

ABSTRACT

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URBAN REEF AND OTHER STORIES

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This collection of fictionalized work (an assemblage of interrelated short stories within a novelistic structure) represents my thematic interests as a writer: the tensions between a community and the people who comprise it; the consequences of religious identification; the possibility of life after death and how that belief affects life; the consequences of devoting one's life to the bar industry. My intent was for this collection to explore these interests (and others) through the interlocking experiences of those who work and drink at a bar in Washington, D.C.

URBAN REEF AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Preface

This work is totally fictional, y'all.

Dedication

To my family.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Maryland MFA program for giving me a chance to teach and write, and especially to Maud Casey for being willing to put up with me for more than one workshop. Thank you also to Michael Collier for allowing me the opportunity to remember just how bad I am at poetry.

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Urban Reef, and Other Stories

Rats

Washington, D.C. has plenty of rats, and I'm one of them. And, for awhile, I had a partner in crime: me and Caruso, two of the District's finest alley-dwellers, spending our days lying between big black garbage bags, working on the remains of rubbery t-bones, knobs of brown guacamole, spongy apple cores, yellowing tomato slices. We lived in a nook, too narrow for cats, birds, and pest control to get in, beneath a bar called the Blue Bonnet. When it rained, the water ran in veils off the corrugated tin awning above, keeping us safe and dry. In the evenings, we'd climb the gutters and shimmy into the space below the Bonnet's wooden roof deck so we could drink the spilled booze that made its way down between the wooden planks. It was the good life.

Caruso was like my little brother. He was also about the fattest, ugliest specimen in a species full of them. Poor shlub, he barely knew his mother. He told me once how he watched her get run over by a Geo when he was five weeks old. She'd been rummaging through trash in the rain, and didn't even see the car coming. Bam! Well, that's life, isn't it? As a kid, eating was practically all he could do, being wracked by grief over his mother and all, so his brothers and sisters (all gone now too), they just protected him, letting him get bigger and bigger. The kid never had to go anywhere or do anything. All he had to do was eat.

I guess it was because he lost her so young, but Caruso believed his mother was waiting for him in the Endless Trash Heap on the other side of The Bridge. The Bridge, by the way, is just a block past where the alley curves around a sandy brick apartment building, and from end to end it's as long and as high up as any place a rat has ever been. Whether they're crossing it or jumping from it, The Bridge is where rats go when they're not planning to come back. I've heard it said that on the other side there's some sort of Endless Trash Heap, or Bottomless Trash Pit, or what have you. Some smorgasbord-type deal. Speculating is a waste of time, I used to tell Caruso, no matter how steadfastly he believed in that shit. I bet there's nothing on the other side except more of the same. For me, life starts and ends with the company you keep.

The afternoon I met Caruso, it was raining hard, and the rainwater was pelting an exposed bag of garbage at the top of the Bonnet's dumpster, and pretty soon there was a waterfall of garbage runoff sloshing down into the alley. Now, most rats are not particularly discerning eaters, but there's no way, even on my hungriest day, that I would have touched that runoff.

Caruso, hell, he stopped right where he was and started going to town, with no regard for any vehicles that might come rolling down the alley. (That was the thing about the poor bastard—he never had any regard for his own safety.) Soon there was wet Styrofoam in his whiskers and congealed cheese on his chin, his big ears were flopped over with waterlog, and his legs were coated with a thick gray paste, equal parts rainwater and curdled milk. Absolutely disgusting, but rarely have I someone happier. I swear to you, I couldn't look away. It was one of those events you really do have to see to believe.

“Hey, fatso,” I yelled. “Having fun out there?”

He looked up at me, matted black fur slick with cheese-water. “Leave me alone,” he squeaked. (Caruso had a very high voice.)

“Aw c’mon,” I backed off. “Take a joke, will you?” My right back paw brushed against a pile of yellowing Pad Thai I’d picked at for dinner the week before. I asked him if he wanted some. He scratched his head. Turned out the poor guy had only ever had scraps from the burger joint down the block.

I didn’t care if the bastard looked like he was covered in bird shit. I was just thankful for the company. So I invited him in, and sure enough, he ate almost everything—and I mean *everything*. He started with the Thai, worked his way into a deposit of Greek, and burrowed through a hillock of Ethiopian. That was fine, though—the worthwhile things in life are the things you can share. From then on, Caruso lived with me.

I’ve been drinking on the Bonnet’s roof since I was on my own; what else are you supposed to do if there’s nobody to keep you company? Sure, there’s plenty of other rats around, but nobody was ever willing to make the trip to the roof with me—they hear the sound of human feet and they get spooked, and I don’t blame them.

When Caruso entered my life, I found out that he had good cause to join me. Sometimes it would be late at night and I’d hear him whimpering in his bed, a matchbox for a pillow and pigeon feathers for blankets, and I knew he was dreaming about his

mother. In his dreams he was usually falling off The Bridge on his way to meet her, which naturally scared him half to death. So I'd wake Caruso before he hit the ground and push him, crying and shaking, up to the roof for a nip, and after a few slurps he'd get to feeling better about everything. Maybe it wasn't a perfect solution to his problem, but it was better than nothing.

To get up to the Bonnet's roof, first we climbed the back drainage pipe, which came down from the gutter on a slant. Then we crawled through a small imperfection in the wall and tracked along an iron beam which took us into the space beneath the roof deck. There was liable to be any number of sloshed or spilled drinks from the people above that pooled in dimples on the sheet metal floor beneath the deck. There was sweet stuff, sour stuff, tart stuff and bitter stuff. Of course, by the end of the night, it all started to taste the same.

One night—this was months after we'd started palling around together—Caruso had suffered through a real bad dream, and when I woke him he couldn't wait to get up to the Bonnet. The two of us had hardly arrived when we heard the screech of chair legs, followed by a shriek. There was a scattering of footsteps directly above us. A woman's voice was apologetic, followed by the muffled rip of paper towels. Classic.

. "C'mon, Roose," I said, nudging him toward the puddle forming at his paws. "You're up."

He toddled over to the orange spill and slurped.

"Tastes good," he said when he'd gotten through half of it. Then it was my turn, and I had to agree with his assessment.

On nights at the Bonnet we were liable to talk about anything and everything, but mostly we talked about what we wished was different. I never knew my mother—I couldn't miss her like Caruso missed his. But there were things I wished were different. I wished we could eat food that hadn't spoiled, wished winters weren't so cold, wished there weren't so many people out to exterminate us. The longer we talked about these things the longer we stayed at the Bonnet, and sometimes it made the next day that much harder to get through. *All the same*, I would think to myself, *should I do things any different?* It wasn't the best life we might have had, but at least it was something.

That night was no different: we drank and talked like this until almost everyone had cleared out. When made our way back down the drainage pipe, we did so tipsily, almost not caring if we fell, knowing that our courage was temporary.

And perhaps if we hadn't felt so courageous in the moment, Caruso and I would have noticed the car coming at us much earlier. After so many drinks, we had only enough time to register the feeling of asphalt trembling beneath our paws, and when we turned around the coupe's front bumper was almost right on top of our heads.

"Duck!" I pushed Caruso down and fell on top of him, and the car passed over. When we felt the swoosh of the back tires rolling past the ends of our tails, we ran on instinct back to my den. I cowered behind a moldy empanada. My breathing was little punches. When I looked up, I realized that I'd never seen Caruso so scared. His eyes were the size of buttons. For an hour, the only sound was our teeth chattering.

The next day we were back to the trash bags, eating away, but a dour mood had settled over the meal. Then Caruso said something which caught me off guard:

“I saw my mother last night.”

“You’re crazy,” I said. “What do you mean, ‘saw your mother?’”

“Everything slowed down when the chassis grazed my ears. Then I felt a paw on my shoulder. And when I turned around, my mother was there...or her face, anyway.”

I had a vision of Caruso’s mother chowing down in the Endless Trash Heap beneath The Bridge. “It was probably just your mind, playing a trick on you,” I added. Caruso was looking right down his snout at me, and it was making me nervous.

“You think I’m making this up?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” I seriously felt like having a drink. “C’mon,” I said, motioning up toward the Bonnet. “Let’s have a few and you’ll forget all about this.”

He looked at me doubtfully. “You didn’t see her,” he said, a tinge of resentment in his voice. “You don’t know.”

I could tell Caruso had fundamentally changed. The next several nights, he kept having even more intense dreams about his mother, so intense that when he woke me with his cries his legs were pedaling against the air and his tail was thwacking the wall. When I’d smack him awake and start to pull him toward the Bonnet, he’d resist. “I can’t,” he’d say, with a gravity that made him seem almost possessed.

“But how else are you doing to calm down?”

“Maybe I’m not supposed to,” he said cryptically.

A few days after that, I woke up surprised that I’d been able to sleep the whole night without Caruso rousting me. Then I looked around, and saw that the bastard wasn’t in his bed. A nervous wave passed through my gut, and I threw myself out into the alley, calling into every cranny and burrow for him. No one else had seen him. It wasn’t until around dusk, as the sun was finally dropping behind the apartment building at the end of the alley, when I surmised where Caruso had probably gone.

When I got to The Bridge the light was near gone and the sidewalks were mostly empty. There were a few people running or bicycling along it. A car sped across. The sky was lavender. I saw one other rat, someone I didn’t recognize. He was making his way across the span. I saw him get smaller and smaller until he disappeared.

I considered that Caruso might not have made the jump. He might have been anywhere else, doing anything else. What mattered was, whatever he was doing, it wasn’t with me.

I looked across the bridge. Then I looked downward, seeing only the tops of trees, a lark in flight. What went on beneath those treetops? I wasn’t ready to find out. I turned back around toward the Bonnet, knowing that the first drinks would come pouring through the cracks any moment.

On Holiday

All of us deserve the chance to put our best foot forward. The Blue Bonnet's best foot was its holiday party.

The party dated back to 1983, the bar's first year of operation, when its owner and proprietor, Mr. Pibb, the former guitarist for the Coal Minors, one of *Rolling Stone's* Five Bands to Watch For 1980, had raided his inventory for a few extra bottles of Jameson on the night before Christmas Eve, closed the Bonnet two hours early, and stayed up past sunrise recounting stories from his European tour with a few hardy souls. By that point, The Coal Minors had disbanded for good, and Pibb had sunk all his money left over from their tour and record deal into the Bonnet. Those bottles of Jameson were all he could spare.

In the years that followed, the Bonnet had persevered, and holiday party had grown in scope and expense. The few bottles of Jameson had become cases of it. There was an official guest list and a dress code: jacket, tie, nice shoes for the men; sensible eveningwear for the ladies. It was a far cry from the days when jeans and flannel were the Bonnet's version of formal attire, a sign the Bonnet had matured alongside its outspoken owner. The atmosphere was cordial and courteous. Caterers provided hors d'oeuvres until midnight. Spotted among the Bonnet's staff and regulars were lobbyists, aldermen, and the occasional local television personality. Recent years had seen brief appearances by a congresswoman whose daughter had tended bar on the side for Pibb while she completed her master's degree at Georgetown. Though it had been decades since any of the original attendees had made it back to the party, one wondered what they would have thought

about the bottles of Veuve Cliquot; the invitations, handwritten with a calligraphic flourish by Mrs. Pibb; the politicians courting support; the miles of twinkling lights that turned the Bonnet into a well-lubricated carousel.

Nevertheless, a few traditions endured. There were no bartenders on duty. Guests were cordially invited to enter that sacred space behind the bar and pour their own drinks, and you could always recognize new attendees by the look of astonished glee on their faces while working the taps for the first time. There was no closing time on the night of the party. One stayed as long as one wished, and Pibb was always the last to leave. The party was often still going as morning arrived, pale and pink, over the brick rowhouses of Washington's waistline.

The Blue Bonnet consisted of two floors: a street-level lounge and a rooftop deck. The holiday party was on the deck. To get there, you entered the bar from the street beneath the bar's name in neon letters, a bonnet sitting atop the word *blue*. There would be a bouncer inside the door to check your name off the list and take your coat. For the last few years, the effervescent Mrs. Pibb had hung mistletoe just inside the doorway leading to the stairs. She stood there with a Santa hat and candy cane earrings and a generous smile alongside this year's bouncer, a former high school football star seated on a borrowed barstool, greeting guests and handing them glasses of champagne. This is where she encountered Tiny Toes, a young bartender, and his date, as they arrived early in the evening. Toes would have been a senior in college if he'd stuck around to finish. He was spritely with coffee-bean eyes and restless hands, and when he spied the

mistletoe and abruptly pushed into his date to kiss her, she gave an embarrassed squeal, followed by a sidelong glance toward Mrs. Pibb. She brushed Toes' hands off her sequined cocktail dress.

"Are you always this impatient?" she murmured.

"Only with the ones I like," he whispered back.

Toes and his date wished Mrs. Pibb a happy holiday and proceeded down the narrow hallway with a side door that hid the Lounge from passersby. The hallway was painted sky blue, and the young couple followed it along as it took them to the left and up a flight of twenty-four stairs, twelve and twelve, with a small landing between. As Toes and his date ascended the stairs to the roof, hot on their heels was the Bonnet's queen bee, Hairspray, one of the more experienced bartenders and the weeknight manager when Pibb was out of town. She'd arrived with her boyfriend. Beneath the mistletoe they shared a brief embrace. Hairspray put her head on his shoulder.

"Sometimes my mom used to hang this shit." She wiped her nose on her wrist.

"How's she doing?"

"Not tonight," she said softly, kissing him on the cheek.

Hairspray and her boyfriend paid their respects to Mrs. Pibb and followed Toes and his date up to the roof.

A bit later on, the Bonnet's resident bachelors came in from the cold. Frederic Dumont, a long-time regular and sommelier at a neighborhood bistro, and Crick, the

manager of the Bonnet's downstairs lounge, made their entrances as one another's date. Frederic and Crick kissed Mrs. Pibb's hand.

"Boys!" she laughed.

Noah Louderman, one of the Bonnet's younger bartenders, and his girlfriend, showed up just after Frederic and Crick. Noah had been drinking already. Noticing the mistletoe above them, he turned to kiss his girlfriend but she pulled away.

"Aww!" Mrs. Pibb said to the young woman. "Where's your holiday spirit?"

"Jews don't believe in mistletoe," Noah grumbled.

"It's because you taste like whiskey," his girlfriend retorted.

"Oh, that doesn't matter anyhow," Mrs. Pibb said. "This thing has been non-denominational from the start."

Noah shrugged, left his girlfriend's side and made for the stairs.

Around midnight, the bouncer locked the front door from the outside, went upstairs, and alerted Pibb, who'd been commiserating with the owners of two bars across the street about the city's new indoor cigarette ban.

"Show time," he said, picking up his glass of champagne and making for the bar. With the help of a bar stool he mounted the bar and stood overlooking the entire rooftop patio. His wife quieted the record player behind him, which had been playing an old Coal Minors record. The roof was at capacity; there were no empty chairs or barstools, and in

the margins people stood watching Pibb, champagne glasses in hand, glassy eyed already from the festivities.

“Now,” Pibb began, clearing his throat.

“Free Bird!” yelled an uninitiated partygoer. He was shushed by those familiar with occasion.

“I’m not one for sermonizing,” Pibb began, his gruff voice shoving through the noise of the city, “but I think you’ll all agree that we’ve done something wonderful here.”

“Hear, hear,” spoke up Toes from the back of the deck. There was a smattering of applause.

“The first time we gathered on this roof, this block wasn’t more than a few crack dens, convenience stores, and the rats living in the alley. And,” he added, “we still can’t seem to get rid of the damn rats.” This was met with some polite laughter. “Point is,” Pibb continued, “we’ve all worked our butts off to get here. I know at least some of us remember the bad days, back in the 80s.” The older participants nodded. “And yes, getting here hasn’t been all roses. I’ve always said that I’d rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy, but running a bar will drive anybody crazy from time to time.” More laughter. Pibb’s wife looked up appreciatively at her husband.

“Still, there’s something different about tonight. It’s a new era in Washington—for all of us,” Pibb proclaimed. “The 80s are over. The 90s are over. Hell, last decade’s on its way out. We’ve got new places popping up all over town.” Some scattered boos. “Wait, let me finish,” Pibb held his hands up. “These new places, they’ve all got

something going for them. But they also owe places like ours a debt; they wouldn't be here if it weren't for us. Hell, let's look at ourselves and acknowledge that none of us would have made it this far without places like the Bonnet. We've managed to fill this space with something wonderful—ourselves.”

There was a general murmuring of agreement.

“So in light of this wonderful thing we've got here,” Pibb continued, “let's all raise our glasses.” A hundred glasses went up in the cold night air. “To the Bonnet,” Pibb said. “She may not be perfect, but she brought us each other.”

The dice table was set up in the corner of the deck. There were a handful of people sitting down, each with a strong drink in front of them, and perhaps a dozen more clustered around the sitting group. It was getting toward sunrise, and most of the partiers who worked outside the industry had long since left, along with Mrs. Pibb, who had to drive her daughter to school later that morning. The traffic below had slowed to a sporadic passing cab. The rest of the bars on the block had shut down. But the music on the Bonnet's rooftop continued to wail out into the night, and spirits were high as Pibb took his ceremonial position at the head of the long wooden table. Joining him were Frederic, Crick, Toes, Louderman, Hairspray, and an energy lobbyist who wasn't expected at work the next day. Toes' date stood behind him, wobbly from the champagne. Louderman's date had long since left.

“Okay boys and girl,” Pibb said. “Let's roll.” Everyone reached into their pockets and pulled out a billfold. “We're starting a dollar a round. Any objections?” Toes looked

around at his tablemates, started to raise his hand, and then thought better of it. “You sure, Toes?” Pibb raised his eyebrows. “You look like you have something to say.”

Toes shook his head. “No boss,” he said. “A dollar’ll be fine.”

Pibb’s dice spilled out onto the table top. He threw a one and, shrugging, passed the dice to Frederic, sitting to Pibb’s left. He brought the dice up to his thick, florid face and examined them.

“C’mon, Frenchie,” Toes grouched. “Papa needs a brand new pair of everything.” The Frenchman frowned at Toes, shook his fist, and threw. The dice knocked against his gold rings and flew across the table. The point was a two.

“*Merde*,” He spat.

“Say what now?” Hairspray perked up. Her boyfriend was sleeping on a barstool at the other end of the deck.

“It’s French for, ‘Things ain’t goin’ my way,’” Crick chuckled. Frederic shot him a look of tender irritation.

“What’s French for, ‘let’s keep this thing moving?’” Louderman piped up from the back of the table. His head was resting against his forearm.

“You know, Louderman,” Pibb said dryly, “nobody’s forcing you to stay here.”

“What if I *want* to be here?”

“Then I guess you’d better hope you get something out of it,” Pibb grinned. “Now throw your money down.”

Louderman did as he was told. He picked up the dice from Fred and chucked them down the length of the table. “Three,” he said, looking at Fred. “That was a pretty quick surrender, Frenchy.” Fred ignored him.

The dice shifted to Hairspray, who bested Louderman with a four.

Now the dice passed to Toes, who threw a six. “C’mon now,” he spoke encouragingly to the dice, “gotta pay those bills.” Last to throw was the lobbyist, McDonald. He wore leather gloves—it was quite cold out—and a brown mohair coat. He knew Pibb well from having hosted a number of events at the Bonnet, and the staff was aware of his predilections for gaming and strong drink. The dice made little sound against his glove. When he threw they came up winners, a four, five and six.

“Horseshit!”

“Watch yourself,” McDonald said to Toes. He raked the pile of crumpled singles toward him. “Be thankful this is small potatoes. I see amounts of money you wouldn’t believe change hands every day.”

“Bet that’s the luckiest you get all night,” Toes grumbled. His date leaned down to whisper something in his ear. “Yeah, sure, whatever,” he said, waving her way.

“Toes?” She whispered.

“What, what is it?”

“I’m out of cash...how do I get home?”

Toes shrugged. “I need all I have here,” he said under his breath. Everyone pretended not to hear him. Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wrinkled ten. “See you at the apartment,” he said, pushing the note into her hand. She nodded and left, escorted out by Hairspray.

It was five in the morning when the only partiers remaining were the ones seated at the dice table. Most had managed to stay more or less even, though McDonald had taken in quite a bit of cash. Toes was out of singles and fives, and had only a knot of twenties left. He reached into his billfold, found another twenty, and smacked it down on the table in front of McDonald.

“What’s this?”

“I’m raising the stakes,” he said. He put back a shot of Jameson and stared McDonald in the face, “Twenty bucks, straight up. You and me,”

“Toes,” Pibb cut in—

“Hey Pibb, this is a side pot,” Toes said. He pushed the twenty further over, so that it touched against the stack of ones and fives in front of McDonald. “This guy can spare it, can’t you?”

McDonald looked from Pibb to Toes. Frederic and Crick were both on the verge of passing out. Hairspray was over trying to wake her boyfriend up. Louderman was snoring, a bead of drool dangling from his lower lip. “Okay,” he said, shaking his head. “Whatever you say.” He matched Toes’ twenty and threw. Another four-five six.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Toes said, exasperated.

McDonald shrugged. “I didn’t tell you to bet,” he said.

“Another,” Toes fumed. “Throw down.”

“Toes,” Pibb cut in again.

“Things have to change at some point,” Toes said. He flattened another twenty against the table. They threw. McDonald won this time with a five.

“Okay,” Toes said. “If that’s how you want it, fine.” He opened up what remained of his billfold, counted it, and placed it on the table in front of McDonald. “The rest of this month’s rent,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. Pibb looked at the cash, shook his head, and got up to use the bathroom.

“Better watch out you don’t piss your boss off too much,” McDonald needled Toes.

This woke Crick and Frederic up and they stared, first at Toes, then at the cash. Hairspray and her boyfriend returned to the table.

“What is this, a joke?” she asked.

“I’m just trying to get my money back,” Toes said. “I got bills to pay, you know?” The table was silent for a moment, except for Louderman’s sporadic snoring. Eventually McDonald handed the dice to Toes.

“If that’s how you want it,” he said.

Toes rolled. It was a five. He said nothing.

McDonald picked the dice up. The rest of the partygoers held their breath.

McDonald threw a six. Dumbfounded, Toes stared at the dice as McDonald added the rest of his money to his wallet. He looked up to gloat but, instead, found a set of disapproving faces staring back at him.

“I should probably be going,” he said, standing. Nobody answered him. He nodded to everyone and bounded down the stairs.

Toes continued to stare at the dice. Crick and Hairspray looked at one another, walked to the bar and poured a beer. They brought it to Toes and clinked their glasses against his.

“Drink up Toes,” Hairspray said, resting her hand on his shoulder. “You’ll figure this out tomorrow.” Crick nodded and drink along with him. Toes still said nothing. Presently, Pibb returned from the bathroom and sized up the situation.

“C’mere,” he called to Toes. Toes didn’t move. “It wasn’t a suggestion,” Pibb said. Toes pulled himself up and walked over to Pibb. The two walked back over to the bar and each sat down at a bar stool. Pibb didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of hundreds and stuffed them in Toes’ pocket.

For a moment, Toes couldn’t say anything. Eventually he said, “Pibb, I—”

“It’s not the money I care about,” Pibb said quietly. He got up and went behind the bar and poured them each a shot. “Just know that I’ll be needing some favors from you in return,” he said, pushing the shot toward Toes.

“Anything,” Toes said. “Anything at all.”

“Hey, wait for us,” Hairspray said. She joined them, followed by Frederic and Crick and Louderman, whose drool stain reached down the front of his shirt. Pibb poured them all shots. They raised and clinked.

“To the Bonnet,” Pibb said.

“To the Bonnet,” they echoed.

Night Rises over the Blue Bonnet

Hairspray had known Gingerbread almost as long as she'd been at the Blue Bonnet. His was an easy face to pick out of a crowd, long and pale with hair the color of a lit cigarette. He smelled like cigarettes, too; when he wasn't smoking, he seemed constantly in the act of plucking one from the crumpled soft pack he carried in his brown corduroy blazer. He was always talking about how good his band, a garage-punk group called Wolf Cancer, was, or how he was due for a promotion at How it all Vegan, the vegan bakery he worked at to support his music career, or how some scout from a record label was planning to attend one of his shows.

Gingerbread's self-promotion had joined the many running jokes among the Bonnet's elite, in the way Pibb and company dotingly mocked Tiny Toes' hyperactive libido or Louderman's thin skin or French Fred's bizarre infatuation with the Crick and the Lounge. Except for Pibb himself, a musician by heart who sympathized with his red-headed regular, most Bonnet staff agreed that Gingerbread's musical aspirations were destined to go up in smoke; that he'd be working the cash register at the bakery until he was 60; and that any girl he was seen with, as Louderman had once frankly put it, "was wasting her time." Nothing in the handful of years since Hairspray had come to the Bonnet from southern California had given her reason to disagree with the conventional wisdom; Gingerbread's position in life seemed virtually unchanged from the first day she'd passed the bakery and noticed a gangly redhead dumping soy milk into his coffee. She still saw him in the window on her afternoon walks to work, chatting up uninterested

customers about his next show and fidgeting away the minutes until his next smoke break.

Recently Hairspray had been promoted to Manager and given the much-coveted Thursday shift on the roof. On her first night, while unlocking the roof door for the first time as the manager on duty, she heard footfalls on the steps below. Moments later, out popped Gingerbread. He offered her a quick hello and took his usual seat—the corner of the bar by the planter’s boxes full of marigolds along the railing—and remained there, cigarette crooked rakishly at the corner of his lips. Hairspray knew his habits, and she poured him a chalice of his favorite Belgian ale. He took it in one hand while writing what she guessed were song lyrics in his gray moleskin. For some time, they were the only sign of life on the roof.

Eventually, the silence proved frustrating for Hairspray. She had never liked silences, seeing them as lost opportunities. She turned to watch Gingerbread, his pen jogging across the narrow page like a polygraph’s needle. Her first instinct had been to ask about his writing, but she knew the answer would dwarf the question. Her bartender’s intuition recommended keeping the conversation light.

“Lovely weather we’re having,” she’d said. This was a typical August evening in Washington when those who hadn’t decamped to the Delaware coast remained to baste in a glaze of humidity.

Gingerbread halted his scrawl mid-line and looked up. “I like a challenge,” he’d replied.

Hairspray had to smile at this. “Either you or the weather has to break, I guess.”

“Damn right,” Gingerbread said. “All these rich lobbyists hightailing it to Rehoboth Beach with their bratty children, it just goes to show you they aren’t *real* Washingtonians like me.”

Hairspray, whose mother had never taken her on a vacation of any length, found herself agreeing with this sentiment, and she and Gingerbread wound up spending the rest of the night talking at intervals about the various inequities of the DC experience—how the Metro escalators were continually out of service, how Georgetown kids never tipped, how the Salvadoreans saw no reason not to play their Reggaeton albums at four in the morning in the streets of Columbia Heights. The next week, Gingerbread was back in the same seat, and they picked up where they’d left off.

Hairspray came to realize after a few Thursday shifts that she actually sort of enjoyed Gingerbread’s company when the subject wasn’t him. This was partly because Hairspray had just emerged from a relationship and was finding that she missed the friendly presence of a male companion. The ex-boyfriend, a fellow bartender from a dive in Logan Circle, hadn’t been the talkative type, either, leading Hairspray to shoulder the brunt of their conversations, something she didn’t particularly enjoy; Gus (that was his name) had a particular knack for answering even complex questions in fewer than three syllables, which irritated Hairspray beyond words. She also found it comforting that Gingerbread’s presence was so dependable; every Thursday, rain or shine, he was sitting on the same barstool waiting to restart their ongoing conversation. Gus, though good-looking and witty, and in some ways very caring (he was the best Big Spoon she’d ever dated), had been more or less undependable in everything from showing up at the right restaurant to remembering to buy more kitty litter. Even if Gingerbread’s task—showing

up to get drunk—was comparatively easy, at least he excelled at it, leaving Hairspray to occasionally wonder if this reliability translated into other areas of his life.

As the weeks passed, she and Gingerbread quickly found more things on which to agree. They would banter about how poorly the Redskins were playing, with Gingerbread offering a laundry list of what the team was doing wrong. They poked fun at the forward creep of the holiday season, epitomized by the Christmas lights Pibb had asked Toes to string up in September. They discussed outdoor screenings at the National Geographic Society, an event that each had somehow been sporadically attending for years without managing to spot the other. This last topic was especially engrossing for Hairspray because of her love of travel, a love that was, given her salary and schedule, necessarily vicarious. It was a love that had originated when Hairspray was still in elementary school, when her mother would sit at the foot of her mattress and, before passing out on top of the blanket, recount hazy, fantastic stories about far off-sounding places like Tucson, Pahrump, Durango, Cheyenne—places Hairspray now doubted her mother had ever visited.

On one Thursday in the heart of Indian Summer, while listening to Gingerbread wax poetic about a documentary on the Navajo, she felt the names of so many of those Southwestern towns burble up and pop in her throat like skunked beer, and before Hairspray could swallow the thought back down she saw herself again at age five, sitting lotus-like at the base of one of her mother's barstools, spilt liquor adhering discarded peanut shells to her palms.

“What’s the matter?” Gingerbread asked with a tinge of resentment after seeing Hairspray go vacant mid-memory. “Not interesting enough for you?”

“No, no,” she shook herself out of her head and refilled his beer, giving him a reassuring smile. “It’s not you.”

“Hey, by the way,” Gingerbread leaned, emboldened, partway across the bar. They were physically closer than they’d ever been, with perhaps only a couple of feet separating them, and she realized that Gingerbread had a scent, a combination of spice and tobacco and sandalwood, probably from his anti-perspirant, that she found oddly inviting. “Next Sunday the Society is showing a film about old European distilleries.” He stopped there, unsure if he needed to spell out the invitation or if she’d catch his meaning.

“Yeah, I saw that online,” Hairspray said, not exactly realizing she was being asked on a date.

Believing that she was either rejecting him gently through feigned ignorance or had missed the message completely, Gingerbread laid his cards on the table: “Do you want to come?” he asked, a little sheepishly.

“Oh,” she replied, startled more than anything out of unpreparedness. Gingerbread perceived her hesitation as disinterest and offered her a way out, rushing to add, “I understand if you can’t make it, it wouldn’t be serious or anything, I just figured since—” He trailed off, stabbed his cigarette in an ashtray, and then fished out another.

Hairspray felt acutely self-aware, and looked around the rooftop to see if any of the Bonnet’s staff had been eavesdropping on their conversation; it was nearing dusk, not

yet busy, and the only customers on the roof were a couple at table three, one of the high-tops along the railing. The couple was still in their work clothes, twining fingers over the candle light. She looked at the couple, and then at Gingerbread, whose face was scarlet with discomfort, before deciding that a film and a show with him surely couldn't be worse than an average Sunday alone at home in front of her television.

The film, *Uncovering Europe's Spirit Secrets*, started at six in the evening, and Hairspray had decided to arrive there between five and ten minutes late to show Gingerbread that she cared just enough to not make him wait *too* long. She'd felt slightly uncomfortable standing in the Metro in heels and a light floral-patterned dress and dark leggings, her voluminous black hair out of its clip and full of the product that had become her nickname in those first few tumultuous weeks at the Bonnet. It was such a departure from her usual work attire—black shirt, black jeans, bar rag hanging from her belt like a horse's tail—that she wondered for a moment if maybe she wasn't wearing an ensemble so much as a costume. She remembered that it had been close to a year since she'd worn this outfit last, ironically to a first date at a bar on U Street with Gus. But, though the outfit itself felt incongruous, it was nice to have a real occasion to wear it—even if she didn't entirely want Gingerbread to get the wrong idea.

To Hairspray's surprise, when she arrived at the downtown pavilion in back of the Geographic Society, the film had started but Gingerbread was nowhere in sight. She was hit first by a touch of disappointment that the faithfully punctual Gingerbread had missed his first deadline. It reminded her of her mother, who, it seemed to Hairspray, was unable

to show up on time for anything. Hairspray drew a couple of deep breaths and reminded herself that this was a low-stakes event.

She took a seat in one of the white foldout chairs at the rear of the little urban park, once an alleyway between two old office buildings with vines inching up their brick backsides. It was a cool, cloudless evening and few seats were occupied, but Hairspray always felt more at ease in the back of a room. Inside the pavilion a large screen showed images of old stills—room-sized, Hershey kiss-shaped pots of dented bronze and dulled pewter. A magisterial British voice which Hairspray could not quite identify provided commentary and led her from mossy peat marshes in the Scottish hinterlands to slouched pine cabins all in a row like worn-down molars along the cliffs of the Danish North Sea. It was not the greatest documentary Hairspray had ever seen, but it certainly wasn't the worst, and it held her attention well enough that at first she hadn't noticed Gingerbread taking the seat next to her. In fact, it was his smell before anything else that alerted her to his presence.

"You're late," she said, turning to her right. He was sporting an unfamiliar blue button-down shirt under his brown corduroy blazer, both of which were curiously free of wrinkles.

Improbably, he also held a single rose in his hand.

"You're right," he said, loosening his collar. "But I picked this up on the way." He handed the rose to Hairspray, who could not help but blush a little. Too big for her Target handbag, she laid it on the adjacent empty seat. Flowers on a first date were decidedly corny, she thought...but there was an earnestness to the presentation, an old-

fashioned correctness about it, which made Hairspray feel younger than she was accustomed to feeling. It dawned on her that this was what television made high school dating seem like. It was certainly a galaxy away from her own rather limited high school dating experience, which had been hindered by the fact that she could not bring potential boyfriends home on the (often correct) assumption that her mother was smashed and in some state of undress. She'd had the dismal feeling even back then that she was training to live a life unsuitable for television. And yet, here she was, just shy of thirty and accepting a single rose on a first date.

“Thank you,” said Hairspray, meaning it.

Gingerbread grinned wide but with his lips pressed together. Hairspray knew from the Bonnet's rumor mill that his teeth had suffered from an adolescent meth habit, and she had an urge in that instant to pry open his mouth to see in. Gingerbread's grin relaxed and he settled into his folding chair. “Did I miss anything good?”

Hairspray nodded. “You missed Scotland and Denmark, and now they're on to Italy I think.”

Gingerbread squinted up at the screen in the distance. “Can you actually see what's going on?”

“I mean, yeah. You can't?”

“It's fuzzy,” he said. “Let's move up.” Before she could make her case for staying put Gingerbread was shuffling past her. He looked back. “C'mon,” he said. “What's the

worst that could happen?” She looked at him, then at the rose, which she took with her as she stood.

The rows of folding chairs were split in two by an aisle, and Gingerbread and Hairspray, pinching the stem between thorns, walked down close to the screen. They sat a few rows from the front. Gingerbread pulled a flask from his breast pocket and he and Hairspray traded nips until the movie ended. She had to admit that the view from this vantage was indeed much different and, on the whole, nicer. The grass had seemed greener, the beaches sandier, the Mediterranean sun brighter. It was a side of Europe she’d never seen before, and as the film concluded they talked about what it would be like to live “back there,” as French Fred called it. Gingerbread spoke proudly of a second cousin who’d moved to Amsterdam in the late ‘90s and never returned, now a famous tattoo artist who’d intimated that Gingerbread could crash in his canal-front flat any time he wanted. She started to ask him why he hadn’t gone yet, and her mind flashed back to something Louderman had said months earlier, the week before Hairspray was given her manager’s master key and promoted to the Thursday night shift:

“I like the guy and all, and he tips better than most of the regulars, but the muffins he sells taste like cardboard. Also, I don’t believe a word of any of his stories,” Hairspray remembered Louderman mentioning casually while the two of them threw dice on the roof bar after a long shift. It was an uncontroversial statement, and she remembered seconding the observation without pause. Hairspray now found that she was unhappy with herself for having judged Gingerbread so quickly, but at the same time, she could not help but also think of her mother’s frequent avowal that Hairspray’s father had been the featured saxophonist at a smoky Bourbon Street jazz club. As a twenty-one year old

junior college dropout on the verge of fleeing her mother's spare, water-damaged apartment for the opposite coast, Hairspray had learned from one of her mother's former drinking buddies then in recovery (and there were plenty of these) that although she was correct in assuming she'd been the product of a one-night stand, her parents had actually met just down the highway in San Clemente, at a Bennigans.

As her thumb grazed the base of a thorn, Hairspray contemplated the ramifications of living in a world where you couldn't believe everything you wanted to, and it necessarily made her re-scrutinize Gingerbread's sincerity. But while Louderman believed Gingerbread to be dishonest because everyone else seemed to think that way, she held a hope that his stories were not empty rooms. It would be nice to know that at least one person in her life prized substance beyond style.

Honeymoon

“You had two hundred people? Up here? In this small place?”

“Not only that, but we didn’t have a single problem all night.”

“You’re lying.”

“But it’s true,” Louderman said, pouring a line of shots for the businessmen.

There were three, all out of a corporate insurance office in Omaha, in town to meet with a senator. It was half an hour before closing, late enough to indicate the meeting had gone well. They were the only ones left at the bar. In the background, Fugazi’s *Repeater* was spinning itself out on Pibb’s record player. Louderman liked playing the album at the end of the night. The roof deck glowed amber in the candlelight. It was midsummer.

Louderman pushed the glasses toward them and grabbed the fourth for himself.

They drank. After Louderman burped and wiped the Jameson off his lip with the back of his hand, he added, “You can’t make this sort of stuff up.”

“So you know, we didn’t vote for the guy,” the red tie on the left, who’d been doing most of the talking, said. He dressed and acted like he knew his way around a steak. They all did. The businessman pulled a kerchief from his suit breast pocket and wiped his glossy forehead where it met the receding range line of his hair. They all looked roughly like this. Louderman had been differentiating them by their loosened, slightly crumpled ties.

“I might have guessed.”

“Let him get to his story,” the blue tie in the middle said.

“Now hold on there, Hank. I’m as ready for a story as you are, but I got a couple preliminary questions for our bartender here. First of all,” the one on the left said, “what’s your name, son?”

“Louderman,” said Louderman. He wiped his hand on the bar rag hanging off the back of his jeans before extending it.

“Pleased to meet you,” red tie said. “I’m Clay. Hank here’s to my left. And on the other end, that’s Phil.” Louderman shook hands with Hank and Phil, who wore a gray tie.

“Louderman, you say?” asked Clay. Louderman nodded.

“That a first or a last name?”

“Last.”

“You always gone by your last name?”

“No. But it’s what they called me when I showed up.”

“That how it works around here?”

“Yessir,” Louderman said, grinning.

“Jesus.” Phil leaned over. “You’ll have to excuse my associate,” he apologized to Louderman. “Nothing he loves more than his own train of thought. Some people these days get so caught up in the moment they forget what’s going on around them. Usually

that sort of deficiency's on account of your upbringing. And Clay here happens to be from Kansas."

"Now what in hell's wrong with being a Kansan?"

"My granddaddy grew up just across the border in Oklahoma, and he always used to say that Kansans were proof buffaloes and Indians fucked."

"Can't argue with that logic," Hank laughed.

"You ought to be ashamed, stepping on my toes while I get some essential information from this young man," Clay said, coughing. "Just the kind of thing my wife would do."

"Mine too," said Phil.

"You ever been married, Louderman?" asked Hank.

"Not that I know of," Louderman said. He glanced away from the bar for a moment.

"Girlfriend?"

"Yeah, but she's in Europe for the summer."

"Oh yeah?" Clay laughed. "A young person can have some real fun over there. Some of 'em have so much of it they end up staying for good."

"Well she's got a return ticket," Louderman said. "If that counts for anything."

"That don't prove nothing," Clay said, wiping his forehead again.

“Would you stop harassing him and let him tell the damn story?” Phil cut in.

“I’m just trying to get the story behind the story.”

“So Louderman,” Hank interjected, “you were saying about there being two hundred people here?”

Louderman nodded. “That’s right. Two hundred. And capacity’s ninety-six.” He grinned and gestured with a turn of his head toward the sign on the wall by the door.

“And the city didn’t bust y’all for overcrowding?”

“City cops were paralyzed,” Louderman said calmly. “You have to understand,” he explained, “there were three million people here that weekend. Three million. Lines to the mall backed all the way up to U Street. Lawns turned into parking lots. Three million. I’m no expert, but I have to believe that’s more people than there are in the entire state of Nebraska.” The businessmen nodded. In the pause that followed a taxi cab honked below. The needle on the Fugazi record inched closer toward the edge.

“So lemme get this straight,” Phil swigged his pint. “If you got all the law enforcement in a twenty-mile radius clustered around downtown, what’s stopping anyone from breaking the law?”

“Well, that’s what I’m saying,” said Louderman, lining up another round of shots. “It was the furthest thing from anybody’s mind. Even after a long day out in the cold, when we had people streaming up the stairs in tuxedos after the balls, nobody said a bad or wrong thing to anybody.” He finished pouring the shots and they drank the round.

“So what was it like up here?” Hank asked. “I mean, could people move?”

Louderman laughed. “Not really, no. We had our owner bouncing people because whoever the security guy at the time was couldn’t get here—the traffic was snarled all the way out into Maryland and the Metro was shut down—and after we hit capacity, I remember he called me over to the stairs. ‘C’mere, Louderman,’ he said in this gruff, happy, and completely floored way. I left the bar for a moment and went over. I had to push through people blowing party favors, wearing nametags, throwing streamers. He had a sloppy grin and I could smell he’d been drinking Irish coffees all day to keep warm, because it was the coldest day of the year. I glanced down the stairs. There were people all the way down, four across, on every stair, all the way to the bottom and even snaking down the hallway toward the Lounge in front. We were busier than we’d ever been, ever—that’s what our owner said later, anyway. And the thing was, nobody was pushing or shoving. Old people were turning crimson, bundled, huddled against one another, but with tired, defiant smiles on their faces. Most of the young women had taken their heels off and were standing in their stockings, singing songs. Even with the few heat lamps the roof was chill. But the stairwell was warm, and bright with people. Ever felt like you were perched between summer and winter?”

The businessmen shook their heads.

“That’s what it felt like. And I remember, I looked at Pibb—that’s the guy who owns and runs this place—and I said, ‘What, are you actually thinking about letting all these people up?’ Because, like I said, we were already at capacity—and even at ninety-six people, it’s not particularly easy to move around. Not to mention, there were only two of us behind the bar—myself, and our bar back, this little guy named Toes—and we were busy enough already without adding another hundred people into the mix.”

“Why weren’t there more of you behind the bar?”

“No space,” Louderman said, sweeping his arm around him. “You can see for yourselves. Between the shelves of booze and the sinks beneath the bar, there’s barely enough room for two people to get back and forth behind here. And the bar narrows at the end,” he pointed over toward the door to the staircase, “so it’s hard even for one person to squeeze through normally, which means, when it’s so busy that people are backed up all the way into the corner, you’re basically trapped up here until things quiet down.”

“So what’d your owner say?” asked Phil.

“He just shrugged and said in this real goofy way, ‘Let’s take them to church.’”

“And you had to listen to him?”

“Well, yeah,” Louderman chuckled. “Pibb’s word may as well be gospel around here.”

“So, then what?”

“So then, we began to fill up. Slow at first, just one or two people at a time as Pibb would only let them in gradually. But at some point he gave up on that and they started flooding in, jackets off, hats in hand because they’d been hot, standing so long. People wouldn’t stop coming in—not in a pushy, difficult way—but in this orderly, friendly kind of manner. I remember having this vision of Ellis Island. Pretty soon we were packed to the corners. I really do think we couldn’t have fit another person in here. People were barely able to turn around in one place. Watching them try to move was one

of the funnier things I've ever seen." Louderman pantomimed this by wriggling in place like a caught fish. The Fugazi album entered its last song.

"That just don't seem right to me," Clay grumbled. He scratched his cheek and took a sip of his pint. "How can you put a bartender in that kind of situation? Now, I've never bartended before. But from what I understand, it's all about taking care of people. And here you are, trying to do your job—trying to *take care of people*—and you got them piling up on you all at once by the hundreds."

Louderman thought about this. "I guess on the one hand, Pibb doesn't always make things very easy for me," he said. "But at the same time, maybe that's the point. How's a bartender ever going to get better if he doesn't get tested every so often?"

"That's the kind of thinking that goes beyond bartending," Hank observed, finishing his beer.

"So then what happened?" Phil asked.

"Then," Louderman said, "I made drinks. I made them as fast as I possibly could. I'd been working here for about three years at that point, so I wasn't new...but I'd never had to work half as hard as I did that night. I was doing about ten drinks a minute, just racing through pours, slopping liquor around everywhere, serving beers that were half-foam, whiskey-and-cokes that were mostly coke with no garnish, glasses of red wine that spilled over the sides and stained shirtsleeves. I remember there was this woman from Indiana or somewhere who was wearing a jacket covered in presidential pins and lapels, who ordered a mojito. Well, it's right there on the menu." Louderman picked up one of the laminated sheets that served as the Bonnet's drink menu and pointed to the *Cocktails*

section. “Can you believe a place like this serves mojitos?” He laughed. “Pibb wouldn’t have even entertained the idea if his wife hadn’t been dead set on it. She comes in about twice a year and that’s the only thing she orders.

“Anyway, this woman wants a mojito—and she’s being smushed up against the bar by the sheer weight of the crowd. She’s not farther from me than you are now, but Toes had put on one of the few soul albums Pibb owns, something by Stevie Wonder, and everybody was singing *Sir Duke* at the top of their lungs so it was pretty much impossible to hear what anyone was saying...but still, I could tell this woman wanted a mojito. You gentlemen know what goes into a mojito?”

Nobody responded.

“I’ll tell you,” said Louderman. “You need sugar water, mint leaves, rum, ice, club soda and lime. At that moment, all we had were the rum, the ice, and the club soda. So I told the woman we were out of everything that makes a mojito a mojito. I said, ‘I’m sorry, I want to take care of you, but I don’t have everything I need.’ And you know what she said?”

“What?”

“She said, ‘Don’t worry about it, sweetie. You just do what you can.’”

Louderman crossed his arms across his chest and shook his head, grinning. “People just aren’t ever like that,” he said. “It was incredible.”

“I bet the money was incredible too,” Clay interjected.

“Ha,” Louderman said. “You better believe it. When people are happy, they aren’t afraid to part with a little more than usual. I made a grand in one night, and I only worked from ten to three.”

Clay whistled. “A grand in one night? I must be in the wrong business.”

The needle spun off the record player.

“Gentlemen,” Louderman said, looking at his watch, “a shot before you go?”

The businessmen drank a last shot, paid their tab, and lifted themselves off their barstools. Louderman suggested the diner across the street if they wanted something to eat before they turned in.

“Don’t forget,” Clay said as they made their way toward the door, “cherish the good times while you got ‘em.”

“And if you ever see this guy again,” said Phil, “don’t serve him.”

“You probably shouldn’t listen to either of them,” Hank yelled, disappearing behind the door and down the staircase.

“You guys might as well be the Three Wise Men,” Louderman yelled after them.

“More like the Three Stooges,” one yelled as they descended.

Louderman followed the businessmen downstairs, watched them leave the Bonnet. Then he locked the front door behind them and turned back upstairs to close up. He paused midway up the staircase and put his hand against the wall, wondering what it would have been like if he’d been with everyone else on the other side.

Urban Reef

Thursday morning, the one day we both had off, so Cash and I woke up around noon, hopped in his beater and hit the Burger Shack for two-fers, double cheese, Cajun fries, and then cigarettes on the patio. Now we were throwing disc. We only played on weekdays, when the traffic was light and the course was empty.

“Not often we get days like this,” Cash said. It was Indian summer.

“No indeed,” I said. “These are the days to savor.”

In pleasant conditions the course posed little challenge until the eighteenth, which required a substantially longer and straighter shot than either of us had in us. Cash threw too early and stranded his disc in a maple. I launched too late. The yellow disc wobbled like a woozy canary, thudding down into a dense thicket.

“It’s The Unbeatable Hole,” Cash said, scuffing the ground. “It’ll be the end of me.”

“Of us,” I said. “Let’s we never finish it anyway. Let’s get to work.”

We crossed the stream that ran through the park and propped ourselves up against the fat waist of an old walnut tree. Cash brought out our red packet of unfiltered smokes. I pulled our notebook, a pen, a warm bottle of whisky, and two steel jiggers from my backpack.

We drank to the future.

As usual, Cash and I spent the afternoon working on plans for our bar. The bar had been several years in the making. In a way, it started as far back as college, when Cash went by Dave. He'd gotten me to start throwing disc and smoking cigarettes with him, and when the weather was nice we'd throw disc and smoke cigarettes with our girlfriends in tow and talk half-jokingly of going into business together after school. Our girlfriends would look at each other and roll their eyes.

Then we graduated. My girlfriend dumped me so I came back home to Chicago. I'd majored in accounting, so I got a job as an accountant. Dave's girlfriend dumped him and he went to Washington, where he'd grown up. He was a history major, so he got a job at a bar. Dave had always been imaginative, gregarious, voluble—perfect for bartending. He moved up fast at the Blue Bonnet. By the time my firm had laid me off—this was two years ago—he was already tending bar on the plum shifts. The owner of the place, Mr. Pibb, trusted him so much that he gave him the keys to the house safe, which is how he got his nickname. After getting laid off, I was on the verge of moving back in with my parents when Dave called one day to catch up. We hadn't talked in months. I told him what had happened. He said Wouldn't you know it but Pibb's books were a mess and he was desperate for someone to do payroll. The salary wasn't great but certainly a guy could live on it. Dave/Cash had a couch I could sleep on. As an employee I could drink for free. We could party with his crazy co-workers and do whatever we wanted. Think about it, he said: You and me, back in action. Just like college, but without those pain-in-the-ass ex-girlfriends.

So I went to work for The Bonnet. It was a far cry from my office job. For one thing, I worked Saturday to Wednesday, which took some time getting used to. Pibb's

books were in disarray, but in a few months I'd put them right. Problem was, after that, the job got boring real fast. And Cash had been right about everything else, too: the pay was lousy; our co-workers were drunks, and I was ruining my liver trying to keep pace with them—they unceremoniously dubbed me Books because, well, that's what I did. I slept on a yellow-green couch Cash had found on Craigslist. It was basically an olfactory ink blot: depending on the season and your mood, it could smell like twenty different things, not all of which were identifiable. I mostly lived out of a suitcase. There were no girlfriends because we spent most of our time working and drinking. After six months I was ready to call it quits.

The day before I was planning to leave I asked Cash into the living room and told him what there was to tell. He sat and listened. When I was done, he slapped his knees. He stood up. "Sorry to tell you this," he said flatly, "but you can't go."

"Give me one good reason why not."

"Because...I've got a plan for us." He said this so craftily that it was hard not to want more information.

"Give me a break," I feigned skepticism. "You don't have a plan."

"Books, I can't blame you for burning out on the Bonnet. But think about it—" he grinned mischievously—"would you be so burnt out if you were working for your *own* bar?" I had a flashback to our college days on the disc course. "Hell, we used to talk about it all the time," he said, as if reading my thoughts. "So, what if we started our *own* bar? You could crunch the numbers—*your* numbers, by the way—and I'd run the show from the front of the house. That's naturally the next step for me, anyhow; unless Pibb

kicks the bucket and wills the joint to me, I've risen as high as I can go at the Bonnet."

Cash had been rapid-fire pacing the tiny living room (he was tall and could cross it in two paces) while he talked, stepping over little piles of my shirts and toiletries like a scout avoiding landmines. He came to a stop between me and the suitcase. "This just makes *sense* to me. You know that feeling, don't you Ez? When you just *know* something?" It was hard to know if I knew what he'd known. Not that it mattered. I'd never been good at saying no to Cash. Most people weren't. That's the kind of guy he was: he had an answer for everything. He made you want what he wanted. And anyway, I'd been balancing other peoples' pocketbooks for awhile now, and part of me wanted to know what it would feel like to balance my own.

So that was that. I'd bought a notebook and we'd gotten down to business. Every Thursday after disc, Cash would pitch ideas and I'd write them down. Cash had a conception of the place. My role was to square his dream with our means—something I really did enjoy much more when it was *our* future I was managing. The serpentine, fifty-foot, chrome-and-acrylic bar in Cash's head would have to be wooden and half as long, but at least we could afford the leather barstools he wanted. And we would only carry twenty bottles, not the hundred Cash had initially wanted—but each and every beer was his choice. Today, we'd settled on a property. Between Cash's salary and some money I'd kept from my severance package, we had just enough to start a lease in a walk-up a few blocks away from our apartment. It was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of opportunity, the absolute perfect place—cozy, in a great location, with a back patio already built—and just barely within our price range. The only real hurdles remaining were signing the lease

and quitting to Pibb, but we had to sign the lease by Saturday or we'd lose it to another buyer.

A chill breeze filtered through the wood. Cash shuddered and pulled a hood over his head. He was watching the sun set over the trees and I was pouring us two shots. I handed one to him. "You know," he said, staring at the shot, "as ready as I am, it'll be hard to leave the Bonnet."

"Sure," I said, clinking my glass to his and tipping it back. "But we have to do this sooner or later. Better to quit tonight. It'll be like ripping off a band-aid."

Cash drank his shot and lit a smoke.

"So you know, when we leave," he said offhandedly, "Pibb won't take it well."

"Certainly not," I said. "But what can you do? People come, people go. Pibb's been at this a long time. He should understand as well as anyone."

Cash drew his knees to his chest. "Still. We need to do this respectfully. I owe him that much."

"Listen," I said. "You're making too much of this. This isn't like being laid off. *I've* been laid off; it's not a choice. At least you *get* to quit. Trust me, it's not so bad."

"Maybe," he admitted. "But you never liked your boss anyhow. Pibb, on the other hand—he's like family to me."

And this was true: many of the staff considered Pibb a kind of second father, but Cash, bartending wunderkind, was closer to him than most.

“C’mon, Cash,” I said. “Are you about to turn your back on this?” I pointed to the bulky cowhide notebook.

“Well—no. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying we’re not necessarily throwing from the same tees. That’s all.”

I looked from the notebook to him, but did not reply. Neither of us really knew what to say. Suddenly Cash revived. He shook his hood off, grabbed the brandy and poured us two more shots.

“Hey Books?”

“Yeah?”

He raised his jigger to mine. “To the bar.”

I nodded. “To the bar.”

Thursday night, so we went to the Bonnet around ten for drinks. The plan was to have a few drinks, then ask for a moment alone with Pibb and break the news. Cash hadn’t said another word about it all night, so I assumed he’d gotten over his cold feet.

Our apartment was in a brownstone around the corner from the bar. This was one of those urban neighborhoods still in search of an identity. To get to the Bonnet, you walked past a dingy Honduran bar, an Italian restaurant, a bodega crawling with cats, an upscale gym, a second-hand clothing outlet and a newspaper stand. At the corner, you made a left, and once you got to the coffee shop, the Bonnet was across the street. To get

to our new bar, you'd have had to make a right at the corner instead. That night, when we turned left, it hit me that this would be the last time I made the turn as an employee of the Bonnet. I looked at Cash. He had his hands in his pockets and he had his head down. He was walking at a pretty good clip. I walked faster to keep up.

It wasn't like the Bonnet was some shitball dive, but it wasn't exactly the Four Seasons, either. It had probably looked great twenty years before, when Pibb had opened it. It needed a paint job and some basic structural repair, at a minimum, but Pibb just didn't have the money for it. Being that I kept his books, I knew that as well as he did.

The bar had two parts. There was a dim, fusty lounge at ground level, veiled by tacky velvet curtains, where newer staff cut their teeth. The only people in the lounge were regulars. There was also a busier, airy rooftop bar with a tiki theme to it. On the weekends, Georgetown students liked to slum on the roof. Much of the older staff split time between the lounge and roof, but Pibb and Cash only tended and drank upstairs.

When we reached the roof, sure enough, there was Pibb in the center—his hair a bleached plot of rye grass, arms spotted with old ink, filling a line of shot glasses in a single, practiced sweep—and across the burnished brass bar, set apart from the few other customers, sat the off-duty staff. Furthest down was some mousey cocktail waitress Pibb had hired yesterday—I hadn't yet added her name to the staff roster so I didn't remember her name at the time. She had a face that seemed familiar, though I couldn't place it. Next was Tiny Toes, the little rooster, puffed Cuban chest and slender Irish nose, a mouth that never shut. Closer was gangly, sardonic Louderman, shoulders hunched as if fighting a headwind. Word was that he was going back to school to get his doctorate. He was the

only other bartender I'd spent much time with outside of work; we liked the same bands and occasionally went to shows at the Brown Dog. Nearest was Hairspray. Her hair was raven black and she wore it up. I got on well enough with Hairspray because she was one of those girls that you'd never find yourself attracted to—not because she wasn't attractive, but because she was basically a guy with breasts.

The stool in front of us was reserved for Cash and, meeting Pibb's gaze, he gingerly eased himself onto it. There were no more open seats so I stood behind Cash.

"Attaboy, hey, attaboy!" Toes called down to us, a sloppy grin splattered across his face. He leaned cheekily over the bar and yelled at Pibb. "Do us a favor, barkeep, hey, and filler up two extra!"

"I remember *my* first beer," Louderman said.

"Oh leave him alone," Hairspray said to Louderman. "The vertically challenged have feelings too."

Toes, Louderman and Cash brought their glasses up to meet Hairspray's.

"Hey now, Books," Pibb acknowledged me. "Numbers still adding up?" He burped and pushed a shot glass in my direction. "Join us in a family toast?"

Before I could answer, Hairspray cut in. "Wait—we're one short." She looked down to the end of the bar where the new waitress had been watching us a vacant look on her face. "New girl," she barked. "What're you afraid of? Drag your butt down here and take this shot."

As instructed, the girl walked gamely over to our corner of the bar. I saw she was a slight girl, pale, even paler than Cash, which was hard to do. Her face was peppered with freckles. She wore too much eyeliner. She was wearing a long beige skirt and leather boots.

I turned to Cash. He was watching her intently, but with the same giddy look that reminded me of when he'd proposed the bar plan to me. I realized why she seemed familiar. Physically, she very much resembled Emily, his college girlfriend.

"Here I am," she announced. She planted herself between me and Cash. She surveyed the crowd around her. Then she curtsied. She seemed to do this without irony. In a place like the Bonnet, the gesture seemed especially absurd. Hairspray and Louderman scratched their heads but Pibb seemed strangely pleased. Toes stared at her but, for once, had nothing to say. I decided then that I did not like her. Cash startled me by laughing loudly at the gesture—maybe he found it amusing because Emily had been far from the curtsying type. The girl seemed to fixate on Cash's long blond hair. She beamed at him. He returned her smile.

Pibb poured the girl a shot. Cash fished our cigarettes from his shirt pocket. There were two left. I was glad he'd done this, because I felt strongly that I needed a cigarette at that moment. Before I could grab one, he offered it to the girl. She accepted. He took the other for himself.

"—But now we're out," I blurted, though nobody had spoken to me. Cash gave me a belittling frown.

"Really, Books? Is this the time to whine about smokes?"

“Well, no,” I said. “I just thought...”

Cash groaned and plunged a hand into his wallet. “Here.” He shoved a fiver into my shirt. “Go next door and get us another pack.”

“But why me?” I protested, my voice rising perceptibly. “It wasn’t me who gave away our last cigarette. *You* should be the one to go.”

“You’re going because I outrank you,” Cash said, standing as if to make the point clearer. He was the taller of us by a good few inches.

“You can’t be serious.” He’d never done this to me. “Cash,” I asked quietly. “You’re pulling rank on me?” The bar went silent. I swore I saw him grimace. Nevertheless, he crossed his arms, and nodded.

“House rules,” he said. I searched feebly for a sympathetic face, but the rest of the staff had deferred to Cash. Pibb’s arms, too, were crossed, his mouth closed.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I’ll get you your damn cigarettes.” I balled the fiver in my hand and flew out the door.

“Books! You can drink your shot before you—” Hairspray yelled after me as I slammed the door to the roof.

I thought about leaving for the night, but on a Thursday the neighborhood was usually dead, and there wasn’t much else to do except to go to the Corner Bistro—though I’d heard from Cash that French Fred, the big bald guy who managed it, had been in a real crummy mood since this girl he used to date had decided not to come from France to visit him, and he wasn’t giving Bonnet staff free shots anymore.

Eventually I decided to get the smokes and went back to the Bonnet. I figured Cash would apologize and that would be that. We'd break the news to Pibb, have another drink, and head home.

When I got to the roof, though, I ran into Hairspray and Louderman making for the stairs, something that didn't usually happen until late into the evening.

"Hey," I asked, "what gives?"

Louderman and Hairspray looked at one another. Then Hairspray motioned behind them with her eyes. I could see Pibb was still behind the bar, but I looked past him and saw Cash and the girl at a table by themselves near the railing. The girl was holding Cash's hand. They were sitting across from one another, and she was holding his hand and talking to him.

"C'mon," Louderman grabbed my shoulder. "We already put Toes in a cab. We're hitting the lounge. Let's give them some privacy, huh?"

I had an urge to walk over and throw the pack of smokes in Cash's face. "What about the smokes?" I said to Louderman. "I need to give him his smokes."

Hairspray sighed. "Something tells me he's not interested in your smokes right now," she said.

"C'mon now," Louderman said again. "Have a drink with us, Books. It'll do you good."

I'd been drinking with Louderman and Hairspray for two years, but almost never without Cash. It felt wrong now, sitting in the lounge without him, Louderman on the left

and Hairspray on the right. Hairspray's mother called, which happened a lot. She excused herself and beelined for the bathroom. That left me and Louderman.

Usually we talked about music, but I wasn't in the mood. I asked him if he wanted a pop.

"Is the Pope Catholic?" Crick was bartending. He served us two pops of the house whisky, which was all Louderman ever drank. Then Louderman ordered us two beers, to even our score after I'd bought him the shots. I thanked him. We sipped our beers.

"Well," Louderman broke the silence. "Guess Pibb was right for once."

I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Sorry," he shrugged. "Not your fault you didn't know, but Pibb had been talking about finding Cash a regular lay for months. He knew Cash's type because Cash had told him all about his ex. He essentially hired the waitress on Cash's behalf. He orchestrated the whole thing." Louderman adjusted his eyeglasses.

I felt hot. Had Cash known about this? Had he been hiding it from me?

"Don't worry," Louderman said, anticipating my question. "Cash had no idea. Only Hairspray and I knew, and to be honest, we were skeptical about the whole thing. Pibb's not the world's best matchmaker." He shook his head and took a gulp of his beer. "For what it's worth," he added, "I understand why you're vexed about it."

"What makes you think I'm vexed about it?"

“Well, maybe you are, maybe you aren’t. I’m just saying, I get it. I had a girl I was close with once, and then she met a guy. Now we don’t talk.”

“Sorry to hear that.” It was the first time I’d heard him talk about this.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I made peace with it, but at the time I felt betrayed.”

“‘Betrayed’ is a pretty strong word,” I said. “That’s what Judas did to Jesus.”

“Or Cain to Abel.” He shrugged. “I’m an Old Testament guy, myself. Either way, someone’s getting screwed in the end.”

“Maybe the lesson is not to repeat history?”

“Would be nice,” Louderman mused. “Unlikely to happen, though.”

“You don’t think so?”

“Nah.” He smiled wanly and rubbed his shoulder blade. “Best we can do is glance back every so often to make sure we don’t completely lose our way.” I didn’t follow him but I suddenly had a strong desire to leave. I knew Cash wasn’t going to quit to Pibb tonight, and I wasn’t about to quit for him. Cash wanted to do it right, and I wasn’t going to step on his feet about that. I paid my tab and stood. Louderman shook my hand. “Don’t be a stranger,” he said. I nodded. I walked out of the lounge, glanced up the stairs, and walked home.

Friday, so Cash and I should have been preparing to sign our lease, but I didn’t see him until the next afternoon. I passed the morning watching television and playing

solitaire. I played solitaire every morning when I woke up while I waited for Cash to shower and get dressed, but today the shower wasn't running. When I threw a card down on the little glass coffee table the *smack* resounded through the apartment. I even walked down the tiny hallway to Cash's room to see if maybe he'd overslept, but the door was open and the light was on; he wasn't there. By noon I was fidgeting all over the place, walking around the apartment in hurried circuits and talking to myself. I couldn't take the silence so I called his phone two or three times, but nobody answered. I assumed the battery had run out.

Finally, Cash came home around one. I was on the couch playing solitaire again. He was wearing the same clothes from last night and whistling a song Pibb had been playing on the roof the night before.

"Sup?" he said, strolling past the couch. I heard him searching for a clean glass, which was hard to do in our kitchen.

"Good night?" I craned my neck so I could see him as he answered the question.

"Totally." He said this evenly and did not peek his head out of the kitchen. I heard him run the tap and chug the water. I waited for him to continue. He emerged from the kitchen and started walking to his room. It occurred to me that perhaps the night had not been a success for Cash. We had no secrets from each other, and his reluctance to elaborate suggested very little had transpired.

"By the way," I blurted as he approached the couch, "I have your smokes here." He seemed puzzled. I reminded him.

“Oh...right,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Here,” I offered him the pack. He hesitated.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You bought them. They’re yours.”

Cash had never excelled at apologies; I was sure this had something to do with why Emily had dumped him. “Letting” me keep the smokes seemed like as much of an apology as I was going to get. We always split our smokes, but I knew he understood that what he’d done was wrong, and as an olive branch, he wanted me to keep the whole pack.

“So what’s on tap for today?” I asked hopefully. I was going to remind him that we were supposed to sign our lease, but at that moment, I felt like hearing him to say it.

Cash yawned. “I’m tired. I’m going to lay down for a nap,” he said. He made for his bedroom.

“Wait—” He whirled around.

“Jesus, Books. What is it?”

“Do you, um, feel like Burger Shack today?”

“Actually, yeah,” he said after a beat. “I’m pretty hungry.”

“Great,” I said, leaping to my feet. “Great, so, I’ll throw some pants on and we’ll leave in a minute, then?”

“Perfect,” Cash said. “I’ll call Mona.”

Mona ordered the plainest, smallest, simplest burger on the menu: the Kids Klub Burger, which consisted of one patty, no cheese, ketchup, and two pickles. She convinced Cash to order the same. She and Cash shared an order of fries on their side of the table; I ordered my own. They somehow managed to hold hands while they ate. It was bizarrely like college, “Emily and Dave” all over again—except the new Emily had no grasp of sarcasm and what I guessed was an I.Q. in the low 70s. The old Emily wasn’t the nicest person—neither was Nadia, my own ex, for that matter—but at least they had strong intellects and personalities. I suspected that’s what Cash was attracted to: an Emily that wouldn’t challenge or question him.

While timidly picking at her meal, *Mona* regaled us with her life story.

“I’d never been to Washington,” she explained. “I always wanted to go, it being our nation’s capital and all, but my aunt has this fear of rivers, and wouldn’t drive us across the Mississippi.”

“Why not just fly?” I asked.

“Couldn’t afford it. Still can’t. I bussed out here, you know.”

“No,” I said. “I hadn’t known that.”

“*Mona*’s going to be a cosmetologist,” Cash said.

“Cutting hair sounds exciting,” I said.

“Actually,” she broke in, “the brochure I got from the Washington Cosmetology Institute says that cosmetology deals with all aspects of proper hair care.” Cash was listening, rapt. “We’re going to learn the proper and improper ways to revitalize, style,

and care for hair. It's a science, you know." She tenderly nibbled the edge of her plain bun. "But what's *really* important to me," she said, looking at Cash, "is growing my roots somewhere." She looked back at me, like Cash had already heard this story. He probably had. "My dad left us when I was little and my mom's second husband took her to Idaho, so my aunt was always chasing jobs and moving us around when I was little. I never got to really feel like I *belonged* somewhere."

"Where'd you grow up?" I asked, purely out of courtesy.

"Oh, all over. Kansas. Oklahoma. Nebraska. I even spent some time in Texas."

"I think I know what you mean," I said. "My parents are still together, but when I was seven, they moved us from New Jersey to Illinois. Also, Cash and I went to college in Ohio."

"Yes," she said. "I'm planning on going back to college, too."

"You sure are," Cash said, draping his arm around her. "Mona did a year at the Art Institute of Southern Oklahoma." He said this like it was supposed to be impressive.

"It was just a semester, actually," she demurred. "I was going to major in loom studies, but my funds ran out when my tribe's casino folded. I'm one-eighth Apache."

"Guess that explains your dark skin," I said. She laughed.

"It's only an eighth. I'm mostly Scandinavian, with some French, German, and a little Polish thrown in there. Basically, I'm a mutt."

“Sounds about right,” I said softly enough so neither she nor Cash would hear. I bit into my burger, which did not taste as good today.

“Tonight, Mona will be drinking at my bar,” Cash informed me. “You’re more than welcome to come with her.”

With *her*.

“Come with me, Books!” I didn’t much like my nickname at the Bonnet, but it was still an intensely personal thing—the only people allowed to call me by my nickname were my co-workers. Mona hadn’t earned the right to use it. It infuriated me to hear her say it.

“Maybe,” I said. I looked at Cash and wondered if he had already explained the meaning of *his* nickname to her. “By the way,” I spoke directly to him, “I was thinking we could take an hour this afternoon to sign the lease.” Cash coughed and took a drink of his soda.

“Lease?”

“Yes,” I said, mildly surprised she didn’t know this. “Cash and I are going to open a place together.”

“Huh.” she turned to Cash. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Slipped my mind, I guess,” he said, shrugging. “Anyway, Books, I don’t have time this afternoon. I’m giving Mona a tour of the city.” My stomach leapt.

“Cash, if we don’t do it today—”

“Then we still have tomorrow,” he cut me off. He glanced out the window.

“Cash...”

He looked at me again, but this time his eyes were set. “We’ll do it tomorrow,” he said. I didn’t feel like arguing. Cash grabbed his and Mona’s trays and took them to the refuse bin. I cleaned up after myself and followed them out the door.

Friday night, so I went to the Bonnet like usual, but when I reached the top of the stairs I paused. The roof seemed noisier, uglier tonight. There were shrieking college girls everywhere, drinks were being spilled, and Cash and Pibb were blasting their music. I couldn’t see her, but I knew Mona was somewhere at the bar.

The lounge, on the other hand, was nearly deserted. I walked downstairs to find Hairspray behind the bar—she subbed in for Crick on Fridays so he and French Fred could go prowling at the clubs. It was late enough that she was probably toasted by now. The only customers were Louderman, who did not work Fridays, on account of it being the Jewish Sabbath, and Louderman’s new girlfriend. He had his arm around her. I wondered how much of Cash’s comp tab would be used to buy Mona drinks. If it were any other week, I’d come into work on Sunday like usual, check the records, and find out.

Hairspray saw me and sloppily beckoned me over. I paused in the doorway.

“C’m on,” she giggled. “I won’t bite.”

I walked over to the bar and sat down at the end opposite where Louderman and his girlfriend were sitting. They didn’t notice me. Hairspray poured us two shots of house

whisky and we drank them. She could really hold her liquor. Then she gave me a beer and leaned in, over the bar, so that we were face to face.

“I want to suck your blood,” she intoned, opening her mouth to reveal plastic fangs. It was a joke she pulled on occasion when business was slow.

“Don’t they all,” I muttered. It was only midnight. Cash wouldn’t be off for another three hours. Hairspray frowned. She leaned in even closer, so our foreheads were touching. She clasped her hands behind my head and held my head tight to hers.

“Hey Books,” she whispered just loudly enough for me to hear. I could smell warm beer and whiskey on her breath. She could sometimes be very physical when she was this drunk. “Hey Booksie,” she repeated. “Those numbers still adding up for you?” She was talking nonsense. She laughed and belched at once. The belch rose up into my nostrils. The smell was suffocating. It smelled like my couch smelled on a hot summer day. I felt sick.

“Hey quit it,” I hissed, trying to hold my breath. “Let me go.” She kept me pressed to her head. She had very strong arms.

“If you want to go so badly, Books old pal, then why don’t you leave?”

“Jesus, Hairspray,” I said, trying to pull away. “Just let me go.” My forehead was beginning to grind against hers. I was getting a headache. “Christ,” I said. I said this loudly enough for Louderman and his girlfriend to hear.

“C’mon Spray,” he shouted at her. His girlfriend looked at me. Louderman looked at me, then at Hairspray. “Don’t keep him against his will. Let him leave.”

I felt Hairspray frown. She unclasped her hands and wiped them. She bowed to me. “Be gone with you,” she said, hiccupping. She stumbled down to Louderman’s end of the bar. I left the Bonnet and walked back home.

Saturday afternoon, so I woke up and checked my watch: it was noon. We had until five to sign the lease. I’d gotten pretty smashed the night before; I’d passed out in my clothes. After I’d gotten home I took the bottle of whisky from my backpack and drank. I paged through the notebook over and over because I wanted something to read. Then I tried to watch television but there was an old buddy-cop movie on and it depressed me so I turned it off. I wanted to stay up until Cash got home but I fell asleep before he came back.

When I got up I gently knocked on the door, but there was no answer. I tried the handle. Again, there was nobody inside.

I slammed the door and walked back into the living room. I picked up my phone and dialed him. The first time it went to his voicemail. I called again. And again. On the fifth time he picked up.

“Myeah?” It sounded like he was eating something.

“It’s Saturday afternoon. Where are you?”

“I’m out with Mona.” He said it like it wasn’t a big deal.

“We don’t have much time,” I said. “If we don’t do this by five we’ll lose it.” I could hear him chewing in the background. It sounded like they were at the Burger Shack.

“Mona and I are going to see a movie,” he said. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Well when’s the movie?”

“I dunno,” he said. “Two, maybe?” I heard him say something to her.

“Well how the hell will you get there in time?”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” he snipped.

“Then how should I talk to you? You’ve blown me off for two days.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“You owe me this,” I said too loudly.

“I owe you nothing. Get off my ass.”

He hung up.

Being inside, alone, was going to drive me insane. So I grabbed my disc and walked over to the course.

I threw around until the eighteenth, where I launched a drive into a patch of Poison Ivy; I didn’t want the rash so I just left the disc. I jumped the stream and took my usual seat against the walnut tree. I threw back a pop of brandy and brought out the notebook.

I stared at it, and...it was like staring at Cash. Because all I could think about was Cash and Mona. Mona sitting on my couch, drinking my booze. Standing behind Cash at the Bonnet. Sitting shotgun in Cash's car. Smoking my cigarettes. Eating my French fries. Watching my television. Everything known and comfortable was unraveling with a new order establishing itself in place of the old. It was a terribly helpless feeling I had, a stone in my gut. I stood up and left the park.

It was getting darker out; I checked my watch. It was getting on toward five. I sprinted over to the real estate agency. I got there with ten minutes to spare. Cash wasn't there. I began to panic. I called him. Then I called him a second time. Why wasn't he here? I called him again, and this time, I left a message, telling him that it was imperative he get there immediately, and that if he truly cared about us, he would show up. When I hung up, I was shaking, so I had a smoke. I thought about calling Cash again and leaving another message, telling him to delete the first one before listening to it, but I reconsidered. There was nothing more to say. The real estate office shuttered its windows.

Saturday night, and I sat on the couch like usual, watching television, drinking, playing solitaire, until around nine, when I found I was getting drunk and couldn't sit still any longer. Cash must have gone straight from the movie to work. I grabbed my backpack, double-checked to make sure the notebook was inside, and walked down to the Bonnet.

It was ten, still early for a Saturday, so there wasn't much business. I saw things with such clarity. Pibb was on my side of the bar, humming some insufferable tune, slicing oranges and limes, licking the juice from his fingers. Cash was skipping around at the far end, refilling bottles with bar disinfectant. I wanted to choke him with his smelly bar rag. Mona sat there, watching him. I wanted her to fall backwards off the railing.

I sidled up to the brass and waited for Pibb to notice me. Even my feet, heavy against the wooden boards, failed to capture his attention.

After a few minutes, I coughed loudly.

"Ah, Books." He looked me over. "Here on the early side, I see. Can I quench your thirst?"

"Two pops," I said. I sort of slurred this; he could see I was already drunk.

"You sure you need so much, Books?"

"You heard me," I said. "Two pops. One for me, one for Cash." Pibb didn't say anything. He reached behind him and got out two glasses. He filled them both. Then he turned around to Cash. He yelled at Cash to come over and do a shot.

"Be right there," Cash yelled back. He put down the bar rag and went over to Mona. They kissed. Then he walked over to us. When he saw me his smile evaporated.

I glared at him. "Well," I said. "I hope you enjoyed your film."

Cash said nothing. Pibb, who was essentially standing between us, looked worriedly from Cash to me. “You boys need some time alone?” I could see over Cash’s shoulder that Mona had seen us standing together and was walking over.

“No,” I said before Cash could respond. “This will only take a moment.”

I reached into my backpack and brought out the notebook. Cash’s eyes bulged.

“Stop it, Books,” he ordered. “Put it away. We can talk about it.” He started to walk toward me.

“The time for talk is over,” I said. I stepped away from him so he couldn’t reach over the bar to grab the book.

Mona reached us and saw Cash was no longer smiling. She quietly started to make for the door.

“Oh no,” I ran to her and stopped her from leaving. “Cash obviously wanted you here for this, I think you should stay.” I looked at Cash. “So how’s it feel?” I asked. “How’s it feel to break the biggest promise of your life?”

“Promise?” Pibb interjected. I’d never seen Pibb frazzled about anything, but he looked as uncomfortable as I’d ever seen him. “Hey now, how about the both of you promise to take your personal business out of this bar, huh?” We looked at him, then back at each other.

“I can’t talk to you,” Cash sputtered. He turned to walk away. “Call me when you’re sane again.”

That did it. I turned to Pibb.

“Just so you know,” I explained in a voice so clinical it surprised me, “Cash and I were going to start our own bar.” Talking in the past tense was unnerving, but I slogged through it by using the notebook as an aid. “We were planning to quit—two days ago, in fact—to start the place. Down the block, on Eleventh Street, there’s a property—that’s pages 2-9, the exact location, estimates of interior space, you get the idea. Between my savings and his earnings, we had enough money to lease it. But of course—” I looked at Cash “—we missed our chance to sign because apparently a movie was more important.” I was shaking but I kept going. “Anyway,” I continued, “the place is two floors, just like here—er, that’s on page 34. Wood bar, about as long as yours—that’s on page 47. We had the capacity pegged at around 150 plus bar seating—page 56. All we needed was a name, and that was going on the last full page.” I showed him the only remaining empty page. “Cash was going to be you. And I was going to be me.”

The silence was ugly.

“I think, Books,” Pibb said, “you should go.”

I looked at Cash. He was so stunned that, for a moment, he simply stared at me.

“We’re through,” he said to me. Mona was whimpering. I ignored her. I put the notebook back in the bag, zipped it up and slung it over my shoulders.

“Have a nice life,” I said. I turned around and left.

Late Saturday night, and the last thing I needed to do was to tie up loose ends. After I'd gotten home, I packed up my suitcase, and considered writing a goodbye note to Cash. I held off, though. What was I going to say? When I left the apartment there wasn't a trace of me remaining.

I walked out the door, up the block, past the restaurants, the clothing store, the newspaper stand. Their doors were all sealed with gates.

I got to the corner and, this time, I turned right. I walked the two blocks to what would have been our property. The "For Sale" sign had disappeared. Somebody else had taken it.

I made it to the disc course around 4 AM. It was still dark but only for a another hour or two. The course was quiet, a cold wind had picked up. I lugged the suitcase behind me as I walked through the course, past the eighteenth tee, and crossed the stream. Even the dark I knew exactly where I was going. I'd done this before.

Lighting a cigarette, I pulled out the whisky and drank the last of it. I left the two jiggers and the bottle at the foot of the walnut tree. Then I took out the notebook. I took the cigarette and held it to the bottom of the notebook. The pages kindled. Pretty soon the whole book was aflame. I threw the book at the foot of the tree, and the flames began to lick the bark. A cloud of smoke rose up. In the cloud I saw Cash.

"Don't you ever just *know* something?" The Cash-cloud asked.

I said that I did.

The Cash-cloud stuck around for a second longer and then it disappeared. The notebook burnt itself out. I slung my backpack back over my shoulder and grabbed my luggage. I walked out of the park and waiting for fifteen minutes until a cab picked me up. I had the cabbie drive me to the airport. With some luck, I'd be in Chicago that morning.

Brown Dog

Hairspray couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a show at the Brown Dog. It was a small venue, built with Chuck Brown and Trouble Funk in mind, which clung to an ageing sound system and employed bartenders who on principal refused to mix mojitos or break a dollar. The floorboards had dealt with countless boot heels and the walls were papered with faded posters of acts that had stopped at the Dog along their road to celebrity, or on their way back from it. The joint smelled like the sweat of nearly-famous people, and took some getting used to; Hairspray rankled as she left the crisp autumn night and followed Gingerbread into the "over 21" line, holding her wrist out to be stamped by a man who resembled an Allman Brother.

"Let's be on the lookout for a guy from Nonesuch Records," Gingerbread declared as they made their way to a bar adjacent to the stage, a familiar grunge anthem droning in the background. Hairspray had never heard of Nonesuch, nor did she know what one of their representatives might look like, but she decided to believe that such an agent did exist in their world, and that he might even be Gingerbread's ticket to stardom.

"You got it," she assured him as they eased up to the bar. They did shots of Jameson while, just above them on stage, a dour mixing engineer with devil locks unfurled a nest of speaker cords.

Gingerbread checked his watch. "We're on in forty-five," he said. "I have to get ready."

“I’ll see you after the show,” said Hairspray, fully aware that she was granting the date an extension. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, but we won’t need it.” Gingerbread touched her gently on the elbow and raced off.

An hour and a half later, the faded red curtains finally went up to a handful of whoops and some sarcastic applause, and Wolf Cancer launched into their set. Wolf Cancer songs turned out to be short—mercifully short, Hairspray thought—two-minute starbursts of distortion threaded with exhortative lyrics, yelped in unison by all three members, about populist uprisings or shoplifting. Each was met with roughly equal amounts of high praise and ambivalence by the audience. Hairspray had known going in that this wouldn’t be the kind of music she most enjoyed—she and many of the Bonnet’s bartenders were captivated at present by electronic and dance music—but after a few songs she began to acclimate herself to the guitarist’s scratching, the drummer’s clanging. Hairspray recognized both of them, as they joined Gingerbread at the Bonnet for drinks from time to time. They were all thin, so thin up there: Gingerbread was a flute, but the drummer was a piccolo, the guitarist a fife.

Midway through the set, Hairspray scanned the crowd for someone who might have been from Nonesuch Records. Nobody stood out, though it occurred to her that there were more people present than she’d imagined there would be—at least several dozen by a crude count. They seemed to fall into two categories. The cluster standing further from the stage, trading jokes and juggling texts and cups of beer, acted like people who would have been there no matter who was playing, and now they were seeing the

same band run through the same songs for the thirtieth time, which Hairspray guessed was likely the case.

The second group was a crush of spastic dancers at the foot of the stage who sang along to every word, however unintelligible it was to Hairspray. This was Wolf Cancer's fan club. They were mostly male, twenties and thirties, metal rings hanging from their nostrils or eyebrows. Of the few girls scattered among them, all looked appreciably younger than Hairspray. One in particular, a girl with glittery cheeks and a spaghetti-string purse and cherry streaks running through her blonde boy cut, seemed especially young and—was it her imagination?—fixated on Gingerbread. When the bass line switched from walk to slap, his torso registered the change with a jerk, and Hairspray swore she saw the girl giggle and mouth something directly into her friend's ear.

Hairspray had planned to meet Gingerbread out front after the show. But as Wolf Cancer concluded their set and Hairspray settled her tab, she saw the cherry-blond girl grab the hem of her friend's leather jacket and escort her around the side of the stage. The two girls disappeared through a door that led to the changing rooms. Hairspray looked to the front of the Brown Dog, moonlight peeking in through the sides of the drawn curtains, and then to the door separating her from Gingerbread. Several drinks deep, alone by the bar, and with the last song of the set dying out in her ears, Hairspray grabbed her rose and headed backstage.

The corridor was dim, and as Hairspray tried each doorknob, it became clear that all of the changing rooms were locked. Like a game show, she would have to knock on

each door until she came to the right room. The first two doors produced no response. With the third came a young girl's voice:

“What's the password?” There was muffled giggling. Hairspray saw herself at age eight, standing outside her mother's bedroom in the middle of the night. She'd had a nightmare. The door wouldn't move, and the noises behind it were unfamiliar. She wrenched the knob as far as it would go, but it wouldn't budge. She banged on the door. The noises quieted. She heard footsteps.

“Dreams aren't real,” her mother yelled into the door. “Go to bed.”

Hairspray brought her blanket in from her bedroom and slept outside her mother's room.

“C'mon, Jaime.” She heard Gingerbread as if he were speaking over the phone. “It's probably Dan with our speaker cords.” The door swung open and Hairspray stepped into a small, humid, bottle-green room with a long, low russet couch against the far wall. There was a coffee table in front of the couch with a number of empty cans of Pabst and a pack of cigarettes. Jaime, the girl in the leather jacket, looked Hairspray up and down in the span of a second before stepping aside to let her enter. On the couch, her blonde friend sat beside Gingerbread, their shoulders not quite touching. Neither girl was drinking, but Gingerbread had a fifth of Jameson in his left hand. He looked truly...comfortable. Yes, comfortable—Mick Jaggerish, even—with one leg crossed over the other, ratty Pogues tee-shirt sweaty from the performance, whiskey aslant in his red-knuckled hand. Hairspray thought he looked more comfortable than she'd ever seen him.

Her default image of him had always been on the defensive, hunched over the roof bar, fending off invisible swipes at his career with a determined scowl.

Gingerbread winked at her. “Ladies,” he announced, “please make way for tonight’s featured guest act.”

The blonde sized Hairspray’s outfit up before spying the rose dangling from her fingers. “You brought him that for his show? That’s kind of adorable.”

Hairspray began to open her mouth—to say what, she didn’t know—but she kept it shut as Gingerbread returned the Jameson on the table, left the girl’s side, strode across the gray, cigarette-singed carpet, and came to a stop next to Hairspray, her eyes even with his collarbone. He put his hand on her back. It had been months since she’d felt a hand on her; this one felt bigger, warmer than Gus’s. She didn’t move away from it.

“You got it backwards, Tessa,” he said to the blonde. “*I* brought it for *her*.”

Tessa parted her lips and frowned. She looked from Gingerbread to Hairspray, then back to Gingerbread. Then she looked over at Jaime, who shrugged and pulled out her phone, as if to say, *your call*.

“Well whatever,” Tessa said, checking her gold-banded watch. “Jaime and I have French homework due tomorrow anyway.” She looked eagerly at her friend. “We’re living together next semester in Paris, right Jaimers?”

Hairspray saw Jaime nod, zip her leather jacket, and locate a set of car keys from her bag. Tessa hopped off the couch and brushed past Jaime, beckoning her to leave. The girls’ heels clacked against the tile as they walked down the corridor. Gingerbread pushed

his head out the door and called after her, “Hey, your dad’s still definitely coming for Parents Week next month, right?”

Tessa looked over her shoulder. “Uh, yeah?”

“I mean...you said he produces for acts like us, so...you’re bringing him by?”

Tessa and Jaime caught one another’s glances and giggled. “I mean, sure,” Tessa said as they vanished from view. “Y’know, if there’s time.”

The Brown Dog was far enough uptown that everything around it had closed by midnight, so Gingerbread and Hairspray caught a downhill bus toward the Bonnet for a nightcap. It was cold enough that goose bumps had surfaced on Hairspray’s arms; Gingerbread cloaked her in his blazer, and she enjoyed the feeling of it settling around her shoulders.

Falling leaves scattered as the bus rolled down along the wide, smooth streets of Northwest Washington, lined with midrise apartments and organic grocery stores. They were the only people on the bus, and Hairspray took the aisle seat right next to Gingerbread. She listened deferentially as he explained how Tessa’s dad had worked with everyone from Frank Zappa to the White Stripes.

“Tessa said she played him a recording of us from a month ago and he said we had ‘a distinct sound,’” he said, almost breathless. “A compliment like that, that’s got to mean *something*, right?”

Hairspray nodded vigorously, unsure she agreed but more than happy to keep Gingerbread talking.

The bus deposited them just up the block from the Bonnet. Hairspray followed Gingerbread down the moonlit sidewalk past the empanada stand and the convenience store, the new Irish pub that wouldn't last the month and the even newer tapas bar that had a better shot, until they reached the blue bonnet sign over the front door. Inside, Gingerbread started for the stairs leading to the roof. Tiny Toes was tending bar on the roof, and Hairspray heard his adenoidal cackle carrying down the stairs. His voice was joined by another—Louderman's deep, machinegun bray. Hairspray seized. There was a reason she worked hard to keep her romantic life separate from the Bonnet, sharing few details about boyfriends with Bonnet staff and rarely bringing them around: the vicious crosscurrents of gossip, the dodgy admixture of work and play, the emergence of a reputation beyond her control. She'd seen it in her mother, who was now banned from nearly every drinking establishment and gentleman's club between Carlsbad and Costa Mesa. Imagine: Hairspray entering the roof in heels and Gingerbread's jacket, that jacket's owner glued to her side. It would be an anchor, an image she could never escape.

"Hold on," she said.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter." She cradled the rose as she dug into her handbag for the master key. "I just thought it might be hard to talk up there with everybody." She motioned with her eyes to the Lounge door.

Gingerbread straightened a little. "Of course," he said. "As you wish."

Hairspray knew the Lounge was empty on Sundays—it was Crick and French Fred’s night off, and they usually went bar-hopping together. It was the first time she’d used her master key on anything other than the roof door, and she fumbled with the lock until it clicked and released, and they slipped into the still room, dark except for a traffic light on a stand that the drummer from Pibb’s band had stolen from a deserted street corner in Berlin. The timer had broken off during the heist, and the light, which had been on red, was still stuck there.

(“In the Lounge, red means ‘go,’” she quipped.)

Hairspray felt her way around along the short wooden bar and found an electric candle at the end. She turned it on and set it on the bar. Then she went around and pulled out two Heinekens, which Pibb had been buying more of lately, from the fridge beneath the bar. Gingerbread grabbed a worn black leather barstool and sat opposite her. They clinked and drank. When he’d finished his beer, Gingerbread asked Hairspray to fill his bottle with water.

“Why?” she asked.

“Trust me,” he said. She hesitated, and then filled the bottle in the little stainless steel sink next to the fridge. She put it back on the bar beside the electric candle, and Gingerbread sat the rose stem in it; the flower hung just over the neck, a perfect fit. This was her *made for TV* moment, Hairspray realized. She tugged on Gingerbread’s sleeve.

One of many longtime Bonnet regulars who had never spent more than a few moments in the Lounge, Gingerbread caught sight of *The Coal Minors’* tour poster above

the leopard-print couches running the length of the room toward the alcove that led to Pibb's office.

"No way," he said, awestruck. "I never knew Pibb was *that* big."

"Don't get him started about that tour," Hairspray joked, squeezing his hand.

"He'll go all night."

Gingerbread continued to stare at Pibb, envious. "Soon enough," he said, "that'll be me over there."

Hairspray caught a glimpse of Tessa and Jaime receiving Gingerbread and his band on the balcony of their sunlit Paris flat, the Eiffel tower and the Arc de Triomphe framing the image, and was struck by a thought. "Maybe you don't have to wait to go," she said. Before he could respond she turned her back to him and, one by one, brought down from the shelves above the cash register the European spirits now doubly familiar to them from the documentary that evening. She clustered them on the bar. Then, she reached into a glass rack beneath the cash register and found two shot glasses and set them between herself and Gingerbread.

"It'll be like being there without the hassle of going," she explained. Gingerbread appraised the liquor skeptically.

"It's not the same," he said.

"Trust me." She poured the bottle of Chartreuse. "The trick is to close your eyes," she ordered. As the shot went down Hairspray scaled alp after alp until she reached the verdant meadows of southern France, full of chalets and mountain goats. She hiccupped

and Gingerbread instinctively reached across the wood bar to steady her. She covered his hand with hers and opened her eyes. “Did it work?”

“I guess,” he bit his lip. “Maybe we better try another?” Hairspray poured Orujo this time and floated off across the Bay of Biscay to the shrub-specked hillsides of Galicia.

“Any luck?” she asked.

“Third time’s the charm,” he said, wincing a little from the burn of the distilled grapes. Hairspray poured the Drambuie. In drinking it, the smell transported her not to the Speyside highlands, but to her mother’s apartment. Drambuie was a smell she hadn’t confronted since her last morning in California, the morning she’d awakened to find her mother, who’d been drinking it all night, rummaging through Hairspray’s closet looking for cash.

At 21, Hairspray’s feet now hung over her mattress when she slept, and her disgust for her mother seemed also to have grown too big for the tiny bedroom she’d known all her life.

“Get out of here,” were the first words from Hairspray’s mouth. Her mother ignored her, scattering pairs of Hairspray’s pants across the floor in a search for her wallet. “I said, get out,” yelled Hairspray, and her mother turned around.

“It was never your room,” she said, her tongue thick as clay, cheeks purpling, skirt ripped. “I own everything here, I paid for it.” She located Hairspray’s wallet beneath a mound of dirty socks, pulled out a twenty dollar bill, and left, slamming the door. She

had not spoken to her mother since; even on her birthday, Hairspray would habitually resist the urge to call. A few hours later, she remembered, she was speeding down the Five in a cab headed toward the San Diego airport, in search of the first cross-country flight with available seats; she'd wandered Washington that evening, homeless and tired, and come across a "Help Wanted" sign in the Bonnet's Lounge window.

Looking out that same window now, her thin, rough hands cupped by Gingerbread's in the electric candlelight, she marveled how it had actually been that easy—it was as if she'd never left home at all.

Hairspray kissed Gingerbread's ears, his eyebrows, his jawbone. When she saw his mouth was still shut she knew there was a secret inside that he wouldn't let her get at, a light he'd been keeping all to himself. She wanted in, would force herself in. Hairspray angled her tongue in between Gingerbread's lips but he clenched them tight. "Lemme in," she groaned, pointing a finger where her tongue had been.

He shook his head. "Relax," he told her. "Just wait."

Gingerbread laid Hairspray flat on the leopard-print couch and delicately but deliberately removed each item of clothing. When she was down to her underwear, she felt the need to reach up and tug off his shirt, his pants, his socks and boots. They each went the last step of the way on their own.

In the red light of the empty Lounge, Hairspray opened her eyes at the warmth of his breath against her nose, a cable of decomposing sugar that she climbed until Pibb's

mist-framed face from the show at Lyon floated up above Gingerbread's pale shoulders. She wheezed a little, eyes closing once more. Finally, Gingerbread pressed into Hairspray, gasping, lips parting involuntarily, and for a moment the wet mountaintops of his teeth outshone the moon.

How to Make it Through a Monday Night Shift

Hit the snooze once, twice, maybe a third time if the headache is particularly bad. Can you believe you actually set the alarm last night? Notice that there's no direct light hitting the blinds because it's already afternoon. Last night was Sunday night. What happened? Ah yes. Sunday nights are industry nights, the only nights now when the college kids stay away. Sunday nights are when Gingerbread and the neighborhood guys from Patty Boom-Boom come through. They smell like rum and they all want hugs. They hijack Pibb's record player because he spends Sundays at home with his wife and daughter now. They spin dub and reggae and even a little dancehall that shakes the wood floor and rattles the antique metal advertisements for extinct European beers on the walls. They dance on tables and whoop in the chill night air. When it gets late enough one of them reaches into a leather satchel and pulls out some premium ganja. Be amazed you closed up in time. Be amazed you didn't pass out in the stairwell like last week. Wonder if you remembered to shut off the tap lines.

You could lie in bed for hours, really. Your shift doesn't start until five. It's not a particularly bad headache. There's a mostly empty bottle of aspirin on the floor a few feet from your mattress, but you don't need it. Consider, though, that if the headache were excruciatingly bad, like the one from a few weeks ago, it would be murder reaching for the bottle in the first place, and so you probably wouldn't do it anyway. Remember that you read a book your senior year of high school about this kind of damned if you do, damned if you don't, sort of thing.

At some point, though, you should probably think about getting out of bed. There are two, maybe three errands to run. Triage your errands. One of them is crucial. There's a rent check to send. Your roommate sent hers in two weeks ago. Yesterday there was a note on the counter. When you went in to the kitchen to finish off her carton of milk you found it. It read,

Dear Toes,

Rent?????

You wondered if this was meant existentially, or rhetorically. Consider that it would be better if you and your roommate were still on speaking terms. Then she could have simply asked you to remember to turn in the rent. Two weeks past due isn't even that bad—last month you were three weeks late. Wonder why she feels the need to approach the situation in such a passive-aggressive manner. Were five question marks *really* necessary? It's almost comical. And what gives her the right to address you this way? There's something oddly intimate about five question marks—nobody in a professional setting would phrase a question like this—but it's not like she ever made much of an effort to know you when you moved in. No matter how you feel about Rae and her salaried government job, however, you don't want to get kicked out of another apartment. Sending in your rent is crucial. Turning off the tap lines when you leave for the evening is crucial. Speaking of crucial, *showers* are crucial. Be thankful you have a great shower in this apartment. None of this namby-pamby low-pressure shower head nonsense. This is like being extinguished by a firehose.

The shower door fogs up. Lather your short black hair and stubbly beard with shampoo. Scour soap over the tattoos on your forearms. There's a smell to eradicate, a smell associated with your job. Even when you don't do wrong—even when you're on your best behavior—there's a certain stink that settles like cigar ash when you've spent a night at the Bonnet. If you could describe it to somebody you would. Every year when you come home for Thanksgiving you know your parents can smell it on you. You're the only one in the family with that smell. If they could describe it for you they would. When you get out of the shower, wipe the fog off the mirror in front of the medicine cabinet with your towel and look yourself in the eye. Pretty soon the fog is back.

It's a gorgeous day in late fall. The leaves are sparse and brown on the trees and the air is thin and cool. Your wet hair feels heavy, like you're wearing a mop. A drop of water falls off your beard and on to your shoe as you walk. You're wearing a hoodie and jeans. You own two hoodies and three pairs of jeans. There's a rent check folded in your back left pocket. You've had the jeans for years, threadbare and holey and stained with whiskey. The check is just big enough so that it doesn't slip out the hole in the pocket. The last time you sat down to Thanksgiving dinner you were put next to your mother, and she looked at these jeans and shook her head the way people shake their head when they learn a coworker's wife has left him for another man.

The post office is up the hill from your apartment building. There are construction workers smoothing out uneven pieces of roadway. Two men in starched shirts and leather shoes, perhaps about your age, walk down the hill. As they pass you hear the man on the

left brag to the other about the size of his new backyard. We'll have you and Lissy over for dinner this weekend, he adds. Mimic his affected speech patterns quietly. Make the invitation into something grotesque.

When you get to the post office, tell the clerk you want the check sent express mail. Order him the way your customers order you to make them shots without thinking twice about it. Grumble about paying the extra ten dollars for this privilege. While you dig through your wallet, remember that there are other errands that need to be run: you're almost out of shampoo, detergent, toilet paper. The water bill is late. You probably turned off the tap lines. If you didn't turn off the tap lines, the worst that could happen is that some of the beer leaks out from the taps, right? Didn't Hairspray do it once when she was new? Check your watch and realize you haven't eaten yet. Wish the clerk would hurry his sluggish ass up. Maybe he hasn't eaten either. Your father says people are useless on an empty stomach. Resolve to tackle these obligations after lunch.

On the walk home the sun jumps out from behind a cloud. Put your hood up over your head and dig your hands into your pockets. There's a hole in the bottom of this pocket, too, and two of the fingers on your right hand brush against your underwear. All the way back down the hill turn the words over: *We'll have you and Lissy over for dinner this weekend.*

By the time you stop at the taqueria for lunch it's late in the afternoon. You're wanted back at work in an hour. Douse your burrito in hot sauce. Slug a bottle of coconut water. Pibb has been on a kick lately where he only drinks coconut water. Before that it

was acai juice. Before that it was Kombucha. Before that it was Oolong tea. Before that it was pomegranate smoothies. Wonder when you'll reach the stage where any of these are preferable to a shot of whiskey.

There's music in the lounge when you walk through the front door. There's always music in the lounge. God only knows what Crick does in there; you've been here three years now and even you don't have an idea. The music thuds against the wall as you walk up the stairs to the roof. Think, Please let the tap lines be turned off. Take the stairs three at a time. The fifth stair is where you passed out last Sunday. Trip over your own feet thinking about this. Steady yourself against the wall. Notice how, when you put your hand on the wall, it feels unnatural and smoothed over. This is because, a few months ago, Pibb made you repaint the walls. The paint had been peeling in places. They were scummy, to be sure...but they were always blue—ocean blue. Now the walls are orange, which makes no sense. The place is called the *Blue* Bonnet, for Chrissakes. If you wanted to tend bar in a giant tangerine you'd look for work elsewhere.

Open the door to the roof; it will cry out a little. The hinges are old. Pibb will make you replace these, too. Out with the old, in with the nucleus, your physicist older brother likes to joke every year. It's an awful joke, but his wife loves it. She'll poke his side lovingly. The future is nuclear, he'll add, and your parents, not an atom of scientific understanding between them, will nod intently. Think, There's nothing nuclear about the Bonnet. Here, Hairspray is the future. Crick is the future. You're the future, too.

Beer will be everywhere.

There will be a bog of beer behind the bar. And it's *your* fault.

Run back down the stairs. Pound on the door to the Lounge. The music will stop—when does the music ever stop? Crick will jamb the door, pop his head out like a whack-a-mole, and say something like, What'd you mess up this time? You don't want him calling Pibb. You're down to three shifts as it is. No more Friday nights for a month after you after you showed up drunk. What a two-face. The guy spends his life at the bottom of a bottle, but now if his bartender has a few before a shift he's suddenly a *liability*. Your father sold insurance before he retired, and all he ever talked about were liabilities. Am I a liability? You asked him once when you were very little. Never, he said, sweeping you into his lap.

What you need right now is a way to de-bog the bar. A bucket, a mop. Nobody can know about this. You'll have to convince Crick that nothing is fucked while gaining access to the supply closet. This is highly unorthodox. Think of a plausible excuse. Tell Crick you ran out of soap for the dispenser behind the bar. He'll look at you askance. I thought Pibb made you refill it on Friday, he'll say. Don't waver. Give him your most serious, un-fuck-with-able stare and declare, When was the last time you were on the roof, huh? He'll size you up, trying to decide whether to turn this into something bigger than it already is. Give him a moment. Don't lose that stare. Eventually, he'll shrug and say, *entrez-nous*.

There's a stale quality to the Lounge. It reminds you of museum exhibits you visited on field trips in elementary school. Laugh at the idea of Crick being embalmed, stuffed, and put on display like a woolly mammoth with a glass of bourbon in one hand

and a lit smoke in the other. At his feet a plaque will have his Latinate name and important information. *Homo Sapiens Bonnetensis*. A sub-species of a sub-species. Range: this room. Lifespan: a little less every day. At one point in high school you'd considered biology as a career. It was one of the few classes you didn't regularly skip. Can you imagine: there might have been *two* scientists in your family. Would you have made the same awful jokes your brother does? Decide that you would not. You have more sense than that.

Pretend to rummage through the storage closet for the soap bottle. In reality, you're waiting for Crick to take a smoke break so you can grab the bucket and mop. It takes him five minutes, longer than usual. In fact, it's almost impossible to imagine Crick without a cigarette in his mouth. You don't trust Crick; he might still call Pibb because he thinks something's up. Remind yourself to lock the door to the roof while you clean. Look at Crick wolfing down his smoke out in front of the Lounge. Think that you might feel like having a cigarette, too. Before you dash upstairs with the bucket and mop, consider how amazing it is that you've been here as long as you have without taking up the habit full-time.

Mopping up behind the bar will initially go better than you thought it would. Dip the mop into the beer and squeegee it out into the bucket. Nothing to it. When you started out on bar back detail you had to do this sort of thing after every shift. Your muscles remember what it feels like to do this kind of work; it's practically second nature. The sun is slipping down over the brownstones and lofts and you can see in the windows of

the diner across the street that Crick has flipped on the Bonnet's neon signage. Now that you think about it, you're positive Hairspray did this very same thing when she was starting out behind the bar. It's not as excusable for a vet like you, but at least there's a precedent for it. Back then, Pibb probably would have given her a little sound and fury, then sat her down and got blind drunk with her. That was years ago. What would Pibb do if he saw this today? Blather on about abstruse things like *overhead* and *inventory* that you're not entirely sure even he understands? Force a bottle of coconut water into your hand and tell you to go home and drink it while you think about what you've done? Here's a good question, though: why last night of all nights? You've entertained Gingerbread and the Rude Boys dozens of times in the past with no ill effects. Shake your head for no particular reason. You're always doing that sort of thing lately—reacting to things and people that aren't physically present.

At six, you have no choice but to open. It's not a huge deal, though—you know nobody will show up until after dark. Remember that this place used to get packed right at six when you first started, but now the older crowd hangs closer to downtown. They've been replaced by college kids and hipsters, and these tip worse, make bigger messes, and don't order top shelf. The sun disappears. Turn on the roof lights, strung over the bar like constellations.

You're probably halfway done with the job when the upstairs phone rings. You almost miss it. You have one of Pibb's Bad Brains records on with the volume maxed out and you only hear the ring when a song ends. Check the caller ID. It's Pibb. Debate

whether to answer it. It won't stop ringing. Consider that even if you let it go to the machine he'll keep calling. He knows you're supposed to be here. Realize that if you don't pick up he'll get worried. Maybe he'll even bike over to make sure everything's okay. Answer the phone.

Hello? He'll ask. It's not a happy kind of greeting. Tell him it's you, you're here. Ask as innocently as possible if there's a problem. He'll say, Crick said you were having issues with the soap. Say, What do you mean? I just needed more, that's all. Swear at Crick under your breath—maybe he went into the closet and saw the soap bottle still there. Pibb will reply, I had you fill them three days ago and now they're out of fluid already? You can tell he's suspicious, that he thinks you've got something to hide. It's the kind of thing he might not press if you hadn't shown up to work last Friday drunk. It's the kind of thing he might not press if he wasn't so damn old.

Say, Everything's cool—there was less soap in there than I thought. He'll say, Are you sure? The way he says it, emphasis on 'sure,' lets you know he's definitely got suspicions. Before you can give him another assurance, he says, I'd better swing by and make sure everything's working fine. As if to justify the visit for your sake, he'll add, Maybe there's something wrong with that dispenser. Say, Okay, see you soon. Hang up the phone before he can respond. Punch the bar furiously.

It'll take Pibb fifteen minutes to get here. There's no way you'll be able to clean the rest of the beer up by then; it's crept into every old crevice behind the bar. It's between floorboards, pooled behind the garbage can. Your shoes and pant legs are soaked

in it. Think about damage control. How do you handle a situation you're uncomfortable with? If you're your roommate, Rae, you leave a comically passive-aggressive note. If you're your mother, you drop hints over pumpkin pie about job openings at your father's former employer. If you're Pibb, you confront the problem head-on. There might not be sense in crying over spilled milk, but what about beer? Laugh bitterly at the thought of Pibb crying over spilled beer.

After a few frantic minutes of pacing you decide to use the mop to push the remaining beer as far under the bar as possible and hope it doesn't leak out in Pibb's presence.

While you're doing this, you hear the roof door cry out. Look up from behind the bar; it's not Pibb. A group of kids streams through the door. Some guys, some girls. They sidle up to the bar and take up most of the available barstools. They're young, real young. They look younger than you when you started here. Their faces are fresh and red from the cold. Maybe they don't have class tomorrow. Something makes you doubt they have valid ID but it's not your job to card them—the new security guy probably didn't check very closely. They'll all ask for Pabst Blue Ribbon so you start reaching for bottles preemptively. One of them recognizes a tattoo of yours. You get that at Ozzie's? He asks. Tell him you did. Who did your District flag? He'll ask. Tell him La'Ron did it. He'll say it looks good and ask how much it costs. He'll say he wants to know because he paid fifty for the cross on his upper back but even though the work was good it felt like a rip-off. Don't tell him that La'Ron does all your tattoos gratis because you feed him endless booze on Sunday nights; instead, tell him you paid out the ass but it was worth it. He'll smile in agreement. More tips for you.

You hand out the beers to everyone. Hey, one of the girls on the end says. You forgot me.

You still have a bit of a mess to clean up, but you won't be able to help yourself. You've been here before. Pretend not to hear her; ask the tattoo kid where they all go to school. When he says Catholic, raise your eyes a little as if his answer was a surprise. Wait for the girl to yell again. When she does, pretend to groan and reach for a Pabst. Walk slow, exaggeratedly slow, to the far end of the bar with her beer. Her friends will laugh. Make a joke like, Is she always this needy? She'll smile and you'll see that she looks much better than the hostess from Centralia you took home last week, and a little better than the new bartender at Chloe down the street that you slept with in August, and better even than the law student who annoyed you to no end but whose skill in bed kept you attached much longer than you should have been—long enough that you ended up bringing her to your parents' house last year, and whose presence caused your mother to ask later that evening in the kitchen, Do you feel like she's a Special One?

When Pibb shows up ten minutes later you'll be in solid shape with the girl and the rest of the kids seem to like you well enough. You're in the middle of a story about how you had to make Gilbert Arenas the same cocktail twice because he kept spilling it all over his date when the door creaks open again and there's Pibb in bicycle shorts and a racing jersey straining to keep his gut in check. Pibb in bicycle shorts. Jesus. You knew his wife had been pushing him to make certain changes, but this is ludicrous. It reminds you of last year, your father lifting weights in the basement before the football games

come on, shirt dripping with sweat, grunting feebly as he strains to return the seventy-five pound bar to its holder. Too little, too late, you thought. Think, Isn't it absurd that Pibb actually purchased this stuff? The kids look at him. They see his legs, purple with ink, and his earlobes stretched by nickel-sized earrings, and the racing cap on his half-hairless head, and whisper to one another. They, too, must recognize how wrong this inter-species experiment looks.

Pibb won't seem to notice your stare. He'll stride over to the near end of the bar like he did when he was still working and cough to get your attention. You've already seen him enter but you have to play along. Most of the remaining spilled beer can only be seen under close examination; you just have to be easy and hope Pibb doesn't come snooping around the back of the bar.

So, he'll ask. What's with the soap? This request will prove problematic for you; between covering your mistakes and earning tips you've forgotten to bring up the soap bottle. Tell him you've been entertaining these customers and that you'll get to it. He'll ask, So why did you go into the supply closet? This is a head-scratcher. Now your customers know something's up. Their eyes keep ping-ponging between you and Pibb. Swear under your breath at Crick again. Buy yourself a second: pretend there's something in your throat and say, Excuse me. Then, once you've "recovered," tell him you didn't want to open the bar late, and that there's enough soap to last through the shift. Pibb seems to digest this well enough. You look at the kid with the cross tattoo and he seems to be shrugging, as if to say, Sorry this old fart is cramping your style. Pibb, an old fart. Jesus. Look back at Pibb; he's scanning the roof for other signs of trouble. What else would he find? Wonder for a moment if maybe you're out of the woods.

Then Pibb will say this: Mind if I come behind the bar?

As soon as Pibb comes behind the bar you can tell he senses something's wrong. What is it with this guy? You think. It's like he has a sixth sense for catching mistakes. Time was, he wouldn't have given a shit over this kind of thing. Now that he has too much time on his hands, it's like he thinks he doesn't have enough of it. Something catches Pibb's eye and he slides his foot under the bar. You know it's still wet and sticky with beer—you can hear his biking shoes squeak. He grunts, his shorts straining to keep his ass in check. Ever since he quit smoking he's added about fifty pounds. Hence the biking, the coconut water. Hence all of it.

So, Pibb will say. Want to explain why there's a puddle of beer under the bar?

This is it, you think. You've been here three years and this is the way it ends? You wonder if maybe you should tell him the truth. This seems like a reasonable tack to take.

Pibb, you stammer, I can explain—

He'll say, I don't want to hear it, Toes. This is the second time in two weeks. He'll shake his head, make a big show of things. This is insane—it's almost as if he doesn't care that this is happening right in front of your customers. Look at them; they'll look back at you, empathetic and helpless. Pibb, the Tyrant. And then, as if to drive the point home, He'll direct your attention down to the beer spill. Look, he'll say, bending

over to rub your nose in it. Think, that this is the sort of thing people do with their dogs to get them to stop using the carpet for a toilet.

You know from personal experience that there are times when you just can't hold your tongue in the face of indignity. As you're bent down, peering into the mess you've created, one of the Catholic kids mutters, What a jackass. You know he means Pibb. He says it quietly—he wouldn't want to get thrown out—but you hear it clear as night. And you can tell Pibb heard it too, because when you look up he's eyeing each of the kids individually, trying to identify the guilty party. Pibb turns to you, about to ask you to come down to his office (never, ever, a good thing, even when Pibb was still Pibb), and the kid mumbles it again. His friends start to giggle. The ineffable Pibb, lampooned by a jury of his former peers.

Pibb tries to ignore it but he can't—it's clear the words are affecting him. C'mon, he motions to you, but his voice is softer, and you can hear the wound in it. The kids are snickering more loudly now, and you can tell one or two is about to start going on him. You think, This is painful. There must be something you can do. And then you realize that there is.

You say, in a voice louder than normal, I bet you kids don't even know who this man is, do you?

The laughter dries up, and they look at one another.

This man is a living legend, you explain.

These kids have built-in bullshit detectors. They'll look doubtfully at Pibb, like he doesn't belong in his own bar. Can you imagine? You can see Pibb's face sagging.

Pibb isn't speaking. He's staring straight at you.

A what? One of the kids asks.

You address the kids gently, instructively: You mean to tell me that none of you know who this guy is? You have their attention and respect already, especially the girl at the far end, so they'll stare up at you, expectant. Point your thumb casually at Pibb. Say, This guy was a friggin' celebrity. Glance sideways at Pibb—his mouth is slightly open but he won't speak. Before someone can crack a joke, say, Lemme play something for you. Walk over to the record player and pull out Pibb's band's album. Side one is better. Either the first or the third song will get the point across—go with the third. The chords are more ferocious.

The album snaps to life and soon Pibb's voice is howling over the thump of the bass drum. The kid with the cross tattoo yells to you, That's him? They all look at Pibb, still standing there. You nod. Yeah, you say. That's him.

Pibb doesn't know what to say at first. But midway through the song he motions you over. Thanks, he'll say. Tell him it wasn't a big deal. Tell him, even though you're not sure you mean it, that you know he'd do the same for you. He'll nod. As he leaves, he'll say, And we'll see if we can't get you back on Fridays by next week. Smile

appreciatively, but try not to smile too wide. After he leaves, remind yourself to ask for the girl's number. Ask one of the kids for a cigarette. Inhale. Here you are.

Last Call

Friday night shifts at the Bistro du Coin were always stressful for its sommelier, Frederic Dumont. There were the hordes of young pushy professionals, rutting each other for the few available bar stools. The troika of ham-fisted line cooks, newly arrived from Cuba without a dollar or word of English to their names, who barely knew the difference between béarnaise and roux. The trouble booths—numbers four and seven—whose pleather surfaces had somehow been punctured and now acted as giant whoopee cushions. The possibility that the young lobbyist he'd been out with the week before, but had no interest in seeing again, would stop by the Bistro anyway. But these anticipated pressures were secondary in Frederic's mind to something completely unforeseen—an email he'd received that afternoon from his teenage girlfriend, Cecile Auberge, with whom he'd not spoken in well over a decade.

After the young professionals had gone off to the clubs, the clumsy line cooks had scattered to the corners of the District, and it was clear the girl would not show, Frederic shoved the printed copy of Cecile's email into his pocket and locked up the Bistro, loosening his tie as he walked around the corner, past his own brownstone, to the Blue Bonnet. He loitered in the building's halo and pulled on a cigarette while the last of the Bonnet's crowd streamed out the door and into the high backed booths for pancakes and coffee at the diner across the street.

Frederic heard Tennis Shoes bellow the All Clear from the roof. This was Frederic's signal to bang four times on the front door. Crick appeared instantly, scanned

the street to make sure no police were watching, unlatched the lock, and ushered his old friend into the lounge, where Frederic grabbed a seat on his customary stool and waited for Crick to fetch them a bottle of wine.

As always, relief for Frederic came in the form of the Blue Bonnet. Crick, the lanky administrator of its ground-floor Lounge, had Pibb's blessing to open after-hours week just for Frederic. Lately, Frederic's presence had been a particularly welcome sight: business had grown sluggish, and the Bonnet needed all the money it could get. But Crick and Frederic's after-hours amity far predated the Bonnet's recent financial concerns, and was a ritual both men had come to treasure.

For Frederic, the Lounge was a comfort and a constant. Shielded from the street by thick black curtains, it hid in broad daylight and rarely saw business. Unlike most profit-seeking ventures, it owed its existence to nostalgia rather than enterprise. Pibb had opened the Bonnet just a few years after his band's Continental spree, and he'd wanted the Lounge to evoke the unhurried *laissez-faire* of a rainy afternoon camped in a Dutch coffee shop. Faded tour posters dressed in psychedelic tones, featuring pictures of Pibb's band, *The Coal Minors*, and the various acts they headlined for, covered the walls. An old mint-condition Wurlitzer juke stuffed with vinyl peeked out from behind a pull-operated cigarette machine. There was an antique dartboard dusty from disuse and leopard-print couches that had gone years without a human touch. From the cheap lagers on draught to the broken pinball machine in the back, one could feel in every corner the subtle resolve of self-preservation. And while the Bonnet's façade was in the midst of a sorely-needed paintjob and the roof had undergone a series of refurbishments and renovations over the

years, the Lounge was the industry's version of Pompeii. It looked exactly the same as it had ten years before, when Frederic and Crick first met.

Crick returned with the bottle and poured a glass for himself and his friend. When he caught the dreamy look staring back at him he knew Frederic was preoccupied.

“So Frenchy, another woman on your mind? Little Miss Thing who took you out last week?”

This was the lobbyist, Raina, who'd asked Frederic to move her party to another table after the flatulence of the party at table 7 had proven too distracting for her and her three co-workers. Judging by the mostly-full plates their server cleared, Raina hadn't thought much of the Bistro's stab at real “French” *duck l'orange*. She had, however, taken note of his courteous demeanor and beguiling accent, and had cajoled her friend into asking for Frederic's number on her behalf.

Frederic shook his head, pouring the wine. “She took me out, yes, but it's not likely we'll be seeing one another again.”

This was true, and elucidating the reasons why was a complicated business, in the way that Frederic could explain the effects of gravity on a person without understanding the science behind it. One issue he still hadn't reconciled himself to was the way American girls flirted, where the “best” lines were irreverent, honest, and deprecating all at once, as if their primary purpose was actually to obscure the woman's feelings or make herself seem less desirable—one of Raina's prouder efforts was to tell him she loved his country's toast and fries. It made him wistful for the girls he'd attended secondary school with, whose flirtations came organically charged and without pretense.

Another problem usually surfaced in the bedroom. As confident and barefaced as they could be in conversation (“We’d be better off if all Republicans hurled themselves off a bridge,” Raina had volunteered after the first round of champagne, a round she insisted on paying for), almost every American woman who accompanied Frederic back to his brownstone seemed to need him to do all the heavy lifting.

“Teach me how to French-kiss,” Raina had breathlessly instructed him as she lay motionless across his bed, feeling the effects of the champagne. Needless to say, he’d been forced to take every lead she’d let him take, something he’d never been completely happy about. On their own, these kinds of gripes seemed petty or trivial; combined, they usually prevented him from calling the woman back. As he rolled on his side to watch Raina leave his apartment the next morning, he remembered an early spring afternoon as a teenager when, after walking her home from school, Cecile had simply grabbed his hand, pulled him around the back of her house, and pressed him to her. He’d begun to wonder recently if American women were even capable of such things.

“Chin up, buckaroo,” Crick said. They clinked glasses and drank. “You know there’ll be another right around the bend.” Crick was preternaturally optimistic about these things, and with good reason: he was skilled at attracting the women he came across at other neighborhood bars. At first, when he would brag about the steady procession of female presences in his life, Frederic assumed it was because of his height and looks. With his sharp jaw line and winning smile, Crick wasn’t hard on the eyes. Eventually, he realized that what got Crick in bed so often was his disarmingly approachable demeanor: everything for him was easy come, easy go. This approach worked well in America, where pursuing the opposite sex seemed to Frederic less about passionate overtures and

more about artful evasion. As someone who'd grown up doing things a certain way, it wasn't always easy for him to stifle the urge to make a grand statement or gesture in favor of a cryptic smile or subtle nod. The girls he dated here would send you a short, ambiguous text; the girls he'd grown up with would write you a complete letter.

Frederic felt in his jacket pocket and ran his fingers over Cecile's letter. The more he thought about it, the problems he'd had encountered in dating American women transcended the romantic and applied more broadly to his tenure in the States as a whole. Part of the issue was that Frederic was aware of his own standing as the Bistro's novelty act; the overworked lawyers he served all night would spend more on wine in an evening than he typically spent in a week but still didn't care to learn the difference between a Pinot and a Cabernet, in much the same way an American girl would melt at his Gallic accent, believing that the speech of all French men was equally appealing. Both his customers and his romantic interests paid scant attention to his often lengthy declamations about the history, the culture, the veritable essence of whichever winery's long, unbroken legacy had led to the very bottle they would slug down in twenty minutes, all the while avoiding conversation in favor of pecking out endless messages on their phones. Frederic had learned years ago that he couldn't change Washington, but he had increasingly begun to wonder why Washington had not changed him. He knew didn't want a demanding job with a high salary and negotiable benefits any more today than he had upon arriving stateside with only a high school degree and a commanding knowledge of French viticulture. The problem was that everyone in this town had some sort of agenda except him, unless one counted an affinity for good wine and stimulating conversation as an agenda. And, unless Frederic was willing to sacrifice many of the

fundamental principles by which he lived his life—to savor, to converse, to explain, to appreciate—he would never be able to fully acclimate. To Frederic’s mind, Crick’s honesty was an exception to the rule: behind most American actions was an understanding that the person usually wanted you to see them differently than they saw themselves. It was comparatively refreshing, he remembered thinking as he read Cecile’s letter for the second time in the slender hallway between the Bistro’s bar and wine cellar, to have a woman make her romantic feelings clear for you.

“There’s something I want to show you,” Frederic said, pulling out the letter. Crick perked up.

“Well now,” he stroked his chin and grinned slyly. “What’s that you got there, Frenchy? A love note?”

Frederic grinned.

“See?” Crick said. “I told you there’d be another one right along for you.”

“It’s not ‘another one.’ It’s Cecile.”

“Cecile?” Crick’s eyebrows rose. “That girl you used to run with back home?” Frederic nodded.

“Yes,” he said. The letter was in English, and he spread it out on the bar for Crick to read:

Dear Frederic.

Due to booming demand, my father's winery is, for the first time, exporting cases of our award-winning 2007 vintage to America. Our new distribution firm has identified several American establishments as matches for our label. One establishment is the Corner Bistro in Washington, D.C.

I have been informed by my distributor that you are in charge of wine sales at the Bistro du Coin; I would like to meet with you to discuss the future of our joint venture. My flight arrives at eight on Sunday evening. It would be a pleasure to see you again.

Warmest Regards,

Cecile

Frederic had already read the letter several times. Still, he read it again out loud, along with Crick. When his friend was slow to respond, Frederic poked him from across the bar.

"So?" he asked. "What are your thoughts?"

"My thoughts," Crick stroked his chin, "are that she's coming to sell you wine."

Frederic shook his head resolutely. “You’re wrong my friend,” he said. “You have only had time in America, you don’t know how things work where I come from.”

Crick shrugged. “Maybe you’re right, and maybe you’re wrong. But I’ve seen a few love notes in my time, and this don’t look much like a love note to me.”

Frederic was struck by a note of pity for his friend, ironic insofar as Crick had always been by far the more skilled of them with women. In fact, learning about Crick’s *savoir faire* with the fairer sex was one of the first memories Frederic had of Crick.

Then, as now, Frederic had been the sommelier at the Bistro. He’d already been in America for some time and had finally scored his first American date. On a brilliant summer afternoon a few days before that date he’d taken his citizenship test up the block from the Bonnet; and after learning that he’d passed, he naturally felt very much like having a drink. Back then the Bonnet was practically the only open place on the block, so Frederic had just to walk fifty feet for a celebratory glass of wine. The roof was closed but the door to the Lounge was ajar, and as Frederic pushed through he startled at the poster advertising Iggy Pop with special guests *The Coal Minors* in Lyon; the cigarette machine like the one in his uncle’s café; the thick, stale air of his father’s den; somehow, he found himself back on the other side of the world.

“You lost?” Frederic turned to his right and his eyes rose. The bartender was impossibly tall and built entirely of angles. He’d been nursing a can of beer and humming along with the lachrymal twang of a blues guitar while he worked a crossword puzzle. Seeing the look of confusion on Frederic’s face, he extended his hand; to Frederic, this recalled a crane operator lowering a boom. “Name’s Crick,” he drawled.

“*Enchante*,” said Frederic, shaking the hand. Then, catching himself: “Pleased to meet you.”

Crick screwed his eyes and picked at his stubbly chin. “And what was that first thing you said?”

“Sorry, just another way to say the same thing. It’s French,” he explained.

“You’re French?”

“Actually, no.” This didn’t sound right. “However, for years,” he added, “I was.” Frederic couldn’t help but laugh a little at the absurdity of this, and Crick looked at him doubtfully.

“Well are you or ain’t you?”

Frederic realized the easiest thing to do was to present his proof of citizenship. He produced it from his breast pocket and handed it to Crick, who unfolded it and flattened it against the bar. He bent down to scrutinize the document, which put Frederic in mind of a grade school field trip to the zoo where his class had marveled at flamingos feeding. Moments later, Crick handed the document back to Frederic and offered him a second, more ceremonious, handshake. “Well lookee here, Frenchy.” Crick beamed. “Guess you’re one of us now.”

Crick suggested they celebrate and reached for a bottle of whiskey. Frederic interjected.

“Maybe we could have wine?” he asked. “It’s what I’m used to.”

There was one bottle of wine behind the bar, and it had been there for months. Crick groped beneath the bar for stemware. Finding two glasses, he took a bar towel and, with a brief look of embarrassment, removed the thin layer of accumulated dust. “You can see we don’t sell much wine around here,” he explained. Frederic nodded.

“I’m at the corner bistro,” he said. “There we sell wine.”

“No kidding.”

“You’ve been?”

Crick shook his head. “Can’t say I have.”

“You should,” Frederic offered gamely. “It’s just a little like visiting France without the plane ride.”

Crick glanced at the posters on the walls. “Tell you the truth, Frenchy, this place is enough of a trip for me.” He prepared to dig the screw into the cork. Then Crick saw Frederic’s eyes resting intently on the bottle and hesitated. “Here,” he handed the bottle and key to Frederic. “You should have the honors.”

Frederic bore the key into the cork and teased it upward. The bottle gave a little sigh and the gasses escaped as the cork came free. Frederic smelled the bouquet and tasted the cork. He thought it tasted of the soil in Cecile’s father’s vineyard where he and Cecile had used the grape-laden rows for games of hide-and-go-seek, the budding plum trees in a nearby park, the ripe, earthy currant berries growing in thick groves along the way to the train station...in the States, thought Frederic, these were precious sights and smells that you could only find living in the right wine bottle.

Crick watched him expectantly. “So?” Frederic opened his eyes.

“It reminds me of home,” he said, examining the bottle. He knew the winery well, had visited it on a childhood field trip. It had existed for hundreds of years, but here the label was of course in English; the colors were brighter, more arresting, and the letters bolder. He filled Crick’s glass and then his own.

“Cheers,” Crick said.

“Shee-urs,” echoed Frederic.

They knocked the glasses against the bar and drank.

Frederic soon found that he and Crick had many things in common. One was a deeply ingrained aversion to half-finished bottles. Once they’d polished off the wine, Crick pulled out the bottle of whiskey. Frederic protested, but Crick was steadfast.

“Part of being an American,” he lectured, “is drinking like one.”

So they’d gotten wrecked on Crick’s whiskey and, at Crick’s insistence, had put thirty-six dollars in the old Wurlitzer juke, using every last dime on Jimi Hendrix’s rendition of the Star Spangled Banner. The following day had been the worst hangover of Frederic’s life; he decided that there were some American passions he simply would never acquire. It was the last time he ever drank whiskey.

Around the fifteenth playing of his new national anthem, Frederic, shirt unbuttoned and windmilling on his air guitar, had proudly divulged to Crick that he was going to have his first date with an American woman. Crick, laid out on the bar with his head resting on his hands, was pleased.

“Tell you the truth,” he bragged, “I know all there is to know about American women. You ever have a question about ‘em, you come to ol’ Crick. I’ll set you straight.” And Frederic, grateful for this show of generosity—the bartenders at the Bistro seemed to think of him always as the Other and were reluctant to engage him in conversation, much less offer him crucial advice about the opposite sex—could think of nothing else but to hug Crick until the latter pushed him off. “Jesus, Frenchy. I thought you said you were into women.”

“I am,” Frederic could remember saying. It was one of the few things he could still remember clearly from that night. “I am, and I need your help.”

Ten years—and American women of all stripes—later, it could be said that Frederic’s confidence was no longer an issue. He had a remarkably easy time forming relationships with women, but none of them seemed to last very long—it was, he’d remarked to Crick several months earlier, as if each came equipped with a kitchen timer.

Back in the Bonnet, Frederic wondered if he’d reached the point in his American career where he no longer needed Crick’s help. Who *knows*, he thought. *Maybe after Cecile visits, I won’t need to keep looking for women here anymore...*

The men finished their wine and Frederic poured them each another glass. “The way I see it,” Crick said, “whether or not it’s a love note, what do you have to lose, anyway? You’re doing pretty well for yourself here, so what’s one girl more or less?” He drained half of his glass in one gulp and wiped his lips with his sleeve. “Anyhow, I recommend you play it cool. When she shows up, act like you’re all business.”

Act like you're all business? Frederic thought this sentiment well-intentioned but severely misguided. How could you be “all business” with the girl who did your math homework for you, came over for Christmas dinners, took your virginity? A girl who’d wept when he’d explained around the time of his eighteenth birthday that the town they’d grown up in was beginning to feel unbearably small, and that, rather than start apprenticing for one of the local vintners—Cecile’s father had already offered Frederic a job at his winery—what he needed most was to be as far away from everything he knew as he could.

“But I don’t understand,” she’d said quietly to him as they lay naked on a mattress in her attic while her parents worked the vineyard behind her house; as Frederic turned on his side he could see through a tiny window Cecile’s father, bowed by arthritis, still with the same tools and land and grapes like a postcard picture after forty years in the business, tending to the rows of stubborn vines bursting with clusters of unripe fruit. “This is what you love, no?”

“It is and it isn’t,” he could remember himself saying. It would have been so much easier if he’d been able to explain that his aspirations were larger than a few acres and an old wood press—larger than his girlfriend’s family. Instead, he saw himself shrugging and turning his back to Cecile, and when she pressed her face against his shoulder he could feel the wetness of her cheek but it didn’t bother him as much as he knew it should have. In his calculations, America would be much better to him than anything imaginable.

Of course, his expectations began to recalibrate themselves almost as soon as he landed in San Francisco with some cash and a suitcase to his name. He paid a cab almost a hundred dollars to drive him the hour north to Napa, where he went from winery to winery offering his services. As it turned out, the labor in American vineyards was migratory and cheap, and the vintners had their own way of doing things, culling from wine-making traditions around the world to craft their own unique approach; they treated Frederic, whose knowledge was prodigious but admittedly Galli-centric, like an antique, or something out of a history book. And even though everyone here spoke the universal language of viticulture, it did not help Frederic that his English was poor, and many owners were not willing to spend extra time and money to allow him to play catch-up while he tinkered with their grapes.

Discouraged and with just enough money left for a return trip, Frederic booked passage for what would have been a humiliating homecoming. Then a chance layover in Washington D.C. due to weather changed everything. While waiting for his flight to board, he caught sight of an advertisement for a new French-themed restaurant, boasting, to Frederic, what seemed like an impressive array of wines. On a whim he skipped the flight, took the metro into town, and approached the general manager, an American who was clearly in over his head. It didn't matter that Frederic was only eighteen and didn't speak more than fifty English words; he was French, honest-to-god French!

And though Frederic had promised to write Cecile when he got to the States, his efforts never came to fruition: it was hard enough mastering a new language, making enough money to pay rent, maintaining the wine program, and all the rest. Write a love note to a girl he might never see again? Such an effort had seemed pointless at the time.

So he ignored Cecile's letters to him, which arrived with decreasing frequency over time; it was a year after the final one arrived, a terse update on her father's now-expanding operation, when he realized another one had not come. No matter, he'd thought. That was the past.

"Frederic."

"Yes?"

"You hear me, Frenchy?"

"Huh?"

"I said, play it cool." Crick looked at him sideways. "You'll do that, won'tcha?"

"Sure," Frederic said, looking at the picture of Pibb's screaming, tattooed face contorted with song, above the words *21 Juin 20h30, Lyon*. "I'll play it cool."

Crick's words remained with Frederic the next afternoon when, before going off to work, he sat down at his computer to type out a thoughtful response to Cecile.

Dear Cecile,

he began. But then the words evaded him. He went to his kitchen and poured himself a glass of wine, hoping that the smells and tastes would transport him to a time when writing a mash note like this would have taken him five minutes. He was most of

the way through the glass when he realized the problem: he'd been living in America so long that his ability to flirt as a Frenchman had atrophied.

He cursed to himself in French and, in doing so, had a thought.

"Maybe the problem," he reasoned aloud, "is that I've been going about this in the wrong language. What if," he followed the thread of his logic, "I composed this in French?" A giddiness collected in Frederic's chest and worked its way, along with the wine, to his extremities. "So it's settled then," he told himself. "I'll write in French."

Sure enough, the words came easily.

Dear Cecile,

I know you must think me heartless for stomping on the garden of our love so many years ago. We were very young then, I especially so.

There are words which die like a whisper on the breeze, and there are words which bear repeating so many times they take on forms and meanings beyond their first intent. And so I will repeat some of these words to you now. It was with you, Cecile, that I created and cemented many of my fondest memories. And it was with you, Cecile, that I committed my gravest error: letting you go in favor of a life which has not always served me well.

Tomorrow, when you arrive in Washington, I ask that you let me prove to you that I am not the person I once was; that I've grown and changed, all for the better. I very much look forward to your arrival, and hope you feel the same.

Until tomorrow,

Frederic

After several proofreads, he was satisfied with his letter, and sent it off.

It was difficult for Frederic to deal with the young professionals, the incompetent cooks, and the fussy booths at work that night, and every chance he had, he stole into the back office to check his inbox. By the end of the evening, there was still no reply from Cecile.

On Sunday morning, too, found his inbox empty. Frederic began to wonder if perhaps his efforts had not been sufficiently striking. And so he sat down to craft a supplementary letter:

Dearest Cecile,

You may be on a flight this very minute, and if so, when you land, please disregard this message. If not, please just let me explain once more:

I am sorry for what I did, and I can't wait to see you.

Love,

Frederic

This, too he sent off, though after fewer proofreads.

Sunday passed sluggishly, and Frederic spent his time alternately planning for Cecile's arrival and wondering if perhaps she had mixed feelings about her trip. Had Crick really been right? Had he gone about this the wrong way?

Though her letter had never asked him for this favor, early that evening, Frederic decided the right thing to do would be to meet Cecile at the airport. He put on his nicest jacket and slacks and hailed a cab at the corner. When he got to the airport, checked the arrivals and ran to her gate.

Frederic's heart thumped against his chest as the passengers disembarked from the plane. He scanned each female face for traces of the Cecile he'd known. In a few faces he found false hope—a nose that vaguely resembled hers, an ear with the same general shape. By the time the last passenger had exited the aircraft—and old man with a

walker—Frederic worried if maybe he'd missed her. Perhaps she'd had plastic surgery, or was wearing too much makeup?

He quickly ran outside and flagged a taxi back to the Bistro, where she said she'd meet him. He asked every waiter, bartender and busser if "Cecile" had come by, asking for him. She hadn't.

At midnight, when it was clear Cecile wasn't coming, Frederic went into the office to check his inbox once again. There, he found a letter from her:

Frederic,

My intention was to meet with you to set up a partnership between my father's label and your restaurant. After receiving your last letters, it was clear to me that such a partnership would be a mistake. I wish you all the best,

Cecile

Frederic read, re-read the letter. He deleted it, slammed the office door behind him, and walked outside into the night. Up the block, the Bonnet beckoned. Frederic dragged himself toward Crick. Easy come, easy go, Crick would say. And maybe, for a moment, Frederic believed it would be that easy.

Hairspray Meets the Blues

At sunset, as Hairspray returned from the Ralph's on 101 with a bottle of Jameson, a pair of plastic swimming goggles, a cheap one-piece swimsuit, a toothbrush, and box of sanitary napkins, she turned on to her Aunt Elizabeth's street and startled at the squad cars, the sweep of their sapphire lights turning the neighborhood into a discotheque. It was a sight made stranger by the absence of sound: the lack of sirens was a concession to the town's permanent state of solitude. Neighbors mingled with policemen in the street, chatting amiably. This would be the most comfortable arrest ever made.

Hairspray could also see that up the block Aunt Elizabeth was standing on the lawn, arms crossed across her chest, talking to a policewoman. The policewoman looked like she worked beach patrol. She cradled a small baton in one arm and held a surfboard to her side with the other.

An officer leaned through the open window of the Pontiac, his face painted with sun and sea salt. Your aunt called us. If you make this easy we'll sort everything out at the station. He smiled gently. Hairspray nodded and adjusted her sunglasses. She removed her foot from the clutch while in gear and the car jumped and died—the sound shocked the people on the street.

Sorry, she murmured.

It's okay, the policeman said, still smiling.

Thinking she might as well go out with a bang, she let her hair down.

Okay, she said. I'm ready.

Then she opened the door and, as handcuffs locked around her wrists, readied herself to meet the next morning.

Before that, as she charted the Pontiac from her Aunt Elizabeth's rancher to the Ralph's on 101, Hairspray had called Pibb.

Pibb?

(Nothing)

Pibb, I—I don't think I'm coming back.

(A moment's pause)

Jesus, Spray. She could hear his voice bowing under the circumstances. None of us loved the kid, but was this really a matter of life and death?

Something like that.

You don't have to do this. Come home and we'll work something out.

I am home.

The kid's parents are pressing charges, Pibb pushed. The cops'll be around to meet and greet you sooner or later.

Cops, shmops. She wondered if there was a place nearby where she could find cheap surfing gear.

If you don't come back, I won't be able to help you.

I've got someone out here.

Hairspray—

She hung up.

Before that, they were sitting in the shade of Aunt Elizabeth's backyard garden sipping cherry Kool-aid from plastic tumblers and watching hornets leap between azaleas like frogs on lily pads. For the first time in ten years, Aunt Elizabeth declared, she needed a drink. Be a doll and get us a bottle of something, she said.

Hairspray stared at her.

What? Aunt Elizabeth said. It's what your mother would have wanted, you know.

On some warped level Hairspray thought this actually made sense. Bottle of what?

Of anything, I don't care.

Really? Hairspray couldn't remember the last time she'd met someone who didn't know what they liked to drink.

I think I've spent so much time in the surf that I never gave myself the chance to be much of a drinker. She laughed softly. All those years I was traveling, I never felt the need.

Hairspray couldn't understand how her aunt and mother had ever been related.

You're saying you and my mother never tied one on? Never?

Elizabeth shrugged. I remember one night, your mother begged me to go up to Vegas for the evening with two bartenders she knew—I didn't want to, but I suppose I owed her for something. We were staying in the old Tropicana. At some point, one of them—Jed was his name, I think—tried to get me alone in the bathroom but he was at least ten years older than me and all I saw when I looked at him were shot glasses and cheap cologne. I waited until he'd passed out under the sink, stole fifty bucks from his wallet, and made for the bus station. I was in Santa Barbara the next afternoon, ready to catch the waves.

Aunt Elizabeth laid her dark, faintly liver-spotted hand on Hairspray's knee. The trio of fake gold bracelets looped around her narrow wrist was blinding in the afternoon light. Hairspray's stomach jumped.

So what are you saying?

Aunt Elizabeth chuckled. What I'm saying is that you should get whatever bottle you like.

I drink whiskey, Hairspray admitted.

Just like your mother. She lived on it.

The idea of her mother having survived solely on whiskey struck Hairspray as mildly preposterous. You can't live on whiskey alone, she said aloud.

Well, that was an experiment your mother was more than willing to conduct.

Hairspray said nothing.

Aunt Elizabeth peeled off a fifty from her money clip. Since whiskey won't enough, might as well get yourself whatever extra you need.

Yeah?

How long'll you be here, anyway?

Hairspray didn't know what to say to this, but she had an inkling that the answer wouldn't be most easily expressed in hours or even days. Aunt Elizabeth answered for her:

You can stay as long as you need. Only thing you need to know is that I'm up at five every morning to get out there before work.

Do you go out by yourself?

Yes, but I'm never alone. The water's always full of us. Both women looked out at the waves, flecked with spirited activity. Growing up out here, I'm surprised you never tried it.

Hairspray shrugged.

You should. I've got another board in the garage.

Hairspray smiled and took the money. She stood to leave.

So you're aware, her aunt's words caught her, I know that's not your car.

Hairspray froze.

According to the bank, I have enough money to post your bail.

But how—

You're not fooling anybody. And anyway, if you're going to start over, her aunt explained, you've got to do it right.

And...you're willing to help me?

That's what family's for.

Before that, Hairspray had buried her mother at San Clemente Peace Gardens in the early hours of the morning, before the sun burnt her and the fog clean away. Aunt Elizabeth was also in attendance. Hairspray, with no formal clothes to wear, joined her aunt in a pair of her most official snakeskin pants. Both women wore sunglasses. The junior pastor of the only Baptist church in San Clemente, booked for the minimum fee and time, turned up his nose at their attire but kept his mouth shut.

At the head of the gravesite sat a squat memorial candle and a clump of dewy wildflowers donated by Aunt Elizabeth and Hairspray, respectively. The pinewood coffin had already been lowered into the ground by the maintenance crew. It was to be an economical interment in every sense of the word.

The pastor had been booked from seven to seven-thirty. Aunt Elizabeth checked her watch. Isn't it time? She asked pointedly.

He scowled and drew himself up a little. He opened his bible and began automatically, We are gathered on this most somber occasion, but was interrupted by a gull cawing overhead.

Aunt Elizabeth nudged Hairspray and winked. Even in death she won't make this easy, she whispered.

The pastor coughed. We gather here to celebrate the life of Barbara Cieslewicz. He looked to the two women on his right, each of whom appeared in the morning mist to be half-swallowed by a python, and sighed. The pay, he reflected, was rarely worth it.

With his half-hour limit never completely out of mind, the pastor made haste to hit all the liturgical high notes: Psalm 103, Ecclesiastes 3, Revelations 1. With a handful of minutes remaining, it struck him that this was the appropriate time to say a few personal words about Barbara. In her will, she'd bequeathed the sum total of her assets—fifty dollars and a car held over from the Reagan years—to the church on the condition that she be buried a Baptist by an ordained pastor. It was unfortunate that a church should be in the business of accepting the bequests of people who'd never set foot in one as an adult, the pastor reflected. All the same, he considered, times for evangelical religion in Southern California had never been tougher, and fifty dollars and a Trans-Am could hardly be turned away. So the junior pastor was enlisted by his boss to preside over the funeral of a woman he'd never met, knew nothing about. The way around this problem, he remembered from a similar situation—that man had no close living family, had been alone for decades, had been dead of a heart attack for days before his neighbors noticed the smell, and his burial was attended by only a distant cousin from Oregon and the

assistant manager of the Coffee Bean where he'd stopped once a day for an espresso—was to elicit responses from the mourners themselves.

The pastor looked down at his bible, at the hidden cheat sheet he'd made for himself with what little information the church had given him about Barbara Cieslewicz's next of kin. I wonder if Barbara's sister, Elizabeth, or her daughter, Joanie, might be willing to share a few kind words in her memory?

Elizabeth turned to her niece. Go on, girl, she said. We don't have much time.

Hairspray was acutely aware that her hands had grown wet from the mist, and she tried to wipe them on her pants, but the snakeskin wouldn't absorb the water. Instead, she clasped her hands behind her back and closed her eyes.

To Hairspray's mind there were only two kinds of memories: ones which whisked you off like a runaway train and ones which stubbornly bubbled up like gin blossoms, and she knew the latter weren't generally appropriate for funerals. The problem was most of what she remembered of her mother fit into this second category.

For instance, there was the night she'd finally left home. This was when they were living a few miles north of Tijuana, and to retrieve her clothes she had to swim through a pool clotted with used condoms and syringes.

I'm never coming back, Hairspray had yelled at the ragged figure her mother made in the open window of her room.

Big fucking surprise, her mother had yelled down to her.

Hairspray remembered back before that, to Parents Day in seventh grade, when she'd first noticed she could smell her mother before she even entered a room, and her friend Carly—who didn't even *have* a mother—had turned to Hairspray and, after their class had listened with bemused fascination to Barbara ramble on for five minutes about a Government Conspiracy to repossess her Trans-Am, whispered how bad she felt for her.

Before Jamie and Carly, her best friend in kindergarten was a girl named Annie. Another girl's family usually took Annie home, but one day her father had come from work to pick her up. In one of her earliest memories, Annie had asked, Where's your father? Hairspray didn't know how to answer the question. Well what's he look like? This, too, Hairspray had no answer for; she knew of no pictures her mother had ever kept.

You're weird, Annie decided as her father scooped her up and carried her away.

Where were Carly and Jamie and Annie now? Where was her father now? Where, for that matter, was anyone now? To have been able to answer it these questions, she realized, would have required a real bond, a relationship; and this was the essence of the problem. You had to feel connected to someone or something to make the right kind of memories, and until she'd come to the Bonnet, Hairspray had never lived in one place for very long. Places and people came and went, and the things she could remember—memories of real permanence—had mainly to do with objects. Boxes, being unpacked, then repacked in the space of a month; That 1983 black Trans-Am, with an odometer that had run out of numbers and a radio volume dial that could never stay put—a wedding gift from her father's brother, an auto mechanic and junk enthusiast—that her mother used to shuttle the two of them from apartment to apartment, job to job, from Pismo to Encinitas

and everywhere in between; the 40 ounce tall boys she shared with her friends after school when she hit ninth grade; the letters from creditors that followed them everywhere; the chipped mugs of Irish coffee her mother would nurse before going out to look for work.

There was one morning, a few weeks before she'd left home, that Hairspray and her mother sat at the table in their kitchen, each with a coffee mug in their hands. The classifieds were spread out before them like a tablecloth. Hairspray remembered looking up at the liquor cabinet. Her mother had caught her eye and, in a rare moment of early morning lucidity, had said, Joan, don't you ever go in there.

It was the extent of their conversation. And for Hairspray, who had been drinking for years, it was as pointless an admonishment as any. Nevertheless, it was a recollection that, if not inspiring, at least did not rankle her any more than the memories she'd needed to enter to reach it. Short on time, she decided to share it with her audience.

The pastor nodded and looked at his watch; there was only minute remaining. Elizabeth? He looked at her. Anything to add?

Aunt Elizabeth shook her head. I think Joanie has said enough for the both of us.

They each heaped a ceremonial shovelful over the coffin and then the pastor left and the women had a moment to share alone at the grave.

I wish, Hairspray said, that I cared more. Elizabeth wrapped a denim arm around her niece.

You're here at all, she said. That shows you care enough.

Let's go home, Hairspray said.

By the way, said her aunt, you made it sound on the phone as though you didn't have a car.

Oh, Hairspray said. I try to drive as little as possible, so sometimes it seems like I don't have one.

Before that, Hairspray and her aunt sat on the beach at sunset.

We have to be there at seven tomorrow morning, her aunt had said. Elizabeth's hair was bleached blond-gray from the sun and, in contrast to her own hair, fell in thick curls about her ears like a poodle's coat. Elizabeth was sitting atop her surfboard and wearing her wetsuit and Hairspray watched the sea bead off her hair and crater down into the sand. She recalled her mother throwing pieces of fake jewelry her father had once given her into the wall of one particular apartment in Dana Point where silverfish nested comfortably in the ceiling and the drywall strained to stay that way in the face of the winter rains.

Were you expecting me here?

Yes, Elizabeth said. I knew you'd find your way here sooner or later.

Before that, Hairspray had sat on the beach alone in the heat of the day under a beach umbrella. This was a September sun she hadn't seen in years. She had only the clothes she'd come to California in and was baking in her black pants and shirt. Her eyes were puffy from lack of sleep. Watching her aunt carve her board from crest to trough and back again, Hairspray wondered how much practice it had taken just to be able to get down a wave without falling off.

Before that, the manager at the Coffee Bean had pointed her toward the ocean, not more than a couple of blocks away.

You're sure? Hairspray asked. She lives a few blocks away?

Yep, that's the one, he said. He ran a thumbnail through his mustache. Comes by before work for the paper every day.

Where can I find her?

Well, it's Sunday, he said.

So?

So, I'd bet she's probably out there. If I wasn't stuck in here I would be too, he chuckled.

Hairspray looked out across the beach and saw hundreds of bodies in various states of submersion bobbing along to the water's pulse.

Before that, Hairspray had guided the Pontiac Bonneville up to the address her aunt had given her over the phone for the first time. It was a white ranch house, all stucco and Spanish tiles, with open windows and a gate swinging in the breeze. Hairspray stood, reveled in a long stretch, and approached the door. She rang the doorbell, waited, rang it again. When it became clear nobody was home, she considered her aunt might be in the backyard and walked toward the gate. Behind the house was a garden filled with pregnant insects flitting about and flowering plants whose colors seemed to throb in the salt air.

Hairspray stood in the garden as the sun rose higher and smelled every plant she could, none of which were able to exist in the cold East. There were two wicker chairs sitting beneath a fig tree. She imagined Aunt Elizabeth had been sitting in one of them when she'd called her niece two days beforehand.

Who is this? She'd asked just before the start of her shift that Friday evening, aware of the possibility that this unknown number might again be her mother asking her for another job reference, or money, or even worse, a place to stay. She was instead greeted with a voice tonally identical to her mother's, but far finer in quality—every word audible, every consonant crisp, every sentence free of superfluous pronouns and phlegmy accusations and illogical meanderings. *You're killing your mother, Joanie. How could you do this to your mother, Joanie?* As voices went, it was like the difference between silk and twill, between rotgut and blended rye.

Joan?

Who is this?

This is your aunt, the voice introduced itself. Hairspray could hear the surf breaking in the background.

...Aunt Bethy? That Hairspray was able to remember her aunt's name at all was impressive; she hadn't seen her since she'd left for Mexico in search of gnarlier waves. Hairspray was four years old. This was about the time her mother had first been fired from a job and had pawned her wedding ring to pay for groceries.

You can call me Elizabeth, the voice said.

Elizabeth?

Yes, I'm here.

Are you still...are you back?

I've been living in Oceanside for the last three years, if that's what you're asking, Aunt Elizabeth explained.

Oh, Hairspray said. She'd once lived for two months in Oceanside while her mother was between jobs and recalled that it was one of those places where every kid except her owned a surfboard. So, she said. What is it? Did my mother ask you to call me? Does she need money?

Hairspray could feel her voice rising.

Actually, Joan, I've never been one to beat around bushes, so I'll cut to the chase. Your mother's gone.

No she isn't, Hairspray heard herself say with more than a little derision. *This woman spends twenty years surfing her way around the Pacific Rim and she thinks she knows my mother better than me.* She's probably just gone up to San Simeon to see Stardust.

Stardust?

Yeah, the hippie woodcutter she goes back to get money from about once a year.

Joan, your mother—

Yes, I know, Hairspray said, rolling her eyes. She's missing. But she'll turn up, looking for money or a place to crash. And nobody calls me Joan anymore.

(Pause)

Well, what should I call you then?

Hairspray opened her mouth to say her name, but hesitated when she realized how inane it would sound. Who the hell went by a name like "Hairspray," anyway? It was the nickname Pibb had given her years ago when she'd started at the Bonnet, because of the way her hair naturally refused to lie down. It was black, shiny, a bouffant wonder massed in unwavering protest of gravity. She could thank her mother for it, along with her green eyes and her dimples. She remembered nothing of her aunt except her name; her mother rarely mentioned her. She wondered if her aunt's hair looked anything like hers.

Hello?

Sorry, Hairspray said. If...if it'll make you feel better, just call me Joan.

Okay, Joan, her aunt said. Your mother's dead.

It took Hairspray a moment to process this information. In that time, she could hear Pibb kidding with customers in the background, searching for another one of his old records to play. She could hear Louderman clinking shots with a regular and asking her for advice about that girlfriend who, he divined, was preparing to leave him for an older man. From the corner of her eye she could see the new kid, Wendell, hungrily eyeing her butt.

Joan?

I'm here, she said. She felt tired, angry. One thing she didn't feel was guilt. Should she feel guilty? Why didn't she care? *What was the proper thing to do in this situation? Ask about the cause of death?*

How did she—

Liver cancer, said her aunt, anticipating the question. The ensuing silence confirmed that this particular cause of death was not the least bit surprising to either woman.

The funeral is Monday morning, added Elizabeth. I've made all the arrangements. Can you come?

I...I don't know, Hairspray said. I have to work this weekend. I have things to do this weekend. I have no money. No money, no place—I'm between apartments, you know?

I didn't know.

Well, Hairspray said, now you do.

Now that the busy summer season was over, she wasn't making enough as a bar back to cover her rent. It hadn't always been that way—in past years, the Bonnet stayed busy enough through the winter to support her. For whatever reason, the place wasn't doing as well, and she'd taken to sleeping in the Lounge. She knew Pibb was aware of this—Crick had probably snitched on her—but he hadn't kicked her out...yet. She knew that eventually he'd ask her to leave. Pibb was generous, but as much as he hated to show it, he had to act like an adult every once in awhile, and as long as Hairspray lived in the bar the Bonnet was in violation of every health code in the book.

If you can't make it, you can't make it, her aunt allowed. But you'd have a place to stay, and it would be good to have you here.

Would it?

Well, yes, Aunt Elizabeth said. We're all the family we have.

Family hasn't done me good, Hairspray muttered.

Like them or not, at least they're a constant, replied her aunt.

Before that, the Bonneville crested through Temecula at sunrise and the whole of the Golden State flooded her with its brilliancy.

Before that, Barstow. Hairspray remembered the last time through Barstow, going the opposite direction on a Greyhound bound for Fort Worth and Jamie's brother's head shop. The desert shone merciless as tin foil. There were tears everywhere; coating wrists and worming under nails and soaking into her jeans. Hairspray felt then that she and the bus were kindred spirits. Every road sign was an appeal to change direction. Halfway through Colorado she decided she'd come too far to turn back.

Before that, Texas. Driving through Amarillo at eight on Saturday morning she saw she had fifteen missed calls from the kid. She deleted him from her phone book.

Before that, Hairspray had parked the car in an empty wheat field at dusk, grabbed a blanket from the backseat, and grabbed an hour's worth of sleep atop the Pontiac's roof under a starless Arkansas sky. She'd passed over these same fields five years before on her way to commune somewhere in Tennessee. After the commune had quickly proven too dirty, a hop through Ohio, a skip by way of Virginia, and a jump into the District of Columbia had followed.

Before that, she'd answered a call from the kid somewhere in eastern Maryland in the middle of the night, wide awake from sixty ounces of coffee and a fresh pack of cigarettes, for the first and only time.

Hairspray, she could hear him pleading. I'm using my one call on you...it smells like pee in here...can you come get me out?

Sorry, kiddo, she said, flicking a cigarette butt out of the window of his car. I'm in this for the long haul.

But—

She hung up.

Before that, she was sitting in the passenger's seat of the kid's green Pontiac Bonneville. Neither was sober, but he'd been was the more intoxicated of the two—Hairspray had made sure of that. His cheek was wet from her mouth—that was the reason he'd been speeding uptown toward his apartment in the middle of the night in the first place. Faster, she'd urged him. I can't wait any longer; I *need* you. He'd listened. And now a policeman was banging on the window, motioning him out with his nightstick.

She could hear him groggily pleading with the cop, failing to walk a line, falling down. Then he was in cuffs and being led to the police car by a deputy. The first officer reappeared by her window.

You safe to drive, ma'am?

And Hairspray, who'd spent most of her life on the run, felt as though she'd been down this road a hundred times before.

You know it, she said, flashing a smile.

The officer nodded. Just be careful out there, he said. And off she went, blue lights melting behind her.

Pop-Gun

That Thursday night I got to work around seven, which is when we open. Toes was supposed to have set up the bar by then. When I got in, I took off my jacket, looked for the rack to hang it on, and remembered that Crick was supposed to reattach that damn coat rack last week, so I threw my leather jacket on a chair in the office. I went up to the roof and discovered Toes drunk, sitting on the bar, tapping out something on his phone. None of the barstools had been put down, the top of the bar was still dirty, the citrus was still in plastic buckets. The one thing he'd done right was to take out a bunch of my records, including my band's only album, *The Coal Minors Say: Stick it Where the Sun Don't Shine*, and put it on the record player at the end of the bar.

A month ago, Louderman left to go back to school and I had to start from scratch on Thursdays. I promoted Toes to work with me. Kid reminds me a little bit of myself in my early twenties: no college, plenty of attitude, a chip on his shoulder. He'll be a great bartender one day because he can talk. He's the kind of kid who has a tendency to keep talking until you come to see things his way, and as much as I feel like a shill saying this, sometimes that's enough to get you laid or paid. The problem is that he's still young, as young as I was when we signed our first deal, and sometimes he gets so set on something that he forgets he's a bartender first and a wannabe Casanova second, and I have to sit him down, chew him out a little. It's never been my style to tell anyone how to live their life or do their job—and you may as well stick a fork in me if I become that guy—but in his case, if I don't step in, you get situations like the one I walked into. And Toes knows as well as anyone that we need the money right now.

Toes, I growled. Get off your pint-sized butt and open us up. Toes tipped his head sideways like a hunting dog with water in its ear.

Good to see you too, Boss. You in some sort of hurry? Toes belched loudly. In the evening chill, it formed a contrail of Jameson.

I tapped my watch. We were supposed to open at seven. He shrugged.

Seems to me I've got all the time in the world. He swept his hand around the empty bar. Not like there's anyone to open for, is there?

This wasn't like we when we headlined Saturday at Glastonbury in '81 and there were so many people—this was the first stop of our European tour—that we didn't want to rush the set. That's the difference between opening and headlining. If you're the opener, you have to play on their terms—otherwise, you might never get a chance to play on yours. You have to earn the right to make people wait, and Toes hadn't earned the right to make anybody wait yet.

I shook my head. You don't have a say in this. Rules are rules. He looked at me suspiciously.

Jesus, he mumbled, pocketing his phone. When did *you* become no fun?

That got me thinking. While Toes began to set things up, I ducked back into the stairwell and reached into my satchel. I took out the bottle of caffeine pills I'd bought at the drugstore down the block the night before. My wife was none too happy about this—

the pills, that is. She'd seen me pocket them. She was in the kitchen sautéing vegetables when I left for work.

Stimulants won't help, she'd said flatly. Her response caught me off guard—I'd never said anything about stimulants to her.

Just how do you know that, anyway?

She pushed a strand of long gray hair out of her eyes. I called the doctor myself.

You see what's going on here? My wife calls my doctor behind my back to see if I'm telling the truth about my visit.

And I suppose you want to know if this pissed me off. Does a bear shit in the woods?

Don't get me wrong—I love Hazel—but she's never been the kind of woman to barge into my life like that. On the other hand, as mad as I was, standing in that doorway, I couldn't completely blame her.

Recently, I've run across a new problem you might say I'm having trouble "adjusting to." (Doctor Stone's words, not mine.) This is the kind of problem that if someone else was describing it to me I'd find it hard to give a shit. Like when I was driving my daughter to her junior varsity soccer practice last month and our drummer, Streaks, who I haven't talked to in over a year, called out of the blue to cry about his dealer moving to Thailand. But now that *I'm* the one dealing with it, it's a different story. In my case, the problems have been more physical than anything else: I've been falling asleep in the middle of my shifts.

It started a week ago. I showed for work like normal. It was a clear fall evening, the first in a run of them that haven't let up since. I remember I had on my aviators, the jeans I wore on stage at CBGB when we opened for the New York Dolls, black Chucks stained with the sweat of a hundred stages, the leather jacket I stole from Johnny Rotten's dressing room after a show in Atlanta. I've walked this way to work a thousand times, me on my route as natural as a tree in a forest. And here I am today, cruising down Eighteenth Street, the crisp fall air running sprints through my flattop. I've been in this neighborhood for twenty-five years now, and nothing's changed. Same bank across the street, though they've got Latin tellers now that smile real big but can't understand a damn thing you say. There's the same old newsstand on the corner, a wobbly four-legged pavilion run by an Ethiopian guy whose dad started it—only difference is that they sell fewer papers. The coffee shop next door's gotten about four makeovers since the nineties, but it's still in the same family. The owner even comes by for a drink every now and again.

When I got up to the roof, it was primarily quiet and sober—Toes hadn't even put on a record yet. This has been a problem lately: we usually go a little slack when the cold sets in, but we'd been doing worse than usual. And with most of our top bartenders gone—Louderman at school, Hairspray doing God Knows What on the other side of the country—we needed all the quality shifts we could get.

Around eleven all the industry regulars came in like usual and we started ripping back shots. Toes was drunk already—as my wife would say, What else is new?—but the kid was proving himself worthy of the shift: holding himself together, earning good tips, pushing bottles of stuff most of the newer bartenders aren't good enough to sell. In a

moment between a Lou Reed record that had finished and the Patti Smith one I was putting on, he started telling us about this girl we just had to meet. That drew laughs, not because Toes couldn't pull tail—quite the contrary—but because it was hard to take him at his word. He was the kind of kid who had a different girl every month, and every girl was, in his words, a “Dime.”

If your girl's a perfect ten, then I'm the goddamn president, one of the regulars, a bartender from down the street, said. He tipped back his shot and pointed a finger at Toes. How on Earth, he asked, can such enormous lies come out of such a small person?

We knew Toes' “Dimes” were anything but, because every so often, each Dime would inevitably appear at the bar looking for Toes—and when it was clear he wasn't around (usually because he was out in pursuit of the next one), I'd feel bad and convince her to sit down for a drink and some small talk. No sense in walking all the way up to the roof only to come down without a good buzz and a story, I say.

I don't mean to insinuate that there was anything *wrong* with these women. Certainly, they were all lovely in their own right. And seeing one after another standing there, dolled up, expectantly searching the bar with doe eyes for someone she'd never find, gave me a guilt I've been feeling more and more these days. So I always made sure to put her tab on the house, spin a record just for her, and compliment her dress. After a few drinks and the B side of our album, she'd half-forget why she'd come to the Bonnet in the first place.

I wish every bartender was as cool as you, Theresa (or Isabel or Monica or Jaime) would say coyly.

We can't all be rock stars, I'd admit.

This'll sound conceited, but since it's the truth I'm going to say it: if I didn't have a wife and a daughter at home, I could have taken any of these girls off Toes' hands. I pulled girls like this all the time on tour, and some skills, like writing a song or strumming a chord or picking up a girl, you just don't lose. Of course, I never did take any of them home. But that doesn't mean a guy can't want certain things. And when Toes mentioned any of these women up for the first time, as he was bound to do every so often, I'd wonder how long it would be before I'd be able to place a face with her name.

Obviously, this wasn't the first conversation we'd had about Toes' romances, and usually they ended at a stalemate, with Toes swearing on his mother's life that this or that girl was different, and whoever else was listening to the story equating it with what comes out the back end of a horse, and in my duties as Head Honcho, I'd have to intervene with another round of shots to mollify the crowd. This time, though, something was different. For one thing, we had something we never got: a picture.

Her name's Roxie, Toes said with a measure of pride we could hear in his voice as a deepening of the first vowel in her name. She just finished school and she's living at home while she looks for a job. Oh, and her family's *loaded*.

He pulled out his phone and opened it. This, he pointed to the screen, is her car. The regular and I leaned in close. There was a picture of Roxie in the driver's seat of a car. The car was sitting at the apex of a semicircular gravel driveway, in front of a white portico. I recognized the car. It was newer model of the same silver Lotus our guitarist, Bulldog, bought right after Atlantic Records picked us up in the summer of 1980. The

engine was so powerfully controlled that when we heard Bulldog coming down the street it sounded like afterburners sent through a tin can telephone. Roxie was waving through the window. It was hard to clearly make out more than the white flash of her teeth and the strawberry smudge of her hair, the rest of her face hidden by sunglass lenses as big as dinner plates.

The regular was unconvinced. I know what's going on here, he insisted. He's obviously pulled this picture off some website.

You're just jealous, Toes spat back. She's real, and she's a Dime. A Dime if ever one existed.

But while the regular and Toes went back and forth, I kept staring at the picture. Hair, glasses, teeth. There was something familiar about the face, and I knew what it was. Berlin. 1981. Blonde, First Row. Aiming her pink cotton underwear (my name, followed by the outline of a heart, scrawled across the crotch) at my axe during our first encore. Even today, that's all she is: hair, sunglasses, teeth. Not that I didn't want more—boy, did I want more. She was all I could think about during that encore and the next. And while speakers were stacked and champagne bottles popped, I waited for her alone, backstage, after the show. Even as we were heading out to the tour bus, a stop in Prague upcoming, I told Bulldog and Streaks I had to go back to get a watch I'd left on the coffee table in the green room, just so I could wait around an extra ten minutes in the hopes she'd come back for me.

Pibb?

I looked up. They were staring at me.

You okay, buddy? The regular asked, his mouth agape, exposing his tongue ring.

He's okay, Toes cut in. He elbowed me in the ribs. Must be the years sneaking up on him. You okay? You need to take a break or something? I saw him glance at the clock above the bar. I brushed his hand off.

I don't need a break, I insisted. I need a drink.

We could all agree on that, so Toes poured us three big shots of Jameson and lined them up. We raised, clinked, drank. This time, the booze went down slow—too slow. The heat fanned across my stomach like wildfire. It knocked my knees in, and I held the bar to steady myself.

Pibb?

I stumbled over toward the stairwell, visions of sunglasses and white teeth dancing dimly before me, feeling certain that what I needed more than anything was to get the hell out of there before something bad happened. I never made it down the stairs. A few moments later, when Toes opened the door to see if I'd made it out okay, he found me slumped against the wall, snoring—as Toes described it—louder than an army of bandsaws.

When I showed up at home three hours early that night in the passenger seat of a cab, naturally my wife was a little worried.

She cloaked me in blankets and sat me on our sofa. We were quiet because our daughter was asleep upstairs. My wife held my hands and sat with me. I want you to tell me everything, she whispered. Well, what choice did I have? When your wife of twenty-

five years asks you a question like that, you answer. So I did. Almost as soon as I'd finished my story, she vowed to have her doctor refer me to a specialist. Of course, I wasn't giddy about the prospect of standing in front of some strange machine while an old doctor poked and prodded me. People telling you to see a doctor, people calling you sir, people discouraging you from doing things: all moments where you feel the tempo increasing.

This isn't a debate. Hazel said.

What if tonight was just a one-time thing? I said this a bit too nonchalantly. After all, I've partied much harder. She looked right at me.

Do you really believe that's true?

I shrugged.

You're not on tour anymore, my wife pointed out.

So what? Look, I think you're overreacting. This is probably nothing to worry about.

My husband thinks there's nothing to worry about. She looked away. What else is new?

So, two days ago, I went to see Dr. Stone. After an old nurse ran a bunch of tests on me, Dr. Stone came in and said hello. She was scrawling something on a clipboard. She seemed to write more legibly than most doctors do. The skin on her hands looked invitingly soft. She was at least ten years younger than my wife. I imagined she made enough money to drive a pretty nice car.

I've always wanted to say this, I grinned, sitting in a gown on the examination table: Give it to me straight, Doc.

She looked at me archly. Mr.—

—Pibb, I winked. But you can call just me Pibb. She frowned.

My chart says your last name is McGinty.

Well, y—

Mr. McGinty, your liver function is abnormal. Have you been drinking more than usual recently?

No, I winced. No more so than normal. And please, call me Pibb?

But no less so, right?

I paused to think about this.

That's likely the problem, she answered herself. She pulled out a prescription form. You're falling asleep on the job, she spoke as she wrote, not looking up, because your liver can't keep up the way it used to. In effect, you overheat and, like a circuit breaker cutting off, you end up passing out.

That's it? Judging by her demeanor, I'd been worried it would be something serious, like cancer or heart disease. Sounds like to me like I just need to drink more coffee or something, I said. She shook her head.

Mixing uppers and downers is the last thing someone your age needs, sir. She handed me a script. One of these a day, she said, will quiet your enzyme production down. And cut way back on the drinks.

Way back?

You know what I mean, she said. A level people your age can handle. One or two a night.

One or two a night? A man can't live on one drink a night.

Sounds like you'll have to adjust.

Is there an alternative? I asked this as she left the room.

Yeah, she said over her shoulder. Cirrhosis.

I saw Hazel before dinner the next evening. I was on my way out to work. She asked me what had happened. I told her Dr. Stone was a lovely woman, and that she'd said to take things a little easier. It was the truth. Like I said, Hazel worries about everything. No sense in riling her with speculation anyway—hell, who was to say if Dr. Stone was even right?

When I offered my version of things, Hazel nodded, but didn't say anything.

Of course, as I stood alone in a staircase that Thursday, two No-Doze pills in my palm and a pint of ale in the other, it all made sense. My wife had probably called Dr. Stone the minute I walked out the door. It explained why she hadn't kissed me in the

morning as she left for work. It also explained why, even after I'd apologized repeatedly for not giving her the whole story, she still hadn't forgiven me.

I put one of the pills back in the bottle and popped the other. Then I went back up to the roof bar and, feeling the burst of energy, decided to help Toes finish setting up. We were still dead, but Toes and I knew how to have fun. After my album finished playing, I pulled a handful of records out of the crate behind the bar. We spun The Stooges, Minor Threat, The Buzzcocks. Toes accidentally put on the Bad Brains album I'd bought before I learned that Ian MacKaye had trashed me in a Rolling Stone article (Turn that MacKaye bullshit off, I yelled.) We spun Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Replacements. We spun Fugazi, Nirvana, Soundgarden. Hearing all those records is like hearing yourself recited back to you one revolution at a time.

At one point I'd gone into the storage close to grab a broom when my foot knocked into a basket of black metal candle holders. Years ago, when I'd just married Hazel and was in the process of turning this building into the Bonnet, I bought a full set of kerosene candles for evenings on the rooftop, but they were a pain in the ass to set up, and none of the staff ever used them. I thought of the last time I'd seen a room alit with flames: the last stop on our European tour, twenty-thousand lighters for twenty-thousand fans in Madrid. Every stop was like that: our shows were waves of flame set to song.

Since when have we had those? Toes was putting limes and lemons into caddies.

Since forever, I said, reaching into the basket and filling the first holder with kerosene.

It took twenty minutes to set the candles up. After lighting the wicks and putting them on the patio tables I wanted a better view. I used the broom as a crutch to ease myself up onto the bar. I stood on the bar, holding the broom across my body. The patio quivered with light.

Hey Boss. I looked down; Toes' coffee-bean eyes were even with my knees. What say you let me off early tonight?

No can do, I said. You know we'll get the regular crowd in an hour.

C'mon Boss, he pushed. It's a special occasion—Roxie 'll be here any minute.

Warmth spread across my body. I must have smiled.

Aha! Toes beamed. His eyes glowed with candlelight. Of all the people here, I knew *you'd* understand. You can't play games with me. I know that when Louderman worked this shift, you used to tell him about all the girls you met on tour.

Toes my boy, I said. You don't know the half of it.

Like what, he grinned. Try me. Tell me a story.

I heard a noise like a fan belt through insulation. The noise grew closer, closer, stopped below us. Toes heard it too; he ran to the edge of the roof and craned his head over the planter's box my wife had installed over the summer. Through rows of marigolds he watched the lights of the silver Lotus go dark.

She's here, Toes said. My Dime has arrived.

We heard excited footsteps on the stairs. Roxie came through the door onto the roof.

Babe, Toes said. He came running from behind the bar. They embraced, kissed, unembarrassed. I watched them, but really I watched her. She was the real deal. Stardust hair, pink cheeks, wide eyes. A Blonde in the First Row. I stepped forward to introduce myself, but Toes beat me to it.

Roxie, meet Pibb, he said. Toes squeezed her hand, went back behind the bar. He pulled out a bottle and some shot glasses. I usually introduced myself to Toes' other girls with a hug that lasted a half-second longer than it needed to. I tried to do the same here, but Roxie put out her hand before I could wrap my arm around her. Her hand wasn't limp when I shook it.

She smiled. It's nice to finally meet you.

Finally? I jumped a little. Has Toes been talking about me?

Are you kidding? She laughed with her whole face, and her hair danced while she laughed. He won't shut up about you

Yeah? I suppressed a smile, leaned toward her a little, and asked, conspiratorially, So what's he been saying about me?

Um. It seemed like she wasn't prepared for the question. Her nose wrinkled with thought. Oh! She brightened. I know. Yesterday, he was over at my house and I wanted to show him my room, but my dad got all weird about it, and Toes said later that *you* would have been chill about it, because you remember what it's like to be that age.

That age. When I was that age, I was getting the stink-eye from every dad I met.

Daddy, this is Pibb, the girl would introduce me. We were probably in a hallway with pictures of the daughter as a baby, in elementary school, all over the walls. He's in a band, she'd add. At this point, you could see Daddy realizing his daughter was showing a bit more skin than usual.

Pibb, huh. Like the soda?

You got it.

That, uh, your given name, son?

I gave it to myself, yeah.

If the dad was naïve or generous or genuinely nice, he'd laugh and maybe offer his hand and a glass of water. In either case, I wasn't thirsty. What the dad never did, though, was leave the house, but that didn't matter, because I'd make sure we were so quiet in her bedroom that all of our enormous potential energies shrank to the soft squeals of her mattress springs. Had Toes been with Roxie yet? Had her father unsuccessfully kept them from one another? If it had been me in there, I would have brushed her dad off, fed him some line about Roxie needing to give me last week's math assignment even though I never went to class anyway, felt the dad's eyes lasering into the back of my head as we walked down the hall to her bedroom. Had Toes been ballsy enough to get Roxie alone in her room anyway? Or had he chickened out, apologized to her dad for being an inconvenience, left without getting what he'd come for?

Toes is right, I winked. I wouldn't have given a good god damn what your old man said. She gave me a look.

I think what he meant is that you remind him of a cooler version of my dad.

Your dad?

Uh huh, she said, smiling. All he ever talks about is where he wants me to go to college. I bet you don't do that to your daughter, do you?

Before I could answer I heard my phone ringing. It was my wife.

Everything okay? Roxie frowned.

Yeah, I said, recovering. It's, uh, business. Roxie nodded and went over to Toes. I took the phone into the stairwell.

Honey?

I'm worried, said my wife. I've been thinking about this all night. I want you to come home. The reception wasn't great but it sounded like she was using her non-negotiable voice.

Hazel, I'm fine. She didn't respond. Honest, I said. Everything's fine. I'd only had a few beers, but just to be sure I put my hand to my stomach. Nothing felt abnormal.

Have you been drinking? I didn't know how to respond.

Answer me. Have you been drinking?

I was silent.

Then I need you to come home. Now she was definitely using the non-negotiable voice. My mind was zooming from the caffeine but when opened my mouth to speak I didn't have the words. Enough is enough, she added. What's been happening to you are warning signs, and we can't ignore them. If you won't take this seriously, then I have to do it for you.

You're crazy, I said. I was literally shaking my head. This is crazy. I've been here for twenty-five years and nothing's ever happened.

Nobody's forcing you to be there. Give me one good reason why you can't come home.

From the roof, Toes said something I couldn't make out, and Roxie laughed. Then, silence.

The kid, I told Hazel. The kid already has a girl here to pick him up, and we're slow enough that we don't need two people. There'll be nobody left to close if I leave. I felt satisfied with this explanation.

So you'll put your own life in danger because this girl showed up?

When you say it that way it sounds much worse than it is, I protested.

That's it, she said. I'll be there in five minutes.

Honey—

She hung up.

I walked back up to the roof. Roxie was bent across the bar, her heart-shaped butt aglow in the candlelight. Toes was sliding his hand up and down Roxie's forearm. She quivered. Quit it, I heard her whisper. You're giving me goose bumps.

In the candlelight I could make out the pink outline of her underwear. I pretended to be staring straight ahead when Toes looked up at me. All good? He asked.

I sat down next to Roxie.

Sorry Toes, I grumbled. I think you're closing solo tonight.

What? Why?

Family emergency. I looked down at the bar. Hazel's coming to get me.

Toes scratched his head. Hazel's coming this late? Why? I almost didn't want to answer. Wait, he said. Is this because of last week?

I was silent. Roxie appeared concerned.

What happened last week?

Nothi—

—He was working late last Thursday with me and he fell asleep, Toes cut in. He began to giggle.

What? Roxie asked. What's so funny?

I dunno, Toes said. He looked across the bar at me. It's just funny to think of you like that. Falling asleep early is the kind of thing my grandfather used to do when I was

little. We'd finish dinner and he'd go sit in the den and fall asleep in his chair and my mom would have to wake him up so he could go to bed.

Roxie wasn't laughing. She gave Toes a look. He sobered. She turned to me. You poor thing, she said. She wrapped her arm around me. This wasn't the way it was supposed to work. Did you wait up this late just to see me? I didn't answer. Roxie looked at Toes. Why didn't you tell me he was up so late? Shouldn't you get him some tea or something?

Toes looked puzzled. Can I, um, get you some...tea? I could tell he was having a hard time taking the situation seriously. I didn't blame him. *Tea?* I might as well have been sitting in a wheelchair with a blanket over my lap.

On the street below, I could hear the feeble whir of my wife's Prius approaching the bar.

Hit me, I said as calmly as I could to Toes. He stared at me for a moment, as if the order had come from someone else.

Hey Pibb...you, uh, sure Hazel will be cool with that?

I'll show you cool, I said. Hit me. Roxie put her hand on my shoulder. You sure that's a good idea?

I pushed her hand away, too roughly.

We could hear the front door open and close.

Damnit, what are you waiting for? This is my place, I said, standing up, and I can have a hit if I want. I pounded the bar with my fist. Roxie gave a little jump.

Toes glared at me. Your funeral, he muttered. He went and got a bottle of whiskey and a glass and filled it.

What the hell is this? I asked when he'd filled it. There are three of us. Where are your glasses?

Roxie looked at Toes. She doesn't want to drink, Toes informed me. Neither do I.

Fine, I looked at both of them. You both want to be buzzkills? I guess I'll have to show you how it's done. I drew myself up, downed the shot, and slammed it on the bar. Heat swam through me. In the candlelight the bar heaved and swayed.

I could hear movement on the staircase.

Another, I growled.

Toes refilled my glass. I threw it back.

Roxie's hand was over her mouth. Bet your old man can't party like this, I sneered.

The footsteps grew louder.

Another.

My knees buckled. Somebody was going to have to teach these kids a thing or two. The glass filled itself and I emptied it. My body felt white with heat.

Another.

My wife was at the door.

Another.

Girl on my Shoulder

“Everyone comes back from that place with a story.”

This from my boss, Mister Pibb—which I had long suspected was not his real name—over beers at the bar he owned, the Blue Bonnet. I was a few years out of college back then, tending bar full-time at the Bonnet.

How I remember it, Pibb had gotten cozy with a Dutch beer distributor in the hopes of shaving a few dollars off each pallet of Heineken; and because we sold so much of the stuff, he’d been invited, all expenses paid, to Holland, to meet the distributor. The meeting would be in Amsterdam. Afterward, Pibb was going to make the most of his time by spending a few days sightseeing around the country before heading home. As for me, my ex-girlfriend had left me with an empty apartment and an emptier social calendar, and I was sorely in need of a vacation.

It was the night before we left.

“Been awhile since I was in Amsterdam,” he added.

“Define *awhile*.”

“Oh, this was years before I bought the Bonnet. It was the first show on our European tour, and we were opening for Iggy and the Stooges. Summer of ‘80.”

“Good show?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? Probably a sell-out. Funny how that happens—the shows all sort of run together. It’s the little things we did afterward that stayed with me. Maybe it’s because we played the same songs everywhere we went, but the other stuff could only have happened in those particular moments. Like later that night, for instance. We go to get inked up, and who do we find at the tattoo parlor but Iggy himself. Of course, we’re all cocked on angel dust.” He said this last part with such nonchalance that I remember wondering how the hell he’d managed to make it out of Europe alive. “Anyway, our drummer starts a fight, and somehow Iggy ends up getting thrown through the window. One thing leads to the next, and suddenly the sun’s coming up, and I’m lying on a park bench covered in newspaper with a tattoo of a pig on my left bicep.”

I looked at his leathery arm and, sure enough, there was the porker’s snarling double-barreled snout. The guy wore enough ink to fill a well, but it was clear the pig occupied a special place.

Pibb gave the kind of wistful sigh you hear from old couples recounting their courtship. “I bet nothing’s changed. You’ll see. The pot smells like an angel’s vagina. And the canals, man, they were like out of some old photograph you’d see in a museum. You know they call it the Venice of Northern Europe?”

“Is it better than the Venice of Southern Europe?”

Pibb frowned. “What’s that?”

“Venice.”

He socked me playfully below the shoulder. “Wise guy.”

We finished our round and I ordered two Heinekens for the road. When the beers came we raised and clinked.

After close we parted ways at a corner under flowering cherry blossoms. “Remember, Louderman,” he cautioned, “our flight leaves at seven. I’ll see you at the gate. Be sure to take enough cash with you. Don’t forget your passport and map. Also,” he winked, “bring protection. If memory serves, Dutch women are voracious.”

Voracious. For a guy who never made it past high school, he had a killer vocabulary.

That flight to Amsterdam remains one of the longest and most uncomfortable I’ve ever taken. The air tasted like pressboard. The engine thrummed outside my window. We were stuck in the butt of the plane.

This was my first time to Europe, and Pibb’s first since he’d been my age. I could hear his giddiness; every time he shifted in his seat it groaned. Between his excitement and the toy-sized seats, neither of us could catch any shut-eye. Eventually, Pibb called the flight attendant over and ordered us a pair of Heinekens.

One thing about going somewhere you’ve never been before is that you almost don’t believe you’re actually going. I kept looking around the cabin as if to remind myself this was real. I noticed a girl sitting two rows in front of me with the same haircut as Kara, the ex-girlfriend. After we’d broken up, Kara had moved to Europe.

I stood.

“I’ll be back,” I told Pibb. “Nature calls.”

I shimmied my way up the aisle. When I was almost to the bathroom I couldn’t help myself; I looked back, aware that it really could have been Kara, that stranger things happen all the time.

It wasn’t.

Kara had spent the previous summer in Madrid on loan from work at a Jewish history museum. It wasn’t like she’d taken the position because she was especially religious—an old friend had gotten her the job—though she had grown up in a practicing household. By comparison, my personal connection to Jewish history mostly started and ended with the batting averages of professional Jewish baseball players. Sometimes when I described Kara as ‘religious’ to other people I felt a snag of regret. While she was in Spain, I’d briefly contemplated visiting her with the hope of trading a few homerun totals for a little Talmudic wisdom; but flights had been prohibitively expensive, and beyond that, I hadn’t wanted to give up the few lucrative shifts I had at the Bonnet for a trip abroad.

By that point, we’d been dating for well over a year. There had been a real leisure and symmetry to our relationship. We lived together, cooked together, cleaned together. We went out together. At holiday parties at the Euro-American Jewish Cultural Cooperative, Kara’s employer, I was the guy who hadn’t been to camp or youth group or Israel. When Pibb would throw private, staff-only functions at the Bonnet, Kara did her best to keep pace with us. I often ended up carrying her the two blocks back to our apartment.

When I returned to my seat, Pibb was staring at the same girl. “Hey,” he nudged me. “Who does she look like?”

The words were out almost before he’d finished the question.

“Oh—right.” he clapped my back twice, and on the second clap his hand remained fastened. “Didn’t she used to live in Spain?”

“That’s where she met the new guy.”

“Shit,” he spat. “Goddamn Spaniards. We played Barcelona two weeks after Amsterdam, and one of them snuck backstage after the show trying to steal our fruit basket. Caught the slick, lispy bastard with a red apple in his hand.”

“Actually, the guy’s American. Penn for undergrad, then Cornell.” I drained my beer and signaled to the flight attendant for another.

“Well,” Pibb removed his hand from my back. “It is what it is.” He was fond of saying this, to the point that most bartenders at the Bonnet had adopted it almost as a personal mantra. As a guiding philosophy, its laxity had always irritated me—though I remember thinking later that if it had gotten Pibb this far in life, there was probably something to it.

After we landed we caught a taxi from the airport into the city. Pibb instructed the cabbie to leave us by a particular canal.

(“We dumped the bassist from the Stooges into that canal,” he boasted.)

At the time it awed me that even after a thirty year absence, the scheme of the city, vibrant and crooked in his mind, endured with a cartographer's precision. Now, though, I'm not so much impressed as I am delighted. Isn't it amazing how these small but stubborn associations inevitably outlive the other media of memory? I smile to think that even without aid of video or photograph, I am certain that if I returned to the Bonnet tomorrow, I'd be able to tell a true story concerning just about every square foot of that place.

Pibb explained in the cab that we had the afternoon at our leisure. I was on my own for dinner while he met with the distributor. We would meet later in the evening at the place the taxi left us. We had a train to catch to Antwerp the following morning.

The taxi pulled off the highway and I remember glancing out the window and suddenly everything was brick and cobblestone and the streets were barely wide enough to accommodate the cab, whose wheels scraped now and again against the curb. I'd grown up in the flat sprawl of the Midwest where nobody ever wanted for space. It felt as if, in entering the city, we were being involuntarily compressed.

As we neared the heart of the city, Pibb began to point out the sights.

"I don't believe it!" He jerked upright. "It's the same tattoo parlor!" His fingers brushed against his bicep. The parlor looked a bit haggard: the blue paint was peeling in places. It had also been partially converted to a bar. But it lived still, neon sign and everything. I tried to imagine Iggy Pop flying through the storefront window. "And over there," Pibb swung my attention to the other side of the street, "is the *frites* stand we raided at four in the morning."

“Is still good *frites* there,” the cabbie assured us in a thick Slavic accent.

“Louderman, you getting all this?”

I nodded.

“And look down that canal.” I obeyed as he cracked the window and craned his head out like a puppy. “See there? That’s a houseboat filled with hundreds of abandoned kittens that just floats around the city non-stop. It woke me up the night I was sleeping on the park bench.”

We passed a sign for the red-light district. It was hard for me to believe such a thing really existed.

“Whore area,” the cabbie advised, “is not far from where I leave you.” He looked back at me: the look on my face must surely have registered with him as that of a rookie traveler on the doorstep of discovery, because his next question was, “You plan to visit?”

Pibb turned from the driver to me and back again. “When in Amsterdam...” he said. Then he gave me one those raised-eyebrow looks to mean, *Am I right, or am I right?* I hadn’t so much as kissed anyone in the months since Kara had left, and I certainly had no desire to reenter the world of the sexually active with a prostitute, so I ignored him.

The cabbie gave Pibb’s upper back two sympathetic slaps.

“If I wasn’t driving all day,” he told Pibb, “I’d go with you.”

We shot around a corner and halted at the intersection of about six different streets, an exploding star of busses, bikes, trams and cars. Next we knew the driver was

out of the taxi and sliding our door open, urging us out into the whirling uncertainty. “Go, go!” he was yelling. We were as far to the side of our street as was possible, but the tail of the taxi was partially obstructing a bus lane, and the indignant groans of the big bus horns were filling the air. Cyclists whizzed by, a kinetoscope of bemused faces. Lost to the clamorous novelty of the moment, I stood there, overwhelmed and unmoving, until I felt Pibb’s hand latch itself to mine, pulling me to the safety of the sidewalk. The driver yelled something in his language at the busses behind him and held up two fingers, a gesture I guessed to be a Cold War cousin of the bird. He slammed the back doors, got into the car. Then he cracked the passenger window, leaned across the front seat, looked out at me and grinned.

“If you change mind about whores,” he yelled, “dedicate first stroke to me!”

He treated the busses behind him to a second helping of that proud gesture—bravado for our sake, I thought—and drove off down a side street.

Pibb and I found seats on a bench in a park next to a busy bridge. The trees were dressed in a cottony fog. The drooping branches of a willow hung down almost to the tops of our heads. A row of august low-rises peered over the canal. There were embankments of tulips on both sides of the canal, which was lined with mossy brick. Small droplets of rain bothered the surface of the water.

Spring was cooler here than in the States. Pibb zipped up his coat, and I did the same. “We’ve got some time,” he remarked. “Anything you want to do in particular, Louderman?”

I thought about this. The summer before, when Kara had come to Amsterdam, she'd visited a number of museums, various places she'd later described in rapt tones as 'gray, venerable, historic.'

Gray. Venerable. Historic. These were the qualities that photographs of Amsterdam were supposed to evince. The first such photograph that came to mind, anyway, was of Kara. She'd already been to Paris (lovely), Rome (dirty), Lisbon (too much port). Near the end of her stay, she and her friends traveled to Amsterdam for her birthday. When I called, they were at a museum in the old Jewish Quarter. On the phone, Kara was laughing, but my humor wasn't responsible for it. All of it was the other guy. Neil was his name. I could hear him in the background, quipping sweetly but eruditely. At this point I knew about Neil. *Doctor* Neil Fein, Ph.D in History. Short, dark-featured, intensely pious. Later, right before we broke up, I found the photograph of Kara in Amsterdam. She was beaming, and Neil's short, dark, pious arm was cinched around her waist. They were standing on a bridge much like the busy one across from our park, and I wondered if this was the exact place she'd been when I called to wish her a happy birthday.

"Why did I call you?" It was six in the morning. My shift was over and I'd been drinking.

"What?"

"I said, 'why did I call you?'" This was more accusation than question. "Sounds like you'd rather celebrate with *Neil* anyway."

“I can’t hear you, you’re slurring your words,” she yelled. Though the reception was poor it was plain she was sober.

“I *said*—“

“Listen,” she sighed, “just call me later, okay?”

“No, *you* call *me*,” I pushed.

“Noah, don’t be so childish. I really can’t hear...Neil’s telling me about...look, just call me tomorrow!”

She hung up.

“*Louderman.*”

“Huh?”

“C’mon, kiddo.” Pibb stood, itching to go. “We don’t have forever. What do you want to do?”

I opened the Fodor’s map he’d asked me to bring. Behind us, back where the streets had first narrowed, the map showed various Quarters, assemblages of museums, galleries, and monuments. On the flight, before I’d gotten to drinking with Pibb, I’d been planning to single out a few sites to visit. I realized that the only recommendations I had to go on were Kara’s, and at the moment, I didn’t much feel like following her advice.

The map indicated a coffee shop on the other side of the canal. It was lodged between a laundromat and a Turkish diner in a row of multicolored apartments. It was only a block away, but we had to cross roughly fifteen lanes of traffic. Pibb bobbed and wove his way there with the expertise of a local. I couldn't keep my head straight and was almost hit by a tram and three bicyclists.

The light in the shop was diffuse. The walls smelled of incense, coffee, tobacco, spice. The décor was very Age-of-Aquarius, lots of purples and yellows. A television in the corner was playing the Three Stooges. A glass counter near the entrance contained a menu and samples which were painstakingly arranged by strain, color, flavor, and price. The woman at the counter could not have looked more bored if she were at her dining room table itemizing deductions. She reminded me of a bleary-eyed Pibb doing liquor inventory on a Tuesday morning. I'd never thought of marijuana as a serious thing, but this was clearly a scrupulous operation.

The woman recommended we split a gram of indoor called Mexican Chow-Chow, which was supposed to provide a lucid, meditative experience. The strain was also notorious, she added offhandedly, for giving the user certain animalistic properties.

I chose for us a corner table beneath the television. Pibb, who had remarkably nimble fingers for someone his age (probably all the guitar he played), spliffed the joint with tobacco. He explained that this was how the natives did it. I bought us each a Heineken. We started the joint.

I have never in my life been very comfortable on this terrain, but I acted as if I was. I began to hack.

“Careful, kiddo.” Pibb took a prodigious hit, French-inhaled, and then blew an elegant series of rings. These caught the eye of the woman at the counter, who raised an approving eyebrow. There was something perversely paternal about the moment.

“You make this look too easy,” I gagged. The joint passed again from his rough mitt to my smooth one

“Practice,” he leaned back in his chair. “That’s how you get to be me at my age.”

His words stuck with me until the stuff crept up and then I started hearing *nyuck-nyuck-nyuck* over and over like a hypnotist’s trick. There was a flash, a sparkle, a sis-boom-bah to when I was fifteen and my mother had lobster on the boil. My face went grainy like white noise. Then I was four, and my father was calling from a business trip to Moscow. Hello son of mine, he said, voice garbled, and told me that the toilet paper was unconscionably rough. We visited the zoo in Miami the next year and my grandmother showed me the pachyderms. Her skin was as tough as theirs. My neck felt as long as an ostrich. Pibb snickered quietly like a hyena.

Pibb’s eyes had gone to slits. He started grooming his arm. “Watch out!” I warned him. “You’ll lick the ink clean off!”

“Get your head out of the sand,” he said. “Once you’re inked, it’s forever.”

“But what happens if you get the wrong design?”

“Aha!” He smiled. “That’s the best part—there is no ‘wrong design.’ What matters is the moment itself. And if the moment is right, then the design is incidental.”

Today, I know exactly what he meant. At the time, it was all I could do to keep from getting lost in his logic.

It was warm and dry in the coffee shop, and there was a Three Stooges marathon playing right above our heads. For a long time neither of us could move. We must have sat beneath the television for hours. We drank at least one more round of Heineken. As the afternoon faded into evening, I remember I'd found myself staring out through the window of the coffee shop. There were two people outside, a man and a woman. The man appeared to know something about a building at the far end of the canal. It looked as though he was describing it for the woman. For all I knew, Neil and Kara had struck an identical pose hundreds of times.

"Neil just *knew* so much," Kara had told me. We were in her bed. It was growing light out. I'd finished a shift and was drunk and couldn't sleep, and neither could she. "But that's how rigorous his doctoral program was: he really had to know *everything*."

"He doesn't know how delicious bacon is," I said.

She was silent.

There was a space on the mattress between us. I moved myself into it, craning my neck over hers. I pressed my lips to her mouth, but she drew away. "I'm sorry," she said, "but you taste like the bar."

"What else would I taste like?" I tried to reach for her hand. She tucked it into her chest. A piece of purple sunrise squirmed beneath the blinds.

"Maybe that's the problem," she whispered.

I could feel a sour mash of beer and smoke on my tongue. Suddenly, back in the café, I noticed that same mixture on my tongue; and then, feeling somehow that the world was no longer playing by my rules, the lavender walls of the coffee shop seemed to close in on me, and I was struck by an immense fear. I kicked back my chair and made for the exit. Pibb had finished with his arms and moved on to grooming his hair. He didn't realize what I was doing until I'd done it. Hell, *I* didn't realize what I was doing.

Pibb stumbled outside to yell after me.

"It's not safe out there for a flightless bird!" He hollered across the muted water of the canal. It's possible I heard him because I couldn't have been far off, but if I did, I don't remember. And even if I had heard it, nothing was going to stop me anyway.

In some ways, I wish I still had the Fodor's map I'd brought along with me. It was a user-friendly affair with a laminated surface, big white lettering, and a small, uncluttered key. With a few minutes' careful study, it would have returned me to the coffee shop.

That is, if it hadn't fallen out of my back pocket and into the canal. I figured this out as I came to in a small plaza with a statue in its center. As best I could tell, I was near where the man and woman had been standing. I had crossed a bridge and wound my way down along the canal and now I was beside a statue of a girl, and as I reached into my back pocket, I felt only my passport and wallet.

I was still awfully high. Otherwise, I would've flagged down a policeman, patiently explained my situation (Pibb said they all spoke English), and been escorted back to the shop. But as it was, the missing map mattered for only a moment: what drew my attention away was the statue.

The girl could not have been more than twelve years old, thirteen at the very most. I never had the chance to see a picture of Kara as a teenager, but there was something sweet in the girl's face that put me in mind of her. The girl wore something like a sundress. There was a flower in her hand, freshly picked because the petals hadn't wilted. The sun was falling fast and there was little natural light left in the square, but the streetlamps shone like gold bars, and there was such preternatural joy on her face...it was the closest you can get without stepping over the line. It was like a bronze sunrise.

I walked over. I stepped through a small crowd of children, and stood at her base. I stood there for a long time. While I was standing there, children approached from all sides and did things that children do, like touch her legs, or try to sit on her feet before their parents pulled them off. Old people had their pictures taken with her. Soon there were fewer people. After I don't know how long, I looked behind me. The sky was painted with colors of dark wine and the plaza was nearly empty.

Most of the buildings enclosing the court were now dark and shuttered but one was still open. I wandered over, not yet tired of looking at the statue but dimly aware of a creeping hunger. I'd thought the lighted building was a restaurant.

Instead, I found myself at the entrance of the Anne Frank House.

The woman at the door glanced at her watch. She informed me in heavily accented English that it was the first night of Passover, and the museum was closing early, but that there were a few minutes left, and did I want the last ticket of the day?

This, I realized, was what the man had been showing the woman...and I'd come this far, hadn't I? This was one of those old something-or-others Neil had shown Kara.

"*He* understands," Kara had said. It was dawn again. But this time, instead of lying in bed, we were standing in our tiny kitchen. *My* tiny kitchen. She'd come to pick up the rest of her things at that early hour because it was the only time of day she could count on me being awake and at home.

"Understands *what*, exactly?"

"Our history," she said. She was cradling Uris' *Exodus* in her arms. The symbolism was too much.

"What do you mean, *our* history?" I couldn't believe this was happening. It was like one of those whiskey dreams that feel so vitally, unmistakably real that you truly believe your dead aunt is talking to you over a hidden loudspeaker and pigeons are dropping silver eggs on your coffee table. "Since when is his history *our* history? I mean, it's not like you ever really cared about this stuff before. And now you won't eat off of my plates, or come to the bar. You observe these numinous holidays I didn't even know existed. And every time we're in bed you end up saying things like, how wonderful it would be to live in Jerusalem and cover your hair and have ten kids. As if, *that*, of all the things in the world, is what you most want?"

I'd been gesturing wildly as I talked, and now I found my back was against the refrigerator. Like I said, this was all too much. I pulled out a Heineken. "Tomorrow," I popped the cap off, "when I'm in a better mood, we'll sit down and iron all this out."

"What is there to iron out?"

"You know," I said. "All this *Jew* stuff."

"*Jew* stuff? Noah, can you hear yourself? You have this notion that there's barely more to life than the drinks you pour and the sleep you get afterward...and you make it sound like *I'm* the one with the problem. Like I've got cancer or something."

"At least you can diagnose cancer. Whatever disease you picked up from *him*, I don't think they have a name for it."

A tear dribbled across her cheek. I put the Heineken down and went to her.

"I didn't mean it. Honest. Can't we just talk?"

"If that's how you see us, then there's nothing left to talk about," she said, backing out of the kitchen. When she left she was still crying.

Over the next month I called her every day, sometimes twice a day. She never picked up. A few weeks before I left for Amsterdam, I ran into a mutual acquaintance on the street. When I asked if she'd seen Kara, the acquaintance told me she'd moved back to Europe, that she was living with Neil, and that they'd gotten engaged.

It had grown colder, and a chill caught me. Standing in front of the woman at the ticket counter, it had been hours since I'd said a word to anybody. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. But I had to say something, and as I've learned, it's much easier to say yes than no to just about anything.

"How much?"

"Five euro for whole experience. Three for self-tour." I felt inside my wallet and realized that in the bustle of the afternoon I'd neglected to exchange my dollars.

"You can pay American," she read my mind. "Is seven American for whole experience. Five for self-tour." I handed her a five, not because I didn't want the whole experience, whatever that meant, but because it was the first bill my fingers touched. "Tour begins there," she pointed over toward a flight of narrow wooden stairs leading to the second floor of the house.

Painted arrows on the ground indicated the way up to the attic. There were wall displays next to the objects with explanations in English.

I was the only person in the museum. It was silent as a crypt, but every so often my feet found an irritable floorboard, and then the whole house seemed to moan.

What made the difference—that is to say, what I still remember today—wasn't the main attraction. Sure, it was a very old attic. But so what if something is old? I was in an old, fusty attic. If I hadn't known who lived there, or looked around long enough, that's all I'd have had to say about it: it was an old, fusty attic. That's all a house is, anyway. A skeleton, a vessel.

I saw the beds, the sink, the cabinets, the chairs. It was essentially a furnished apartment. There was a long historical commentary posted beside each item. And what did the Great Scholars of History have to say? I don't remember. Not that I mean to trivialize any of that stuff. It's important to some people. Neil and Kara, for instance, are the kind of people who get off from parsing life's footnotes. But I couldn't help but feel, as I descended the stairs, that for people like myself, there was a limit as to what you could get out of places like this.

It was on my way out of the house—really, the last thing I saw before walking out—that I came across the photograph, the only one taken of her after she'd been taken. As exhibits go, it was an afterthought; the story of Anne Frank is supposed to begin and end with the attic. In the picture, she was barely older than the statue made her seem, but she looked the definition of old age. Her cheekbones protruded like the keel of a ship and her eyes were dun saucers. On her arm, peeking out from under her ragged shirtsleeve, were eight little numbers in an even line. It was warm in the house, but I shivered. I was seeing the bookends of age all in a moment. Moored to that photograph, I felt old—as old as I'd ever been—and yet, I was as young as I'd ever get. I had the feeling that every minute from now on would, in some way, be like this. It was the feeling of emerging from a wild you never knew existed.

The woman who had sold me the ticket tapped me on the shoulder.

“No more time.”

“Are you sure?”

She gave an apologetic smile and tapped her watch. “You can always come back,” she pointed out helpfully.

“How do I know if I’ll ever make it back?”

“Maybe you don’t.” She frowned gently. “But for now, you go.”

I stumbled out of the house, past the bronze statue, and followed a canal downhill through the evening mist until I came to a strand of buildings dressed in red light. I was a few blocks from the park where I was supposed to meet Pibb.

My high was finally gone. I was still dizzy with thought, but there was a growling hole in my stomach. I made for the *frites* stand Pibb had shown me, where I dispatched two large pouches of fries covered in ketchup, mustard, malt vinegar and mayonnaise; three slices of pineapple pizza; a waffle dusted with powdered sugar; and a bucket of cola.

Half-comatose, I trundled up to the park and took a seat on the same bench where the day had started. The streets were calmer at night. One cyclist bumped gently into the back wheel of another at a stop light. The houseboat piloted by kittens came into view; a chorus of *mrows* greeted me as it slipped down the canal. A young woman walked by. I smiled at her. She smiled back.

I felt a hand on the nape of my neck. Pibb sat down beside me. His eyes were no longer slits, but his thinning hair was matted from an afternoon’s worth of preening.

“Well I’ll be damned,” he said. “Back, and in one piece.” I blushed. “You hear me yelling at you?”

I said I probably had.

“Coulda fooled me. Dunno what ruffled your feathers, but it was like you had sand in your ears.”

I intended to explain, but Pibb immediately launched into the nuts and bolts of his meeting with the distributor, which had been a resounding success. As euphoric as he was, there was a dissonance I couldn’t ignore, and it took me a minute to figure out why it sounded so odd to hear him sprinkling his speech with business jargon, until I began to wonder if Pibb the Guitarist had ever imagined himself as Pibb the Businessman. The thought that both were, in fact, the same person, was unnerving to me, in a way I think I will never be able to fully explain.

I interrupted him. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” he said. “Shoot.”

“I don’t know exactly how to phrase this,” I started. “But when you were watching rock stars fly through windows and throwing people in canals and all that, did you ever think about...”

“Think about what?”

I tried again. “I mean, or maybe if you weren’t in a band, but if you were tending bar, how would you know if...” I wanted to finish the question, but I couldn’t. It now

struck me as ludicrous. How could I expect anyone to be able to explain the calculus of their own wilderness? Pibb put his arm around my shoulder.

“Look, kiddo. I don’t know where you’re going with all this, but it almost sounds like you’re trying to ask if I can see the future. And I hate to disappoint my fans, but I can’t.” I held my breath. A houseboat had docked behind Pibb, and its lantern lent the ruts of his skin a peculiar dignity. “One thing I can say is that the way the deck is stacked, it’s too easy to be too young—until you’re too old. I’ve seen it happen more times than I can count.” He was staring at me intently. “The solution is to always remember that you’re neither.”

Eventually, I asked:

“But how do you expect the average person to do that?”

He grinned as he started to rub the pig on his bicep. “If you go about it the right way it’s easier than you’d think. The key, Louderman, is to set constant reminders for yourself. If you do that, nobody can convince you otherwise.”

Despite the cold, it was pleasant in the park. Mist rose in wispy rings off the canal. We sat until our shoes were streaked with dew. Even then, Pibb was too excited to sleep, so we decided to have a drink before we turned in. We made our way through the cool, wet evening to find a bar.

We were having little luck at such a late hour until we passed the same parlor where Pibb had gotten his pig tattoo. I didn't notice it at first and kept walking, but Pibb put his arm out to stay me.

"This is it, Louderman," he proclaimed. "Our search is over."

I followed Pibb in. The windows gleamed with neon. If I recall, it was a Monday, and there wasn't much business crawling by to keep the employees on their toes. There was a bar in the front for if you were waiting for someone, or you wanted to celebrate afterward. The place was empty, and the bartender was absently tousling his hair and watching a repeat of a soccer match. The tattoo parlor was behind a burgundy velvet curtain.

I got Pibb's attention and motioned toward the curtain.

"Give me a tour?" I asked.

"Certainly." He led me back behind the curtain into the parlor. The place was covered in leopard print and smelled like a mixture of antiseptic and grease. There were pictures, framed and signed, lining the wall of famous patrons. Notably, there was no picture of Iggy or Pibb's band.

"I guess if you start a melee, you don't get on the wall," he shrugged.

"Is it just like you remember it?"

He nodded. "Even with the angel dust, I could have described it down to the very last detail," he said proudly, crossing his arms over his chest. A young man with a handlebar mustache and a coral reef sleeved into his lower arm approached Pibb and

asked if we wanted anything done. I would have expected Pibb to jump into a chair. Instead, he looked to me and smiled. “It’s my friend’s call,” he deferred.

I could tell you for instance that Pibb was a bighearted guy based on the Christmas parties he threw for us, or the minimal amount of sidework he assigned, or the fact that he often let us go home early when business was slow; but to mention all of this would still be to woefully understate the magnanimity of that evening. The whole trip to that point had been a reanimation of Pibb’s history. To not only share such a history with another, but to let them add their own line to it, is an act vastly more generous than any bonus check. In that moment, I felt like Pibb’s brother. It was a marvelous feeling. I wanted never to lose it.

Pibb decided to get a hyena on the opposite bicep, a conspicuously vacant plot of skin. “I’d been saving it for an animal tattoo I’ll actually remember getting,” he explained.

For my part, I didn’t have to think too much. I wanted it hidden well enough, but not so far out of the way that I’d forget it existed.

You might think otherwise, but the process really took no time at all. At least—that’s the way it seemed to me. Coral Reef sterilized the spot and went to work. The whole thing hurt much less than I’d expected it to. While I was on the table, my mind was a welcome blank. The only thought I had while under the needle was of Kara and Neil chastising me for doing something the Torah forbade.

“Fuck it,” I said aloud.

“Huh?”

“Sorry, nothing,” I apologized to the tattooist. “Keep up the good work.”

Pibb and I were mighty pleased with ourselves afterward, so we went and sat at the bar and entertained the bartender by getting deliriously drunk. We never made it to hotel. Instead, we slept in the park, blanketed by fog, on benches beneath willow trees. When the sun began to peek above the attics of the buildings across the canal, we retraced Pibb’s memory to the central train station.

We were racing through the Dutch countryside. The ride was uneventful. The one thing I do recall from that morning was the dull pain above my right shoulder, where the bandages were. I slid my hand beneath my collar and gently removed the bandages. I smiled to myself as I traced the eight tiny numerical grooves with the tips of my fingers. It was the first time I made that motion, a motion I have made countless since, a motion which grows easier and faster every time.

Indeed. It’s the very motion that makes this story possible.