

The New Orphic Review

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We at *The New Orphic Review* are happy to announce that “Crossing” by Andre Kocsis (Vol. 15, No. 1, 2012) has been selected for inclusion in *The Best American Mystery Stories, 2013* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 45 books. The most recent are *Heretic Hill*, *Flesh and Spirit: The Rasputin Meditations*, *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow*, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, *Kafka: The Master of Yesno* and *The Life of Bartholomew G. Hekkanen* is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen* (New Orphic Publishers, 2007).

Addicted to Story

Ernest Hekkanen

CURRENTLY, I AM GOING through a bad case of story withdrawal. I'm having actual physical symptoms. In the region of my corpus callosum, a small electrical storm, rather like sheet lightning, has been roiling for the past ten days. Traffic noise in the streets of our sleepy little town crackles like static in my ears. Moments ago, a Purolator driver slammed shut the rolling door of the truck's box, and I actually jumped. Upon being confronted with too much information, I feel overwhelmed. I was addicted to the novel I was working on for so many months, I feel lost now that it has been completed. However, in spite of my symptoms, the story-addicted part of my brain keeps looking for a new narrative to latch on to, rather like a parasite in search of a host.

I must make a confession. I'm the sort of person who finds it difficult to participate in the *common story*. Common stories are comprised of received ideas having to do with things familial, social, religious and national. They exist in order to pass on the mores, morals and attitudes of a particular group. With the technologies available to us today—texting devices and mobile phones equipped with a plethora of apps—those stories are now instantaneous and ongoing and, when I observe people 'checking in' with their instruments every few minutes, it strikes me as obsessive-compulsive. The need to be part of a grand, unfolding narrative seems to be just as important as it has always been, perhaps even more so than it was in the past. Deprive people of their communication devices, and they might very well go through a kind of story withdrawal, too.

Grand, unfolding narratives have existed since ancient times, when people first started to gather in communities. Grand narratives account for the origin of the universe, as well as our place in it. They also provide us with codes of conduct, which end up shaping our character. Human beings have been governed by story for millennia now. The need to

participate in a grand narrative of some kind has become second nature to us. We respond to narratives the same way Pavlov's dogs do to bells. As soon as the phone rings, we pick it up. As soon as we receive a text message, we feel obliged to respond. If Moses had possessed a texting device, he could have stayed on Mount Sinai until the end of his life. It wouldn't have been necessary for him to have delivered his Ten Commandments in person. One can only wonder how this might have changed the story he was determined to foist on his followers, the one about YHWH breathing words of wisdom into his ear.

For someone like me, someone who finds the *common narrative* difficult to participate in, the desire to be commanded by story hasn't exactly atrophied. *The New Orphic Review* might be viewed as an ongoing narrative I have decided to participate in—for dubious reasons, perhaps. Also, I enjoy creating fictional communities in which characters are governed by narratives. During the weeks, months and years it takes me to write a novel, I am enthralled, even captivated, by the narrative. I act as its servant, some might even say its slave. Unfolding the narrative consumes a great deal of time, energy and concentration. Furthermore, the idea of discarding it as a failed project is enough to crush me. (Perhaps I am being overly melodramatic, now.) Writing stimulates the frontal part of the brain, which has been equated with the seat of the imagination. My moods take sudden twists and turns having to do with how well the narrative is progressing. I put down my work only to return to my desk to further stimulate that area of my brain. I'm like one of those rats you have probably seen in films of lab experiments, rats who repeatedly step on a foot pedal to produce electrical stimulation in the pleasure centers of their brains, where an electrode has been implanted. When the switch is turned off, and the rats can no longer get that all-important hit to their pleasure centers, they nonetheless step on the foot pedal in hopes that the stimulation will return. One might go so far as to suggest that the rats have primitive hopes that a miracle will occur—that the experimenter will flip the switch back on.

In the United States of America, a story fundamental to that country is being threatened with possible review. That story has to do with the Second Amendment, which guarantees its citizens the right to bear arms. The right to bear arms contributes to thousands of deaths each year and at least one mass murder every few months, usually of innocent bystanders. The idea that restrictions might be placed on the purchase of automatic weapons such as the AR-15 Bushmaster has had the effect of stimulating sales of the same. It has also resulted in the hoarding of ammunition. Indeed, the hoarding of ammunition in the U.S. has resulted in ammunition shortages up here in Canada, according to newspaper reports. The proposal that the right to bear arms might be reviewed in some small fashion has caused a form of story withdrawal among gun enthusiasts, who fear they

might be denied their socially-sanctioned hits, one bullet at a time.

In this issue of *The New Orphic Review*, you will find an assortment of characters addicted to narratives that have taken command of their lives. Of course, commandments exist in order to be broken, especially in fiction. Take, for instance, the commandment: Thou Shall Not Kill. Shortly after bringing it down from Mount Sinai, Moses broke that god-given rule by ordering the sons of Levi to kill 3000 of his followers. You see, his followers had reverted to worshipping the golden calf of old. Shame on them. Wrong story, bad timing.

An academic and independent scholar, M. A. FOX holds a doctorate in English Literature from the University of Toronto. She has been a university lecturer, a librarian and a book-dealer's assistant. She's studied piano and flamenco dance, tended bar, sung with a rock band, written restaurant reviews, acted and directed, engaged in political activism and chaired parent-teacher associations. She is also the founder and principal of The Dragon Academy, a quirky independent high school for gifted non-conformists.

Piano Boy

M. A. Fox

THAT YEAR, his senior year in high school, Addison Ormsby was Mr. Stone's favourite pupil. Addison did not understand that there might be any complicated reasons for his position. He was not burdened by modesty. He was, far and away, he thought, Mr. Stone's best pupil. He was preparing for his audition for Julliard: Bach, *The Goldberg Variations*; Beethoven, *The Hammerklavier*; Liszt, *Sposalizio*; Debussy, *L'Isle Joyeuse*; Prokofiev's *Stalingrad* sonata. Addison did not doubt that he would be admitted. If he was auditioning for Peabody, Curtis, and the Montreal Conservatoire, it was only because his mother insisted.

From the perspective of Reginald Stone, the reasons Addison was his favourite were not so simple. All of Reginald Stone's pupils were remarkably gifted. He had retired from an exalted position in the Faculty of Music some five years ago, and if he now coached a select handful of pupils, more than the Graces, less than the Muses, he liked to say, it was for his own satisfaction, to pass along the mysteries of a sterling technique, to foster deep musicality in a new generation. He did not need the income. He owned a beautiful penthouse apartment with a south view over the playing fields of Victoria College, the towers of Bay Street, the gleaming grey of the lake. His living room could accommodate twenty-five auditors facing the nine-foot Bechstein, perched on rows of white folding chairs set up on the expanse of hand-knotted off-white carpet. Reginald Stone did not need pupils either for occupation or for self-assurance. He had had a Career, not perhaps a career of the first water, playing concerti with the world's major orchestras, but a fine career nonetheless. He had accompanied some famous singers, he had been the long-time pianist in the Jubilate Trio, and he had, after all, played his share of concerti, with the Winnipeg, the Buffalo, the Orchestre de Lille. He had studied composition with Stravinsky, and piano with Nadia Boulanger. If the view of Toronto from his living room window did not compare with the view

of Paris from his studio in Montmartre, he was not discontented with his life. He was still invited to give master classes, wooed for juries. He was working, somewhat desultorily, with a very handsome young graduate student, on his book, part memoir, part technical manual.

What Reginald Stone felt for his favourite students was love. It began with the whiff of promise, not just technical brilliance, but something in the personality, some susceptibility to the magic of music, an emotionality that poured out of them when they played, a capacity for ecstasy. To be enthused, to be filled with the divine. When he met such a capacity in young girls, he was fatherly, kind, generous with his time, his support. But in a boy, this promise made his heart drum in his ears, raised the hairs on his forearms, and with them he was motherly, tender, demanding. Reginald Stone was extremely careful that nothing improper in thought, glance or act should occur. It had been different in his day, of course. Poulenc had listened dutifully to his playing, made some highly technical suggestions while caressing the back of his neck, and led him from the living room with its crowd of Louis Quinze pieces to his bedroom, where an enormous four-poster dominated. And he had gone to rehearse with Ned Rorem, whose songs were on the programme he was planning with a wonderful young lyric soprano. He remembered those rehearsals with a frisson even now, half a century later, Rorem then still youthful, vigorous, impossibly handsome, kneeling worshipfully on the floor before him, gently undoing his fly.

No, for that he had a collection of old and some-time lovers, the occasional young rent boy. With his favourites, he allowed himself only the feeling of love, the delicious sensation that rose from the pit of his stomach, made his throat ache, his eyes fill. This was not a sensation that Addison Ormsby had at first aroused in him. Reginald himself was meticulously clean, elegantly clothed, dapper. The boy looked as if he lived on the streets. To the despair of his mother, who had laid out a presentable outfit on his messy bed, Addison had slouched in for his audition with Reginald dressed in torn jeans, a worn tee shirt that shouted "Rage against the machine", and a very wrinkled and ill-fitting plaid shirt. His hair, of a blonde his mother now paid extravagant sums to a hairdresser to restore, was tortured into dreadlocks that fell in his face and over his shoulders. When asked to leave his filthy workboots on the mat at the door, he revealed grimy socks, the big toe of his right foot with its dirty nail poking through a hole. His mother made all the small talk, looking nervously at Addison's feet. After a particularly awkward silence, Reginald invited the boy to sit at the piano. Addison slouched and scowled, held his wrists awkwardly high, and played the *Polonaise Heroïque* at breakneck speed, with far too much pedal. But he also played with astonishing strength and passion. At the end of the piece, while Addison was picking at his nails, and his mother was actually wringing her hands,

Reginald said, "Please describe your practice routine to me."

"I just kind of play until I'm finished," Addison said.

"If you wish to study with me," Reginald told him, "I shall put you on a technical regime, with which you must begin a daily practice of at least two and a half hours, more if I require it. I shall select the pieces for you to work on. Anything of your choosing may be played outside the appointed hours of practice. I have time for you on Tuesdays at 2 p.m. I shall be pleased to write a note to the relevant authorities at your school, excusing your absence. And, Mrs. Ormsby, I would ask that you send the fee for each lesson with Addison in an envelope, in cash."

They began the following Tuesday. For the first few months, there was no tenderness, only technique. Reginald sat beside Addison on the piano bench, and cruelly parodied his hand position. He explained, in metaphor, in detailed description, in demonstration, how the keys must not be hammered, but caressed, pulling from the fingertip to the centre of the palm, reaching the key bed. He pressed his palm against Addison's sweaty lower back, poked a rigid forefinger between his shoulder blades, intolerant of slouch. "The piano is your partner in the dance," Reginald told him. "You must approach it with confidence and grace. You will lead, the piano will follow. Like a good dancer, you want to hold your frame. Otherwise you will be clumsy, uncontrolled, a boy with sweaty palms who treads on his partner's toes."

Unlike most piano students, Addison never apologized, not for wrong notes, or mistaken tempi or forgetting to sit up straight. He responded to corrections with a grunt, if at all. In the beginning, Reginald doubted very much that Addison was practicing as he had been instructed, suspected he was sight-reading the Scarlatti, and probably slouched over the keyboard at home just as he pleased. He did not possess any of the physical traits Reginald found beautiful. He was stocky and compact, like a wrestler, his nose a snub snout, his mouth curiously small and fleshy, an incongruous rosebud. It would not hurt him to bathe more frequently, and as Reginald leaned over his shoulder, writing in a more sensible fingering, he sometimes picked up a strong smell of marijuana.

But he kept coming to his lessons, on time, and at some point, things began to change. The quality of the sound Addison produced grew richer, more controlled. He acquired a true pianissimo, no longer failing to draw sound on every note. He was weaned from over-dependence on the sustaining pedal. He responded to correction with interest. He demonstrated that he had been working on the assigned exercises from Philipp's "Exercises for Independence of the Fingers," though he persisted in calling M. Phillip, "Fill-eep" with an exaggerated squawk. He began to talk with Reginald, about technique, when the lessons were over, asking intelligent questions, even expressing appreciation. One kind of talk led to another. Not yet in love, but pleased with the boy, Reginald offered

cups of delicately perfumed lapsang souchong, served in his beautiful Limoges porcelain, and gold-tipped Sobranie cigarettes.

Reginald had an interest in psychoanalysis. He himself had, for a time, seen the illustrious, irritating, and mysterious Jacques Lacan, and later undergone a Jungian analysis. These experiences had not only handed him the key to his own behaviours, but illuminated his pupils. The peculiar intimacy of teaching music, alone in the studio side by side on a narrow padded bench, the way music touched and drew forth emotions, had led his pupils to treat him very much as one treats one's analyst, bringing him their hidden thoughts, their fears, their dreams, describing the most intimate details of their lives. Like an analyst, Reginald nodded and answered questions with questions. "What do you think that means, then?" "How does that make you feel?" The combination of a ready sympathy and a detached manner was helpful, he thought. He was not surprised they talked to him in this way. He was receptive, intuitive.

Once Addison began to talk, all the unattractive elements of his behaviour and his presentation made sense. Reginald pitied him, understood him, was touched by his trust and his confusion, began to find him lovable, and ended by being in love with him. Addison's troubles began, inevitably, with his mother. Reginald knew her a little, from long before, when as Edith Buford, and then Edith Buford-Ormsby, she had been the second violinist in the Spadina Quartet. This was long before they were renowned, a celebration achieved only after she and the violist had been bumped in favour of a brilliant brother and sister, Chinese students the first violinist had discovered in a master class, and somewhat indiscriminately fucked. Their tone and technique raised the quartet to a whole new level of artistry. Dropped from the Quartet, she lost her confidence, was possessed by a crippling stage-fright, muffed auditions. She languished, took on a number of elementary pupils, and began to have her own children. There were three young Ormsbys. Macauley, the eldest, was a perfect product. He was nice-looking, well-mannered, academically high-achieving; he played the violin with care and style, and was now doing a master's of music performance in Berlin. Edith had hoped for a girl, the second time out, although her relations with her own mother and sister were rather fraught. She swallowed her disappointment, and tried once more, after Addison. The youngest boy, Steele, was also quite perfect, more gregarious and charming than Macauley, and already, at the age of fourteen, the lead cello in the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra, and a straight A student. Both her eldest and her youngest had reaped the benefits of a Steiner education. But Addison, who picked up and dropped a number of different instruments before settling on the piano, had been rebellious and difficult even in elementary school, and was finally expelled from the Steiner high school for smoking dope on the playing field.

Clifford Ormsby, the father, contributed his own ingredients to Addison's psychic mix. An enormously successful entrepreneur, an engineer who had made some brilliant advances in bio-medical technology, he was utterly absorbed in his work, putting in long hours, travelling frequently, and emotionally absent even on family holidays. Reginald had glimpsed him, his face illuminated by the light of his smartphone, dealing with messages during a recital. Clifford saw his role in the family as that of provider, and he provided very well indeed. He left everything else to Edith. She structured and guided the children's lives, judged and dealt out consequences, positive or negative. He paid the bills. He clearly approved of Macauley, and was charmed by Steele's high spirits. Addison baffled and irritated him. He engaged with his middle son as little as possible, and when he spoke to him, his tone was ironically critical. He hoped, for Edith's sake, that the boy would get into some conservatory. If not, he would have to leave home, get himself whatever kind of job waited for those who did not apply themselves, flipping hamburgers, standing behind a cash register in a supermarket.

And while Macauley sailed effortlessly from success to success, never intoxicated, Addison thought, with anything, drugs, drink, girls, music, and Steele was endlessly winning, it was he, Addison, who was the one with real talent. How was he supposed to behave? He could not imitate his brothers. They had taken up both possible versions of the good child, excelled at them. He was the flawed impression. He felt like a ghost, a shadow, in his parents' house. Nothing he did could make them really see him, even when he took up the role of the restless, confrontational bad boy.

Reginald tried to suggest to him that the role of rebel might not be a constructive choice for Addison himself, that if he felt slighted by his parents and his brothers and his teachers, he might be better served by pursuing his authentic self, doing what was good for him. Then Addison revealed what lay beneath the rather banal costume and the display of attitude. He had the heart of a true romantic. Like Goethe and Byron, he was filled with yearning, for beauty and meaning, reverent before the mystery of life. That was the moment that Reginald felt the first stirrings of love for this unlikely object, decided to give him Liszt and Rachmaninoff. Reginald was very strict about how he must learn the pieces, playing them with agonizing slowness, *sans pédale*, hands separately, each piece broken by Reginald's markings into small sections to be practiced one at a time, in order. He did not allow Addison to move on to the next section until the one assigned was perfect, played with the utmost accuracy, memorized. "You must know the music by heart," he said. "Think about what that means." He drew lines where Addison must take a breath. "The music must be sung," he said. "You cannot produce a decent line if you do not breathe, if you run out of breath before the line

has been fully extended.” Addison embraced these instructions, even expressed gratitude. He was in love with this music, he honoured it.

Reginald felt that Addison was ready for the next step. It would be good for him to take on the role of accompanist, to learn to modulate his playing in support of someone else. Given Addison’s vexed relationship with his string-playing brothers and mother, he thought it might be better to pair him with a singer. He thought it would be good for him to be paired with someone gentle and modest, so that he would have to rein himself in, listen attentively. That was when he introduced Addison to Jade Jong.

Jade was the daughter of his piano tuner, himself a person of great interest to Reginald. Jade’s father had once himself been a musician of great promise, a clarinetist who got on the wrong side of the authorities in the Cultural Revolution, just at the moment when his career was blossoming. Suddenly his hard-won mastery of the Western Classical tradition was regarded with suspicion. Pulled from his home by a gang of exuberant youths in the uniform of the Red Guard, he was forced to kneel in a public square. A placard was hung around his neck, labeling him a capitalist running dog. His beautiful Rampone instrument was taken from him and broken into pieces while the self-proclaimed “worker-peasant-soldiers” droned on about the evils of studying anything that hindered socialist transformation. In order to understand the struggles of the peasants and the dignity of labour, he was transported to a remote rural backwater. His delicate hands were damaged by the brutal work they set him to do, the cold and damp of rice-planting knotted his fingers with arthritis. He was separated from his beloved wife, a pediatrician who had trained in Guy’s Hospital in London, for almost three years. She too was sent for re-education through heavy manual labour. With the ascension of Deng Xiaoping, they were able to return to Shanghai, to find each other. After the birth of their son, they managed somehow to get to Canada, where Jade had been born.

Newly arrived, penniless, without connections, there was neither time nor money for Lan to re-qualify as a pediatrician, so she had ended up as a pediatric nurse who often knew more than the specialists. Because he had absolute pitch, Wing took a course on line as a piano technician, then found work with the Remenyi House of Music, who held the contract for the pianos at the Faculty, which is how he met Reginald. Jade’s older brother, as dutiful as Macauley Ormsby, was now in medical school at Western. But Jade had early demonstrated remarkable musicality. In exchange for tuning the Bechstein (a very unequal exchange, for lessons required an hour or more per week, while the piano needed work only once every season), Reginald started the child, his only beginning pupil, on piano lessons. One fall day, she had grown over the summer, her little breasts were starting to sprout, Reginald was trying to get her to bring

out the melody in a Chopin waltz, and he asked her to sing it for him. Her voice astonished him. It was high, clear and pure as spring water, her pitch as accurate as her father's. "Who taught you to sing like that?" he said.

She lowered her eyes, as if the answer were written on the tops of her shoes. "No one. I just like to sing, that's all. I sing along with the radio."

"And you've never joined a choir?"

"At school, I sing in the choir, in the alto section."

"But you're not an alto."

"No, I think I am a soprano, but they don't have enough altos, and I can hit the low notes, so Miss Carrington..."

"And Miss Carrington has never suggested you should have singing lessons?"

"My father does not tune sopranos," she said.

Reginald had pulled his own strings, brought her to sing for the head of Voice at the Faculty, who was now grooming her for her own conservatory auditions. She would have to win a scholarship to go anywhere outside of Toronto. He worried about her. Her voice had a rare beauty, but it was not big. The prestigious schools were looking for future opera stars. Neither Reginald nor her voice teacher could figure out why her sound remained so small. She was herself tiny, it is true, but it was a myth that you had to be the size of Jessye Norman to produce a big sound. She was young, and shy. The moment would come, he felt sure, when the walls came down, when her voice would soar, piercingly sweet, over a full orchestra. Just as he thought it would be good for Addison to temper his big personality to hers, she might expand under his influence.

Reginald was not match-making in any baser sense. He introduced them at one of his soirées, the gatherings he organized for his pupils to perform their best pieces to a select audience of friends and other students. Jade of course was diffident, Addison swaggering, but they agreed to work on some pieces together, Hugo Wolf songs from the *Italienisches Liederbuch*, a nice complement to Addison's work on the Liszt, a good practice for Jade's diction. But if he had been looking at the young people instead of the score, he would have seen the golden arrow flash from Addison's blue eyes to her black ones, seen them gaze upon each other with wonder and reverence.

Jade was very beautiful, though she did not think so, magically exotic for Addison, her creamy skin, her almond eyes, her shining fall of silken black hair, the delicacy of her bones. And she saw past the dreadlocks and the dreadful clothes to a body as perfect as a Greek statue, muscled and compact. The music did the rest, highly coloured, expressive. Poetry spoke words of love beyond their own adolescent eloquence. They discovered that they both had been going to the same high school for four years. They had not met because Addison disdained the music

programme, and because Jade was in the gifted stream, a model student, while he pulled a mediocre performance in the regular college preparatory classes, when he could be bothered to attend. They began to meet every day after school, rehearsing in the empty music classroom. The piano was not very good, an old Heintzman apartment grand that had taken a lot of abuse, but it was kept in tune, and Jade, wisely refraining from revealing the name of her accompanist, had begged the use of it from Miss Carrington.

By November, they were practicing in the demi-twilight. Alone in the dim room, pouring out their hearts in the music and in tender glances and almost accidental brushings and touches, they created an enchanted world. Inhaling the perfume of her, shampoo and soap and fruit-scented lotions, Addison became aware of his own smell. He threw out his disgusting socks, he put his clothes in the laundry hamper every night, he showered every morning, and shaved carefully so she would touch his cheek. He nicked his father's bottle of Habit Rouge. They arranged their transits through the labyrinthine halls of the school so they could pass each other between classes, slip each other notes. Late at night, her parents safely in bed, Jade took the hall phone, which had a very long cord, into her bedroom closet. Turning on the bare bulb that hung from the closet ceiling, having carefully closed both her bedroom and the closet doors, Jade crouched under the ranks of her dresses, whispering to Addison. He of course did not have to crouch in the closet. He had his own cellphone, and had the entirety of his parents' spacious Rosedale basement to himself. His own piano, a Steinway, was there, the rest of the house insulated from his practicing by sound-proof ceiling tiles. He liked to say they'd banished him to the dungeon, but in fact it was not even really underground. The backyard sloped away from a wall of plate glass windows. It ran on a separate HVAC system from the rest of the house, so that he could roll himself a joint or light up his hash pipe while he talked at a normal volume.

In the snug safety of her closet, insulated from Addison's breathtaking physicality, Jade could talk easily and amusingly, sharing anecdotes about her teachers and classmates, asserting her own opinions about music and movies and regaling him with the plots of the nineteenth century novels she favoured. Addison's English grades improved, though he was not consciously stealing her insights. Sometimes he helped her, over the phone, to study for tests, and she helped him with his homework. Since he was on a cellphone, he could sit in front of his computer or his notebooks. It was annoying that his mid-term report card gave his parents so much pleasure, but they increased his allowance, and he spent it on Jade, taking her on the sort of dates that would not alarm her parents, to concerts and recitals, to the Opera, to serious, literary plays, grabbing a bite beforehand. She taught him to read the programme notes, to use chopsticks, he taught

her to lie to her parents, to kiss.

Because no one ever came down into the basement, even the cleaning lady, and because he could sneak in through the sliding doors, Addison had long been used to coming and going as he pleased. Before Jade, he had smuggled his dope-smoking friends, and other girls, in and out in the middle of the night without his parents being the wiser. For Christmas, he gave her a ring, a circle of heavy gold with a carved jade seal. He told her jade was the stone of wisdom and prosperity. The signet was carved with a rather Egyptian looking boat, its sails wide, and the letters A J, backwards. Her fingers were thin, so she wore it on her thumb. If her parents noticed, they said nothing. When Addison gave it to her, he told her that he loved her, would love her forever. He recited a carefully memorized sonnet.

After that, she felt as if they had been secretly married in the cell of some kindly friar. As she grew accustomed to visiting his basement, and became confident that no one would ever interrupt them, she gave him more and more of herself. Without his clothes, Addison was marble white, white as the ivory keys of the piano, his skin was soft and smooth over the bulk of his muscles. The hairs on his legs and arms were golden in the candlelight. She seemed to him a sylph, not really a fleshly creature, but made of moonlight and water. They made love with the same intensity with which they made music, silent though their heads were full of melodies. After, they dressed quickly, and he took her home, kissed her goodnight in the elevator because they did not want to risk being surprised by her parents. Addison knew he must never make her late for her curfew. As they walked down the corridor towards the apartment door, he saw her put on the mask of the good daughter, compliant and self-contained.

March was the month of auditions, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore. Addison went everywhere with his mother, first class plane tickets, hotels with plenty of stars. He refused to cut his hair, but submitted to wearing his new suit, and let his father teach him how to tie a Windsor knot. Jade went to her auditions alone. Reginald felt she should certainly try for Curtis, Peabody, Julliard, hope for a scholarship. He transferred the points on his credit card to obtain her tickets, he phoned old friends in every city to arrange a place for her to stay. Her auditions went well, sometimes there was even a scattering of applause from the jurors, but she despaired when she heard the others, their voices already huge, mature, swelling with confidence and rich, bright sound. Addison's auditions were uneven. He played too fast and too loudly for Curtis, he had an unaccountable memory lapse at Peabody, and became rattled, and consequently rather bumptious in interview. But at Julliard, he played as well as he had ever played in his life. As the last note of the Shostakovich died away, he turned on the bench and looked down to see the jurors nodding at each other.

He got in, Jade did not. Though she was short-listed everywhere, the consensus was that her voice, while lovely, and very promising, was not yet mature. The consolation was that she had been offered not only a place but a full scholarship at Toronto, where she had always expected to go in any case. She would continue her studies with her own beloved teacher, she could continue going to Reginald for coaching. She truly rejoiced in Addison's good fortune, though her heart ached at the thought of their separation. She tried not to say anything pathetic. She did not beg him not to forget her, extracted no promises of faithfulness.

His response confounded not only Jade but everyone around him, including Reginald. She was not coming to New York? Well then, he would not go. His refusal was loud, angry and absolute. He had a place at Toronto, too, of course, though he had not particularly exerted himself for the audition. By now, everyone knew that he and Jade were romantically involved, though her parents' imaginings did not extend to the basement. Reginald felt dismay, and not a little guilt. He knew perfectly well that they were lovers, he was certainly no puritan, but was not convinced of Jade's wisdom in bestowing her pure and ardent heart on such an unreliable recipient. He suspected that, like a swan, she would mate for life. Addison was not a constant star, he was an emotional train-wreck, playing for the moment at Romeo and Juliet. He needed to go to Julliard, needed the humbling and challenge of serious competition if he were to make anything of himself, heal his psyche. As a big fish in a relatively small pond, already reaching the limits, if not of what Reginald had to teach him, then certainly of what he was prepared to learn from Reginald, Addison would surely soon regret his choice, blame poor Jade for it. Like everyone else, he tried to reason with the boy, but found him adamant.

Clifford Ormsby was not accustomed to defeat. He knew better than to think he could persuade his recalcitrant son of anything, but he was adept and inventive in solving problems. Patient, orderly, he assessed the point of weakness, gathered the necessary information, prepared his brief. It was not difficult to figure out that the best time to catch Jade on her own, with the advantage of surprise and unencumbered by the presence of anyone who might interfere, was after her voice lesson. He cleared his schedule, and settled himself in a chair outside the studio, calmly reading the most recent issue of *The Economist*. When the studio door opened, he rose, nodding affably to her teacher, and possessed himself of her elbow. Would she allow him to bend her ear a tick, buy her a cup of coffee? Numbly, unable to think of an excuse, she allowed him to pilot her to the café bar in the newly refurbished Royal Conservatory. The coffee was excellent, which was important to Clifford, who did not have room in his life for the mediocre. He wanted to have privacy and quiet. The café tables were set at a discreet distance from each other, the space

was open to the roof several stories overhead, and conversation drifted up into its heights, muffled and indistinct. And yet it was a familiar space, filled with music students and professors, not intimidating and alien as a hotel bar might have been. He wanted her full attention for what he was about to say. She held her cup tightly between both hands, and would not meet his eyes. "My dear," he said, placing his hands gently, briefly, over her own, "you will wonder why I have waylaid you in this fashion. But I need to ask your help. With Addison."

She nodded, but said nothing.

"Now I am perfectly well aware that you agree with us, with everyone really, that he must and should accept the place Julliard has offered him. And that this mad scheme of giving it up to stay in Toronto is not your wish, but his fantasy, that he believes he must stay here to be with you, that he cannot bear to be parted from you. You may have given some thought to what he is giving up, but you may not be aware how the plans and hopes of so many others are contingent on his. I have a golden opportunity to take up a rather shall we say exalted position for an international firm with its head offices in New York. It was my plan to relocate my family there. We have already secured a place for his little brother in perhaps the premier Steiner school on the continent, where in fact there's a job for Edith, teaching music, and you know she's had rather a slow time of it, trying to get back into the workforce here. We've got an offer in on a really terrific apartment on the East Side, the piano will be no problem, and we've actually already sold our place here, with a closing date in July." She was looking alarmed, and he suspected she was holding back tears.

Still clutching her mug of coffee, looking down into it and addressing her answers to its depths, she spoke carefully, in a pleading tone, as if she had somehow, without willing it, unconsciously, behaved wrongly. "I hope you understand, Mr. Ormsby, that I totally agree that Addison should accept the offer from Julliard? I always knew he would get in, and I never thought I would. I mean, it was clear to me that he would be going to New York and I would be staying here, right from the start. I've told him and told him he's crazy not to go. It's not as if I'm going to forget all about him the minute his plane takes off. And it's only for eight months, right, and then we can see each other in the summer. Maybe I could even come down at Christmas?" She looked up at him, as if for reassurance. Clifford waited out her silence, smiling just a little, giving nothing away. "But it's hopeless. You know how he is, he gets mad, he rages around, he won't listen. I mean, if you and Mrs. Ormsby can't convince him, I don't really see how I can..." She trailed off.

Clifford leaned forward towards her, his forearms resting on the table, palms up. "So much hinges on his going, not only the opportunities for my wife, for his brother, but the very harmony of our family. It is too late,

now, for the rest of us to stay in Toronto, but how can we leave him behind? His mother will fret, any mother would. She will be torn in two. And Addison? He's never managed on his own, and he doesn't have the habits, the frame of mind to adjust to the demands of being someone's roommate. He's pampered, spoiled even, but I can hardly set him up in a luxury apartment with maid service and meals, where he can bang on the piano any time of day or night and not elicit a peep of protest. And what of his development as a pianist, his career? He has made great strides over the past year or so, but without further challenges, he will lose focus, backslide. You don't want to ruin things for so many people, do you, my dear? Surely you can see it's best all around, if he goes?"

She took a sip of her coffee, almost recoiling from the cup, and put it down hastily. It was evidently too hot. "It's not up to me," she said. "I've really tried, Mr. Ormsby, I have, but what can I do?"

"I believe you," he said, injecting his words with just the right amount of sympathy and warmth. He smiled at her, a gentle, sad smile, practiced over the years on employees whose work was unsatisfactory. Then he leaned back, turned his hands over, pushing against the edge of the table, so that her coffee sloshed a little over the rim of the mug. "But you are wrong when you say there is nothing you can do. What keeps Addison here, what makes him dig in his heels and refuse to leave? Only you, you tie him to Toronto, that is all."

She was bewildered, and hurt. "But he..." she could not finish the sentence, say that he loved her. "That is, it's not me, not exactly. It's his feelings, and I can't change those."

"Can't you now? Let us be logical. Addison will not leave you, granted. But if you were to break off your relationship? If you made it clear you no longer wished to be...involved with him? Hmm?"

Now her eyes were bright with tears. "I couldn't do that," she swallowed, tried to keep her voice from rising into a wail. "And even if I told him it was over between us, he would know it wasn't honest, he would see what I was doing."

He frowned impatiently, tapped his finger, just twice, against the table top. "Not if you just mouthed the words, no. You would have to put in a little effort, write him a chilly note, perhaps flirt with some other boy, rub his nose in it a little."

She shook her head. A tear made its way down her cheek, and she did nothing to erase it.

Clifford leaned forward once more, made her look into his eyes. "He has a hot temper, does my son, he is jealous and possessive. It wouldn't take much to make him believe he has a rival, that someone else has risen over him in your affections. Oh you think he's deeply sensitive, that he will read your true feelings. But I know better, trust me. He may seem terribly deep, with sheet music in front of him, but when it comes to

reading people, he's not so perceptive or clever."

Jade gave up trying to argue, and began to cry in earnest, soundlessly, her shoulders shaking, the tears pouring out. Clifford extracted the expertly folded, immaculately clean white handkerchief from his breast pocket, and extended it to her with a sympathetic expression. "I feel dreadful demanding this of you," he said, "but I'm afraid I have no choice. And it really is a demand." She looked up at him fearfully. He held her gaze for a long moment, then looked at his watch. "I've kept you long enough," he said. "Promise me you'll give it some thought?" She nodded. "Good girl. It's for the best, all around. I'm sure your parents would agree. No, no, keep the handkerchief." He pushed back his chair, stood, gave a quick squeeze to her shoulder, and walked off. She watched him till he had passed through the doors to the outside world. He never looked back.

Addison grew moody and distracted. All he could talk about was the steadily worsening situation at home. He was fighting with everyone, not just his parents, but his brothers too. Macauley called him from Berlin, and when he hung up on him, began persecuting him with messages on facebook, diatribes on his ingratitude and stupidity. It was when Jade learned that he had fought with Mr. Stone, actually yelled at him and smashed one of the porcelain teacups by throwing it against the wall, stalked out of his lesson declaring he was never coming back, that she knew she had no choice.

The Senior Prom was announced. Addison of course declared he would not go, pouring scorn on the whole enterprise. This would have been fine with Jade, who was not very comfortable dancing, and did not enjoy being crowded in a hot room, bombarded with the kind of music she hated blasting at full volume. They were in the lunchroom, Addison holding forth about the stupidity of the thing, everyone getting all hyped up about participating in such a cliché of teenage life, when Sandy Brickline turned towards Jade. "What about you, gorgeous, don't you want to have a prom dress and pin on a corsage? Or won't you go unless Addy does?"

Jade had disdained to flirt, it was a point of feminist pride to her, but she knew how it was done. She favoured Sandy with a Mona Lisa smile, opened her eyes wide, and looked into his. "Oh, if the right person asked me..." She gave a little shrug, actually tossed her hair.

"I'd take you, baby, in a heartbeat, so would half the guys at this table."

"Is that an invitation?" she turned her head a little, looked at him sideways.

"You bet," he said. "It's a date?" He sprang up, pulling his wallet from his back pocket, dislodging a condom, which fluttered to the floor. He laughed, stooped to pocket it, "Always be prepared, that's the boy scout motto," he said. He made his way over to the table where the prom

committee was selling tickets, plunked down two twenty dollar bills, turning to make sure she was watching him, grinning at her over his shoulder like an eager dog.

Addison mimed gagging, but he was watching her closely, through narrowed eyes.

“Why not?” she said to him in a challenging voice he had never heard before. “It’s not as if you’re going to ask me.” She tossed her hair again, hoped she wasn’t overusing the gesture.

He tried repeatedly to provoke a fight over it, he demanded, then he wheedled, but she stuck to her guns, cool and determined. Sandy Brickline was a perfect choice. He was contemptible, a show-off, a would-be player. Addison despised him, she despised him herself. He would also, she knew, try to put his hands all over her. After the prom, after the after-party, he tried to get something happening in the back seat of his parents’ car. She submitted just enough to get his hopes up, drawing a firm line when she couldn’t stand it anymore. She didn’t let him get very far—his tongue in her mouth and his hand down her bodice and up her skirt, pressing himself and his hopeful erection against her thigh. Hardly a conquest, but she knew Sandy would broadcast it all over the school, and make up for her failure to put out by exaggeration and outright lies. Addison would hear about it, and what he heard would make her sound like a nymphomaniac.

The Monday after the prom, Addison yanked open the door to her French class, yelled “you fucking whore!” and was sent to the office. After that, he avoided her in the halls, perhaps was skipping school, she never saw him.

Reginald guessed most of this, the falling in love, becoming lovers. He could read it in the way they looked, some change of posture, voice, movements, some special grace that illuminated their smiles. He was worried at first, not for Addison, but for Jade, afraid that once he’d uncovered her mysteries, he would lose interest in her, drop her, hard, and without warning. So he spied on them, took the pulse of their happiness, guilty, apologetic. Then, when Addison was digging in his heels over leaving her, Reginald knew Jade would find a way to make him let go. His anxiety extended itself to the boy. He repented having introduced them to each other, thought himself meddling and lacking in foresight. He did not guess Clifford’s role.

Reginald left Tuesdays at 2 open, and stayed at home, listening, for the intercom, for the telephone, for the doorbell, waiting for Addison to come around, to sulk and backtrack his way through some approximation of an apology. In the last week of June, right on the hour, he was rewarded by the crackling of the intercom. He could not make out what was being said, simply let the visitor in. So sure was he that it was Addison, that he was startled to open the door to Edith, bringing flowers and a replacement for the broken teacup. “Addy is so sorry for his bad...for failing to control

his temper,” she said. “He would have come himself,” this Reginald doubted, “but you know, the end of term and all that, exams, final papers. The movers come on Friday.” And, then, leaning towards him, across the coffee table, for he had invited her in, seated her on the white leather of the couch, made her tea, she half-whispered, dropping her voice as if someone might overhear, “And he’s completely broken up over that girl,” meaning Jade. “He just can’t make sense of her behavior, dumping him like that. Not that I’m surprised, really. The Chinese, I have found, are fearfully ambitious. They do not feel things as we do. A very cold race, I’m sorry to say.” She did not sound sorry at all. “I’m just glad that we are going to New York. Friday can’t come soon enough. I think once we’re settled there, and he’s got the routine of the school to bolster him up, he’ll pull himself together. Find a new girl. He’s not even eighteen yet, you know.”

The replacement teacup, though of a similar pattern, was new and not old. Reginald put it beside one from his own set, and tried to figure out the difference. The writing on the bottom of the cup said “*Fait à la main*,” but he thought the flowers looked too uniform, stenciled, not free-hand. He put it in the cupboard alongside the other cups, then kept taking it out by mistake. Whether he used it or replaced it with one of his own cups, it disturbed him with thoughts of Addison, and his own mistakes. One day in August, instead of putting the cup back on the shelf, he threw it against the wall, then threw the saucer after it.

He did not see Jade all summer. She went, as she always did, to a number of music camps, *Domaine Fourget*, *Inglenook*, and then, on a fellowship, to *Banff*. The Canadians appreciated her voice at least, he thought, heard the promise in it. When it was time for the *Bechstein*’s fall tuning, Reginald asked Wing about his daughter. Jade was doing very well at school, working away, but he could see she was heartbroken over that idiot boy. He had known it could never come to much good, but who could school the young in the ways of the heart? “Perhaps next time,” Wing said, “she will find a boy who will treat her with respect, who will make her feel beautiful and worthy of love. A boy with decent values.”

“A nice Chinese boy?” Reginald teased. “I know, my friend, it is hard to see the girl suffer so. The first heartbreak is the most terrible.” He placed his hand on Wing’s smooth forearm. He permitted himself such little flutterings.

In time Jade came back to him. He thought she was thinner, but she was brave, said nothing of her secret sorrow. She brought him her pieces, for help with the German or the Italian, to note the breathings, to correct the tempi. Bit by bit, ever sympathetic and discreet, he teased it from her, Clifford’s cruel demand, her caving in, the crude mechanism of Sandy. He did not push her to admit her resentment. He waited, it was a kind of penance for his ill-conceived interference.

A snowy February day, shedding her schoolgirl hat, scarf, unbecoming down-filled jacket, her clunky boots, he saw she was agitated. He drew her into the kitchen, made her tea, waited for her to come out with it. “Why does everyone think I have to everlastingly sing these same baroque pieces?” she wailed. “I’m going to enter the Norcop, if I win I get to go for the summer to Vienna, everyone’s saying I should. But you know what he wants me to prep?” He being her voice teacher. “Exultate Jubilate! I was singing that when I was in grade nine!”

“Is there something you would rather sing instead then, dear?” He was thinking of Cherubino, “Voi che sapete.”

“A real aria,” she said, “a stretch, a challenge. The *cabeletto*, from *La Traviata*.”

He thought about the high notes, whether she could reach them. Why not? She would not win by merely showing off her range, offering her promise yet again. He had noticed the slow coming of change into her production, a new dynamic breadth, something rich and moving under the flawless exactitude of her pitch.

“Please, Mr. Stone, could you work with me on it? If I get it really ready, so I can sing it for him, maybe he’ll let me.”

“He doesn’t have to sign off on your application, you know,” Reginald said. “And of course I’m delighted to help you with whatever you wish.”

“I’m just sick to death of it, everybody in the whole world telling me what to do!”

“You can’t stop people from having their little opinions,” he said. Gently. The corollary, that they could not stop her from having hers, from doing what she wanted, hung in the air between them. He did not say it, not so baldly. He said, “Why do you rely on them?”

She moved impatiently, rattled her teacup. “I don’t know, I just always have. People tell me what to do, and I do it.”

“And how does that feel?”

“I hate it!” Passionately. “I hate the way it makes me feel, like a sheep, like I don’t have any will of my own. Half the time I think they’re totally out to lunch. And then I’m so angry. At them, at myself. It makes me feel so ugly.”

“Compliance, or being dominated? Or the feeling of anger?”

“Both! All three. Anger is such a useless emotion.”

“Is it?” He thought of the lines from the *Iliad*, quoted them. “‘Anger, like a plume of smoke, coiled in his belly.’ There are gifts to be drawn from our emotions, my dear, from rage, from suffering. They can be a source of authenticity, and of strength. I have always thought there was more in you. An operatic voice. Not Wagnerian,” he laughed at the thought of her in a helmet with horns, “*bel canto*, of course, but there are great roles, Handel is very much in vogue now, and you could certainly sing Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti.” He smiled at her, a mild and encouraging

smile, but with a challenge lying under it. Her voice had always been limited. Perfect in its way, but an instrument suited for a living room, hardly big enough to fill a concert hall, lost on an operatic stage. A small, still voice, Reginald thought. But if it were a small voice, it was because she was holding herself back, confining herself within walls of her own construction, timidity, crippling modesty, shame, fear. “You need boldness,” he said to her. “To step across the threshold without waiting for someone else to tell you it’s time. Life belongs to the courageous,” Schnabel had said this once, in a master class. He’d stored it away, waiting for the right moment and the right student. “You have brought the score? Come, let’s go to the piano.”

In the audience, Reginald wiped tears from his eyes. She sang about love as a cross and a delight to the heart, about her own folly, and ended on a ringing high note, forever free, *sempre libre*. In that moment what he felt for her could only be described as love. It beat in his ears with the dying note, until his heart corrected him: she was not a boy, however beautiful. But he had felt it, acknowledged it. When she was called forward to the stage to accept the award, he took her hand and lifted it to his lips. The judges praised her purity of tone, the perfection of her legato, the elegant portamento which supported her phrasing, the exquisite way she turned her ornaments. Accepting the award, her eyes searched him out. He was the first she thanked, before her voice teacher, her parents. My favourite teacher, she called him. There was a little scattering of applause, he was urged to stand. “My favourite pupil,” he said. And in that moment, it was true.

ROBERT COOPERMAN'S latest collection is *Little Timothy in Heaven* (March Street Press). His work has appeared in previous issues of *The New Orphic Review*, *Queen's Quarterly* and *The Sewanee Review*.

Robert Cooperman / Four Poems

Theodor Levi, Owner of the Mograbi Theatre, Tel Aviv, During the Anti-Yiddish Riots, 1930

My Mograbi, my lovely Mograbi!
It's like when, pardon the hyperbole,
the Greeks rode through Solomon's Temple:
their mounts defecating on the altar,
the heathens fornicating with prostitutes,
raping the pure daughters of Judea.

I exaggerate a bit, but can you blame me?
Watching these Hebraist louts rampage
like a Munich mob through my theatre:
tossing ink at the screen, throwing
smoke bombs to summon panic and hysteria,
men beaten, women fainting, children sobbing.

And all for what? For what, I ask you?
My showing the first Yiddish talkie!
The Jewish Mother, an honor to screen it:
charming, poignant, starring Seymour Rexite!
Had it been the same exact film in Hebrew,
these Zionist-Huns would've sat gape-mouthed:
that movies on a screen filmy as moth wings
can talk, a miracle sent by *Hashem*,
not the abomination they spit on, now.

Fools, apes, may the Golem crush them,
shove them into his mouth like the Cyclops
and spit out their desecrating bones.

Who's going to pay for the damages?

Not these self-righteous *shtarkers*.
But so help me, I will show the film again
and again and again, even if the British
and the Vice-Mayor forbid me. No one
can push me around, like Tel Aviv
were a shtetl of mud and creaking
wooden hovels helpless against Cossacks.

Rebecca Moskowitz, Ticket Collector
at the Mograbi Theatre
During the Anti-Yiddish Riot: Tel Aviv, 1930

The Hebraists gathered for hours, working
themselves up for a rampage. I was terrified
they'd smash the glass of my box office
that sat naked as a sun bather on a Joppa beach,
and would beat me for daring to collect money
for a movie they considered blasphemous:
in Yiddish, not their sacred Hebrew.

They poured past my booth like a river of rats:
mad to stop the showing of *My Jewish Mother*,
flinging ink at the screen, tossing smoke bombs,
like the Bolsheviks they accuse Yiddishers of being.
And here I thought I'd finally landed among landmen:
all of us Jews loving each other in Tel Aviv.

Ha! Hebraists hate Yiddishers for being socialists
and *shtetl trayf*, for not being Zionists vowing
to live pure as Ruth and Boaz in *Eretz Yisroel*;
the Hebraists forget this is 1930: women can smoke!
Let them wear Joseph's robes and rebuild the Temple.
But let them also mind their own damn business.

What an honor, to screen the first Yiddish talkie,
and starring the great Seymour Rexite!
Such a voice, such an actor, a star in America!
Thank God he didn't attend the opening;
I'd have prayed the ground would swallow me:
Jews no better than Mussolini's black shirts
or the monsters spawning fangs in Germany.

Finally, the police arrived, but little good!
At least the commandant ordered a private
to escort me safely away. The smirking Brit
suggested we stop for a drink; I told him
what he could do with his drink, but a dashing
boychik, a smile like melting chocolate.

Israel Rokeach, Vice-Mayor of Tel Aviv,
Helps Settle the Fight Over the Showing
of a Yiddish Language Talkie, 1930

King Solomon had it easy:
knowing a true mother would never
let her infant be cut in half.
Me, I've got to appease the Hebraists,
who clamor for the purity of Hebrew,
when what they speak is as different
from Deuteronomy as English from Welsh.

Then, there's the Yiddishers,
who claim their tongue's more fitting
for the modern, civilized world.
No one will consider us civilized
until we have our own country
that we'll steal from the Arabs
and fight them forever for this sandlot.
Still, we have to: Europe becoming
a zone of, "No Dogs and Jews allowed,"
though they prefer dogs; and America
warns, we threaten to overrun their cities.

Now we have the first Yiddish talkie:
My Jewish Mother: Yiddishers claiming
it's a landmark of apocalyptic significance;
Hebraists called it an abomination
against the exalted poetry of the Torah,
and tore up the Mograbi Theatre like red Indians.
Of course, the Yiddishers protested,
socialists practiced in dialectical debate:
a fancy term for yakking and yakking.

I agreed with the British commandant
to cancel a second performance.
Talkies? Not as if their dialogue rivals
Shakespeare, who, hateful as he was,
at least gave Shylock great lines.

Colonel Lionel Richmond,
Commandant of the Tel Aviv Police Force,
at the Anti-Yiddish Riot
at the Mograbi Theatre: 1930

At least neither side was armed,
no grenades or Molotov cocktails—
just bottles of ink hurled at the screen,
and some fruit grown rotten in this heat
merciless as the stones of Golgotha.

For a moment, while my men roused
the Hebrew-protesters from the theatre—
at the showing of this Yiddish language film—
I understood the Pilate's exasperation
when Pharisees bellowed for Holy Blood.

But here, Hebrew speakers shouted slogans,
Yiddish ones threatened revenge, then bolted
like panicked horses: the kerfuffle over,

Vice-Mayor Rokeach swore the rioters
had merely been letting off steam; he vouched
for their future peaceful behavior,
if I'd guarantee that a second showing
of *My Jewish Mother* would be canceled.

I was happy to: few enough entertainments
for my men to indulge in, in this cauldron
of sweat and schism, and a plethora of films
in the language of Shakespeare and Kipling
that could be shown for their delight,
and for Jews to learn the tongue of their civilizers.

I suspect they already know English, but refuse
to speak it out of sheer Hebraic mulishness.

TOM WAYMAN'S works of fiction include a novel, *Woodstock Rising* (Dundurn, 2009), a collection of short stories, *Boundary Country* (Thistle-down, 2007), and a collection of novellas, *A Vain Thing* (Turnstone, 2007). Since 1989, he has lived in Winlaw in B.C.'s Slocan Valley. Other tales in a new series of West Kootenay stories he is writing have recently been accepted by *Windsor Review* and *The Nashwaak Review*, among other journals. His most recent book is a collection of poems, *Dirty Snow* (Harbour, 2012), which focuses on the effects of daily life in southwestern B.C. of Canada's participation in the Afghan War.

Respect

Tom Wayman

BE STERN, Duncan Locke's mind prompts him as he advances toward the couple. The rough trail he is following emerges from the woods at a small gravel beach, and he estimates that the pair who stand at the water's edge are in their early twenties: less than half his age. Both are in jeans and T-shirt, she not bad-looking in a stupid sort of way; they are staring across the half-kilometre width of the Lake's West Arm. Duncan catches his left hand floating up to begin to skim the back of his skull, checking the extent of his bald spot. "Leave your hair alone," his wife Anne frequently commands in the midst of their arguments. "It'll disappear soon enough without you fingering it all the time."

Duncan halts where the trail ends amid some scrubby young cottonwood. He can hear the burbling of the little creek that flows alongside the path—the water hardly more than a trickle, even now in late June—and a noisy outboard or Sea-Doo on the Arm. He interlaces his fingers over his stomach to keep his left hand under control. Waits to see if the couple will notice him.

Get the drop on them, Duncan orders himself. He steps forward. "This is private property."

The young people swing around, cow-like expressions pointed at him.

"Huh?" the male responds. His face begins closing down: a man trying to assess, Duncan thinks, whether the situation calls for bluster.

"This is private property. You are trespassing."

"Huh?" the male repeats. "What do you mean?" Stalling for time, Duncan concludes.

"We saw the sign." From the female. Defensive.

"Yeah. There's a 'For Sale' sign by the road. How are we supposed to buy something if we can't look at it." The male.

Duncan unleashes The Glare. The Glare is a courtroom technique he has perfected: an intense, disapproving stare. Reliably intimidating, he

has decided. The trick is to hold your face, your eyes, directed at your opponent as if overcome by negative, censorious thoughts. And to hold it. Hold it longer than seems natural. Duncan finds The Glare especially useful during cross. But he's learned also to swivel around and direct The Glare at the section of the courtroom gallery where the supporters of the other side are seated. Perhaps while opposing counsel is summing up, or just before court convenes. The Glare lets the targets feel he has utter contempt for their wrong-headedness, for their misguided existence. The act seldom fails to discomfit those who have backed the other side. Which is also a service to the client, win or lose.

The clients get The Grin. The Glare and The Grin: the two sides of the coin of courtroom success. The Grin is reassuring, encouraging. It lets Duncan's client understand Duncan is in charge, in control. Useful in examination-in-chief, as he builds his case with his witnesses. After The Grin they are at ease with him; they are certain they are doing great.

Or, he employs The Grin when an opposing witness says something in cross Duncan needs to demolish. A statement he wants the judge to regard as incontestably wrong. Duncan will stop his flow of questions. Drop his pen on the notepad. Or his notes on the lectern. Give an exasperated sigh and head shake. He stalks across the courtroom and pauses in front of the client and the client's friends in the gallery. Silently counts three. Then gives them The Grin. They know he is on top of it. They know they are getting their money's worth. They realize the opposition does not have a chance. After that, Duncan strolls back to the hostile witness, who during this pause has to wait, nervous in the witness box. Duncan then slowly lifts and scans his notes. He is giving the witness time to doubt: "Gee, was what I said really that dumb?" Invariably, Duncan finds hostile witnesses more tractable after a dose of The Glare and The Grin. He has planted the all-important seed of uncertainty. Planted it with the judge. Planted it with the other side. With the opposing lawyer, too.

Of course, any strategy can get shopworn. The technique has started to lose effectiveness with some colleagues, Duncan has to admit. But never with opposing witnesses. Never against a new lawyer locally, or one from out of town. As for the judges, Duncan has determined most are not bright enough to identify any specific courtroom methodology.

Now, on the lakeshore, Duncan keeps his voice grim, strict. "If you attend on this property without the owner's permission, you must be in the company of a real estate agent."

"You the owner?" The male. Trying to sneer. *He sees me as aging, slightly overweight, balding*, Duncan guesses. He regrets he's wearing sloppy gardening clothes, but reminds himself there was no time to change into something more intimidating to this sort of person.

Duncan had been using the electric Weed Eater at the flowerbed by the birches in front. Anne had nagged him for more than a week to attend

to the chore. He had slipped the ear protectors off to go search for more extension cord when he heard a vehicle door slam, and saw the oversized pickup by the road and a couple disappearing down the trail. Immediately he had scolded himself for not having already put his plan into effect,

He fights the urge to smooth his left hand over his hair; instead, he points up the trail. "I'm a neighbor. I keep an eye on this property for the owner. I live across the road."

The middle sentence is not true, so the words have to be pronounced in a strongly declarative mode. Duncan is aware that an untruth forcefully spoken in the midst of truth is invariably convincing. The Strategic Sandwich is his name for the technique. Two firm facts bracketing a shakier one, or a white lie.

He takes another step toward the couple. "I'm also a lawyer. If you're present on this property without the owner's express permission, or unless accompanied by a real estate agent, you can be charged with trespassing. That's a *serious*, serious offense."

Fear on their faces. "We were just looking around," the female whines.

The male, though, starts to scowl. Duncan can almost see the poor devil's brain smoking in its attempt to produce an effective counter. Hostility about to surface. *Your goal is not to win popularity contests*, Duncan almost chants the phrase old Robinson drilled into him through Duncan's year of articling, the watchword that has sustained him through the decades of his own practice. *Your goal is to win cases. To win thereby not personal approval, but respect.*

Dislike, even hatred, is the natural response accorded a winner, Duncan has found. Loathing is a form of respect: no one hates a nobody. Besides, he reminds himself, he doesn't need to care what the losers who pass for lawyers around the Nelson courthouse think. Duncan was in the stacks at the courthouse law library last week when he overheard McFadden talking to his new articling student, Denise something, Denise Quan, about the other lawyers in town. Nice-looking Chinese girl, but too timid by far for trial work. "Then there's Duncan Locke," McFadden was telling her. "Dunc's middle name is 'Canyon.' Nobody knows why. He's not that deep."

Har-har; old joke: Duncan has heard mockery about his middle name his whole life, thanks to his parents. Beatniks, ridiculous premature hippies, especially his mother. *No question I was "The Boy Named Sue" like in the song by Johnny Cash: "Son, I knew you'd have to get tough or die."* Except his parents thought the opposite: that if you gave your offspring a nonconformist name, your child would automatically be hip, cool, with-it, non-aggressive. At least, as the eldest, Duncan has a conventional first name. His sister is Juniper Butte. *Poor Juni had to be "Butt" all through school; no wonder she weirded out. I tried to get her to emigrate here too, to start over. But she wouldn't. Committed and*

discharged from the hospital in Albuquerque five times. During two marriages. Finally back living in Flagstaff.

And Duncan is aware the clerks in the court registry here refer to him as “Fraser”: another hee-haw, referring to the Fraser Canyon, the old route of the Trans-Canada Highway west to Vancouver. “Fraser Canyon Locke” even showed up one day on the courthouse’s daily roster of trials and lawyers. He raised hell with Arlene, the registrar. But nobody was disciplined. Arlene claimed she could not get anyone to admit responsibility for preparing that day’s list.

Two or three times a year Duncan considers whether his middle name might be holding him back from elevation to the bench. At this point in his career, he should be a judge. He has weighed changing his middle name to Frederick. One of the senior partners in the firm in Vancouver where Duncan articulated was named Frederick. That partner became a judge—first, provincial court, later B.C. supreme court. Duncan envied the man’s style: cordial enough, but also removed, austere. A natural aristocrat. Nobody ever called him Fred, either. *Mr. Justice Duncan Locke*. He envisions himself striding up onto the dais as the clerk drones out: “Order in court,” and everybody stands. He can picture himself seated under the great carved coat-of-arms—lion and unicorn on either side of the shield and the knight’s helmet above it—as his former adversaries have to bow and address him as “M’Lord.”

But he realizes that long before he is raised to the bench they will be sniggering behind his back if he becomes Frederick. Everybody practicing in the Kootenays is asked to prepare legal name changes from Debbie to Seagull, or William to Star Seeker. Other people just start calling themselves Osprey or Sasquatch. There’s that kid in the environmental group in the Slocan Valley who insists he be referred to as Dewclaw. Duncan will be viewed as one more failure pathetically attempting to retrofit a personality by adopting a different name.

“This is a beautiful piece of land,” the female offers, attempting to smile ingratiatingly at Duncan. She’s frightened, Duncan observes: a good result. *Keep your expression merciless, unforgetting.*

“Hey, if the owner wants to sell this property, how come he has you kick people off who might wanna buy it?” the male barks. Here’s the expected chest-thumping, Duncan notes. He mentally shakes his head at the male’s predictability, places a mark in the box of an imaginary checklist. On the other hand, Duncan concedes the male’s question in itself is not a bad one. Duncan raises his estimate of the male’s intelligence a notch: up from slug to flatfish, he decides.

“I told you: if you attend on this property without the owner’s permission or accompanied by a Realtor, you’re trespassing. That’s the law.” *Never retreat, never yield.*

The female tugs at the male’s arm. “Guess we better go, hon?” She

sighs. “Nice place. We can come back with an agent?” She starts to walk toward where Duncan waits at the entrance to the path.

The male remains rooted, gazing at Duncan through narrowed eyes. “We’re within our rights to be here,” he pronounces. “It says, ‘For Sale.’ This guy ain’t the owner.”

Defiance. Duncan’s left hand twitches, but he subdues the urge. *Do nothing,* he instructs himself. *She’ll handle him.*

The female is alongside Duncan now. She turns around.

“It’s okay? Honey? We’ll come another time?” She swivels to flash a tight smile at Duncan: a pleaser’s appeal. Then back at her husband/boyfriend. “We’re supposed to be at your mother’s at four anyway. To pick up Jason?” An additional grimace shot toward Duncan. “We’ll be late as it is.” She steps around Duncan toward the trail.

The male lumbers into motion, angry look fixed on Duncan. *It is fine if you are not their favorite person,* he reminds himself. Duncan waits while the male steps around him, begins to follow the female along the path. By bringing up the rear, Duncan is escorting them off the property.

He recalls Lisa’s advice, offered to him one afternoon during the past month when he had been complaining that at times he believes he is the most detested man on the West Arm. He had been accosted in the produce section at Safeway by the plaintiff in a civil suit over a water line. Duncan’s client owned a well near Six Mile he no longer wanted to be the water source for a neighbor. The latter had no easement or anything in writing: a slam-dunk case. But during the plaintiff’s spit-spraying harangue in the supermarket he had mentioned the names of several other losers Duncan had bested on behalf of clients in the past and insisted they all had nothing but contempt for Duncan. He had refused to be drawn in, and afterwards had torn a strip off the plaintiff’s lawyer. *Rules are rules, and if your client chooses to get in the game he can’t start attacking officers of the court once it looks like he’s not going to win.* Duncan, despite himself, had been bothered by the plaintiff’s vehemence, however. He thought briefly of mentioning something to the RCMP in Nelson, just in case.

Lisa put the incident in perspective. She has that way of insisting he open up about himself. His wife Anne never demands he talk about what he feels. Duncan finds Lisa’s questions both scary and exhilarating. When she prods him relentlessly to reveal himself, she proves she *cares* about him, unlike his wife. Lisa can be a challenge, but she behaves as though she is truly fascinated by what makes him tick. For instance, her reaction to his confession of being widely hated. Her eyes had inspected him in silence for a moment. Then her response, so unexpected: “Hey, get *into* it.”

She is so damn *right*, Duncan had responded to himself. Why not *enjoy* the role? His mood of self-pity had vanished and he burst out laughing with relief. They had been up in her bedroom, propped by pillows

leaning against the bed's headboard, sipping Lisa's favorite after-sex cooling-out drink: ice water with a slice of lemon. The more Duncan had considered her idea of how to deal with the inevitable consequence of his being a winner, the more pleased he felt. He put down his glass, bent across, and kissed her about a hundred times all over her face. Her squeals and wriggles of protest got him hard again. His hand slipped into her open shirt and identified that her nipples had hardened, too. Lisa likes to wear an item of clothing—usually a shirt—when they make love; being partially clothed is more of a turn on for her than nudity, she claims. On this occasion she purred: “Back off, buster. I’ve got an appointment in fifteen minutes.” But Duncan could see her eyes shining with the fierce soft light he recognized by now as her signal of desire. About two seconds later they had both slid down horizontal in the bed, and he was inside her.

Sex with Anne is entirely different. Lisa is open about what she prefers, is demanding sometimes even in the heat of passion—“Faster; slower; not so rough.” Yet she appears to genuinely enjoy the act. Anne mostly submits to sex; her climactic commentary is: “No; no; no,” which to Duncan sums up her deepest attitude toward their once- or twice-a-month lovemaking.

Duncan began his affair with Lisa three months before when he was referred for physio. She is one of two physiotherapists he is aware of along the West Arm who have converted parts of their homes into clinics, the way other women on this stretch from Nelson to the ferry landing at Balfour operate hairdressing salons in their houses. Duncan had twisted his back forking a load of manure for Anne's gardens out of a neighbor's barn. His doctor had suggested physio, and Duncan remembered he had processed Lisa's conveyancing when she bought her property four years ago. He had admired her energy when they spoke in his office; she was in her forties, and listed her status on the documents as divorced. A boyfriend didn't seem to be in the picture.

Duncan's admiration trebled at her clinic as she discussed his diagnosis, examined him, and applied ultrasound. As far as Duncan can perceive, Lisa is happy with her job, with herself. Anne, on the other hand, qualifies as a lost soul, incapable of deciding what gives her pleasure in life or what does not. After twenty-eight years of marriage, she still is not sure who she is. She does occasional relief shifts at the Nelson museum, and has a potter's wheel she sometimes uses in a basement room he had built for her when she became interested in ceramics. But he regards her as a chronic complainer, upset most about the hours he puts in at his practice, even though these hours are what makes their lifestyle possible. During their frequent disagreements, often initiated by some comment of hers about how little time he devotes to being at home, he urges her to discover some occupation or activity that she finds meaningful.

Lisa is the exact opposite: she delights in each aspect of being alive,

sex not the least of these. At her clinic she often wears revealing tops: Duncan found her cleavage almost unbearably tantalizing before they started adding a sexual dimension to their weekly medical trysts. He considered it odd at the beginning that she wanted her deeply-cut lace brassiere off but her shirt left on as they tussled upstairs on her double bed. Yet her appetite for sex was such that he quickly adjusted to her whims. The first time she had taken him by mouth, he tried to stop her before he came because Anne intensely dislikes that experience. Lisa lifted her face up from what she was doing, grinned, shifted over to kiss him, then went back to her task.

Lisa is not Duncan's first affair. He once calculated his success rate as one such episode, usually short-lived, every three years. A client, a friendly witness, a museum colleague of Anne's. He may have put on a little weight, but he is aware his professional success, financial status, boyish looks and sandy hair are definitely a combination women find appealing.

During the days he does not see Lisa, far too often he imagines being with her. The relationship is new, he reasons, so no surprise that he regards Lisa at present as overwhelmingly attractive. He has postponed thinking about whether his excitement at being around her means he wants his marriage to terminate. *Whatever happens, enjoy your time with Lisa*, he tells himself. *You've earned it.*

When the couple and Duncan reach the road, Duncan notes that the absurdly huge pickup is new. Vehicle loan, he calculates, maybe a mortgage, looking for land to put a house or trailer on. Likely the couple owe as well on a snowmobile and power boat, perhaps an ATV, too. They must have relatively good-paying jobs, or at least the male does: telephone company or Nelson City or a journeyman of some sort at Kalesnikoff's sawmill or in the Teck smelter down at Trail.

"Sorry we looked around without permission," the female declares, a little breathlessly, from where she has paused by the passenger door. "You wouldn't happen to know what the owner wants for it, do you?"

The male is leaning on the hood beside her. Duncan fields an inquiring look from him also. Time to shift gears, he resolves.

"If *you* owned this property," Duncan says, his voice now a pleasant *I'm-on-your-side*, "you'd *want* me to find out who was wandering around on it when you were absent." He produces The Grin, then names a figure he guesses is more than they can afford, but not so large as to be out of the question. He can see the recoil in their eyes.

If they check with the real estate outfit, Duncan cautions himself, they'll discover the number is much lower. *Cover yourself.* "I could be wrong. That's what I heard."

He decides to launch The Downer: you introduce, then attach, a negative aura to your opponent's idea or position. "You folks aiming to build? If you acquire some property, I mean?"

“Yep,” from the male.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this,” Duncan begins. Drops his voice to indicate a confidence. “You seem nice folks, though.” Stern again: “Of course you shouldn’t be on anybody’s land without permission.” Shifts to The Grin. Then a pause, as if wrestling with conscience. He wrinkles his forehead worriedly: should he betray the owner? Face smoothes: decision made in their favor. Leans closer toward them. “At least two previous buyers have been burned by this property.”

“Why?” “What is it?” The male and the female in unison. Hook, line, and now the sinker.

“Flood plain. You aren’t allowed to build here. Folks buy this land, get their house plans together, go to the district office for their building permit. *Bam*: permit refused.”

More recoil evident. The male initially disbelieving, of course, but the concept percolating in. “Flood plain?”

“What’s a flood plain, hon?” The female.

“Government says certain areas are unsafe to construct on. The property might flood every hundred years.” Stupid young males, ever a font of practical knowledge: Duncan checks off another square on his phantom checklist.

“Oh. I guess that settles it.” The eternally trustful little woman.

“Maybe. Don’t look to me like that creek could flood. We’re about at the end of the June rise, and look at it: I’ve seen horses piss more than that. The West Arm can’t flood, neither. That’s what the dams make sure don’t happen.”

“It’s been declared flood plain,” Duncan responds, his voice cheery. *Don’t allow them to associate the negative aura with yourself.* “At least, as far as I know. Still, it’s a good piece of land. If you buy it, you can come up summers and camp on it. You have kids? Your kids will love it. Or you could hold the property for investment. Land prices along the West Arm are only going to rise.”

“Not if you can’t build.” The male: a genius.

“You’re right about that,” Duncan almost purrs. “But it *is* waterfront. Great holiday spot. Cool out by the lake.”

A snort of derision from the male. *Let them have their imagined victory, no matter how tiny, in defeat.*

I need to get my plan in gear fast, Duncan thinks. Anne asks him why he doesn’t simply buy the land if he wants to keep their privacy. And he does want to, and more: having their own beach has been a real plus, especially since they didn’t have to pay for it. He recalls several memorable picnics at the gravel beach with friends, and even with just Anne and him. Someone building on this property—cutting a driveway in, then clearing a site and constructing a house—would amount to a definite reduction in their quality of life: more traffic and more noise,

besides losing their personal beach.

Yet they knew some day old Ernie would try to sell his place. Duncan has assured Anne he can chase off anybody interested in purchasing it, which is infinitely cheaper than handing Ernie the bag of gold he insists his crummy acre and a half is worth. But, Duncan muses, the male here is capable—remotely—of blundering into the land title office or district office and asking a few too many questions.

Duncan devised his strategy three weeks ago, the moment Ernie's "For Sale" sign appeared across the road. Events could not have been more fortuitous. Duncan has been smoothing over Peter Geddes' indiscretions. Geddes and three of the other boys in the district planning office were gambling online on their work computers during office hours, particularly on Geddes' computer. Some site where you could bet on horse races, and NFL football. Not only was that activity not too bright. An audit revealed that Geddes had been dipping into district funds to place some of the bets. Incredibly dumb. Geddes so far had always restored the funds on pay day, but no question this was breach of trust.

When the auditor notified the Mounties, Geddes denied everything, but eventually hired Duncan. The deal Duncan has proposed is early retirement for Peter—not quite a golden handshake, but not dismissal either—and letters of reprimand for the rest. Everybody but Peter to undergo counseling for gambling addiction. The arrangement saves expense and embarrassment for all parties. He nearly has the district and the union and the Crown convinced. Almost, but not quite. So Geddes and the others are still vulnerable. Geddes will owe him big, too, when everybody signs off on the deal.

Duncan's plan is to breathe in Peter's ear a simple request, achievable before he's officially out of there. But until today, nobody has showed up to gawk at the land. Possibly it's a slow year for real estate, Duncan decides. Or, the "For Sale" sign has drawn fewer looky-loos because the property is on a side road rather than right on the Nelson-Balfour highway.

Geddes couldn't care less, Duncan is sure, if another lakeside lot is flagged as flood-prone, unsafe for habitation. Duncan can offer to discount his bill 10 per cent as a token of appreciation. *Get on the phone the instant young Mr. Macho and his consort depart*, Duncan admonishes himself. *This should have been nailed down tight the day Ernie listed the property.*

In a sense, the whole exercise will be doing the district a favor, Duncan reasons. The less people who live right on the Arm, the less chance of sewage pollution, not to mention shoreline degradation due to tree removal for building sites.

Duncan knows from case law that flood plain designations are pretty arbitrary. A partner he'd had for a few years in the Nineties had represented a property owner suing the district for not having so designated his land,

and also a couple suing because their land *was* so designated. Testimony in both disputes showed that the engineers' calculations can be based on rather far-fetched predictions. Not that Ernie would sue: the old man is too much of a penny pincher, Duncan is certain, to do anything but complain.

Duncan has revealed his scheme to both Anne and Lisa. Anne had shaken her head. "Do whatever you want to," she had said. "But I still don't understand why we don't just buy the property. You've got the money." He started to explain again but she had cut him off: "I don't want to hear it."

Lisa, characteristically, had laughed when he outlined his strategy. "You're a clever rascal, Mr. Locke," she had said, her eyes twinkling. "I hope you don't outsmart yourself. Flood plain," she chuckled, as if she admired the audacity of his idea.

"We better get going. Hey, man, thanks for the tip." The male's voice is difficult for Duncan to read—he's unsure if the male is convinced. *That call to Peter Geddes is overdue regardless*, Duncan lectures himself. *It may be Saturday but you have his home number.*

"Perhaps we'll see you again," the female says, opening the truck door.

"Nice meeting you two," Duncan uses a sincere tone. "Look me up if you need a lawyer. My office handles property conveyancing. Name is Duncan Locke. I'd give you my card, but I don't have any on me. I'm in the Nelson phonebook, though, under 'Lawyers': Locke with an 'e'." *Stick out your hand to the male.*

"An 'e'?"

What a half-wit. "L-o-c-k-e: Locke."

An arm reaches toward his hand. "Don Barsotti. We'll keep you in mind."

Shake on it, sucker. The pickup's tires spin gravel as it lurches from the shoulder onto the road, pulls a U-turn. Duncan watches the vehicle disappear.

Why did I fail to contact Geddes the same afternoon the sign was posted? Duncan chastises himself as he climbs his driveway. A good lawyer, he knows, cannot be reluctant to make such phone calls. He initiates calls like this constantly, ones that make happen what he wants to happen. To neglect to place even one such call, he reminds himself, is to fumble, is the road to disaster.

Duncan recognizes he has long had a twinge of aversion to using the phone, a failing that he has worked fiercely to overcome. He prefers to observe in person the reaction to what he's saying, which lets him in turn fine-tune his response. Or is the Peter Geddes business particularly difficult, he wonders, because he has a stake in the outcome? He can imagine Geddes refusing, claiming he doesn't want to get into more trouble

if anyone finds out. Duncan knows he needs to have his rebuttals ready for that. Worst-case scenario, however, like Anne says he can easily pay Ernie. But why, if there is a more cost-effective way?

He reviews other calls he dreads: phoning his parents, for example. Yet despite the distaste he experiences as he dials their apartment in Phoenix, and his relief when he finally hangs up, he does place the call. His parents complain that Juniper never phones. Duncan isn't surprised. But tough phone calls are one means by which he earns his money. They helped get him where he is.

Duncan removes his gardening shoes at the front door of the house, and passes through the cool rooms to his study. He sits at his desk. Anne is off somewhere—a summer school pottery class? He is grateful that she won't have witnessed the couple's arrival and him charging off after them. Anne can put two and two together, sometimes. His left hand lifts to allow his fingers to inspect the boundaries of the bare patch at the rear of his skull.

Not that Juni or he *owe* their parents any calls, Duncan reflects. Neither their mother nor father was overendowed with parenting skills. Duncan remembers coming down to breakfast one morning and his mother starting in on him again at the table about his demeanor. He was fourteen. She had just announced that as a special treat the whole family was going to attend a concert that night by some pathetic folksinger. He was pouring cereal when she leaped up, strode around the table and grabbed him by both ears. She started jerking his head from side to side, left to right to left. "Why...(yank)...can't...(yank)...you *ever*...(yank)...look...(yank) ...*happy*?" His sister gaped bug-eyed, open-mouthed, across the table. His father was not yet out of bed.

Small wonder he wasn't interested in having children, as he had told Anne years before. What if, despite his best intentions, he inflicted that sort of disrespect on their kids?

Duncan pulls the Geddes files from his attaché case, finds the home contact information. He catches himself tracing the outline of the hairless area on his head, picks up the cell, and punches the numbers. "Is Peter there?"

RAYMOND J. BARRY is currently raising three of his four children (one grown) and playing the role of Arlo in the FX Cable TV series, *Justified*. Chicago Plays, a branch of Act One Book Stores, published his anthology, *Mother's Son and Other Plays*. Of his eighty performances in New York stage productions and some fifty films, his favorite roles are Mr. Kovic, Tom Cruise's father, in Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, secondly, a bereaved father in Tim Robbins' *Dead Man Walking* and thirdly, the alleged second gunman who shot President Kennedy in Neil Burger's *Interview with the Assassin*. Mr. Barry's website is raymondjbarry.org.

Fired Help

Raymond J. Barry

TELEVISION BLARES its usual noise—another politician talking about the American people as if he cares; the falseness of his voice similar to Barbara's flashy, millionaire, car-salesman father, who died a year ago at the age of ninety-four. The volume is raised too high, having been blasting for the past five hours, since she awoke this morning. Actually the television has been playing since yesterday and all through the night. It has been on so long that she is numb to its sound that satisfies her need for human contact. That is the case now. Its pacifying images calm her nerves.

An odd smell in the living room.

"Damn her!"

The cap has been left off the cleaning fluid bottle on the dining room table. For years Barbara has left caps off bottles, but when the maid commits the same offense, it infuriates her. "Stupid, dumb woman;" the inconvenience of having to walk with her sore leg to the bottle of cleaning fluid, place its cap on, fasten it securely and walk again into the kitchen to place it on its proper shelf, all the time mumbling, "Stupid woman, too dumb to know better;" toxic fumes of cleaning fluid, a cancer-producing carcinogen, no less. What is the stupid immigrant attempting to do, compromise Barbara's health? Wait till she returns. A good scolding will set Maria straight. Fumes of cleaning fluid could poison both her and her cat—a legitimate reason for firing the maid.

Another dosage of pills? Barbara's leg still hurts. She must have her painkillers for her injured leg. Any normal person would take more pills for a throbbing leg. Pain requires pills. She must have her pills. With the maid gone on an errand, she is alone and free to do as she pleases, free to imbibe a glass of water together with two tablets, part of a meager supply she hid before her last trip to the hospital.

Standing now, Barbara's leg still hurts. She feels her way along the

hallway and enters the kitchen, her bent torso shuffling across the floor's accumulation of dust and dirt, past the textured, paint-peeled walls of the living room that reveal gray-flecked blotches of the original plaster beneath, past signs of neglect and subtle hints of resigned defeat; a fallen, broken jar here, a filled ashtray there, a worn shoe lying on the rug without its mate and a mess of crumbs on the scarred, wooden coffee table not wiped off for days. Mountains of garbage bags and litter surround her on all sides; piles of old newspapers, boxes, dirty dishes on the floor, clothing thrown in heaps, shoes, furniture, pillows, cups with pencils in them, plastic pill containers, some sort of "Energizer" tool left in its wrapper, coins dropped on the floor, nondescript papers, a clock, a dirty towel, a piece of cloth strewn onto the pile, an empty cardboard box, a vacuum cleaner that hasn't served its purpose for years and paper bags whose contents have been partially eaten and left in their flimsy containers.

Her apartment reeks of apathy, sending an ominous message of imminent death, its owner's lack of concern obvious to anyone privy to its view. This is not a habitat for the living, but rather a hovel designed for that moment of expiration, that last breath when all chaos will end and a new adventure will commence. The air is gone from her life and a forest of garbage has taken its place, complete with valleys and mountains overlaid by a stench of death. This room is a coffin and not a living space, an environment that describes the final moments of life longing for an exit. The word "suicide" has entered Barbara's thoughts so often that its meaning has become palpable by the mere sight of the hovel in which she exists, one discordant piece of throwaway upon another, one wrinkled pair of dirty underwear after another dropped onto the floor to collect layers of dust. She has lived in this swill for twenty-nine years, but the end is near. Hope is gone. The burden of her weight has become her prison. A few meager connections with the world remain, weekly sessions with her therapist, telephone calls to her best friend Faxi, and the prospect of another back surgery that promises a future in an otherwise uneventful existence. Walking more than a few steps under the burden of her alleged injured leg is impossible, let alone cleaning or lifting piles of debris from her floor. At age fifty-eight she is too old to care, too old to heal. A point of no return has arrived when the garbage of life has buried a woman old before her time, slowly suffocating the oxygen in her soul.

Barbara sidles into the kitchen where under more normal circumstances the lady of the house might be fetching a harmless glass of water to quench her thirst, an innocent enough purpose for a trip to the kitchen in the presence of a spying maid or her vigilant son who might be visiting. She has hidden that vial behind the refrigerator to test her resolve to rid herself of her addiction. But now choice is out of the question. Barbara must have her pills before Maria returns; this one last time, one last dose for recreational purposes only.

Maneuvering with the aid of the wall toward the kitchen, two pills will do and the faucet turned on—a glass, this one dirty, not having washed the dishes for months on end—filling it with water from the tap, sipping a taste, and back to the couch with a half-filled vial of painkillers to which she is enslaved; those dear little pills that give her life purpose, encouraging her through her loneliness, eating up the hours of the day. At times she is interested for a moment or two, in some random comment from the television about the world's corruption. Finally back to the couch, swallowing her pills and drinking water from a dirty glass. Imagined voices celebrate her consumption of pills, applauding her common sense to swallow those little capsules, anything to feel better, anything to numb the pain of her leg, the pain of her heart, the pain of how useless her life has become and the burden of her weight.

"I do not know," she answers a question that hasn't been asked. Barbara keeps her own company with answers to unasked questions. The other party is her "other self," talking to her addicted self. Which self is in charge vacillates day and night. Always on the couch, submerged in the effects of painkillers, night and day are indistinguishable. Her activity amounts to nothing. Barbara does nothing. Not that the need for action is absent. Surely the need is there, but desperation for another pill when the last one loses its effect is the whole of it.

Meanwhile it is done. The ache of her leg will be soothed soon enough, and, oh, yes, her back, a fine excuse and not a matter of choice. Pain is pain and must be dealt with humanely. Medicine for pain is a modern-day comfort available to anyone in a world too complex for sustained sobriety, especially with a sore leg and an aching back; mustn't forget her back.

Reclining now on two pillows laid on the arm of the couch, Barbara permits full view of her thighs and enlarged belly; her legs similar to rhinoceros legs, top-heavy and laden with layers of fat. Her calves are those of a rhino as well, thick and muscular from years of carrying excessive flesh above her knees. It is an unwieldy form she carries upon those pillars, awkward in its presentation, devoid of feminine charm. On the other hand, she has a mind, astute and perceptive, bold and innovative, often cunning in its approach to the financial obligations she skillfully avoids. Barbara is a wily fox when it comes to paying her share. She hasn't paid her taxes in years, some forty thousand dollars. Oliver will pay it, such a good boy to his mother.

Barbara's eyes close. Her head nods downward in her euphoric state, familiar relaxation, ease of mind that makes her decision to fire the maid justified. Sure of her power within the boundaries of her apartment where her wishes must be obeyed, her solitude must be maintained. A maid is not required. Barbara will do the cleaning, but only when necessary. Maria will be let go, sent on her miserable way followed by her son's inevitable

scolding. Meanwhile Barbara must have her pills. Oliver will understand in time; no need for a spy in her home, watching her every move.

* * *

The front door opens and Maria enters after a successful outing.

“I buy your pens and notebooks, ma’am” she says. “A few stores didn’t have them but I find a place that did,” she states proudly, smiling, expecting to be thanked for her efforts.

From beneath drooped eyelids Barbara prepares to let the axe drop. Silence overlays the room. Maria has seen that expression before from past employers, that contemptuous look that smacks of imbalanced power in the hands of the rich. Class warfare has begun. Barbara, who for the most part has lost touch with her strengths, suddenly has an insurmountable resource of intelligence and education, so useful for controlling a servant who can barely speak the language. Her “helper” grovels before her gaze, judged by a white woman who doesn’t lift a finger to clean the daily mess she leaves behind. Barbara waits before announcing Maria’s termination, watching closely a servant groveling in a white woman’s home.

“I hope these are what you need,” Maria states quietly, apologetically shifting her body while waiting for a response. Tension is thick in the room. Barbara enjoys her effect on the humble woman. She hasn’t felt such power over another person since she was a slim, attractive woman in her thirties, when her womanly charms and curvaceous body melted the wills of men. She often had her way during those years, before she gained one hundred pounds of fat. The strength of her youth has returned, while this helpless housemaid stands humbly before her, hoping for a response to an errand well done.

Maria recognizes immediately a familiar plight that all immigrants must endure; integration into an unforgiving, foreign society that offers her children a better life. This woman before her is her boss, her lifeline to having a barely sustainable income that will allow for a roof over her head and food for her children; a white woman, who is incapable of picking up her leftovers after stuffing her stomach with free microwave dinners provided by a social service free of charge. Barbara plays a nasty power game that Maria cannot win. Maria has seen power of the white race at play—best to remain silent and wait for the inevitable. Fear is in the air, predator and prey in a game of survival.

“Put them on the table, would you?” Barbara says.

“Yes, ma’am,” Maria replies, and does as instructed, then moves toward the bedroom to straighten out Barbara’s unmade bed. Barbara does not make her bed. That is left to the hired help. Allow Maria to make the bed and then fire her seems the best plan. A few moments pass. The bed must be made by now; time to lower the boom, time to tell her to go. Maria passes through the living room. Barbara sits on her couch, longing to be alone.

“Maria,” Barbara calls.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“You left the cap off the cleaning fluid. The fumes have made me very ill. I won’t need your service anymore. You may go. You will be paid by my son for the entire day.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Maria says, mumbling something in Spanish under her breath. The mother of two gathers her things and leaves the apartment.

Barbara’s bed is made. Her new notebooks and pens are resting on the table, her tools for writing. Barbara feels her old strength return after firing her maid. She is boss within these four walls. That will always be the case. Supporting her habit is really the issue and not the cap left off the cleaning-fluid bottle. The maid is an imposition upon a drug addict’s privacy. Barbara is the drug addict; Maria the spy, checking on Barbara’s sobriety to report to her son. They play their roles well. But Barbara will have her way and Oliver will understand in time.

The phone rings. It is Oliver, scolding her for firing the maid. The agency must have called already. He is furious.

“If you’re serious about losing weight and getting better, really serious, you can’t fire people who are there to help you! Do you understand that, mom?”

“Yes, Oliver.”

“Maria came highly recommended from the agency and Medicare also recommended her. These people are difficult to find. You can’t fire them and think they can be replaced, because they can’t. Do you get it, ma?”

“Yes, Oliver.”

“You’re in trouble, mom. Don’t you see that? You don’t clean your apartment. When the kitty-litter is dirty, you don’t bother to change it, for God’s sake! Why did you fire her?”

“She left the cap off the cleaning fluid and the fumes permeated the entire apartment!” Barbara yells back. “I got sick.”

“And that’s why you fired her?”

“Well, wouldn’t you get rid of her?”

“Look, mom, I’m going to rehire the maid and I don’t want you to interfere with that. That’s all there is to it. Take stock of yourself, for God’s sake. Look at yourself and ask what you see. You could work again if you would take some initiative. Don’t be so lazy, mom. It’s killing you. I’m going to rehire Maria and don’t you get in the way of that!”

For a moment Barbara closes her eyes after her son hangs up, too lazy to be productive, too frightened to work at her profession, visualizing herself a professor at New York Law School, speaking to a room of students, much too fat for public view, imagining her obese body foolishly waddling across a classroom floor. Her students would surely ridicule her ungainly walk. Maybe her leg will recover; perhaps in the next few

days. But, no, her leg is too damaged; something refuses to heal, a tendon or a damaged muscle; it hurts whenever she puts weight on it—restricted to the apartment day after day, lying on her couch week after week, month after month. Her sore leg is the cause of her sedentary existence, along with her unattractiveness to men who once found her so appealing. Shame is part of it, too.

A barrage of advertisements vomit from the television at a frantic pace: “Drink Milk for Health” type slogans, featuring an endless stream of spokesmen with teeth like Chiclets and neatly combed hair. An exuberant talk-show host’s strident voice careens off the walls of her living room, flattering an aged actor from fifties’ gladiator films with rave reviews of films that the general public has long forgotten. He pleads a case for the actor’s place in the history of American film, suggesting he’s the forerunner of the modern-day, muscle-bound ‘action hero’ and citing numerous Hercules movies in which he’d starred. The would-be movie star rambles endlessly about the highlights of his forgotten film career. Barbara remembers him from her youth, guessing he has to be eighty, but the surprisingly high pitch of the man’s voice doesn’t match his basso tone she remembers as a teenage fan. His performances must have been dubbed. She takes special note of the form-fit, silk number the old body builder wears to firm up his sagging chest, with pants too tight around his flattened buttocks and crotch. His balls are large sacks that protrude when he stands in full view, similar to the swollen groins of ballet dancers while they flit about the stage. His dyed brown hair contrasts too severely with the texture of his aged skin, and worst of all, his incessant chatter is mostly centered on himself, citing numerous health secrets that have maintained his physique well into his supposed ‘middle-age,’ insisting at one point that he can still play the same gladiator hero today, if some generous producer would only give him a chance—such longing in his voice. Surely he can do what Schwarzenegger is doing, he promises hopefully, implying they are in competition.

“Nothing much has changed in my life,” he claims. “Weight-lifting keeps me in shape,” flexing his biceps mid-sentence. “I’m always reading one thing or another to keep myself mentally fit!”

Longevity seems much too important to this fragile soul. Barbara has had enough of him and his jaunty host to last for the day. Eyelids drop to half-mast. What is happening? Where is she? Of course, this ocean of debris is her apartment, providing a safe cocoon to shield her from the world. Cleaning the mess before her might provide hope for the future, the act of cleaning, some hope. Hope is enough to survive, along with the property her father gave her, providing income with its rental fee, and, oh, yes, this leather couch that has been her nest for the last dozen years. Her leg hurts again. Her heart is palpitating, sign of an imminent heart attack; short of breath and a slight pain in her heart, possibly dying and

afraid to take action.

Barbara's reflection in a distant mirror; the horror of what she sees—turning away from her image, hands busy now, shuffling plastic bottles and old letters into a garbage bag. A piece of cloth and a pile of magazines have overused their stay; into the plastic bag as well, followed by the wish to throw every piece of refuse, including her oversized body, off the balcony. Yes, the balcony is a likely place to venture, to lean over its rail too far and to splatter upon the cement pavement below, yes, a viable temptation. The balcony looms before her outside the terrace door. "I could," she says, as the door to the balcony is opened, releasing a waft of fresh air into the living room, cutting through the thick kitty litter smell.

Barbara's breaths come in short pants. How important life is. Or is it important? Why is she on this balcony? Violent outbursts are common in this apartment, throwing objects against walls and such, but this time hurling herself off the balcony looms as a foreboding possibility, like a piece of human garbage thrown to the street, the finality of such an act, the courage it would take. Her cat responds with an expectant look, as if the ceiling is falling. Barbara's lids almost close. Voices tell her not to jump. There are numerous useless things to do, telephone calls to make, voices to hear, television to watch, food to eat, a couch upon which to rest, a vile mess of garbage to observe. Those piles transform into a bundle of moving reptiles, shiny and wet with their jaws open, hungry for their next meal. They smell Barbara. They will devour her, tear her round, fleshy body to shreds, leaving nothing but her head, lying on the street below and calling for her son. A head severed from its body and a few bones is enough to show for a life destroyed by reptiles. The building's weight drags her downward, her body pinned by brick and mortar. No, people must not see her body, her disgusting, overweight body. Voices from the television; chills again. Why is she cold? It's warm but she has chills. A person to communicate to now, today. She needs someone. Someone! The telephone, to call someone!

"Hello, yes, this is Barbara Langberg. Yes, Barbara Langberg. . . 'L' as in lullaby. Yes, that is correct, Langberg. . . Langberg, as in lullaby. . . I need an ambulance to take me to the hospital. Yes, I have been at your clinic before. I see Doctor Lazarus every week. No, I cannot wait. I need to see someone immediately. You must send an ambulance. I must see a doctor immediately, preferably Doctor Lazarus, or I'm going to throw things off my balcony. I'm on the thirty-third floor and I could hit someone with one of the glasses I'm throwing at the walls. I'm already throwing things out to my balcony. I must see any doctor available who can help me, preferably Doctor Lazarus, or any male doctor will do. Just help me, please. Send an ambulance. Please help me, please. . . . Okay. . . . soon then? Send them soon? Thank you. Thank you so much. Doctor Lazarus will help me."

Barbara places the phone on its stand. Her fury takes its course; objects bouncing, breaking into pieces as they land, garbage loosely scattered in a colorful array on her apartment floor; junk thrown in every direction. The cat knows when to hide. She could be next; the beast runs away, shards of glass in its wake.

An ambulance heads to Two Hundred One, West Seventieth Street. The die has been cast; help is on its way. She'll be assisted downstairs with a minimum of fuss, escorted to an ambulance and whisked away to Roosevelt Hospital's geriatric ward. She's been there once before, a horrid place.

* * *

The ambulance takes Barbara to the triangular-shaped clinic with a small alcove in back, set a short distance from the busy crossroads at Lexington and Sixty-Eighth. It is a high structure framed with steel girders and slapped together with large, fitted panels. Once inside, the lobby's ambience gives the impression of expediency, built to serve an anonymous public without use of first names. She is quietly called from the waiting room to be processed with the necessary information given; name, address and telephone number fed into a computer by the nimble tapping of a secretary's fingers on a keyboard that sends information into the proper data bank. The secretary is perfect for the job, tall, nervous, with her hair neatly pulled into a bun. Her face is barely visible through her dark, plastic glasses that obliterate the shape of her eyes and the contour of her head. The arched shape of her body suggests long hours spent sitting at a desk. Her head turns and jitters about, insisting that everything is in order, everything in its place. Has she missed something? Are details left unfinished? Is anything left undone?

Barbara is part of her process. Without her and other patients like her, the secretary's job would come to a halt, but that does not warm her to Barbara. Communication between them might slow the woman's busy pace. Small talk is held at a minimum. Barbara doesn't help much, having little interest in talking. Her thoughts are private. She is uncomfortable in this clinic with its whites and yellows, hard white beds and everyone dressed in blues and whites. The secretary sits as she works, indifferent to her sterile surroundings, highlighted by her hard metal desk's impenetrable surface, so cold, so impersonal that Barbara wonders how it feels to be bombarded every day by its steel flatness. The woman seems hatched from the desk itself, fully matured, and already running her corner of the universe from the moment of her birth. Her efficiency is mesmerizing. Every minutiae of her routine seems under control, every detail perfected by the quick, sure movements of her hands and arms and subtle twists of her torso as she moves above her desk; the confidence of her glance to each exact location when she needs some object within her reach. Staples, pens, rubber stamps, paper clips fall to and from her fingers

as if they are pouring out of her arm. She takes her tools for granted with the concentration of a good mechanic and uses them with the expertise of a master craftsman, who expects maximum production from her efforts.

After shaking Barbara's hand, Doctor Lazarus studies Barbara's face from where he stands. She is comfortable with this man, particularly when he smiles; a kind doctor's smile. He is a handsome man with smooth skin and obviously happy about what he does for a living, healing the mentally ill. His uncertain gaze communicates an unusual sensitivity within an impersonal ambiance of a hospital. She feels human to the man, judging by the sympathetic manner in which he looks into her eyes.

The doctor walks with a pronounced limp across his office floor—an imperfection at last in this sterile environment. He ignores her stare when his leg whips into place perfectly with every step, walking more with his hip than with his leg, jerking with a great swing of his body the dead limb in place with each stride; the leg aptly supporting his weight in spite of its deadness. Barbara identifies with that withered limb, constantly jerked along by a stronger force and then, left to support a weight too heavy, refusing to budge. His lame leg reminds her of Frankenstein's Igor, if it weren't for the pleasant inflection of his voice and his kind expression with sensitive, dark eyes under deep, overhanging brows. His gimp and doe-like expression narrate a story she wishes to know, some private obstacle he's suffered. She is more than ready to sympathize. Perhaps it has to do with his bad leg, similar to hers.

Finally he sits, perched upon his throne, like a monarch overseeing his kingdom. The large, dark wooden, mahogany desk is raised slightly above the inner office floor. His clean, shaven head is outlined by the large bay window in back and highlighted by a subtle, soft beam of light from the ceiling. There is relative shadow surrounding her seat, and she is forced to look up to him from below, as if from an operating table. The clean Persian rug that separates them is patterned with touches of gray speckle to camouflage any droppings that might fall from the sick. They needn't judge their reason for being here. Doctor Lazarus performs a service that Barbara needs, simple as that. Her condition seems normal to him, which, of course, it isn't to her. There's nothing normal about 'a nervous breakdown' as he calls it, a phrase that implies that life isn't going so well.

The doctor seems professional, sure of himself. Barbara is safe under his inspection. His smile exudes total confidence in his craft. Captured by his spell, she is eager to open her soul that he promises to restore to health; something about his forthrightness and his paternal air. Barbara is his young daughter, who needs the certainty of her daddy's wisdom to make her whole again. Or perhaps he is her rabbi. Either way she would be content spending the entire afternoon at his disposal, her surrogate father, while he dissects her mind into as many pieces as he wishes, to

serve their common goal. But first she must reveal her private life. The word, ‘anxiety,’ is mentioned; *anxiety*. At least it has a name. He’s seen her condition before. That’s encouraging. He plucks the loose skin under his chin from his neck.

“People should use whatever means available to maintain mental health,” he claims. “We live longer and demands are put upon us to stay balanced in an inhospitable world that makes us anxious.”

He fails to mention arsenic. His lower lip shakes, a subtle quiver that Barbara is not meant to notice. They are a team, so to speak, doctor and patient, surrogate father and stepdaughter, two birds in a nest, and never mind the ‘why’ of it. Barbara can be healthy again if there’s money enough to pay for what’s been used up by time or, in her case, deformed at birth.

“Life seems absurd, nothing more than a big joke. Nothing is important.”

The statement is made with mischievous openness, typical of Barbara’s way of saying things. The emptiness of life’s endless chore can be understood only by someone who is aware. Her revelation flatters his intelligence, assuming he comprehends her meaningless existence. An awkward shift of his body fails to hide his discomfort.

“We must find a way to cope with the nonsense,” he explains.

“Why must we?”

“Why would you allow yourself treatment if nothing matters?”

She smiles as only Barbara can smile, an intimate smile from friend to friend, a defensive tool used against anyone who might feel the urge to probe.

“I’m crazy,” she admits. They both smile.

During the remainder of their session, Barbara is a wily patient. Along with high intelligence, her charm is enough to fool any professional that she is well enough to take care of herself. She is evaluating the situation very fast, accelerating every second, coming to fast conclusions; how to proceed, what tact to employ, when to smile, when to appear vulnerable, when to appear smart. Her winning, warm smile is used to charm doctors at the sacrifice of true recovery. Priding herself on being smarter than her therapists, her brilliance outwits those who might help if given half a chance. No single person has managed to alter her downward spiral, certainly not her son nor her dead husband who failed miserably on that front. In Barbara’s estimation, Doctor Lazarus is little more than a ‘hired hand’, useful when the going gets rough.

After accompanying his patient to the geriatric ward, Doctor Lazarus attempts to sedate her. The needle doesn’t take at first so he removes it. Barbara trusts his error. She is safe in his hands. Her doctor is trying his best. He becomes her patient whom she must protect. She is attracted to his kind face, as she is attracted to all men who wish to lend a helping hand, not the attraction of sex, but rather trust of human to human, bonded

by a common goal. Communication ensues without words, an understanding that each is here to help in his or her respective role. They feel each other's needs and stand compliant, sympathetic to mutual insecurities. Above all, he does not judge Barbara for being at this clinic. She appreciates his fairness and wishes him to be her friend if only she had the courage to beg friendship from a stranger. Such familiarity is forbidden within the bleak glare of plastic panels and spotless floors that dwarf her with their expanse. After a deep breath, he slides the needle in again, injecting into her blood a substance that immediately calms her. While the needle rests in her arm, she thinks kindly of her doctor with the limp, a kindred spirit at last.

"Do I have to stay in this geriatric ward, Doctor Lazarus? I can't stand this place; all of these old people with Alzheimer's, barely able to function. I don't belong in this ward. I'm not like that."

"I have very little control of that," Doctor Lazarus says.

"But you do have control of where they place me. I am not that sick. These patients are completely debilitated. I am not debilitated. My mind is clear. It's my body that's holding me back, my weight. I can think straight. I'm not one of them. If I were to stay in this ward I'd go mad. I won't be able to cope with these people. Most of them are on their last legs. I'm not on my last legs. I'll get better. I'll lose weight. I still have my son, who gives me something to live for. I have an apartment and friends who talk to me on the phone. I even have a cat I take care of. Please, don't keep me in this ward. I don't belong here. I really don't. Send me home, please. My son Oliver hired a maid to clean my apartment, but I fired her. Maybe she'll come back. She's highly recommended by the agency. If she'll come back it'll be good for me, or my son will hire another maid, and I'll get used to her coming every day. I promise. I must go home, doctor. You can arrange it with your influence. Please, do that for me, please. I cannot remain in this ward. Please, doctor, don't keep me in this ward. These patients are homeless people with nothing left in their lives. I'm not like them. I'll heal myself by writing. I can write. I know I can. Please, let me go home, doctor."

* * *

Days have passed. When Barbara arrives home the apartment has been cleaned, thanks to her son Oliver. A team of men removed bags of garbage and washed the kitchen and bathroom floors. They placed everything in their proper place, books on bookshelves, cleaned dishes in the cabinets, bathroom utensils placed in the medicine cabinet, bed made, pillows placed in their proper locations, coffee table cleaned of debris, piles of garbage removed from the apartment. Her son paid the electric and water bills, as well as next month's rent. Dust and layers of caked dirt are gone, hopefully for good.

Today her life will begin anew. Barbara always wanted to be a writer.

Doctor Lazarus suggested she attempt to write again. If only she could write; starting with a sentence or two, nothing profound, nothing to boast about, but, nonetheless, to concentrate long enough to make herself proud. But writing is not ‘busy work.’ Writing is, for a legitimate writer, “a calling more important than eating.” Barbara has heard that somewhere. Since Doctor Lazarus as much as forbade her to eat, writing is a must. Of course, that logic doesn’t make her a legitimate writer. Real writers need to write or something in them dies. Barbara will die too, unless she focuses on something as important as raising her son when he was little. Commitment came easily when it came to raising her boy. She had a grip on her life during those years. What if she left the television off, allowing the silence necessary to put pen to paper? What would be the outcome of that? A healthy way to fill time, her mind utilized for the first time since she graduated from law school, since she was forced to study for the bar; such a long time ago. My, how time flies.

One phone call to Faxi before she gets started wouldn’t hurt . . . to announce Barbara’s return from the hospital. . . the considerate thing to do, after all. . . Loneliness is not the reason. Procrastination isn’t the reason, either. She will begin her writing as soon as she hangs up, but Faxi must be told how happy she is to be back home. . . after that dreadful geriatric ward for six days . . . unspeakable. . . Yes, she must call Faxi.

But the phone has been moved. Where is it? Oh, yes, on the table that holds the lamp at the far end of the couch. Its new location forces her to walk on her sore leg. Oh, well, she will do it, such a bother really and so much easier when the phone was within reach on the floor beside the couch. Granted, it is proper for the telephone to stand on the side table centrally located. Barbara will no longer be relegated to her leather couch where she has squatted for the past ten years. That must change. The phone . . . on the side table. . . She will make the effort to walk every time she makes a call, as a healthy woman would.

She lifts her weight from one end of the couch, and, like a drunken sailor, balances herself to walk towards the telephone on the side table; one step followed by another, until she covers the short distance. The cleaning company Oliver hired did a good job. All the *New York Times* from past months have been taken away, leaving room to sit while she calls Faxi. That’s a sign of recovery, the absence of old newspapers, a sign of caring for appearances in her home. The patient is in recovery. Hurray! Old newspapers have been removed. Hurray! Maybe she should stop having them delivered, but if she did that, there would be no way to study current affairs and that wouldn’t do. No, she’ll throw the newspaper away every day, like a normal person would.

God, if only to be normal. She has always been suspicious of normalcy, but a sore leg and extra weight has changed all that; normalcy, to follow the example set by healthier friends. Her condescension towards normal

folk must end. Barbara can learn from normal people, learn how to live like they do. She will imitate what the masses do. She will throw away old copies of the New York Times like her neighbors. She won't forget that; one lesson learned.

And now picking up the phone, sitting heavily on the far end of the couch, habitually tempted to recline, but, no, she will sit up as if she were awake and active, not resting or sleeping and surrendering to fatigue as she is wont to do, not languishing on the phone, engaged in endless, silly conversations. Her new, healthy approach will not involve lying on the couch at all hours of the day. She will stand and walk and sit upright when necessary, alert, as if she were too busy to sit. After her call she will write as promised. She will find a pen and her empty writing book recently purchased by Maria before she was fired. Her thoughts will be recorded in a healthy, disciplined fashion—but first a call to Faxi.

Dial the number and wait. God, she is hungry for Oreo Cookies with the creamy fillings, but she will not eat. She refuses to break her promise for the sake of her new life. Otherwise, she might die. Fat people die before their time. No, death will take a back seat to a healthy life, regardless of the odds of her winning this battle. But Barbara will not think about odds. Her dignity is at stake, her dignity above all else. Speaking of dignity, who is she kidding? Hers has been a life devoid of dignity, twenty-four hours of television every day, while lying prone on an old leather couch, a routine of absolute nothingness. "Nothingness," she calls it, a euphemism if there ever was one, but, no, Faxi must hear all about it. Faxi can relate, true friend that she is.

The telephone is ringing. Dear telephone. . . Dear connection to the world at large. . . Dear contact with Faxi. . .

"Please, answer, Faxi. Please be home."

"Hello," on the other end of the line.

"Thank, God, you're home. I was afraid you wouldn't be home, afraid I wouldn't be able to contact you, but you are home and that is wonderful. I have so much to tell you about my stay in the hospital. My doctor is smart, very smart. I persuaded him to release me from the geriatric ward, so I'm smarter, of course. It didn't look possible at first. The second visit in three years and he knows I'm suicidal, not now, but sometimes. He realizes I could go down that road, but, on the other hand, I'm afraid to kill myself. He doesn't know how much of a coward I am, since I don't give that impression. . . What's that? Oh, you know, I'm funny. I make him laugh. He likes me, and, you'll see, I'm going to get better. I'm already getting better. Phil is my new trainer. I trained with him for a whole hour before I went to the hospital. It's difficult for me with my weight. I don't care, though. He's stupid but he'll be good for me. And I'm going to start writing, too . . . Yes, that's right. I'm going to start today. When I stop talking to you, right after I hang up I'm going to begin. I promised myself

and I'll do it too. Maybe I'll even publish. You never know. I have a lot to say. You know that of all people; all the conversations we've had. . . What's that? Oh, yes, I'm dieting too. I'm dieting today. I haven't touched a mouthful all day and I won't. My writing will block out thoughts of food. I'll keep you up to date on that front. Yes . . . And what's new with you? Everything is new? Right. Anything unusual going on? Jim? Oh, yes, Jim. You saw him? Where did you see him? Really? I can't stand the man really. He's so 'trailer-park.' I just can't stand him. He used to smoke dope in front of my son and claimed to be in the program. What an ass he was. Oliver finally told him so. But you saw him in the park? How did he look? I bet he gained weight, didn't he? He was so sedentary. We used to hole up here in my apartment for months without going out, getting stoned out of our minds. I shouldn't have been with him. He was beneath me, such a vacuous jerk. What's that? Oh, yes, my writing? Don't worry. It can wait. Once I start, there'll be no way to stop me. I might write all night. I have nothing but time, so I might as well write until I drop. This is a very exciting time for me, to begin what I've always wanted to do, to be a writer. Up to now I've just been doodling. But now I'm serious. I'm so excited, so exhilarated. I must record what happened in the hospital when they put me into the geriatric ward and left me with those weird patients who couldn't remember who they were. Some were drooling and bouncing around in chairs, I mean really demented, and I in the middle of that; God, what a life. The things I get myself into. Maybe it's good I gained so much weight. I can't move around much anymore, so I can't get myself into such situations. Oh, yes, you have to go? Oh, sure that's fine, dear. I'm going to write anyway. I just wanted to tell you I'm home. Goodbye, Fax. Love you."

Barbara places the phone on its stand and stares at the newly washed and tidied room, such a nice present given by her son, a clean apartment. She must remember to thank him. He is a good son to his mother. Maybe she should call him now to thank him, but, no, she must not procrastinate. Her writing, she must begin without delay, first by turning off her television, but then the apartment will be silent and she'll be left with her thoughts, left with nothing but her writing. Yes, that is the point and no more television, no more phone calls. No, she will call Oliver later and begin to write, but where is that lined notebook that lay on the table before those men cleaned her apartment? And her pens? She must have a pen. Where did the cleaning men hide her notebook and pen? They were put away somewhere, probably in one of her drawers. Yes, she must search through her drawers. She must rise to her feet with a sore leg and move through the apartment to find her pen and notebook.

Standing upright, she supports her weight on the empty coffee table that used to carry everything at her fingertips before those damned cleaning men put things in their proper place. At least the space is clear of clutter,

and she doesn't really mind searching for writing utensils, not much anyway; a little effort for a good cause. That's what a real writer would do. Nothing would stop a professional writer from working; nothing would obstruct a writer's drive to write. She is a writer and she will pursue her craft at all costs. Nothing will stop her this time. The other alternative would be the geriatric ward at Roosevelt Hospital after endless hours of television, phone calls and eating microwave dinners that taste like airline food. No, that mustn't be; no more geriatric wards for her, no more inactivity. Her notebook and pens? Where are they? Where could those damned cleaning men have placed them?

She ambles toward her bedroom where her desk has stood for a decade, leans upon a wall. Spotting the desk, she guides herself in its direction, and upon arrival, reaches for its top drawer; nothing of use in it, a few papers and a pencil that won't do. She must write with a pen. Reaching lower now to open a middle drawer, her eye spots another pile of papers topped by a dirty sock. That too must be remedied. Dirty wash must be placed in the dirty wash bin, but that must wait until her immediate need is fulfilled. A pen and her lined notebook. Where are they? The bottom drawer next, containing letters and random bills, beneath which lays a ballpoint pen waiting for use. One mission accomplished, a glorious pen found.

Her notebook? What about her notebook? Where could it be? Where have those well-intentioned cleaning men placed it? Damn them.

With support of the wall, her search continues. She ambles into Oliver's old bedroom. Her notebook must be somewhere in this spanking clean apartment. Everything in its place; must familiarize herself with healthy compartmentalization of her belongings, continuing her search with an undercurrent of resentment. Her notebook, where is her notebook? How dare those idiots remove the one thing necessary for writing—a notebook, something upon which to write? Whoever heard of a writer without a writing book? Looking in another drawer to no avail, finally entering the dining room; its wooden cabinet, piles of papers and neatly stacked books, all read in the past twenty years, lots of books consumed, but now Barbara must write her own book for someone else to read.

Yes, she should have guessed, her notebook at last, in the cabinet. Relieved she has found a conduit toward a fulfilled life, or, at very least a busy life, or day, depending upon how it goes. She'll begin her creative venture, independent of telephone and television, but first return to the couch. No, no, an upright dining room chair would be better to guarantee alertness, but the hardness of that wooden chair. No, the wooden chair's brittleness would be more of a distraction than a cushioned chair might be. The comfortable easy chair will also hold her body upright, guaranteeing she'll stay awake during her labors. But she must begin.

Must be selective; not acceptable to jot down anything that comes to

mind and call it writing. Demands have to be made as to what is a worthy subject to catch the eye of the reader. Selection of subject matter becomes a bit of a chore, the mere thought of someone reading her words a source of embarrassment; how exposing that might be, a stranger reading her thoughts. Foolish, already imagining someone might read her words, writer's block all too familiar. Forget other people and be courageous. Her hand tightens upon her ballpoint pen.

The phone rings. Barbara jumps. Should she answer it, or should she not? Such pleasure these few minutes have provided; such pleasure in finding independence, the prospect of jotting down her thoughts. The phone is still ringing and Barbara is tempted. Maybe it's her son. He would understand her refusal to answer at a time like this. The phone stops ringing. Disappointment follows and utter, lonely silence, the pang of being cheated. But she knows better. Independence and freedom to choose a creative life, hangs in the balance.

Barbara begins again—that nuisance phone, a moment to gather herself.

Sitting in her easy chair with the tools of her craft, pen and notebook, both readied for use, she probes her mind for the subject of the day.

What is she thinking and feeling? What thoughts prevail? But are those enough? Continuous flow of ideas runs through her mind, but as unique as they may be, they do not amount to a story, which by definition has a beginning, middle and end. What would the beginning be? Or maybe she shouldn't push so very hard to produce a story. She should write anything and leave it at that. Writing is enough, or at least it was enough a minute ago. Why has her definition of writing changed all of a sudden? Where did the pressure to succeed come from? To legitimize her writing by giving birth to a story, or maybe something as grand as a novel, is a new ambition in this journey towards health. It's too soon to expect so much. Writing must not become a burden, after all. She needs writing to live and that is enough. There, she said it, "needs writing to live," but not writing itself, more importantly the focus writing brings to counterbalance her otherwise meandering mind. Yes, she will write, not a novel, not a story even, and certainly not a poem for which she has neither the talent nor the skill, but rather that for which she is best suited, a letter to her son. That is enough ambition for now.

New York City, May 1, 2011; 5:52 pm.

My darling Oliver,

A man asked me to smile. I did so. At first with a forced muscular contraction of my lips, but after a few seconds the smile became genuine and I actually felt better. The fellow offered some peanuts that I refused, as I was not hungry. However, so he could not possibly misinterpret my refusal, I thanked him and told him I appreciated his offering. I turned

away, preparing to leave. Shortly before I arrived at the exit door, I passed a woman who was grimacing and told her to smile. She did so and enjoyed the effect it had upon her. She continued to smile, ear to ear, as I left the room.

The day that followed was a happy one. I saw through the window a sudden gust of rain, pouring as if the gods were watering their flowerbeds and we were their seeds. I become poetic when I am writing to you, my dear son. The reason I write is not only because of the love I feel for you but because the record of my thoughts gives me peace in your absence. I speak only to you, my special child, in such a private manner. It is only you whom I trust so very much.

The rain shines the world and I drink its nectar. I am replenished by it and have become self-respecting through its balm.

The fountain from which our current runs . . .

For years I was immersed in a wave of debilitating fright, until today when I found myself daydreaming as the rain fell against my balcony door. My logical mind fortunately had fallen dead by then, beheaded by a blade of anxiety. The incessant cycle of repetitive thoughts that I couldn't shake for the life of me was suspended on my balcony under that glorious, wet storm. The healing process had begun. For the first time I'd left my thoughts untended rather than forcing them to respond to my wishes. This was a breakthrough for me, dear son. Choices toward the 'good' gradually bare themselves at the end of this dark period, when balance reinstates itself, but upon embarking on my flight back to reality, I haven't found my wings yet that might allow me not only to fly, but also to navigate once in the air.

But enough; I must end this. I wonder what you are feeling at this very moment. I'm sorry I shall never mail this letter but now a record of me exists somewhere in case I don't make it through.

As always, I love you,

Mom

P.S. I am writing this with optimism about the future. Its fountainhead is appreciation of self; me, the 'I' within that is finding its way to this notebook page by means of a simple pen. I gain strength with every word.

* * *

"Hello, this is Maria."

Her voice is cold, detached, expecting the worst.

"Oh, Maria, I am so happy you called," Barbara begins. "I'm so sorry. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Your son ask me to start working again."

"Yes, I know about that. He spoke to me. I do want you to return, Maria."

"Your son want me to begin today," Maria says.

“Of course, please come back today.”

“I near your building. I come.”

When she arrives Maria is close to shedding tears, a condition common to both of them. Barbara also has cried often. Tears are a universal symbol of sadness that characterizes both of their lives. Tears unite the two women. Barbara’s hand reaches for her maid’s shoulder that withdraws from Barbara’s touch. The threat of intimacy from a white woman, her boss no less, is unknown terrain. She distances herself when Barbara seems too close, two socio-economic classes, the brown worker and the white, wealthy boss woman, suspended in time.

Barbara is hesitant. Maria is still a hired hand paid to do Barbara’s bidding; an uneducated woman at that, an immigrant barely able to speak English. Mustn’t be too familiar or the essence of the relationship will be threatened, a relationship analogous to slavery, considering the meager wage her servant is paid. On the other hand, part of Barbara’s healing process involves challenging old prejudices, particularly her condescension towards the lower classes, as well as to all people, let alone her maid.

Maria automatically returns to her duties. Work is this woman’s justification for being here. Constantly fearful of being accused of laziness, she is anxious about doing nothing. Her compulsion to earn her keep, combined with her distrust of Barbara’s sudden transformation, urges her to clean something. Her eyes search for an article of clothing misplaced, a dirty dish, anything that might satisfy her need for tidying or cleaning. Maria’s strength lies in the work she performs, the mark of her labors seen in the fresh appearance of spanking clean floors, sheets, pillow cases, washed dishes, and clothing worn by the white woman who dominates her life. These are the fruits of her labor that are easily noticed by her overseer who provides a pittance every week spent on Maria’s two children. Maria’s dedication to her work is what matters. Talk is not required, nor is rest. There is no rest. There never will be rest and Maria’s life will be better for it. Barbara is an example of what happens to a person who spends all her time resting.

The maid might continue her job. Barbara hopes so. Her attitude towards this immigrant woman invading her space has softened. In the apartment’s current state of cleanliness how barren the rooms appear, how aesthetically unappealing; everything in its proper location, chairs, table, vases symmetrically placed on the bookshelf in the dining room area. Piles of garbage once disguised her lack of concern for beauty. Once, long ago, she cared about the appearance of things. Aesthetics meant something then, the difference between ugliness and beauty, when she studied law and her mind was capable of thinking clearly. Law involved intricate, logical thought that defended the common man from injustice. The science of law was beautiful in its way, a study of ethical choice

among men who need rules to live. Her involvement with law conditioned her to be fair during those years and generous toward her fellow man. Barbara lost her connection with the generous, more forgiving part of herself along the way. She lubricated relationships with kindness when she was a lawyer fighting for the rights of the weak.

But today her neatly cleaned apartment is a tacky reminder of a woman blind to beauty. The woman who lives in this uninspired environment is that same person who once fought for the rights of the lower class. So much more can be accomplished during her quest for health; kindness for one, possibly beginning with her treatment of Maria. What must it be like to be an immigrant peasant woman, working for an overweight white woman, who doesn't work and who has no regard for a maid's suffering as a member of humanity's poor, deprived of education and language skills; the inferiority she must feel, dependent as she is for a measly income to live, by cleaning, scrubbing, running errands, bowing, scraping and taking insults for a few pennies every week. The woman from El Salvador actually cleans the dirt from Barbara's apartment floor. That in itself is a statement of inequality. While her apartment is being cleaned, while floors are washed and shopping is done, Barbara has ample time to transform into a loving human being. Her maid will see her transformation. Maria will understand how sincerely she is trying. Moment by moment, awareness by awareness, life will change. Her appearance will alter. Barbara will work at improving herself. Life is beginning at the age of fifty-eight. Her life is truly beginning.

Barbara writes:

I recognize the beauty of Maria, her service, her smile, her intelligence, and her company, which applies to my newly found appreciation of all people's worth, as well as mine. My spirit will glow one day when I heal the separation I have created between me and all people. That separation must end. Arrogance must end. I am not worth more than my maid. Arrogance is a disease that robs me of tolerance for all people.

How did that statement give birth to itself? Why is the subject of arrogance suddenly taking shape? Am I arrogant is my question, even in my current state? I am an addict and I shall always be an addict, regardless of whether I am ingesting chemicals into my body. It is a condition that will always be a part of who I am. In spite of my addiction, I admit to a strong dose of arrogance in my make-up, a tendency to patronize those who don't fit the usual criteria of income and education. Income can be generally forgiven but class distinction based upon education I shall learn to forgive as well.

I must ease the tension between us. I must show my appreciation for Maria; a gift perhaps or maybe I should speak about how I feel. Yes, that would be best, to speak of how I feel.

JILL MANDRAKE'S most recent publications include a review of George Bowering's *Pinboy*, in GEIST #87, a co-authored Canadian Map of the Twilight Zone, in GEIST #86, and a memoir at PRISM INTERNATIONAL online, entitled, "Dramaturgical Gratitude: Notes on my time as Drama Editor at PRISM". She has also published a young adult novel, *The Dodgem Derby* (New Orphic Publishers: 2012).

Jill Mandrake / Two Poems

"The Last Sunset"

there's a boy in a ramshackle yard
feeding rabbits in a hutch
he's a natural with pets
there's a dog that has followed him home
after school, out of nowhere
"she's my friend, can we keep her?"
the boy likes horses
has a friend called Roy
with a mare called Duster
they go to a Saturday matinee
wishing it would be a Western
they can't take the horse or the dog
but the boy's sister takes up the rear
"rats! We can't lose her on the trail"
next they are watching Kirk Douglas
bad guy with heart of gold, herding cattle
a cut above the average show
they're in luck
when the movie lets out
the sun, the fading sun, is gold
every kid is ambling home
he gives the horse an apple core
he feeds some pellets to the rabbits
gives the dog a tasty bone
the year is nineteen sixty-one, so
he'll always be around twelve years old

Fog Near The End Of The Month

I'm writing this as no one might ask again, "Where were you when you heard the news?"

We're getting so old, that's why.

We used to get heavier mist and fog, worse near the end of November.

What a surprise, to be dismissed from school before the bell.

We were restless already, since this was a Friday.

Seconds after we'd heard the announcement, our class sat dumbfounded, mostly because Mrs. Winston cried at her desk, hiding her face. She'd been such a mean teacher so far, and now this helpless display.

Even the fog couldn't stop us from playing Red Rover at recess, when Denise sprained her wrist and had to see the School Nurse. "Nix the Red Rover games, or I'll wring your necks," yelled Mrs. Winston, seconds before the loudspeaker crackled.

It wasn't easy to find my way home; I couldn't see the white line in the road. The lines were white then; not yellow. Yellow came later.

A boy in our class called Brian used to swallow air so he could belch the loudest, multiple times. He was also the fastest with multiplication tables.

I was what Mrs. Winston called a Slowpoke, and Brian ran out of the mist, just to burp at me.

I replied, "Shut up," as though we were having a conversation; a mean one.

Brian stormed ahead and tried it on somebody else. I couldn't see him but I heard it.

When I finally got home, I saw my brother pacing the kitchen floor, sobbing to Dad, "He was just like a friend; he was just like a friend".

Dad replied, “I felt that way about FDR. Even up here.” He didn’t say, “Men don’t cry”; just rolled a few smokes at the kitchen table, tobacco scattered from hell to breakfast.

ROSS KLATTE and his wife emigrated to Canada in 1971. He began writing seriously in the 1950s while serving in the U.S. Navy and has published short stories in literary and men's magazines in the United States and Canada. In 1959, he won a Longview Foundation award for fiction, and in 1990 first prize in the personal essay division of the CBC Literary Competition for what became, in revised form, the opening chapter of *Leaving the Farm: Memories of Another Life* (Oolichan Books, 2007), an account of his Minnesota boyhood. In 2011, he was one of three finalists for the Writers' Trust of Canada's Journey Prize for a story that originally appeared in *The New Orphic Review*.

How Long Have I Been Here?

Ross Klatte

GILBERT LARSEN was in his boat, heading for the island. It rose out of the vast lake like a varicolored rock, suspended in blue space. The green came from the trees on its gently rounded top. The cliffs sheering down to the water were tiers of red and yellow and black. He could see the waves crashing against them, see the pebble beach, the entrance to the cove. Then he was in the air, soaring over the island and looking down at the cabin and the clearing in front of it that stretched to the edge of the cliff overlooking the outer lake. The lake seemed to rise to meet the horizon. And then he was over the lake, flying out into all that emptiness.

"Mister Larsen?"

Such a feeling of lightness, of three-dimensional freedom, the emotion of it in his throat so that he wanted to cry. Then such a feeling of sadness, such a deep, overwhelming sorrow so that he couldn't breathe, he began to gasp, and the sound woke him.

"Mister Larsen, you all right?"

There was a hand on his shoulder. He opened his good eye and saw a big blurry image too close to focus on. It was black. Black and blue. He opened his other eye, the sticky one, and looked up at a big black man dressed in blue cotton whom he vaguely recognized. The man was smiling at him.

"How you feel today, Mister Larsen? You ready for your bowel movement?"

"Where am I?" he said.

"You know where you are, sir. You in the Home. Remember?"

"How long have I been here?"

"Oh, a long time now, Mister Larsen. Your son brought you here, remember? That was almost a year ago."

"My son?"

Leonard? Yes. Leonard was his son.

He was in a wheelchair, he realized now, in some hospital? What for? The attendant in front of him—all at once he remembered his name.

“You’re Clayton.”

“That’s right!” Clayton said. “Hey. You having a good day.”

Clayton swung the wheelchair around and pushed him down the hall. They passed the open doors of rooms through which you caught glimpses of flowers on tables, televisions turned on, wizened old people in beds with their eyes closed and their mouths open. That smell. The smell of piss. It reminded him of the sea.

“Where we going?”

“To your room, Mister Larsen. You just had your lunch.”

“I did? I don’t remember.”

“Thas right, and you ate good this time. You musta been hungry for a change.”

“I’m *still* hungry. Take me back to the dining room.”

“Can’t do that, Mister Larsen. The dining room’s closed now. Anyway, it’s time for your nap. Which you started already, sittin’ there in your chair. You still hungry when you wake up, I’ll bring you a sandwich. How’s that sound?”

“Don’t want no sandwich. I’d like a piece of pie, though. With ice cream.”

“What kind you like, Mister Larsen? Apple? Blueberry?”

“Peach.”

“Can’t promise you that, Mister Larsen. I only see apple and blueberry today.”

“Peach was my favorite when I was in the navy.”

Peach pie, made with syrupy canned peaches in a doughy crust. That always tasted so good on his ship during the war when the cook was able to make it. In rough weather just the peaches were served, after creamed chipped beef on toast or cold cuts, (shit on a shingle or horse cock), not the best of navy chow but good enough when the seas were high. Anyway, he wasn’t hungry anymore. Mainly he was just sleepy. He just wanted to go back to bed. Bed, sleep, was heaven to him now.

It was an effort, even with Clayton’s help, to get out of his wheelchair and into his bed. But then, what a relief to be stretched out under his blanket and to close his eyes and feel himself sinking into sleep again. His wife’s face swam hazily before him. His good, sweet, infuriating Elizabeth, his Lizzie. All the fights they’d had! He missed her. He missed *them*. And how, no matter that they’d argued all day, they went to bed at night and found the warmth and solace of each other’s bodies once more. They were both surprised at times to realize they were happy.

Lizzie had been the first to go, leaving him here to get on without her. She still made him angry when he thought about her. Smoked herself to

death, continuing to smoke even after the emphysema got her, pulling the oxygen tubes out of her nose to puff on a cigarette every hour or so, gasping and choking, her pale face turning blue, until he yanked the fag out of her mouth and forced the tubes back into her nose. She'd hated him for that.

There was a tightness in his chest. It wasn't pain exactly. Mostly he wasn't in any pain. Mostly he was just tired, utterly exhausted; it was probably the drugs they gave him. Then things were fading from him, all that had ever happened to him and he could remember, drifting off and away. Had they happened to him or to somebody else, in another time, another life? Anyway, he was losing interest, withdrawing into himself. And yet, still, there were waves of sadness, surges of rage, of elation.

* * *

"Dad? *Hey Dad.*"

Someone was tugging at him, shouting in his ear. Whoever it was didn't have to yell. He wasn't deaf.

He opened his good eye. A familiar, earnest face hovered over him.

"It's me. Rhonda. Your daughter-in-law, remember?"

"You here to take me home?"

"No-no, Dad. *This* is your home now."

"No, it ain't. How's the business?"

"It's doing great, Dad. We're thinking of building more guest cabins. We're booked up for June already. We'll be moving onto the island soon. Looks like we might have a good season."

"That's good."

"How are you feeling?"

"Okay. What month are we in now?"

"Why it's May, Dad. Spring! And it's a lovely day outside. You want to go out?"

"Is it windy? I don't like the wind anymore."

"There's just a nice breeze. You won't even need a sweater."

"No."

"No? You don't want to go out?"

"That's right."

He had shut his eyes again. It took too great an effort to keep them open. His daughter-in-law kept talking, her girlish voice drifting down to him from away off somewhere.

"How long have I been here?" he asked, keeping his eyes closed.

"It's been a year already, can you believe that? Do you want me to read from your guest book, the one we've been keeping for you?"

"Guesso."

"I'll start with last weekend. On Saturday you had two visitors. Leonard and I were the first, and he wrote in your book. 'Dear Dad,'" she read. "'Rhonda and I stopped by on the way to the mall. You were sleeping.

We woke you, but you didn't want to get up. Told you how the business is going—great! Finally left this note. See you again soon. We love you.”

“I don't remember,” he said.

“Next, in the afternoon, your sister Ollie—short for Olga, remember?—she visited. Her husband Bert had a stroke and he's in the hospital now. It's real bad. He can't talk anymore.”

“Hmph. Something finally shut him up. He tried to get in my wife's pants, did you know that?”

“No. That's just a story, Dad.”

“Yuh, well, not according to my Lizzie. The son of a bitch.” He opened his eyes to see Rhonda's ample rear end as she bent over the table at the foot of his bed, writing in his guest book. Then he closed them again, and the next thing he knew he was being wheeled into the lounge for the afternoon's entertainment. His attendant this time was the cute, caring little gal from the Philippines, Isabel (he remembered her name), his favorite.

“Here you are, Mister Larsen.” She touched the back of his neck with a warm hand. “I'll be back to get you in a little while.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” He wished she'd give him a neck rub—she did that sometimes, he guessed.

In front of the room, a pretty young woman, long reddish hair tied back with a kerchief, introduced herself—her name escaped him immediately—then bent over a guitar and launched enthusiastically into a song that sounded familiar: “On Top of Old Smoky.” She motioned for the group of old people in front of her to join in, and a few weak, out-of-tune voices attempted to, then died. A few folks seemed attentive. Most, though, were right out of it, slumped in their wheelchairs, eyes closed, their heads lolling to one side. He closed his own eyes.

He opened them to find himself in bed again, after lights out, his room only dimly lit by the light in the hallway. He closed his eyes once more but lay awake, his ears ringing, his head full of images.

The images flicked past as if he were watching a slide show. Old faces. Old places. How old was he now? He wasn't sure, only knew he was old and his life was over while life was going on around him and would keep going after he was gone. Okay. He felt detached from it now, withdrawn; he was withdrawing into himself.

What he felt most keenly now were regrets, the mean things he'd done to people, to Lizzie, to his sisters when they were kids: little cruelties, practical jokes he had a weakness for that turned out to be not so funny—his having to shoot his good dog, Odin, for biting a neighbor boy who'd been tormenting him. Lizzie had made him do that; she'd been afraid of a lawsuit; he'd figured the boy had it coming. Even more he regretted not doing some of the things he might have done: ignoring the overtures, for instance, of women, those seemingly open to him but with whom he'd

been too shy or uncertain or, after his marriage, too faithful to respond to.

He used to tease his adoring younger sister, not Olga but Carol, only a year younger than he was, Carol, killed in a car crash just out of high school. The boy she was with had survived, and he had hated him for it: why *he* and not she? Then that smartass practical joke he played on a navy shipmate, his buddy, who ceased to be his buddy. And that other shipmate, no friend really, who woke him one night in the crew's quarters on the *Ryan* when they were tied up in Pearl and tried to kiss him; he'd pushed him off and the next day turned him in, afraid they'd been seen and he'd be thought a "queer" like maybe the other guy was, then instantly regretted it. And when, a few days later, the boy disappeared from the ship and he heard he'd been transferred—probably sent somewhere to have his asshole checked (what sailors called psychological testing) and afterwards maybe busted or given an undesirable discharge. He wished he'd kept quiet because he could never forget the boy nor what he had done to him—maybe ruined his life—out of stupid fear.

* * *

"Mister Larsen?"

He opened his eyes. The light of day lit his room. The big black man—what was his name again?—stood over him.

"You all right, sir? You was moaning in your sleep."

"Which one are you again?"

"I'm Clayton."

"Clayton. Where am I?"

"You know where you are, Mister Larsen. You in the Home."

"How long have I been here?"

The man didn't answer, just stood back as a nurse came in and, abruptly rolling up a sleeve of his pajamas, took his blood pressure. She took his pulse, then listened to his heart. So he was in a hospital. But how long had he been here, and when was he getting out?

"Here's your morning pills," the nurse said. "I want to see you take them. Did you sleep all right?"

"Didn't sleep at all."

"Oh, I think you did, Mr. Larsen. Insomnia is the least of your problems."

She was the nurse he didn't like much: too cold and efficient. Too old. He liked the young pretty ones, who flirted with him a little and with whom he flirted back.

"Okay. You had your bowel movement today?"

"Not yet."

"Well, let's go to breakfast. That should loosen you up."

"I'm not hungry. Let me sleep."

"You've had your sleep, Mr. Larsen. Let's go," and she turned to the

big attendant, who appeared from behind her, sat him up and lifted him out of bed. Suddenly he had to piss and felt it oozing out of him, into his diaper. Then, on the commode, his bowels exploded.

The big attendant stuck his head into the restroom. "Can you wipe yourself, Mister Larsen? You want some help?"

"I can wipe my own ass, goddamnit. I ain't that far gone yet."

The attendant grinned. He scowled back at him.

He was pushed in his wheelchair to a table at which sat a group of zombies he didn't recognize. The food didn't excite him, and he refused to eat at first. Nobody else was eating either. But then, nagged by his attendant, he took a bite of toast and ate half of his omelet. Then he was wheeled back to his room and helped into bed.

He was awakened by visitors he recognized: Leonard and Rhonda. He was glad to see them, but had they ever visited him before?

"Hello, Dad," said Leonard. "How are you?"

"Pretty good, I guess. I'm in no pain," he told him.

"I brought you some candy," Rhonda said. "One of your favorites, bridge mix."

She handed him a large box, the kind they sold you at movie theaters, he remembered.

"You want me to open it for you?" Rhonda asked.

"Okay."

She helped him sit up in his bed before handing him the candy. He stuffed his mouth greedily, with piece after piece of the sweet, chocolate-covered concoctions. Candy was one of the few things that still tasted good to him. That and ice cream. They gave him all the candy and ice cream he could eat but wouldn't allow him any liquor. He had occasional sharp memories of the refreshing, bittersweet taste of beer on a hot day or the raw, soothing effect of whisky.

He looked at his son. Leonard had been a worry, but he'd turned out all right. Dropped out of high school and ran off to San Francisco to live on the street with all those hippies then; got some girl pregnant and would have stuck by her, he said, except she went with some other hippie and disappeared from his life. Came home with hepatitis for Lizzie to nurse and his father to bawl him out. Met Rhonda, the receptionist at the doctor's office, who latched onto him. They got married, joined the family business, the resort he and Elizabeth ran on Spirit Island in Lake Superior, now a nature conservancy but once owned by old MacIntyre, the lumber baron, and inherited by his son Charles who, after that one summer, donated it to the province. That summer Charlie and his beautiful young wife, Rose, lived on the island and Gilly took supplies and mail out to them in his boat every couple of weeks and Rose went crazy, finally, from the isolation. He kept thinking of her now. He'd kept thinking of her then, when he was still a bachelor and too old for her and came close to making a fool of

himself.

“Dad,” Leonard said. “Dad? Something has come up. It’s about your will.” He was speaking slowly, carefully enunciating each word as if attempting to communicate with someone whose understanding of English was limited.

“What are you talking about?”

“Your will, Dad. What you’re leaving us.”

“What’s that?”

“The resort, Dad. Your boat. Whatever other assets you have. Your estate.”

“I have a will, don’t I?”

“Yes, but our lawyer tells us there’s somebody mentioned in it he’s never heard about – somebody *we’ve* never heard about.”

“You had a look at my will?”

“Our lawyer did, Dad. And I’m the executor, remember?”

“Yes, and you name a woman in it,” Rhonda exclaimed. “Who *is* she? Some relative? Some *distant* relative?”

“You talking about Rose?” Gilbert Larsen said. He was having a moment of clarity. “I put Rose in the will, you know.” It was like a joke, and it made him chuckle.

“We’re talking about somebody named Rose MacIntyre,” Leonard told his father. “Our lawyer’s trying to find her. She’s someone you knew, apparently. She may even be dead by now.”

“You’ve given her a share of our business!” Rhonda shouted at her father-in-law. “Why did you do that?”

“What?” asked Gilbert Larsen. “What’s going on?”

He felt his son’s hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right, Dad.” To Rhonda he whispered harshly, “*Stop* it, Ron. Can’t you see it’s beyond him now?”

“But . . .”

“Let it *go*,” Leonard insisted. “We can talk to our lawyer about it.”

His father had slumped in his bed and closed his eyes. “There’s nothing more we can do here,” Leonard said. “Look. He’s sleeping again.”

“I wonder. Dad? *Dad*. You still awake?”

“He’s sleeping, can’t you see?” Leonard said sharply. “Let’s go.”

From a long way off, he heard the voices of his son and daughter-in-law. Then nothing. He was left to think of his lost sister, Carol, and how old she’d be now had she lived—almost as old as he was—and how he got the news of her death when he was at sea and couldn’t get back for the funeral, and how Rose—the realization just came to him!—had filled the empty place left in him after Carol was killed, and what did that mean? Was there something unnatural about it, about his love for Carol? They’d been raised together, they were close right up to the time he joined the navy and left home. Rose had reminded him of Carol. Elizabeth, whom he married finally, never did.

His chest constricted suddenly so he couldn't breathe. And then he was dizzy, and he was falling. Then he was rising. He was falling and rising, like on his boat in foul weather, like on his navy destroyer during the war, and he was going to be sick, he was going to be seasick like a boot-camp sailor as the ship kept rising and falling, and falling and rising, until all he wanted was for it to stop.

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My Rich Friend

Michael Washburn

ON A SUNNY Saturday morning, I pulled away from the traffic of Sherman Oaks and drove through a series of back roads to the mansion of James Hamilton III, or Jim, as I knew him. It was Jim's younger brother, Nathan, who greeted me at the door. Well, greeted isn't really the word.

"Uh, Andy, maybe this wasn't the best time for you to come over," he said.

From one of the rooms upstairs came yelling and the sounds of chairs and tables slamming into walls. I looked Nathan in the eye.

"Catch-22, man. I can't make the situation better unless you let me in," I told him.

Warily he moved aside to allow me through the lobby and up the curving white stairway with scarlet carpets and a banister of smooth fragrant oak. As I drew nearer to Jim's room on the second floor, I reflected on how few 30-year-olds of my acquaintance still lived with one or both of their parents. Jim had to be something of an exception, and he had every reason not to push his luck, yet here we were—

"Locusts! All of you, prying, infesting locusts! See if I don't step on you!" he bellowed from the third room down the hall.

Immediately I was sorry that I'd lent him my collection of Nathanael West's writings from the Library of America series.

"Jim, please put that down," came a heavily accented female voice. One of the maids, I surmised.

"Locusts, you'll all burn!"

"Jim, please!"

Part of me wanted to linger outside the room, to see how my friend's monologue, his Nathanael West fantasy, would develop, but I did the responsible thing. When Jim saw me enter his room, he stood frozen in a dramatic pose, like an Olympic athlete clutching a lamp instead of a javelin in his right hand a split-second before release. In the corner was a

Salvadorean woman I'd met on a few occasions, when Jim's mood was serene like the water at the Santa Monica piers on a lazy day.

"What do the little people say when the depressed and self-loathing are no longer so vulnerable to their wives? Step back, or I may have to teach you a sharp lesson . . ."

"Jim. Jim, I know what you're going through," I began.

"I will impale you on your own clichés. Beware!"

For a moment, I thought he was going to hurl the lamp at me, but he spun, first toward the maid, who shrank in her corner like a deflating sex doll, then toward the wall painted the color of ox's blood. Jim paused, appearing to savor the incongruity of the moment, nothing impossible or inevitable, then let loose like the athlete he'd never been in spite of his father's pressures. The lamp flew into the wall, its dome shattering and spraying shards on all three of us. The maid began to weep.

"*Bastards!* Take every fucking shred of dignity but you won't dare meet me face to face!"

He began to reach for one of the stereo speakers. I dashed between him and the object diametrically across the room from the cowering maid.

"Tell of your troubles, Jim, if I don't really understand them."

"I think anything I could tell you would be most redundant. Don't insult my intelligence—as if you haven't been following this stillborn affair from the start."

"That's kind of a mixed metaphor, but let's sit down and talk it over, shall we?"

He stood, panting, amid the wreckage, and I sensed what he felt. I thought of words from "Stop All the Clocks" by Auden: "For nothing now can ever come to any good." Indeed.

"Get out of here," he said to the maid.

The poor abused immigrant's feet crunched shards of glass as she scurried from the room. I heard her rushing up the stairs, sobbing, conveying everything to one of the other maids. Already I imagined what Jim would say if either of the maids protested his behavior to his face: *Another word, and you're on the next plane to Costa Rica.* Neither of them was from Costa Rica, but never mind. I realize that I may have made my friend sound like a monster. I can attest that he could be incredibly generous to his friends, or even to strangers. And he was not a bigot.

"Contrary to your suspicions, Jim, I do not run around like an anteater, sucking up the details of your private life."

He stared at me. His breathing began to ease a bit, his eyes surveyed the chaos of a room he'd once shown visitors with pride. I was patient. I knew the trajectory of his emotional state, had witnessed it before. The woman with whom he'd grown obsessed, of whom he'd barely stopped speaking and dreaming in six months, had left L.A. without so much as

saying goodbye to Jim. I'd met Rachel White briefly, and found her lovely and intelligent, but Jim's reaction went quite a bit further. She came to represent an ineffable quality without which he could scarcely imagine his life; knowing her was part of his self-schema, a part of his experience from which he extrapolated in dreams that left him exhausted when he woke, fingers clutching the damp sheets, his face beginning to run like cheese at a July picnic. He could not possess Rachel. Already it was clear, he'd go through life with his lust and his dreams unrequited. In front of a computer screen he'd sit, googling her name, finding a mention of her from time to time. The online newsletter of her church at home in Tennessee might mention her in connection with a church supper; Jim might find a page-12 story in a regional newspaper featuring comments about a new seafood joint she'd visited with the upwardly mobile Southern gentleman to whom she was happily married. Or, better still, he'd come across a letter she'd written concerning trash pickup on her block. At the sight of these crumbs of Rachel's mind and personality, Jim would comically, pathetically, dredge up memories of when she'd smiled coyly at him, the leash around his neck as tight as ever.

I sat there in the mess beside my friend, saying what words I could. Upstairs I could hear the maid sobbing, sobbing.

"I always thought of you as a strong person. I never imagined one woman's rejection could hobble you to the point that I barely recognize—"

"Well, this isn't 'one woman' we're talking about. This is Rachel. How many times have you heard me describe her mouth, her eyes—"

Spare me, I wanted to shout at him. I know the deal. Just when you thought there weren't any women left in the world, you met Rachel. You began to conceive of that chance occurrence as part of the natural course of your life. . . .

"Whatever rewards are to come in your life wouldn't be authentic if you'd never been where you are now . . ." I began. I talked to him for a couple of hours before sauntering back out into the brilliant sunshine.

But on my way out, I paused in the hallway outside Jim's room. Down the hall, there was the doorway of another room where I had a strange sense of all assumptions, all naïveté about the ways of the rich and powerful meeting their end on that sunny morning in L.A.

The subsequent events of my friend's life are a story I know well, either because I was there, or—more often—because Jim shared them with me in detail over two or three or twelve beers. Jim was a rich kid who got to do pretty much what he pleased with his time, while I had a gig as a writer for a late-night comedy show that was demanding, but reasonable enough by some standards. When he ventured out of the seclusion of his house in Sherman Oaks, we hung out in the bars and cafés and comedy clubs of Glendale, Pasadena, Santa Monica, Venice,

Encino, Bel Air, any place where blaring techno music and shuffling bodies without an ounce of fat on them helped my friend's mental state. Existential despair does, after all, require a certain amount of thought. From this point of view, Jim's way of life could inspire hope. Everywhere my friend and I went, I noticed the lithe young women around us, but Jim kept loyal to the memory of his departed girl, declining to look at or return the smiles of the romantic ingénues.

In all honesty, I lied to my friend on many occasions. At various times in his life, Jim had tried his hand as a director, a cartoonist, an actor in commercials, or even as a lead in one or another Shakespeare production at USC. I would soon come to appreciate the ramifications of Jim's interest in Shakespeare, and of the rumored existence of a sequel to the bard's early comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost*. In the meantime, I encouraged him as best I could with the lie that I thought him highly gifted, that he really should sift through the rubble of his life and find something to hold up and say, "I created this!"

Before long, Jim grew weary of our outings together. He'd started to figure out in advance what I was going to say when he began to get sloshed and talk about putting a Remington .45 under his chin and squeezing the trigger. I'll admit not much of what I told him was original. He stopped answering his cell phone when he saw my name flashing on the screen. After one more evening sitting plastered in a Venice nightclub, Jim became something of a ghost, always around me, invading my thoughts, but never a physical presence. Sometimes I gazed out the window of my car and imagined him, walking alone between rows of 4 million dollar palaces in Beverly Hills, envious of the successful men with their Norman Rockwell lives, their elegant private space that existed outside of time. I cannot know whether my friend was trying to construct mentally the life he thought he was going to have with Rachel, but I suspect that every rustle in the palm trees, every cry of laughter from a backyard pool in the brilliant morning must have prodded his death-bent imagination . . . as all around him the streets seemed as desolate as the remotest canyon in Riverside County.

I called the Hamilton mansion a few times, and once I got through to Nathan.

"Could I speak to Jim?"

"He . . . uh, he can't come to the phone."

In my mind's eye, I saw my friend poised over a toilet bowl, his fingers pinching the linoleum, dry-heaving until he thought he'd suffocate. Nathan didn't get along with Jim and probably took pleasure in all this.

But amid the swaying palms and the vast stretches of empty street, Jim's life went on. Jim enrolled in a filmmaking class at USC, and told others he enjoyed it, but I wondered whether he hoped to get shot wandering alone in the neighborhood around the campus late at night. In

his class, at least, were some interesting people he might not otherwise have met: chic kids from Des Moines or Austin or Seattle who, however varied their backgrounds, shared a dynamic, a passion they hoped to marshal in the medium of film. After class, Jim went out for drinks with a few of these fellow travelers, though they were a few years younger and probably a bit leery of this self-absorbed rich brat.

What follows a loss of such magnitude? “Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief,” says the nobleman Berowne in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. But I wasn’t getting anywhere with honest words, or dishonest ones for that matter. I knew that Rachel White was an almost inexpressibly charming woman, with her rich shoulder-length blonde hair and her intelligence, her love for words, her taste for language as part of the texture of experience itself. I’d passed over in silence a more troubling question, one which seemed to lack any purpose at this juncture: *Explain to me the wisdom of pegging your existence on a gamble. Only a fool or a criminal would say, I hope this plays out as I’ve dreamed, and in the event it doesn’t, well, I’ve got a Beretta in a holster sewn into the lining of my right breast pocket and can align its barrel with my Adam’s apple in a hot second.* Jim would be the first to call himself a fool, but he resembled a bandit perhaps even more. To tell the truth, I cannot know whether the most notorious bandit in North Hollywood’s history thought ahead to the moment when his existence ended by his own hand on a sunny alley behind the Bank of America one day in February. Maybe he expected to escape, maybe he never thought the scenario through beyond an awareness that the Beretta must always contain at least one round. *One round for when every possibility steals away like a blinking will-o-the-wisp from a marsh, when every new circumstance turns around with a hideous dripping grin. Helicopters and sirens and bullets grazing the air around my head.* A fool for love can expect no better. . . . As I sat on the beach at Malibu amid the tanned bodies, watching gulls circle in the nebulous blue, my thoughts circled just as tediously back to my friend sitting on the floor with a .45 in both hands, pressing against the pasty skin of his upper neck, in a room like that of a spoiled child who methodically broke one of his toys after another and left them strewn without rhyme or reason. You come up with something really eloquent to tell someone in this state, and he replies *Yeah, sure, whatever.*

I didn’t see my friend for a few weeks.

One night, Jim sat in the lounge of a club in Glendale listening, from across the bar, to a series of comedians.

“So I heard that Beaver College changed its name to Arcadia University. Probably a good idea. It’s a little easier to say ‘I’m an Arcadia man’ with a straight face than ‘I’m a Beaver man.’”

There were titters, and a fat guy directly in front of the stage laughed really loud, but otherwise the room was quiet.

“Hey, most guys I know like Beaver . . .”

The fat man roared again. The comedian finished up and another took his place on the stage. Jim turned to a blonde he’d noticed sitting two stools down, trying to gauge her expression.

“So I put my mouth around this tiny penis and sucked really hard . . .”

Jim couldn’t be sure, but thought he detected an immensely subtle change in the woman’s expression.

The comedian on the stage went on: “. . . I think if my wife doesn’t start having her period once every three months, we might not stay married . . .”

A couple of people got up and walked out of the club. The comedian didn’t seem to notice.

Jim made eye contact with the blonde seated near him, and said:

“Good humor startles you with its incongruity. Too often, people confuse being loud and in-your-face with being funny.”

“Tell me about it,” the woman sighed.

On the stage, the routine went on: “So I met this kid who has *both* organs . . .”

Jim asked the woman whether she was a regular at this place.

“No, not really. The first comedian tonight is a friend of a friend. I’m not sure why I’m still here,” she replied.

For the first time, Jim studied her features: sandy blonde hair almost boyish in its length, in the way she brushed it coyly to one side, but smooth cheeks the hue of milk tinted with butter. Her black sweater hugged the curve of her chest. Her belt had a shiny silver buckle wide enough to pop a bottle cap, and her jeans looked new. When she smiled, she seemed to acknowledge that she knew exactly what the other person would like to do to her. Jim forced himself not to stare as he ransacked his brain for an explanation as to why *he* was here if he found so much of the so-called humor in this joint distasteful.

“I, uh, would be playing chess tonight, but my partner’s attending a Fischer-Spassky reenactment in Helsinki,” Jim said.

“You mean Reykjavik?”

“Uh, yeah. Can I buy you another drink?” he ventured.

The woman smiled.

Her name was Sarah.

In my concern for my friend, I broke the rules of polite society and went out to the Hamilton house unannounced. Once again, Nathan met me at the door. Recalling the effects of my earlier visit, he grudgingly let me enter. I couldn’t shake the sense that Nathan had other troubles on his mind. At times in our acquaintance, Jim had compared his father, mysterious and aloof James Hamilton II, to King Lear, for his impotent howling at the folly and treachery of the world as he sailed straight past the borders of senility; to Timon of Athens, for his odd notions of loyalty;

and to King Ferdinand of Navarre, the monarch of *Love's Labour's Lost*, for his overbearing, relentless pressuring of his sons when it came to success in study and in work. I don't know which mask the elder Hamilton wore on this day, and I wouldn't find out. As soon as I made it to the top of the stairs, I knew that things were quiet today, both the Salvadorean maids were humming to themselves as they went about *le ménage*, not an article of furniture was out of place. I turned into the doorway of the third room down the hall on the second floor, and there was a clean room with sunlight spilling through the beige curtains a demure six inches apart. Through the gap I could make out the deep rich green on the fringes of a neighboring estate, a blond boy tossing a frisbee to a dog. The sounds of the maids faded, until for a moment I had the impression that I was alone in the mansion.

A pair of feet thumped upstairs. The boy outside whistled at the dog. Then I could just—*just*—make out labored breathing from another room on this floor. Retracing my steps, I thought that perhaps Hamilton senior was up and about. The breathing sounded like that of someone struggling with Parkinson's, or some equally debilitating condition. No, the elder Hamilton never exerted himself or moved about without his mechanized wheelchair. I looked in both directions between the walls painted like ox's blood, then strode through the hallway toward the front of the mansion. In this place that practically reeked of sorrow, the phantoms of murdered possibilities must have studied me with loathing. I pursued the faint, spastic sounds two more doors down, still at a remove from the room that had beckoned to me on the earlier visit, and turned into yet another doorway. Here was a rather nondescript guest bedroom, blinds drawn all the way behind the prince-sized bed, but the prince was not in it. Beside the bed, I detected the moves of a pale, moaning, writhing shape on the rug, clutching at the sheet like a child at a mother's skirt.

"Jim. Is it cocaine or smack?"

He wheezed. Unhealthy tired eyes rotated upward in their sockets.

"Jesus, let me help you up here," I said, extending a hand, then I did not help so much as pull with all the might of my gym-toned biceps to get him into a prone position on the bed. At once I read something in the depths of those dilated eyes: the facetious self-congratulation of someone who experienced an upturn and went way too far in his celebration—sensing the victory, on some level, to be a fleeting one. I looked into those eyes, they looked into me. Then I went to find a cup and made him drink about six gallons of water. I wanted to be there for my friend, but I couldn't stick around as he convalesced. I was not there when he found the strength to start getting ready for his film class.

I was not there three nights later, when Jim met Sarah at the door of her bungalow in West Hollywood and drove her to the Laugh Factory, where he'd promised they'd find humor of a more cerebral variety than

at the other joint. I wasn't present when Jim turned and vomited on her lap at the punchline of one of the jokes by the first comedian in the night's lineup, nor when he tried to pursue her as she beat a retreat from the club and he slammed into a waitress whose tray of drinks sloshed all over a party of four at one of the tables directly across from the stage, and one of the offended patrons seized a chair and hurled it with such force that it missed Jim and slammed into one of the front windows. The man wrestled on the floor with Jim, and lacking a better weapon, pulled out a set of keys and raked the largest one back and forth against Jim's left cheek. An off-duty cop pulled them apart and arrested them both.

It won't surprise anyone that Jim was soon out on \$10,000 bail, charges of misdemeanor, assault, and disorderly conduct pending. He was in bed at least half the time, but in spite of his crippling depression, he did make it out once in a while, to the beach at Santa Monica, or to the bars on the Strip. One evening after a few glasses of Stella, my friend shuffled eastward on Sunset Boulevard, a dull purplish sheen hanging over the street as lights began to come on in the windows of houses in the hills to the west and north. Jim was walking a trifle unsteadily when he spied a lass heading in the other direction, toward those hills in the clear air carrying scents from damp leaves and patches of cranberries in one of the yards. The woman had olive skin and black hair only slightly longer than Sarah's. She wore a denim jacket and a pair of faded jeans. When they made eye contact and a smile spread across her face, Jim's first thought was that she was a whore. But he chided himself for that surmise as soon as he turned and studied the bag slung over her right shoulder, which gave the impression that she was on her way home from the gym, not working the streets. He told himself it was not naive to detect something innocent and benevolent in her openness. She'd taken his glance as a compliment, from a stranger who was staggering a bit but looked like a decent guy. There were no monsters out tonight.

Two nights later, Jim was getting sloshed at one of the wine bars on Santa Monica Boulevard, when he saw the woman again. She was sitting at one of the raised round tables between the bar and the modest garden out back where wealthy studio executives were chatting up their dates. Sensing that it might be bad form to ask her, "Hi, are you a whore?", he carried his drink between two trembling fingers until a moment of sublime awkwardness when they were making eye contact and his tongue was like a motor turning over helplessly. Yet maybe she sensed that it was almost enough for him, at the moment, to probe the depths of her lucid brown eyes. Her skin was like the tarpaulin of a tent that had stood in the sun for a week, something less than a deep tan, but not the ivory of an actress on Oscar night, either. Her smiles revealed perfect, gleaming teeth, but she never appeared to be showing off.

"Emily," she said, extending a hand.

“Jim,” he breathed.

“You’re creeping me out a little, Jim,” she put in with a guarded smile.

“Forgive me, I thought I recognized you from a screen role—I was puzzling over which one that might be . . .”

“A roundabout way of asking me what I do. I suppose you think you’re clever?”

When he learned that she was a flight attendant, he wondered how many nervous fliers had seen their anxieties evaporate at 30,000 feet as soon as Emily leaned over them, smiling. Though she didn’t express it in as many words, Jim picked up on a longing in her soul as powerful, as eloquent, as what crippled him. But Emily caught a little too much of Jim’s breath that evening. It might tell you something about Jim’s state that even someone who had grown used, through bitter experience, to deciphering the words of barely coherent men and dealing with them diplomatically when she felt like blowing their heads off lasted no more than a few minutes, before she set down her drink and vanished from the wine bar without a look back.

I still couldn’t reach my friend by cell phone. I left a note with Nathan saying that I hoped Jim could accompany me to Santa Monica Beach on the weekend.

When we got to the beach, and Jim pulled off his t-shirt, I could see right away that he hadn’t been quite as zealous about hitting the gym as I had lately. Well, what had I expected? We lay back on our towels studying the nearly naked bodies prancing on the sand. We drank beers from a blue plastic ice-box. We took in the sun, the raging surf, the scores and scores of jaw-dropping women. These days, my friend was so lost, he wandered among pink stucco buildings and neoclassical columns in the disused studio lots and knew that Rachel would never again be a breathing tangible presence amid this Nathanael West *mélange*. Without preamble, I turned to my friend and finally put into words what had been at the back of my mind for months now. It wasn’t the insight of the century; it was simply that what he might have thought of as a unique, unequalled longing for a certain person was really a sign of more generalized needs. Show me a happy spouse, who could not imagine being married to anybody else, and I’ll show you someone who, at a different time of life, could scarcely conceive of standing athwart destiny by not marrying someone who was now quite forgotten. I’m not totally sure Jim was listening. He watched as crowds came spilling southward down the beach, surfers, blondes, portly men from Pennsylvania and Florida and Minnesota with their overfed families, Mexican girls with rich, dark, shoulder-length hair and skin like diluted caramel. *I don’t know*, said my friend’s eyes, *I just don’t know*. After listening to the waves pound the shore for a while, he shifted on his towel and made eye contact with me.

“Maybe I’ll find a different parlor game,” he said.

No more Russian roulette, in other words.

A few weeks later, Jim was out strolling at the ever-popular Venice Beach Boardwalk when a red-haired woman in a green and black jogging outfit asked him for the time. He told her he had a hunch that she was a film student, and a conversation ensued. Anne's glorious red hair fell straight to her shoulders; she knew it would be a crime to crop hair like that short. She'd always have the face of a girl—not a plastic face like a model in a Ralph Lauren ad, but the face of a baker's daughter, or of the girl in the tea shop in Ezra Pound's poem. While Pound brooded about his subject inexorably growing middle-aged, Jim felt hard-put to resist the hypnotic properties of this girl. They exchanged numbers. For the first time in weeks, my friend ceased to muse with the tip of a .45 digging into the soft flesh of his upper neck.

The next time I visited the Hamilton house in Sherman Oaks, my friend came to the door. On his breath came not the faintest trace of liquor as he greeted me and asked me to follow him upstairs, where he showed me the \$1,500 suit he'd bought in Beverly Hills the day before. When he sought my advice on preparing for the "date of his life," I could only mumble.

"Phenobarbitol. I hear it calms the nerves—when you're making a gamble of this magnitude . . ."

Jim laughed, excused himself.

Now I heard a voice I'd never heard before in my life. Croaky, labored, preemptory. It called my name, summoned me to the room down the hall that I'd never dared enter.

I entered that room, which had a distasteful air of adult diapers. I stood face to face with James Hamilton senior, seated in the mechanized wheelchair from which I doubt he'd risen, on his own, in six years. His face looked like an ancient prune with a bit of whitish fuzz on top. Two wizened claws gripped the armrests of the wheelchair. In the dim light behind the shades, I strained to make out the old man's eyes. I had no idea what he made of me, only that some sinister intelligence was at work in the depths of those ancient sockets.

"Close the door, boy," the voice croaked.

I obeyed.

"Can I trust you?" he asked me.

Though the question was quite pointless, I nodded.

"We were the greatest oil dynasty in the history of the southwest. Kind of hard to believe when you see my pathetic son stagger around, isn't it?"

I said nothing, but did not lower my eyes.

"Nonetheless, whether I like it or not, he is a Hamilton, and I have maintained, however futilely, certain expectations for him."

"You should do yourself a favor—" I began.

“Do not interrupt me!” he said with a vehemence that made me jump.

I resumed my pose of respectful attention.

“At various times and in varying states of coherence, my son has compared me to King Lear, to Polonius, to many other personages I am too polite to mention. It’s sort of funny, since he obviously considers me a cultural philistine who rarely opens a book. But I suppose the comparisons are no less valid for that. He’s also compared me to King Ferdinand of Navarre because of the way I tried to keep him and his brother on a single-minded course of study and work, rather as the monarch in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* did his three noblemen.”

Something glimmered in those crinkled eye sockets.

“Perhaps you have heard of the rumored sequel to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*? A play called *Love’s Labour’s Won*?”

“I’m sure you didn’t make your fortune by listening to rumors,” I said.

“Of course not. But suppose the manuscript of that sequel did turn up at some point. I’d be curious to know what became of the king who so cruelly denied the men dependent on him the pleasures of female company. What would an older, more reflective king choose to do?”

And I knew which mask James Hamilton senior now wore.

“My cancer has advanced quite a ways—the time when it threatened my second kidney is ancient history now. They give me about six weeks to live. In spite of my agony, in spite of everything, I must maintain high hopes for my first-born. After I’ve returned to dust, there must be someone to engineer these matters. That’s why I asked whether I can trust you, Andrew Burke.”

At this point, the ancient man showed me a brochure from a discreet agency, Premiere Model Introductions, and I wanted to cry from the sick realization that came over me.

“Do they—do they—” I couldn’t finish.

“Obviously they aren’t responsible for what happens during or after an encounter with a woman who is desperate to get married. But they orchestrate the meetings between single men and their models, yes, for a very considerable fee. They can arrange it so the man thinks what’s happening is quite organic.”

I thought of all the agony in my friend’s life. I thought of the strangers who spurned him, the barren alleys, the palms swaying over the lonely boulevards of his pitiful existence. I thought about feminine beauty in its infinite manifestations, and I made a decision. Yet I couldn’t help thinking of one of the Princess of France’s lines in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*:

Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye, Not utter’d by base sale of chapmen’s tongues.

“Andy!” my friend greeted me a few minutes later in the lobby of the mansion. “How do I look?”

JOAN BARIL, a Thunder Bay, Ontario native, has appeared in many magazines including *Prairie Fire*, *Room*, *Northword*, *Other Voices*, *Canadian Forum*, *Herizons*, *Ten Stories High*, *The New Orphic Review*. For several years her columns on women's and immigrant issues appeared in *Thunder Bay Post* and *Northern Woman's Journal*. Recently she won third place in a contest with the *Antagonish Review*. In May 2013, her story "Grace Street" will be published by Roseway Press in an anthology called *Everything is Political*. She blogs at Literary Thunder Bay.

Subterranean Homesick Blues

Joan Baril

A LIGHT STEP on the wooden sidewalk outside wakes JJ from the old nightmare. In it, he's twenty-three years old, sitting with the entire family on the long couch in the rec room and watching TV. Ed Sullivan disappears from the screen and, a heartbeat later, a picture of his New York townhouse appears.

Walter Cronkite's words streak through his brain like a line of fire.

At first the authorities believed the explosion was caused by a gas leak but now it appears dynamite was involved, perhaps some sort of bomb.

His father, ever the news reporter, leans forward. "Oh, my God," he says.

His grandmother half turns. "Don't you live close to there, JJ dear?"

No Grandma, I do not live close to there. I live in there. My friends live there. That is my house; my dynamite. He does not say these words out loud.

But now, JJ, in his basement room, feels the dream shredding as he tunes into the sounds outside, the foot steps on the long wooden walkway from the street. He lies in his lounge chair, swaddled in sheep skins, a ridiculous fifty-year-old mummy, the blessed morphine pump near his shoulder, his laptop on the swivel tray, the phone within reach, or whatever is left of his reach.

He's never played a radio in his basement room, never a TV. The wooden sidewalk outside tells him all he needs to know.

Steps move lightly around the house. One person. He releases a breath. The pigs come in pairs. The ambulance dudes trundle a gurney, but there'd be at least four of them after what happened last week. They'd be bringing in the reinforcements.

He hears tapping at the back door, a male voice and his wife Marion's lighter tones and then the footsteps coming down. He is pretty sure he

knows who it is. Max's boy, over from Salt Spring Island. To get the scrapbooks.

He glances at the pile on the table, the work of years. Well, it had to happen sometime.

"Hi," says the young guy in the doorway. "Remember me? I'm Keith. I came to visit a couple of months ago with my dad, Max Cameron."

"Take a chair," JJ says, studying the slight young man in the beige windbreaker, round-lensed glasses, collar-length hair. Max's grey eyes.

"How's it going?" Keith says, pulling the wicker chair close to JJ's sheepskin cradle. "Are you doing any better?" He has a gentle smile, just like his dad.

"Same, same. The melanoma has moved to my brain, that's the big news. But I'm still making sense. I hope. I've got my morphine so I'm OK for a bit. My skin is bad though. Real bad."

"Dad didn't want to make another trip so soon," Keith says. "You know what I mean. He likes to stay on the island. But he'll take the night ferry next week. He's thinking about you."

"He's right, your dad," JJ says. "Twenty-seven years on the run, just like me, and no use getting careless. He's got lots of life to live yet."

Keith gives a sheepish smile and reaches into his pocket bringing out a small paper packet. "He sent you this. There's not much but he says he'll get more next week."

JJ feels his heart bound. "Oh, good man! Do you know how to fix it?"

"Well, I've seen them do it in the residence. I think so. Is there a razor blade in the bathroom?"

JJ watches avidly as the young man uses the razor to chop the cocaine crystals on the shaving mirror, gathering in the powder with the edge of the blade and chopping it again and again, his head bent to the task.

"You're at Simon Fraser, right?" JJ says.

"Yeah." The young man is forming the powder into two thin lines.

"What are you taking?"

"International finance."

"Oh, Christ," JJ says.

The young man smiles up at him. "That's what my dad says. He says I'm learning to be an imperialist. An outsourcing imperialist." He laughs.

"The primary task of revolutionary struggle is the contradiction between the oppressed people of the world and the imperialism of the United States," JJ says.

Keith raises his head, stops moving the white powder. "What?"

JJ laughs. "Something I wrote a long time ago, in 1969. Part of a dynamite speech I gave." *Had he really said dynamite? The cancer must have reached his brain for sure.* But he smiles to himself because he realizes it doesn't matter any more. Not at all.

"Imperialism and outsourcing are dead opposite," JJ says.

The young man shrugs. He takes a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and rolls it tight. "Fresh and clean from the ATM," he says.

"You'll have to do it," JJ says. "I can hardly hold anything. The skin on my fingers is peeling off. Marion has to feed me." He holds up his hands and sees the young man wince. "That's nothing. You should see my back, my ass. Pretty soon I won't have skin, just an interior with no exterior to hold it together."

The young man's face flares into pity as, with one hand, he carefully places the tip of the rolled bill into JJ's nostril and, with the other hand, raises the mirror. JJ takes a deep breath to contain the pain of lifting his head. Then he breathes in the powder again and again, as Keith moves the mirror so the end of the rolled bill slides along the white powdery line.

JJ closes his eyes. He hears Keith snort the second line. A feeling of lightness, a golden lightness, floats through his body. "The queen of drugs," he hears himself say. "The queen of drugs."

* * *

He's back in the family rec room in 1970, twenty-seven years ago. Ed Sullivan disappears from the screen and a picture of his New York town house flashes on. They're all staring at the television as he gets up, makes it to the bathroom, and flushes twice so they can't hear him throwing up.

He goes upstairs, gets his jacket and car keys and slips out the front door. By two in the morning, he passes through Hartford and pulls into a picnic area beside the Connecticut River, opens the trunk and tosses the case of dynamite into the current. He stands on the muddy bank, his body swaying towards the dark water. Beautiful Diane. Dead. She was the only one who hated the plan, said it was pointless and wrong.

But he and Robbins were fired up for violence, for the supreme deed.

Three friends dead and it's his fault.

He can't stop shaking as he forces himself to walk back across the wet grass. He gets into the car and, all the way back to Hartford, as the radio gives him bits of news about the explosion, he hears himself sobbing like a child. He leaves the Ford Falcon in the Greyhound parking lot, keeping the keys to ditch later.

On the bus and gone.

He never saw his parents or grandmother again.

* * *

"I used to peddle coke," JJ says to Keith who is walking around the basement room, looking at his books, the statue of Buddha with its elaborate incense holder, the mandala posters on the walls, the scrapbook table with its scissors and glue sticks, the drawing of the Buddhist temple on Salt Spring Island which he helped to build. He'd been a good stone mason right up to last year, and all the interior stone work in the temple, all the carved lintels and railings and deep window sills were his creations.

One thing to be proud of, anyway.

"In California," JJ says, his mind drifting back over the bad years, "I almost got caught. I had to jump out a window like Spider Man. Headed for Mexico. The thing about being on the run is you're lonely all the time. No friends, really. Unfortunately, I found José Cuervo. Coming up here and meeting Marion saved me."

"Why Vancouver?" Keith asked.

"My brother Bob had started his first year at Simon Fraser."

He sees Keith's start of surprise.

"Sixteen years ago. Bob lives in Richmond now, but the Mountie pigs never give up so I don't see much of him. A couple of times a year, we find a way."

Keith's voice is hesitant. "Your wife wanted me to ask you something."

"I know," JJ says. "To go to the hospital. She's having it tough looking after me."

"So why not go?"

"One more week, that's all I need. To settle the scrapbooks and to finish my bio on the laptop. I can only write a few minutes at a time. One more week and then for sure."

Keith opens the top scrapbook on the pile on the table and, without looking at him, says, "Dad told me you killed someone in an explosion."

"No, but I bought the dynamite. From a guy who worked construction near my parents' place. He stole it for me and I paid him. The group had lots of money because we'd just robbed a bank."

"I don't understand it." Keith turns, frowning.

"We were bringing the war back home. That was the idea at the time, anyway. Bring the war home," JJ says.

"The war? Which war?"

JJ feels his eyes open in surprise. "The Vietnam War."

"It's been over for ages," Keith says.

JJ closes his eyes again, tries to find the golden heart of cocaine.

"Have you ever heard of the Weathermen?" JJ says at last.

"No," Keith says.

"Did you ever hear the phrase, 'You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows?'"

"I don't think so," Keith says. He's holding open a scrapbook so JJ can see the page. "Pretty girl here."

"That was Diane. The guy beside her was Robbins. He wanted to make a nail bomb and set it off at an officers' dance at Fort Dix. Robbins knew nothing about bombs and neither did Diane."

"What?" Keith glares. "A nail bomb? That fucking sucks. I don't get that kind of violence. It's stupid. No matter what the cause. Just plain, fucking stupid." He lets the scrapbook drop from his hands back on the pile.

“It wasn’t stupid,” JJ says. “It was cruel. Cruel is worse than stupid. Way worse.”

A tiny sound outside.

“Keith!” JJ snaps the name. “Get that mirror and the other stuff. Lift the corner of the carpet under the table and pull up the floorboard. Just press on the right side and the board will pop up. Throw your wallet in there too. And any other identification.”

Keith stares at him, confused.

“Just do it, man! Move! Right now!”

He hears Keith fumbling with the carpet and he also hears the background noise, the double set of footsteps on the walkway outside. They aren’t hurrying and, half way along, they stop. Maybe they’re trying to look in the basement window but long ago he’d painted the glass black. Another vehicle stops on the street. Doors slam but silence follows as if everyone up there is frozen, wondering what the hell they’re doing.

Then the sound he expected, the soft clunking of the gurney wheels on the boards. More footsteps. A god damn army out there.

The tap at the back door and his wife’s voice from above.

Keith stands up, his eyes round. “I did it,” he whispers. “I covered it up pretty good.”

“Listen. Do what I say. Sit on the floor in front of the table. Cross your legs. Your name is Kama and you’re a Buddhist monk from the Salt Spring temple. You came over to do meditation with me. Got it?”

“Yeah.” The young man’s voice is all breath. “Got it.”

“Did you get rid of all your identification?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t want to give them a lead to your dad. Now put your hands on your knees like this.” Painfully JJ lifts one arm, his palm turned upward with his thumb and forefinger creating a circle. “Hear me now. Don’t get involved, whatever happens. For your dad’s sake, do not get involved! You understand?”

From his place on the floor, Keith nods.

Marion’s voice at the door of the rec room. “I’m sorry darling, but it’s time. I had to...”

The two cops push past her.

He hears Marion cry out, “Don’t touch him. His skin is very sensitive.”

But the cop has JJ by the upper arm and he screams in agony and then he flies from the chair, his raised fist connecting with the square face and the guy hurtles backwards in surprise, hitting the bookcases. JJ rounds on the second cop, pummeling him in fury. He feels the old strength flowing back, the strength of many years working as a stone mason and he knows too that the cocaine is pumping in energy and dulling the pain. Out of the corner of his eye, the ambulance guys shrink in the doorway. They’d seen him like this before.

He grabs the cop on the floor high enough to slam his head against a lower bookshelf, but he feels his arms being locked from behind and his body bent backward. It takes them a long time before they can get him into the cuffs and on to the gurney, and as the straps bite into his legs, arms and chest, he lets his body relax into the pain.

As they bump him outside, he hears Marion crying and crying. "I'm sorry, darling. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

* * *

They're all sitting on the couch. Ed Sullivan disappears from the screen and a picture of his New York town house flashes on. Walter Cronkite opens his mouth; but, with an effort, JJ forces himself out of the dream and into the hospital room. A light voice in his ear. Keith is bending over him.

"How did you make out?" JJ whispers, trying for a smile.

"The monk thing worked fine. They just waved me away. I panhandled the money for the ferry and Dad picked me up last night. Then I came back over this morning."

JJ tries to raise his head to look around the room, but he can't do it. "Your dad isn't here, is he?" His voice emerges as a far-away panicky whisper. He's aware that Marion is standing at the foot of the bed and that Keith is bending closer, his sweet face blurry in the dimming light.

"No," Keith whispers.

"Good man," JJ says. "Tell him to stay away."

"They roughed you up." Keith says.

"I'm OK," JJ says. "A bit battered maybe but basically OK."

"My dad sent you a message," the young man says. "But I don't understand it."

"What?"

"It doesn't make sense," Keith says.

"What?" JJ says, a little stronger.

Keith sighs. "OK. He said first you were right about the outsourcing. I can't figure that out, but he said he'll explain it later. The main thing is I'm supposed to say this sentence to you. But it's silly, just gibberish."

"Tell me anyway," JJ whispers.

"OK. It's this. 'The pump don't work 'cause the vandals stole the handle.'"

"Say it again," JJ says.

The young man does so.

"Again."

As Keith says the sentence for the third time, JJ feels himself laughing and laughing along the entire length of his body, but no sound emerges as he laughs his way down and down into the darkness.

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East Van Rules

Don McLellan

FIND YOURSELF a seat in the bleachers, shell some peanuts, turn your face to the sun. Listen for the *ping* of aluminum colliding with rawhide, the softball *whooshing* beyond the jurisdiction of an outfielder's glove and a player known as Double Cheese chugging into third base. Make it a Sunday afternoon in July, if it helps. Insert boisterous spectators along foul lines.

Some will say Double Cheese had a large lead at third and that catcher Tubby Tuchman tried picking him off. Others maintain there was legerdemain at work, that the catcher tossed a *second* ball to his third baseman which sailed into the outfield, encouraging the runner to trot home with the winning run.

This, though, is undisputed: before Double Cheese could cross the plate, Tubby Tuchman slapped the runner's thigh, reaching into the soft flesh of his catcher's mitt and exhibiting the ball for all to see.

"The runner is out!" declared the umpire. "And this game is over!"

* * *

There are no stalemates in baseball. Whether it's a hard-fought nine innings or a friendly pickup affair, when the duel is done there's a winner and a loser—the reason, when a satisfactory labour contract proved elusive, Morton Hollingsworth, the "M" in M&B Landscape Supplies, agreed to settle the month-old dispute with seven innings of slow-pitch.

"Isn't this a little unusual?" queried Dexter Beesley, the firm's U.K.-born accountant, when informed of the proposal. "I've never heard of wage settlements being decided by the number of...goals scored."

"In baseball, Dex," sneered Chip Hollingsworth, the proprietor's son, The Brat to employees, "you score *runs*."

The management team that sweltering summer afternoon was sequestered in a dusty storage bin furnished with a foldout table, the

required number of uncomfortable stools and one well-worn La-Z-Boy armchair for the boss, who suffered from backside carbuncles.

“But they have Jimmy Witherspoon,” bemoaned Lyle Trafford, the general manager. “Didn’t he play pro ball somewhere?”

“A season or two in the minors,” The Brat sniffed. “Besides, he’s got a gimpy back. Right, Dad?”

“Enough!” barked the CEO, rising gingerly from the La-Z-Boy. “Our suppliers are grumbling, our competitors are gaining ground. And last night the house was egged again. Minnie’s furious.”

According to official company spin, all was swell.

“We’re prepared to wait as long as it takes to reach a fair settlement,” Morton Hollingsworth, only a day previous, had told a reporter with the *East Vancouver Echo*. “Our subsidiaries are having a banner year.”

Which was, everyone even remotely familiar with the company knew, a mile-high pyramid of cow shit. M&B didn’t have any subsidiaries, and there hadn’t been anything but a cessation of revenues ever since employees, vexed by another year without a pay raise, downed tools (so to speak) and began reporting instead to strike leader, Anton Malakoff. The M&B forklift driver had been living in a weathered Winnebago since his wife, tired of the rants, had given Mr. Know-It-All the heave-ho.

* * *

At noon, fresh from his tête-a-tête with the company president, Malakoff waved his colleagues into the motorhome. Fast food wrappings and bottle caps crunched underfoot. Hand-scrubbed underthings swung from a shoelace clothesline stretched across the rear window. Empty egg cartons were stacked under a fold-out table.

“Our side wins,” Malakoff told them, “we get the raise. Lose, we return to work Monday morning, no griping.”

“Seven innings?” echoed Wilf Harrelson, a part timer. “No griping?”

“You guys wanted it settled ASAP,” the strike leader reminded.

“Actually,” corrected Arnie Wick, the Afro-haired janitor and pot dealer, “our wives wanted it settled ASAP.”

“Why not two games out of three?” asked Bob LeMaster, a delivery truck driver. “Some of their guys can really hit!”

“We’ve waited long enough,” said Malakoff, who dropped out of community college to peddle a Marxist newspaper.

“It’s our only chance for a raise,” agreed Connie Sugar. On account of her rack, a paragon of surgical excellence, Connie managed the showroom. Some of the fellas suspected the comely single mom of visiting Malakoff in the Winnebago after hours.

“I second that,” said Jimmy Witherspoon, the erstwhile pro. “We know the company’s making a good profit. What have we got to lose?”

“Our jobs?” offered Hymie Toomer. Due to his years, Hymie agreed to act as a kind of ceremonial coach and cheerleader. His eyes were failing.

Co-workers suspected his mind was as well.

“Yeah, we’ve got Jimmy,” Bob LeMaster said, “but he’s just one of nine. Those arseholes in sales jog and go to fitness centres. A lot of our guys”—he eyeballed Arnie Wick, who was rolling a spliff—“are hallucinating most of the time.”

A lineup was drawn up on the back of an empty pizza box. Even factoring in the arseholes who jogged and attended fitness centres, most strikers figured they had a fighting chance. Many had played some organized ball as kids and a few still tossed the ball around with their own after work. Tubby Tuchman had some pop in his bat and Andrea Sanchez, the cashier, could hit better than many of the guys. Some believed Jimmy Witherspoon, bad back or not, was the best damn baseball player ever to come out of East Vancouver.

The strikers also had Buddy Paul, shipping & receiving. Buddy kept a set of free weights in his van. The walls of the vehicle were insulated with photos of Mr. Olympus and Mr. Universe, which accounted for Buddy’s nickname: Mrs. Paul. Though he lacked the skills required to catch a baseball, everyone remembered the round tripper he smacked at the last company barbecue. Even Jimmy Witherspoon couldn’t hit the ball that far.

“You in?” Malakoff asked him.

The young bodybuilder flexed his beach-bronzed biceps: affirmative.

“Okay,” said the strike leader. “Let’s see a show of hands.”

“Hold on a sec,” said Bob LeMaster. “Aren’t we supposed to mark a ballot or something?”

“You, Bob,” said Malakoff, “have been watching too much CBC.”

“You seem very confident,” LeMaster said. “This is because...”

“Because,” said Malakoff, “this is East Vancouver. We’ll be playing by East Van rules.”

* * *

In the storage bin, meanwhile, management was holding its vote.

“Let’s get this over with,” said the CEO. “I have to be on the golf course in an hour. Another one of Minnie’s goddamned charity things.”

Three of M&B’s six managers were wary of settling the dispute with a do-or-die contest none of them were very good at.

“Did you see how far Buddy hit that ball?” asked Lyle Trafford. “I heard he was...”

“Does he pitch or catch?” someone snickered.

“I think we should negotiate a modest raise,” said Beesley, the accountant. “After all, we did have another good year.”

But young Hollingsworth was eager for a game.

“We can get some help,” The Brat said. “I know a couple of guys every bit as good as Witherspoon.”

“But they don’t work here, Chip,” protested Trafford.

“Dad and I have been talking about hiring a few sales trainees.”

“You mean we’re bringing in ringers?” asked Trafford. “Athletes we hire just before the game and then fire?”

“Quit worrying, we’ll win,” assured The Brat.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because,” said Chip, sliding shut the window and lowering his voice, “while we might be in East Van, most of management lives in West Vancouver. We’ll be playing by West Van rules.”

Morton Hollingsworth, his backside pustules erupting, cast the tie-breaking vote.

“Okay,” he decreed. “A game it is. But may God help you if we lose...”

* * *

The Brat reached Malakoff on the strike leader’s cell.

“Five minutes, the parking lot,” he said.

Face to face, young Hollingsworth said, “I don’t know what the old man sees in you, Anton. It’s not like you’re the only forklift driver in East Van.”

“I’m not,” Malakoff said. “But I’m probably one of the best.”

As the management team looked on from the loading ramp, and as the strikers observed from the Winnebago, Malakoff attached his John Henry to the agreement. Hollingsworth did likewise on behalf of M&B.

“Pay peanuts,” the strike leader said, “you get monkeys.”

“We’ve always offered competitive wages,” replied The Brat. “Anywhere else, with your politics, you wouldn’t be working.”

“You’re hardly an authority on labour, Junior,” Malakoff said. “You wouldn’t know a real job if it fell on you.”

The deal inked—and because the *Echo* photographer had been summoned—the pair shook hands.

“The world’s full of your kind,” Malakoff said, smiling for the camera. “You wake up on third base...and think you hit a triple.”

* * *

A city-owned rectangle of mostly weeds, a mud puddle when it rained, sat adjacent to the company’s asphalt parking lot. Alongside it was a section of rusted iron bleacher, the splintered wooden planks splattered with pigeon shit.

Just beyond left field bloomed a private vegetable plot. It was owned by the Hongs, who were from Vietnam. Family members, each under a lampshade hat, tended the crops devotedly. Every summer the Hongs would peddle their yield to homes and businesses in the area. Many M&B employees were customers.

The most popular item was the potato—Hong potatoes, they were called, implying a kind of gold standard for taters. They were a light brown, thin-skinned delicacy responsible for the popular French fries served in the M&B cafeteria. Each Hong spud was the size of a softball.

Even the company president took home a few sacks.

“At my age,” Morton Hollingsworth was fond of saying, “it’s important to maintain fecal bulk.”

* * *

As forecast, game day featured a glaring sun and a mild breeze—perfect for a seven-inning contest. Morton Hollingsworth was hoisted onto the bed of a pickup from where he delivered a brief speech about everybody getting along. It was not lost on the strikers that he was as familiar with the subject of social harmony as his boy was with independently secured employment.

“This dispute will be settled by dinnertime today,” he beamed. “Then we’ll be family once more.”

Predictably, management sycophants and their supporters applauded. Predictably, strikers and theirs jeered. Team captains Chip Hollingsworth and Anton Malakoff, the starting chuckers, convened at home plate.

“Your lineup cards, please, gentleman,” said the umpire, a broad-beamed sort on loan from a local rec league. “Have you decided on team names?”

Little did Chip Hollingsworth know when hiring the ump—slipping him an envelope fat with appreciation—that the official was also the nephew of employee Hymie Toomer.

“We’re the Reds,” said the strike leader.

“That’s for sure,” said The Brat, squeezed into a polyester uniform, apparel he picked up off eBay, his surname and the numeral 1 stitched across the shoulders. “We’ll be the Whites.”

“An imaginative choice,” said Malakoff.

A toonie was tossed: the Reds would bat first.

“Play ball!” hollered the ump. “And for Christ’s sake, play fair.”

* * *

By the fifth inning both teams had scored 10 runs and several of the strikers were drunk. Just about all of them were high. Jimmy Witherspoon’s bat—plus a towering three-run blast by Buddy Paul—had accounted for most of the Reds’ markers. The newly recruited sales trainees did much the same for the Whites.

By mid-afternoon tempers on both sides were frayed as a dishrag. Insults began to fly.

“Hey, you!” shouted a red-eyed Arnie Wick, referring to one of the ringers. “You must work the graveyard shift. I didn’t get your name!”

At M&B Landscape Supplies there was no graveyard shift.

“And you are?” he asked to much hooting of another unfamiliar batter.

At the top of the sixth inning The Brat strutted to the plate. Malakoff’s first pitch was a ball.

“Good eye!” screamed Morton Hollingsworth, who had the La-Z-Coy carted to a canvas tent behind the company’s bench. He and Minnie,

attired in matching whites, sipped martinis.

“There’s only one thing missing,” said Hymie Toomer, talking to himself again. “A darkie fanning the old man with a palm leaf.”

Chip slapped the next pitch into shallow centre, where it trickled like a mountain stream through Mrs. Paul’s waxed gams. It turned out to be a sloppy, error-filled inning for the strikers. They entered their half of the inning down by a run.

The first Red batter, Andrea Sanchez, was easily retired. But then Connie Sugar dropped a blooper over the second baseman’s head, putting the tying run on first. Players on both teams quietly admired the snug fit of Connie’s crimson jersey.

A murmur of anticipation rippled through the crowd as Jimmy Witherspoon completed his practice swings. The Whites called a timeout. Infielders huddled on the mound.

“Walk the big ape,” advised one of the hired guns. “The spaz on deck”—Arnie Wick—“hits like a blind man.”

But the company scion balked at the idea of handing Witherspoon a free pass to pitch to a Brillo-haired pothead. A Hollingsworth didn’t give anything away for free.

“Let’s hurry things up,” the umpire said. “It’ll be winter soon.”

The Brat opted to challenge Witherspoon—or at least appear to. The first two offerings were wide of the plate. Ball three almost cleared the backstop. A chorus of boos rained down on the M&B heir.

“Chickenshit!”

The fourth toss was high and outside, but Witherspoon leaned over the plate and tomahawked the ball into right-centre. It soared over Dexter Beesley’s confused head, nestling amongst a patch of dandelions. The Red’s cleanup hitter lazily circled the bases.

That same inning, the bases empty, Buddy Paul hit his second round-tripper. This one went even farther than the first.

The Reds were up two runs going into the bottom half of the final frame.

* * *

Malakoff’s arthritic arm was beginning to ache. He fanned the first batter but walked the second, who advanced a base on a passed ball. Andrea Sanchez in left field then switched places with Malakoff. She promptly induced Dexter Beesley, whose bat hadn’t ventured into the same hemisphere as the ball, to whiff once again.

Double Cheese, the next batter, tapped some dirt from his cleats and freed his sweat-drenched underpants from the crack of his well-fed rump.

“Problem?” shouted Arnie Wick. “Got letters in the mailbox, do ya?”

The Whites’ ringer answered with a high drive to left-centre, splitting the outfielders. A more fleet-footed batsman would have made a four-bagger out of it, but Double Cheese, who represented the equalizer, pulled

up winded at third. He'd had a beef dip and a Heineken for lunch.

What happened next depends on whom one talked to, on where one was positioned and perhaps on how much drugs and alcohol had been consumed. Did Double Cheese attempt to steal home when the catcher feigned a pick-off attempt, as the Reds maintained? Or did Tubby Tuchman intentionally overthrow a second illegitimate ball to entice the runner to dash for the plate, as the Whites believed?

The ump claims he was momentarily rendered sightless in the late-afternoon glare. By the time he'd regained his vision, Double Cheese was charging down the line...and catcher Tubby Tuchman was applying the tag.

Final score: Reds 16, Whites 15.

Half the spectators were outraged, half ebullient. Several Whites threatened the ump, who had to be escorted to his car. And while work did resume the following morning, as per the accord, the post-game picnic was cancelled. Later that night the strikers had themselves a victory bash in the Winnebago. They hoisted Malakoff on their shoulders, smashing the overhead light. Connie Sugar stayed over.

* * *

Years have passed. The Brat has inherited the company, the La-Z-Boy and the debilitating Hollingsworth abscesses. There's still a picnic every year, but it's a muted affair, and there are no more softball matches. Anton Malakoff found work as a union rep with the steelworkers, denying the new CEO the satisfaction of sacking him. And yes, employees did get their raise, but it was a token sum, and there hasn't been another since. As punishment for their poor showing, the Whites, as promised, received a salary rollback.

Obsessed with rehashing the contested game, Chip Hollingsworth continues to claim the Reds cheated that day. He insists the catcher did make a throw to third, just as the ump was temporarily decommissioned, and that it was intentionally errant. Tubby Tuchman, The Brat says, must have been concealing the game ball under his chest protector, waiting for just such an opportunity.

The Reds argued that if this theory was true, that another ball had been put into play as a ruse to deceive the runner, verification would have been found in the Hong's vegetable plot, where the alleged second ball came to rest. With the bewildered Hong clan looking on, The Brat had commanded teammates to drop to their grass-stained knees and overturn every leaf in the garden. A second ball was never retrieved.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. He's writing the novella, *I'm Not You*, as a fictional tribute to nihilism.

I'm Not You

Ernest Hekkanen

1

THE FIRST THING he became aware of was the damp, moldy odor of decaying leaves against his left cheek. First the odor, then the pain like a tight-fitting helmet against the left rear of his skull. His limbs and body were, at the moment, too leaden to move, and so he simply lay there, breathing through his nose, comforted by the odor of the damp, decaying leaves. The odor seemed to recall something. He felt a recollection trying to stir deep within him, but the recollection wouldn't solidify into a memory, and so he gave up trying to recall whatever it was. Now with each breath, he also became aware of a great deal of pain in his ribcage, abdomen and lower back, all of which added to the overwhelming resistance he felt toward moving his body.

I have to get out of here, he told himself; however, he couldn't make himself do that. He was content to lie on the damp, comforting leaves—to lie wherever the heck he was, and where was he, exactly? A small voice of panic tried to rise up inside of him, as though through layer after layer of resistance. What was he doing, lying on the ground? Had he fallen from a great height? Had he tumbled head over heels down a slope to where he was now lying on his stomach, unmoving except for the shallow breaths he drew in through his nose? Each time he breathed, his nose produced a burbling sound, and now he became aware of a salty taste seeping past his lips. And his lips—his lips struck him as unnaturally thick, like two taut bands drawn over his teeth.

Finally, after another minute, he willed himself to open his right eye, the eye furthest away from the damp smell of the leaves, because the one nearest the earth wouldn't open; indeed, his left eye felt as if it were swollen shut. What he saw when he wrenched open his right eye was

more or less what he had anticipated, given the odor he'd been breathing in through his nose, namely, decayed, brown leaves in some sort of shady grove. The trunk of a dead tree lay on the ground, the bark peeling off in large scabs, and now, a small bird, a bird he didn't know the name of, lurched in fits and starts along the log, emitting strange, nervous-sounding chirps that seemed to float upward to where they joined a cacophony of similar sounds, high overhead. At one point, the small bird seemed to fix its gaze on his right eye, very briefly, very fleetingly, and then, as though reacting to something in the bird's glance, he tried to roll over onto his back by pushing against the forest floor with his right hand.

The move produced a great deal of pain throughout his ribcage, and up into his neck as well, and so he let himself collapse back onto the earth, where he breathed somewhat more strenuously than he had before trying to move. Had he been in an accident? What was he doing there, on the damp leaves? Again, a small voice of panic tried to rise up inside of him, and again he pushed with his right hand against the forest floor. The sodden, decayed leaves squeezed up through the spaces between his fingers, and he let out a groan in response to the pain that threatened to cause his muscles to writhe and cramp.

I have to move; I must, he told himself, pushing with all his strength in hopes of rolling over onto his left side. He felt as if he were pushing against an incline. I have to move; I must, and then he did exactly that, despite the pain that seized his body. He tucked his legs into the fetal position so the slope wouldn't force him back onto his stomach. There, that's better, he thought, breathing heavily, not knowing why that position was any better than being on his stomach, because he felt no lessening of pain, nor was he less confused as to why he was lying there, in what was now obviously a grove of some kind, one that was somewhat marshy, he observed with his good right eye.

I must move, he kept telling himself. I have to get out of here; but for now, he couldn't urge himself to do that. It would result in too much pain, it would cost him too much effort. How long had he been lying there, and why? With his good right eye, he surveyed what he could of the world around him. Yes, he was definitely in a wooded grove. Thrusting up through the decayed leaves was a patch of green horsetails and, further off, what looked to be skunk cabbage, with yellow blooms. There was a gentle rustling of leaves high above him, caused by a breeze that stirred the tops of the trees; however, the breeze didn't reach down to where he was lying on the ground. He knew he must try to move again, and soon, although he couldn't say why it was so urgent.

"I have to get up," he told himself. "I must...."

He looked at his right hand, which he realized was moving toward his face. He stared at his fingers with the eye he could see out of and was struck with amazement that his fingers were moving at his command. To

confirm that they did exactly what he instructed them to do, he moved them at will, like tentacles, a feat that in some small measure astounded him, although he couldn't say why he felt so astounded or even relieved. He observed his fingers nearing his face and then he felt them probing his lips, from one corner to the other. His fingertips produced small stabs of pain from the center of his upper lip over to the far left corner. When they explored the left side of his face up to where his left eye was swollen shut, they produced further stabs of pain below what seemed to be a mask of bruised, numb flesh.

What has happened to me? he thought. Why am I so sore?

Then he thought: I have to move. I must....

He waited for several seconds, in hopes of preparing himself for the pain he would feel, and then, with an explosion of effort, he kicked at the forest floor with his feet and tried to spin himself onto his back while at the same time forcing himself to sit up. The effort resulted in pain throughout his body. He collapsed onto his back, moaning, his eyes closed, waiting for the pain to subside in his body. While paddling with his feet, he had kicked what seemed to be the sharp point of a stick and now there was pain in the sole of his right foot—a new, bright pain as opposed to the sore, dull, aching pain in the rest of his body.

How did I get here? he thought.

Off to his right, somewhat above his right shoulder, he spotted the thin trunk of a dead tree angling off the base of a tree that rose to the height of the surrounding trees, where a leafy canopy filtered the sunshine. If he could reach the trunk of the dead tree, he thought he would be able to pull himself up into a sitting position. It seemed vitally important that he do this; that he get off his back, that he leave, and leave soon. While contemplating how to reach the dead tree, he became aware of a rushing sound he had dismissed at first as coming from inside his head, but which he then realized was coming from the direction his feet were pointing in. He raised his head high enough to look in the direction of the sound. Fairly far off through the trees, he glimpsed flashes of light glinting past the trunks of the trees. The rushing sound came and went and seemed to bring with it the glinting shards of light, and then he heard something he thought he recognized—the guttural, belching sound of exhaust produced by a tractor-trailer that was gearing down a slope.

Holding his head up so long had caused his neck muscles to tremble and nearly cramp. He allowed his head to fall back on the decaying leaves and there he lay, watching the leaves flutter high above him—now panting in shallow breaths. What am I doing here? he asked himself. The lack of an answer alarmed him. The question, although unuttered, was sucked into a place of unknowing unresponsiveness, as dull as pain. Again, he glanced up over his right shoulder at the dead sapling that angled off the base of the tree which reached to the height of the surrounding trees.

Although it produced quite a lot of pain, he attempted to stretch his right arm in the dead sapling's direction, only to discover he couldn't quite reach it. His fingertips came to within a couple of inches. He let his arm drop back against the earth and rested a few moments in anticipation of the pain he would cause himself and then, shoving with his feet and lurching on his back, he flung his shoulders several inches up the meager incline behind him.

Pain manifested as quaking reports throughout his body, far more on his left side than on his right. Shielding himself from the pain by blocking his awareness of it, he repeated the feat of lurching up the slope two more times in rapid succession. "Jesus," he gasped. "What the hell happened to me? Why am I so sore?"

Again, coming from the direction his feet were pointing in, he heard the distant rushing sound of traffic and then the back-belching of a semi-trailer's exhaust as it geared down. The traffic sounds came intermittently. In between, he heard the sound of chirping birds in the trees, high overhead. In an attempt to get away from the pain in his body, he tried to spot the birds in the leafy foliage that moved and swayed in the breeze. There, he saw a bird. A tiny bird. It flitted from one bough to another. And there, he saw another one, high above him, with a yellow breast. Yes, with a yellow breast! What was it called? He felt he should know its name. He felt as though the name was waiting for him to find it, just around a corner somewhere, but it declined to let itself be found.

His pain subsided, minutely. He glanced at the dead sapling that was now close to his upper right arm. He twined his arm around the trunk, gripped it firmly with his hand and then, with another trembling bout of pain, pulled himself up until he was slumped against the trunk of its larger companion. In his attempt to sit up he had pushed against the earth with his left arm, only to discover that it caused him a nearly unbearable amount of pain all along his left side, right up into his shoulder.

He looked around, as if trying to discover how he had come to be there. There was nothing unusual about the grove. It was simply a spot in the forest, on the edge of a marsh, where some stagnant water was held back by an embankment further down the slope. Except—except on his left, where some horsetails appeared to have been crushed, due, possibly, to something having been dragged through them.

Me? he wondered, glancing at his pant legs and shirt. His shirt front was quite soiled. Possibly, he had been dragged on the ground. Possibly. But by whom? To what end?

Glancing down the length of his legs, he noticed there were socks on his feet, grey socks, with faint grey lines running up to where they were bunched above his ankles, just below the hem of his pant legs. He noticed that the sock on his right foot had a hole and that his big toe was poking through it.

I shouldn't be here, he thought.

Yes, but where should I be?

And then, moments later:

I must go. I have to get out of here.

Overhead, up the slope behind him, he heard the chortle of a raven that was soon muted by the sounds of traffic going by on the highway. Now that he was sitting in a slumped position against the tree—an alder—he was able to better see the light flickering past the tree trunks arrayed along the embankment. It was the reflected light of passing vehicle windows. At least, I'm not out in the middle of nowhere, he thought with relief. At least I'm somewhere....

He may have dropped off for a moment, because the pain in his body seemed to distance itself, but then he was jarred awake again, by a new sound that came from the direction of the highway, a loud booming that sent jarring quakes through the air. The rhythmic thud-thudding of the sound was accompanied by light glinting past the trees. Human voices could be heard, yelling or perhaps singing, then some sort of missile came flying into the grove, where it bounced off a tree trunk and splashed in the stagnant water of the marsh downhill from him.

For several seconds, he was stunned by the looming indifference of the world: the traffic that went past on the highway, the birds that chirped high overhead in the alders, the raven that chortled further uphill from him, the wind that swayed the upper boughs where a canopy of leaves filtered the sunshine. None of it, absolutely none of it, took any notice of how much pain he was in. He was alone with his pain. Entirely alone.

I have to move, he thought. He sensed, remotely, that he should be moving in the same direction that the world was moving—toward some outcome he could not comprehend, but which must exist, because everything around him was conspiring to bring it about, or so it seemed to him.

He struggled to get to his feet, at first with a feeble push of his legs, in an attempt to scoot his back up the alder's trunk. That approach caused him too much pain. He spun around onto his knees so he was facing the alder and grasped it in an embrace. That approach worked a lot better, but with no less pain. He moved his arms up the tree's trunk, intertwined his fingers on the far side and, pushing with his legs while tugging with his arms, rose in to an awkward, bent-knee posture, with his rear end angled out from the tree. Seeking to get his feet firmly under him, he extended his arms further up the trunk and repeated the movement, causing himself almost unbearable pain.

"Jesus," he grunted, clinging to the tree's trunk, trying to figure out what his next move ought to be.

The pain in his body seemed to shout. SHOUT....

He tentatively looked around him. He imagined someone standing

further off, watching his every move, and then that person spoke: “So you got to your feet, eh? What are you going to do now?”

The voice spoke with such familiarity and closeness, he was convinced that someone must be in the wooded grove just behind him, and so he twisted his head to the right and then to the left, trying to discover if anyone was standing nearby. Nobody was.

“I’m hearing things,” he muttered. His muscles were beginning to tremble from the exertion it took to stay on his feet. He let his forehead nod against the alder’s trunk, fighting the urge to ask himself what he was doing there, in so much pain.

“Just concentrate on your next move,” the voice came again.

Again, he looked around to make sure he was alone in the grove. He was seized by the latent fear that he might be hit from behind, hurled to the ground and stomped on, although he had no idea why he feared such a thing happening to him.

“Concentrate,” he told himself. “Get yourself together, man....”

Hugging the tree with his right arm, he swung his left side away from the trunk to better observe his whereabouts. He surveyed the lay of the wooded grove, hoping to figure out how he could get from his present location to the highway where the cars were going by at such speed. He tried to plot a route from tree to tree, the shortest route possible. His legs were trembling; indeed, he was mildly surprised that they were holding him up at all.

I must try, he thought.

“Yes, you must try,” he heard the voice come again, but this time he refused to believe it was coming from anywhere except in his head.

The nearest tree was about ten feet away. He raised his left arm, a feat that made him wince with pain. He loosened his grip on the alder and propelled himself in the direction of the next tree. He staggered as if he were drunk. His legs lurched along, trying to keep up with the inclination of his upper body, which threatened to fall forward onto the ground. His left foot dragged slightly. It caught on a fallen branch, causing his upper body to lurch forward even more severely, and it was only with a great deal of luck and a great deal of pain that he reached the tree trunk he had aimed for and caught it with both arms, thus preventing himself from falling on the ground. He clasped the trunk, breathing heavily, pain rising and falling with his ribcage.

“You’ll have to do much better than that if you expect to get to the highway,” he heard the familiar, close voice admonish him.

The voice seemed so real, he swung to his left and then to his right to see if anyone was watching him, although he knew, even as he did this, that nobody would be in the grove—that he was alone, quite alone.

“Yes, I’ll have to do much better than that,” he muttered.

His muscles trembled. He felt exhaustion throughout his body, and

now there was a burgeoning pain in the center of his head. He felt like slinking down the tree's trunk to the ground, but he didn't permit himself do this, because of what he now felt, down at his feet. Water. He looked, saw that he was standing in a puddle. His feet had sunk into the wet, decaying leaves under the alder trees and a brownish-colored water now bathed his feet up to his arches. He looked around for the next nearest tree in the direction of the highway and saw it would take him into the patch of bright green skunk cabbage. Several of the plants were unfurling yellow blossoms. He lay his face against the trunk of the tree, only to realize he had lain his left cheek against it, and the pain it caused in his cheekbone was nearly unbearable. He yanked his head away from the trunk and brought down a kind of inner shield between himself and his pain.

"So even if you get to the embankment, how are you going to get up to where the highway is?" he heard the close, familiar voice ask him.

"Don't worry. I'll manage," he mumbled, aloud.

The next nearest tree was only about six feet away. He could cross that distance in his sleep, he told himself, not quite believing what he told himself, but telling himself just the same. He surveyed the ground to see if there were any branches he might trip on. Then, swinging himself gently away from the tree, he stretched forth his left arm while letting go with his right and stumbled toward the next tree. He ran up against it with a little too much force and caused himself renewed pain.

"See, it was just like flying," he congratulated himself. "It was no mean feat at all." Then he told himself: "You'll make it. You will."

"Yeah, sure, you will," the familiar voice replied.

"Shut up," he told the voice. "I'm going to make it. Just watch me."

He was now standing in water up to his ankles. For several seconds, he let the tree take his weight, now feeling somewhat more confident in his ability to stay upright—this, while he listened to traffic going by on the highway. Judging from the light glinting past the trees, the embankment was a good eight to ten feet above where he was standing in the marsh. He breathed deeply, waiting for the pain to subside, trying to decide which route to take. The next closest tree would take him deeper into the skunk-cabbage patch. The large, fleshy leaves of the plants hid anything his feet might trip on, if indeed he didn't trip on the skunk cabbage itself. The distance he would have to travel was further than anything he had traveled since getting to his feet, a good fourteen to sixteen feet away. He closed his eyes for a few moments and tried to summon the strength he would need to cross the distance.

He opened his eyes, focused on the tree he intended to reach and then, once he had mustered his resolve, pushed himself away from the tree he was clinging to and staggered through the skunk-cabbage patch toward the next tree along his path. The water in the marsh grew deeper,

up to his shins, adding resistance that made his progress much more difficult. He stubbed his right toe on something that refused to move, and thrust out his arms to keep from falling face down into the water. The jolt delivered to his outstretched arms caused him enormous pain throughout his body and now in his head, as well. He still had several feet to go to reach the next tree and so he dragged himself on hands and knees through the stagnant-smelling water to get to it—despite the enormous pain each movement caused him. He clasped the tree and pulled himself up the trunk into a standing position.

“We won’t give you ten out of ten points for that execution,” the close, familiar voice told him.

“I’d like to see you do any better,” he mumbled.

In this manner, he slogged his way through the skunk-cabbage patch to the edge of the grove. The embankment rose seven to eight feet above his head. Now and then, vehicles went by with a whooshing sound that crackled like static in his ears. By now, he was not only painfully sore throughout his body, he was soaking wet as well. He rested his back against the tufted grass of the embankment. Once he had sufficiently regained his strength, he sat up in a hunched position and looked both ways along the embankment. The exhaust of the transport trucks rumbled loudly as the rigs geared down the grade of the highway. To his right, the embankment met the shoulder of the mountainside, and there it looked as though there might be an access road that led off into the forest. The access road filled him with a feeling of dread. To his left, the marsh he had waded through gave way to higher ground, gradually at first and then more substantially, until, at last, the earth massed into a rolling hill that met the level of the highway.

He decided to head off in that direction, once he had rested enough.

By now, he had quite a headache. It felt as though it might split his head in two, right down to a point between his ears. Possibly, he had had the headache since waking up in the wooded grove. It had become more pronounced and edgy upon slogging through the marsh, especially after tripping and falling in the dank water. A mosquito buzzed near his left ear, but he reached with his right hand to drive it away. By narrowing his eyes he was able to dull his headache ever so slightly, and so he kept his eyes almost squinted shut.

He pushed with his right arm while twisting into the hill to get to his feet, a maneuver that nearly threw him off balance down the slope. He waited several seconds for his dizziness and pain to subside and then he turned slowly to the left and staggered in a bent-over posture along the base of the embankment, holding his arms slightly out in front of him, in case he fell. The going was slow—slow and excruciating—and several times he had to sit down and rest against the embankment. By now, he had attracted a cloud of gnats and mosquitoes that kept hovering around

his face and, on one occasion, he breathed some of them into his mouth and had to spit them out.

Where the land began to rise to meet the rolling hill, he was confronted by a sizeable patch of bracken fern, chest high, that he had to drag himself through. At one point, as he was stumbling up the slope, he came upon a half-rotten stump and sat down on it, the sun warming his shoulders and neck. Despite the sun's casual heat, he kept tensing up and shivering—uncontrollably—as though he had a fever.

“Well, you made it this far,” the familiar voice told him. “Good for you.”

“Yes, good for me,” he replied.

“So where are you going to go now?”

“How would I know? Maybe you could tell me.”

He shook his head to rid himself of the voice. Shaking his head jarred his brain, worsening his headache. He continued to sit there, shivering. When he had recuperated enough to go on, he swung himself around on the stump, only to have his attention arrested by an anthill, about a foot away. Fir needles, bracken fern fragments and grains of dirt constituted the hill that teemed with ants. He watched the ants with rapt attention. The anthill seemed to recall something that was quite distant now. Because the recollection refused to solidify into a memory, he gave up trying to recall whatever it was that had nearly come to mind. He pushed himself up from the stump and proceeded to drag his body up the slope through the bracken fern to where the slope leveled beside the highway. There, he lost his balance and fell down when he glanced at four or five cars speeding past him along the asphalt pavement. Fastening his gaze on them had made his head swirl, and the swirling had dropped him in his tracks.

Between the slope and the asphalt of the highway was a two-foot-deep ditch, with a gravel shoulder on the far side from him. Several cars roared by on the opposite side of the highway. He felt the urge to look at them, but decided not to out of fear they would make him lose his balance. He was exhausted and in a great deal of pain, and so he eased himself down onto his buttocks on the edge of the slope—where, very recently, a machine must have cut down the ferns, as they were lying shredded on the ground, drying in the sunshine. The slope he was sitting on very gradually rose into a mountainside covered by fir trees. While sitting there he watched the traffic pass without focusing on any of the cars, because, when he did that, his stomach threatened to heave. Briefly, his mind returned to the anthill and the recollection it had tried to stir in him. What was that all about? he wondered.

Six to eight cars, and finally a transport truck, flashed by on his side of the highway. Now, as he sat watching them disappear down the highway, he understood why the trucks had to gear down. The highway went down a rather steep grade, following a river that carved out the flank of the

mountainside. Further down the hill, the highway crossed a bridge that, from his vantage point, seemed too narrow to accommodate two-way traffic, but which did, miraculously. His mind was trying to fathom all of this, when a lone car slowed down, pulled onto the gravel shoulder and stopped across the ditch from him. The window on the passenger side descended into the door panel, and a red-headed woman looked at him with an inquisitive, somewhat concerned expression.

“Excuse me,” she said.

He very nearly looked around to see if she was hailing somebody sitting beside him on the edge of the fern patch, but then he realized she was speaking to him.

“Excuse me, sir—sir—are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he replied, at last.

“You don’t look fine.”

“I’m fine,” he repeated.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Can we offer you a lift? You look like you could use one.”

He couldn’t think of what to tell the woman so he rolled over onto his knees and pushed himself to his feet. The idea of taking a ride in the car filled him with anxiety. Without casting a backward glance at the woman, he began to limp down the trough of the ditch, simply to get away from the sound of her voice, which caused a painful static in his ears. He tucked his left forearm into his side below his ribs to keep his pain at an acceptable level. Several cars hurtled past him down the highway, and then he became aware of a grinding sound along the gravel shoulder and realized, with a quick backward glance, that the car which had stopped across the ditch from him was following along at his heels. He picked up his pace in an attempt to get away from it, lurching along with a painful limp, following the curve of the ditch down the hill, his brain jarring in his skull.

Then, suddenly, he tripped and fell, knocking the wind out of his lungs. The car caught up to where he was lying in the ditch; at least he assumed that was the case, because the tires had stopped crunching in the gravel along the shoulder of the highway.

“Excuse me. We would like to help you, sir,” the woman said. “May we help you, please? We have a cellphone. We can call for help.”

It took him quite a while to recover his breath. When at last he did that, he pushed with his right hand against the side of the ditch and stumbled to his feet. Somehow, in his effort to wrestle himself back into an upright position, he stared directly into the eyes of the woman who stared back at him from the open car window.

The woman was now speaking to someone on her cellphone.

“Yes, we’ve got a little emergency on our hands. We’re here on the Number 3, the Crowsnest Highway. Not long ago, we passed a pullout

called Cayuse Flats, heading west. We might be ten or fifteen kilometers past it by now, maybe more. We're pulled over onto the shoulder. I'm staring out the window at a man who looks like he's been beaten up pretty badly. His face is swollen and bleeding on the right side—no, let me correct that, on his left side, because he's facing me. When I asked him if he was alright, he said he was just fine and declined our offer to give him a lift, and now he's struggling to get to his stockinged feet and is trying to get away from us by limping down the side of the highway. I think he might be in bad need of some medical attention....”



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