Double Dutch and Other Stories
Tag Cavello

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By

Tag Cavello

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Double Dutch

for Stacy Ross

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In late May of 1984, the Strawberry Festival came to Norwalk, Ohio, as it did every year at that time.

Aaron walked down West Main Street with his head in the trees. The sun shined in the boughs like a promise told through a smile; it dried their leaves of the previous night's rain, and brought the window-sill flowers they courted to full bloom. A smell of cut grass loitered about the morning stillness. Birds twittered, squirrels scampered.

The boy, who was thirteen, noticed none of these things. He hardly even noticed the constant chattering of his friend Jill, who walked beside him with her hands moving, as if in effort to conjure the subjects she was going on about. And why was he so oblivious? The answer was twofold: He had money in his pocket, and the Strawberry Festival was in town.

They came to a small bridge spanning the Baltimore and Ohio railroad tracks.

"Let's cut across the street," Jill said.

Aaron heard enough of this at least to give her a nod, and as they crossed, they saw that West Main Street, from Church Street all the way down to Milan Avenue, had been closed off. People walked everywhere beyond wooden horses set up to block traffic.

Jill broke into a run. "Yay!"

"What, did you think it wasn't going to be there?" Aaron called, grinning.

They ran the rest of the way. Cut grass smells quickly gave way to more aggressive odors like bratwurst and caramel corn and cotton candy. With long black hair flying, Jill vaulted one of the horses. Her gracefulness came as no surprise to Aaron, who had seen her do things like skip rope and walk on her hands like it was second nature.

"The merry-go-round first!" she screeched.

"What? Why?"

She stopped in front of Bob's Bratwurst and flashed a dodgy smile. "I like horses. Now come *on!*"

And off she went, towards the intersection of Benedict Avenue.

It was a decent-sized merry-go-round for such a small town festival. Aaron watched it spin while they stood in line. Two or three younger kids looked scared, but the rest seemed to be enjoying the ride.

"More wooden horses," he said to Jill.

"More wooden horses," she agreed, a little breathily. "These look just a tiny bit more like the real thing though, right?"

"Well...yeah."

"Hey, wanna see my ring?" She raised her hand without waiting for a reply. On the third finger, a tiny stone gleamed.

"Where did you get that?"

The face peering up at him turned red. "I bought it. It isn't real of course."

"It looks real."

"Yeah?" she asked hopefully, splaying her fingers open.

Aaron smiled. “Yeah. It does.”

“Two tickets for two horses!” the ticket-man bellowed. *“That'll be one good American dollar!”*

“Two tickets for *one* horse,” Jill corrected him. “We're riding together today.”

The tattered greenback Aaron had been pulling from his pocket froze. “We are?” he asked. His heart jumped like a man on a pogo stick.

“So you're a couple,” the ticket-man observed. “How nice. Let's have the gentleman up first.”

Aaron climbed onto one of the horses. Jill then stepped forward, her hand outstretched. Seconds later she was sitting behind him with her arms wrapped around his waist. Her head rested on his shoulder—all pink bubblegum and soft locks of strawberry shampoo.

“Um,” Aaron stammered.

It made her laugh. “Somebody's blushing.”

“Now hold it right there!” a voice cried from the street.

Aaron looked to see a man in glasses with a neatly trimmed mustache. His hands clutched a large, awkward-looking camera, and from the way he approached the merry-go-round he intended to use it.

“My name's Jim,” he said. “I'm with the Norwalk Reflector. How about a picture for the front page?”

Horrified, Aaron shook his head. “Oh no no,” he gibbered.

“Sure!” Jill sang.

“Jill!”

“Please? Come on, it'll be cool!”

Jim raised the camera without waiting for further debate. “Look natural, guys! Show me how you're feeling at this exact second!”

“Wait!” Aaron said.

And Jim did wait, but only for a moment.

***

“Ooh let's go to the magic show!”

It was late afternoon. Lights everywhere were starting to come on amidst the festival's constant, happy chatter. Aaron could hear bumper cars croaking near Seminary Street. Screams peeled from larger rides like the Trabant and the Scrambler. On a stage closer by, a group of girls were putting on a dance recital. Next to that were the tents. Some sold beer, where long lines of men stood checking their watches. Others sold t-shirts and cheap toys. Jill led Aaron past all of them. They read a sandwich board at the entrance of a larger, violet-colored tent. Inside, a crowd could be seen waiting before a rickety-looking stage.

“The Great Bloomcraft,” Jill read off the board, “Thrills, Amazement, and Wonder!”

A picture accompanied this rather outlandish promise. It showed a man, dressed in black, coaxing a rabbit out of a hat. Aaron went to the ticket booth and paid another dollar. Five minutes later he and Jill had joined the crowd.

“This guy must be good,” he remarked.

Indeed, the tent seemed packed to capacity, which obliged Jill to snuggle close. Aaron could not stop marveling at how comfortable she looked with her arms around him, as if she'd possessed knowledge about the destination of their friendship—which had begun three years ago—from the very start.

"With a name like Bloomcraft it's a sure bet," she agreed.

The lights dropped. Everybody stopped talking. After a moment of silence, footsteps echoed from the stage. A tall, slender man appeared. He looked like any other magician Aaron had seen a hundred times before: long-legged, long-fingered, eyes set deep, a black top-hat perched on his head. He stopped center-stage. His face regarded the crowd without expression. Someone in the back coughed. Someone else let off a heavy sneeze.

"Welcome to the show," the magician announced. "My name is Bloomcraft." Then, after a moment's hesitation: "You will all be witnesses."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "Oh please."

But it seemed to be a day for mocking the impossible. Over the next forty minutes, Aaron saw things he never would have guessed were real. And most came from the hat: butterflies big as jungle parrots that burst into a rainy dazzle of glitter; a dancing mannequin; a barking cat; a meowing dog.

Just one hiccup occurred. At the end of the show, Bloomcraft announced that a rabbit who lived inside the hat would be closing the proceedings with a juggling act. After a wave from his hands, the rabbit jumped out. It was huge—Aaron guessed it would have come up to his hips were it standing next to him. Its white fur cast a ghostly glow around two red eyes that regarded the crowd with what looked like a mixture of intelligence and contempt.

Bloomcraft approached it holding three glass mugs. "Here you are, my furry little fellow!"

The rabbit turned its head. It then rose to its full height and, amidst a gasping of *oohs* and *ahhs*, swiped the mugs from Bloomcraft's hand. The gasps turned into cries of shock. One of the mugs spun at Jill's face. Without thinking, Aaron snatched it. A hot, stinging sensation burst through his hand...

And the entire tent went dead silent.

The mug, which seconds ago had been clutched in the magician's fist, was now clutched in Aaron's. Through an act of defiance, it had travelled from performer to observer.

The silence drew on. Slowly, someone began to clap. Another someone soon joined in, and then another, and another. Before long the entire tent, including Bloomcraft, was applauding Aaron's heroics.

Cheeks flaming, he stepped forward, proffering the mug. But the rabbit was still in a rebellious mood. It swiped again just as Bloomcraft bent to reclaim his prop. Everyone went *OH!* at the same time as Aaron jerked the mug backward. A white blur swished in front of his face. The rabbit had missed! Now it teetered for balance on the edge of the stage as more cheering erupted from everywhere.

Aaron felt a kiss on his cheek. He turned to see Jill smiling at him. In that same instant the cheering turned into hard, heavy laughter. Oh no! They were laughing at him for being kissed by a girl!

No, no. That wasn't it. No one was even looking at him. They were looking at the rabbit, which had fallen from the stage and into a box of confetti. Its head poked from a pile of rainbow colors, red eyes angrier than ever. Its ears, bent in two different directions, were a mess of bright sprinkles.

"Worth every penny!" one man who had laughed himself into tears gasped. "Every penny!"

"A show we will not soon forget," came Bloomcraft's voice from the stage. He bent forward again, and this time Aaron was able to give him the prop with no trouble at all. "Thank you, my good boy. You have very fine reflexes."

"I play baseball in the summer," Aaron, sheepish, explained.

"No doubt a contributing factor. Enjoy the rest of your evening at the festival."

Aaron thanked him and turned to go, but not before casting one last look at the rabbit. It was still in the box, still being laughed at. And its eyes, still furious, were fixed on him.

***

"Wow," Jill said once they were outside the tent. "I can't wait for the second date, Aaron."

He laughed as she put her head on his shoulder. "I don't think they're all gonna have quite that much...novelty."

They returned to the midway. It was after dark. Lights flashed, music played. As a last hurrah for the day, Aaron bought two tickets for the Ferris wheel. At the top, he leaned forward and kissed Jill on the mouth--his first real kiss. At that moment, all thoughts of the magician and his silly rabbit were gone.

At least for that one night. But by next morning, the rabbit was back. And it stayed with him, in one form or another, for the rest of his life.

2

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"Two little dickie birds sittin' on the wall!
"One named Peter, one named Paul!
"Fly away Peter, fly away Paul!
"Don't you come back 'til your birthday's called!
"January, February, March, April, May!
"Now fly away, fly away, fly away all!"

***

Aaron awoke from a bad dream two weeks after the festival had ended. He got out of bed (sleep had not been coming well of late) and went to the sash. On the sidewalk below, three girls in T-shirts and shorts--one of them Jill--were skipping rope.

He could also smell bacon and eggs. Would breakfast be possible this morning? For once the idea did not seem so outlandish; no instant rebuke came from his belly. Feeling a little buoyed, Aaron began to get dressed.

Twenty minutes later the girls were giggling at him on the front walk. They blushed. They whispered to each other. They nudged Jill on the shoulder. This went on until finally Jill rolled her eyes and told her friends to shut up.

"Don't pay attention to them," she implored. "They're uptight. We're practicing for a tournament in July."

"Jump rope?" Aaron asked.

She nodded. Out of breath from her exertions, her eyes seemed even more blue than usual. "Double Dutch junior division. First prize is five hundred dollars."

"Wow that's quite a haul."

"Did you eat?"

He was silent. Jill had always been a girl who liked to change subjects on the fly. Keeping up with her during a conversation could sometimes be a challenge—a fun challenge, but a challenge all the same. On one breath she could go from stories about school to complaining about her parents to decorating the house for Christmas. Now, effortlessly, she had used that aptitude to train the spotlight on Aaron. He found it jarring, not because of the light itself, but because Jill's question—did you eat?—was also a confession. She knew something was wrong.

But where to begin? Not a single word had come out of his mouth and he already felt ridiculous. Rabbits were supposed to be cute, cuddly little things, after all. You didn't stand in the bright sunshine and talk about them as the subject of your nightmares. That kind of stuff was for crazy people.

"I ate," he managed.

"Your eyes are red."

"Can we take a walk?"

"Sure."

Her friends giggled some more as they left, but Aaron didn't mind. At least he had question number one answered: They were beginning by taking a walk. They went up Valley Park Drive, with its one-level houses painted in pastel shades of yellow and green, to West Main Street, where the older houses were. Summer had arrived early; the morning was hot, the air still. Old men drank lemonade on porch swings. Motorcycles (Aaron's dad affectionately called them "hogs") shined from open garage doors, ready for the road.

Jill talked more about the jump rope tournament. Her team had been practicing hard and the results were at last beginning to show. She told him they were jumping like competitors now. Aaron nodded in all the right places, asking questions from time to time. Where was the competition to be held? How would it play out? And on what, pray tell, did she plan to spend the prize money?

Then the topic of discussion swung back to Aaron. Baseball would be starting again soon, which was good. The books he'd been told by his teacher to read over the summer sounded boring, which was bad.

"Huckleberry Finn is not boring," Jill objected.

It made Aaron shake his head. "Man I can't tell you how little I'm interested in reading about two kids with bare feet paddling up and down a river."

"You'll like it."

"Maybe. I'll try, I guess."

She put an arm around him. "You didn't ask me on a walk to discuss books and baseball though."

"I didn't," he admitted.

Her eyebrow went up. "So?"

"Do you remember the rabbit we saw a couple weeks ago?"

"The one at the festival? Sure."

"I've been dreaming about it. Almost every night."

They came to a small, ancient church, where broken headstones idled beneath a number of whispering willows. Perhaps it would do for the story he had to tell.

It didn't take long. But Jill, as Aaron had feared from the start, found it difficult to digest. The expression in her eyes—a mixture of shock, amusement, and gentle concern—gave the game away. He finished by describing what he'd dreamed in his bedroom an hour ago, and waited to hear the girl's thoughts.

Her compliance was by no means immediate. Instead, she struck off towards the town's ice cream parlor. All he could do was follow. Soon they were eating crunch cones at the pick-up window. Here, at last, was where the verbal feedback commenced.

"So you've been seeing this rabbit in your dreams," Jill said in a tone level and cautious.

"Yes. For the past two weeks."

"Has it shown up anywhere else?"

"No," Aaron replied, flashing her an odd look.

"Okay." She licked the side of her cone to catch a drip. "And every time you see it, it's angry."

"Very, *very* angry. I think it wants to rip my throat out."

"Because you embarrassed it at the show?"

"That's the only reason I can think of. I'm being haunted by my own guilt."

"But it wasn't your fault."

"MOMEEE!" A little girl had appeared beside them; she was pointing at a poster that depicted Frankenstein's monster holding a milkshake. *"That one, Mommy! That one!"*

The mother in question stood gawping at the poster. "A Monster Shake? Oh come on, honey, that's too big."

"Please?"

"No."

"Pleasssssse?"

"You could share that thing with your entire family tree and still have some left over for the dog. Get something else."

"WAHHHHHH!"

"Knock it off, Sheila, I mean it."

Aaron felt something wet running down his hand. He looked--and his eyes all but broke from his head. The bawling girl had distracted him for too long! His crunch cone was turning into a mess! Panicking, Aaron began to lick like crazy at the sides. But the cone would have none of it. Everything, in fact, had tipped to the edge of total collapse.

"Help me!" he yelled around a mouthful of crunchies.

Jill couldn't help—she was doubled over with laughter. "Help me!" she yelled back, gripping the counter for support. "No more, please! It's too much!"

FLOP!

The remains of Aaron's cone hit the concrete. Aaron looked at it, then at Jill. He could feel ice cream dripping down his chin.

"Look, Mommy," the little girl said, "what a *mess!*"

It got Jill laughing even harder. Aaron told her in a dry voice to find a stool before she fell down. This advice was taken, but the laughter went on. Aaron sat down beside her. Why weren't there any napkins at the counter? he wondered. Didn't things like this happen all the time?

"Anyway," he brought out, trying to move past the moment.

Jill slowly and by degrees got herself under control. "It's okay," she said, patting him on the back. "I'm not laughing at *you*, I'm laughing at...at..." She began to choke as another jag threatened to burst forth.

Through it all, Aaron could only shake his head and wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. "Baby," he grinned at her. "Darling, sweetheart, gorgeous. If this is all it takes to show you a good time then I'm going to bring you back to this place on our prom night."

"Not on your life."

She finished her own cone without too much trouble. Meanwhile the little girl had settled on two scoops of Dutch chocolate, which Aaron did not see as being very far down the ladder from the Monster Shake.

"Idea time," Jill said.

He blinked. "What?"

"I have an idea. About your rabbit."

"Fire away."

"Well, seeing that juggling number at the magic show may have triggered some phobia that you have about rabbits. And now your mind is going silly over the whole thing."

"So?"

"So," she went on, "we go and see the show again. Together. Find out how seeing the actual rabbit back on stage affects you."

Aaron thought about it. Perhaps Jill was on to something. Seeing the rabbit again, in a tent full of people rather than all by himself in a nightmare, could present an opportunity to make peace with the creature. At the very least, he and Jill would be getting a repeat performance of a magnificent show.

"Do you know where Bloomcraft might be these days?" Aaron asked.

"As a matter of fact I do," the girl replied.

***

The Milan Melon Festival was taking place that week six miles outside of Norwalk, which meant getting there required them to craft a few tricks of their own. This was doubly true on Jill's part, but she was able to convince her parents to drive her under the ruse of gathering information for a summer book report. The parents agreed to let Aaron ride along after a short talk over the phone with his mother.

And that was how he found himself standing once more inside the violet tent, with Jill at his side, to see Bloomcraft's show for the second time. Everything looked as it had before: the crowd was large, with the sandwich board out front promising Thrills! Amazement! and Wonder! Then Bloomcraft appeared, wearing the same top hat he'd had on in Norwalk. He told them they would all be witnesses. The performance commenced...

And laid a smelly, rotten egg.

Thirty minutes of uncoordinated blunders. None of the things Bloomcraft had given them at the Strawberry Festival—butterflies, mannequins, cats, dogs—were offered up today. Instead the audience was served a patently fake, borderline ridiculous buffet of card tricks, mirror games, and optical illusions.

Once, while Bloomcraft was attempting to shuffle the cards, he slipped and fumbled the entire deck all over the stage; as he bent to retrieve his mistake, a loud fart--*thhhhpppt!*--burst from his pants, invoking laughter three rows deep.

Another stunt, called The Disappearing Dessert, produced similarly disastrous results. "Watch this, everyone!" Bloomcraft commanded, holding a large apple pie in one hand. He tossed the pie into the air, waved a cheap plastic wand—and the entire tent erupted into wild guffaws as the pie landed on his face, splatting fruit and crust everywhere.

The entire tent, except for Aaron.

His bewilderment had exceeded his sense of humor. What was going on? Was Bloomcraft trying his hand at slapstick comedy out of boredom for his previous routine? If so, he did not appear comfortable with the effects. His hands shook, his eyes blinked. Sweat poured from beneath his ears. He asked for a club soda from the audience and got no takers. In short, he looked a mess.

"I don't get it," Aaron told Jill, after Bloomcraft backed his butt into a sword during a blade box trick.

"I don't either," she giggled, "but it's funny, Aaron. *Really* funny. I'm glad we came."

"He's not doing it on purpose."

"No, it doesn't look that way."

At the end of the show, Bloomcraft didn't pull anything out of his hat. He didn't even take it off. He merely gave a trembling, ungracious bow to the audience, thanked it for its time, and exited the stage.

It wasn't enough for Aaron. He asked Jill to wait with him inside the tent until everyone had gone, then pulled her by the hand to the back of the stage, where the smell of dry wood (clippings scattered the ground like petals from a terra-cotta garden) wafted about a ragged flap. Behind this flap was a patch of asphalt. There was also a

small, wooden cart where—with a tired expression on his face—stood Bloomcraft. He took no notice of Aaron and Jill as they approached, still holding hands.

"Hello," Aaron said.

Bloomcraft jumped, banging his head on the rail of the cart. His eyes widened.

"Can I help you?" he snapped.

He looked older up close. There were pockmarks on his face, as if it had been pelted with dozens of tiny asteroids. His eyes were sunken and dark. His black hair was shot with gray.

"Where's your hat?" Aaron asked with genuine curiosity.

"Never mind my hat," the magician snapped some more. His voice, dry and barbed, sounded like a bundle of sticks being put through a chipper-shredder. "You kids shouldn't be back here."

"We liked your show," Jill told him.

"Fine. Come back tomorrow and you can see it again."

"Not this show. The one you did at the Strawberry Festival."

Bloomcraft eyed her for a moment. Then he looked at Aaron—and something must have clicked, for the expression on his face changed, as if a release valve had been turned to the left. All the tension relaxed.

"I remember you," he said, a trifle reluctantly. "In Norwalk, right? You were the one who caught the mug."

"That's right," Aaron confessed. "Your rabbit got a little upset."

"Salto was sick that night. He shouldn't have gone on."

"Is that his name?" Jill asked.

"Yes." The magician knelt and picked up a box of pyrotechnics. "He's my good luck charm. Makes every show a breeze." The box went into the cart. "I really missed him tonight."

"Where is he?" Aaron chanced.

The other looked at him without so much as a twitch. "Still sick. Poor thing."

"What's wrong with him?" Jill wanted to know.

Without replying, Bloomcraft threw a strap over top of the cart and clipped it on the other side.

"Mr. Bloomcraft?"

"The veterinarian hasn't called," he said finally, "so I can’t know for certain." Another strap went over the cart. "I'm sorry if I failed to please you tonight. I'd offer you a refund, but then everyone would ask for one, wouldn't they?"

"Everyone isn't here," Aaron pointed out. "Like your rabbit."

The strap clipped down hard. "As I've told you," the magician said from the other side of his cart, "he's sick."

Aaron didn't know what to do now. Bloomcraft was in no mood for conversation—that much could be ascertained from the short, terse answers he gave, and from the way he shuffled about his cart like a puppy looking for a place to pee. Jill seemed to realize this as well. Her face showed a mixture of thoughtfulness and frustration that in its own way summed up their entire meeting.

"If we're finished here," Bloomcraft said, "you can get back to the street through the tent. Only please give the stage a wide berth. It isn't very safe for children."

And with that, their encounter with the magician came to an end.

***

"Rats," Aaron said, holding the flap for Jill.

She ducked under, hair trailing a scent of strawberry shampoo. "Did you see his eyes? I thought he was about to cry. He must miss that rabbit all right."

"Yeah. He looked...broken somehow. Used up."

They walked around the stage. Empty and silent now, the tent felt nowhere near as blithesome as before. Shadows hovered in deep, undulating recesses. Thick and heavy support beams seemed to tilt at strange angles, like the mighty masts of a sunken pirate ship.

Jill touched Aaron's shoulder. "Feel free to walk me through this place quickly and with as much chivalry as you can muster."

"Do you mean that?" he smiled.

"Yes, please."

He bent and scooped her off the ground. It was a risky undertaking, but the dividends turned out to be perfect. In one instant Jill's face went from grim uneasiness to pure delight. Squealing like a cheerleader, she clutched an arm about his shoulders and kicked her legs into the air.

"Aaron what are you doing? You're *crazy!*"

"Well, Bloomcraft was a bit too uptight this afternoon to teach me levitation. So I'm taking a more pedestrian approach to the act."

"Are you going to carry me all the way back to the square?"

"Yep!"

He meant it, but the ticket master caught them at the exit flap. An old, bald man with enormous glasses and blubbery lips, he began scolding them straight away for trespassing and loitering.

"Do the police know you're here?" he snarled, pointing a stubby finger. "Eh? *Do they?* These tents ain't no place for kids to be foolin' around!"

Aaron had already put Jill down. The idea now was to keep from laughing and bursting into flames from embarrassment at the same time. Not an easy trick—he needed more input from Bloomcraft.

"Yes sir," he answered as best he could.

"'Yes sir' my hairy, wrinkled butt! Get outta here, both of you!"

"Yes sir."

And they both ran down the street, hand in hand, past little boys carrying plastic airplanes and little girls carrying dollies; past fat men with hot dogs and fatter women with soda cans; past criers shouting *break the balloons!* and *put a ring on the bottle!*; past candy wrappers tumbling in the breeze and Japanese lanterns swaying in the trees. They ran hand in hand, laughing like loons.

***

"I want you to have something," Jill said.

Two hours later. Twilight. Valley Park drive had turned orange. Fireflies flared over the grass. Wind-chimes jingled.

"What is it?" Aaron asked.

She reached into the pocket of her shorts brought out a white rabbit's foot. "Something physical," she said, proffering the foot, "to dispel the bad dreams, which are not in any way real and never will be."

His hand reached forth tentatively. "I don't know, Jill. This might make it worse."

"Nonsense." The foot dropped into his palm. Then she took his hand in both of hers and curled the fingers closed. "Remember always," her voice spoke softly, "where the dreaming ends and the being begins. Draw a line for everything you care about and step over it."

"Does the foot really bring good luck?"

"It has for me," she whispered.

And then she kissed him. Her lips were soft as flower petals, her breath a sigh of summer in a midnight meadow. When it was over, Aaron watched her run to her porch, arms waving, ponytail bobbing. The screen door banged open, banged closed. She was gone.

"Aaron?" His mother's face had appeared in the window next door. "Come inside, honey, it's almost dark."

"Okay, Mom."

Sliding the rabbit's foot into the pocket of his jeans, Aaron went inside.

3

***

There were things to do over the next month. Summer things, like watching television in the morning, listening to the radio at night. Racing bicycles up and down the street with friends, catching fireflies, eating ice cream. Hanging out at the video arcade and the skating rink. These last two activities were mainly spectatorial in nature for Aaron, while Jill had become a master at games like Ms. Pac-Man and Tempest. He could scarcely stand on roller skates; she glid the rink with her eyes closed, fearful of nothing. Aaron liked the baseball diamond much better. His little league team went undefeated that year. In July came talk of a championship. Aaron, who played shortstop, was batting .310. Some of his teammates were doing even better. On Saturday, July the fourteenth, they were 8-0, with two games left to play.

Also on that day was Jill's jump rope tournament. It took place at Norwalk Middle School, home of the largest, most modern gymnasium in town. Aaron already knew it well; his fourth period gym class used it every day during the previous school year.

He parked his bicycle and walked to the vestibule where a number of girls and their parents had already gathered. The morning was hot. Sunlight gleamed off brightly colored T-shirts. High-pitched, musical chatter filled the air. Everyone, to Aaron at least, looked wired to the point of near detonation.

He found Jill's team by the cafeteria entrance. They wore red shirts with yellow shorts. On the back of each shirt was the word WILDFLOWERS. Aaron did not interrupt

them while their coach--a tall, slender woman whom Aaron recognized as the school's sixth-grade social studies teacher—issued last minute instructions and advice. Aaron hung back, pretending to be distracted. Chatter from other teams floated by—things like *I'm so nervous!* and *Keep your heels off the floor!* The WILDFLOWERS stood with their hands on their hips, nodding at their coach.

"All three of you girls are going to cruise right through the compulsory and freestyle sections," the social studies teacher pledged. "But Jill, you may find yourself running out of breath during the speed run. *If*, that is, you forget my advice. Which is what?"

"Breathe with the rhythm of our rhyme, with my mouth in the shape of an *O,*" Jill incanted.

"Beautiful. How do the lungs feel now?"

"They feel great!"

"And the legs?"

"Ha! Even better!"

"So we're going to win?"

"We're going to win!"

The social studies teacher blinked at the other two girls, who had not answered this last question with Jill. "Gee, I'm sorry, ladies," she pouted, "you must not be interested in the five-hundred dollar purse some *other* team is going to take home."

"We're going to win!" the girls shouted in unison.

"What?"

"WE'RE GOING TO WIN!"

"What?"

"WE'RE GOING TO WIN!"

"Wildflowers rule!"

The entire vestibule went silent. All four Wildflowers, plus every girl from every other team, plus their parents, stared at Aaron. Blushing, he stared back, waiting for it to end.

"What?" he told them at last. "Y'all got somethin' against a guy rootin' for his team?"

"'Y'all got somethin'?'" Jill said to him, after his fifteen minutes of fame wore off. "Did you start Huck Finn?"

"Oh be quiet." He hooked an arm around her waist. "Are you ready for this?"

"Five minutes, Jill!" the coach called.

The chatter began to get even more boisterous. Showtime was fast approaching.

"I'm ready," she told him, "but I could use some tips on how to relax."

"Think about what relaxes you. Your very favorite thing. Then think about doing it once the tournament is over. What's compulsory, by the way?"

She blinked. "Compulsory? Oh!" Understanding flooded her face. "That comes first. It's a series of specific maneuvers given to each team by the judges. Then comes speed, where they time how fast you can jump for how long. Then freestyle. That one's my favorite. You get to perform pretty much any trick you want."

"Okay. So--"

"Jill!" It was her mom. She waved to Aaron and he gave a shy nod.

"Hello, Mrs. Jennings."

"Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to wish the little rabbit here good luck. Is that okay?"

"Aw heck, Jill doesn't need luck."

"Don't say that too loud," Mrs. Jennings admonished.

"Mom," Jill said, rolling her eyes.

She laughed. "All right, all right. So Aaron's correct. You have me, you have your father, you have your brother, all of your friends. And you have Aaron. We're behind you. We know you're good. Don't think about luck."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll give it my best."

"You're a winner, Jill." She kissed her cheek. "Aaron? Do you want to sit with us?"

"I sure do."

"Team Wildflowers!" a voice called from the cafeteria. *"Team Wildflowers to gymnasium door A, please! Gymnasium door A!"*

"That's us," Jill said. Then, to Aaron: "Can I get a kiss from you, too?"

He bent and briefly touched his lips to hers.

"What a world," Mrs. Jennings lamented. "You know I was fifteen--*fifteen*--before I even let a boy buy me a milkshake."

"Ohh what a world!" Jill cried in her best Wicked Witch of the West voice. "I'm melting, I'm melting!"

Mrs. Jennings smiled back. "I know you are. Now go join your team."

***

"Now batting for the Furies, number nine, Aaron Graves!"

"We managed to get one duck on the pond for you," Coach Bradford said, nodding towards second base. "Think you can give us an early lead?"

Aaron knew the kid at second base, whose name was Danny Sadler, could run. "Sure," he answered, trying to sound tough.

"Atta boy." A meaty hand clapped him on the back. "Knock the cover off the ball."

He told himself not to look through the fence as he strode to the plate, not to even think about the spectator seats where his parents would be sitting had they not needed to be at work. Where Jill had sat all season long, before today. It was only the bottom of the first inning. And while this game—game seven of a series tied at three apiece—would feel different without her watching, the Furies still needed their cleanup hitter to drive in some runs.

The first pitch came high and away; the second pitch was low and inside. Sadler stepped off the base pad, ready to run. The pitcher, a blond-headed kid, put his foot on the rubber. A very slimy, very pretentious grin split the space between his jug ears. The two and oh pitch came in hard and straight. Aaron swung—

Fouled to the neighboring diamond. Two and one.

"DANNY!" Coach Bradford bellowed. *"DANNY THERE'S TWO OUTS SO RUN ON ANYTHING!"*

Sadler nodded. Aaron stepped into the box, then came the two and one pitch—

Ripped the other way to right field!

Everyone leaped to their feet, screaming, as Sadler came around to score. Aaron dove head first, Pete Rose style, into second base, beating the throw. A double and an RBI in his first at-bat to give the Furies the lead.

Coach Bradford now looked on the verge of having a stroke. Spittle flew from his lips. *"WAY TO GO, AARON! WAY TO GO!"*

Aaron paused long enough while dusting himself off to wave back.

"Now batting for the Furies, number twelve, Lonnie Place!"

The pitcher looked at Aaron for a moment. He was no longer grinning. The slime had been shriveled away, the pretentiousness snuffed. Aaron put his foot on the bag, pulled off his batting glove, and waited for Place to knock him home.

***

As Jill's coach had predicted, round one of the tournament went beautifully. All three Wildflowers completed the compulsory stage without a mistake. Jill in particular did well, racking more points during her jumps than any other girl in the gym. The Wildflower parents loved every moment of it—not a butt stayed seated when their team was placed atop the leaderboard with two hundred and seventy points. Aaron whistled and clapped with the rest. He wished he'd worn a red T-shirt today.

The social studies teacher predicted a weak second round for Jill. And yes, even from his somewhat difficult vantage point, Aaron could see Jill seemed a little worried about it, too. She was still sitting on the bench, but her narrow chest was rising and falling with deep, full practice breaths. Her lungs were about to receive a brutal workout, and by her own admission, she didn't have the strongest pair in the world.

"I practice holding my breath, but it's hard," she'd told Aaron the previous week. They'd been discussing stamina in their respective sports during an afternoon of cold lemonade on her porch swing.

"How long can you last?" Aaron, curious, had asked.

"About thirty seconds. By then I'm like...dying." A high-pitched, cutting little laugh had shrilled from her throat. *It doesn't bother me,* the laugh said.

Except Aaron knew it did. "That's not bad at all," he'd tried to attest.

"It isn't good, either."

Well, Aaron now thought to her, *it's going to have to be good enough.* Just then she turned and smiled at him. He waved back, giving her a thumbs-up.

A rival team had already taken the floor, ready for its speed test. On impulse, Aaron reached into his pocket and found the lucky rabbit's foot. Only this wasn't about luck. Instead, it signified a part of her he wanted to hold and give all his best.

She looked around one more time before it was her turn to jump. He put his hand over his heart, wearing the most encouraging smile he could find. Her mom gave a cheer. After that, the Wildflowers took the floor.

***

By the bottom of the seventh things looked grim for the Furies. Above their one run, an unsightly row of crooked numbers added up to eight. Eight runs on six hits for team jug-ears.

No one in Aaron's dugout seemed much disposed to talk. Kids sat on the bench with their backs slumped. Tired, lost eyes stared at the diamond as, one by one, Furies

hitters failed to get on base. Aaron himself had struck out swinging in the fourth, though he had used the exact same stance and style—feet back in the batter's box, right elbow raised over the right shoulder—against the exact same pitcher. Trouble was, that pitcher (the one with the ears) had begun to relocate his pitches since the first inning. And no one could figure them out—at least not yet. Nine outs remained to solve the puzzle.

"Graves!" Coach Bradford bellowed. Seven runs in the hole and still bellowing.

Aaron looked at him with as much artificial buoyancy as he could muster.

"The leadoff hitter in their half of the frame likes to bunt to short. Be ready to charge in, okay?"

"All right."

Coach Bradford's expression curdled. That was it, Aaron knew. His answer hadn't been convincing enough. Time for the entire team to come clean.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "Are you listening to me?"

"I am, Coach," Aaron said, trying not to notice all the stunned stares pointed at him. The dugout was still quiet, but now it was a charged quiet, a quiet on the verge of catching fire and exploding. Coach Bradford had never gotten angry with any of his kids before. "Play the leadoff hitter close."

"No! Play the leadoff hitter *prepared* to come close! You move in by default and he's gonna knock the ball right over your head!"

"But—"

"Don't talk back to me, just be READY! Okay?"

"Okay," he nodded.

But the fuse kept burning. Gritting his teeth, Coach Bradford looked from one player to the next. Looking, Aaron thought, for his next target. When he couldn't find one, he decided to nuke the whole dugout.

"Everybody stop gawping!" he snarled. "Stop staring up at me with googly eyes like *Aw, how could you dare?* How could any of *you* dare? Huh? *HUH?*"

No one said a word. On the diamond, Danny Sadler hit a weak grounder to second base and was thrown out.

***

The Wildflowers scored one hundred and fifty points during the speed stage. It wasn't the highest, but their place on the leaderboard, at four hundred and twenty points total, did not change. Afterward the girls huddled to discuss the freestyle event—or so Aaron presumed. They still looked wrought to the eyeballs with emotion. But (and this Aaron was able to notice at once) the nervousness had gone from their eyes. A more refined form of excitement had taken its place, a form that burned with enthusiasm rather than fear. In short, they were beginning to taste victory.

Jill told him later over a game of jacks that she had begun to flag during the speed jump. "I could feel myself running out of breath with still over a minute to go on the run," she said.

"So what did you do?" he asked.

"Just what I was told. Adjusted my breathing style to the rhyme Tammi and Jessica were using. Short intakes through pursed lips." She puckered her lips and demonstrated what she meant with a few puffs in and out.

"And it worked," he said. It wasn't a question. He knew it had.

"Got me through it all right." She bounced the rubber ball and scooped up the last two jacks almost too fast for Aaron to see. "I win again. Wanna play for money this time?"

"That does it. Give me the ball."

She dropped it into his hand. He scattered the jacks, gave the ball a bounce...and knocked everything into the street when his fingers didn't close fast enough on the grab.

"Klutz," Jill smiled.

They played jacks a lot that week—the last week of July. During the first week of August her family moved to Texas, where her dad had taken a new job. After she'd gone, Aaron never touched the game again.

The tournament ended with the Wildflowers scoring a total of seven hundred and twenty points. It set a new record for the junior division, plus sent everyone home with prize money to spend. Aaron met with Jill for a banana boat at the infamous ice- cream stand the very next day, and it was here—over cherries and chocolate—that she broke the news about her dad's relocation plans.

Aaron stared at her with a glob of ice cream on his nose. "No," he said.

"It's okay," she replied cheerfully, though her eyes told a different story. "We can write each other. And I'll be back every year to visit grandma and grampa."

"No."

"Aaron..."

The bottom of the boat had become a pool of sludge in the sticky afternoon sunshine. Jill stirred it with her spoon. Watching her, Aaron began to feel like a piece of his chest had been torn out with a barbed hook. How could this be happening now? The summer had been a near perfect myriad of discoveries. Most of those discoveries were because of Jill.

"Is it...a certainty?" he asked. "I mean, you're really, *really* going?"

She nodded without looking at him. "He accepted the job around lunchtime. It was still morning in Texas. Then he told us to start packing. We're having a garage sale next week," she added, as if this made it all worthwhile.

"Jill—“

"You have ice-cream on your nose."

"Jill."

"Here." She dabbed it off with a napkin, then began to go about checking for more on his clothes. "What is it with boys and ice cream anyway? They always wind up getting it all over themselves."

"Jill?"

She looked at him, and her eyes were brimming with tears. "It won't be that bad." The words were almost a plea. "I mean the postal service is very efficient. And—and it's just twenty cents per ounce. Do you really need to write a book to tell me about what's going on in Norwalk, Ohio? I—I doubt it."

He took her hand. "No but I might need a book to tell you about some other things."

Her mouth came open to say something else, but the pain would no longer wait. Tears streaming, she fell into his arms. He caught her up, slipping off his stool to provide a more sturdy embrace. His eyes stung; his vision was blurred. Yet he went on holding her, certain they each needed what the other was giving in order to make it through this moment.

"Don't go," Jill whispered through her sobs, "don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere," he promised.

"But it feels like I'm losing you."

"You're not."

Yet he couldn't tell her the rest—how he felt the same way in reverse, how his mind reeled at the idea of Jill no longer being around. It wasn't what she needed to hear. The clocks around them were broken; time had stopped. Aaron felt frozen amidst the fallout of an ugly incident. Nothing would move until he let Jill go.

So he waited, and she waited. And there was time enough—or so it seemed—for all the cherries atop all the ice-cream sundaes in all the world to fall from their frozen perches, as the heat of a treasure chest summer melted them away. Down and down into the cups of what it would all become, trusting on the ingredients, and how much love had been used to unite them.

***

"Strike one!"

Aaron looked at the umpire. The pitch had been off the plate by a good four inches—how could he not have seen it?

"Something wrong, son?" the umpire asked.

"No."

"Then stand back in there."

Aaron stood back in there. The score, here in the bottom of the ninth with a runner on and two outs, was eight to six. It all began to happen right after Sadler's ground-out in the seventh. Aaron had lined a single to left, and then the next kid—Lonnie Place—had driven him over to third. Not long after that, jug-ears was out of the game. His replacement came in the form of a lean, red-headed kid who used the same pitching style, but whose arm was fresh. Having already made a number of slight adjustments to this style, the Furies kept on coming, until the game turned into the taut knuckle-biter that every bleacher seat vaticinator in Norwalk—from the overzealous parents of jaded players on less successful teams to the small number of ambitious local sports-writers looking for their lucky break—had been saying it would be from the very start.

The next pitch sailed over Aaron's head to the backstop. Danny Sadler ran to second while the parents screamed and jumped.

"DANNY!" Coach Bradford bellowed.

Oh shut up, Aaron thought.

"DANNY BABY THERE'S TWO OUTS SO RUN ON ANYTHING! ***ANYTHING!****"*

Sadler also looked like he wished Coach Bradford would drink a glass of warm milk and lie down, but he gave a thumbs up while stepping away from the bag. It was the all he could do. The game now belonged to Aaron.

The one and one pitch came in. Aaron swung and fouled it down the right field line.

"One and twwwo!" the umpire called.

"TIME OUT!"

Aaron stepped out of the box while the catcher trotted out to exchange a few words with his pitcher. Coach Bradford shouted something about staying focused and keeping his eye on the ball. These instructions, of course, sounded much easier than what they actually were. It was hard to concentrate with all the parents in a frenzy, pumping their fists and clapping their hands for whichever kid they'd brought with them today.

Aaron did not see anyone in the bleachers cheering for him. His eyes searched and searched, looking for a familiar face. One familiar face, preferably with black hair, blue eyes, and a jump-rope in her hand. But they were strangers all.

"Okay, boys, break it up!" The umpire again, doing his duty not to let the burner cool too much. He needn't have worried. A fever of insanity had come over the entire diamond; Aaron could barely hear himself think.

"One more strike!" the catcher hollered at his pitcher. "One more strike and we go home with the championship! Bring it to me!"

With that encouragement delivered, he replaced his mask and squatted behind home plate.

Aaron choked up on his bat. He set his feet further apart in the box. He bent his knees a little more than usual, which provided a lower viewpoint of the infield but also seemed to facilitate his eyes' hold on the ball. The red-headed kid gave a kick. His pitch came flying in—

And Aaron fouled it off again to right field.

"Oh this kid is out!" someone—the catcher, it sounded like—cried over the maniacal din. "He's not getting his swing around fast enough! We've got him!"

Not yet, Aaron thought, though it *did* feel like he couldn't quite catch up to red-head's pitches. That he had a stronger arm than jug-ears was indisputable—but then, Aaron knew that he was nothing if not a good fastball hitter. So the problem with this kid lay somewhere else.

"You're out," the catcher reiterated, in case he hadn't been heard the first time. A locker-room bully grin twisted his features.

Meanwhile the parents didn't seem to know whom they were rooting for any longer. They had taken up a steady, pounding chant, clapping their hands and stomping their feet hard enough to make the bleachers shake with every meaningless syllable that came from their mouths: *"GO! GO! GO! GO!"*

Aaron stepped into the batter's box. It was game seven of a championship series tied at three apiece. One ball, two strikes, two outs. A runner at second. Everything was in place; everything was just how everyone wanted things to be. Except...

"Ball twwwo!"

Down in the dirt. The parents stopped screaming—for a moment, at least. As the chorus picked up again Aaron had a chance to look around one more time for Jill. Jill, who had been there to cheer for him during the first six games. Jill, who had once told him to draw a line for the things he cared about and then reach beyond, but whose heart remained elusive.

"GO! GO! GO! GO!"

The two and two pitch. Aaron knew he needed to focus, to concentrate, but he couldn't seem to get Jill out of his mind. Losing her the way he had, after so many happy times, so many sunny days. He couldn't get used to the idea of not seeing her anymore. That was the catch—the groove that was slowing him down.

He called time out and stepped away from home plate. The chanting stopped. Several people booed him for having the audacity to disrupt the tension. Aaron didn't care. He pretended to study the diamond, looking for weak spots. Only one was obvious, however; it lay on the inside, where no driven ball, regardless of its precision, could penetrate.

He tried to see himself hitting the next pitch. It was a trick his dad had once taught him, and still preached to this day: Before undertaking a task, imagine yourself first with it already accomplished. Aaron closed his eyes for a moment (a moment was all he had there in the sunshine around home plate), but on this occasion, his father's tried and true method failed to meet up with demand.

"PLAY BALL!" the umpire bellowed.

Aaron crouched into his modified batting stance. His mind's eye had not shown him what he had hoped to see. There had been no boy hitting a baseball over a fence for a game-changing homerun. Instead, there had been a rabbit. A rabbit, of all things, glaring at him from the bottom of a confetti box. Aaron had once dispelled it during a magic show, made it look ridiculous after it had threatened Jill. Weeks later, Jill had reciprocated the deed, casting the creature from his nightmares with a charm and a kiss.

Now what did that mean? He didn't know, he didn't know.

And the crowd was chanting again: ***"GO! GO! GO! GO!"***

And the pitcher was nodding his head, going into his wind-up.

And the ball was flying from his hand. Time had run out.

Locked onto his target, Aaron swung the bat.

4

In late August of 1984, the county fair came to Norwalk, Ohio, as it did every year at that time.

Aaron was sick of summer. He walked down a charmless midway of hot gravel and dead grass. Ants crawled over sticky ice-cream wrappers. Garbage cans shimmered in the heat. The temperature was eighty-eight degrees. Not a breath of wind stirred.

Coming here had been a mistake. Aaron had accepted an invitation from his father to join him (he was going to an auction in one of the pavilions), thinking that a stroll around the fairgrounds, drinking lemonade, would be a pleasant way to spend the afternoon. Instead, he found himself searching for a shady spot.

There were few to choose from. The horse tent was too smelly, the pig tent too muddy. The arts and crafts tent looked over-crowded. Old ladies milled about faded paintings and chipped carnival glass while dusty record players spun jazz. Aaron passed the funhouse, where a group of children were standing by the exit ramp, shaking their heads. The afternoon lay dead in a sickly heat-haze.

Dead, that was, until he saw Bloomcraft again.

Needing a place to sit for a rest, Aaron took a path that led to the picnic area. Set back in a copse of trees was an old, wooden wagon. On back of this wagon stood a man in a black suit, talking pleasantly to a small group of spectators, most of whom were children. Curious, Aaron approached the group, and with each step, the man on the wagon became more and more familiar.

"And so it goes," the man was saying. "Colors by day, shadows by night. What you discover during either interval depends upon how well you search. But rest assured"—he pulled a small pink canary from his pocket and, to the delight of the children, let it fly—"there is magic to be had by both. Now who would like a balloon?"

Almost everyone in the audience started jumping. Cries of *me! me! me!* rose into the trees. Bloomcraft smiled, removed his hat and placed it on the table. "One for all!" he pronounced, and with a wave of his hand, a helium-filled balloon expanded out of the hat. He caught it, tied it, then cut a piece of string from a spool attached to the table. This he tied to the balloon while the children formed a line.

It was hard to know whether or not Bloomcraft would recognize him, but Aaron felt willing to risk the odds, so much was his intrigue at how the magician's show had changed over the summer. He waited until the last child had gone, then approached the wagon. Bloomcraft paid him no mind. Done for the day, he had begun to pack what few props he still used for his act: the hat, of course; a roll of colored ribbons; a mirror; a deck of cards.

"Mr. Bloomcraft?"

The magician turned on his heel—and at first, nothing on his face suggested he remembered Aaron at all. His expression was friendly but quizzical (one bushy eyebrow was raised towards the canary still waiting in the trees). Aaron hesitated. Now what? Three months ago, the situation would have been cause for panic. But Aaron didn't panic now. His mind turned various methods he could use to make introductions, to remind Bloomcraft of who he was. And after a few seconds he decided the simplest way was to start at the beginning.

"I've seen your show—"

"Yes!" Bloomcraft cut him off, eyes lighting with recognition. "Twice, right? Once in Norwalk and again in...where was it? Vermillion?"

"Milan."

"Milan, of course," he said, a trifle sadly. "The comedy of errors. A learning experience, to say the very least."

"Your show's different now," Aaron observed.

The magician's eyes grew big in their sockets, as if the realization of Aaron's statement had occurred to him many times over. "Oh...*yes*," he agreed. "I've had to make a number of adjustments now that Salto's gone."

"Salto the rabbit?"

"The very one." Bloomcraft locked his belongings inside of a chest considerably smaller than the one he'd been using in Milan, then hopped from the wagon, brushing dust from his pants. "Would you like some lemonade?" he asked. "I know I could use one. Today has been what my father would have called an atypically ridiculously hot day."

***

Salto was dead.

It had happened, the magician explained as they walked with their drinks, out of nowhere, from a disease called VHD. Aaron listened without interrupting. The rabbit still occupied a highly accessible place in his memory. Thinking of Salto brought the Strawberry Festival back to him in exquisite detail. Had its volatile temperament on that day been a symptom of the disease that had killed it? It seemed so. Bloomcraft described VHD as an ailment of high fever and muscle spasms. Perhaps Salto hadn't been able to control himself that day. Perhaps it had been too late to save him even then.

The magician tossed his lemonade cup into a wastebasket. "I loved him," he said. "I suppose that sounds absurd. But bear in mind we'd been doing shows together for five years. Good ones."

"I believe you," Aaron said, thinking of the dancing mannequin. Then: "Your show's good now."

Bloomcraft raised his brow again. "Do you think so? You're very kind. I like to hear people laugh. Children in particular."

"Mommy look!" As if on cue, a young boy had appeared from beneath the awning of a carrot cake vendor. One of Bloomcraft's balloons bobbed from his hand. "Remember, Mommy?" he yelled, pointing at the magician. "Remember?"

"I *do* remember," the woman next to him sang, "that's the man who gave you the balloon."

"Yeah!"

"Did you thank him?"

"Yeah! Can we come back and see him again tomorrow?"

"We'll see, we'll see."

Aaron asked him what it was about Salto's death that made it necessary to change the show. Walking with his head down, Bloomcraft described it as more of a feeling than a necessity. He explained that he knew things weren't going to be the same without Salto, no matter what.

"I couldn't enjoy what I was doing anymore," he went on, "which meant my audience couldn't enjoy it either. So I made adjustments, first by trying to force life into the act using comedy. After a few hitches that actually worked, but I still wasn't satisfied. I realized I didn't want Salto's death to turn the show into a joke."

Just then a huge shadow fell over the midway, followed by a cool gust of wind. Candy wrappers and potato chip bags began to swirl at their feet.

"Now where did this come from?" Bloomcraft wondered, looking at a batch of clouds chasing over the sun.

"You can't predict Ohio weather," Aaron said.

"No," the other agreed with a small sigh, "any more than you can predict how your life is going to change from one season to the next. We can't predict, but we can adapt. I'd tell your friend the same thing if she were here."

Now *Aaron's* brow went up. "Who, Jill?"

"Is that her name? She seemed very sweet, from what little I knew of her."

"She moved to Texas a couple of weeks ago."

"Ah. Was that hard?"

"Excruciating."

Bloomcraft gave him an odd smile just as another gust of wind swept the midway. "Excruciating? Yes, I'm familiar with that word. And sometimes the adaptations we orchestrate in order to cope with pain are enough." The wind took his hat; he snatched it out of the air before it could blow away. "And sometimes they're not," he continued, without replacing the hat.

"What happens then?" Aaron asked.

"We keep changing," the magician replied. "Nothing wrong with that. As long as we don't forget where we began."

Aaron took a sip of his lemonade. A picture on the cup caught his attention. It showed a girl and a rabbit, jumping rope while two other girls spun. The girl was holding hands with the rabbit, and everyone was laughing. Across the top were the words: *Treats For The Sweets!* Beneath it: *Keep Your Dutch Down!*

***

There was a letter from Jill when he got home later that afternoon. By then the streets were wet. Raindrops made music in the trees. With the window open, Aaron sat in his bedroom to read the letter. She'd written it in red ink on powdery white paper. The top left corner showed a picture of a butterfly. At the top right, crouching in a bed of flowers, was a rabbit.

***

Dear Aaron,

It took some time, but we've settled into our new home in this very hot, very flat state of Texas. School starts next week. I am not looking forward to that, but I realize things won't feel strange forever (PLEASE don't let them feel like this forever! Ha!). I just need some time to get used to being in new places and meeting new people. So my mother tells me. Right now just going outside makes me almost too clumsy to walk. All the same, I'm forcing myself to do it. Exposure tactics, ha-ha! It'll work, it'll work—and even if it doesn't, I'll just try something else.

Now what about you? Are you getting along okay? The right reactions aren't always the easiest ones to make, I know. Some people are stubborn and refuse to compromise. And sometimes that's the right way to be. But for us, Aaron—you and me—there needs to be a shift of some kind. We can't be together, at least not the way

we'd like, but that doesn't mean we can't make it work. You wanna know something? I love you. I've loved you for three years. Wait...

Okay, done crying. For now at least. I should have told you before I left. It would have made us stronger. Please don't let this move hurt you too much, Aaron. Don't think that I'm not thinking of you. We'll be okay. Will you remember that? Can you adjust to the way things are? Should it ever get too hard, remember the Strawberry Festival. Remember the merry-go-round and the Ferris wheel. Remember your rabbit's foot too (you still have it, right?). Most of all, remember me. I can't wait to see you again. I love you, Aaron.

Yours Always,

Jill

-

p.s. what happened at the baseball game? don't forget to tell me when you write! Also I enclosed a picture. I don't know if you have a copy already, but I have two, so...

***

He spent nearly an hour reading the letter over and over before discovering a second sheet of paper folded beneath the envelope seal. He pulled it out, opened it. It was a newspaper clipping. On it was a picture of a boy and a girl riding a merry-go-round horse. The girl, seated in back, had her arms around the boy, and was smiling with complete confidence. The boy was also smiling, but his hand covered his face, for he couldn't bear to do more than peek. *Spring romance!* the caption read. *Young couple enjoys a spin on the merry-go-round at Norwalk's annual Strawberry Festival.*

Aaron opened the desk drawer. He got out a sheet of paper and a pen. His hand touched the rabbit's foot, which was still clipped to the belt loop of his jeans. On the wall hung a baseball glove. Next to that, a trophy. Lost in thought, Aaron looked at both. How was he feeling at this exact second?

The answer was easy.

Aaron began his letter with two simple words that not only described the baseball game, but everything about that summer with Jill: *We won.*

Konky

for Dean, Gary, and Tim
Dublos ‘til the end!

The convenience store was always empty at two o'clock in the morning. This worked out just fine for Albert Konky, who held even less patience with waiting in lines than most other residents in the small town of Norwalk, Ohio. His fat belly bounced as he walked down the candy aisle, first eyeing the chocolates—Marathon, Powerhouse, Snickers—then hesitating with a queer look on his bearded face over the other, stranger sweets the kids were eating this year. The boxes, he noticed, were getting more colorful, more garish. But then the decade was new. Nineteen-eighty was finally here, and it seemed to have brought with it (among other things) a kind of happy whirlwind that drove anyone under the age of thirty to paint the world like a rainbow.

"Volcano Rocks," Konky said to himself, eyeing one of the red boxes. "What the hell?"

"More like harder than hell," the man behind the counter replied. "Don't eat those things, Al, they'll break your teeth."

"What about these?" He held up a small, pink pouch so the man—whose name was Eddie something—could see it.

Eddie something's eyes grew wide. "Pop Rocks? Jesus Christ, no! They jump all over your tongue like a buncha damn fleas and then if you drink a soda pop with 'em they explode in your stomach!"

"Get out of here."

"I'm serious, Al. It happened to this one kid's cousin's younger sister. The kid was an actor on TV, somethin' like that."

"You're serious all right. Seriously deranged." He tossed the pouch back onto the rack. "Anyway, I'll just go with a Marathon bar. 'Lasts a good, long time.' Just like me in the sack."

Eddie grinned. "Blow it out your ass. Coffee?"

"Of course," Konky said, walking up to the counter with his chocolate. "And a lottery ticket. Ohio Lotto."

The grin widened. "A lottery ticket? What, they're not paying you enough over at Sheller Globe?"

"Hell no they're not paying me enough. I'm a calibrator. I come here on my nights off in a Chevette, wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt. What's the jackpot?"

"Six million."

Konky whistled at this. "God damn. Somebody's going to hit that."

"More like five or ten guys are going to hit it at once," Eddie replied as he poured coffee into a Styrofoam cup. "And then bitch and piss and moan about who gets how much and why. One guy'll want twenty-five percent because he went around back to take a piss against the wall before he bought the ticket, which timed everything just perfectly."

"Eddie—"

"The other guy'll also want that much—at least that much—because it was his car they took to the store that day."

"Eddie—"

"Next thing you know they're all fighting in court over the goddamned thing, not that it'll matter, because two years later the whole pot's blown on pussy and beer." Eddie leaned forward on the cash register, an older man with hair and mustache styled like Albert Einstein's, looking thoughtful and a little sad for all the unlucky lottery winners in the world. "You see what I'm saying, Al?" he asked. "You understand?"

Konky didn't. "Eddie have you ever won anything in your life?"

"Just a free hand-job for cutting the loudest fart at a strip club up in Cleveland."

"Very romantic. And how did that turn out?"

The sadness disappeared from Eddie's face. "Well I didn't have to share it with anyone."

He placed a plastic cap on the coffee cup. Konky opened his mouth to ask for extra cream before realizing, just in the nick of time, how inappropriate such a request would be considering the topic of their conversation. He asked again for the lottery ticket instead.

"Your money," Eddie shrugged. He produced a long, rectangular card from underneath the counter. On it, from top to bottom, was a series of ovals and numbers. "Know how to play?"

"I just pick any six numbers I want, right?"

"That's right. There's a golf pencil in that cup right next to you."

Konky took the pencil. His brain, however, did not seem able to choose even one number, let alone six. The tip of the pencil hovered over the card. Finally he looked at Eddie for help. "Which numbers should I pick?"

"What am I, Uri Geller? I don't know, Al. Try your birthday. Or the date of your graduation. Or the last time you took a shit."

"Gee, thanks."

"If I picked it for you and it won I'd just demand half the haul. I just tried to explain that."

Konky's eyes went back to the card. His birthday was no good—June of 1947 occupied no special place in his heart. Indeed, these days he spent most of his birthdays alone on the couch with a bottle of beer in his hand. High school graduation didn't work, either. He'd gotten by on all of his subjects with Cs and Ds.

"Fuck," he muttered. Then, more loudly: "Well, when *did* I last take a shit?"

Someone behind him gasped. "Goodness!"

He whirled around to find a little old lady with her mouth hanging open, a loaf of bread in her hand.

"Sorry, ma'am."

Eddie looked at him and winked. "Pitch that loaf right up here on the counter, Stella. That'll be ninety-nine cents."

_____

The winning numbers were announced two nights later on television. By then Konky had forgotten all about buying the ticket. On the night before the announcement—Friday night—his foreman yelled at him for falling behind on his piecework. In and of itself this was nothing remarkable. Konky had never been the fastest man on the line and knew for a fact that he never would be; he simply didn't

enjoy his job enough to accomplish more than the very minimum requirements to hold it all down. But tonight, if not on any other night, there was somebody else to blame: Anderson Jenkins, his line partner.

"Big date tomorrow?" Jenkins asked, raising his voice over the radio that was always blaring in the work area.

Konky fumbled with the truck part while more were coming down the line. "What?"

"Aren't you taking Marnie out somewhere romantic this weekend?"

Nobody at Sheller Globe liked working next to the lanky, chinless Jenkins, whose mouth moved much faster than his hands. But now Konky gave him an incredulous look.

"Oh yeah," he blinked. "Jesus, I forgot."

"Ha!" Jenkins laughed. "That's just like you, Al! Wait'll I tell Marnie that one!"

"Don't even think about telling her that." Konky took a step forward, bumping Jenkins with his protruding belly. "You just keep your mouth shut. I've been busy. I've got things going on. It just slipped my mind that's all."

"A date with a girl slipped your mind. Of course it did. You're a regular Rudolph Valentino, Al."

"KONKY!"

The foreman was big, but not the way Konky was big. A mountain of muscle had crept up behind him during his altercation with Jenkins—a man whose biceps bulged at the seams of his white dress shirt, and whose skull flamed red under the bristles of his flat-top haircut.

"How many times do I gotta stick my foot up that fat ass of yours? Huh? This is a factory not a goddamned tea party!"

Nobody ever had trouble hearing the foreman talk, no matter how loud the radio.

Konky turned back to the line. "Yes sir."

"You do your fucking off at home, understand?"

"Yes sir."

"That's another demerit! And if I catch you talking on the line again I'll have you suspended! Are we clear?"

"Yes sir."

The foreman's face twisted in disgust. "Twinkies and Ho-Hos, Al, that's all I see when I look at you. You're like the poster boy for the bowling league over at Kenilee Lanes."

The entire line paused to laugh at this witticism, but no further reprimands were doled out. Of course not. Without another word to anyone the foreman stormed back to his office and slammed the door shut.

"Well fuck a duck in an old pick-up truck," Jenkins said.

"Fuck you too while we're at it," Konky muttered back.

"I know why that date with Marnie really slipped your mind."

"Yeah? Why?"

"Because you're quitting here soon. Or you want to anyway."

Konky's hands shook as he calibrated the truck piece. He was not normally a man to be embarrassed, but encounters with superiors always seemed to do the trick. "Doesn't everybody?"

"Yeah but didn't you apply at Dickonson's? For that motorcycle repair job?"

"Sure. They ain't called me yet, though."

"Don't wait by the phone. Places like that only hire certified mechanics."

"I've been fixin' bikes all my life," Konky rejoined, though Jenkins' words made his heart sink.

"They won't give a shit," the other man pushed further. "All they'll care about is the piece of paper that you don't have. Tough luck, big guy."

Konky didn't know what to say to this. His hands kept working as fast as he could make them go, but the line kept falling further behind. Likely, it would take the rest of the night for it to catch up, and they would miss their quota. Another demerit for that. Maybe the foreman would wind up suspending him after all. Suspension without pay…with the rent coming due and the refrigerator empty. Konky told himself to work faster, trying not to think about unpleasant things.

"I wish somebody'd turn down that fuckin' radio," Jenkins moaned. "Christ how I hate the Eagles."

_____

"Yo!"

"Yo."

"Stevie! Did I wake you up?"

"Don't worry about it," the voice on the other end of the receiver said sleepily, "I had to get up to answer the phone anyway. Who the hell is this?"

"Oh come on! It's Al Konky, your best buddy in the entire world!"

Hesitation now on the line; Konky could almost hear gears clicking as Stevie Primwater, the only man at Sheller Globe he honestly considered to be a friend, tried to make his head work after another Friday night of hard drinking.

"Jesus," he managed. "Al. Yeah. We missed you at Reinick's last night."

"I had to work. Listen, I'm sorry I woke you up—"

"My head's killin' me."

"Well, goddammit, stop drinkin' all of that cheap beer at night. Switch to Tab or Fresca."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go fuck yourself. What do you need?"

"A car, for my date tonight with Marnie. Can I borrow your Matador?"

"My whatta-door?"

"Matador. Your car."

"Oh!" Understanding flooded into Stevie's tone. "Yeah, sure. But it's a Javelin not a Matador."

Konky blinked. "Get the fuck out of here. Are you serious?"

"Jesus Christ, Al. You've been in that car how many times? Didn't you ever once bother to read the fucking console?"

"I'm sorry," he laughed. "Can I pick it up at six o'clock tonight?"

"You can pick it up now. I'm not going anywhere for the whole rest of the day, believe me." He paused for a moment. Then, tentatively: "Is the Chevette okay?"

"It's the same as always," Konky told him, "but your car's a little nicer to look at. A little."

"A little, right. Well you know where it's at. Keys are in the flower pot."

"Thanks again, Stevie. I owe you a beer for this."

"Ugh. Please don't mention beer to me ever again."

Not long after he signed off there was a knock at the door. Konky opened it to find his neighbor's eleven-year-old son, Bryce, smiling up at him. As usual, Bryce was wearing dirty clothes, and his hair was a mess. This was due in large part, Konky knew, from the boy's lack of a mother. For two years now she'd been gone from his dad's tiny apartment at the end of the hall.

"Hi Mr. Konky!" Bryce beamed, chipper as always despite having a dad who drank and a mom who was never around. "Collecting today. Two dollars."

"Two dollars for that rag you leave on my doorstep every day?"

The boy's smile beamed wider. "Of course! How else are the reporters going to buy ribbons for their typewriters?"

"Yeah, shit," Konky grinned, fishing money out of his wallet. "Here ya go."

"Thanks! Seeya!"

"Hey."

Bryce turned around. His face was unwashed, his teeth were crooked; but his eyes could not have been more alive and healthy. "Yeah?"

"You ever get that bike you wanted? The little scooter for sale over on State Street?"

"Naw," the boy shrugged, as if not getting it didn't matter. "Dad couldn't talk the guy down. Plus it doesn't run anyway."

Konky nodded at this, giving his own shrug in return. Soon Bryce had disappeared down the steps, and a minute later Konky saw him through the window, standing in the sunlight of the dead-end street they lived on, looking up at the sky with a bag of papers slung over his shoulder.

"Take her easy, kid," Konky said quietly. "Shit happens and then you die."

_____

"Shit," Marnie said, "where the hell is my root-beer?"

Konky leaned over the table and told her to keep her voice down. Other diners frowned in their direction. "Sorry," Konky simpered to one of them. "I think it was the TV."

"Oh quit makin' like you're Prince Charles," Marnie groaned. "This is Shakey's not the Homestead Inn. Jesus."

"It isn't Sheller Globe either," Konky admonished as he forked spaghetti onto his plate. "You shouldn't talk like that in a public place."

Their date had been a disaster thus far. It started with Stevie's Javelin not being clean, forcing Konky to spend five dollars at Jim's Auto Wash for a scrub-down and a polish. He'd also needed to dump about forty cigarette butts from the ashtray, mop spilled coffee from the console (with the word JAVELIN right there across the center),

and wipe french fry grease off the steering wheel. Then, later that night, he'd forgotten to hold the door open for Marnie—he'd just sat there in the driver's seat after honking the horn, smiling up at her like an idiot. No flowers, either; those had slipped his memory as well.

One look at Marnie made him realize that none of it mattered anyway. She'd come out to the car wearing a ragged green house dress, what looked like a dead animal of some kind twisted into the back of her hair, and no make-up.

"Beautiful," Konky'd told her, smiling away, "climb on in here and let's go."

On the way out of Norwalk Stevie's car broke down. Konky had gotten out and popped the hood, not quite able to get his mind around all the steam billowing from the Javelin's engine while traffic blew by them on route 250.

"Radiator," he'd told Marnie with a stupid grin on his face.

"No shit, Sherlock," she'd come back with. "Do you need to piss? Sometimes that works when a car needs coolant."

"Really?"

Her eyes rolled. "No I'm just fuckin' with ya. *Yes*, really! Now do you or don't you?"

He hadn't, but a trucker on his way to Marblehead had been kind enough to stop and fill the radiator from a jug of water in his cab. Kind enough, that was, for a small fee.

"Five bucks," he'd told Konky, holding out his palm.

"Jesus Christ!"

"Five bucks or wait for somebody else."

So Konky'd paid the five dollars, and the Javelin had given him no further trouble. Now here they were at Shakey's, and at least the spaghetti was good. Konky stuffed a huge forkful into his mouth and chewed while pretending to look ruminative. This brief moment of serenity perished, however, when Marnie pulled a face (uglier face) and reached for a napkin.

"Wipe it," she ordered, reaching towards his beard.

Instantly the napkin went up in flames—she'd forgotten about the candle flickering on the table between them.

Konky snatched a glass of water and dumped it all over Marnie's hand. "Jeez!" he hissed.

"Damn it, Al, look what you did!"

"I told you not to talk like that in public. Please," he added, smiling up at a waiter who had just arrived.

"Is everything all right?" the other man asked with an even tone.

"Yes, fine," Konky assured him. "Just a little mishap with the candle."

"Can I get you some more water?"

"Thank you."

Marnie, meanwhile, had turned the usage of one napkin into the usage of five. The sleeve of her cheap dress was soaked. "Thanks a lot," she grimaced.

"I didn't want you to get burned."

"Right. There's spaghetti sauce all over your beard—you might wanna do something about it."

"Oops."

"Fuck-a-doodle-doo, Al."

"And now let's find out the winning lotto numbers this week, right here from our very own Richard Heddenfayce. Richard?"

"Hello, Vicky! Yes, let's get those numbers indeed…"

Konky stared at the TV mounted on the wall, where the network reporter was reaching into a glass-paneled wind machine for the first of what would be six plastic spheres with black numbers printed on them. Frowning, Konky reached into his wallet and pulled out the receipt he'd gotten from Eddie two nights previous.

"Eighteen!" Heddenfayce smiled after twisting the number towards the camera. "Thirty-five!" he continued, twisting another. "Twenty-six! Twelve! Forty-one! And one more, ladies and gentlemen, let's wait. Here it comes up the chute. Twenty-nine! Well there you have it, Vicky! Those are this week's lucky numbers! Did you win? Ha-ha!"

Konky looked from the TV, to his ticket, to the TV, and back to his ticket again. Something wasn't right. This had to be a mistake. For all six of the numbers matched perfectly. In the time it had taken for the balls to pop up in the machine (about ninety seconds), he'd become a millionaire.

"Huh," he said, blinking down at his hand.

"Al?" Marnie asked. "Are you all right?"

He put the ticket back into his wallet and smiled. "Yeah, I'm good."

Still smiling, he pitched over face-first into his plate of spaghetti.

_____

On the following morning he woke up on the floor of his apartment. An empty bottle of bourbon lay nearby, along with two ashtrays full of crushed out cigarettes. By degrees, Konky began to remember his night of celebration. Had Marnie been a part of it? No, he didn't think so. He'd dumped her off somewhere before making a beeline at the nearest bar. After that, everything went black.

He sat up gingerly, rubbing one hand on his temple and the other on his lower back. "Cock," he muttered. "What a night."

His eyes flew open wide. The ticket! Where was it? His pants pockets were empty—in fact, his fly was unzipped and his member was protruding out the pee door in his boxer shorts, whatever that all meant—and nothing else but dust-bunnies littered the floor.

"No! Fuck no, oh please, no!"

His head turned left, then right. There underneath the desk lay his wallet, flapped open like a dead bird. Konky snatched it, plunged his fingers under a yellow photograph of his mom smoking a Camel, and pulled out the lotto ticket. A sigh of relief plumed from his lips. Everything was cool.

In fact, things were so cool, it was time to claim the jackpot and start living like a millionaire. Step number one involved dialing the 800 number on back of the ticket.

Konky did this while slumped in his favorite recliner. After three rings a pleasant female voice spoke into his ear.

"Ohio Lottery offices, this is Megan, how can I help you?"

"Hello, Megan," Konky said cheerfully. "I hit your biggest jackpot last night. Six million dollars."

"Well that's very nice to hear, sir," the woman replied without the slightest change in tone. "May I have your name, please?"

"Albert Delaware Konky."

Keys clacked on the other end of the phone. "Delaware like the state?"

"That's right."

"And how do I spell Konky?"

"K-O-N-K-Y."

"Okay, Mr. Konky, please confirm that your ticket has these numbers printed on it. 12-18-26-29-35-41."

"Those are the ones I've got all right."

"Very good, Mr. Konky, let me just transfer you to our claiming department."

"Hot damn," Konky gushed, grinning from ear to ear.

"Yes sir, Mr. Konky. Please hold."

There was some clicking on the line, and then the sound of another number being dialed. Feeling like the lord of all he surveyed, Konky spread his legs open to let what was quite possibly the loudest fart he had ever cut escape his bowels. Life today seemed just too good to care anymore.

"WELCOME!" a voice shouted through the receiver, making him jump, "to the Ohio Lottery's claiming department! And congratulations on your success!"

"Why thank you very much," Konky replied, easing back into the chair.

"Please be advised that our offices are closed on Sundays—"

He sat up. "What the fuck?"

"--but you may call back on Monday morning at 9AM for instructions on how to claim your prize!"

"Goddammit!"

"Thank you very much for calling Ohio Lottery! Have a pleasant day!"

"Goddammit, goddammit!"

The recording ended; the line went dead. Konky put the ticket into the desk drawer. He showered, dressed, then went out to get some breakfast.

Bryce waved up from a pile of toy cars on the front walk. "Hi Mr. Konky!"

"Hey, Bryce. Traffic jam?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Dad's sick this morning so he told me to go outside."

"I know just how he feels," Konky said, wishing he'd remembered to take aspirin before setting out.

"Is there a flu going around?"

"Yeah. Sunday morning fever. Stay happy, kid."

"I will!"

_____

He called in sick from work that night. Some of the bars in Norwalk stayed open on Sundays, and Konky intended to hit every one of them he could find. This turned out to be a mistake for multiple reasons. One of them involved waking up on Monday afternoon with the biggest hangover of his life. But long before that, at around 3AM…

"Yeah, it looks like you've been hit pretty good here, Mr. Konky," the policeman said, entrenched in the shambles of what had once been Konky's apartment. "TV. Stereo. You said you had some cash put away in your closet too?"

"Yeah," Konky growled. He felt sick in a way he had never known before. Frustration, despair, and what had to be the sourest kind of hatred there was boiled in his belly like a poisonous stew. "But I don't give a shit about that. I wanna know why the fuck whoever it was robbed my apartment felt the goddamned need to clean out my desk. Jesus Christ, he had my TV on one shoulder and my stereo on the other! *Why would he even bother? WHY?*"

The officer let out a long breath of air. "Well that's hard to say, Mr. Konky. These kinds of criminals know they don't have much time to do their work, so they grab anything they can as fast as they can."

"*MY DESK!*" Konky bellowed. He swept a tree of coffee mugs off the kitchen sink, shattering glass everywhere.

"Was there something special inside of your desk, Mr. Konky?" the officer asked with his brow raised.

"Personal shit. Papers." Then, under his breath: "Fuck!"

"Documentation? Birth certificate? Driver's license?"

"Cash vouchers."

"I see. And what was the value of the vouchers?"

Konky's eyes widened. "What *was?*" he asked. "Does that mean I'm totally fucked out of my belongings for good, officer?"

"They will be difficult to recover, Mr. Konky, I won't lie about that. But the department will make every effort to resolve this matter."

Konky's hand went to his forehead and rubbed. He felt like crying, except that tears required energy, and he didn't seem to have any on hand. After the officer left he slept for the rest of that morning with his arm hanging over the edge of the bed. Twelve hours later he came around with a terrible hangover. He rolled over and fell, hitting his head on the floor. That made it even worse. Still, he managed to stand and stagger into the next room to give the desk—as well as the area around it—one final exploratory sweep. But no joy came of it. The six million dollar ticket was gone.

The next stop was the bathroom. There, he vomited into the toilet for almost five minutes before nearly passing out on the floor from exhaustion. His bowels felt twisted and tight, ready for revolt. As if on cue, a sudden stabbing pain ripped through them. Konky got his pants off and his butt on the toilet-seat just in the nick of time to avoid disaster.

"Somebody kill me," he heaved, slumped in the stink of his own waste. "Somebody please just kill me now."

He returned to work that night in a mood blacker than a year-old skunk carcass on the side of a dirt road. Jenkins clapped him on the back and said hello. Marnie gave a half-hearted wave from her table at the far end of the work area. A song Konky hated—Tom Sawyer by Rush—blasted from the radio. He still wanted to die.

"Still feeling sick?" Jenkins asked.

"Yeah."

"We missed you last night."

"Yeah."

"Foreman was pissed."

"Fuck him."

"KONKY!"

Konky looked up from his piece-work. The mountain of muscle had gone ninja on him again. Only tonight he didn't make Konky feel afraid. Tonight, he only made Konky feel angrier.

"Guess what?" the foreman smiled. "Go on, guess."

Everyone on the line had stopped working to watch them. Konky found that he didn't care one iota.

"Oh I just love guessing games," he replied, grinning right back. "Let me see now. You're an asshole? Naw, everybody knows that already."

Tittering up and down the line. Round eyes, surprised faces. The foreman turned and told someone to shut off the radio. This order was carried out, plunging the factory's work area into blissful, blessed silence. Blissful and blessed for Konky at least.

"Now that's a fucking relief," he told the foreman, "having that miserable, pukey, diarrhea toilet water classic rock music from Toledo finally choked off. That's where you're from, right Mr. Foreman? Toledo?"

The foreman snarled and clenched his fists. Konky knew he was on the edge, but went right on not caring. All at once he realized that he had in fact been on the edge for a very long time.

"Keep digging it, Mister," the foreman told him, "just keep right on digging. So that stupid head of yours can't guess. Fine, I'll spell it out. You called off sick last night. That's another demerit. Which means you're suspended. Now get the fuck off my line."

"Fuck you," Konky fired right back. "You can't give out demerits for sick days."

"I can when the person who called off sick spends his night down at Bluto's Bar drinking beer and playing Space Invaders. That's where you were, right Albert? Us assholes from Toledo might not have good taste in music but we sure know how to keep our ears to the ground."

"Playing Space Invaders beats the shit out of sweating my life away in this stink-hole."

"So leave. And don't come back."

Konky tossed the part he was calibrating—unfinished—back onto the line, knocking three other pieces off. "How about if I just kick your ass instead?"

The foreman smirked as if he had been waiting for Konky to say this ever since his first day on the job. "You really are stupid, aren't you? Go on, fat boy," he challenged, making come-here gestures with his fingers. "Give it your best shot."

Without hesitating, Konky punched the foreman dead in the face. It sent him stumbling backward into a broken pallet jack, where he tripped over the forks and fell flat on his butt.

"How's that?" Konky asked.

"Jesus Christ, Al," Jenkins whispered.

Bellowing with rage, the foreman got to his feet and charged. His fist punched Konky in the stomach—a mistake if there ever was one. Konky fell backward one step, then picked the foreman up and threw him over the line. Several women screamed. Cries of *easy fellas* and *break it up* came from the men.

"Come on," Konky said to the foreman, who had gotten back on his feet, brushing filth away from his white shirt. "Let's dance, fuckface."

The foreman climbed over the line and charged again. Konky knocked him right back down, pounced on him, and punched his face twenty-five times. Or was it fifty? Or one hundred? He didn't count. But he was still punching when three other men were finally able to pull him away.

"Get up!" Konky screamed at the bloody mess on the floor. *"Come on, get up! Get up so I can fucking KILL you!"*

"Come on, Al, relax," one the men holding him said. "It's over."

Breathing hard, Konky looked around at the faces of his coworkers. Fear and shock stared back from every direction. All at once he felt like a man on a game show—a man who, despite all evidence to the contrary, had lost pitifully on the very first spin of the wheel.

"It's over," someone said again.

At last Konky's shoulders slumped. He gave a nod. Cautiously, the men let him go.

"Don't worry," he told them. "I'm done. Believe me, I'm done. Done with a lot of fucking things around here."

_____

Sitting in his cell at the police station later that night, the entire, ridiculous scene played itself out over and over in Konky's aching head. He felt bad for the foreman (who'd been carted away to an ambulance during Konky's arrest) and embarrassed for himself. What on earth had gotten into him? All of that misdirected hatred…for what? Losing six million dollars? Did it really mean that much?

"Yes," Konky laughed to himself. "Yes it did. But I was still stupid."

A black man sitting in the next cell looked over at him. "You're gonna fit in just fine here, Porkchop. We tell each other that shit every night."

"And does it help?"

"What do you think? Man, hatred needs an outlet. It's gotta come out somehow, some way. I think so at least."

"Maybe I need another outlet," Konky mused. "Maybe you do, too."

"Maybe we need to just stop hating, period. But how, Porkchop?" The black man's eyes were desperate as he asked this question, as if he had stayed up nights in search of the answer.

For Konky it was simple enough. "Money," he said. "Money, money, money."

"Money makes a man happy," the other agreed, "but man it can't be the only thing. It just can't. Because Porkchop, it's too goddamned hard to come by. You dig?"

"I dig," Konky replied. The lost ticket floated across his mind like a golden flower petal from a paradisiacal garden. "Brother do I *ever* dig."

_____

Tuesday morning.

Konky rolled over to the sound of the telephone ringing and fell out of bed. Only today he wasn't hung over; today, he simply felt too defeated to stand.

The phone rang on. Ignoring it (it was just the public defender anyway, wanting to talk about his date in court with the foreman), Konky crawled into the bathroom. There, he managed to pee and shower and find clothes that were still a tiny bit clean on top of the hamper. Breakfast consisted of two eggs laid over top of a dried-out knoll of reheated rice. He ate it in front of a small, black and white spare television as Richard Heddenfayce talked about this week's weather report.

"Calm and quiet," the meteorologist told his audience, smiling into the camera, "that's really what we've got going over next couple of days. Or I should say what we don't have going. Light clouds, temperatures in the mid 60s."

"Oh how I love that, Dick," an anchorwoman sitting nearby gushed. Everyone in the studio laughed.

But not Konky. He sat blinking at the remains of his meal. What was he going to do now? Just what was he going to do?

While in the midst of pondering this question a fast, excited fist began to knock on the door.

"Mr. Konky?" a child's voice called from the other side. "Hey Mr. Konky come outside, I gotta show you somethin'!"

Konky got up slowly and opened the door to a bright-eyed face with a smile on it that twinkled like one of the pinball machines at Bluto's bar.

"Bryce. What's on your mind, kid?"

The boy pointed at the stairs. "Oh you gotta come down with me and see! Please please *please!*"

Konky shook his head. "Listen, kid—"

"*PLEASE!*"

"All right," he shrugged after a confused moment. "Lead on."

"MacDuff, right?" Bryce said over his shoulder as he ran down the hall.

"Huh?"

"My dad always says that. Lead on, MacDuff."

"Oh. Well tell him it's Lay on."

"Lay on? Why would I want to lay on MacDuff?"

"Kid—"

"It's outside, come on!"

He burst through the front door. Konky followed. But whatever it was Bryce wanted him to see did not seem to exist. The drooping, lopsided porch looked exactly the same as it always did, with its rotting swing and cracked flower pots. Nothing

appeared different about the front curb either. His Chevette was parked there, just like always. Next to it—

"So cool, right?" Bryce asked, sounding almost intoxicated with joy.

The motor scooter leaned crookedly on the curb. Its handlebars were rusty; its seat was ripped. Two nearly bald tires in need of air sagged in puddles on the concrete. The bike had been red once, Konky supposed, but a myriad of dings and scratches on its frame made it impossible to tell for sure.

"Kid…" he said again, not knowing what to tell him.

"I love it! *I love it!*"

Konky looked from Bryce, who was jumping up and down on the sidewalk, to the bike, which could barely stand on its own at all, and back to Bryce.

How do you do it? he wondered. How do you find things to be happy about every single day?

The boy could see the good, or the potential for goodness, in everything he looked at. Could this be what the man in jail with him last night had spoken of? Could it be the other thing?

"So your dad caved in," Konky said.

"He sure did! And once I get it running I'm gonna ride it school every day!"

"You're gonna fix it up yourself? Do you know how?"

The boy's smile faltered just the tiniest bit. "Well…no." Now it came back to full brightness. "But that's cool, 'cos I wanna learn how! I can read about it in books and stuff! Even if it takes a whole year I'm gonna learn! Even if it takes *ten* years!"

Unable to help himself, Konky smiled back at the boy. "Okay. Ten years. I'm gonna hold you to that."

"Want a piece of gum?"

A tattered pack of Hubba-Bubba appeared from the boy's pocket.

"No thanks. Good luck with your bike, Bryce."

"I can't wait to ride it! I can't wait, I can't *wait!*"

Konky went back upstairs to his apartment. The percolator was still on the stove—whoever had robbed the place on Monday morning apparently didn't drink coffee. After fixing himself a pot Konky stood in front of the window and sipped while watching Bryce tinker with his new ride. A pile of crude, rusty tools that he clearly had no idea how to use were piled in a circle around him. Down the hall from Konky's door his dad would be passed out somewhere in a drunken stupor. His unwashed clothes would be lying in a pile in the bathroom. His uncooked breakfast would be in the refrigerator.

"You have nothing," Konky whispered against the glass. "Don't you see that, kid?"

Grinning from ear to ear, the boy picked up a pair of pliers and started tapping on the bike's carburetor.

"Don't you *see?*" Konky said again, as if trying to point out something obvious as the sun in the sky, or a pile of dog poop on the sidewalk.

The phone rang. Konky jumped and spilled coffee on his wrist. Bracing himself for the worst, he picked up the receiver. Raised it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mister Albert Konky?" a female voice asked.

"This is he."

"Mister Konky my name is Sheila Beemer, and I'm calling from Dickonson's Motor Sports out on route 20. You applied for a mechanic position here not long ago, correct?"

"Yes that's right," Konky replied numbly.

"Well how would you like to stop by for an interview with our maintenance head? Say two o'clock this afternoon?"

A cheer erupted from the street. It was Bryce, happy with something once again.

Konky looked out the window. What was going on? This couldn't be right. It was supposed to be the public defender on the phone, not this Sheila Beemer. Legal procedures needed to be discussed. Settlement ideas. Apologies.

"Mister Konky? Are you there?"

What? What?

Konky's eyes squeezed closed. When he opened them, everything was still the same. Another whoop flew from the street. The lady on the phone said his name again.

"Yes, I'm here," Konky told her, though couldn't be certain of that fact. "Two o'clock is perfect for me, thank you."

Sheila Beemer's voice smiled. "That's great, Mister Konky. Please come prepared to answer any and all questions you can think of in regard to motorcycle repair."

"I will. Thank you again."

He put the receiver down and went back to the window. There on the sidewalk was Bryce, getting himself greasier by the moment. Yet beneath all of the grime, all of the filth and blackness that clung not only to his face but to the very structure of his life, there stood a happy boy.

"I don't get it," Konky said. "I just don't get it, kid. I need you to teach me how. You teach me and I'll teach you."

He kept his toolbox in the closet, on the top shelf. It too had been overlooked by the thief. Konky hauled it down, and the tools inside of it jangled together happily. He walked to the door. Maybe Bryce's bike wouldn't be too far gone to help.

The phone rang.

Konky hesitated. Now it would be the public defender. He said he'd be calling this morning, and to prove himself a man of his word, here he was. Two rings now…three rings…four.

"It's you all right," Konky said to the empty apartment.

His fist clenched around the handle of the toolbox.

Five rings…six.

Nodding, Konky went into the hallway and closed the door.

Hurricane Angel

for Amy and Shelly

On a sunny summer morning in New York City I received a call from a young lady which interested me a great deal. Her house in South Carolina, she claimed, was haunted, and would I be interested in coming down for a look around?

"If nothing else you could use it as an excuse to pop in on your mom and dad," she went on. "They miss you, you know."

"Ma'am," I asked, taken aback, "how is it that you know I'm from South Carolina?"

A shrewd little laugh came through the line. "Jack, it's me—Veronica Dehrer. Lord, you *have* been in the Big Apple for too long. Hello?"

I was silent for such a time it was a wonder she didn't hang up the phone. Veronica Dehrer—the only girl I had ever loved. I had not heard her voice it since my junior year at high school. That was 1982.

"Jack? Are you there?"

"Yes," I managed.

"Let's not try and talk over the phone, okay? It's been a long time and I'd like to see you again. Come down to Justinville and look at the house. There are more things going on here than you could ever believe."

"It's that bad?"

"Yes," Veronica replied.

I hesitated, thinking of another client in Louisiana. He, too, was complaining of heavy activity, and oh how I could have used the money just then. But—

"What's the address there, Veronica?"

"Number one fourteen, West Main Street."

"I think I know that one. Is it the Greek revival?"

"Yes."

"You bought it?" I wanted to know, surprised all over again. I had loved that house since my childhood.

"Yes. But I don't sleep here at night anymore. I stay with a friend on Tate Street."

The line garbled as she spoke this last. Veronica sounded like a woman talking underwater. But then it got better again.

"I mean the bumps," she went on, "the thuds, the footsteps. The *voices.* What would you do? This is crazy, Jack. *I'm* crazy, maybe.

"No you're not," I insisted, sensing tears beneath her professions. "Listen, I'm going to bring some equipment with me. Reel-to-reel recorders, cameras, things like that. Techno-junk, basically, that'll clutter up your living room but good."

"I don't mind. Come right to the house when you get here. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Me too. I'm on my way, Vee. In fact if you want to meet me at the airport I can be on the first plane down—"

But I had to stop myself there. The line had gone flat dead.

***

I flipped through my address book and found the number for Louisiana, called it and said I'd be waylaid for awhile. This did not go over well, but I told the client it couldn't be helped. Our conversation ended on a cold note, and as it turned out, put our

business dealings to bed for good. Next, I dialed the number of my folks' house in Justinville and told my mother I'd be coming for a visit.

"This is a shock," she said, sounding underwhelmed. "When do you think you'll be here?"

"To be honest I haven't even called the airport yet, but I'm hoping to be on the earliest flight to Charleston. From there I can rent a car and drive up the coast."

"I suppose so. But you'd better hurry, Jack. We've got a hurricane blowing in."

I slapped my forehead. "Dammit! That's right! How close is it now?"

"They're saying twenty-four hours, but it'll get really bad before then. The whole town's been evacuated aside from the ten or fifteen families who decided to stick it out—along with your dad and me."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? Staying, I mean?"

"Not in the remotest sense of the word. But your father is your father."

"So it was his idea?"

"Do I sound like I'm hopping up and down with joy at the prospect of being blown across the Atlantic?"

Minutes later I phoned a clerk at LaGuardia who informed me there would be a flight leaving for Columbia at 2:45. This brought a sigh of relief. Columbia was better anyway, being at least a hundred miles offshore. I thanked the clerk and left for my apartment to do some swift packing.

***

The plane ride was uneventful. We touched down under sunny skies at around 4:30, and over the next two hours, driving southeast in a rented minivan, I felt troubled by little to no anxiety. It wasn't until I neared Mclellenville that the wind started to pick up, sweeping the trees in cool, hurried gasps. Heavy clouds pitched across the sky. I had the radio tuned to a weather station; it was calculated the storm would arrive at 8:30AM at the very latest, but the wind would be quite damaging well before then. Hail was also expected, though as yet not a single drop of rain had fallen. The entire coast was under a flood warning.

It was an astonishment then to see how vulnerable Veronica's house looked. I recalled it as being a huge, dark manor; time had done nothing to exaggerate the memory. It had been built during the Greek revival period of the mid nineteenth century, at the very edge of Justinville's West Main Street district. Its vast windows, appallingly bare, gaped at me as I approached. I was about to knock on the door when I heard a rap from above. I stepped back, and there, smiling through the clawing boughs at the upper west curtain, was Veronica. She made an inviting gesture with her hands. The door was unlocked and I stepped inside.

A small anteroom glowed beyond the threshold, its source of light a single candle set in a crooked sconce. Others like it flickered in the living room—where, I found, awaited Veronica. She stood near a burning fireplace, dressed in a long gown of navy blue. Her face wore an oddly chilling smile, with eyes like slivers of ice, and lips almost serpentine.

"So here you are," she told me.

***

The house was even bigger inside than out. I was given a grand candlelight tour, from the darkest corners of its bowels to the tiniest cobwebs of its lofts. The place looked haunted enough, a fact I pointed out to her more than once as we walked.

"Have a look here," she said, as we entered a large room above the main floor.

"What is it?"

"A chalkboard. Look."

She raised her lantern. There was indeed a chalkboard set into the wall, and I suddenly remembered reading about it at the town's public library a long time ago.

"This house used to be a seminary for girls, right?"

"In the early 1830s, yes, not long after the house was built. The first two floors were for classrooms and there are rooms upstairs where the students slept. Would you like to see them?"

She led me up a flight of steps hidden behind some old clothes at the back of a walk-in closet. The passage was like a step-ladder, narrow and very steep. A candle, flickering on a broken stool, greeted us at the top. On the right leaned a stack of old magazines. On the left, the flywheel from an antique loom.

We were at a kind of T intersection. Small wooden doors led into old bedrooms where once, long ago, teenaged girls had spent the night. Veronica showed me the left one first. Wind beat against the windows with powerful hands. Tree limbs scratched at the walls. We were walking to the other room when suddenly a voice (to this day I am sure it was the playful voice of a young girl, though all the ones I was later fortunate enough to get on tape sound deeper and much more forbidding), shouted: HEY!

Veronica quite nearly dropped her lantern. The voice had come from the top of the stairs, where nothing stirred now.

"Do you really like living here alone?" I asked, after some seconds had gone by.

"Why don't I just finish showing you these rooms and then we'll go downstairs?"

"Good idea."

Ten minutes later we were back on the main floor.

"That's everything," Veronica told me.

"You've got yourself quite a place here," I allowed. "In fact when I was a kid I wanted to own it myself. I loved it."

"Is this the first time you've ever been inside?"

"Yes."

"And?"

I smiled at her. "And now I love it even more."

We looked at each other for some moments without saying anything.

"I'm glad you called me, Vee," I came out with at last. "I'm glad I'm here."

"Me too. Feel like taking a walk?"

"A *walk?* In this weather?"

"Sure," she shrugged. "There's just the wind—it won't rain for hours yet. Her body came closer, the gown gliding. "Well?"

Well indeed. What choice did I have?

"Let's go," I told her.

***

So we took a walk. The wind, albeit powerful, was warm and playful. Indeed, a surprising number of people had ventured out that night to experience its magic. I remember couples ambling beneath the sidling trees, lanterns glowing. Some carried portable radios to keep tabs on the storm. In one neighborhood we came across a group of children playing with a puppy. They too had a radio on, and I asked one of the boys if there was any fresh news about the storm.

"Nope," I was told, "same old stuff. Dawn sometime."

We walked on, listening to the surf as it crashed against the rocky cliff faces of Reeding sound half a mile off. Its high waves were a lot like the memories I found myself coping with. Places I hadn't seen in over ten years were set before me again, blown from the yellowed photographs of some fractured album in the dust. There was the Gilger Theater—or I should say, the parking lot where it once stood. Veronica told me about the fire; we were both sad to see it gone. Other memories were still around to be seen, such as the Port Street bridge, which we walked across, and Dick's Camera shop. Old Dick Jarvis, Veronica said, was in his eighties these days and still ran the place.

An hour went by with the two of us talking idly about nothing at all. We passed a beach near Bull Bay and watched the waves, then made our way to nearby Peddler's Alley. There were many shops here, all closed for the storm, where wind-chimes made fretful music above marble doorsteps.

By midnight we were back at the house, and I was at a window on the main floor, fiddling with the battery pack of a surveillance camera. I wanted to get it mounted in the attic as soon as possible, where we'd been given our little scare.

"So what's it like living in New York?" Veronica wanted to know.

"I like it," I answered. "Isn't that funny?"

"Funny why?"

"All I hear is how people want out of that city for good. They tell me it's a total damned mystery. But I guess that's what I like about it."

"Back in high school I had you pegged for doing something unusual when you graduated."

I looked from the camera to find her simpering. "Really?"

"Really. Everyone did."

"Stop it." I went back to the battery pack, then looked at her again. "Everyone?"

"You were so tense and reserved, like you were trying to defuse a bomb no one else could see. Now look at you," she said, coming closer. "You're loose, you're relaxed. Things turned out all right, didn't they?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But what makes you think because I was tense and reserved I was afraid of the future?"

"We were *all* afraid, Jack. Kids in high school, they never know what's waiting outside. All they know about are the cracks."

"Cracks?"

"That they're wide, that there are lots of them—" she hesitated, standing at one of the windows, the snaky arms of so many shadows entwining her features—"and that people slip through them. All the time."

Her voice was but a whisper, like the inkling from whatever begged it beyond the glass. I rose and went to her.

"What happened after I left?"

"I was the one who left."

"We both did. But I've sometimes wondered why."

"It was too odd. We never shared a single secret together."

"And now?"

Still eyeing the glass, Veronica took my hand. But her response betrayed the reaction. "I don't suppose anything has changed."

"Maybe not. Maybe it doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters, Jack." Her eyes dropped. "I just wish I'd known years ago. We could have done so much for each other."

"There's still time."

"No," she replied.

Her grip on my hand tightened. Her face turned to mine—

And the kiss I had been waiting thirteen years to offer was suddenly there for the giving. We made it last, without awkwardness, without ambiguity. She was the seamstress of my past, the governess of my future; she was the lanterns, the candles, the hurricane over the sea. I lifted her in my arms. This was the end of our vagrancy, the end of our chamomile reticence. And later, in sleep, a dream I had interpreted the sound of the storm to be that of chains breaking. The spikes atop some high iron gate were bent and twisted into nonsense, and the bars were melting. Yet what existed beyond could not be deciphered. There was only the wind and rain—slate-gray, slanting rain. An urge to challenge this tempest begged, but dream or no, I didn't quite dare. I waited instead, and when the truth of things came sweeping down, it was far too to vast absorb, unwilling to accept what it revealed.

***

Morning.

I was awakened by the crash of something. Glass. The storm had come and was all but ravaging the house off its foundation.

I stepped out of bed, gathering my clothes, and called Veronica's name. There was no answer. Moments later there came the sound of feet in the hallway. I glanced at the door, thinking she would be there, but the open threshold was empty. Faint light spilled through, causing me to notice for the first time how dark the room was. And no wonder—the window that faced a row of trees next to the driveway had been boarded over. Thick, heavy ply-wood clung to the wall.

"'Vee?" I called again, this time from the hall. It was deserted and dark. In the adjacent rooms I discovered more evidence of what the night had done to the bedroom. Crude handiwork. Boards nailed over windows, sheets blanketing furniture (what little furniture there was; a lot seemed to have disappeared), moth-eaten and dusty. "Veronica?" I called for a third time, my strength diminished.

Something heavy came down on the ceiling, shaking the entire house. Three seconds later it came again. I swallowed. She was in the attic.

The door at the back of the closet was hard to find, though I knew right where it was. How indeed could anyone forget such an oddity? And yet the darkness made it difficult, and I found myself wishing for a lighter ever since giving up smoking two years previous. Once inside the closet I groped; my arm probed open space. The door was already open. Gaping, in fact. It had been taken off its hinges at some point during the night. The stairs beyond led into blackness.

I was about to call her name again when I heard her walk to the highest step. After a brief pause, she started down. I could only see the bottom three steps, and again wished for some tool to disarm the shadows. The storm ripped and raged. At times it was like tree trunks were being slammed against the walls. But as Veronica neared the bottom I heard nothing but the agony of the risers—and at that point knew, beyond doubt, that Veronica was not the person descending the passage.

There was one last creak (which came from the very bottom, I was sure), then—nothing. After all of that, nothing. I wasn't sure what had happened, but waited for another five minutes in front of the closet door, chilled yet unwilling to dismiss the event.

I went back downstairs in a mixture of puzzlement and relief. I have since returned to the attic several times. It's charged place, cold and austere. And that little girl is still there, which is sad. Still there, but not alone.

***

The storm forced me to wait until it was safe to leave the house. Where Veronica had disappeared to, under such conditions, I could not say; I could only hope for her fortune, and my parents' fortune, whom I had all but forgotten of during the night.

It was after two in the afternoon before I managed to see them. Justinville looked like a cobweb torn apart by a broom. People were standing in the rain. Some looked speechlessly at their homes, or what was left of their homes. Others sobbed, their faces hidden beneath fingers that clawed and trembled.

My dad was in the front yard when I got to the house, looking at where the roof used to be.

"Christ, boy," he said when he saw me—not *Jack, are you all right? Where've you been?* or *It's been a long time, son.* "Christ, boy, lookit my house."

I could say nothing. This smashed jigsaw puzzle was the house I'd grown up in, the place of my youth.

"Where's Mom?" I managed.

He pointed upward. "There's your old bedroom, son."

I looked. There it was, all right, except it looked more like a county landfill now, all trash and forgotten trinkets bared to the gray drizzle.

"Your mother's out back," Dad went on, "cleanin' up a little."

I found her standing amongst the shattered remains of I don't know what. A mattress lay in the middle of the yard. A lamp. Part of a desk. The sink from the kitchen in which I'd once had my mouth washed out with soap. The storm was worse than anyone had expected. For that first hour or two I even forgot about Veronica, too engrossed with comforting my mother and helping wherever I could.

Three days later the truth came again, this time for keeps. By then my head was clearing up a little and had begun to muse over Veronica's whereabouts, mostly while I was alone. That was how it was in the basement, where Mom and Dad had stayed during the storm; I was holding a broom in one hand and a Lucky in the other, trying to remember the way she'd looked on the night I stayed at her house. It was hard. I kept trying to fill the void in her eyes with something sedulous that struggled for freedom from another time.

Then I noticed a torn photograph fluttering on the edge of an old bedside table. What it showed made me wonder whether I was dreaming. It was Veronica.

The newspaper had been drenched at some point or other, and had dried to a yellowish-brown that made the pages feel brittle and aged. A flashlight lay nearby; I shined it over the parchment, and began to feel cold.

The photograph was small. I was looking at an obituary column.

"Son?"

It was Dad, calling from upstairs. I couldn't answer him. A harsh ringing sound, the kind that warns of blackness and falling, had encapsulated the world.

"Jack? Are you down there?"

"Yes," I croaked.

Then I fell down, bringing the entire table with me. It was a rickety old thing just waiting for an excuse to collapse, and the crash was more than enough to bring my father running. He got into the room just as Veronica's picture floated to the floor.

The date of the obit was last spring, in April. She'd been dead for over three months.

***

A full year has passed since the day of the storm, with me floundering after daydreams and unavailing insights. Thus far, my pockets are empty. There is no comprehending that night—or, for that matter, the house itself. I have since spent the night there a number of times, and to my knowledge there are at least five entities occupying the premises. Three of them, including the lass, seem harmless enough, but the other two can be quite taxing on the nerves. I awoke early one morning last month to discover a tall, powerful-looking old woman dressed in black glaring at me with hate on her features and a knife in her hand, only to watch her disappear as I cowered in terror.

The obituary indicates that Veronica was indeed living in the house at the time of her death, caused by a car/truck accident just east of Bull Bay. She'd been decapitated, I later learned, by a telephone wire.

For answers, I've searched everywhere. The house has yet to yield a clue, but I'm going back next week, this time to stay. There's something there, I think—something besides harsh laughter and angry old women with knives. It may be the same something that belongs in the whisper of Veronica's voice.

Aside from the house I've been searching a few other places. There are relatives, of course, and friends. Old high school photographs. Her headstone at Tate Street Cemetery. I've even attempted to contact her by Ouija board, and there was one

occasion in the infamous attic when I think we may have been communicating. Except all she would keep saying was: O-N-E-T-H-I-N-G-T-O-O-M-A-N-Y-P-O-L-E-S.

It's summertime here in New York. The sun is shining, and my office window is open to let in the breeze, which carries with it a light scent of caramel from a vendor on the street. I like it fine, and I think I'll be able to remember it well enough to take with me when I leave, on down to Charleston, and then to Justinville.

Flights back and forth are done in first class of late. It's the house. It hasn't yielded any clues, but from among its corridors I've captured some of the most outstanding formations ever seen on film. I've recorded voices and written articles. My picture has shown up in magazines like Omni and Discover.

Still, I miss Veronica. That's okay. Maybe she misses me too. If so I imagine that, one day, we'll see each other again. In a garden, perhaps, or near church-bells after a rain, on a night warm and rife with breezes that carry foliage high over the tolling spires of our dreams.

For now I go alone. But there is a truth behind all this, a truth that maybe—just maybe—could be different from the ones I see in the everyday world. A truth that stands in the light and flourishes. A truth that sings forth, and clears the skies, and spends eternity with me in a house that feels like home.

Aftermathers

for Tony

There was fire after the war. From makeshift torches its touch pillaged the chiseled high harvests of man. Office buildings once glorious were left gutted and blackened amid barren business districts smoldering at the throat of death. Churches, their idols deconsecrated, lay in ruins, abandoned by the zealots who'd worshipped there in less secular times. Bridges were crashed, schools were smashed. It was over—the age of arrangement. Chaos had usurped its throne, and it ruled with fevered lunacy.

The city of Cleveland had been all but flattened during its country's intense three years of conflict. The fires had been burning ever since, with and without the aid of what destitute maniacs still roamed the streets. And as to when it would all stop, the wheel was still in spin. Sometimes it seemed like never.

***

Tonight's newest conflagration had been set in the suburbs beneath a small red picnic table next to the library—where a number of moss-covered books lay bloated in the gutters—and a museum, where Kenneth White lived with his wife and baby daughter. The table now stood engulfed. Tongues of fire writhed over their meal. Seeing it caused White's heart to fill with dread. Not an hour ago, he'd left here in a black sedan dispatched by his employer, Clabe "Beetle" Durgeon. That was by no means a very long time (especially when Durgeon wanted you for something), but long enough, White guessed, for something bad to happen.

Skirting the table proved difficult. This first night of June carried a steady breeze, spreading the flames. White was forced to go around the long way to gain access to the museum. When at last inside he sprang upstairs fast as his legs would carry him.

"Bridgette!"

Half a dozen candles flickered at the bannister. He scrambled up another flight of steps, to the rooftop—and let out a sigh of relief. Bridgette was sitting near the ledge, quiet as ever, a cigarette between her fingers. The baby lay asleep in a wicker basket.

"Christ, I thought something might have happened to you!" White breathed. Then: "Someone set the picnic table on fire!"

This last remark earned her attention. "No," she said.

"Yes! And if we don't take care of it the whole damned block'll go up!"

Bridgette muttered something as she rose from her chair—White thought it might have been "fuck" or "shit", but not being a woman of many words she often didn't speak loud enough to be heard. Together they raced to the scene of the crime.

It took half an hour to get things under control. White was about to suggest they use the last of this week's water supply (issued by Clabe Durgeon), but before he could open his mouth Bridgette turned and ran to the adjacent parking lot.

"What the shit are you doing?" he yelled.

She didn't answer. Instead, there came a sharp, squeaking noise—the noise of a rusty steel door being opened. Bridgette had found an old blue dumpster in the parking lot and was tugging something large from inside. Inspired, White rushed to help. The carpet was bulky, and still wet from a shower earlier that day, but with Bridgette's help White worked it free from the trash and carried it to the picnic table, where the flames were now bright enough to read by.

"On three!" White shouted. "One...two...*three!*"

The carpet flopped over the table with a hollow *whumpf!* sound, and the scene was pitched into darkness.

"Jump up here with me," Bridgette commanded, as her boots began to stamp the wet fabric.

Five minutes later the flames were extinguished. Fetching a sigh of relief, White leaped from the table. "Is that the first time we've ever danced?" he asked, smiling.

No longer feeding a fire, the night breeze felt like an old friend again, whispering through the snub trees and ruffling the pages of countless broken library books. Bridgette gave a curt little nod to herself before turning to head back inside. On the rooftop Cindy--the baby--was still fast asleep. With her, at least, Bridgette had never been uncharitable with words, and White was happy to see the tradition continue as she knelt to make certain no harm had been done.

"How's my little one?" she cooed. There was warmth in her gaze reserved explicitly for the child, and by the time said gaze returned to White it had gone. "She's fine."

"She has a good mother."

Bridgette stood. "I can't hear shit up here, Ken. Not when it's windy."

"You mean the vandals?" he asked, his brow furrowed. "Of course not. We're three stories up."

Her fingers ran through her auburn hair. She went to the edge of the roof, beyond which the city's ruins were spread like the broken toys around Cindy's basket. From this vantage point White could see at least two dozen other fires, and beyond, on the distant horizon, hundreds more burned around the skeleton towers of downtown Cleveland. Soon, he knew, nothing would be left. And if he and Bridgette and Cindy weren't gone by then...

But not every light hurt to look at. Tonight's meeting with Beetle Durgeon had gone surprisingly well.

"We have work then?" Bridgette asked, once he'd shared the news with her.

"You could say that. Ask me how much we were offered."

"Okay."

He named the sum.

It garnered no reaction whatsoever. Nor was this surprising. Bridgette had never been an easy woman to convince. Even her living arrangement with White (and this he knew on instinct) was more a matter of convenience than chemistry. Simply put, she didn't believe. In *anything.* It was an apathetic disposition White chose to blame on the war, but sometimes he wondered. Not that wondering helped. She never talked about her past.

"With that much money we could get out of this shit-hole," he brought out, reaching for straws. "We could drive to Maine like we wanted, or...wherever. No more vandals, no more working for Durgeon. No more...sightless idiots in the streets clawing at our coatsleeves. This is a real chance, Bridge."

He waited. Nothing. Her eyes roamed the landscape. This time White decided to challenge her reticence. She had to care about this, dammit! Not for him, maybe, but for Cindy unquestionably. They had to get away for her sake. Get north, where the air was still fresh and the water clean.

Was she somehow able to read these thoughts? It seemed so. For at last, with a sigh and a shrug, Bridgette asked:

"What do we have to do?"

***

Beetle Durgeon would disclose no concrete reasons for the assignment he had in mind for them, but there no questioning why all the same: The death threats were beginning to unnerve him. He wanted to trace them to their source fast and snuff them out, even it meant purging all of greater Cleveland.

Wishing to start with the most sensible target, he chose his top competitor, a man known only as Madnishnue by the diplomats who served him. Like Durgeon, Madnishnue had thrived in the decadence that followed the war, and was said to be every bit as ruthless as his cross-town nemesis. No small feat, considering how well the years had fed what White could testify to. Durgeon, for all of his political decorum, carried the reputation of a monster. He was the biggest, meanest black man White had ever known. On the streets of East Cleveland—where most of his dealings took place—they called him a modern day Vlad Drakul, which doubtless derived from his love of torture. That torture consisted of two methods, depending on the sex of the victim in question: impalement (men) and drowning (women).

"I suggest you watch yourself," he had admonished during the meeting with White. "Don't get caught under this guy's thumb. The best time to get him would be this coming Friday—or Saturday morning, to be precise. He'll be traveling by train through Cuyahoga Valley sometime between midnight and dawn—"

And who might have died, White wondered at the time, to get you that information?

"—which means you'll need to work fast. Get on that train and get him before the goddamned sun comes up. With luck no one will even know what hit them."

White knew a run-in with that kind of fortune was unlikely but said nothing.

"And remember: I want Madnishnue brought back alive, with breath in his lungs. He's going to need it when he answers to me."

There, then, was the meat of their mission. Dozens of questions still ached to be asked, but White knew from experience how receptive his employer was to such things. On top of that, he and Bridgette had a child to support—

So what did those questions matter?

Durgeon was a brute, but he had never been known to sever his end of a bargain. If he said there'd be a windfall, there'd be a windfall. As long as you worked for it, of course.

***

And that was how, some four days later, White and Bridgette found themselves atop a high hill overlooking the valley, waiting for Madnishnue's train to come roaring on the tracks below, at which time they would board it, abduct him, and deliver him into the unforgiving bosom of Beetle Durgeon.

His crime? The death threats. Little *epistles* that were turning up more and more often in the vicinity of Durgeon's home in Shaker Heights, suggesting that the addresser was at last preparing to make good his promises.

"I hope we don't wind up having to sit here all fucking night," White was saying. "Seymour'll soak us for every penny we've got."

"He's worth it," Bridgette remarked.

"I don't know. I never quite trusted that kid watching over Cindy. He's taken us for close to a thousand dollars over the years, and God knows—"

"Not *that* much."

"Don't be so certain. He's a thief. A neighborhood crook."

He expected her to protest further, but she was silent, perhaps knowing already that White's current anxiety had nothing at all to do with the babysitter. She herself was more like a block of ice. Long abandoned lay the idea she could fear anything at all, but on tonight of all nights, White thought he would see at least a little edginess. Wrong again. Her face remained a deserted isle, the eyes twin lagoons, glimmering with nary a ripple.

"What are we gonna tell Clabe if he doesn't show up?" White wondered. He had a pair of binoculars fixed on the tracks. They were a good distance away, but it was still obvious that Madnishnue's train was nowhere near. Cold moonlight decorated the rails; all was quiet.

"I dunno," Bridgette admitted.

A leather belt lay in her hand, and she was testing its durability with tug after quick, hard tug, perhaps to reassure herself. Or White.

Were it the latter, she was wasting her time. After first hearing her idea on how to board the train—three days ago on this very hill—he'd come right out and called her a lunatic. It was absurd, he'd said. They would both be killed.

"It would be crazier trying to get on from the side of the tracks," she'd insisted with as little flare as possible. "First of all, we couldn't do it. The train'll be moving too fast."

"What makes you think that?" he'd demanded.

"Second of all we'd be spotted. Do you want to get shot down while panting like a dog? No, Ken. We come in from the top."

She'd never been so insistent with him, or so point blank as to leave him without vocabulary to shelter his opinion. Caught off guard, he'd been forced to succumb, butterflies already stirring a ruckus in his loins. Her idea really *was* crazy, and sleep would only come in uneasy dozes over the following nights, illustrated with dreams of plummet and death.

That unease was a comfort compared to the way White felt now. Brought face to face with the madwoman's intentions it was a wonder he could hold the binoculars still. Sad, then, that Madnishnue was so difficult a man to pre-empt. Even the train's destination was a mystery; the knowledge had ultimately proved too difficult for Durgeon to come by. Either that or the fucker knew and just wasn't saying.

"Come on," White urged, studying the tracks. "Jesus, when the hell's he gonna get here?" He lowered the binoculars and turned to Bridgette, who'd given up tugging the belt and was now smoking a cigarette like a woman on the sunny deck of a luxury liner. "The sooner this is over with the better," he went on, "especially your suicidal boarding stunt. If I lose my gun on the way down what am I gonna do? Huh? Christ. This is the

last time, Bridge—I told you that, didn't I? I swear this is the last time. Once we're done we'll collect our money and get the fuck outta here."

"If you don't have a coronary first."

"Yeah, yeah."

His eyes went back—as they had done a hundred times already—to the telephone wire. It was the longest he had ever seen, stretching from the hill all the way down to the tracks and beyond. Nor was this the lone association the thing had with the fantastic. One end of it had been driven into a tree, presumably by yesteryear's war, leaving a black bruise around the space where it had entered the bark. Seeing it had inspired Bridgette. In half an hour she'd traced the entire length of the cable, knotting its other end to a second tree on the far side of the valley. It would hold, she'd assured; and better yet, it would equip them with the benefit of surprise. Madnishnue's acolytes were certainly not prepared to defend the train from above, and Bridgette felt this lack of foresight was the key to the whole enterprise.

White walked to the edge of the hill and looked down. The bottom could not be seen, never mind the moon's penetrating brilliance. If he fell there'd be no tomorrow.

"I'd like one of those cigarettes if you don't mind," he put forth.

She nodded, reached for one—and then froze as if poked by a stick. Springing to her feet, she joined him at the precipice.

"Can I have the cigarette or what?" White asked, confounded.

He was violently shushed. "Listen! It's coming!"

Now he understood. Sure enough, something tainted the shadowed silence now, a rasping, clanging sound—the din of a steel factory from a mile away—that lingered over the trees.

"I'm a son of a bitch," White muttered. The next thing he knew a leather belt was being thrust into his hand. Except it wasn't a belt at all, he realized. It was an old guitar strap. "Where did you get this?"

"Never mind. Put your hand through the loops before you go down. That way if you lose your grip you'll have a second chance to gain it back."

"Um…all right."

The sound of the train had grown much louder, rising to the brim of the hill. Physical evidence of its proximity could be only seconds away. The tension it caused White was almost painful.

"I'm going," Bridgette said. She was the one with the belt (no safety loops for her), stretching to the very tips of her toes to sling it over the wire. "Okay!" she yelled, turning her face towards him. "After I let go you get on this thing and count to five! Understand? But not too slow and not too fast! Go one-two-three-four-five, then let go! *Got it?*"

He started to acknowledge, but it was already too late. She had gone, sliding away down her makeshift zip-cord.

Cursing, White threw the guitar strap over the wire and squeezed his hands through the loops. This, of course, was not what they'd been put there for, and the fit was tight. Still, it felt good, and he believed he would indeed be given a second chance should his hands slip from the strap.

The train was in full view now, a black serpent on the rails. Without looking down—oh God, he mustn't look down—White shrieked Bridgette's advised countdown at the top of his lungs, and let go.

Panic clutched him. The abyss of Cuyahoga Valley gaped underfoot, every bit as vast as the heavens above. Down and down he went, faster and faster. The guitar strap produced a high-pitched whine as it streaked along the wire. The wind pressed his face into a comic mask. His hands ached, his heart raced. Yet somehow he held on, all the way to the vital release point, which Bridgette informed would be about thirty feet from the train. Still screaming, he let go the guitar strap. Two seconds later the "safety loops" broke, and he was in full plummet.

"OHHHH SHIIII--!"

He hit the roof of the train on his ass and tumbled to the opposite edge, nearly falling over it, except that Bridgette's hand appeared out of nowhere to pull him to safety. She was visibly shaken, and they were both forced to spend a few minutes collecting themselves on the cold steel of the railroad car. Dazed and giddy, White sat down with her, at which point Bridgette did a most peculiar thing: She took his hand.

"You were right," she confessed, "that was crazy."

"Yeah," White gasped. "It sure worked though. Everything you said to do was pretty much right on the money. What did you do, use a slide rule?"

Five minutes later she told him that she was ready to move on. The gun she carried—a .45 caliber pistol—had found its way into her hand. "Are you?" she asked.

"More or less."

"Then let's do this."

***

Madnishnue's train was not exceptionally long. This fact carried both pros and cons. With fewer cars to search, the potentate would of course be easier to find; however, it made his pursuers easier prey as well.

At Bridgette's suggestion they worked their way to the back of the train, hopping between cars, and entered through a door which White was obliged to break down. Blackness pressed from the other side. Bridgette clicked on her flashlight. Its beam cut a swath through the murk, splashing its way from floor to ceiling and back again. In one corner was a wooden stool. In another, a lamp with a broken bulb lay on its side.

"No one's here, Ken."

"Good."

The door on the next car was unlocked. Suspicious, White pushed it open. Candles flickered on a polished oak bar table. Fluted glasses jingled from suspended holders. White stepped on the plush red carpeting of the car's interior—

And ducked a mere instant before an aluminum softball bat whisked through the space where his head had been. Its barrel struck the wall next to Bridgette, sending a shower of wooden splinters across the floor. Without thinking, White grabbed hold of the thing before its wielder could pull it back for a second swipe and yanked it free with one hard jerk.

"You fuck-wad! Gimme that back!"

The bat had yielded with surprising ease, and no wonder: Its owner was little more than a child, a boy no older than fifteen, dressed in filthy jeans and a torn brown vest that hung on his scrawny torso. Two huge brown eyes glared at White.

"I said gimme it!" the boy repeated.

Bridgette leveled her .45 at him. "Pipe down or I'll put a hole through your chest."

"What's your name?" White asked, hoping to calm things a bit. Scrawny or no, the kid had a strong set of lungs, and if he didn't stop using them Madnishnue's entire regiment would be beating on the doors before long.

But it seemed the child knew better than to shout when before the barrel of a loaded weapon. "Chevron," he answered soberly, eyeing Bridgette's gun.

"Chevron, good. That your real name?"

"Nope. But my real name sucks. Lady, don't point that thing at me no more, huh? I'll shut up or whatever. Jeez you look pissed."

"She is," White said, "all the time. Now tell us which car Madnishnue's riding in."

Chevron blinked and looked at White. "Who?"

Just then the opposite door was broken down with a hollow *crack!*, splitting the rhythm of the train's wheels. A giant stood at the obliterated threshold, bald-headed, wearing a blue muscle-shirt. So much for the element of surprise.

"He's got a fucking machine gun!" White hollered.

Bridgette had already hit the floor and White was diving for cover behind the bar when the air came to life with a metallic and deadly spray of discharge. Chevron never had a chance. He neither ducked nor dived, and as a result his skull was blasted apart in the rataplan. Fragments of it (hair, teeth, and bone) flew everywhere as the machine gun kept blazing away. Meanwhile White remained crouched behind the bar. He'd struck his hand on the side of it while diving and lost his gun. It was nowhere in sight. Nor, for that matter, was Bridgette. She was somewhere on the other side of the bar, dreadfully vulnerable. How long could it be before she was hit? God, was she dead already?

He looked back at the door, hoping to spot her, and instead saw Chevron's softball bat. It too had clattered to the floor during his sprawling leap, but was still within reach. He snatched it and wriggled like an iguana to the other end of the bar. Then, while muscle-man remained busy with his gun, White lunged and brought the bat down hard as he could on the giant's wrist. There was another *crack!* sound, this one of bone.

Muscle-man stopped firing and collapsed to the floor. "My arm!" he thundered, glaring at his assailant. "You busted my friggin'—"

The sound of a different gun cut the accusation short, and White caught sight of a hole appearing in the giant's forehead as he spun to discover Bridgette, poised in one of the old-tyme target shooter positions, smoke trickling from the barrel of her .45.

There was no time for celebration; the jig was up. No longer could they hope to act surreptitiously. Voices trailed from above—commands being issued and acknowledged. The job had become a full blown mess.

Bridgette was first to voice the fact. "They're circling us," she observed, eyes probing the ceiling. "Walling us in. Jesus, how many of them are there?"

No sooner was the question asked than a lithe black man wearing mirror sunglasses dropped from the roof and came at White. He was brought to the floor hard, and as Bridgette was aiming to get another shot off, two more brutes appeared at the opposite end of the car, eyes burning, guns blazing. The woman was fast, but not fast enough. She managed to cut both of them down, but then the gun was flying from her hand and she was yelping with pain as a hole above her wrist spouted a fountain of red.

Over in the corner the man with the sunglasses was pummeling White with an assortment of hooks and uppercuts. But then out of nowhere, like a gift from some vindictive deity, came Bridgette's gun, clattering to the floor just a few feet from where he lay. In a desperate gambit White brought his knee up hard as the muscles in his leg would allow, not expecting to find the other's groin but doing so with an accuracy that verged on the miraculous. Shades was stunned, and when his grip loosened it seemed there might be just enough time to reach out and snatch the gun. When he had it he'd aim for the mother's face and show no mercy.

This vision of glory glowing in his head, White lunged…and let loose a cry of frustration when at the last instant the gun was kicked away by what looked to be an immaculately polished dress shoe. White caught just a glimpse of it before its wearer jerked it back into the shadows.

And uneasy hush followed, broken now and again by the steady *clack-clack, clack-clack*, of the wheels on the rails.

White lay still on the floor, waiting for what he didn't know. Death, likely. Within moments that would be what came. He'd heard Bridgette cry out a minute or two earlier, and the sudden memory of it, what it insinuated, made his heart go cold.

"Okay, Ben, now what?" a voice asked.

"Go and get whatshername, willya?"

"Bridgette."

"Yeah."

At the mention of her name White's jaw dropped. What the hell?

"You must be Ken White," the black man said, his face materializing in the gloom. "The brains of this operation?" When White didn't answer he took off his shades, revealing a pair of eyes that looked highly amused. "You were fucked from the git-go, brother. We seen you comin' all the way."

"On the zipline?" White replied. "Bullshit."

The other laughed at this. "Yeah man," he insisted, "all the way."

But White still didn't believe him. "You're lying. You don't even know what I mean when I say zipline, do you? You found us because of that little prick. Chevron. He screams like a woman."

"So does this little thing," the other man put in from nearby. As instructed, he'd gone and fetched Bridgette. She'd been shot, White saw. Her face looked pale and feverish. "She's got a hole in her hand and it's gushing," her captor went on. "I gave her my t-shirt but it ain't helping a whole helluva lot."

The black man looked up and gave her a wink. "You'll survive, sweets. If we'd wanted you dead, you'd be so by now."

"I don't get this," Bridgette said, stunned by more than just the bleeding wound. "How do you know us? To be identified was the last thing I thought would happen tonight. So just how the fuck—"

"Questions, questions," the black man's friend broke in. "Save 'em for the boss-man. He's waiting for you at the front of the train."

With that, they were ushered out of the car, which by now had begun to smell quite like the abattoir it was, and brought to the fore of the coaches. Or to the very first coach, to be more precise. The engine itself was not their destination, for just as the raucous din of it was beginning to overcome that of the wheels underfoot the two men stopped.

"We're here," one of them said.

They were outside, standing between the first two cars of the train. At some point Cuyahoga Valley had been left behind, the scenery having given way to what White guessed had once been a warehouse district of some kind. Glimpses of Lake Erie could be seen between pulped buttresses of bland, solemn-looking structures perfectly fit for the drama of death and desolation that had fallen over the earth. No inkling of dawn yet touched the horizon, leaving White to wonder whether he and Bridgette were ever going to see the sun again.

"Boss!" the black man called, rapping on the door of the coach—a red door, White noticed with another pang of dread. "We got 'em!"

A few seconds of silence followed. Then: "Get their asses in here, Ben! Now!"

The voice, White thought as Ben reached for the knob, was familiar. In fact, damned familiar.

If indeed the arterial hue of the door was portentous, then what waited beyond was the apocalypse its assurance stood purpose for. Here, standing in the center of a car carpeted wall to wall with azure blue, was Clabe "Beetle" Durgeon, their hard-fisted, hard-tempered employer. He glowered at White, huge black eyes more threatening than ever.

"Ben," he said, baritone, "leave. Trashy, you too. Take Bridgette and go find Doc Preston before she bleeds to death. *Now, godammit!* Me and Kenny here got lots to talk about."

This was a lie, and Bridgette knew it.

"Ken!" she called, struggling against the arms that grasped her. Crazy as it seemed, she was terrified, and when their eyes met White caught that look of love she'd stopped giving long ago. Then Durgeon's acolytes pulled her through the door and slammed it shut.

"Ah!" Durgeon smiled, spreading his arms. "It's just you and me again." He waited a few moments before continuing, until the sound of Bridgette's struggling faded. "Your lady was very frightened, Ken. I suppose she's got it in her head something…*bad* is going to happen to you."

"She's right, isn't she?" White replied. There was little reason to prevaricate here, or feign ignorance. He'd been alone with Beetle Durgeon many times, and on most he'd taken severe beatings. Like White, Durgeon was tall; unlike White, he was a mountain

of muscle and bone, with skin dark as a Nuba tribesman and eyes like burning coal. After each of these beatings, Durgeon always promised the next one would be worse.

Now the dark giant walked to a large oak desk and sat on its edge. He wore a pair of blue jeans along with a red dress shirt, which made him look almost like a regular guy, especially in the kind luminescence of the many oil lamps burning from sconces on the walls. What betrayed the illusion was the fury—that ever present fury, in which hundreds had cried for mercy and been denied.

"I'm going to tell you why I'm pissed off. What it was the two of you were supposed to do tonight, and didn't, and why you found me at the front of this train instead of Madnishnue."

"I am kind of wondering about those things," White had to admit.

"It was a test, Ken. This whole mission."

"A test?"

"Yes. I chose the two of you—because I *thought* you were the best I had working for me—to undergo this complex task in order to prove your loyalty of service. Of *protection,*" he added in a rough bark, "and I'm outraged by your failure. It was your job to get to the front of this train tonight no matter what the obstacles, and you *failed!*"

"We were outnumbered," White protested, weakly.

"*Shut up!* Don't you talk back to me! Outnumbered shit—the majority of the men with me tonight are half-wits, like that fuck-head Teesly who opened fire on you and killed Chevron. I was standing right above you when that happened, and I swear to Christ right now that he'd have been happy you got to him first. He had explicit instructions not to kill you."

"Well he damned near did," White said. Then, incredulously: "You were there?"

"Don't you understand," the other went on, "that now more than ever I need to be able to put complete faith in my people? *There's some maniac out there threatening to kill me, you idiot! Hasn't that sunk into your thick head yet?*"

As he spoke he rose from the desk, fists closed, eyes blazing. What was coming next made no sense, and White wished he could somehow avoid it. He backed towards the door as Durgeon brought his tower-like frame closer and closer.

"Don't do this," White pleaded. "Come on, man, I can't be your bodyguard if you put me in a fucking wheelchair."

"Close your eyes," Durgeon whispered, pressing White against the door.

"What for?" White, trembling, asked.

Durgeon reared his fist back. "I said…*close*"—the fist punched White in the eye as hard as it could—"*your*"—another punch to the other eye—"*fucking*"—and another—"*eyes*."

Blind and sobbing, White collapsed to the floor. But the punishment had only begun. In a way the real torture was how he in some fashion remained conscious through most of it, until at last Durgeon placed the hard-heeled end of his boot over his forearm and pressed. And pressed, and pressed. White's arm bent…and then broke.

The final thing he heard before blacking out was an admonishment from Durgeon. "The next time it'll be Bridgette. Or that little girl of yours. Mark my words."

***

An hour later he was lying in front of the museum, a sack of broken glass with a spine like those of the books strewn around him. The sun, if he could but see it, had deigned to grace the eastern skies with its presence, although at this hour its warmth was still tentative and brought no comfort. Relief did, however, have a messenger this morning, whose footsteps could be heard stumbling over the bloated volumes. It was a woman, and her hands, when they touched his face, provoked a smile.

"That you, Bridge?"

"It's me."

"I need a doctor."

"You sure do. And I'm going to get you one."

On the following day she brought a woman to the museum who lived in Lakewood and claimed to have some knowledge of medicine and human anatomy. She tended to White caringly enough, splinting his arm, providing ointment for his cuts and bruises. Afterwards, her advice to Bridgette was that old, eternal remedy:

"You'll just have to let him rest," she said.

The fee for her services was steep, especially since there would be no payment for their disaster on the train. Over the coming weeks a notable change in living habits was forced upon them both. Less and less often did Bridgette go to see Brundy—the pusher who procured cigarettes to all the neighborhood addicts—at the corner of Chatham and Wicker streets. Less often still was the number of times fresh milk could be gotten for the baby, which obliged her to breast feed on a regular basis. Throughout this trying time, little aid came in from Durgeon—just enough, in fact, to keep them afloat should a job arise that fitted their abilities.

But no job came. Months passed without a summons from the underlord. White and Bridgette began to skip meals. People on the streets stopped talking to them and started talking about them. More fires were set by tribal vandals, one right on top of the museum's sagging porch.

"How about we just leave?" White suggested one night not long after this incident. It was the middle of August. He'd made a complete recovery, as had Bridgette, and had been brooding about the two of them taking their chances with flight ever since.

Except that Bridgette, over the burning months of June and July, had become aloof again. Seeing it happen hurt White in a way that Durgeon would never be able to. The glimpse given him of the woman she might have been had been all too brief; he wanted that woman back, to care for and be cared for by. But it seemed that this dry, hopeless season, which promised so much in the beginning and left them with so little, had deflated her fleeting acceptance to bathe in the compassion of loved ones. She'd retreated to the shelter of taciturnity.

"Bridgette?" White said. "Are you listening to me?"

They were sitting in a pair of lawn chairs on the roof, and no, it did not appear she was listening. Her eyes were on the scene below: the gnawed upon garbage in the lanes and the dead that lay with it.

"We wouldn't get far," she told him at last. "There's no food and the car's about out of petrol."

"Durgeon."

The remark earned him an evil scowl. "*Fuck* Durgeon. Durgeon's a monster. I don't want anything from him, ever again."

"I don't either. But Jesus, Bridge, our options are limited. We're running out of food and I don't have any money in my pocket. Do you?"

She didn't answer.

"All I'm saying is maybe we should drive over to Shaker Heights and—"

"You idiot!" she hissed, leaping from her chair. Her eyes were beveled to a fury so pectinate he could almost feel the sting. "Jesus, *fuck!*"

White gaped at her.

"Are you really that fucking stupid? To go crawling back to that prick for a job?" Tears were welling in her eyes. *"Answer me, you sissy! Stand up and answer me!"*

Beside them, Cindy woke up and began to cry.

A little angry himself now, White leaped to his feet. Being yelled at was one thing, but hearing her call him a *sissy*—

"All right, lady, cool it. One more job, that's all I was talking about. One more —"

WHACK! She hit him across the face.

And without thinking, he hit her right back.

In the next instant she was lying on the rooftop, unwilling to look up. From that night on White would apologize for what he had done, over and over, in his prayers. Except in those prayers the echo of Cindy's hungry crying was always present, and with that echo would come a failure to ever make peace with the incident.

"Oh my God," he whispered. "Bridgette, honey, I…I'm…"

Quietly, she got to her feet, and stood before him, head down, hair hanging over her eyes.

"Bridgette?"

All at once her head snapped up, to reveal a face so twisted out of true with loathing that White became uneasy, and stepped back. A Bridgette with haggard features glared at him. Her hair hung over her eyes in gossamer strands that looked almost brittle, like a witch's, teasing the skin of a countenance that had turned corpse-white. She raised a hand to her chest, squeezed it and shook it at him. Then, howling with rage, she kicked one of the lawn chairs over the edge of the roof.

Cindy's cries turned into screeches. Hearing them seemed to sober the woman a bit, for her face slackened and she walked to the basket, bending to pick it up.

"What are you doing?" White said.

It was obvious. In moments she had Cindy's basket in her hand, and was walking away.

"Bridgette!"

She didn't turn, she didn't even flinch. Her hand grasped the door which let on the staircase before White could say anything else, opened it, then closed it again from the other side.

***

Early that October, Beetle Durgeon's head was found in a clock tower near the west end of Parma Heights. White heard about it through Brundy, who'd picked it up while working the streets and was spreading the word. Madnishnue had won.

It didn't matter. After the train incident, Durgeon had never reached out to White again. Still, on windy nights White would sometimes go to the roof to have a smoke and think about the delusive (or was it not so delusive?) Madnishnue—whether or not he had indeed played a role in Durgeon's demise, or if he even existed at all. More often he thought of Bridgette. She'd not made contact since their fight in August, and he missed her. He missed her during the daytime, at least. But at night, when there was no light but for the candles he kept near his bed, and the sound of last summer's foliage through the window, he became strangely terrified of her. This was in large part because of the nightmares, in which she'd been coming to the museum not as his lover, but as his demon, a creature with cold skin and killing hands.

They started with deep moaning from beyond the window. Hearing it, White would rise to throw open the sash. Bridgette looked back from the shadows, dressed in black and wailing like the banshee his mind had made her out to be. Her hair hung in thick curtains over her face, so her eyes and mouth were hidden when she said: *"You used me! You wasted me!"*

Then, she'd come for him, first crashing around on the museum's lower floors, screaming, before pounding up the stairs to the bedroom, where she'd seize his throat and bounce him on the bed, sometimes high enough to touch the ceiling.

"I did it! I wrote the letters! I killed him! And soon I'll be coming for you! I'll be coming for youuuuuu!"

That was when he woke up. Often, it was still dark out, and he could swear he saw her shape in the corner of the room, hunched as if preparing to strike. The nightmare never changed, never faded, and always left him half wishing and half fearing for her return.

About the author: Tag Cavello was born in Norwalk, Ohio, in 1971. He currently teaches creative writing in Manila, the Philippines, where he lives with his wife and two young daughters.