. Better to wait her out, let the woman play her hand. Somebody always needed something. *Quid pro quo* - at the bank it was a loan to cover a spiffy sports car or maybe a mortgage for a bigger house than the absurd behemoth they already owned. Enough was never enough. "Look, here's the deal," the middle-aged woman threw formality out the window, "I need someone with a head on her shoulders to talk horse sense with Norman. His brains got all muddled what with all the crazy books he reads and that god-awful German poetry."

"Norman speaks German?"

"No, not a word," Mrs. Snyder clarified. Reaching into her purse, she withdrew a scrap of paper and handed it to Paige. "He reads mystical gibberish in translation and then the poor boy doesn't know which end is up anymore." She began to cry, making horrible choking sounds, her pendulous lower lip quivering under the burden of grief.

Paige laid the sheet on the bed without looking at it. "You brought me something that belongs to Norman with neither his knowledge nor consent."

Mrs. Snyder slumped down on the edge of the bed and shrugged dismissively. "It's just a poem by Rilke that he downloaded off the internet."

Paige lowered her eyes and read silently.

*Sometimes a man stands up during supper
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.
And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.
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

"So what the hell is a church that stands somewhere in the East?" Mrs. Snyder fumed. "It's a lot of malarkey, right?" Without waiting for a response the woman answered her own question. The woman rose and began pacing the room, getting more agitated by the minute. "I mean, who reads this sappy shit?"

"The church in the East," Paige replied diplomatically, "probably refers to some spiritual quest or Holy Grail."

"My son's washing dishes in a greasy spoon. The Holy Grail don't figure in the grand scheme of things." When there was no immediate reply, the woman added. "In recent weeks, the boy's become morbidly depressed... turned his back on all his friends from high school." "He goes away, disappears for days at a time." Mrs. Snyder jutted her flabby lower lip in a theatrical scowl. "I say, 'Norman, I tried to reach you a dozen times over the weekend. Where the hell were you?'"

"And?"

"He says, 'I traveled north.'"

North - what did that signify? North to Boston's North End, still further north to New Hampshire or Vermont, north to the polar latitudes? "So what do you want from me, Mrs. Snyder?"

"The few times your name came up during high school, Norman always had flattering things to say about you. If he wasn't so painfully shy and tongue-tied, Norm might have even asked you..." The woman cut herself short, abruptly sallying off in another direction. "Maybe you could drop by the diner after work. Give the poor boy some moral encouragement... lift his broken spirits."

Paige felt overwhelmed. With her gloom-and-doom pronouncements, Phyllis Snyder was a blight, an emotional pestilence; she sucked every molecule of nourishing oxygen from the air. "I'll visit after work tomorrow."

Mrs. Snyder reached out tentatively and squeezed her hand. "You're a kind-hearted soul." Without another word she retreated to the doorway and lumbered back down the stairs.

At six-fifteen the following afternoon, Paige wandered into Ryan's Diner, took a seat at the counter and ordered coffee. A moment passed and an employee dressed in T-shirt and white apron came bustling through the door from the kitchen with a plastic rack full of clean water glasses. Noticing the girl, he hurried over.

The boy stood on the far side of the counter grinning good-naturedly. He had grown a full beard and let his wavy blond hair cascade down over his ears. He could have passed for a beach bum or an ax murderer. "I heard you got a plum job over at the bank."

"In the loan department," Paige stumbled over several words as though she suffered a speech impediment. "Got bumped up from head teller last August."

"Well that's just great!" In no great hurry to stack the glasses, Norman rested his fists on the countertop.

Earlier in the day, Paige had rehearsed several equally distasteful strategies for finessing the encounter. She would open the conversation with innocuous pleasantries. Once the conversation hit a snag, she would cut her loses and disappear out the door.

Properly understood, the visit was nothing more than an empty formality, a bit of misplaced altruism foisted on her by a manipulative, blatantly neurotic mother. Mrs. Snyder had

resorted to emotional subterfuge, whining and wheedling until Paige agreed to do her bidding. His sour-pickle-of-a-mother duped the girl.

"Actually, I'm here under false pretenses," Paige blurted.

"Excuse me?"

"I came under your mother's auspices, to talk you off the ledge... a mission of mercy."

She hadn't originally intended to say anything of the sort.

Norman rolled his eyes. "Mother came to see you?" Paige nodded. "I'm so sorry! You're the fifth sacrificial lamb." Norman reached out and patted her wrist, a reassuring gesture, but then his droll expression turned reflective. "Look, I go on break in ten minutes, if you don't mind waiting around."

"I came here expressly to see you," Paige reminded him.

"How soon we forget!" Norman cracked a boyish grin and went off to unload the drinking glasses.

"In answer to your unspoken question," Norman noted, "I'm not quite sure what I'm doing bussing tables, scrubbing dirty pots and pans. Think of it as a rite of passage."

"To a church somewhere in the East."

"Yes, something of the sort." Norman didn't seem the least bit ruffled by the familiar literary allusion.

"Scrubbing pots and pans... how does that make sense?"

"Sometimes doing nothing can be proactive." His tone remained cordial if a tad flippant. "Say, what are you doing next weekend?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm going north on an adventure Friday afternoon and was wondering if you'd like to join me."

There was nothing salacious in his tone or body language. It was the indefinite and ill-defined 'north' that put Paige's nerves on edge. "Where exactly north?"

"Scarborough, Maine. It's on the ocean just over the line from Old Orchard Beach and the boardwalk. I walk the beaches and contemplate my navel among other things."

"It's the middle of November, a week before Thanksgiving. Isn't it freezing up there?"

"Brisk... maybe a bit chilly," he countered. "But on the plus side, room rates are dirt cheap and coastal Maine is especially scenic this time of year."

"No, but thanks for the invite."

Behind the counter, a waitress, who needed Norman to finesse a five-gallon milk carton into the chrome dispenser, was gesturing frantically. "If you have a change of heart, here's my cell number." He scribbled the digits on a napkin and rushed back to work.

A week passed. Paige had all but forgotten about her clandestine visit to Ryan's Diner. In the kitchen the telephone clattered. "It's Mrs. Snyder," Paige's mother yelled up the stairs.

"Aw, crap!" Paige blew out her cheeks. She counted to ten and did a couple deep breathing exercises to compose herself before reaching for the phone.

"Well?" The tone was belligerent, borderline confrontational, as though the woman had expected Paige to fax a twenty-page, confidential report as soon as she had returned from the diner.

"I met with Norman last Thursday and can assure you he's not the least bit distraught about his personal circumstances."

"Well, he ought to be, considering what he put me through these past few years." The sarcasm was palpable. Without skipping a beat, the woman demanded, "Tell me what he said."

"No, certainly not! I don't appreciate cloak and dagger intrigue or being blackmailed into becoming your surrogate. Goodbye, Mrs. Snyder." She hung up the phone and promptly burst into tears.

"Your hands are shaking something awful." Mrs. Bryant pulled her daughter close and kissed her cheek, quickly rubbing the wetness away with the heel of her hand. "In the future when that witch calls, I'll simply tell her you're not available."

"No, it's not Mrs. Snyder's fault." Paige insisted, blotting her eyes with a tissue. "There was some ugliness at work earlier today and I'm still feeling a bit shaky."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No, it's over and done with." She pushed her mother away at arm's length. "What's the weather forecast?"

Mrs. Bryant eyed her uncertainly. "Chilly... below freezing by dawn but warming up midday."

Paige retreated back upstairs. She took a bath and steeped in the warm sudsy water for a half hour before finally washing her hair. Choosing a pair of flannel pajamas, she got ready for bed. She closed the bedroom door and reached for the cell phone. "Hello, Norman? Your mother's a royal pain in the ass, but that's not why I called."

Perched in a lotus position on the top of her queen-size bed, Paige took a deep breath and blew all the air out in one sinewy thread. "That escape weekend you were telling me about... is it too late to reserve a room?"

"Probably not." His tone was relaxed, nonplussed. "I'll call and see what they got." He hung up. Ten minutes later, Paige's phone twittered. "I reserved two adjoining rooms on the first floor with baseboard heat. The place is rustic... no frills but very clean."

"Okay." Paige could feel her mood brightening.

"I can pick you up at the bank after work, if you like."

The girl flinched. "I'm calling in sick tomorrow. Drop by my house instead."

"Bring a warm sweater... evenings can get downright frigid." The line went dead.

Paige studied her hands that, in truth, had been trembling quite violently only a few hours earlier. The supple fingers lay placidly in her lap. The worst was over, thank God!

During the trip north, Norman avoided downtown Boston, swinging west of the urban center. The detour added another half hour to their final destination but proved a wash by avoiding the late afternoon, home-bound, city traffic. Reaching the New Hampshire state line in just over an hour, they cruised through Kittery with its bargain outlets a scant twenty minutes later. Close on to seven-thirty they reached downtown Old Orchard Beach. The boardwalk and theme park that normally bustled with thousands of bikini-clad tourists was boarded up tight, not

a single shop or burger joint open for business. "Where do we eat?" Paige's stomach began gurgling restively several miles back.

"There's a seafood restaurant within walking distance of the motel." Norman took a hard right onto East Grandview and skirted the ocean. The temperature had dropped another ten degrees since leaving Boston. Shortly they passed into Scarborough. The motel was three blocks down. "I'll check in and then we can grab dinner."

Paige followed Norman into the motel lobby where a lithe blonde assigned their keys and took a deposit. Norman headed back in the direction of the car. "Shouldn't we at least view the rooms?"

"The accommodation are clean and tidy and small and dowdy and a bit old-fashioned. Let's eat!"

At the restaurant, Paige ordered lobster, while Norman settled on the seafood medley with baked scrod, scallops, shrimp in a béarnaise sauce. While they were waiting for the meals, Norman glanced up. "Maddie Etheridge... she was a year ahead of us in high school. She married last year."

"Really?" Maddie, a WASP'y blonde with translucent skin, drove a fully-loaded BMW convertible to school her senior year, courtesy of her father, a stock broker with a firm on State Street in Boston. Maddie looked down her nose at anyone who didn't shop the exclusive boutiques at the Chestnut Hill Mall.

"The wedding was at the Park Plaza overlooking the Charles," Norman reported dispassionately. "Forty thousand bucks... that's what they spent on the wedding ceremony with all the trappings."

Paige tried to picture Maddie traipsing down the aisle in the swanky Georgian Ballroom of the Park Plaza, to the dulcet tones of a classical string ensemble. The waitress returned with a basket of warmed bread rolls and their salads. "Thirteen months and three days."

Paige spread butter on her roll and teased the onions to the side of her salad with the tines of her fork. "And what does that figure represent?"

"How long the debacle-of-a-marriage lasted. Maddie and Mr. Right are presently in divorce court salvaging the mess they created at the pricey Park Plaza." Norman speared a cherry tomato with his fork. "A hundred dollars a day - that's what it ultimately cost them." He wasn't being judgmental or vindictive. On the contrary Norman's tone was laced with regret that Maddie's life had veered so badly off course, fallen to pieces.

After the meal arrived, he leaned across the table and thumped Paige on the forearm. "In the Asian republics such as Chechnya and Kyrgyzstan, the family of a young girl sets a bride's price and expect payment from prospective suitors."

"The opposite of a dowry," Paige noted.

"If a man is poor and can't afford a wife, he might simply grab one off the street and take her home to his family, where they hold her prisoner until the fellow can meet with the parents to try to negotiate an acceptable arrangement." He stared at his baked potato. "Apparently the practice is widespread throughout patriarchal, Moslem societies where women have little say in the matter. Half of all Kyrgyz marriages include bride kidnapping. Two thirds are non-consensual."

"What about the rest?"

"Sometimes couples love each other, but the parents object to the marriage so the love birds 'elope' under the guise of bride kidnapping."

"Romeo and Juliette," Paige interjected, "with an Asian twist." The utterly absurd notion that Norman Snyder might be planning such a daring feat flitted through her sleepy brain.

He raised a forkful of butternut squash seasoned with honey to his lips. "Yes, a perfectly good analogy."

"And how do these bride kidnappings work out?"

Sipping at his draft beer, he made a wry face. "A hell of a lot better than Maddie Etheridge's matrimonial fiasco."

After supper they returned to the motel. "I'm going for a walk on the beach," Norman announced.

"It's pitch dark," Paige blustered, "with the temperature bottoming out in the low forties." The baseboard heating, which came up immediately when she adjusted the thermostat, was making a ticking sound as forced hot water coursed through the metal fins. The room was warming nicely and she wanted to go to bed.

"I won't be long." He reached for a wool jacket.

Bone-weary, she didn't want to be left alone in the no-frills cabin. "On second thought I'll join you."

A path through a cluster of salt spray roses and rubbery sea grass in back of the motel lobby led down to the beach only a few hundred feet away. Although the sun had gone down hours earlier, a harvest moon hung like a fluorescent bulb in the star-flecked easterly sky. High tide at night - neither the thought nor physical imagery had ever occurred to her before setting foot on the frigid beach. And yet, the churning, wind-swept waves accompanied them, like a soothing prayer on the late night stroll.

Wave after wave crashed down on the blackened sand. Paige felt infinitely happy. Even the chilly sea breeze couldn't dampen her newfound courage and sense of resolve. Certain things needed attending to as soon as she returned home. What had seemed insurmountable - utterly hopeless just a few hours earlier - was suddenly of no great consequence.

Norman walked a mile and a half in the damp sand before reversing direction and heading back. Feathery plumes of frosty air tumbled from his nostril. Several times he stroked his beard and she thought he might say something, but nothing came of it. When they were back at the motel, he said, "We'll breakfast around eight and then plan our day."

The room had warmed to a comfortable seventy degrees. "What do you think your mother would say if she knew I was aiding and abetting her deranged son?"

"Let's not go there," he quipped and retreated back to his own room, chuckling lightly while running a thumb and index finger along the wispy beard where it curled up under his chin.

In the morning they doubled back through Old Orchard, which resembled a ghost town, and Norman veered right at a flashing yellow light. A half mile down, the parking lot at

Michelle's Breakfast Nook was full to overflowing. "The savvy local yokels eat here. Breakfast special's the best deal, but you choose whatever you want."

After breakfast, he drove to the Len Libby chocolate factory, a famous tourist attraction a few miles up the road back in Scarborough. In nineteen ninety-seven, the owner of the candy store commissioned an artist to fashion a seventeen-hundred-pound, life-size moose. Sculpted from milk chocolate, the antlered beast was constructed on premises in four weeks. From when they opened the doors at nine a.m. until closing, the store ran a video showing visitors how the animal came to life

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

Back in the center of town, the boardwalk was all locked up for the season. Norman indicated an elderly woman sprawled on a beach chair. "That's Mrs. Bryant over there with the two Lhasa Apso puppies. Her husband died a few years back. She has grown children in Bangor but prefers her independence." The lapdogs were running amok in the shallows. Norman waved and Mrs. Bryant returned the greeting.

Paige suddenly felt weary. Regardless how many new adventures Norman had up his sleeve, they would be heading back in less than a day - he to a dead-end, meaningless job and she to... Paige wasn't terribly sure what she was heading back to, and the short-lived, manic poise of the previous night had dissipated, gone to seed. "What's the matter?" Norman demanded.

She was standing next to him with her head down crying, the wetness dripping on the powdery sand. "A customer came to the bank looking for a mortgage she could hardly afford, and I turned her down. The woman had lost a good paying job around the beginning of the year and only recently found new work. There were outstanding bills, maxed out credit cards. The loan was too risky."

Up ahead a man with a Great Dane was heading in the direction of Mrs. Bryant, and her dogs began barking like twin lunatics. "Refusing the mortgage... you did the right thing. Nobody could fault you for that."

"The branch manager overruled my decision, authorizing the questionable loan. He didn't care that the woman's finances were stretched to the breaking point." She swiped at her tears. "He set a quota for sub-prime loans that the branch had to meet. The ends justified the means."

"She lost the house?"

Paige shook her head. "I should have resigned before he processed the paperwork... told him he was a money-grubbing shithead. Should have but I didn't. And now I'm here walking the beach by moonlight and gallivanting off to Len Libby's to ogle the seventeen hundred pound, life-size chocolate moose."

"Welcome to the real world." Norman's tone had lost its flippant edge, and a sober lucidity overspread his features. "So what are you going to do?"

"Resign on Monday - no notice. My career in finance is finished." She began to giggle uncontrollably. "Maybe when the dust settles, I could become your understudy at the diner."

"In all seriousness, Ryan's is looking for a waitress three to eleven. I could put in a good word."

"I might just do that... at least until I get my nerves back under control and decide what I want to be when I grow up." A fragment of the Rilke poem floated across Paige's mind:

*Sometimes a man stands up during supper
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.*

Reaching out, she placed a hand on his chest. "Why haven't you tried to kiss me?"

Norman's eyes narrowed. "Until a moment ago, I wasn't acquainted with any banking executives who dated dishwashers."

Two hundred yards away, the dogs were becoming fretful and ill-behaved, yipping, yapping and lurching about aimlessly. Mrs. Bryant decided to head home. She folded the beach chair and leashed the dogs before turning one last time to wave at the twosome, but, unfortunately, the young couple was preoccupied and missed the gracious gesture.

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Cupid ain't Stupid

Lenny spotted Elsie McGivney sitting at the bar of the High Hat Lounge nursing a watery Coke. "Not working tonight?"

"Just got off," she replied amiably. In her early twenties, the dark-haired girl had gained weight over the summer and, though she still possessed a reasonably good figure, was more pleasingly plump than svelte. Her frizzy auburn hair, undeniably her strongest feature, framed a weak mouth and smallish, freckled nose. "Seen Derrick around?"

"Funny," Lenny replied, "I was just getting ready to ask you the same question."

Elsie shrugged indicating her boyfriend was among the missing. "Heard you had quite a party last Friday night."

"Depends on your source of information, Lenny muttered disagreeably." When the bartender approached, he waved him off. "I got rolled... lost my goddamn paycheck."

Her features scrunched up in a tight ball. "What happened?"

Well, let's see. I got smashed on gin and tonics and passed out at a friend's bachelor party. Your boyfriend, Derrick, gave me a lift home and promptly emptied out my billfold as I was slumped over in the back seat with my puke-stained face mashed up against the armrest.

"I dunno," Lenny replied. "It was an open bar... all the liquor paid for in advance. I had two hundred bucks when I arrived and not a penny when I left."

Nobody would have learned about Derrick's thievery but for an inadvertent slip of the tongue. Fool that he was, the treacherous louse got shitfaced the next night, buying boilermakers for everyone in the High Hat Lounge on his unexpected windfall. Totally soused, he confided to the guy sitting on the stool next to him how - like a carrion crow - he picked Lenny's wallet clean. Words spoken in strictest confidence have a way of wriggling loose of their constraints and doubling back to bite the unwitting owner on the ass.

Lenny had nothing against Elsie McGivney. He was here to settle the score with the human vermin she slept with two to three nights a week when she wasn't tending bar. "Derrick gonna drop by the club tonight?"

"Dunno. I ain't seen him all week and he don't return my calls." Elsie pulled a cell phone from her purse and hit the auto-dial. After a brief interval she snapped the lid shut and placed the phone alongside her drink on the bar. "Ain't that a bitch... I gotta talk to him about something real urgent."

Lenny eyed her curiously. "You're not..."

"Aw, for Christ's sakes! Give me credit for something." The tone was more self-mocking than otherwise."

Don't just get mad, get even - that was Lenny's philosophy. He wanted retribution in full - two hundred bucks worth - not a wimpy, mealy-mouthed apology. He would confront Derrick with the facts and then punch the bastard in the teeth, making sure to snap the wrist a quarter turn on impact. Or better yet, hit first then fill in the missing pieces while Derrick, with a mouthful of broken enamel, lay squirming on the ground.

Half an hour passed - ten-thirty and still no Derrick. Elsie cracked a sloe-eyed smile and glanced away. Lenny wondered what it might be like coupling with such a blasé, nonchalant creature. Not that Elsie's sexual proclivities were any of his business; they certainly had nothing to do with the task at hand, the reason he was wasting his time in a stuffy room that reeked of stale beer and cigarette smoke.

"He ain't coming," she muttered exasperatedly.

"No, I shouldn't think so."

"Say," she swiveled on the stool, "I'm hungry as hell. Why don't we pick up a pizza and go back to my place."

The offer caught Lenny totally off guard. Clearly, there was nothing suggestive in either the girl's tone or body language and, anticipating fisticuffs, he hadn't eaten a solitary thing since noon. "Yeah, why the hell not." He threw a couple of bills on the counter and the twosome headed for the door.

Elsie lived in a modest apartment complex in back of the library. The place was clean and tidy. Ten minutes - that's how long it took to polish off the Mexican pizza with black beans, jalapenos, tomato slices, sautéed hamburger and Monterey jack cheese. "You don't have to run off," Elsie suggested. "I got a movie you might like."

"Which one?"

The girl was rinsing out the cups at the sink. "I dunno the title. Some silly, porn flick Derrick left the last time he slept over."

Porn and retribution - suddenly, beating Derrick within an inch of his life didn't necessarily seem like the best way to settle an outstanding score. Elsie drifted into the bedroom and returned moments later with the DVD. Everything she did, from setting the table to retrieving forty-five minutes of graphic smut was done with guileless panache. Lenny read the raunchy liner notes on the back of the plastic case. After spending the night exploring Elsie's anatomy, the score would be settled. No need to tell the sociopathic creep that Lenny had bedded the girlfriend. That would be low. On the other hand, if through no fault of his, Derrick eventually discovered ...

"What's wrong?" Elsie suddenly slumped down at the kitchen table sobbing uncontrollably. Tears cascaded pell-mell down her arms, staining the sleeves. There was no immediate reply. "You miss Derrick?"

"What... him? Are you nuts?" She hissed. "That selfish bastard treated me something awful. Good riddance!"

"So what's the matter?"

"Lost my job."

"But I thought -"

"The club owner fired me." Only now did Elsie pull her hands away from her eyes. "A customer complained... accused me of cheating him when he paid his tab... said I didn't make proper change.

"One drunken jerk complains and -"

"It wasn't the first time," She blurted sheepishly. "Back to high school, I was never that good at math... flunked algebra twice." The confession was followed by another outburst of blubbing anguish and self-loathing. "Truth is, I'm stupid as hell!"

Lenny pulled the girl up to her feet and wrapped his arms around her back. Soggy mascara dripped down the side of her face halfway to the chin. "Aw Christ, Elsie, it's just a job! Go work where people don't exchange money."

"Doing what?"

"I dunno... My aunt Helen is a health aide in a nursing home. She don't have to worry about such nonsense. My mother answered phones and did filing at an insurance company."

"Never thought of it that way," Elsie said in a hushed voice. She kissed him on the cheek and draped her arms over his shoulders. "You sure are sweet to say that. I already feel a hundred percent better." "Despite the fact," she added, "that I ain't got two nickels to rub together and the rent's due a week from Friday." Elsie sighed. "You wanna watch that dirty movie?"

"No, not really."

"I'm still feeling shaky." He felt her grip tighten. "You're not gonna leave, are you?" The girl curled up against his chest, like a cat coming in from the cold. He could feel her fleshy stomach, her smallish compact breasts mashed against his chest. Elsie's cheek made a nice fit nestled comfortably in the crook of his shoulder.

Lenny felt complicit. He had come home with Elsie seeking retribution and sucked her into the snake pit of his vendetta. "No, Elsie." He kissed her mouth, a perfunctory gesture devoid of passion. "I'll sleep here but no sex... at least not tonight." Platonic sex - it was a bit out of the usual, but then so was everything that flowed from the ugliness with Derrick. "I'll spend the night but no extracurricular activities."

A month later, Lenny was sipping beer at the High Hat Lounge when Derrick sauntered in with a platinum blonde. The girl went off to powder her nose and Derrick, who looked half in the bag, made a beeline for the men's room. Lenny slid off the barstool and picked his way to the rear of the room.

"Hey, good buddy!" Tall and gangly with a clean-cut, boyish manner, Derrick was relieving himself at a urinal. No one ever saw the mean-spirited nastiness - certainly not until it was too late.

Lenny leaned up against a sink. "Where's Elsie?"

"We broke up ages ago. Elsie's stupid as shit and, if you didn't already hear, they fired her for chiseling customers out of their proper change. The broad was pathetic, a total moron." Derrick wagged his head dismissively. "I seen it when we were together... how she missed certain cues, never quite measured up. When she started ripping off customers, I had to dump the sleazy bitch."

"Funny choice of words." Lenny took a quick read of his own emotional state. He felt perfectly at ease, self-contained. Getting fleeced by the man, who was stuffing his appendage back in his pants, wasn't the issue anymore. He had other, more pressing scores to settle.

"So you don't see Elsie?"

Derrick shook his head vigorously. "Heard she got a job through a temporary agency, working as receptionist for some eye doctor off Lexington Ave." He sniggered and spittle dripped on the tile floor. Derrick was skunk drunk. "I got to tell you, Lenny" he lowered his voice, affecting an confidential, palsy-walsy tone. "For the life of me, I can't picture that dumb-ass broad sitting behind a desk answering tel -"

Lenny slid a half-step back, cocked his fist and let fly. The knuckles caught Derrick, whose chin was raised and hovering slightly forward like a penitent's accepting Holy Communion, flush on the teeth. Too engrossed in his drunken harangue, he never saw the sledgehammer blow coming; absorbing the full impact, he collapsed helter-skelter in a sorry heap, totally unconscious before coming to rest on the tiled floor. Lenny stood over him motionless for a brief interval before exiting the bathroom.

Locating the willowy blonde nursing a martini at the bar, he slid onto the adjacent stool. "You know what a misogynist is?"

She stared at him uncertainly. "Enlighten me, why don't you?"

"It's a guy who ain't got no respect for women. He may treat girls swell at first, but that only lasts until he sweet talks them out of their panties. Derrick's a bona fide misogynist... a liar and a cheat." Settling his tab, he headed home for the night.

Truth is, I'm stupid as hell! Elsie's unflattering pronouncement flitted through his brain. Lenny never liked riddles, crossword puzzles, card games or loose ends; with Elsie McGivney, certain critical considerations didn't add up. The boss at the High Hat Lounge gave her the bum's rush for lousing up the money. Even she admitted as much in her teary-eyed confession. But people weren't selectively stupid.

Lenny's Cousin Felicia was dull normal. She couldn't make change or much of anything else for that matter. She dressed slovenly, seldom bathed unless escorted into the bathroom with a change of underwear and couldn't remember to bring her plate to the sink after eating. She couldn't be trusted to wash a load of laundry, adjust the heat settings and run an iron over a sheer blouse or even mow the lawn for fear she would do something crazy.

Elsie shared nothing in common with Cousin Felicia. Her apartment was fastidiously clean. If you cracked a joke, she got the punch line and laughed on cue. The former barmaid brushed her hair and presumably washed her crotch on a regular basis. When Lenny and Elsie crawled into bed together the night they shared the Mexican pizza, she snuggled up against his chest as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world and fell promptly asleep.

Earlier in the club Lenny wondered what it might be like to bed a woman like Elsie. The experience was sedate and uneventful. It was pure bliss. He couldn't get the feeling out of his

system for days afterward. She wasn't terribly pretty, but she elicited a reverential awe. She couldn't make change. A human slug like Derrick could fornicate with her and then thumb his nose at the girl with the weak chin and deferential smile. It was like something out of an Aesop's fable - the dim-witted Tortoise and the sociopathic Hair. The night they slept together without having sex, the swelter of conflicting emotions confounded Lenny. He lay there in the darkness holding her pliable body, sodden with effable joy.

On Wednesday evening, Lenny stopped by Elsie's place. "How you doing?"

"Better." She held the door wide open. "I got work at a doctor's office."

"So I heard."

"Can I get you anything?" She led the way into the kitchen.

Lenny slouched down in a chair. "Cup of coffee, maybe."

Elsie filled the mesh basket on a single-serve Black and Decker coffee brewer with grounds and added water. "Doctor Blake is real nice Everything's going fine."

"You don't handle cash."

"I process the payments," Elsie corrected, "but use a digital calculator so my 'situation' doesn't become an issue."

"Your situation?"

The coffee brewed, she brought the cup and a pitcher of light cream to the table. "The dyslexia... I was diagnosed in elementary school." She stood near the sink. "It's why I can't learn shit."

"But you're doing okay at the doctor's office."

"For sure!" Her features brightened noticeably. "Like I told you, I need a calculator to double-check my math, because sometimes, in my screwed-up brain I see figures backwards."

"In the wrong order?"

Elsie smiled sheepishly. "While the doctor's giving an eye exam, I talk myself through a math problem, out loud... softly to myself, without disturbing the other patients. I use my ears not just my eyes to make sure bills are accurate." Elsie looked him full in the face and her voice softened. "Want to spend the night?"

"I didn't come here with that in mind, but, yeah, that would be nice. This time, though, maybe we can get a little more sociable, if you know what I mean."

Elsie ignored the playful banter. "So if you didn't come here with that in mind..."

Later as they lay naked under the covers, Elsie ran her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. "Any two numbers... ask me to multiply them."

Lenny was dozing off with Doctor Sheldon Blake's new receptionist draped lightly across his chest. "What's that?"

"Any numbers between two and twelve." She spoke purposefully. The sex was over and done. Not quite ready for sleep yet, in her doggedly resolute manner, the girl had moved on.

"Eight times eight." Lenny felt his blissed-out brain going off on drowsy hiatus.

The girl kisses him leisurely on the side of the mouth, then nipped his ear playfully with her teeth - just hard enough to grab his attention. "Eight times eight is sixty-four, close your

mouth and shut the door!" she intoned with a herky-jerky, singsong inflection. "He ate and ate and sticks in the door, eight times eight is sixty-four. Skate, skate, figure eight's all the way to the shore, eight times eight is sixty-four."

Lenny caressed her buttocks. "Nine times nine."

"He stood in line and ate a ton, nine times nine is eighty-one."

"That's how you learned to multiply?"

"There was no reply. The girl, who could rhyme all twelve multiplication tables, had fallen off the steep ledge into deep sleep.

The thought occurred to Lenny that certain shared intimacies were commonplace. Derrick could have picked himself up off the bathroom floor, gone home and fornicated with the platinum blonde. In the grand scheme of things the carnal act counted for nothing. In the morning over a leisurely breakfast, Lenny would suggest a dinner date at one of the exclusive Italian restaurants on Federal Hill, where a parking valet greeted you curbside and diners cleansed their pallet with fruity sorbet between courses.

He stood in line and ate a ton, nine times nine is eighty-one.

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Kissing Cousins

"Your Uncle Ned, the eccentric old coot, has gone back to nature," Mrs. Peters informed her son with a patently malicious giggle. Mrs. Peters absolutely hated the man - hadn't spoken to her brother-in-law since her husband's death, although, properly understood, the bad blood predated the marriage with Uncle Ned never even showing up for his brother's wedding.

Where Uncle Ned was concerned, Mrs. Peters favored one of several strategies: she either ignored her brother-in-law or ridiculed him mercilessly. "I heard the fool bought several acres of farmland off route 123 in Rehoboth. Gonna build a log cabin and live the life of a backwoods recluse... a fifty year-old Paul Bunyan," she tittered. "What a hoot!"

Why Uncle Ned loathed his mother was never explained by either parent. Phillip's father never spoke badly about his brother; it was Mrs. Peters who detested the man with a homicidal vendetta worse than anything a Sicilian Mafioso could dream up.

Phillip met the man only once in thirty years when he showed up for his brother's funeral and that was a thoroughly eerie experience. An identical twin - he resembled the deceased in every way except that he wasn't laying supine, stone cold in a mahogany box waiting to be lowered into a freshly opened grave. Dressed in a dark suit, Uncle Ned stood off by himself near a gnarled birch tree. Wearing a solemn demeanor, he spoke to no one. Before the priest even finished his eulogy, the stocky man wiped his eyes and drifted from the ceremony. No mention was ever made of his presence at the gravesite. On the rare occasions when his name came up in mixed company, Phillip's mother still referred to her estranged brother-in-law as the 'eccentric old coot'.

One morning in late spring, Phillip pulled into a gas station on the Rehoboth line. "Anybody building log cabins in the area?"

The cashier, a kid in his early twenties shook his head. "Naw, no log cabins... just some old crackpot with a camper puttering about in the woods."

"And where might that be?"

"Three miles up on the left. There's a dirt road and a 'No Trespass' sign nailed to a scraggily maple tree.

Continuing up the windy country road, he located the property. A dilapidated, worm-eaten slab of wood that passed for a mailbox had been jury rigged at a cockeyed angle alongside the gravelly road. Scrawled in red latex paint, the name on the battered box, which had no lid, read Ned Peters. Pulling off the road, Phillip locked the car and continued a good two-hundred feet down a rutted trail to a clearing where an older man was puttering about a muddy foundation. The fellow, who stood about five-eight, was sturdily built with a bushy mop of brown hair shot through with gray, cascading down over his ears. The jaw was wide, forehead broad with a scattering of crow's feet dimpling the eyes. "Hello, Uncle Ned!"

Squinting at the intruder with a menacing scowl, the older man's leathery features gradually softened. "Oh, hello there, Phillip." He came over and shook his nephew's hand as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

"What are you doing?"

The man wandered back to the rectangular plot. "Getting the foundation ready."

Phillip glanced about the property. There was nothing, just an endless profusion of knotty pines, maple and oak trees. A tangle of poison ivy nestled at the base of a chokeberry tree; the tiny, red-to-black, apple-like fruit had long since fallen away. "Foundation ready for what?"

"Log cabin. Twelve-hundred square feet." His uncle pulled a flat, carpenter's pencil from his pocket and marked one of the twelve-inch boards buttressed in a rectangular, knee-deep trench that ran forty feet and presumably defined the front of the dwelling. On the ground was a collection of threaded rods with nuts and silver washers. "Cement truck is delivering a load later this afternoon. Sure hope they can negotiate that twisty trail."

He moved a short distance away, ran a tape measure along the foundation and methodically scribed another pencil mark. "Sill plate's got to be anchored to the foundation. Before the wet cement cures, I'm gonna sink these quarter-inch, threaded rods into the mix so the outside walls can be bolted down. It's just an added precaution."

Adjusting to the late morning light filtering through the trees, Phillip surveyed the worksite. A rusty camper was parked a few hundred feet off to the left by a small pond, but there were no commercial-grade construction tools - no chain saws, nail guns, staging or even a suitable workbench. "How are you going to mill logs?"

"Structure's prefab. I ordered an A-frame, cabin from a commercial supplier in Bangor. Everything required is being shipped tomorrow afternoon. I just put it together." Phillip blinked and the man standing there in the dirty jeans and plaid, flannel shirt was his father resurrected from the dead. He blinked again and the older man morphed back into crotchety Uncle Ned, the eccentric old coot and his mother's nemesis. "Because the structure isn't overly large, I can get away with twelve-inch diameter logs, which will be more manageable for an old fart like me."

"Of course, there are a number of options for securing the logs at the corners, including the lock-joint, dovetail, and butt and pass method..." Uncle Ned went off on a rather lengthy rant explaining all available options, but Phillip wasn't listening anymore. He was feeling light-headed, out of his element... no longer sure what to think. His mind had scurried off down a

rabbit hole straight out of Alice and Wonderland, a cul-de-sac littered with all sorts of emotional excess baggage.

"I teach tenth and eleventh grade science over at the high school." The words emerged in a garbled, disjointed heap, and he was talking much too loud. "We get summers off. I want to do something... help you build your log cabin."

The older man just stood there, perfectly calm and serene. A noisy blue jay flitted among the budding leaves of a slender poplar that leaned precariously close by the clunky trailer. Somewhere in the wooded distance, Phillip could hear a brook or small stream gurgling a bucolic refrain. Uncle Ned rubbed his sunburned neck and smiled mischievously. "I'll have to pay you under the table," he quipped, "and, except for splinters, poison ivy and the ravenous, late-afternoon mosquitoes, there ain't no benefits."

Later that night at his apartment, the thought occurred to Phillip that his Uncle was nothing like the family pariah, the social grotesque his mother concocted over the years. But why the animosity? Why the disparaging and degrading caricature which didn't even begin to resemble the man laying sections of threaded bolt along the perimeter of his middle-age dream? As he was leaving the Rehoboth woods, Phillip asked, "Building a log cabin in the woods from scratch at your age... why are you doing this?"

His uncle released the locking mechanism on his yellow Stanley, twenty-five foot tape measure and watched the blade snake back into the metal carcass. "When did the thirteen, original colonies come together as a nation?"

Phillip stared at him vaguely. "I don't know... after the British threw in the towel, and the redcoats sailed home to England."

"I'm a history buff... self-taught," Uncle Ned rambled on. "Never enjoyed the luxury of formal, classroom study."

"An autodidact," Phillip confirmed.

"Yeah, that fits me to a tee." "Anyway, the colonists were paranoid as hell at the prospect of being taxed to death by their own kind much as the British had done a decade earlier. It wasn't until the Second Continental Congress that the colonies finally agreed to give up their individual rights and form a nation. Things have gone steadily downhill since then"

"Doesn't sound like you put too much trust in the government."

"Tail wags the dog."

"How's that?" Phillip remembered a political science class he attended in college where the instructor used the graphic term as a metaphor for fascism.

"Politicians are supposed to served the common folk not feather their own nest." Directing his words at the clayey earth, Uncle Ned spoke deliberately, with a painstaking manner. "I want to live a more stripped-down existence... simplify things." There was no hint of bitterness or defiance in his voice. The man spoke calmly, almost philosophically and, in that moment Phillip felt an affinity for his estranged uncle that left him shaken if not thoroughly humbled.

* * * * *

Phillip told nobody about his clandestine meeting. A plumber by trade, Uncle Ned negotiated the worksite on sturdy legs with a comfortable, loping gait. Measuring, marking,

double-checking the forms embedded in shallow trenches extending just below the frost line - there was no wasted effort, all his movements methodical and unhurried. Ned Peters said little else the remainder of the time they were together, but Phillip sensed, at some visceral level, that the man was capable of completing anything he put his mind to.

The middle of the following week he went back to the woods. The cement had been poured and a smooth, gray slab defined the foundation of the new structure. Just as Uncle Ned intended, the metal rods, like dutiful sentinels, stood perfectly erect every few feet around the outer perimeter. Several piles of machine-hewn, twelve-inch logs were scattered around the clearing. "Looks like the cat's up the proverbial tree." Philipp came up beside the grizzled man, who was securing the two-by-six sill plates to the foundation with a metal ratchet.

"You come to make fun of an old geezer or do serious work?" his uncle shot back with a challenging grin.

Phillip secured a leather tool belt with an Estwing framing hammer around his waist. "Let's build a log cabin!"

From the morning straight through to the early afternoon, they laid floor joists, sixteen-on-center, securing everything in place with eight-penny nails. "Things would go faster if I had a nail gun," Uncle Ned noted, "but nobody's punching a time clock."

Around ten o'clock they took a coffee break, boiling the water on a small hibachi with a propane fuel tank. "Uncle Ned, why the bad blood between you and my mother?"

"You'd do better speaking to her."

"Already have... a dozen times and all she does is talk in circles or ridicule you."

"I'm not surprised."

"My mother hates you."

His uncle smiled as though the remark was complimentary. "Feeling's mutual." The grizzled man opened a package of sugar cookies and handed several to his nephew. "Your father - may the poor man rest in peace - died ten years ago on the fifth of April. Coroner's report mentioned a blood clot in the brain." His uncle grew silent and a minute passed before he spoke again. "Medical examiner should have included your mother as primary cause of death, because living with her sent the man to an early grave." He bit into a cookie and washed it down with a swig of scalding black coffee.

Phillip would have offered up a rebuttal, something in his mother's defense, but knew deep down in his heart-of-hearts that every word was true. How many times when he was living at home could he remember his mother mercilessly badgering her husband? Badgering, hectoring, shrilling, wheedling, and threatening - she always got her way. The former Mrs. Peters beat Phillip's father down and ultimately dispatched him to a premature grave.

"Cause of Death: thrombosis exacerbated by toxic wife syndrome." Uncle Ned stared at the dark liquid ruminatively but refrained from drinking. "I asked your father once... I said, 'Whatever possessed you to marry?' Do you know what he said?"

As if on cue, a throng of crows secreted away in the branches of a hemlock tree began cawing a loud, throaty protest. "He said that it was all a ghoulish joke that came crashing down on him five minutes after the 'I dos' and 'happily ever afters'."

Uncle Ned tapped his nephew lightly on the forearm. "Ever watch the Nature Channel on cable TV?"

"Yeah, they have some nice wildlife documentaries. Why do you ask?"

"I've seen goddamn feral animals... predatory beasts on the Nature Channel that were more accommodating to their mates than your mother was to my poor brother during their wretched marriage."

"Nice sentiment," Phillip replied.

Uncle Ned tossed the rest of his coffee into the weeds and rose to his feet. "Twenty years, Phillip," the older man was strapping on his tool belt. "I think that about brings us up to speed."

What the older man conveniently omitted from his narrative was equally as damning. Six months Eleanor Peters mourned, playing the grieving widow like some heroine in a Greek tragedy. Then without fanfare, Phillip's mother rushed off to a justice of the peace and married a man twenty years her senior who owned a string of butcher shops over on the east side.

What struck Phillip most was Uncle Ned's utter perfunctory tone. This is what happened. Here, let me tell you how your mother tore my identical twin brother's heart out. In the end, the physical organ was damaged beyond repair, but, early on, it was the ephemeral entity that gave up the ghost and caused the medical train wreck.

"Are you ready to build a log cabin, Phillip?"

"Today's as good a day as any," he replied. There was no more talk of Eleanor Peters, and it was clear that, as long as Phillip scrupulously avoided the topic, his uncle would never mention his sister-in-law again.

They cleared away a mound of brush and grabbed a quick lunch at a sub shop near the center of town around two in the afternoon. By the time the sun began to dip below the trees and the mosquitoes drove them off the property, all the metal joist hangers had been secured in place along with a ten-inch main beam that ran the length of the building. The huge beam had to be shimmed in a few places and checked for level, but it was a very auspicious beginning!

The next day Phillip visited the woods, his uncle was already bustling about, loosening the forms around the foundation. "More lumber arrived late yesterday." A huge stack of logs had been arranged in three, neat piles around the worksite. Some were considerably longer than others and, even with an army of helpers, Phillip couldn't imagine negotiating them into place. Meanwhile, Uncle Ned was arranging a collection of ropes and pulleys on the ground.

"Give me a hand." The older man had abandoned the chaotic tangle of rigging and was pawing at a short length of wood. Together they lugged it to the right side of the building and positioned it with the notch facing up on the foundation. "One down," Uncle Ned chirped. "Nine hundred and ninety-nine to go!" When Phillip's mouth went slack, his uncle slapped him on the back. "A sick joke... nothing more!" They positioned the matching log opposite and then laid the two, smaller pieces on either side that framed the front doorway.

"Here's where things get interesting," Uncle Ned noted. The heaviest logs that ran the entire length of the rear wall were lying off to one side. They rolled, pushed and dragged one into position behind the foundation. Uncle Ned draped two pressure-treated poles over either end of the concrete lip. Rolling the unwieldy log over the rigging, he secured the line with a double half-hitch. "Put my truck in low gear and back up slowly. Only now did Phillip notice his uncle's Ford-F150 parked fifty feet away with the tail end of the rope secured to the bumper. "That truck," his uncle explained, "is rated with a tow capacity of eleven thousand pounds. These toothpicks should be a piece of cake!"

Phillip climbed into the cab and fired up the engine. Five minutes later the unwieldy log had been dragged up the impromptu, pole ramp and was seated in place with Uncle Ned binding the joints with huge twenty-penny spikes. In this makeshift manner, they raised the walls on all four sides another foot. "One more row," Uncle Ned announced and we'll have to take window openings into account."

"Shouldn't we break for lunch?" It was already past noontime.

"Food's being delivered... not to worry."

Fifteen minutes later a brown Toyota pattered down the trail, and a skinny wraith-like blonde with alabaster skin and dark glasses approached the worksite. "Cousin Phillip?" The odd-looking girl reached up on her toes, kissing his cheek. "I'm Katy."

"Enough with the smooching!" Uncle Ned barked. "You got the food?"

"Yes, Daddy." She traipsed back to the car and returned with an armload of bags. Firing up the hibachi, the girl began preparing the meal.

Uncle Ned scared up a couple of folding chairs behind the camper, and they sat watching the blonde girl working over the grille. The sloppy, unassuming kiss caught Phillip totally off guard and even now as he studied the strange creature he didn't quite know what to make of her. Dressed in cut-off jeans and a plaid blouse, her slim white legs seemed to go on forever. She was cute as hell but certainly not beautiful in the traditional sense. A squat nose perched above lips frozen in a perpetual, adolescent smirk. The skin was flawless, the eyes the palest liquid blue. She strutted about with a clunky, childlike grace.

"Katy," Uncle Ned noted, "she ain't the brightest bulb in the firmament, but that girl's got a heart of pure-spun gold." He reached out and thumped his nephew on the arm to further drive the point home. "My daughter's got her PhD in horse sense. She's the real deal!"

Katy approached with a paper plate weighed down with potato salad, a cheeseburger and tossed salad. "Here, Cousin Phillip. This should keep you occupied 'til the hotdogs are done." The girl flashed an angelic smile before retreating back to the smoky grille.

"The other day," Phillip stabbed at the potato salad, "you mentioned the Second Continental Congress and made it seem like the colonists didn't trust each other any better than the British."

An orangey monarch butterfly emerged from a profusion of flowering weeds and fluttered around the edge of the pond. "Hell, no! The northern colonies had their own commercial interests - whaling, fishing, lumber, which the British needed desperately." Uncle Ned stopped talking just long enough to savor a bite of his hamburger, washing it down with a splash of soda. "The southern colonies favored tobacco, cotton and the lucrative slave trade, exporting their goods." "They didn't get around to actually ratifying the articles of confederation until March of 1781. Like I said, this country has gone steadily downhill ever since."

He waved a hand distractedly at the mish mash of logs and tools. "In another year, when this cabin will be habitable, I'm gonna buy some chickens, a cow and clear enough land to grow my own vegetables... maybe even some grain crops."

"Now you sound like a survivalist."

"No, just an old-fashioned, bona fide American."

After the food was done, Phillip walked down the pond. The log cabin was coming together nicely, but he couldn't imagine his uncle using the truck and crude pole ramp to raise the log walls more than another few feet. Because of the sharp incline, any logs hauled beyond that height would be extremely dangerous. Uncle Ned surely understood this and was hiding an ace up his sleeve.

A chain saw fired up and Phillip could hear the two-cycle engine revving. Uncle Ned had mentioned clearing a section for a chicken coop. It was all part of his 'Grand Scheme'. He would acquire several dozen chickens, both for laying and eating, a dairy cow and small tractor. The tractor would allow him to grow enough vegetables for his family's needs and to sell at the annual Triboro Farmer's Market. Each autumn he would gather and split timber to heat the place with a wood-burning stove. The goal was to sever as many ties that bound him to the cradle-to-grave welfare state. As fatalistic as he was about the country's future, Uncle Ned was intent on groping his own way, inch-by-solitary-inch, out of the national morass.

Heading back toward the clearing, Phillip stumbled across Katy wielding a McCulloch 18-inch, 40 cc chainsaw. Seeing him, she shut the machine down. "Are you leaving?" Phillip nodded. Draping an arm casually over his shoulder she leaned forward and kissed him on both cheeks then buffed the wetness away with the heel of a hand. "Hope you enjoyed the barbecue."

The girl, Phillip learned earlier from his uncle, worked second shift as an LPN at the Pine Haven Nursing Home. "Everything was just fine."

"Two decades is a hell of a long time between visits. Don't be a stranger, Cousin Phillip."

"No, I won't." He wanted to say more but the gawky girl, who had already turned away, pressed the primer bulb on the chainsaw - once, twice, thrice - and the humongous machine fired up with a mind-numbing roar, killing any possibility of further small talk.

Over the remainder of the month they erected the walls to a height of one row below the front door sill before Uncle Ned called it quits. "Too dangerous."

"What now?"

"Yesterday, I hired a contractor with a hydraulic crane and a construction crew. He'll finish the last few rows and also raise the roof." He grabbed a bucket of half-inch lag screws. "Got to get the joists ready for the subfloor."

Katy stopped by pretty much every day. In the early afternoons she disappeared into the camper, emerging in white scrubs and a pink smock before heading off to her shift at the nursing home. She continued to kiss, pet and paw Phillip like a younger sibling or lapdog. There was never anything overtly sexual or inappropriate to the girl's dopey antics. In many respects, she was her father's daughter.

"Got a boyfriend?" Phillip asked.

"Now and again," she replied with an insouciant half-smile. They were laying down a half-inch thick subfloor in anticipation of the outer shell being completed and the building finally enclosed. Katy was on her knees pounding anodized nails along a blue chalk line snapped over the parallel joists. Every five seconds she had to pause to push her glasses back up on the bridge of her pudgy nose.

Phillip nodded but had nothing to say. Uncle Ned had been grouching the previous day that his daughter, who had a wild streak, sometimes went off carousing and didn't come home for days. "What about yourself, Cousin Phillip? You spending time with any of those erotic educators over at the high school?"

"Lately I've sworn of women,... taken a vow of celibacy." Swinging the hammer in a broad arc, he buried the nail almost to the nubby head then set his hammer aside.

They completed a row of finished nails and shifted over to the next sheet of exterior-grade plywood. Katy draped an arm over her cousin's shoulder and pressed her lips up against his ear. "And why is that?"

"Don't want to end up like my old man." Phillip gently tapped a nail into a penciled mark on the plywood. Draping a chalked line over the head of the nail he moved to the middle of the floor and held the powdery string over a parallel mark while Katy lifted vertically and snapped the chalky line.

"What happened to him?"

"Married a shrew who sent him to an early grave," he shot back morosely. There was a brief moment of silence before Katy, in typical fashion, pulled an outrageous prank.

The girl farted. Intentionally. She let loose with an obscenely silly expression of disdain for Phillip's moody digression. "Geez! Lighten up, Cousin Phillip!" Coming up behind him, Katy snaked her arms around his waist, pulling him close. Her breezy playfulness coupled with the vulgar, low-brow shenanigan's took all the sting out of his gloomy diatribe. Earlier in the week when Phillip was trying to engage her in another serious conversation, the girl jumped on his back, demanding a piggyback ride. Katy was hedonistic, impulse ridden, a scatterbrain with the attention span of a flea, a live-by-the-seat-of-her-pants sprite born to kiss, hug and tease her way through life with never a heartache nor solitary misgiving.

The weather stayed dry straight through the middle of the following week when wind-driven rain pelted the ground into a muddy mess. Uncle Ned and Phillip drove over to Tony's Pizza for an early lunch.

"Buon giorno, paisano!" the olive skinned man behind the counter looked up when they entered the eatery. "For lunch... whatchawanna eat?"

"And good morning to you," Uncle Ned returned. They placed their orders and settled into a booth near the front of the store.

"And wheres a ya lovely dotta?" Tony asked.

Uncle Ned's expression darkened. "Katy went out bar hopping after work... came home skunk drunk. She's home sleeping it off."

"Marone!" Flexing his wrist, Tony made a tipping gesture with his right hand. "Too mucha da vino,"

"Yeah, too much vino, Jack Daniels, vodka and God knows what else."

Five minutes passed. It was still quite early, and they were the only customers. Behind the counter, the owner was jibber-jabbering with a coworker in a tortuous, guttural tongue that was impossible to pigeonhole. Phillip leaned closer over the table, "What's that weird language?"

"Arabic. Our Italian host, Khalid Mohammed, took the long way here via Southern Lebanon."

In response to Phillip's baffled expression, Uncle Ned explained that the owner of Tony's Pizza emigrated from Lebanon in nineteen eighty-three after the Israeli invasion. The Israeli Defense Force ran Merkava tanks through the tiny hamlet where he lived with jets raining cluster bombs down on the olive and fig trees. The commercial building that housed his falafel business was leveled. "Khalid's Pizza Emporium - that was his first choice, but then someone pointed out the potential liabilities of such a name what with nine-eleven, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Uncle Ned waved good-naturedly at the man behind the counter and Khalid Mohammed - aka Uncle Tony - rewarded him with a toothy grin. In truth, the slim man with the bushy moustache and classic, Mediterranean good looks could have easily passed for Italian, Sicilian or Greek. "The colorful, inflections... that's just a harmless ruse," "In another half hour when the lunch crowd arrives, he stops talking Arabic in favor of the Italian shtick." Uncle Ned began

chuckling as though at some private joke. "It's great for business and really quite funny when you think about it."

An Arab falafel hawker managing an authentic Italian pizzeria When the lunchtime crowd reached its peak, did Khalid launch into an a cappella version of Oh Sole Mio?

Nothing was ever what it seemed to be.

Back outside in the parking lot, the older man kicked at the wet ground with his work boot and rubbed his stubbly chin with the heel of his hand. "Cluster bombs... a modern-day version of napalm. Nasty stuff!" "Of course, the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon was a classic example of the tail wagging the dog," Uncle Ned added, "with the army pretty much running amok while the Jewish government acted as little more than a rubber stamp for religious fanatics' messianic policies."

"How's that?" Phillip was having trouble following his uncles fracture commentary.

"For two thousand years, dating back to Hagar and Ishmael," his mind teetered off in yet another obscure perambulation, "the Semites have been going at it. Nothing ever changes." The older man moved several steps further away from the truck. "There's something I've been meaning to tell you about my daughter." He winced, as though whatever it was he had to confide carried a steep price. "What I'm gonna say about your Cousin Katy is in strictest confidence, and I would hope that -"

Before he could make his way to the central point, a cell phone began twittering insistently. Uncle Ned fumbled about in his back pocket. A window supplier needed to recheck dimensions for all rough opening. Uncle Ned climbed back in the cab of the Ford 150. There was no more mention of Lebanese restaurateurs conducting business under false pretences or Cousin Katy's personal affairs. Back at the worksite, Uncle Ned disappeared into the camper in search of the building plans. When he finally emerged, Phillip said, "Cousin Katy... there was something you wanted you tell me?"

"Not now," his uncle was in no mood for small talk. "I got to get back to the supplier with hard figures or our windows won't ship."

* * * * *

The construction company – eight, beefy carpenters and a crew chief arrived the third week in August and, with a hydraulic crane, the rest of the logs were set in place, the roof raised and shingled.

"This calls for a celebration." Uncle Ned was staring at the finished shell of his log cabin. "Saturday night at the *Boneyard Grille*." The Boneyard was a quasi-respectable rib joint that catered to locals and a handful of bikers who tended to rowdiness, especially on the weekends. They served pulled pork, blackened catfish, steaks and an assortment of Cajun-style chicken dishes. "Eight o'clock," Uncle Ned slapped Ned on the back. "My treat and bring your appetite."

They were wedged in a booth at the Boneyard Grille having finished eating almost an hour earlier. Uncle Ned wagged a finger in the general direction of the bar where Katy was sipping beer and commiserating with a fat, bearded man wearing biker boots and a Harley Davidson dungaree vest. An elaborate series of tattoos extended from the biceps to the wrists. The hairy biker cracked an earthy joke and Katy, decked out in a tank top and cowboy hat

doubled up in laughter. "Now there's a social deviant interviewing for a job in the abstract," Uncle Ned fumed, "and my damn fool of a daughter's buying up every counterfeit word of it!"

Both Phillip and Uncle Ned had been drinking gin and tonics to celebrate the completion of the first phase of his 'Grand Scheme'. The man sipped at his liquor. "My daughter... heart of gold but a first-class dope!"

Interviewing for the job in the abstract. Earlier in the day, Phillip shot by his mother's place. He hadn't seen or talked to the woman in almost a month. Flying to Miami in the morning, the butcher was taking her on a ten-day cruise of the islands. The former Mrs. Peters bought a new wardrobe at the swanky Chestnut Hill Mall, had her hair and nails done. Phillip had never seen his mother, who shed twenty pounds in anticipation of the adventure, looking so svelte. On the other hand, Murray - that was the butcher's name - looked played out, decrepit. "Everything turns to shit," Phillip muttered.

"What's that?" Uncle Ned cupped a hand over his ear.

Between the tank top, gaudy cowboy hat and old-maid-librarian, dark glasses, Phillip couldn't decide if his favorite cousin was infuriatingly cute or a few months early for Halloween. "That Harley Davidson tub of lard..." The sight of Katy at the bar making goo-goo eyes with a three hundred pound degenerate left him so distraught Phillip couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Talk's cheap," Uncle Ned shot back gruffly. "Why don't you get off your schoolteacher's ass and do something about it?"

"Like what?"

"I dunno." He raised his glass and waved it in the smoky air. "Ask my daughter out on a date... marry her, copulate and raise a dozen latchkey brats."

With Uncle Ned's last, outlandish remark Phillip's brain was virtually shutting down. "They got a two-syllable word for that abomination, and it begins with the letter 'I'."

"Katy's not my biological daughter, you idiot!" Uncle Ned rubbed his eyes with the tips of his calloused fingers. "Her mother was married and divorced before we ever met. She's the byproduct of a previous marriage and no blood relation to either one of us."

What happened after that was a dizzying blur of noise, mayhem and buffoonery. Phillip staggered to the bar and said something to the beefy biker who promptly, climbed off the stool and punched him on the side of the head - a single chopping blow. Phillip's legs turned to spaghetti al dente and he ended up on the floor in a heap. The biker, who never even broke a sweat, conveniently slipped out the side door without paying his tab.

Five minutes later, when Phillip finally came to, Uncle Ned helped him up to a sitting position. "I'm okay now." Staggering to his feet, he almost toppled over a second time.

"What with the liquor and the fight," Uncle Ned relived him of his car keys, "you're in no condition to get behind the wheel."

"I can give him a lift home," Katy volunteered. "It was all my fault."

On the ride home Phillip sat with his throbbing head mashed up against the passenger side window. "You knew all along that we weren't related by blood."

"I was in kindergarten when my mother met your uncle."

Reaching his apartment, she asked, "Do you have any cocoa mix, Phil?"

"Yes, why do you ask?" Even in his debilitated state, it hadn't escaped notice that Katy omitted the familiar prefix and foreshortened his name by half.

"Maybe I should come up and fix you a cup of hot chocolate." Reaching out she ran a fingertip over the bruised skin. "That's a nasty bump." She lowered the hand letting it come to rest on the side of his neck. "I'm coming upstairs, Phil, to get you situated... however long it takes."

Phillip didn't quite grasp what Katy meant by the tail end of the previous remark. "Well, I really am in an awful lot of pain, and a cup of hot chocolate might help set things right."

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Legal Procedures

Shortly after arriving at the Emerald Square Mall, Phoebe Marsalis located Aunt Janet sitting on a bench next to the Victoria's Secret outlet. At two hundred and thirty pounds on a five-foot, six-inch frame, the black woman was hard to miss. Despite the weight, Aunt Janet was still a modestly attractive woman with flawless skin and regal cheekbones. When she rose, the girl kissed her mother's sister on the cheek and announced, "I've got problems."

The older woman studied the advertising displays of bras, French-cut thongs and risqué negligees modeled by svelte females in various stages of undress plastered across the plate glass window - skinny minnies every one of them. Aunt Janet didn't, as a rule, do much business at Victoria's Secret. "You're pregnant?"

Phoebe cringed inwardly. "Nobody mentioned sex."

"Thank God!" She blew out her cheeks, pulled the girl close and kissed her a second time for good measure. "I'm famished!" She gestured toward the food court at the far end of the building "Let's grab a bite."

At two-thirty on a Sunday afternoon with the New England Patriots playing just down the road in Foxboro Stadium, the mall was dead. They settled in a booth by the windows overlooking the parking lot. Phoebe ordered a Greek salad while her aunt chose the lasagna dinner with a side order of garlic bread. "This ain't no normal size portion!" Aunt Janet stabbed indignantly at her food with a plastic fork. "They gave me the runt of the litter." Jutting her jaw, she lowered her voice several decibels. "Maybe that doofus behind the counter got issues with plus-size, black women."

In a huff, Aunt Janet picked up her platter and lurched to her feet, but Phoebe deftly maneuvered in front of the woman blocking her way. "That's a perfectly normal size serving, no bigger or skimpier than the rest. You're just going to make a scene for no good reason."

Mollified, she sat back down. "I started a new diet last week," Aunt Janet remarked guiltily, "so this morsel will do just fine." She dabbed the crusty garlic bread at the meat sauce on her plastic plate. "So, if it ain't sex, what's your problem?"

"There's this Jewish guy from school who's been tutoring me in my legal procedures class and..." The sentence just petered out, and, without warning, a flood of tears dribbled down the side of her ebony nose in briny rivulets.

Aunt Janet glanced at her niece and raised a slab of lasagna smothered in tomato sauce to her lips. "Sammy Davis Jr. was Jewish."

"It's not funny." Phoebe sulked, drying her eyes with a clean napkin.

"What's funny," her aunt shot back with a droll expression, "is that you choose the family member with the worse track record to confide your romantic woes." The black woman patted the girl's wrist. "You ain't pregnant?"

"I just told you a moment ago."

She raised her hand in a placating gesture. "Yeah, yeah. I heard you right the first time."

Phoebe pushed the feta cheese to one side with the tines of her fork and speared an olive. Half her aunt's lasagna was already gone, and the girl had hardly touched her salad. "This past September when I started my sophomore year at college..."

"Hold on a minute." Aunt Janet pushed her plate aside. She rose from the chair, a surprisingly spry motion for such a heavysset woman, and disappeared in the crowd. A moment later, she returned with a mocha latte cappuccino and chocolate éclair. "I gotta get properly settled in my listening mode."

"What about your diet?"

"Yeah, the diet." Aunt Janet eyed the wedge of chocolate frosting drizzled across the top of the pastry. "The diet can wait. Tell me about this Jewish dude who's got two, good eyes but don't sing or dance half as fine as Sammy Davis Jr."

* * * * *

As Phoebe explained it, she was doing reasonably well in all her classes except *Legal Procedures*. Signing up for the elective on a whim, she soon discovered she had no affinity whatsoever for law. Her first test Phoebe scored a sixty-nine. The second test she dropped eight points lower. After the failing grade, Professor Birnbaum took her aside. "You need a tutor."

"I can just barely afford tuition much less the added expense of paying someone to cram for tests."

"Finkelstein will tutor you for nothing."

Finkelstein - Phoebe had to think. The skinny Jewish boy with the pale complexion and dreamy eyes. His gaunt face was dominated by a mass of fury, charcoal eyebrows that congealed in the middle each time his forehead wrinkled in a frown. The uncharacteristically adolescent features gave new meaning to the term baby face; the guy, who had just turned twenty, looked all of fourteen and that was stretching it. Arnold Finkelstein was the wiz kid, the brainiac with the encyclopedic mind. During class discussion, he had every answer on the tip of his facile tongue. "How do you know this?"

"I told Arnold that, if he helped you out this semester, I'd give him extra credit and recommend him for academic honors."

Phoebe stared at the rows of empty seats. She was holding her own or better in every academic subject - everyone but legal procedures. "How soon can I start?"

They met in either the student lounge or cafeteria - depending on which was quieter - three evenings a week. Arnold had this quirky ability to make the most arcane, legal gobbledygook seem interesting, almost bearable.

"What are the four elements of a tort?"

"I don't remember," Phoebe stammered.

Arnold rubbed his chin. His face was utterly hairless - smooth as a baby's bottom. Phoebe doubted that he had ever owned a can of shaving cream much less a razor. "Who in your family's the biggest whack job?"

"Whack job?" Phoebe gawked at him in disbelief. They were sitting in the cafeteria on a Thursday afternoon.

"Most disreputable family member?"

"Oh, that would be Uncle Ray, my Aunt Janet's fourth husband. He gambled and did some loan sharking on the side. They're divorced now."

Arnold stared at her with a blank expression. "How many times has your aunt been married?"

"I'm not sure... five or six times not counting live-in lovers."

"Okay, so let's say Uncle Ray is out in the back yard in late November burning a pile of leaves. The phone rings. It's his bookie with a hot tip on the third race at Suffolk Downs. When your uncle goes off to answer the phone, he leaves the fire unattended. A half hour later, the flame spreads to a nearby lot and burns down somebody's storage shed." Arnold cracked his knuckles one by one and took a sip from a bottle of all-natural peach juice. "All four elements of a judicial tort come into play - duty, breach, injury and causation."

Phoebe considered what he had just told her. Why was it that, when Professor Birnbaum explained things, it all got jumbled up in a meaningless muddle, but add Uncle Raymond, the hapless nitwit, into the mix, and the legal ramifications suddenly pulled into clear focus. "His leaving the burning leaves unattended is the proximate cause of the injury," Phoebe volunteered. "It was Uncle Ray's duty to keep the fire from spreading and by going back in the house he put neighbors at risk. The destruction of the shed and damage to any of their personal possessions represents legal injury."

Arnold ran a tongue over his top lip and the brown eyes flared with sober intensity. "Duty, breach, injury and causation - you just identified all four elements in a tort, which is a civil wrong."

Three weeks later, Professor Birnbaum pulled Phoebe aside. "Regarding that makeup test for the quiz you flunked," the older man paused for dramatic effect, "you scored an eighty-eight."

Phoebe felt a lump expanding in her throat. She knew she aced the test before the ink was dry but still needed to hear it from the instructor. "Thanks."

"You did the work," he deflected the praise back at the girl. "I take no credit for your achievement."

Professor Birnbaum removed his wire-rimmed glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. "Arnold's a bit high strung...a tortured soul but a very nice boy. I had a feeling he would help you get back on track." A steady trickle of sleepy-eyed students filtered into the lecture hall, opening loose-leaf binders and perusing texts.

"Tortured soul... what did you mean?"

The man seemed slightly embarrassed, as though his light-hearted banter had inadvertently veered off track. "The most important consideration is that he is helping you with the course work, and that's all that really matters."

* * * * *

"Do you understand the concept of assault and battery?"

It was the first week in November. A light dusting of snow peppered the ground, a premonition of things to come. They were sitting on a bench in the solarium alongside the sports

pavilion. A steady stream of jocks lugging equipment bags were heading either in the direction of the Olympics-size swimming pool or the gymnasium.

"Yes, of course. That's pretty straightforward."

Arnold leaned over her and let loose with a fake sneeze. "So sorry!" He wiped the imaginary snot from her forearm. Phoebe pushed him away, shaking her head in disbelief. "What I just did... does it fulfill the basic requirements of assault and battery?"

Phoebe thought a moment. "Assault implies an intentionally threatening word or action. But the sneeze was accidental, involuntary... something beyond control, especially if you had a head cold."

"What about the other part of the legal equation?"

Phoebe cracked a thin smile. "Even that might be called into question, because the act was unintentional and lacking malice."

Arnold's head bobbed up and down energetically. "My cousin, Jacob, is getting bar mitzvahed a week from Saturday. Did you want to come?"

"A bar mitzvah?"

"It's a spiritual rite of passage."

"Yeah, I guess so," Phoebe replied. After she had a moment to digest the information, she added. "My parents might get the wrong idea if some emaciated white kid with a yarmulke pulled up in front of the house on a Saturday afternoon, so we'll need to make arrangements regarding transportation."

The function was held at Temple Beth David in Sharon. Phoebe met Arnold in the college parking lot and they drove to the temple together. Dressed in a *tallit*, prayer shawl, with phylacteries draped over his forehead, the young boy read from the torah in Hebrew. When the ceremony was finished, they went into the communal hall where a catered buffet was spread across the entire length of the far wall. In the middle of a smorgasbord of Jewish delicacies - herring, latkes, spicy, meat-stuffed knishes, gefilte fish with red horseradish, kreplah and hummus - was a swan fashioned from chopped liver and a pair of glistening ice sculptures.

Baruch atoh adomoi elohainu melach ha'olum... The rabbi blessed the food.

A Klezmer orchestra consisting of a clarinet, cornet, violin, drummer and accordionist were warming up near the parquet dance floor. "Where do you know Arnold from?" Mrs. Finkelstein asked. Like her son, she was a short woman with dark hair and fastidious features.

"We're in the same class together," Phoebe explained.

She pulled the black girl close and whispered. "Don't get frightened when the band starts up. The music, especially the brisk numbers, can sound a bit schizophrenic to people unfamiliar with the eastern European, traditional melodies." She patted the girl's hand indulgently before running off to greet another family member.

* * * * *

Phoebe didn't see Arnold again until the middle of the following week. "I want to tell you about Uncle Nathan, the bar mitzvah boy's father."

"The heavysset guy with the fancy skullcap?"

"He's a *gonif*," Arnold replied. "A good-for-nothing crook, who was indicted for fraud and racketeering a couple years back. His double chin and gold-embroidered yarmulke were

plastered all over the news media." Reaching into his backpack, Arnold withdrew a newspaper article. The garish headline stretched across the top right-hand corner of the page in bold, sixteen-point print.

Regional Food Inspector arrested on multiple Felony Charges.

Directly below the caption, a rotund man wearing a dark suit was being lead into court by local police. According to the district attorney's office, Uncle Nathan had been shaking down a couple of food distributors selling tainted merchandise. A year into the shakedown, the retailers decided turning state's evidence was the lesser of two evils and ratted him out.

"They got my dopey uncle on videotape," Arnold tittered. The footage broadcast on the Channel Ten Eyewitness News supposedly showed Uncle Nathan standing next to his Cadillac Esplanade with the trunk open, while employees from Edgemont Produce loaded the rear with boxes of vegetables, fruits, sausage and bacon. A separate carton containing an assortment of expensive liquors was carefully positioned in the front of the vehicle on the passenger side. "With longevity and benefits," the normally soft-spoken Arnold was musing out loud, "Uncle Nathan was pulling in well over a hundred grand."

"So what happened?"

"The schmuck pleaded *nolo contendere*, and they sent him away to a country-club prison for eighteen months. Then he took early retirement and still got to keep his state pension – proof positive that crime pays."

"One thing I don't understand," Phoebe handed him back the clipping. "If your uncle is so religious, how could he have gotten caught up in anything this sordid?"

They were in the student cafeteria. On the table Arnold arranged a paper plate with a half-eaten cheeseburger in front of Phoebe. Smoothing a soiled napkin, he placed it to the left together with a plastic fork and knife. "Tell me what you see."

"What's this got to do with Uncle Nathan?" Phoebe protested

"Just answer the question," he demanded tersely.

"A table setting."

Arnold's expression was morose. "As an ultra-orthodox Jew, Uncle Nathan follows the *Shulchan Aruch*, a system of Jewish beliefs governing every aspect of behavior from prayer to marriage to business and finance." "Shulchan...table, aruch...set," he translated from the Aramaic. "If you faithfully follow the religious precepts, every aspect of daily life will be as harmonious and efficient as a properly set table. Nothing can ever go wrong, unless, of course, havoc is imposed from an external source."

"But if God provides everything needed to live a humble life, where did your uncle go wrong?"

"My saintly uncle suffers from hubris, spiritual pride." Arnold's features convulsed in a tortured grin. "He's an incorrigible asshole!"

* * * * *

Over the next four months, Phoebe and Arnold slogged through duress and undue influence, contractual capacity, discharge of obligations, remedies for breach of contract, sports and entertainment law. In Each instance, he ignored the assigned reading in favor of the here and now. Married and divorced a half-dozen times, even Phoebe's bulky Aunt Janet was dragged into their legal give-and-take - especially when Arnold needed to bolster a point regarding cohabitation, common-law arrangements and breach-of-promise.

Reaching out with a stubby index finger, Arnold tapped the iPod dangling from Phoebe's neck. "Let's say you make an offer to sell me your iPod. You don't really have any intention of getting rid of it. You're just fooling around... acting silly." "Of course, the court has no interest in what might be in the mind of the person making the offer," he continued. "You may be bullshitting me, but if a reasonable person would interpret the joking behavior as a serious offer, that would establish legal intent."

Phoebe considered the possibilities. "So a person could actually be held accountable for something said in jest."

"Yes, absolutely," he shot back. "For example, if I told you that I was madly in love with a young girl and couldn't imagine living apart even though we had infinitely more going against us than otherwise..."

Several students at adjacent tables looked up. Arnold suddenly began to cry, making horrible snuffling sounds. Phoebe reached out and grabbed his hand, but he promptly pulled away, lurching to his feet. "Now I've ruined everything." He rushed out of the cafeteria without bothering to separate out his recyclable trash or place his food tray on the conveyor belt leading to the commercial-grade dishwasher.

Phoebe should have seen it coming.

When the orchestra played *Sunrise, Sunset* in a lilting, three-four time and Arnold escorted her onto the dance floor, he nuzzled his chin just a tad too comfortably against her neck, draping his arms around the small of her back and pulling the girl gently up against his chest. It was a joyous celebration. Everyone was having a splendid time so why read anything into it? And anyway, by now Phoebe was thoroughly comfortable with Arnold's irreverent humor - his kooky nuttiness and thoroughly weird take on the human condition.

The slapstick buffoonery taken aside, he always got the essentials right; he never compromised the serious stuff. What was that errant remark Professor Birnbaum let slip that late October afternoon following the makeup quiz - something about Arnold being high strung...a tortured soul? Now the proverbial cat was up the tree and it was one hell of a tall shaft of old-growth timber!

* * * * *

"Since his emotional diarrhea, you ain't seen or heard from the Hebe?" Aunt Janet pressed.

They were at the cosmetics counter of Filene's Department Store, where a collection of complimentary sprays were arranged on a silver tray. Though she seldom bought any, Aunt Janet liked to sample the designer perfumes and body lotions. "I left messages, but he won't return my calls."

Aunt Janet spritzed her thick neck from a sampler bottle of *Paco Rabanne*. "When I was your age I was already with child and separated from deadbeat husband number one."

"I thought I could talk to him between classes, but he never showed up on Friday."

"What nerve!" Aunt Janet pointed indignantly at the perfume she had just sampled. "Eighty-five bucks for less than three, fluid ounces and it don't even smell all that hot." She immediately wandered over to a display featuring an Israeli skin rejuvenator manufactured from organic salts and minerals harvested from the Dead Sea and rubbed a small amount of the

pearlescent, exfoliating goo on her wrist. "You're old enough to attend college and make your way in this world. What you wanna do with this guy?"

"I don't know."

They left Filenes and took the escalator to the lower level. Before leaving the mall, Aunt Janet always made a pass through the pet store. After inspecting all the gerbils, hamsters, turtles, rabbits, exotic fish and kitties, she approached a clerk and asked to take a closer look at a cuddly, chocolaty pug. Overjoyed to be free of the metal cage, the puppy was slobbering all over Aunt Janet's leather jacket. She tickled the pooch under the chin and, nestling in her forearm, the dog promptly rolled over on its backs. "What if your Jewish friend was the color of this dog - would that make a difference?"

"That's a hypothetical statement," Phoebe blustered. "What difference would it make?"

"You conveniently answered my question with a dumb-ass question of your own." Crumpling her hand in a fist, Aunt Janet wrapped the knuckles on Phoebe's forehead rather forcefully. "At least, the lovesick Hebe's in touch with his feelings, which is more than I can say about you."

Her aunt rubbed the dog's stomach and kissed it on the snout. For his part the dog, who had been fidgeting like a speed freak on meth, suddenly went limp and fell off to sleep, its preposterously long tongue dangling down the side of its mouth. Aunt Janet petted and talked gibberish to the puppy for the better part of ten minutes before whispering, "Eight hundred freakin' bucks! Who the hell's got that sort of money for some flea-bitten, lop-eared mutt?" She deposited the bewildered pooch in the clerk's arms and sauntered out the door.

Pulling up in front of the main entrance, Aunt Janet sniffed the underside of her right wrist, then the left. "Like this?" She stuck her fleshy forearm up under Phoebe's nose, revealing a light lavender scent from one of the complimentary perfume testers.

"Yeah it's subtle... flowery."

They passed out into the open air. The temperature had dropped to the low fifties but the sun was out and a wintry breeze felt crisp. When they reached the curb, the woman grabbed her niece by the wrist. "Where's this Hebrew kid live?"

"On the east side over by the community center. Sixty-four Jasmine Court."

"Sounds elegant! Let's go pay him a visit."

"You can't be serious?" When there was no immediate reply, Phoebe added, "You don't think that's a bit extreme?"

"Six husbands and an endless parade of live-in lovers," her aunt shot back in a gravelly monotone, "that's extreme!" She sniffed her other wrist. "On second thought, maybe the Paco Rabanne is worth the money." Aunt Janet cocked her head to one side. Her eyes were pellucid, perfectly clear. "Well, what's it gonna be, girlie?"

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Last of the Nature Men

Harry Sylvester was marrying Bernice Abernathy on the twenty-third of March, but from November on, New England weather was always a crapshoot. The love birds could have pushed

the nuptials up a month and planned a balmy spring wedding. That was Harry's original intent, but for reasons only the blushing bride was privy to, the option was never seriously considered. A week before the wedding, Bernice's older sister, Sylvia, called Harry at the community college.

"Did Bernice ever mention a previous engagement?"

"Engagement?"

"To a Wal-Mart marketing executive."

Harry pushed a thick pile of term papers he was correcting aside. "When was this?"

"They were a hot item,... inseparable as Siamese twins, up until about a month before she snagged you."

Harry met Bernice at a Christmas party the previous year. A dark beauty, Bernice Abernathy's jet black hair hung in tight ringlets down to the small of her back. Chestnut-colored eyes and wide cheekbones only accentuated the contrast between a distinctly lewd loveliness and aristocratic aloofness. Bernice favored wine-colored lipsticks with a glossy sheen and raunchy perfumes that smelled more like musk oil than *Channel*. When she moved, the woman displayed a seductive lilt, a suggestive cadence to the hips that left every male child over the age of ten salivating with lust.

From their first meeting Bernice had put a hex on Harry. But wasn't that a part of the courting ritual? Peacocks splayed their pastel plumage, gorillas thumped their hairy chests, and the female of the human species ... Well, Harry wasn't a hundred per cent sure what ritualistic excesses they favored, but he was more than willing to give Bernice, the sultry sorceress, the benefit of the doubt. A whirlwind courtship was followed by the announcement of their marital intentions. Harry felt no compelling urge to pester Bernice about her prior social life. The woman always acted as though Harry was her first and only serious romantic interest. *Acted* - that was the operative word.

"So what happened to the marketing executive?" Harry pressed.

"We need to talk. Privately."

"What?"

"Meet me at the Haywood Recreation Field around six?"

"Not a good idea," Harry cautioned. Roads were blocked, power lines down. The weather bureau had warned of a freak ice storm from earlier in the week. Many schools canceled class anticipating the worse, and Governor Carcieri put a snow emergency into effect around noon before the first flakes even hit the ground. Any cars left stranded on the streets of downtown Providence would be towed at the owner's expense. Harry, who taught English literature at the community college, put the free time to good use correcting exams.

"Regarding the weather - "

Click. Sylvia hung up before Harry could mount a coherent protest.

By five o'clock, driving conditions were downright miserable with freezing rain and blustery wind gusts topping out at fifty miles an hour. Nobody visited the Haywood athletic field during the winter months, certainly not after dark in hellish, bone-chilling weather like this. Straight-jacketed in rush-hour traffic, Harry didn't arrive until six-thirty. What little light seeped through the charcoal clouds was dissipating altogether. Another ten minutes and the field would be shrouded in total darkness.

Sylvia's brown Subaru was the only other vehicle in the empty parking lot. Harry hurried over to the safe haven of the passenger side compartment, but his future sister-in-law lurched out

of the car, pulling a wool cap over her stringy brown hair. "Let's walk."

Pale and emaciated with a jagged, ice pick of a nose, her cheeks were permanently stained by chronic roseola. According to Bernice, her thirty-five year old sister hadn't been out on a date since college, and the Abernathys were fatalistically resigned to the likelihood their first-born might never find a soul mate.

"In this weather?" Harry made no effort to mask his irritation. By way of response, Sylvia struck out in the direction of the corkscrew slide two hundred feet away at the far end of a soggy soccer field. The sleet, which switched over to snow an hour earlier had reverted back to icy sludge.

"Cold feet," Sylvia threw the words out like a malignant curse. "You asked what happened to my sister's first marriage. The groom got cold feet. More like frostbite bordering on gangrene. Cancelled the engagement a week before the wedding... no explanation. No nothing."

Sylvia kept trudging with her head down and boots kicking up a slurry of slippery wetness. "You're the second Mr. Right," Sylvia confided sardonically, picking up the thread of her previous remark. "So why do you think the first chump pulled the plug?"

Harry wasn't sure if the question was rhetorical.

He didn't especially like subtle mind games or the insinuating, ever-so-slightly baiting tone of her voice. Sylvia halted alongside the soccer goal. The netting was frosted over with an inch-thick glaze.

"A guy's engaged to the world's hottest babe, a horny firecracker, and suffers a premature case of buyer's remorse. What caused the romantic change of heart?" The momentary nastiness had fallen away and Sylvia seemed utterly placid. Again, Harry didn't know what to say.

"My sister's a sadistic bitch." Sylvia spoke so softly that Harry had to lean forward, cocking his head to one side to absorb what she was saying. "Marry Bernice and she'll ruin your life."

The Haywood Athletic field was pitch black. Even the toddler swings twenty feet away were totally obscured by the endless barrage of scudding, wind-driven sleet, wrapping Sylvia's ominous words in a phantasmagoric swirl of unreality, a waking nightmare. "Why are you saying this?"

"We grew up together in the same house. Day in, day out for thirty-two years. I know what she's capable of."

"You hate your sister," Harry blurted accusingly.

"Yes, that's true enough," Sylvia shot back. "It's impossible to love someone you pathologically detest. Certain emotions are mutually exclusive."

Harry was fighting a debilitating lethargy that threatened to engulf his mind. His muddled impressions were coming in a surreal slow motion. Whether it was the late winter storm or Sylvia's harsh, unwavering pronouncements, he couldn't get a handle on much of anything. "I suppose you warned the Wal-Mart executive off... put the screws to that marriage, too."

"Nothing of the sort!" Sylvia replied earnestly. "The guy was a schmuck, an ignoramus. They deserved each other." "I *never* had even the slightest intention of discouraging that grotesque farce of a marriage."

"So what happened?"

"Good question," Sylvia replied noncommittally.

Suddenly Harry was in no great hurry to retreat to the cozy comfort of his Jeep Grand Cherokee. "I'm marrying your sister on Saturday."

"Four days from today," Sylvia confirmed.

The main function hall at the Braintree *Sheraton Tara* had been reserved eight months in

advance. Father Flynn—the jovial cleric was present at Harry’s confirmation—was officiating at the marriage ceremony. The flowers, caterer, ice sculptures and honeymoon suite in Acapulco were all paid for in advance!

Sylvia suddenly lurched forward and kissed Harry, a sloppy, beak-nosed peck on the cheek. “I really like you, Harry. You’re a bit gullible but a swell guy.” “I felt obligated ... I felt ...” Bursting into tears, Harry’s future sister-in-law left the butchered sentence dangling in the frigid gloom. Spinning clumsily about, she hurried back to her car.

A minute passed. Harry heard an engine fire up and watched the dim trail of headlights sluicing through the storm toward the main highway. Slogging back in the direction of the parking lot, his legs felt ridiculously unmanageable. In an unbroken line from the thighs straight down to the ankles, his pants were frozen solid, slathered in a quarter-inch slab of ice. Harry picked his way back to the car. Easing into the driver’s side, he flicked the heater on full blast, and then loosening his belt, dropped his pants down around the ankles.

I’m half-naked and alone at the Haywood Athletic Field in the middle of a raging blizzard. I’m sitting here like some predatory pervert at a children’s playground waiting for my boxer shorts to dry.

When the temperature in the car topped out at ninety degrees, Harry turned the heater down one notch. His underwear was toasty warm, almost dry. The cotton slacks had thawed depositing a puddle that resembled a toddler’s wading pool on the floorboard of the car.

Marry my sister and she’ll ruin your life.

If half of what Sylvia Abernathy said was true, Harry’s life was about to take on the trappings of a Greek tragedy. He switched the windshield wipers on and watched as the twin blades labored to clear the mess. He lifted his pants off the floor and, one leg at a time, rung the excess water from the cloth. Then he spread the pants across the passenger seat, directing the heater vents at the crotch. Yes, everything was back under control.

A queer incident early on in their relationship upset Harry enough to raise doubts.

In late January the temperatures spiked from the frigid single digits into the balmy upper fifties. It proved nothing more than a freakish mid-winter thaw that lasted a sum total of three days before temperatures plunged back into an arctic, deep freeze with wind chills registering below zero! One sunny afternoon during the ridiculously warm weather, Harry spied a crimson ladybug, no larger than a pea, scurrying across the oak living room floor. “An omen of things to come!” Hurrying off to the bathroom, he snatched a Kleenex from the carton. Returning to the room, the bug was among the missing. “Where’s our little friend?”

“Oh, that silly bug?” From her left foot, Bernice removed a snazzy leopard mesh pump. The gooey remains of the ladybug were smeared across the sole of the shoe. She waved the elegant leather up under Harry’s nose. “Would you be so kind?” He dabbed the remnants of the insect with the Kleenex, wadding its crushed carcass in the soft tissue coffin.

The shoe which Bernice wielded with lethal force was a knock off of a five hundred and eighty-five dollar *Blahnik* original purchased three blocks down from Times Square during a New York shopping spree. Bernice favored designer shoes from *Louboutin*, *Choo*, *Prada* and

The next day around two in the afternoon, Harry called the Saint Marks Church rectory. Father Flynn answered the phone. “This is Harry Sylvester.”

“We have a date with destiny later this week,” the priest quipped.

“Sunday,” Harry replied. “I was wondering if I could speak with you about a personal matter.”

“I’m free after supper.” Father Flynn, a somewhat disheveled looking middle age man was notorious for his impassioned homilies—the concept of original sin was alive and well at Saint Marks—and, when he drank a tad too much Johnny Walker Red, an occasional off-colored joke. But even Father Flynn drew the line when it came to social propriety. Perhaps this man of the cloth would talk Harry back down off the marital ledge, lay bare the errors in Sylvia Abernathy’s scathing indictment. “Something wrong?” the priest added.

“I’m not sure,” Harry mumbled. A tightness in his chest constricted his breathing and his voice wobbled as he added, “I’ll drop by around seven.” His hand shaking, he hung up the phone.

Surprise. Surprise. So this was what an anxiety attack felt like.

Harry was overwhelmed with panicky despair tinged with self-loathing. What to say to the amiable Father Flynn? Bernice is a self-aggrandizing bitch. She murdered a harmless lady bug, one of God’s most perfect creations, with a five hundred dollar designer knock-off. For these and a host of other reasons, I’ve had a change of heart and don’t want to get married anymore.

At quarter to seven, Harry pulled the metallic blue Jeep into the parking lot of the church rectory. Father Flynn was waiting in the doorway with his coat on. Squat with wide hips and a massive chest, his ruddy complexion was offset by a tangle of bushy eyebrows. “CCD class tonight,” he said by way of explanation. Harry followed him across the lawn to the front door of the church.

“This weekend,” the priest patted him heartily on the back, “you get a pair of golden rings. One for your finger, the other for your nose.” The priest chuckled at his clever repartee. Downstairs in the church hall a group of adolescents were reciting the rosary under the direction of an older, dour-faced woman. “So what’s on your mind?”

This was not good. Harry would have greatly preferred to unburden himself in the privacy of Father Flynn’s office. Even a stuffy confessional would have been preferable to a classroom full of pimply-faced, hormonal adolescents. “My future wife’s sister came to see me the other night.” With the children reciting the Hail Mary in a monotonous drone, he told the priest what Sylvia had said.

All the while, Father Flynn listened attentively, bushy eyebrows scrunched together and a wistful smile coloring his thin lips. “Sylvia Abernathy,... she’s the older, unmarried daughter. The girl with the deformed nose and ...” He waved a hand fitfully in front of his face.

“Awful skin condition,” Harry finished the sentence for him.

Suddenly and without warning, the priest wrapped his arms around Harry in a fierce bear hug. The other children, who had just finished their final prayer and were putting on coats, stared at them with curious expressions. “I am so happy you shared these concerns with me.”

Father Flynn reminded one of the boys that he would be serving as altar bearer at the ninety-third Mass, then spoke briefly with the faith teacher before turning his attention back to Harry. “Sylvia’s obviously an embittered old maid,... a prissy malcontent intent on wrecking havoc and destroying her sister’s sacred day. How terribly sad!”

“She never struck me as a malcontent.”

“She abhors her sister,” the priest countered. “You admitted as much a moment ago.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Harry felt his argument faltering. “But what if—”

“What if? What if? What if?” The priest bellowed. “The world’s full of neurotic naysayers and halfwits paralyzed by indecision.” Father Flynn smiled ecstatically, raising his arms in a magnanimous gesture.

Harry nodded meekly. He had been on the verge of confiding Sylvia’s parting pronouncement - *Marry my sister and she’ll ruin your life!* But Father Flynn’s effusive bear hug stymied that revelation. The church basement was empty now. The priest rubbed his wide jaw and drifted back in the direction of the entryway, flicking off the fluorescent overhead lights as he went. “You want bone fide saints, read the Bible and come to church on Sundays,” he added with a hint of impatience. “Every human has mortal frailties. Learn to live with minor imperfections. It’s a small price to pay for the joys of marriage and family.”

Harry had seen the priest assume the misty-eyed, otherworldly mantle during homilies or when he addressed parishioners at special occasions. His eyes clouded over with awe and veneration. His voice became tremulous, raising in pitch several decibels. He was, in effect, preaching to the choir.

“Bernice is a beautiful young woman... kind-hearted and compassionate. A deep thinker and humble, self-effacing soul. Count your blessings that she chose you to share her life with.” Father Flynn ended his monologue with a rapturous smile and self-affirming wag of his grizzled head. Grabbing Harry playfully by the elbow, he steered him back toward the rectory. “Mrs. Baxter picked up some Ghirardelli’s white chocolate cocoa mix. It’s really quite wonderful.”

They were sitting in the priest’s cramped office, the walls finished in knotty pine with a picture of the red-robed bishop prominently displayed near the window. The housekeeper entered with a tray of steamy chocolate and a small plate of sugar cookies. “A personal vignette,” Father Flynn flung the words at Harry along with a theatrical flourish. “In the late sixties, I was stationed at a Catholic mission in the South Pacific not far from Papeete, where we use to hear colorful stories about the ‘nature men’.”

“Nature men?” Harry blew on the frothy chocolate and sipped. He had come to see the priest to explore the possibility that his impending marriage to Bernice Abernathy was a colossal mistake. He wasn’t terribly interested in expatriate beachcombers or social riffraff.

“A band of Europeans plus a handful of Americans had gone off to live on an isolated beach.”

“Did you ever meet them?”

“No, the island, which was situated off the coast of Tahiti, was quite remote, but Polynesian natives visited on occasion and brought back outrageous stories.” He nibbled on a cookie and washed it down with the sweet liquid. “The nature men subsisted on raw fish - they seldom bothered to cook the meat - coconut, breadfruit, wild bananas, mangoes and papayas. Though many were well educated, they chose to throw their former lives away for what?”

The room grew silent. Harry wasn’t sure if the question was rhetorical. “What about women?”

“Interesting question.” The priest offered another sugar cookie and took one for himself. “Most of the nature men lead celibate lives and, even the few who did have sexual relations with

native woman, were never licentious. Theirs was essentially a spiritual quest. Co-existing in sublime harmony with their tropical paradise, they ran about buck naked or with little more than a loin cloth and perfumed frangipani blossom tucked behind an ear.”

“Adam minus Eve before the fall.”

Father Flynn tapped him on the knee. “Clever analogy!” Suddenly his eyes clouded over. “That was then and this is now. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded. “People have obligations. They don’t rush off on a whim to join the nature men of Tahiti.” The priest’s demeanor abruptly sobered. “They marry, pay taxes, join civic organizations,... lead structured, orderly lives.”

Harry cringed. The Abernathys also attended Saint Marks and, in all probability, Father Flynn had officiated at Bernice’s abortive first wedding! Quickly draining the last of the chocolate, Harry rose and moved to the doorway. The priest grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down energetically a half dozen times. “Where’re you honeymooning?”

“Acapulco.” The tight panicky feeling in his chest had returned with brutal insistence. An anesthetized torpor pervading his brain was gaining the upper hand. “We rented a bungalow on the water.” *Sort of like the nature men of the South Sea Islands but with none of that skinny-dipping, mystical claptrap.*

“Sunday.” The priest accompanied Harry through the kitchen to the back door. “I’ll look forward to seeing you and your lovely bride on Sunday.”

Sauntering into the lobby of the Providence Train Station, Harry Sylvester, a man who had never so much as lifted an extra sugar packet from a coffee shop, felt like an inveterate thief, who had just committed the perfect crime. His heart was racing but not from fear. Rather, he was engulfed in an ecstatic sense of triumph. Of course, he still had to get clear of the musty city, but the worse was behind him.

A bank check for twenty-three thousand dollars—his life savings—nestled comfortably in his right pants pocket beneath a clean handkerchief and car keys—he would throw the keys away once the train reached the seaport town of Westerly and eased over the state line into Connecticut. An overnight bag held several pair of clean underwear plus his shaving gear. He was traveling light, unencumbered. Yes, things were off to a very auspicious start!

“Final destination?” The silver-haired clerk behind the ticket window rested his hands over a computer keyboard..

“San Francisco. I firmed up reservations last night.” From California Harry would fly direct to Hawaii and then arrange a connecting flight to one of the South Sea Islands closest to where the nature men pursued their idyllic existence. What happened from there was up for grabs.

Harry glanced over his shoulder. The waiting room was virtually empty except for a few businessmen and a woman with dirty blond hair sitting next to a young girl, presumably her daughter. The woman was pretty in a matronly way. “Sylvester. Harry Sylvester,” Harry mumbled turning his attention back to the clerk.

The clerk ran his pudgy fingers over the keyboard. “Yes, here we are.” A moment later a machine spit out a ticket, which the agent pushed across the counter. “You parked in the station garage?”

Harry, who had already turned away from the counter, felt a gentle tug of anxiety. *Don’t panic! Act normal or at least as normal as a person who is about to drop off the face of the earth*

can possibly look. “Why yes, I am.”

“Then you’ll want to validate your parking ticket over there.” He pointed to a gray metallic device perched on a shelf at the far end of the counter. “Otherwise you’ll end up paying the standard parking fee which is twice the rate for paid passengers.”

Harry smiled sickly. Damp rings of sweat were pooling under his armpits and wilting his shirt collar. “Yes, I’ll do that immediately.” He wandered over to the machine. Groping about in his pocket he located a crumpled piece of cardboard. Slipping the ticket into the metal machine, he heard a dull thud as the date and time were stamped onto the ticket. Harry glanced over his shoulder, but the silver-haired ticket clerk had already turned his attention to the next customer.

Okay. Get your nerves back under control. Everything’s going according to plan. In twenty minutes the southbound Amtrak train would be chugging into the station. Harry spied a mailbox next to the coffee kiosk. “What good luck!” he mused. Pulling two letters from the overnight bag, he crossed the parquet floor and dropped them in the navy blue metal box. More accurately, he *jammed* the letters into the hopper, flapping the lid a half dozen times to insure that, like a jagged fishbone stuck in the throat, the mail wasn’t regurgitated back in his hypocritical face. In a day or two both letters would reach their destination. Everything would be explained though, in all likelihood, nothing would ever be forgiven. It didn’t matter as no return address was attached to either envelope.

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Five Hundred Forty-three Parishioners

Mortimer Goldfarb was replenishing a bin of 3-inch molly screws in his uncle’s hardware store when a heavysset black man with a sour expression lurched through the door. “Abraham Lefkowitz?”

Morty’s uncle, a gaunt, sallow-faced man with a mop of thinning hair that he seldom bothered to run a comb through, stepped out from behind the counter. “What can I do for you?”

The black man yanked a thick wad of papers from his back pocket. “You’re hereby summoned to appear in district court on the eighteenth of September.” He jiggled a pen in front of the hardware store owner’s nose. “Sign here.”

The old man’s face blanched. “What, I committed a crime?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. Paperwork explains everything.” Retrieving the clip board, the black man disappeared out the door.

Morty removed the papers from his uncle’s trembling hands and scanned the document. “Florence Catelli, that divorcee who worked here a month and a half, ... she’s suing you for sexual discrimination.”

The old man shook a fist in the air. “I never laid a hand on that frumpy witch!”

“Apparently, you didn’t have to.”

Florence Catelli came to work at Lefkowitz Hardware the middle of August doing

bookkeeping three days a week. A month into the job, she approached Abe Lefkowitz and announced she was leaving early for a doctor's appointment.

"You sick?"

"Pregnant." The woman, who was well into her second term, walked out the door and promptly dropped off the face of the earth. No notice. No nothing. Abe called Florence's house a half dozen times and left messages on an answering machine but she never returned his calls.

"You asked her to bring you a note from the obstetrician."

"Yeah, what's the harm in that?"

Morty thumped the legal brief with his index finger. "Asking pregnant women for a doctor's note is against the law without a written company policy."

"Such stupidity!"

A contractor entered the store and requested ten pounds of roofing nails. Still clutching the court papers, Morty went off to the back of the store to fill the order. While his uncle was ringing up the sale, he drifted out the front door. Across the street at a diagonal, a new office building loomed – a mishmash of high rent, executive business suites. A sign on the front lawn read *Garret, Meyers and Morales, Attorneys at Law*.

Louisa Morales' name was prominently listed on the summons. Morty shook his head in disbelief. Florence Catelli probably waltzed across the intersection as soon as she left Lefkowitz' Hardware Store on her last day at work.

Emotional damages. Psychological abuse. Loss of income. Ka-ching! Ka-ching! Ka-ching! The woman, who frittered her weekends away stroking the one armed bandits at Foxwoods Casino just over the state line in Connecticut, must have thought she died and flew straight up to heaven when Ms Morales told her what Abraham Lefkowitz' indiscretion might be worth.

At four-thirty, while his uncle was talking to a contractor, Morty ducked into the back room and called the law firm. "Ms. Morales, please?"

"Who should I say is calling?"

"Mort Goldfarb. I need to speak with her regarding my uncle, Abe Lefkowitz."

After a brief pause a woman came on the line. "Yes, can I help you?"

"Your firm is representing Florence Catelli."

"Are you a lawyer?" The voice was frigid.

"No, I'm Abe Lefkowitz' nephew, but I thought -"

"If your uncle wants to negotiate a settlement that's fine," the woman brought him up short, "but otherwise Mr. Lefkowitz needs to hire an attorney. Under Massachusetts state law, neither he nor a family member can represent the corporation."

"It's a family-owned hardware store hardware, not some goddamn *Fortune Five Hundred* conglomerate!"

"That's irrelevant. Is your uncle ready to settle?"

There was an uncomfortably pause. "You can't be serious," Morty blustered.

By way of a reply, Louisa Morales hung up the phone.

Ten thousand dollars for emotional damages and lost wages plus legal fees—that's what the suit was demanding. And the language was brutal:

“With total disregard for Ms. Catelli’s modesty, Mr. Lefkowitz demanded my client provide him with medical information of a most private and confidential nature. Ms. Catelli felt violated, degraded, humiliated by the store owner’s insensitivity to her condition as a pregnant woman well advanced into her second trimester.”

“From the outset of her employment at Lefkowitz Hardware, Ms. Catelli was treated in a most condescending and patronizing manner, as the several examples listed below will attest.”

The examples were hogwash, a figment of Florence Catelli’s deviant mind and Louisa Morales’ creative writing skills. With a master’s degree in literature, Morty Goldfarb knew perfectly well that the lawyer had embellished Florence’s verbal diarrhea. Abraham Lefkowitz, a devout, orthodox Jew who would carry a lady bug outside on a Kleenex rather than harm the insect, was demonized, vilified and transformed into the employer from hell! Every pregnant working woman’s worse nightmare!

From the outset, Morty had a bad feeling about the woman and tried to talk his uncle out of hiring her. Florence Catelli’s employment history resembled Swiss cheese. A week here. A month and a half there. Endless holes. The red head talked too fast in a loud garish voice and, during the job interview, her eyes flitted about the hardware store in a distracted manner. But his uncle prevailed. “Give the woman a chance. Maybe she’ll surprise you.”

Surprise! Surprise!

“Where’re that legal papers?” Abe asked around five o’clock as they were getting ready to lock up for the night.

“Let me read it over at home later tonight,” Morty deflected the request, “and we can review it in the morning.”

His uncle shrugged. “So, how does it feel having a bona fide sexual pervert for an uncle?”

“Pretty much the same as it did before we knew the sad truth.” His nephew turned the lights off and locked the front door. When his uncle drove away, Morty put the car in gear, but instead of bearing right out of the driveway as he usually did, he snaked his way across the street to the new office building and took the elevator to the sixth floor.

“Is Ms. Morales in?”

“Do you have an appointment?” the secretary asked. “We spoke on the phone briefly earlier today,” he replied vaguely. “I only need a moment of her time.”

The receptionist went off down the corridor. In a room off to the right, Morty could see a mahogany conference table with a set of matching faux leather chairs. Row upon row of legal books lined the shelves. The artwork which decorated the walls was an eclectic mix of post-modern Jackson Pollack and the organic minimalist, Paul Klee.

“Third door on the right.” The receptionist had returned.

“Mr. Goldfarb?” Louisa Morales looked up from a stack of legal briefs she was perusing on her desk. Inordinately large, charcoal-colored eyes lay deep-set like precious jewels in buttery smooth, pecan-colored skin. Decked out in a sky blue, ruffle-hem jacket dress with vented cuffs, the woman was voluptuously stunning.

Morty, on the other hand, had put on considerable weight since college and, at five feet six, a hundred and eighty pounds, was a physical wreck. A victim of male pattern baldness, all

the hair covering the top of his head had fallen away. A few tufts still clung to the temples and skin around the ears, but the general impression was that of a relatively young, flaccid man going utterly and indisputably bald.

Beyond the first disdainful once over, Louisa Morales averted her eyes and assumed an air of bored indifference. “You’ve got five minutes and then I’m throwing you out and calling the Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination to have Mr. Lefkowitz’ case officially calendared.”

Gazing out the window six stories down, Morty could just barely recognize Lefkowitz Hardware Store across the street. By comparison, the building looked shabby and unappealing. “Morales,” Morty said, “that’s Hispanic?”

“Your question’s irrelevant.”

“We’re Sephardic Jews,” Morty parried the sarcasm. “My family can trace our ancestors back to 14th Century Portugal. My Uncle Abe speaks both fluent Spanish and Ladino, which, as I’m sure an educated woman such as yourself would know, is a romance language derived mainly from Old Castilian with many borrowings from Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew and French.”

Louisa Morales scowled and cracked her knuckles one at a time. “Why are you telling me this?”

Morty pulled a tattered news clipping from his breast pocket and laid it on the woman’s desk. “My Uncle Abe teaches English as a second language, mostly to immigrants from Latin America. Twenty years now he’s been doing it. The city honored him with a citation last year.” Morty pointed at one of the legal briefs littering the woman’s desk. “He’s not the callous and depraved monster you described in the court papers.”

Louisa Morales leaned back in her chair causing her breasts to jut suggestively. The erotic display was a playful taunt. There on the sixth floor of the swanky law offices, Louisa Morales was a legal star on the rise, a gorgeous, well-educated Latina; Morty Goldfarb was a low rent shlemazel, a regrettable forgettable nobody. “Your uncle’s generosity is commendable.” She handed him back the clipping without bothering to look at the picture. “Now, Mr. Goldfarb, let me tell you how the legal game is played.”

Louisa Morales was demanding ten thousand dollars, not a penny less. The sum was nonnegotiable. If the suit before the Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination failed, Louisa Morales would simply bump the case up to the next highest civil court and so on and so forth. Like a diabolical, perpetual motion machine, she would pursue Florence Catelli’s sexual discrimination case all the way to the Supreme Court (Morty thought she might have been posturing but wasn’t completely sure). Over the long haul, court costs and legal fees would become astronomical—in the tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars. Truth, justice, fairness—such noble virtues and sentiments never factor into the equation. This was the American judicial system at its finest - a blood sport bordering on blackmail! The moment Abraham Lefkowitz told Lenore Catelli to bring a doctor’s note the game was on.

In the morning, a steady stream of roofers, general contractors, handymen, painters and plumbers kept Morty busy straight through until eleven o’clock. Then a shabbily dressed Hispanic woman carrying a broken pane of glass trudged into the store and spoke with Abe in her native tongue. Her gaunt face smeared with a maze of wrinkles, the gnarled old woman could

have been sixty or a hundred and sixty. “Cut Mrs. Lopes a replacement for her kitchen window and give her lift back to Wickendon Street.” Abe handed him a plastic tub of glazing compound and a putty knife. “And while you’re there, you might as well install the new glass.”

Morty’s mouth fell open. “I know the family from the Literacy Center,” his uncle explained. “Husband died of lung cancer last year. She lives with a granddaughter. They can just barely afford the glass much less paying someone to fix it.”

“I wanted to talk to you about the legal problem.”

Abe waved a hand impatiently over his head. “When you get back. Go fix the window.”

Morty grabbed some additional tools and went out to the car with Mrs. Lopez bringing up the rear. He arranged the new glass in the bed of the trunk. “How did you get here?”

“Boat,” Mrs. Lopez replied.

“No, I don’t mean the country. How did you get to the hardware store this morning?”

They were cruising down Thayer Street in the direction of the East Side. “Walk.”

“You walked a mile and a half carrying a broken pane of glass?”

There was a long pause. The woman peered out the window with a relaxed, self-absorbed expression. “Walk.”

The woman lived on the third floor of a wooden tenement that smelled of black beans and cilantro. A half-eaten taco—homemade not the *Taco Bell* variety—sat on a plate by the sink. Pulling on a pair of rawhide gloves, Morty cleaned the broken shards of glass from the window frame. Twenty minutes into fixing the window, a pudgy, round-faced woman came into the apartment. The granddaughter, who was carrying a Spanish paperback, said something to Mrs. Lopez who answered her in their native tongue then left the room with a load of laundry.

Five minutes later the girl, who looked to be in her early thirties, returned and sat down at the kitchen table. “You’re from the hardware store?” Her English was impeccable with barely the hint of an accent. Morty nodded. “Everybody knows Mr. Lefkowitz.”

Now that Morty had all the broken glass dug from the window, he chipped away at the last few remnants of brittle putty then grabbed a small propane torch. The woman stared at him in disbelief. “It’s to soften the putty.” He ran the flame over the window frame briskly several times then scraped the last few remnants of debris away.

“What are those little shiny things?”

Morty held up a tiny, wedge-shaped piece of metal. “They’re called glaziers’ points.” With the flat blade of a screwdriver, he pushed one down into the wood snug against the new glass. “The stays hold the glass in place, while the putty is setting up.” He gestured at the book. “*Lituma en los Andes*. Is that Death in the Andes?”

The woman’s forehead furrowed. “You’ve read it?”

“Only in English translation.” Morty replied. “Llosa is a wonderful writer, but, unfortunately, the book’s a flawed masterpiece.” Now that the window frame was cleaned up, he repositioned the glass, securing the new pane in place with more of the metal glaziers’ points, which he pressed into the soft wood. “Unfortunately, the author tried to stretch what should have been a novella with a thin plot into two hundred pages.”

The young woman smiled engagingly and crossed her arms over her breasts. “Well, I’ve only finished the first chapter so I couldn’t argue the point even if I disagreed.” With her fleshy shoulders and thick torso, Mrs. Lopez’ granddaughter was far more matronly than Rubenesque, but the girl possessed a modestly pretty face with a flat nose and limpid brown eyes.

Morty opened the can of glazing compound and rolled a pencil-thin snake between the palms of his hands. Jamming the putty into the upper corner of the window, he ran a triangular

bead at a sharp angle the entire length, trimming the excess away with the opposite end of the tool. "You speak good English."

"I came from Guatemala as a little girl so English was never a problem." She stared at him with an amused expression. "Do you usually install the glass?"

Morty finished shaping the bead around the top of the window and was working on the opposite side. "No, not as a rule."

When the job was done, he packed up the tools.

"I'm finishing my degree in journalism at Brown," the girl said.

"Well, then we have something in common. I studied comparative literature there."

"But you work in a hardware store?"

He shrugged. "Things don't always turn out the way we plan." He washed his hands in the kitchen sink. "I didn't catch your name."

"Maria. Maria Escobar."

"Morty Goldfarb."

Mrs. Lopez, who had come back into the room a few minutes earlier, placed a twenty dollar bill on the table next to the tools. Morty took the bill and placed it back in the old woman's hand. "No pay today. Free installation." She handed him back the money, which Morty promptly deposited on the kitchen table.

"You nice people. Muchos gracias!"

Maria Escobar accompanied Morty down to the car. "That was very sweet of you."

A group of college students sauntered by on their way to class. Morty watched the students until they were almost gone from sight. "Does the name Louisa Morales mean anything to you?" Maria shook her head. "My uncle got himself into a legal bind and I don't know what to do." He told her about the lawsuit and his disastrous visit to *Garret, Myers and Morales*."

"What a shame!" She made a face. "Sexual harassment is *the* hot button issues on campus lately."

"Every premenstrual, bra-burning feminist," Morty noted, "with a chip on her shoulder will want Abe Lefkowitz' head mounted on a stake." He blew out his cheeks in frustration. "Even with a good lawyer, I don't see how my uncle can get a fair deal."

It didn't matter if Abraham Lefkowitz was a leading advocate of women's rights, a philanthropist, lover of small children, bunny rabbits and baby ducks. Fling enough dung at a guileless individual and something foul was bound to stick. Afterwards, the person could spend the better part of a lifetime trying to undo the damage. "I shouldn't be burdening you with our problems." Morty turned the engine over and drove off.

When Morty got back, his uncle asked, "Did you fix Mrs. Lopez' window?"

"Good as new."

"She try to pay you?"

"Twenty dollars. I gave her back the money."

"Good boy." Abe Lefkowitz seldom charged any of the cash-strapped customers full price on anything. When Morty challenged him on his pricing philosophy, he said, "I charge them what I think they can afford."

"Then you should inflate the price when some *grossermacher* buys stuff."

"That would be dishonest, and anyway, Mrs. Lopez is devoutly religious... a regular saint."

“That so?” Morty scratched an earlobe thoughtfully. “How would you, an orthodox Jew, know about Mrs. Lopez’ religious habits?”

Abe slit open a cardboard box containing small containers of pumice and rottenstone. “I drive past *Our Lady of Guadalupe* church every day on the way to work, and more often than not that woman is coming or going from the building.”

“Is that a fact?” Morty rubbed his chin. “How many Spanish speaking people do you figure you taught English since you started with the literacy program?”

“Hard to say. A couple hundred or so.”

“What other church do they attend?”

“There’s no other church that caters to Hispanics. They all go to Our Lady of Guadalupe.”

“What about the middle class.”

His uncle waved his hand impatiently. “The Mass is in their native tongue. They *all* go there.” He resumed sorting the polishing agents.

Morty couldn’t get the phantasmagoric image of Louisa Morales out of his brain. The voluptuous, dark-skinned goddess utterly lacking in the milk of human kindness. “We can’t put this off any longer. We have got to talk about the legal papers.”

“And I agree.” Abe Lefkowitz draped a hairy forearm around his favorite nephew’s shoulder and steered him into the cluttered office. Pushing him down in a chair, the older man rested his buttocks on the edge of the desk. Lifting the phone off the hook, he covered the receiver with a greasy towel. “I’m gonna talk and you’re gonna listen.”

The previous afternoon, while Morty was trying to match wits with Louisa Morales, Abe Lefkowitz went to the synagogue to pray over his latest misfortune. “I was reciting the *Shma Yisrael Adoinoi Eluhainu, Adonoi achod*, when suddenly my whole body went numb and I heard a voice.”

“What sort of voice?” Morty gawked at his uncle uncomprehendingly.

“God spoke to me... here.” He pointed to his heart. “It was no different than Moses on Mount Sinai.”

“Moses got the Ten Commandments,” Morty wasn’t buying any of this metaphysical nonsense. “What did you get?”

“God said not to worry. He would smite my persecutors, shame and humiliate them in the eyes of their own kind.”

Florence Catelli was suing them for ten thousand dollars plus legal expenses and Abraham Lefkowitz was hearing celestial voices from the cosmic beyond. “God intends to smite your persecutors?” Morty jumped up from the chair and began pacing the tiny office like a wild man. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

Morty rubbed his eyes with the spatulated tips of his fingers. There were times—floods, natural disasters, unavoidable human tragedy—when a soul required divine intervention, when nothing else but God’s personal solace could set things right in the universe. Other times you needed a hard-nosed, take-no-prisoners lawyer. “Maybe,” Morty was clutching at straws, “you had a spiritual epiphany, an intimation of divine solace and -”

“He said no lawyers.”

“What?”

“The last thing God said was no lawyers. He would handle Florence Catelli on his own, divine terms.” The man’s features were suffused with a radiant, ecstatic glow as Abraham Lefkowitz replaced the telephone on the hook and went back out to check on customers.

The rest of the afternoon flew by in an emotional blur. The day after the ‘miraculous pronouncement’, as Abe described it, Morty visited his mother. “Uncle Abe’s been acting strange.”

“In what way?”

Morty told her about the law suit and his clandestine meeting with Louisa Morales.”

Sarah Goldfarb filled a small pan with water and turned the stove on. The woman had a fetish about tea kettles. She hated them. To this day, Morty still had no idea why his mother wouldn’t use a whistling kettle. “All right, so some lousy, former employee is trying to chisel a few crummy bucks out of my brother. You hire a lawyer. What’s the big deal?”

“Abe got so upset he sought God’s advice.”

“Yeah?”

“And God *talked* to him.” Morty was watching as the tiny bubbles accumulated at the bottom of the pan near the center then multiplied and mushroomed into a frothy sea. Maybe his mother enjoyed witnessing her water come to a full boil, something you couldn’t do with a closed tea kettle. That made perfect sense. “Since when does God talk to hardware salesmen?”

Sarah poured the tea, a cup for Morty and one for herself. “Even from when he was a little boy, my brother was very religious.”

“A religious nut, maybe? A metaphysical oddball prone to delusional excesses?”

“No, a hundred times no!” his mother blew on her tea and added a splash of milk. “Abe is the most down to earth, levelheaded member of the family.” She pushed the carton of milk across the table toward him “Now, if your *meshugena* aunt Trudy said she jibber jabbered with God that would be a totally different matter.”

His mother went to the cupboard and returned with a bag of Oreos. Morty twisted the two halves, separating the chocolaty wafers. “I asked him if God ever spoke to him in such a fashion before and he said this was the first time.”

His mother sat staring into space for the better part of a minute. “God said He would smite Abe’s persecutors?”

Morty nodded with a sick expression. “Shame and humiliate them in the eyes of their own kind.”

“Your uncle is sixty years old,” his mother spoke haltingly, “and devoutly religious. This is a guy who believes in *tzidakah*, righteousness. You spend a lifetime doing good deeds and keeping your nose clean in the here and now... the rest takes care of itself. It’s a Jewish thing.”

His mother brushed some crumbs into the palm of her hand. “You always hear about those hellfire and brimstone televangelists. It’s ‘Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!’ until you read in the newspaper that the Reverend Goody-two-shoes has been *shtupping* his neighbor’s wife for the past year and a half.”

Morty stared at his mother in disbelief. He had never heard her use such language. But then, the circumstances were unusual, to say the least. “Your uncle never made a fuss over his religious beliefs, so you do it his way or no way.” “Now go home,” the woman ordered, “and figure out how to help your Uncle Abe.”

In graduate School, Morty spent a semester in an honors class, studying Russian Literature. He wrote his final term paper on one of Tolstoy's lesser novels, *The Resurrection*. Later that night as he was lying in bed, a scene—really nothing more than a tiny snippet—from the end of the novel floated back to him. A young boy, no more than four or five, and his older sister are traveling to the family's summer estate in the Russian province.

Their horse-drawn carriage is delayed up as a ragged band of prisoners is being lead through the street to an awaiting ship where they will be transported to a prison colony. As the chained and filthy prisoners stumble across the road, the sister flies into a tantrum over the minor inconvenience. The younger brother bursts into inconsolable tears at the sight of people treated worse than animals. Vintage Tolstoy! Just as he felt an overpowering moral affinity towards the younger brother, Louisa Morales reminded Morty of the malicious sister.

Tzidakah.

His mother's words floated back to him in a confused muddle. How could anybody resist the lethal juggernaut that Attorney Morales intended to unleash? She would attack the righteous Jew for days, weeks, months and years on end until Abraham Lefkowitz was consigned to the poor house or gave her unscrupulous client what she wanted.

While he was waiting to meet with Louisa Morales, a stream of attorneys rushed back and forth to the front desk with reams of paperwork that they needed copied or mailed off to various parties. A middle-aged woman with a pair of bifocals dangling from a beaded chain placed a stack of papers three inches thick on the counter. How many Abe Lefkowitzes were being euthanized, sodomized, castrated and lobotomized in the seemingly innocuous, pile of documents?

Earlier in the afternoon at the hardware store, Morty helped a customer choose a router. They settled on a Ryobi with a quarter inch chuck and circular depth gauge. The fellow was originally considering an industrial, production grade Makita, but the tool was four times as costly and made no sense for a 'weekend warrior', a homeowner who only needed the tool for occasional projects.

Did the legal staff at Garret, Myers and Morales derive the same satisfaction as Morty did with the hardware customer, when they ripped the gizzards out of a hapless defendant? At one point when Morty was telling Louisa Morales about his uncle's work at the Literacy Center, the woman arched her left wrist over her should and began sawing back and forth with the right hand to mimic a violinist in concert. She reduced twenty years of selfless dedication to little more than maudlin sentiment.

A week passed. Like a brick phallic symbol, the luxury office suites across the street seemed to grow taller and more intimidating. Mrs. Lopez returned with her granddaughter to buy a gallon of paint and a brush. While the old woman was choosing the color, Maria pulled Morty aside. "I need to talk to you about a couple of things." She lowered her voice and leaned closer. "I told my grandmother about your uncle's legal difficulties."

At the far end of the aisle, Abe Lefkowitz was loading a can of eggshell white latex paint into the automated mixer. "And?"

"At first she said, 'I'll pray to the Blessed Mother', but then she came back an hour later and muttered that sometimes it pays to hedge one's bets."

"Your grandmother said that?"

“Well not exactly in those words.” Maria Escobar told him what the old woman suggested.

“Yes, that makes perfect sense,” Morty replied. “Two things... you said there was something else you had to tell me.”

“You were right about *Death in the Andes*. Llosa’s book was ridiculously long for such a skimpy plot.” She tapped him on the sleeve. “Stop by our apartment after supper,” she whispered, “and we can discuss strategies.”

As the two women were leaving,, Morty could have sworn that Maria’s grandmother winked and curled her lip in a defiant, toothless grin.

“What did you charge her for the paint?” Morty asked when they were gone.

“I think I’ll go to lunch,” his uncle muttered, ignoring the question.

Around two in the afternoon a skinny teenager wandered into the store. “Can I help you?” Morty asked.

“No I’m all set.” The youth was holding a can of carburetor spray. His face was marred with stubborn blotches of acne and one of the front teeth on the top was chipped.

“Car problems?”

“Yeah, engine won’t turn over.” He shook his head and a mop of greasy brown hair fell down over his eyes.

“You were in here just a week ago with the same problem.”

“Yeah, well it’s an older car.” His eyes flitted about the room. “Piece of junk, really.”

“Maybe you just need a tune up.”

The young man began rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet impatiently. His fly was open and the left cuff of his pants was torn and dragging on the floor. “I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

“Let me see your driver’s license.”

“Left it home,” he shot back without missing a beat.

“You’re sniffing carburetor fluid to get high.”

“You got some goddamn nerve!”

“I can smell it on your breath. You probably sprayed five minutes ago. Filled a plastic garbage bag with fumes and took a one way trip to la-la land.”

“Go to hell!” The youth spun around on his heels and headed for the door.

On Friday a registered letter arrived from the *Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination* notifying Abraham Lefkowitz that his case would be heard on the fourteenth of the following month. He read the letter and tossed it in the trash. “Florence has lawyers. We’ve got something better.”

“Amen to that!” his nephew chirped.

Saturday evening, Morty, who usually slept late most weekends, set the alarm clock for six-thirty. In the morning he dressed in his best suit and drove over to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, where he found a seat in the farthest row behind a pillar. It was his first Catholic service. He sat through all the gospel readings and even hummed along during the responsorial. After the Mass as the faithful rose to receive Holy Communion, Morty slipped out the back door and drove to his parent’s home.

“Jews and Catholics share the same God.”

His mother cocked her head to one side and stared at him uncertainly. “After a fashion, yes,” she said. “Let’s not forget the Inquisition, Auschwitz, Pope Innocent the Third and a few other catastrophic bumps in the road.”

“What if the deity that spoke to Uncle Abe wasn’t of the Jewish persuasion?”

Mrs. Goldfarb shook her head in exasperation. “I haven’t a clue what the hell you’re talking about.”

“You said it yourself—if it’s all about *tzidakah*, righteousness, then it doesn’t make a bit of difference whether a Jew or an orangutan performs the good deeds.”

His mother placed a hand on the side of her head. “Mortimer, my son, you’re beginning to scare me.”

When he reached home Morty went into the study and pulled out his Webster’s New World College Dictionary.

Smite from the Old English smitan akin to Ger schmeissen to throw IE base smē-, to smear, smear on, stroke on 1 a) to hit or strike hard b) to bring into a specified condition by or as by a powerful blow c) to defeat, punish, destroy or kill d)..... 3 to affect strongly or suddenly with some feeling [smitten with dread] 4 to disquiet mentally, distress [smitten by conscience] 5 to strike or impress favorably; inspire with love [smitten with her charms]

A horny male might easily be ‘smitten’ by Louisa Morales’ stunning good looks while she *smote* the libidinous loser into a state of rigor mortis with her barbed tongue. The word held multiple dissimilar meanings each of which could be used to good advantage. Catelli versus Lefkowitz: Suddenly the improbable seemed slightly more manageable.

The following Thursday at precisely ten forty-five in the morning, the senior partner at *Garret, Myers and Morales* buzzed Louisa Morales on the intercom.

“We have a situation developing in the lobby. You might want to take a look.”

“Could you be a bit more specific?”

After an inordinately long pause, Frederick Garret replied, “No, I don’t think so. You can either call the police or get your ass out front in a hurry.”

In the lobby close to a hundred Hispanics were milling about—senior citizen, young parents with toddlers and a smattering of middle age professionals. Over by the copier machine, a frail elderly woman was leaning on an aluminum walker with neon yellow tennis balls attached to the rear legs. In the conference room, a woman with a diaper bag was sitting alone discretely nursing an infant. Mrs. Lopez and her granddaughter were marching about the foyer with hand painted signs that read: *Louisa Morales: Shame! Shame! Shame!* And *‘Boycott Garret, Meyers and Morales!’*

“What the hell is going on here?”

Morty Goldfarb stepped forward. “We need to talk.”

Louisa Morales grabbed the receptionist’s phone. “I’m calling the police.”

“Could be the best thing to do under the circumstances,” Morty spoke amiably, “or the worse mistake of your life.”

The attorney’s manicured finger was arched over the keypad. “What do you want, Mr.

Goldfarb?”

“Five minutes of your precious time. Gratis.”

She ushered them into the conference room. The woman with the baby looked up and smiled before settling back to the maternal business at hand. “With the exception of the young children, most of these fine people all have two things in common,” Morty said. “They were tutored by my uncle over at the literacy center and,” he paused for dramatic effect, “they all attend Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.”

“So what?”

“Mrs. Sanchez,” he pointed in the direction of a middle age Hispanic carrying a small American flag on a stick, “just got her US citizenship. She claims that without my uncle’s help, she’d still be stuck in cultural limbo.” Mrs. Sanchez glowered at the attorney and waved her flag proudly.

“Now Mr. Cordoba,” he pointed to an older man with a pencil moustache and gold tooth, “is a member of the Chamber of Commerce along with your father. They’ve known each other for years. He came to this country from Algeciras in Southern Spain. It’s a tiny seaport town on the Straits of Gibraltar. He arrived here thirteen years ago not speaking a word of English. Who do you think tutored him when Carlos showed up one day over at the Brandenburg Literacy Center?”

Louisa Morales shifted uncomfortably in her leather chair. Outside in the foyer, the front door opened and several new Hispanic families flooded into the office. “At last count, five hundred forty-three parishioners attend the first mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe, and that’s not including your parents or visitors not formally registered with the rectory. If you proceed forward with this frivolous law suit, these fine Catholics will tell half a thousand people what you did to my uncle, and they’ll probably tell all their relatives, friends and neighbors. After they’ve dragged your family’s good name through the mud, you may want to change religions or move back to your native country of origin.”

The commotion mushroomed in the hallway. With no place to stand, more people stormed into the law firm, forcing those who had arrived earlier to retreat further down the hallway. Morty Goldfarb leaned across the table so close that his lips actually brushed against the attorney’s lovely ear. “A little voice in my heart-of-hearts tells me Louisa Morales has seen the error of her ways and will do the honorable thing. Tell me if I’m wrong.”

Later that afternoon, Maria Escobar stopped by the hardware store. “That went well, don’t you think?”

“God works in mysterious ways.”

“That’s a worn-out cliché.” Maria shot back. “A man with a Master’s degree in comparative literature from Brown ought to choose his words more carefully.”

“A hackneyed phrase, to be sure,” Morty agreed as a customer, who had been browsing through the bargain bin, went out the door. He picked up a banana-yellow, twenty-five foot Stanley tape measure and lofted it back and forth between his hands. “There’s an Iranian foreign film playing over at the Avon Cinema this weekend and I was wondering ...”

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