

ABSTRACT

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This is a collection of seven stories I wrote during my two years at the University of Maryland. I chose to include them because I feel they best reflect my authorial strengths and goals. They exemplify the themes I most often explore: the duality of “good” and “evil” and how the definitions of each change from person to person; the idea of a journey literally and figuratively, of movement; isolation in the modern world; the idea of sanity and its relative flexibility; the imminent threat and promise of chaos, of violence and disorder, in the everyday world.

SMOKERS AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Smokers

The outside patio was full of smokers. It was early March, and still very cold. All the nonsmokers were inside drinking Italian soda eating scones and discussing the Velvet Underground or Zadie Smith or the latest Merchant Ivory film. Those on the patio sat in silver chrome chairs, smoking, shivering, sipping hot chocolate or coffee and hardly talking at all. Ted lit his third Parliament, sitting alone at the last table in the corner, and set the almost-full pack of cigarettes next to his right hand. He was almost ready for Parliament number four when Meagan sat down without speaking and handed him a bottle of Coke.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asked.

“I don’t like coffee,” he said.

They sat there for a while without speaking. A gaggle of children ran by on the sidewalk. It was three in the afternoon, and the local grade school had let out. A little red-haired girl smiled and waved at Meagan, who waved back after a few moments.

“I wonder how old her parents are,” Megan said. Ted drank more Coke and lit up Parliament number four. His hands shook, and the flame from his Zippo lighter bounced and twisted in the air like a thing alive.

“How drunk were you last night,” Meagan asked. It was a good thirty seconds before Ted said anything.

“Very,” he said. He looked down at his shaking hands and balled them into fists. They grew still a few seconds later, as his knuckles were turning white with the strain. He wore jeans and a muted red shirt under a shapeless brown jacket.

“Did you black out?” she asked. She wore a green pea coat over a bright band t-shirt, advertising a concert that had taken place before she was born.

“I don’t think so,” Ted answered.

“You don’t know?”

“No. But I don’t think I did.” At that moment, a boy in his late teens tripped as he walked up the steps to the patio, to the amusement of his friends, who shouted something about him being hung over.

“Do you remember talking to me?”

“I didn’t talk to you,” he said.

“But I called you,” Meagan said.

“And I didn’t pick up, like we agreed. I mean, I got the voicemail you left me this morning but I didn’t talk to you last night.”

“Right,” she said.

“Right,” Ted replied, “so why do you ask then?”

Meagan didn’t answer, drank more coffee. The sky above was flat and gray, like a giant slab of concrete overhead, or a lid. They were in central Pennsylvania, about thirty miles west of Harrisburg in a little college town. At the table next to them was another man and woman couple, older than Meagan and Ted, arguing over what they were going to name their recently purchased dog, both pausing every now and then to suck on their black, sweet-smelling clove cigarettes. A small white bus

rumbled by on the street. The legend on the side bore the name of a local Methodist church, the phrase “On FIRE for God!” was written underneath in yellow, red, and orange letters with gray-black smoke drifting up from them. Meagan reached across the table for Ted’s Parliaments, took one and lit it with a match she produced from her inner jacket pocket.

“How long are you in town?”

“Just today,” Ted answered.

“You weren’t even going to call me,” she said.

“I wasn’t going to call anybody, like I said I’m leaving town tonight.” Silence between them. The couple at the next table was at a stalemate between Pongo and Lucky. Another couple two tables down, two men, threw away their smoked-out butts and went back inside where the warmth was.

“I miss you, a lot of the time,” she said. Ted shifted in his chair.

“I don’t really know what to say to that. Okay, I guess thanks.”

“You don’t ever miss me,” she said, or maybe asked. Ted didn’t reply for a while.

“We weren’t good for each other, for all kinds of reasons. Besides, you can do much better than me, you know that.”

“I don’t know that,” she said. “I don’t know that at all; I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.” He drank some Coke, took another drag of Parliament number five, which was almost gone.

“Could we not talk about this, May? You told me on the phone if I met you you wouldn’t start on this.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” Ted nodded. “Fine, but why then did you even agree to meet me at all?”

“I’m trying to figure something out,” he said.

“About what?” He didn’t answer. “Me? You? Us?” He still didn’t answer. She drank more coffee and grimaced. Ted briefly closed his eyes and rotated his head around in a circle, cracking some bones in his neck.

“I used to have one of those,” he said, pointing at a Chrysler LeBaron that drove by, an early eighties model. “It was my first car, when I was seventeen.”

“It was Marcie who saw you at the bar last night,” Meagan said. “If she hadn’t seen you and called me last night I wouldn’t have know you were here at all.” Ted massaged his right temple in a clockwise motion with the fingers of his left hand, his left thumb holding up his forehead.

“Yeah,” he said after a time, “I saw her there. Didn’t really talk to her though.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. Did you forget she’s there like every night? You’re almost guaranteed to see her there.”

“Yeah, I remembered that but I was hoping she would make an exception.”

“Yeah, well, it’s even worse now ‘cause she lives in those apartments right above the place, so I guess it’s hard not to go.” Ted was watching the street. A siren whined off in the distance, and he sat up a little straighter. Then they heard the foghorn used by the town’s fire trucks and he sighed or maybe just exhaled and looked back at Meagan, who was looking at him.

“Cat must be up a tree. Anyway that makes sense,” he said. “I didn’t know she’d moved.”

“Yeah, last year. What’d you say to her?”

“Not very much,” he said.

“She didn’t call me this morning like she said she would, probably brought some guy back upstairs with her.” She paused. “You still hate her, don’t you?”

“Why would I hate her? I barely know her.”

“But you know about back then how she was really trying to get me to-”

“I know, I know,” he interrupted her. “But I didn’t mind, she’s your friend and was telling you what she thought was best.”

“Do you think I made the right decision?”

“Which decision do you mean,” he asked, and she laughed a little. “Well, no, uh, I mean I know you’ve made plenty of decisions in your life-”

“I think most people do,” she said. Behind them a cell phone rang, the ring tone a popular song from an earlier decade. They both ignored it.

“Yeah, well anyway I meant...oh you know the ones I meant.” She wasn’t laughing anymore but the smile stayed on her face.

“Well I can’t imagine you have a problem with the way I handled the Bureau,” she said.

“I didn’t have a problem with it, no.”

“But you don’t think it was the right decision?”

Ted shrugged and said “Maybe not, looking purely objectively at it, from your side.”

“Maybe not,” she said. “It woulda sucked for you though.”

Ted shrugged again and said “I’d gone through it before, I could’ve handled the time.”

“I believe you. Besides, you know it was all Marcie that-”

“Yeah,” he said. “I remember.” A black hearse drove by them on the street, but it looked empty. They both watched it till it turned the corner.

“Are you still worried about what Marcie might do?”

“No,” he said.

“Why not?” Ted shrugged, but the movement was so slight it was barely noticeable. The door to the little cafe opened and a blonde waitress stuck her head out and called out the name of an order. It was only one word but it nonetheless revealed her thick European accent. Meagan turned around in her chair to look, but by the time she had the waitress had already gone back inside.

“What about the other one,” Meagan said. Ted had been looking at the flow of pedestrians on the sidewalk, meager as it was, and didn’t react until Meagan repeated herself.

“The other what,” he said.

“The other decision. The other big decision I mean.”

“I’m glad you went through with it, if that’s what you mean,” he said. “You know it would’ve been horrible for everyone involved.” She didn’t say anything in reply. Ted went on, “I knew it would’ve been,”

“It was also horrible,” she said.

“I know,” Ted replied. “I was there with you.” As they sat there, every time they exhaled the cold air turned their breath to vapor, like they were still smoking even when they had no cigarette in their mouth.

“You know,” she said presently, “next week it’ll be the three-year anniversary, you know, of that day. The day you drove me to Harrisburg.”

“I know.”

“You ever think about it?”

“What, that day or-”

“Yeah that day or what might’ve been, either.”

“Not really,” he said. “I can’t afford to be thinking about things like that when I’m working, and-”

“You’re always working,” she finished for him.

“Yup,” he said and smiled for the first time, only a little smile. Her smile returned in answer to his, and they stared smiling at each other for a little while.

“So,” she finally said, “what is your business here today?” Ted glanced over his shoulder.

“Just go see somebody, like usual.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Possibly,” he said but didn’t elaborate.

“What’s their name,” she asked, and this time he said nothing. “What do they do for a living?” she asked. Ted looked at her with a flat, steady gaze for a few seconds and she suddenly held up both her hands. “Right, right,” she said. “Sorry, I forgot.” Ted nodded without comment. His Coke was gone, he was on Parliament

number six. The day was still and silent, no wind or rain or snow or even noise for the most part; the town was like a living snapshot from the patio where they two sat. Nothing moved. Gray sky down to gray streets with only gray steel and asphalt between. Meagan tossed her finished cigarette over the patio's stone wall onto the dead patch of grass on the other side.

“Did you know all this rock,” Ted said and indicated the stone wall, “and actually all the stone in the buildings around here is all limestone?”

“I didn't know that, that's weird.”

“Yeah the town has its own quarry somewhere up north, I hear.”

“That's pretty cool,” she replied. The stone was cold, and had a strange shiny quality on sunny days, but on that day it just looked like any other kind of rock. Ted looked at his watch. It was almost four-thirty. He threw away his finished Parliament number six and looked at his pack near his right hand without taking another one.

“Which one are you carrying today?” Meagan asked suddenly, and Ted's eyes widened a little. He glanced past Meagan to the couple next to them, still dogfighting, and then around at the patio in general, which was otherwise empty.

“Keep your voice down,” he said.

“I'm sorry,” she said more quietly, “but will you tell me?” He stared at her a moment longer, then looked away at the street.

“The bigger one,” he said while still watching the stoplight at the nearby corner change colors, the red yellow and green bright and out of place in the gray blank slate of the day. The light was red at that particular moment.

“So this isn’t one of the accident ones,” Meagan said. Ted looked back at her.

“Enough now,” he said.

“All right, I won’t bring it up again. When do you have to go?”

“Actually, I should go now.” Ted stood up, and so did Meagan.

“So,” she said, “did you figure out what you needed to?”

“I think so,” Ted said as he put his arm around her shoulders and started walking her to the steps, down from the patio and onto solid ground. They left the other couple back up there alone; the two of them silent and looking far more relaxed. Sedona was the name they were going with; it was where the woman’s uncle was from. Meagan looked up at Ted.

“Mind telling me what you concluded?”

“Okay. Walk me to my car and I’ll try and explain it to you.”

“Will I like it?”

“I’m not sure.” He looked at her and smiled, again just that little smile.

“Probably not, but we’ll see.”

“I am an optimist,” she said and he chuckled quietly. They moved on down the sidewalk toward his car. A block down from the coffee shop where they had sat, they turned a corner and were out of sight.

The next day dawned even colder than the ones before in the small town, and by noon the snow was coming down hard. In the little coffee shop the bohemians discussed art of various mediums, while on the patio nearly every silver chrome table was occupied by smoking men and women. They drank coffee and hot chocolate and shivered as the white flakes drifted down from concrete sky, falling faintly and

accumulating on their coats and in their hair, sometimes falling onto the cigarettes themselves and dampening the white paper skin until the burning red cinder at the tip reaches it. No one says much of anything.

The Night Skip McNulty Discovered The Big Dipper

They, whoever they might be, say New York never sleeps. Perhaps.

Pittsburgh, then, is a city that often does. The medium-sized, western Pennsylvania town dozes at the convergence of its historic three rivers, beneath a typically overcast sky the color of all the steel it is famous for producing, although less and less has been over the past three decades. It looks like a city lost, wandering in the dark and unsure of which direction to proceed. In the winter, always longer and harsher than it has any right to be, the look is completed by the blanket of snow smothering the hills and streets down to troubled, unquiet rest.

Richie Ginelli stumbled into the fourth floor squad room a few minutes before eight on just such a morning in January, blowing on his numb fingers while the wet white flakes still clinging to his black wool overcoat reluctantly melted. He was thirty-three and built like a beer keg, short and thick but also solid and hard. His skin was dark and his jet black hair was cut in a flat top only marginally longer than the department-issue crewcut he'd sported as a patrolman in earlier years.

The squad room was almost empty, the scarred gray desks cluttered with papers and forms but devoid of people under the harsh, unsteady glare of the neon lights. Brian Rusk, his senior partner in rank and age, sat on the edge of his listening into the phone. Brian was somewhere around fifty, still reasonably thin but packing more pounds than he'd like. The bald spot he pretended he didn't notice cast a dull

reflection of the light from above. His sandy hair did manage to effectively hide most of the encroaching gray though, and he counted it as one of his few blessings.

Ginelli waved, and Brian nodded at him distractedly. Ginelli pushed through the waist-high wooden gate into the bullpen, wincing as the un-oiled hinges squealed. He crossed the room to his desk, which pressed up against Brian's so that they sat facing each other, and set down his briefcase. He glanced at Brian, who was writing something on the yellow legal pad in his lap. He muttered "Thanks," into the phone and hung up as Ginelli was removing his heavy jacket.

"Leave it on." Ginelli froze, his coat halfway off.

"Already?"

"Fresh too, hit the floor no more than half an hour ago." Ginelli let his coat settle back on his shoulders and buttoned it up again, to protect his blazer, white Oxford shirt and tie from the snow. Brian studied his legal pad again, sighed, and slung on his own nearly identical black overcoat. He opened his top desk drawer and removed his service weapon, a black Glock nine-millimeter pistol, and stuck it in the holster near the back of his right hip. Many detectives took off their guns when they sat down at their desks, damn things jabbed the ass like you wouldn't believe, and although usually Brian never took his out for any reason, ever, lately he'd began to succumb to discomfort. Reflexively Ginelli checked his own weapon, also identical to Brian's and resting in a matching leather holster on his hip, making sure it was squared away in case Brian checked, which he did a moment later, and when Ginelli opened his coat to show him without protest Brian nodded his approval. Neither man

had ever fired his weapon outside of the shooting range, though both had taken them out on the street a few times.

The average police rarely uses his gun, which is just as well because they are loathe to do so. Not only is every bullet discharged the harbinger of danger, both to life and limb and the career, civilian review boards and negative press coverage and lawsuits and internal affairs investigations, but on a more mundane level it means reams of forms, all to be filled out in triplicate, noting the exact procedural reasons for every bullet let go. Pulling the trigger for any reason was bad business altogether, and normal police take great pains to avoid it.

At the wooden gate, Brian also made sure Ginelli had the necessities for the crime scene that was their destination: rubber latex gloves, tweezers, a small bound notebook and pen (never spiral notebooks, where pages were easily torn out and suspect for examination and exploitation by clever defense attorneys), an unclouded mind and “soft eyes”, the police term for the ability to see the crime scene and beyond, into its layers and complexities. It was a state experienced detectives could turn on and off, but for the most part existed in all the time. It made them natural police but also often distant and out of touch with the rest of the world. Satisfied Ginelli was ready for the wars, Brian motioned toward the door and both men exited the squad room.

Ginelli was no rookie, to the force in general or to Homicide, but was still new enough that Detective Second Grade Brian Thomas Rusk often treated Detective Third Grade Richard Antonio Ginelli as if he were both, even after their two-year partnership. Ginelli didn't mind, or didn't most of the time; he figured it kept him

sharp and on the ball until the job came more naturally, when his every move was instinct rather than a conscious thought. That's what a real murder police does, how he clears cases and how he stays alive, he hones his instincts to a fine point and relies on them above all else. Witnesses lie, suspects cry police brutality and demand their lawyer, partners screw up or drink too much, the bosses sacrifice any and everything for the stats they present to the mayor, boyfriends or girlfriends, husbands or wives don't understand The Job, every so often a round or two might fly in your direction; in the end all a police, especially a murder police, could count on was himself. Brian believed that, knew it in his core, and so Ginelli had come to as well.

In the fourth floor lobby they passed by the elevator banks, instead took the side door into the stairwell and began to descend. Ginelli took the elevator when alone but Brian always used the stairs, and though he certainly never ordered Ginelli to do the same he always joined him anyway out of professional courtesy. Their station house was old, one of the oldest in the city, and one of the few that had not yet been modernized in the recent overhaul of municipal buildings. It was a structure of heavy stone and wood, every surface stained to the drab, institutional no-shade that is impossible to describe yet is instantly recognizable to any government or state employee anywhere in the world. The glass, plastic and stainless steel of the newer buildings was miles and years away from them, and as much as the police housed there might complain about their ramshackle pile of bricks it was their home, and deep down all feared the imminent changes on the horizon, to one degree or another.

Halfway to the third floor, they began discussing the Steelers and their chances in the upcoming NFL playoffs, of which they both were hopeful but were

reasonably sure were about the same as the chances of a one-legged man at an ass-kicking convention. Obligatory man-talk out of the way, general family inquiries followed. Brian, being the older and supposedly more settled one, was first to speak.

“Anything new with Lisa and the kids?”

“Not really. Lisa’s fine, Monica’s still having trouble with kindergarten but she’s getting a little better. Timmy hasn’t said his first word yet but the doctor said that’s all right, we don’t need to really worry until he’s like two and a half, which gives us almost seven months.”

“Yeah I don’t think Sean spoke until he was around three. Marcie was so sure he was retarded, turns out he actually waited until he could speak in full sentences.”

“Really?”

“Swear to God,” Brian said, raising his left hand as if he were testifying, which both of them often did. “Doctor told us sometimes that happens, it’s an early sign of advanced verbal skills.”

“Well yeah, now he’s in school to be, uh, is it a writer?”

“Journalist, so same thing.”

“Let’s just hope he doesn’t work the crime beat.” They both groaned, thinking of all the reporters they had to deal with day in and day out, how vicious and hungry they were, how so often they saw each dead body as an opportunity and every misguided, murdering lost soul who was arrested as their shot at promotion.

“Last time we talked about it he wanted to be a sports writer.”

“That’s great, maybe he can get you Steeler tickets.”

“That’s what I was hoping for.”

“You ever read that book?”

“Which?”

“The Sportswriter, by Harrison Ford or something.”

“Never heard of it,”

“Yeah, I tried to once cause Lisa said it was good.”

“And?”

“Didn’t like it much, wasn’t really about sports at all, mostly about some guy traveling and thinking about his dead son.”

“I don’t read a lot anyway.” That was pretty much all either was going to say on that subject, and some stairs went by. They, like most police, talked about the world outside their chosen profession about as much as anyone else, because it’s what people do, but sports, entertainment, politics, even family matters didn’t, couldn’t, matter to a great degree after you’ve seen what they see every day. A movie star’s romantic adventures or the president’s bungling of foreign policy matters were inadequate distraction from the way rain water pooled in a dead girl’s eyes like tears, or the sound of a grief-stricken relative’s wail when they were informed that yes, their loved one had been found but no, they were not coming back. Still, most police pretended and occasionally even thought they had succeeded in blocking out all the things behind their eyes. It wasn’t anything as dramatic as the only way to stay sane or the best method to prevent a man from eating his gun, even though these were very real components of it, buried way down at the bottom of their thoughts. People need to talk, is all. They need to interact, to connect.

Ginelli spoke next, his family out of the way. “How’s your lady?”

“She’s fine, we went to see that new cop movie last night.”

“The one with Pacino?”

“Yeah, wasn’t too bad either.”

“How’d you sneak her in? I mean, they still don’t let in underage kids, right?”

“Oh very clever,” Brian said dryly. “When will everyone get over this? She’s twenty-six, she has a master’s degree in archaeology which means she’s smarter than all of you and she’s getting a Ph.D. at Pitt, she’s not a child.” Brian had begun dating Myra, a grad student at the University of Pittsburgh, two years earlier, and they gotten engaged the previous fall. Her being almost exactly half his age was too much for most of the department cutups to ignore. The fact that she was gorgeous, funny, and intelligent, a rare individual in whom little to no real fault could be found, only goaded them on further.

“We know, man, it’s just funny. Shit, I’m happy for you, I’d kill for a girl like that now, let alone at your age.” Ginelli tried to keep his own jokes to a minimum because of all the time he and Brian had to spend together, but every so often he couldn’t resist. After this there was silence for a bit as they went past the second floor landing, then Ginelli started up again. “Seriously, not fucking with you, but what do your kids think about her?”

“They’re more okay than I expected,” Brian said with a shrug. “Marcie died long enough ago that they don’t mind me having a girlfriend, and as far as her age goes all they ever said to me was as long as I’m happy they don’t mind.”

“Big of them.”

“Yeah I thought so. Took a load off my mind too, let me tell you.”

At the bottom of the stairs, the two men paused. They each looked at the double front doors ahead of them, then glanced the corridor leading to the parking garage on their left. Brian spoke first.

“Is the snow still as bad as it was when I got here?”

“Yup,” Ginelli replied, wondering how long Brian had at the office. Their shift had begun at eight, and Ginelli had come in a full six minutes early. Ginelli further wondered, not for the first time, how much Brian slept. Or if he did at all.

“Roads plowed?”

“Not yet, the bus dropped me off on the side of the highway, had to walk here.” Twelve goddamn blocks in the snow, he almost added but didn’t. Nor did he add that he’d expected this and had left his house half an hour earlier than usual; neither of these would matter Brian, especially since he’d likely done the same thing, only much earlier.

“Shit.”

“So,” Ginelli said after a moment, “I guess taking a Chevy is out?” The police force used either marked or unmarked Chevrolet Impalas, depending on whether the riders were beat cops or detectives, for official business.

Brian nodded. “Fortunately,” he said with a note of false cheeriness, “the crime scene is close. We only have to walk about six blocks.”

“Oh that’s it? Fuck it man, let’s jog it.”

“I’ll pass,” Brian deadpanned and pushed open the heavy oak main door.

The snow was deep, thick and still falling hard when the pair came out the front steps of the station house. The streets were snow-covered and empty; no attempt had yet been made to clear them. Both men, almost in unison, turned up the collars on their overcoats. Brian jerked his head to the left and they started walking side by side through the blizzard.

The ground cover was thick, broken by occasional shoveled and salted patches but mostly untouched and deep; the going was slow. The wind had picked up since they'd last been on the street, now blowing hard in near continuous gusts. Every so often one man would shiver and try to cover it by thrusting their hands deeper into their pockets, pulling their coat tighter and clearing their throat or faking a cough. Their hair was soon soaked and small droplets of the melting flakes clung to the strands; after a few minutes of walking small tendrils of steam began rising from their heads. Neither wore a hat or carried an umbrella-for some reason no one knows or would ever care to investigate, police never carried umbrellas and, in modern times at least, few wore hats once past the obligatory uniform of the patrolman. This was not a rule or even an unspoken, time-honored traditional practice, just something they all seemed to do, just as none of them would under most circumstances shake hands with a civilian. These were just things that police, in every city and every locale, seemed to all do.

Brian and Ginelli didn't say anything at first as they walked through Wilkinsburg, the name of the borough they were charged with. Downtown Pittsburgh has the skyscrapers, tall dark and imposing, obscuring the sky like New York but nearby Wilkinsburg has lower heights. You can see the U.S. Steel building

downtown, once the second tallest structure in America, over the rooftops in one direction or the towering Cathedral of Learning, part of the University of Pittsburgh in nearby Oakland in the other, glimpses of the outside world. Wilksburg is full of storefronts, churches, vacant lots and row houses and it can almost pass for suburban. It was, nonetheless, one of the city's highest crime areas and has been since the 1970s.

Detectives on their way to a fresh crime scene do sometimes discuss it, what they know and what they expect to see, but many do not. Ginelli, for instance, did not inquire about the body or bodies they were on their way to because, at this stage, there was no reason to. The one certain thing about a crime scene, the only certain thing really, was that the victim(s) would not go anywhere, not change. The rest of the scene could and probably would be contaminated, messed with, fussed up and screwed over to varying degrees once the blues were there, once the yellow crime scene tape came up, but the dead were left as they had fallen. Who they were, what had happened to them and with any luck who had put them there, if not why, would all be made clear soon enough.

Halfway through their walk, a high-pitched electronic bleat which vaguely resembled a musical chime rang out of Brian's pants. Both men stopped and Brian retrieved a black cellular phone from his pocket and flipped it open while Ginelli watched with mingled amusement and surprise. "It's new, just got it," Brian muttered before raising the phone to his ear, confirming what Ginelli had surmised. Brian, by his own repeated admission, despised cell phones and never owned one. At least till that morning anyway. He said hello and, after the audible but indistinguishable reply

from the other end, repeated himself, this time adding a “honey” to the salutation. Ginelli always wondered why people on cell phones, when answering a call from a number they knew to be theirs or that of someone they know, bothered with the formal phone greeting at all, since they knew who would be on the other end. As much as he appreciated caller ID, Ginelli preferred the old days (What, he thought, like back in 1995? You’re not old enough to have old days) when every time you picked up the phone there was that small moment of quiet, excited dread, when whoever was about to speak to you could be anyone, anywhere, with absolutely anything to say. Brian spoke for several minutes, and near the end of the call he began to get heated, obviously arguing with “Honey”. Finally he told the phone they would discuss all this later and flipped it closed, replaced it in his pocket.

“Honey?”

“Well what do you call Lisa, Sweet Tits?”

“Touché.”

“Anyway Myra wanted me to pick up some stuff at the store on my way home.” Ginelli thought there had been far more said than that but didn’t press. Man and woman kind of stuff. God knew he didn’t like it when people tried asking him what he was arguing with his wife about on those sour occasions.

“In seven hours?”

“I guess.”

“I thought you didn’t like cell phones.”

“I don’t but Myra wanted me to have one, probably so she could call me for shit like this. Picked it up two days ago.”

“It’s nice.”

“It’s annoying. Oh she also had to tell me Sean needs two-hundred dollars for an astronomy textbook.”

“I thought he wanted to be a sportswriter.”

“He does, it’s a requirement class he has to take.”

“Oh yeah, I had to take geology freshman year at Penn State. Hated it.”

“I was never much for astronomy myself, I could never find the constellations.” Brian paused and looked at Ginelli, who was staring off into the distance, thousand yard staring. “Richie?”

“Hm?” Ginelli was momentarily flustered, taken back out of his thoughts into the present. “Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“What about?”

“Ah it was nothing.” But it had been something. That night in Maine, nearly a decade before, watching the lake and listening to the loons scream. He might’ve thought about it more but then Brian stopped outside a sizable apartment building. He checked the address against the torn out piece of yellow legal paper from his jacket pocket and nodded.

“Here we are.” They walked through the glass door into the vestibule, and even there people were milling around, onlookers, one uniformed patrolman standing by the steps. Brian and Ginelli approached him and didn’t bother showing their badges.

“How is it up there?”

“Not bad,” answered the patrolman, a young Latino that couldn’t have been more than halfway through his twenties. “Ninth floor, next to last, you’ll see all the people hanging out.”

“No elevators?” Ginelli asked, looking up at the spiral of ascending stairs above him. The young cop grinned.

“Getcha in shape though, right?” Brian, not one for humor at crime scenes or their peripherals, glowered at him and started up without a word, Ginelli close behind. Brian moved quickly, taking the stairs two at a time, but Ginelli began to lag farther and farther behind, again taken by the force of his spontaneous recall, set off by the mention of searching for constellations.

When he’d been twenty-two, Ginelli had spent the fourth of July weekend in western Maine, at the summer house of his college friend Ben on the shores of the famous Lake Kezar. Several other friends of theirs also came up as a sort of last hurrah, graduation having been that previous May. Ginelli had been set to enter the police academy in mid-July and, while he had been excited, saw that weekend as his last moments of youthful freedom and irresponsibility before entering the “adult world”, the world of duty, maturity, stability. With that theory in mind he had acted accordingly, getting boldly and ruthlessly trashed at all opportunities, smoking cigarette after cigarette even though he didn’t smoke, flirting with every halfway attractive girl he saw, carousing in every way he could. Ben and the others, numbering five in all, had been much the same, all starting graduate, medical and law schools or entering the work force in the very near future. It had been a fabulous few days which he would later regard as some of the best in his life.

On July fifth, the day before they were set to finally leave, Ginelli had sat on folding beach chairs with Ben and the rest on the dock at the edge of Kezar long into the night, drinking beer and waxing nostalgic about their recently finished college days. The loons had begun their strange, haunting cries soon after the sun had set, and while Ginelli had gotten over his initial wonder and awe by the time midnight rolled around he was still transfixed by them. He'd never actually heard them before but had long known about them and hearing them had been one of the things he'd been most excited for in the days and weeks before the trip. At that point the conversation had mostly dried up, the group settled in to comfortable silence.

"Stars are so much brighter here," someone had observed reverently.

"Ayuh," Ben replied, using the cliché Maine affirmation, which he never actually used in conversation but had often employed that weekend as a sort of joke. "National Geographic rated Kezar as one of the twenty most beautiful places in the world." The group murmured various agreements and soon all was quiet again.

"Holy shit," spoke a voice two seats down from Ginelli. Everyone leaned forward to see, and their eyes settled on Skip McNulty, Ginelli's sophomore year roommate and one of his closest friends. Skip was staring up at the sky, his mouth open. Then he stood up and slowly turned around in a circle, his eyes never leaving the stars.

"What, Skip?" Ginelli asked. "U.F.O. or something?" Skip pointed up at the sky, tracing a line with his index finger.

"I can see it!"

"See what?"

“The Big Dipper, there it is, right there!” They had all looked up then and, yes, the Dipper was there, clearer than normal but same as it always was.

“Yeah, so what?”

“I’ve just never seen it before,” Skip said, his voice small, still not taking his eyes off the constellation. “I never actually believed it was up there, I just thought it was like a symbolic thing or something.” Everyone had laughed and Skip had been momentarily embarrassed but had sat back down with a grin. Didn’t look away from the Dipper for more than a minute though, not for the rest of the time they were out there, till nearly two.

“Hey!” Brian was yelling at Ginelli back in reality, far away in miles and years from Maine on a Pittsburgh winter morning. He clapped his twice in front of his face and Ginelli flinched.

“What?”

“Get on the ball, goddammit.” Brian’s voice was more edgy than usual, irritated. Maybe it was the cell phone, Richie thought. Whatever the reason for Brian’s shorter than average temper, they were now on the ninth floor. As they walked down the hallway, Brian and Ginelli paid close attention to all the clustered bystanders, what they looked like and what they were saying, but did so casually so as not to frighten any potential suspects or witnesses into flight. The apartment was halfway down the hall on the right side, and they had to push people aside to get through. Fewer people than you would think noticed them, and even fewer pegged them as the soon-to-be stars of the show they would become, masters of the tableau created an hour before by some act of violence. Murder police are like that, or can be

if they want to: it's true anyone who gives them even half a look can determine who they are, but they can also move through a crowd like they're invisible, because they aren't part of the crowd, they don't wonder what's going on, what happened to who, they know and their knowledge lifts them up and out of it. Ginelli focused on the random snippets of chatter he heard, searching for anything that could be of some value.

“He finally killed her.”

“Not just her, both of them.”

“Not the kid...?”

“No the older one, I think she's the sister.”

“His or hers?”

“Not sure.” Everyone was saying basically the same things, which weren't much. Ginelli knew he and Brian would very likely be talking to every single individual in the hallway in hours hence, and he was not eager to do so, knowing ninety-five percent or more would give them nothing at all worthwhile. They reached the apartment in question, 904, and showed their detective shields to the uniformed officer guarding the door. He nodded at them and let them pass by.

The first body was in the middle of the front room, between a dingy kitchenette and a pseudo-living room area with a couch and an easy chair set around a small television set. The couch was of the type that could fold out into a bed, which this one had been, and it had been precisely made up, sheets folded and two pillows at its head. The apartment was tiny and about as low-rent as you could legally get, but it was very, very clean. Except for the bloodstains, which one can assume were not part

of the typical decor. It was also packed, full of people milling around, most doing little more than looking around. Brian and Ginelli shared a quick, pained look.

Brian held up both arms and in a loud, booming voice he reserved for these occasions, exclaimed “Everyone STOP!” Everyone froze in place and suddenly, except for the bloodstains, the cadaver on the floor looked like just another participant in an adult game of Red Light/Green Light. Silence fell over the apartment, but still the bystanders in the hall chattered and outside horns honked, people yelled and the wind screamed through the streets of Wilkinsburg. Such is the state of affairs in the modern city-even when it’s quiet it’s never really quiet. Regardless Brian went on, knowing that the ambient noise was not so great that those who needed to hear him could not. “Unless you have a specific reason to be here, unless you’re absolutely necessary to this investigation, get the hell out.” Everyone started to move, mostly toward the door. “Hold on,” Brian said, not quite as loudly but still with unquestionable authority and everyone froze again. “Who was first officer on the scene?” An older white patrolman’s hand came up, and then another white but much younger patrolman stuck his head out of the other room, raising his hand. “You two stay. Everyone else, go.” And everyone else went.

A homicide detective is, in terms of the administration, treated in different ways in different cities. In some he is nothing more than a specialized, plainclothes patrolman, with no higher pay or, technically, higher rank. In others there are grade designations, first second and third (although in different cities first and third grade alternate as the higher rank), and with each comes different authority and pay grade. In every major American city, though, one thing is constant-a Homicide detective is

the tactical commander of his crime scene, and literally everyone else, while at the scene, must bow to his authority. If a captain or colonel shows up, or the mayor comes by to look like he might actually care about a random, unidentified body found in an abandoned vehicle's trunk, the detective will mostly defer to their wishes out of political common sense, but every so often there is a clash. When this happens the detective is, of course, always correct, says so right there in the rule book, but then the detective also gets to find out how much he values being right while working a crosswalk just outside of Omaha. Chain of command, just the way it is. Fortunately, situations like that rarely arise, and that January morning was not an exception, so all unnecessary personnel left quickly and quietly without a negative word. Now with marginally more room, the two detectives got a better look at the reason for their presence.

The corpse was a dark-haired woman lying face down in the open floor space near the door, blood stains all around her in streaks, culminating in a pool of blood spread around and beneath her and staining the worn gray carpet. She had on jeans and a shirt that looked like it had been dark even before her blood soaked through it, and Ginelli's initial impression was that she had been primarily wounded by a weapon from behind. As he looked closer, it appeared to be stab wounds. Actually, it did not appear to be gunshot wounds or, because of the excess of blood, blunt force trauma, so stab wounds were likely. He could have been wrong but probably wasn't; murdered bodies were often, in stark contrast to the scene around them, not to mention whatever events led to their expiration, what they appeared to be.

Several crime scene techs and photographers were moving around the body, the former dusting for fingerprints and collecting potential forensic evidence, the latter snapping pictures of the body from different angles. Brian and Ginelli both knelt down near her, each removing their latex gloves from packs in their inner jacket pockets. They blew into them, ballooning them to stretch them out and pulled them on. They leaned over to get a look at her face: Hispanic, mid to late thirties, dark brown eyes open and unseeing. One of the city's medical examiners, a man they both only knew as Lester, was leaning over the woman, holding his also-gloved fingers to the side of her neck. No one doubted she had expired, but no one can officially be dead until confirmed by a doctor; at any and all death scenes the on-call medical examiner has to formally check and pronounce the victim. Lester nodded at Brian and Ginelli-now the actual homicide investigation could begin in earnest.

“Sirs?” The voice came from behind them and all three men swiveled around to look at another crime scene tech, this one black in his late twenties. “The other one's in here.” All three men stood up and walked toward the next room, presumably the bedroom. They all measured each step they took with care, making sure not to step on or into anything that could be used as evidence later. All detectives know what solves a case, and that it can be broken down into three categories: physical evidence, witnesses and confessions. While indoor murders are preferable to most detectives, they have a much better chance at a contained and uncontaminated crime scene, if you arrive at such a murder site and don't immediately see any screaming hysterical friends or relatives then you know your chances at finding a witness are minimum to nonexistent.

To complicate matters, crime scenes both indoors and out are horrifyingly easy to contaminate, and more often than not it is done by the very people assigned to preserve and/or examine it. Careless technicians might miss crucial hairs or fibers, or sometimes even fail to recover a spent shell casing or, at least once to Ginelli's knowledge, accidentally impress their own fingerprints to a murder weapon. As far as the paramedics and patrol officers went, well, most of the time a homicide detective is just grateful if they don't open a side window "because it's too damn hot", spill hot coffee over a blood trail or set the body on fire. The detective was the total master of his crime scene kingdom, true enough, but before he arrived to claim his throne there was no telling what could transpire.

Awareness of this made both detectives and Lester the medical examiner, who like all the best ones was just a more passive, badge- and gun-less version of a detective, extra careful as they navigated their way into the next room, which did turn out to be the bedroom with a small bathroom attached on one side and a double door closet on the other. The walls were mostly bare but there were some photographs and two posters hung up: the photos featured Hispanic men and women of various ages smiling into the camera, the posters were both of natural landscapes with short quotations at the bottom, which were too far away and too small for Ginelli to read. The bed was below them, in disarray and covered with drying blood. It no longer looked wet but it appeared damp and sticky, implying to the detectives that the actual murders themselves were fresh, not just the call to report them-this violent event had transpired no more than two hours earlier, probably less.

The second body lay on its side, between the bed and the open bathroom door, where the light was on and casting a harsh neon glare across the body similar to that of the morgue it would soon be transported to. It was also a dark haired woman, though this one was nude, and even the first look revealed to the detectives that she was a younger, prettier version of the first woman, presumably her daughter or sister, and that yes, these were murders by stabbing. The woman been stabbed multiple times across the arms and torso, even a few in her legs, which were not often struck either deliberately or accidentally in the commission of a homicide. As the medical examiner tiptoed to the body to confirm the obvious, Brian and Ginelli remained still, eyes making slow sweeps of the room, not searching for anything in particular (yet) but getting the sense of the place.

Brian lightly elbowed Ginelli, and gestured to the corner of the room near the closet, one of whose doors was slightly ajar, darkness and the outline of hanging clothing within. The younger patrol officer, one of the first two on the scene, was standing there with his back slightly turned, holding his service pistol and fiddling with the slide. Ginelli winced inside, knowing Brian was about to chew the young cop's ass. The young cop, not noticing the scrutiny he was under made an even greater misstep by, once he finished whatever he had been doing, twirling his gun around his index finger like a Wild West gunslinger before slipping it back into his holster. Brian waited till the gun was secure, not wanting to cause an accidental shooting, and then with liquid almost-spooky speed crossed the room and smacked the cop in the side of the head. The cop squealed and jumped and Brian began roaring. Removing one's gun for any reason was always a risk, and doing so

unnecessarily while on the street at all, let alone at a crime scene, went against common sense as well as regulations. A few heads looked into the room to see what the commotion was and Ginelli waved them away impatiently, too many damned people in too small a space. Ginelli smiled a little as he turned back to the room, letting Brian vent on the young man, get whatever was bothering him out of the way. At least he wasn't the one getting schooled for once. He looked again at the body of the young woman, trying to take in the scene. As he looked, something began to tug at Ginelli's mind, something he could almost grasp. The pros and cons of an indoor murder scene, something he had heard earlier...

"Hey boss?" asked the elder of the two patrolmen from the bedroom doorway, not specifying who he meant. Brian didn't even pause in his continuing tirade on the young patrolman, and Ginelli took his cue and approached the cop, who had graying hair and eyebrows, somewhere around forty and still on the beat. Maybe he prefers it, Ginelli thought. "What's up?" is what he said aloud.

"Super's here," the cop said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Figured you'd want to talk to him."

"Yep," Ginelli replied, nodding. "Come on with me and talk to the others in the hall, see if anyone saw anything." As he said this he felt that tug again and, finding still out of his reach, shook it off. The building's superintendent stood just inside the apartment, dressed in a dark green robe and matching slippers, staring at the body of his tenant. Or maybe she wasn't; that was the first thing Ginelli needed to find out. He reached the man, white, balding and around 60 with a broad, horse-like face and flashed his badge.

“Detective Ginelli.”

“Steve Polaski,” said the super in a smoke-broken voice. His hand came halfway up to shake but, seeing that Ginelli was not going to act in kind, he let it drop to his side again. “Fuckin’ unbelievable this, ‘scuse me.”

“So you knew the family?”

“Course I did,” he said, sounding indignant. “This is my building, I know everybody, whaddaya think?” People were irritable to cops all the time, didn’t mean anything, and often times the righteous and innocent parties were the ones who treated the cops with the most disrespect. Not every time though. Ginelli had no reason to believe Steve Polaski was the slayer of these women, and if he had to make a preliminary guess Steve would’ve been among the first ruled out. But he had no reason not to believe Steve wasn’t the guilty party, and a preliminary guess was exactly that, and such things were never even vocalized or dwelled upon, so Ginelli watched him. Watched his eyes, his hands, his body language, looking for some sign, some tell. He flipped open his notebook and readied his pen for information.

“Who were they?” he asked, and the super glared at him.

“You don’t know? The big, bad cop and you don’t even-”

“No one told me, Mr. Polaski, and I arrived here all of two minutes ago. No, I don’t know them. I’m hoping, since you do, you could tell me.”

“The Herreras, that was their name. Good family. Well, the girls were anyway. Carolina’s boyfriend, he was a fuckin’ hoodlum, ‘scuse me.” Hey there, the vic’s name and a likely suspect, don’t tell me we’re actually getting somewhere. He wrote the name down.

“Carolina Herrera, is that her?” With his pen Ginelli indicated the elder woman on the floor in front of them. Polaski shook his head.

“No that’s her older sister, I think her name is Rosa but I’m not sure, doesn’t live here.”

“Spent last night here, then?” Ginelli was thinking of the pullout bed. He felt whatever had been bothering him hovering around the surface of his mind and tried to ignore it, hoping that way it would either go away or reveal itself. The sound of the wind outside came up a notch, louder and more shrill. Ginelli realized the apartment was freezing, hadn’t noticed it till then because all his winter gear was still on.

“Couldn’t tell ya,” Polaski said and extracted a pack of Marlborough lights from his pocket and a lighter, started opening the pack.

“Oh, uh, no smoking here sir.”

“The hell you talkin’ ‘bout? ‘Scuse me. But this is my building and smokin-”

“This is my crime scene, and smoking is not allowed.” Ginelli’s voice changed only by a degree or two, but Polaski with a sigh replaced the pack, cigarette unlit. The brief exchange did however manage to finally banish that nagging feeling of unease from his consciousness; Ginelli decided whatever it was it obviously hadn’t been too important. Unbidden Skip McNulty’s awestruck face reappeared in Ginelli’s mind, staring up at the sky. He’d wanted to be a writer, headed to some grad school in New York that fall, maybe Cornell, Ginelli couldn’t remember. He shook it off, trying to concentrate and not knowing why the memory of that night kept rising up in his memory like air bubbles breaking on the surface of the Allegheny. He realized the super was still talking, and tuned back in.

“...been here about two years, moved in on March 18.”

Birth date of great men, Ginelli thought but did not say. He said “How do you remember that?”

“Day after St. Patrick’s Day, c’mon.” Polaski—quite the Irish name—looked scornful. Ginelli resisted the urge to sigh.

“So, you said Carolina’s boyfriend wasn’t with her when she moved in?”

“Nah they moved in alone, that motherfucker came on with them a year ago, ‘scuse me.” Ginelli wanted to tell him that profanity did not offend his delicate sensibilities. He did not, did not want to interrupt Polaski’s train of thought, just quick question/answer, question/answer. Ginelli could hear Brian finish his tirade in the next room, the young officer stammering apologies.

“Boyfriend’s name?”

“Carlos, never knew what his last name was.”

“Was?”

“What?”

“You said was, is he gone, dead, something like that?”

“Ah shit, ‘scuse me, nah I just figure he ain’t gonna be around anymore now that he’s killed ‘em.”

“You’re that sure he did?” Ginelli asked. Polaski looked shocked.

“Course I am, he beat them all the time, always drunk or on somethin’ else, I think maybe he’s slingin’.” Slingin’, Christ almighty Ginelli thought. He probably watches Oz, thinks it puts him in the know.

“When you see him last?”

“I suppose yesterday, maybe the day before.”

“Wouldn’t happen to know where he lives?”

“When he ain’t here? Prob’ly box in an alley somewhere.”

“We’ll check him out. I’m sure he’s around somewhere.”

“What about the kid?” Polaski asked suddenly, like it just occurred to him.

Ginelli blinked.

“Kid, Mr. Polaski?” He felt a huge boulder inside his head begin to move, whatever had been bothering him before right there in front of him. He knew something, didn’t know what it was but it was rapidly gaining vital importance.

“Yeah, Carolina’s daughter, Pez or Paz or somethin’. Where’s she?” Indoor murders are preferable, except for the fact that they rarely have witnesses.

“I, uh, I’m not sure exactly.” The photos, the posters on the bedroom wall, the fold-out bed all set up even though the visiting sister apparently hadn’t slept in it.

“You ain’t seen her?” The noise in the apartment, outside the general noise of the city, the screaming of the wind.

“She’s not one of the victims.” How had Brian noticed the young cop so quickly, toying with his gun, as surreptitious as he’d been, his back turned so that they’d barely been able to see it at all?

“Well shit, ‘scuse me, someone better find where she ran off to.” The bedroom. The bedroom, with the bathroom...and the closet. The closet.

“Fuck me,” Ginelli whispered.

“Scuse you,” said Polaski, surprised. Ginelli ignored him and snapped his notebook shut. His mind distracted for reasons still unknown by his memories, Brian distracted already, short and irritable

“The girl,” he said. Polaski looked confused but Ginelli wasn’t really talking to him. “The fucking little girl’s in the-”

Ginelli was cut off in mid-sentence by a loud crash and shouting. Then a gunshot, thunderous in the enclosed space. The notebook fell from his hands. He spun around and saw the older patrolman and the crime scene techs all staring at the bedroom door, motionless. He sprinted the three steps to and into the bedroom, his gun out of the holster and in his hand before he knew had gone for it. He entered the bedroom with his gun raised in the traditional two-handed shooter’s posture, took in the chaos before him.

Brian was just inside the door, his back to Ginelli, his own weapon out and aiming forward in a fixed version of the stance Ginelli was in. Carolina Rosa lay on the floor, dead as she’d been but now sprawled in a different position. Next to her Lester the medical examiner flopped on the floor like a fish on the dock, the hilt of what looked to be a very large knife protruding from his chest, his blood pouring from the wound and mixing with dead woman’s. On the other side of the bed both closet doors were now standing open and a little girl, a miniature version of Carolina, covered in blood but but quite alive, sat sobbing with her back against the wall. Standing over her was a naked and muscular Hispanic man, his hair going in all directions, his eyes wild. One arm was wrapped around the neck of the younger patrolman, who was struggling without success, using him as a human shield. The

man-Carlos, Ginelli thought-had the idiot kid's gun in his other hand, pressing it to the kid's temple.

"Drop it!" Brian was yelling, and Ginelli joined in.

"Drop it Carlos! There's nowhere to go, put the gun down!" Cops always yelled the same things in these situations, it was a cliché that happened to be true, and what else was there to say anyway? At least they didn't have to yell "Freeze!"

Carlos yelled something in Spanish, a language Ginelli couldn't speak and had always meant to learn and gave the kid a whack to the side of the head with his gun. No luck for that boy, Ginelli thought.

"Shoot him!" Someone, probably Polaski, yelled from behind. "Fuckin' shoot him!"

"Scuse me," Ginelli muttered under his breath, which Brian either didn't hear or didn't respond to, just kept yelling at Carlos to drop his gun. They were in a standoff: it likely would not last long, these things rarely clocked more than a minute, but Ginelli already felt like he'd been standing in his spot long enough to grow moss. How in fuck had no one noticed a naked, strung-out murderer holed up in the closet this whole time, keeping a little girl captive all the while no less? Ginelli saw Skip McNulty's face again and didn't bother pushing it away, it would've broken his concentration such as it was. Skip was dead, died at age twenty-six in a car accident before getting a single thing published. He hadn't seen Ben or any of his other college friends since the funeral, near Skip's home in Delaware. It had been almost a decade ago, but Ginelli couldn't get him off his mind. Brian had stopped shouting for the moment, as had Carlos. Lester flopped around mindlessly, though his movements

were slowing down. The wind roared outside. The little girl sobbed. Brian's phone rang.

Ginelli flinched, as did Brian. And Carlos. Ginelli, so undone by this final crazy cap to the situation, looked at Brian, his gun slipping a little. Brian saw him look from the corner of his eye, looked down at his pocket for a fraction of a second. Carlos chose that opportunity to roar, no words, just a monstrous war cry, and took his gun from the kid's head and aimed it at them. Brian and Ginelli snapped back to attention and pulled their respective triggers. All three guns went off with a sound like standing inside thunder and Ginelli felt a great force smash into him. I'm hit he thought with a strange calm, I'm dead.

He was hit, but not by a bullet. Instead of flying backwards he pitched forwards headfirst into the room, hit the bed and bounced off to the side, landing beside Lester, who was now as dead as Carolina. There was another gunshot and more shouting, the vague noise of physical conflict. Just as Ginelli was beginning to get up Carlos's face came down hard and fast, straight at him. Ginelli threw himself backwards and hit the bedroom wall hard, his head connecting with the unyielding drywall. He saw stars and grayed out.

When he came to he was sitting with his back to the wall, legs splayed in front of him, a parallel of the little girl on the other side of the room. Carlos was face down on the bed, Brian and the older gray-haired cop holding him down while he bucked and thrashed like a captured mustang. The younger cop was standing right where Carlos had left him, dazed. Suddenly more police were in the room, and a moment later a handcuffed Carlos was dragged out, spitting and screaming the whole way.

Brian was standing over him then, holding out his hand. He was shaking but helped Ginelli up without trouble.

“Guy’s being taken away,” he said. “It’s over.”

“Carlos.”

“Eh?”

“Carlos is his name. Or at least I think that’s him, super said the boyfriend’s name was Carlos.”

“Probably him then.”

“Yeah.” They both looked down at Carolina and Lester’s bodies, then on the other side of the bed at the little girl, Paz?, who was being comforted by a technician, who picked her up and left the room.

“They were both in there the whole time?” Brian asked.

“Looks that way.”

“Fuck.”

“Did you hit him?” Brian didn’t answer, just pointed the at the wall. There were two bullet holes there, next to the closet. They’d both missed, but Ginelli didn’t think it was by a lot. “Where’d his go?”

“Anybody hit out there?” Brian called into the living room.

“All good,” said a voice neither of them knew, “bullet hit the floor.”

“Thank Christ,” Ginelli said.

“Myra wants me to retire,” Brian blurted out in an uncharacteristically shaky voice. That’s what we were arguing about before. That’s why I wasn’t on point. I’m sorry.”

“Jesus...you going to?”

“Not a chance,” Brian said, suddenly grinning. “That’s why we were arguing.” He began to laugh, and a moment later so did Ginelli. Several of the crime scene technicians openly stared at them, then looked at each other and shook their heads in wonder.

Several hours later Ginelli sat his desk, flipping through his address book. A stack of papers two inches thick was in his outbox: several crime scene reports, a preliminary second-degree murder charge filed against Carlos Estrella and a procedural form explaining why he had fired his weapon, how, and where the bullet went and its ramifications. Filled out in triplicate. The snow had not let up in the slightest, and the wind if anything was louder than before. Brian had left the station a few minutes before with Myra, who had come in as soon as she’d heard the news in near-hysterics. She’d been less so when they left, after Ginelli assumed Brian had informed her he was definitely not leaving the department. Ginelli hadn’t told Lisa yet, didn’t see the point in worrying her until he was home. He found the number he’d been looking for, with a 207 area code, Maine. He was curious to see what Lake Kezar was like in the winter, curious to see what Ben might remember about constellations. Ginelli dialed the number, and waited.

Cadillac Dreams

Staring out of his window as the world rushed by, Arthur Robinson closed the glass and looked at me. “I’m dying,” he said, “but no one knows why.” I kept my face blank, placid, the way I’m supposed to, just nodded and waited for him to continue. Kept my eyes on the road, that helped too. I read somewhere that the best place to confront someone was in a car, where you don’t need to make eye contact. I think it was used as an example of a good for a parent to talk to their teenager. Neither Arthur nor I was a teenager and we weren’t related either, but this seemed to work for us anyway. We were on interstate 95, outside of Baltimore. It was just past nine at night and Arthur Robinson was dying.

I would look steady, supportive, resolute; the look of a lawyer. I make my clients feel good, or at the very least calm. What always stuns me is it actually works most of the time, the client facing the loss of their estate or a jail time or whatever and my not freaking out comforts them. I think maybe half the purpose of my profession has nothing to do with law but just easing people’s minds. Of course, Robinson wasn’t my client but those seven words changed me into the lawyer anyway, pure reflex.

“The docs can’t get it figured,” he said. “They just know I haven’t got much time left,”

“Well they have at least some idea, don’t they? I mean is it the cancer, I thought that was in remission? Or your heart...”

“My blood’s just thinning out,” Robinson said with a shrug. “Cells keep dying, one of the kids said it reminded him of AIDS.” He called all his doctors, the youngest of which had to be at least thirty-five, kids. Yet he never called me anything other than my name, even though I was barely thirty myself and looked young enough to still get carded when I ordered a beer. He himself was not yet sixty, didn’t look like he was dying. His beard was mostly gray and thick, his hair was the same shade and still mostly intact; he did look much older than he was, worn out and frail, but he’d looked like that since I’d met him nine years earlier.

“Okay so did you get tested-”

“Twice in the past month and once back in ninety-nine.” He smiled a little. “Where the hell would I get it anyway?” I didn’t reply, using another trick of lawyers and agents and similar folk. Whether you’re on the clock or not, don’t say a damn thing unless it’s one hundred percent necessary. Let the silence build, grow, and someone will fill it. One of my professors in law school told me you can’t tell the difference between the best lawyers and the worst till they open their mouths.

“Does Nancy know?” Nancy was Robinson’s wife, a statuesque woman a few years younger than him, always very nice to me but still struck me as frigid.

“Yeah, and I think it upsets her but I can’t tell. Never knew her too well. Married thirty years, mother of my child.” I couldn’t think of what to say to that. I glanced at Robinson’s wrinkled clothes and thought of how long he’d been in the empty hospital cafeteria where I’d found him minutes ago.

“I’ve been here since noon,” he said earlier, back in the cafeteria seconds after I’d wondered that very thing. I tried to hide my surprise and probably did, I’m good at what I do, but the way he could always read my mind never failed to disconcert me. I kept my composure, strengthened it by asking questions. That’s what lawyers do, we learn everything there is to know about the situation as fast as we can and we get a handle on it. Plus asking questions makes it look like you’re thinking, analyzing. Back in the car I thought about that, how long he’d been there.

“Why had you been there so long?” I asked. “Were you getting tested too?” Robinson looked confused, looked like I felt, and then his eyes showed comprehension. Makes one of us, I thought.

“Oh no, I was just there for Carrie, I’ve known I’m dying for a while now.” Of course that raised the question why were we here? And where were we now heading? He went on. “About six weeks ago I woke up from a nap around eight at night and I got confused. You know when you take a nap during the day you sometimes wake up and don’t know what day it is anymore, like you might’ve slept for two hours or you might’ve slept for ten?”

“Sure,” I said, even though I didn’t really.

“That’s been happening to me for most of my life, off and on. I think it started when I started working at the factory, hours changed every two weeks, nights then days and back.” The factory was where he still worked, although now it was his and bore his name, I don’t know what it was called when he started there on the assembly line. “Anyway, it’s been happening more than usual this year.” He stopped, and for the first time since I’d met up with him that night he looked

uncomfortable. His voice, usually a deep, slow rumble was higher with a slight quaver now. “There’ve been dreams too. One dream actually. I woke up from one of them, didn’t know what day it was or where I was at first. Hell for a few seconds I didn’t even know who I was. I thought it was tomorrow, you know, I mean I thought yesterday it was today, and when I realized it wasn’t I just sat around waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Where was this going?

“Tomorrow. Today. I thought the day was over but it wasn’t, and now I had nothing to do. Then I started feeling numb, short of breath. I called Terry and told him to take me to a doctor. I grayed out in the car and woke up in the emergency room. They ran tests on me for a few days, told me I was dying and didn’t have more than a year and probably more like six months left but didn’t know why. So I went home and started waiting again.” I was speechless. I had my lawyer face still on though, and my mind worked almost in spite of itself.

“Even though you-”

“Yeah,” Robinson said before I could finish. “Even though I beat the cancer last time.” Lung cancer, which he’d had and beaten a few years before. I remember at the time thinking Robinson had gotten better with almost miraculous speed, I wondered if he was invincible.

“Well anyway you should be resting, at home or some care facility. You look tired.”

“I am. Haven’t slept since early yesterday afternoon. I spent most of the time watching the city through the window.” I looked at the dashboard clock and saw it was eight thirty-six p.m. He hadn’t slept in more than thirty hours.

“You should get to sleep, Arthur. I don’t need to tell you how unhealthy lack of sleep is.”

“I’m dying, David, can’t get much healthier than that.” He had a point but of course I was going to argue, it’s my profession’s blessing and curse.

“Doesn’t mean you should speed up the process. Plus if they don’t know what’s wrong with you yet maybe they will, maybe it’s something you can beat, something they can cure, you never know.” He waved his hand in dismissal of the idea, shaking his head. “Also,” I made another attempt, “you look well enough now, and even though you shouldn’t have if you can pace around your room all day without sleeping you can’t be that sick.”

“Oh I feel all right now, but I know they’re right. I’m almost done. I feel it, like I’m...dissolving. Like sugar into coffee.”

“You’re just being pessimistic.” Robinson’s slight smile almost wasn’t there.

“Nah. Only an optimist can truly be sad and vice-versa, not getting what you expect leaves you more vulnerable. I’ve looked at the fuckin’ bright side all my life and I dare you to find a sadder bastard than me.” That last part was certainly true, or so my limited knowledge of Robinson the person suggested, but the rest didn’t make any sense, at least to me. I also didn’t see how it affected my point. “Sorry, got off topic,” he said. “Trust me, I know.” Silence fell then, and I could actually feel it settle down on us. Robinson turned back to the window and I studied him in glances.

He was wearing dark pants, loafers and an untucked white Oxford shirt. A blazer the color of his pants had been tossed in the back seat and a dark tie, still knotted, was on top of it. I thought back to the hospital cafeteria where I’d met him

half an hour earlier, how empty it was. When is a hospital cafeteria completely empty? I hadn't noticed it when I'd first come in, hadn't realized it as I crossed the room past all the Formica tables and plastic chairs to Robinson at the back, in front of the huge windows that looked out over Maryland. He was so obsessed with watching the scenery that night, so deep inside his own head.

The emptiness of the place could've been a coincidence, this hospital was never too busy, but I thought maybe the staff was letting Robinson have it to himself for a bit. A man as rich as he was probably got that sort of thing a lot. Whatever the reason it was eerie, all this space and no living thing in it even though you would expect there to be. I didn't know why he was there in the first place, or why he'd asked me to come, but I didn't broach the subject. He'd tell me eventually.

"Carrie's here," he said without turning, and the abrupt intrusion into my thoughts made me jump a little. I was glad his back was to me and he didn't notice my lawyer mask slip.

"Is she? Well where is she, visiting someone or-"

"You don't know about her do you?" I wondered what the hell that meant. I knew who Carrie was: his daughter, a former professional dancer a few years older than me. I'd met her at his house, and he talked about her every now and then.

"I don't know what you mean," I said. He kept looking out the window, watching the traffic maybe.

"She's here, in the basement. The nut ward. She's a schizo. Tried to kill herself for the third time last week. She was having a good day so I stayed longer than usual." He paused. "She gets it from me."

“Suicidal tendencies?” I asked before I could stop myself, not meaning it to be the very bad joke in very poor taste it sounded like. I saw Robinson’s shoulders tense a little and quietly hated myself.

“Being crazy.”

“What do you mean?” I’d heard stories about Arthur Robinson, but every rich man in a small town who values privacy becomes Howard Hughes to the local townspeople. Or so I’d told myself. I’d certainly never seen anything to suggest madness, I thought he was a little strange and maybe a little rough but never thought much of it. Certainly not melancholy or despair. The daughter though I’d had no inkling about, she seemed totally normal when I’d met her, and there’d never been a hint of it from Robinson.

“I’ve a little off since I was little. I did well in school, I can run a business, but maybe one has nothing to do with the other. I got put away once, and three times since I’ve checked myself into a place for people like me. Obviously I kept this tight and usually I can control myself, whenever I couldn’t I went away so no one would know. Only the doctors, Nancy and Carrie ever knew. I’ve never been a doctor sort of guy. To be honest I don’t even remember what’s wrong with me. I just call it crazy. I remember I’m manic depressive but there’s other stuff too.” He shrugged. “Makes no difference to me, name it or not it’s still there. And I passed it on to my daughter.

“But,” he went on, “maybe I passed on the suicide part too. I never tried but I thought about it.” The awful smile that was close to despair had returned. “They say

your children go beyond you and I guess she has.” What could I say to? I had no idea about any of it, as had been his wishes, and I’d been blindsided.

“I’m sorry Mr. Robinson.” He turned back to me, eyebrows raised in mild amusement.

“I’m still Arthur, no matter how batshit my daughter has gone or how fucked up I am.”

“Sorry. Arthur, I’m...uh, sorry.” My lawyer facade had totally evaporated, I sounded like an idiot, one of Grisham’s bumbling but well-intentioned rookies.

“Don’t apologize and as for Carrie, what can I say. Her and I have a history. Our ‘episodes’ have been coinciding since she was fifteen. Whenever one of us starts losing it the other does within two or three weeks. Maybe when I’m gone it’ll be easier on her, whatever link we have broken.” Either that or she dies too, I thought but did not say, even though I believed his theory was just coincidence if it was true at all. I also didn’t pick up on Robinson’s foreshadowing the revelation he would later make to me, I just thought he meant when he was gone in a general sense. What I said was what I’d been wondering about since Arthur’s driver Terry had called me two hours earlier and asked me on his behalf if I might come to the hospital, my anxious curiosity had gotten the better of me.

“Why am I here, Arthur? I don’t think I’m the person you want here when-”

“You are, David. I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure, anything, you know that.”

“I know. We’ll get to it later, right now we should be going.” I couldn’t have agreed more, I’d been in this creepy place long enough. I never liked hospitals in the

first place, though I can't imagine many people do. "You mind giving me a ride?" he asked. "I sent Terry home."

"Not a problem." Arthur gathered his things, put on his sport jacket, stuck the tie in the inner pocket. We left the cafeteria, walked down the hall to the elevators and I pushed the button with the arrow that pointed down. It glowed and we waited. Arthur left my side and approached the blank wall behind us opposite the elevators, which was painted the off-white shade of every hospital wall everywhere. He stood under the vent just above eye-level and I could see his hair blowing around. I took a few steps toward him, got a view of his face and saw his eyes were closed and he looked somewhat relieved.

"You all right Arthur?" He didn't open his eyes when he answered.

"Yeah, just wanted to cool off." The elevator gave out its little ring to signal its arrival and we went inside. As the doors slid shut Arthur pressed the button marked "B" instead of the first floor.

"Where are we going?" I asked, but I already knew and my stomach sank.

"I want to see Carrie again before we go,"

"Okay." My tone was accommodating and respectful; I didn't mind if he treated me a little like an employee, I owed him pretty big. As an undergrad I tended bar three nights a week for extra cash, and Robinson had been a regular. We got to talking the way bartenders and patrons often do late at night in deserted bars and he took a liking to me, so much so that he hired me as an intern in his factory's business office. After a few years of that he encouraged me to enter an essay for a scholarship contest which he was one of the judges, which I won and used to pay for law school.

We would stay in touch after I quit the bar every now and then, go to dinner maybe once or twice a year, exchange Christmas cards. In the middle of my third year of law school he called a few favors with friends to get me my job at the firm I still work for, a job I could never have gotten on my own in a million years. One night that summer, a few days after I found out I'd passed the Bar exam he took me out to celebrate, I asked him why he had helped me the ways he had. I was a few drinks in by this point, it was the only way I could ask the question I'd been dying to for years. Arthur, a few drinks in himself, replied without hesitation.

“Mostly, you're just lucky. Lucky you got a job in that bar, lucky I like cocky smart-ass kids, lucky you met me when I wanted to do something for somebody else for once, and lucky I never had a son.”

The last part of that statement was on my mind as we rode the elevator down to the basement in silence and through the hallway identical to the one we'd just been in, how one of the reasons he'd helped me was because he'd never had a son of his own. I wondered if the child he did have had any part in it, and I wondered when the first time she'd tried to kill herself had been, if it was anywhere around the time I'd met him. I thought of how earlier Robinson had told me he never really knew his wife; I realized I never really knew him, this man who'd gotten me into law school and into my professional career, a sort of mentor and surrogate father to me. I never looked beneath his surface, never tried to see into his core, and it made me feel ashamed. The feeling would only intensify as the night wore on.

“Here we are,” he said and opened a door on our left. The room was standard hospital bed with thin white sheets and the gray blanket that looked like it'd been

washed three hundred thousand times, small table next to the bed, television set up on the wall. I noticed first that the typical chair by the bed was missing, and that room was empty. I was about to say it when Robinson, unbothered, walked in past me. He headed to the far corner where a door stood closed. He opened it and more light spilled out, a bathroom. Inside in front of the sink, Carrie Robinson sat in the chair whose absence I'd noticed, staring at her reflection in the mirror.

“Hey dancer,” Robinson said. Carrie turned around and smiled at him and I. She was right around my age, and pretty with long black hair and deep blue eyes. Her skin was pale but not in a sickly way, the kind of Kabuki pale that was almost luminescent. I remembered why I'd briefly had a crush on her when we first met. I couldn't stop myself from looking at her wrists, where thick bandages were taped. I found out later she'd used shards of glass from a tabletop in her apartment she broke with a hammer. God, I thought, had she been that bad?

“Hi daddy,” she said, and focused on me. “Mr. Bryson, isn't it?”

“Call me David,” I replied, returning her smile. “It's good to see you again Carrie.”

“How you feeling,” Robinson asked.

“Better, almost normal. I think I can go home soon.” She turned back to the mirror and looked into her eyes. “You ever look at your reflection and think maybe it's someone else, not just your reflection but an another person?” She looked at us in the mirror and our expressions must have betrayed us, because she rolled her eyes in amused annoyance.

“I don’t mean literally, I’m not that crazy.” I dropped my eyes down to the floor, embarrassed, but Robinson laughed.

“We know honey, we know. And no, I never thought about that, that’s interesting.”

“I think so too,” she said. “I look at myself and my reflection, the girl in the mirror. Sometimes I dance and watch her dancing with me and she looks beautiful. Sometimes she looks sad and sometimes happy and all the other emotions but she’s always with me and always beautiful.” Robinson looked away from her to his own reflection, I did the same. We all stared at ourselves for a few seconds and didn’t say anything. Then Robinson leaned down and kissed Carrie on the cheek.

“We’re gonna go, are you all right?” She kissed him back and nodded.

“I’m all right, go ahead.”

“Okay, but I’ll be back tomorrow. Call if you need me before that.”

“I know, see you tomorrow.”

“Love you, dancer.”

“I love you too daddy.” She turned around to look at me. “Have a good night Mr. Bryson.” I told her to do the same and we left. Neither of us said anything as we left the hospital and I led Robinson to my silver Volvo sedan, a recent purchase of mine and something I was proud of. It was late summer, the early days of September, and the night was not hot and not cold and just about perfect the way September nights are. We got in and left the hospital parking lot, and when we got to the main rode Robinson told me to turn left.

“I’m not taking you home?”

“Not yet. The reason I called you out was I wanted you to see Carrie as she is now, but one more thing as well. I’ll direct you.” I agreed without a word, I could indulge Robinson a little more. I had work in the morning but it was nothing important, and it was still early, only a little past nine. He dropped the bombshell of his impending death a few minutes later.

So there we were in the car. We drove without speaking. I was waiting for him to tell me what was on his mind and he was probably gathering his thoughts. I tried to find something good on the radio, found a classic rock station and turned it up. The song on was one of the many classic rock songs where I knew all the words but didn’t know the title or the band. Sounded like Bob Dylan but I knew it wasn’t, all I could remember was I had known who made the song at one point and it definitely wasn’t Bob Dylan even though everyone always thought it was, but the actual name still-

“You remember the dream I told you about, the one I keep having?”

Robinson broke into my thoughts and the effect was jarring.

“Uh, yeah, you said the last time you had it was the night you went to the hospital right?”

“Yeah but that wasn’t the last time. I’ve had it almost every night since then. I don’t know what it means but every dream means something right?”

“If you ascribe to that theory, yeah. Is it Freud or Jung?”

“Fucked if I know. My mom wasn’t in it so not Freud I guess. Anyway I don’t know what all of it means but I have an idea about some. I wanna tell you about it.” I looked away from the road at him; he was still staring out his window. “I

wanna tell you about it because it'll help you understand what I want you to do, I think it will. Get off here." He pointed to the approaching exit.

"Another highway?"

"Yeah, but it ain't far." I muttered something in the affirmative and merged onto state route 270, the traffic a little crowded but nothing bad. I was glad for that, it meant I could listen to Robinson with minimal distraction.

"So," he began. "When it starts I'm on a rooftop, some building along the Chesapeake. I was born there you know, in my father's house on the shore cause my mom wanted a natural birth."

"I didn't know that,"

"Yeah. So I'm up on the roof and I'm looking around and I can see the Bay but the shore, Maryland, isn't there. Just faded away. Maryland and Virginia actually, I couldn't see it but I knew it was gone too. Both of them just, uh, mist. The building I'm on top of is like an iceberg in the middle of the ocean."

"What happens then?"

"Nothing, just look around. Doesn't bother me, I know that. You know how in dreams even the craziest things seem normal? Maryland and Virginia being gone made sense, the way it makes sense that 'up' is over your head and 'down' is under your feet. Part of me thinks it's crazy but most of me accepts it.

"Then a hole opens up in the floor, or a hole in the ceiling of the next floor down, whatever it is it opens and I fall in and then I'm on the ground, walking toward noise and music and lights. It's that time gap you always get in dreams, and it don't bother me either. I get closer and closer and then, same place every time, I stop and

say 'I've been here before.' And I have, David, I'm at one of those traveling carnivals. You know, the kind that comes to town during the summer, stays a few days and moves on. With the ferris wheel and the merry-go-round and the crappy haunted houses and the swinging pirate ship? I'm there and it's one I've been to before. Here's where it gets weird."

"I can't wait," I said and wasn't lying; not only was this (hopefully) going to answer all my questions about the strange events of that evening but I really was interested.

"I realize, always at the same moment, that I'm two people at once. No not two people but two versions of me; me when I was twenty and me when I was around thirty-four or thirty-five. I'm both, and like I said before in the dream it made perfect sense. At both those ages I'd gone to a carnival just like that one in the summer, and I remember them both so well because they're two of my clearest memories." I was, as you might expect, a bit confused.

"Hold on," I said. "So you're you at twenty and you at thirty-five?"

Robinson nodded. "And you're at the carnival you went to when you were both these ages?" He nodded again. "How do you know it was the same one, I mean there's a lot of these things and they change ownership and-

"That's the thing," Robinson cut me off. "The carnival is like me, it's the one I was at when I was twenty and the one I was at when I was thirty-five, it's both. It was like a night I went to the carnival in the early sixties was, I don't know, overlapping with the time I took Carrie to the carnival when she was four or five in

the late seventies. Oh yeah, forgot to mention that, Carrie's with me, and she's a little girl again. You with me? It's hard to explain this."

"Yeah I think I got it now. So the second night being replayed you took Carrie to the carnival, what happened on the first night to make it memorable?"

"Ah," he said and trailed off like a sigh. I looked at him and his face was a little more grave. "That night I was going to meet a girl I was in love with."

"Nancy?" Robinson's chuckle was dark and bitter enough to qualify as a bark.

"God no, I didn't meet her for a few more years. Besides she'd never be caught dead at anything so low class, beer in paper cups and funnel cake."

"Hey, I like funnel cake."

"Yeah me too." I could hear a smile in his voice and I was relieved.

"Go on," I said.

"Anyway I was going to meet this girl I'd been with almost a year by then, Anna. We met at a dance and been obsessed with each other from then on. It was a little scary actually, we were so young and had such intense feelings. Not lust, cause we were used to that, or not only lust, it was more. We both knew it in days. I don't know what love is, but we had it, it was just so certain. And like all these stories, it was ending badly.

"That night was supposed to be our last. Her dad was a pilot with the Navy and he'd been transferred out of Fort Meade to somewhere out west, I think maybe Oregon. Real sudden, no notice, he got the transfer order on a Monday and it said he had to be at his new post by that Sunday. They were flying out on Saturday night.

Anna told me all this over the phone Monday night, but cause she had to pack and help her family and I was working at the fucking factory I didn't get to see her till Wednesday night. I picked her up and we drove around, trying to have fun and pretend she wasn't leaving. I drove a Cadillac then, black El Dorado convertible that was prewar and looked it, but I loved that thing. I loved her too, David, I really did. I knew it then and I still do. She knew it too and felt the same way. Or I think she did, I could be wrong I guess.

“When I dropped her off I said I had to see her again before she left, and she said she wanted to but it wouldn't be easy, she had a lot to do and her dad hated me anyway so it'd be tough. Of course the dad hated me, every dad in these stories hates the kid right?”

“No dads ever hated me,”

“Sure they did, every dad hates the young suitor, you were just lucky enough that they hid it. Hell even I hated you for a second every time you'd look at Carrie back in the day.” Had he always known I'd had a thing for Carrie?

“Hey, Arthur, listen-”

“Oh I don't care, just making a point. Nothing happened and you weren't really into her anyway, right?” I shook my head; it was the truth, I'd just been a little intrigued. “Exactly. Don't worry about it.

“Anyway, this dad hated me, always did. I hated him too but I kept that to myself, was nothing but polite to him, never even told Anna, but I hated him all the same. He'd been a pilot in the war, flew in the South Pacific. His nickname then was The Comet, never knew why but he had it tattooed on his arm, showed me at least ten

times, I think to scare me. Christ, his wife, Anna's mom, called him The Comet, mid-forties and still likes a nickname outta Top Gun, I swear it'd be funny if it hadn't been happening to me. But The Comet hated me and wouldn't let Anna out to see me the night before they left, hardly ever let her out to see me in the first place. She had to sneak out most of the time and she'd have to again. I said the carnival, it was in town all week, and since I had a double shift at the factory on Thursday we set a date for Friday night, the night before she was supposed to leave." I didn't like where this going, it seemed like such a standard young love story and I predicted the ending.

"But you didn't see her on Friday." It wasn't a question. Robinson shook his head.

"Nope. Her dad bumped the flight up fifteen hours and they left right around the time I was waiting for her by the carousel. Shit their plane probably flew right over me. I found out she called my house after I left, hadn't left a message with my mom but I knew why she'd called by then. These were the days before cell phones, you guys have it easy." I agreed and was glad I had switched my own off as I entered the hospital earlier; my job ensured the damn thing was almost never silent.

"What happened then?"

"I didn't have her new address so I couldn't write. I certainly couldn't call her. Cross-country calls were a huge deal back then, and I don't think I would've called even if I'd known the number."

"Why didn't she give you her address?"

"She didn't know it. Think about fast it all happened David, we didn't have time to do anything. She was going to give it to me that night; I sometimes think

maybe she was going to tell it to my mom and her dad made her hang up, one last little fuck you to me. I tell you, that man hated me and I never knew why. So many people have felt strongly about me, positive and negative, and with most I never understood it.” He looked out the window, and told me to get off at the next exit. I’d almost forgotten we had a destination and I changed lanes too fast, cutting off the SUV behind us and got a horn blast with a side of high beams for good measure.

“You never tried to locate her later, if she meant that much to you? With your kind of money it wouldn’t be too hard-”

“I never tried, at first cause I wanted to forget it, get over her, move on. Then I was married and then I had a daughter and got promoted and got promoted again and had a factory to run and the thought went away. She was never far from my mind, but I think sometime I decided I wanted her to stay how she was, didn’t want to be disappointed.

“Back to the dream,” Robinson said. “So I’m in the carnival now, walking around with Carrie, holding her hand, but I’m sure I’ll see Anna too. We walk, look at the other people walking past us, a juggling clown makes Carrie laugh, I buy her a doll just like I really did, and we get to the merry-go-round. I remember I waited for Anna there, it was also the last ride I took Carrie on the night she was with me. On that night after the carousel Carrie and I saw some ballerinas, I think it was a local dance school’s exhibition, and right there that night Carrie decided she wanted to be one. She was a professional dancer, did you know that?”

“Yeah you told me,”

“Man, she got a scholarship to go to dancing school, toured the world for a few years, did Swan Lake in Moscow, can you believe that?”

“That’s pretty amazing,”

“Yeah. She had to quit a few years later, strain was too much and she was less and less stable. Terrible thing.” Robinson ran his hand across his face a few times. I was about to say something when he told me to turn left at the upcoming stoplight.

“I gotta stay on track,” he said. “Although I guess it’s all right, the dream don’t make sense if you don’t know the before and after.” I shrugged.

“So you’re old and young, you’re with Carrie at both versions of the carnival and you get to the merry-go-round,” I reminded him, trying to get him focused on the task at hand, away from the bad thoughts. He cleared his throat.

“Yes, that’s right. The night I was waiting for Anna I didn’t get on but with Carrie I had to, make sure she didn’t fall off. In the dream I put her on one of the horses and then just stood to the side, watching her. She rides past on one of those white and red flying horses with the gold bar down the middle and then she’s out of sight on the other side. When she comes back into view it isn’t her anymore, it’s Anna.” I took my eyes off the road, looked at Robinson. He was staring straight ahead, lost somewhere in the dual memory and fiction of his dream.

“It’s Anna and she waves at me and I’m so relieved she made it, this time is different and we’re together and all the bad shit in my head goes away. Then she rides around again and I lose her again and when she comes back around it’s Carrie again, waving. It happens over and over again but I don’t move, I think if I jump on

whichever one of them I stay with while we go around gets to stay with me but I don't move. I just watch them, the only people I've ever loved and my two biggest regrets."

"Regrets?"

"I lost Anna, she was 'The One', that bullshit about the perfect woman but she really was for me, and I let her go. I could've tried harder to find her, or before she left I could've done something."

"Like what? What could you have done?" My voice had more of an edge than I wanted it to but I was getting a little angry; it was over with, dammit, all Robinson was doing was tearing himself apart for no reason, and by the sound of his voice I knew this was a script he'd written many years ago and had read many many times. Hearing this granite boulder of man empty out such a private story was so unsettling.

"The last night we were together, in my car, right before she got out I grabbed her hand. I told her I loved her, needed to see her again, but that wasn't what I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her to get back in, tell her come on, just get in my car and drive. Drive away from everything, didn't matter where we went as long as we were together."

"You would've missed everything you've done since then," I said, now more desperate than angry, needing to convince him his life hadn't been the failure I now knew he thought it was.

"I didn't care. Still wouldn't, if I could do it again. I knew then I was giving up my chance at getting rich, getting established, getting respectable, I had a good job

and was moving up and I thought I didn't care. But, I guess I did. I didn't tell her to come away with me so I guess I did care."

"If she had you would never had have had Carrie," I exclaimed, sure this would satisfy him.

"That's just it," he replied, his voice calm, too calm, too defeated. "That might've been better. Carrie's my other regret, like I told you. I regret I passed what's in me to her and it's ruined her life, I regret I had any child at all with Nancy, a woman I barely pretended to love I should've cut loose from years ago, for her sake and mine." He was looking at me; I let the road be my excuse to not meet his eyes. I felt too shaky to meet his eyes. "The worst, though, the worst is how much I hate myself for feeling like this. I love Carrie more than anything and the fact a large part of me regrets her whole existence is more than I can take. It's like pieces of broken glass in my head." A moment of silence, even though I knew the radio was still on I couldn't hear it, and at Robinson's direction I turned right.

"We're almost there," he said. "I have to finish before we get there."

"There's more?" Robinson was crying now but not sobbing or hitching his breath, totally composed except for the tears running down his face constantly; his eyes looked like they were leaking.

"Just a bit. So I'm watching the carousel spin and spin and for some reason I look up and I see cars."

"What?"

"Cars, David. Black ones. Up in the sky, a line of them, maybe a dozen."

"They're flying?"

“Yes. Well no, flying’s not the right word, not like a plane or a helicopter because there’s no noise, like from an engine. A better word is sailing, maybe gliding. These cars are just gliding through the night sky, and they’re black but the moon’s full so I see them fine. I don’t know for sure, they’re too high up, but I always think it’s my old car, my El Dorado, sailing up there over Maryland.” Just as Robinson was finishing his sentence, I saw where we were going. At first I couldn’t believe it, then it all clicked. I silently scolded myself for not seeing this coming a mile away.

“You remember where to park right?”

“Yeah I remember. I took a girl here when it first opened. Jesus, that was before I even met you.”

“It was a while back. How was the date?”

“I tried to kiss her at the top of the ferris wheel but something happened with the gears and basket like jolted forwards then backwards just as hard and I fell on her, you know, into her. We almost fell off altogether.” Robinson laughed, and once again I was glad I’d showed him a little light. “Yeah the date kinda fizzled after that.”

“I’m not surprised,” he replied, still laughing.

“Hey now, what’re you trying to say, women love me.” Robinson laughed harder, had to parcel out words between laughing fits.

“No, no...the ferris wheel...was the oldest thing we bought, always...problems...shut down altogether...in ninety-five.” It took a while for him to get control of himself, but I didn’t mind; at least his eyes had stopped their bizarre

leaking. Now we were parked in a paved lot, in front of a locked gate with the unlit neon sign above it that read “St. Robinson’s Electric Mile: Rides, games, food, surprises!” I remembered my parents talking about it a long time ago, how great an idea they thought it was, fixing up a bunch of antique carnival rides and offering an old-fashioned fair experience “just like when you were a kid!”, which had in fact been the promotional slogan from the radio commercials. Robinson had opened the place maybe fourteen or fifteen years ago, before he’d known me, before Carrie’s insanity had become a certainty rather than a fearful suspicion. At the time I, the cynical bastard I’d thought I was at age eighteen, blew it off as a sad attempt to cash in on baby-boomers’ nostalgia for their misspent, mythologized and often poorly well-remembered youth. The idea had taken off though, and the place had stayed open more than a decade, finally closing in nineteen ninety-six or -seven. Being here again I thought I’d once asked a few years ago Robinson why he hadn’t torn it down; his response had been something about sentimental value, didn’t want the place to become a parking garage or something, and I had barely given it a second thought. Now I was getting out of the car I never dreamed I’d own back then and staring at the still and dark rides, mechanical dinosaurs standing vigil, looming out of the night. Robinson was standing beside me, also studying the machines.

“It never crossed my mind when I put this together,” he said, “I mean put me buying this with my memories. I just thought it was a good business venture, never saw the coincidence.”

“Hold on,” I protested. “You’re not going to tell me this is the same carnival where you waited for Anna forty years ago and then took Carries to fifteen years later, are you? There’s no way.”

“Come on, David. I don’t even need to answer that one, of course it isn’t. Granted, these things do come to the same places each year and didn’t get new rides too often, so there is a small chance the ones from the night I missed Anna were around when I went with Carrie, and an even smaller chance they’re the same ones I bought ten years later. A chance, sure, but I don’t think it’s the case. Doesn’t matter though.” He produced a key ring from his pocket and began fumbling through them.

“Question,” I said as I watched him. “Why St. Robinson, I never got that.” Still looking for the right key he shrugged.

“One of the guys with me on the assembly line way back in the day used to call me that, I forget why, but I always thought it had a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” He found the right key and opened the gate, which creaked and groaned loud enough to make me wince. “It was either a real Catholic saint or the nickname for a baseball player, I can’t remember.” We went inside and walked down the wide main thoroughfare slowly, the darkness making us unsure of where to tread. Soon we arrived at a little tin hut off to one side which Robinson unlocked and entered, telling me to wait outside. A moment later the lights of the park glared on and drenched everything in flickering neon blankness. Robinson came back outside and smiled.

“Much better,” he said. “I always loved this place, even before I realized the real reason I must’ve built it.”

“How come it hasn’t been torn down? I mean it’s been just rusting here for almost ten years.”

“I wouldn’t let anyone, simple as that. I wouldn’t let it happen, and no one had an idea of what to put here instead good enough for the local government to override me. I guess will power and good luck would be the short answer.” He started back down the midway and I followed, past The Zipper and The Haunted Castle and a few kiddie rides and the concession stands to the carousel. I thought we’d stop there but he kept going to the next ride, where little convertible cars flew up and down and around a much larger rocket ship in the center they were all attached to by thick steel bars.

“I always liked this ride,” Robinson said, patting the fence around its perimeter, “even though it’s usually only for the little ones.” He looked up at the little cars, all frozen in midair, waiting to be turned on again. The cars, the rocket ship in the middle and the white steel bars which connected them were all faded and rusting.

“So you want to know the point of all this,” he said, moving his arm across the landscape in a sweeping gesture. “Your coming here, seeing Carrie, hearing my dream and past romantic fuckups, which I’ve never told anyone else by the way.”

“I was waiting for you, whenever you’re ready, but yeah I’d like to know.”

“Well David, as you know, I’m dying, and don’t have much time left, especially time where I can still walk around and breathe like a normal person, communicate. So this has to happen now.”

“What, Arthur, what has to happen?”

“I’m hiring you David. Independent of my other lawyers, independent of anything to do with the factory and its subdivisions. You won’t be working for or with any of my other lawyers, there are many, but you will be able to ask for and receive any and all amount of funds from my estate to do what you have to.”

“Which is?”

“Three things, or four I guess. One, take care of Carrie: her inheritance money, property and possessions and her continuing medical attention. She’s about to turn a corner, or I think she is, and I have to know she’ll be able to after I’m gone.” The was no problem, I could handle most of this on my own and my firm had plenty of associates specializing in probate and real estate, but as far as Carrie went I had doubts.

“Arthur the legal stuff of course I can and will do but regarding Carrie’s care I haven’t the first clue how-”

“So find someone who does. When you’re throwing around as much money as you’ll be finding someone isn’t a problem, it’s deciding who’s most competent.” I sighed and knew it wasn’t worth arguing, he was right anyway.

“All right. What’s the second thing?” Arthur hesitated, looked down at his feet.

“I want you to find Anna. Her name is Anna Maria Duritz, or used to be, I don’t know if she’s married now.”

“What do you mean, find her? Find her and then what? Didn’t you say you wanted her to always be the way you remembered?”

“Yes and I still do. By the time you find her I’ll probably be gone.” I didn’t want to think about that so I pressed on.

“Well once I find her, what then?”

“Go to her, I mean you personally, wherever she is, and learn her story. What happened to her, who she became, her life. Then tell her about me, all the bad things as well as the good. Tell her about my dream, and how I always loved her.”

“Why? What good would it do?”

“Just to know. I’d find it comforting someone I hadn’t seen in forty years still thought of me, missed me, loved me. Tell her one more thing too.”

“What’s that?”

“Well that’s the third and fourth thing. Tell her at my request and with my estate’s backing you re-opened this park, that’s the third thing I want you to do. Spare no expense, hire the best you can find to bring this place to life again, but make sure all they do is touch up the paint, replace worn out parts. Make sure they fix what was broken and don’t just build something new, it would defeat the purpose. Make sure you bring Carrie here too, let her ride the carousel and see the dancers, help her come out of her shell.” I had no idea how to do this, knew as much about construction or running an amusement park as I did quantum physics, but like he’d said before, with that much money I could get pretty much anything done.

“Ok, I’ll do it all. What’s the last thing?”

“The last thing I want you to tell her, the last thing I want you to do, is this.” He pointed at the ride next to and above us, the flying cars. “These cars all get painted black and tell her this ride is dedicated to her. I want this out front.” He took

a piece of paper from his inner jacket pocket, unfolded it and gave it to me. On it was a colorful drawing of a large sign with what I assumed were supposed to be neon lights spelling out its name in red, blue, yellow and green: “St. Robinson’s Cadillac Dream” and, in smaller letters underneath, “For Anna”. I coughed and kept my head down when Robinson spoke again.

“Cause you see, I figured out part of my dream. She was the love of my life, the one who could’ve have made it all clean. Her father, the pilot, The Comet, came between us and took her away, and in my dream my old car, the one I had when I had her, was flying up in the sky, and it was chasing her. Cause that’s where I wanted to be, where I always wanted to be, up in the sky with her and flying away, just get in my car and drive, didn’t matter where. I think some of me did, and that’s why I haven’t been right since. Like this ride, I was just flying in a circle. I don’t belong here David,” he said, and pointed straight up over his head. “I belong somewhere up there, where I got stuck when Anna flew away. I want you to tell her all that. Can you do these things for me?” I coughed again and blinked a few times.

“Of course I can Arthur, it’d be a pleasure. Anyway I owe you far more.”

“Well I’ll be paying you really well too,” he said and I laughed in spite of myself and the laugh felt wonderful and horrible at once.

“That will help,” I said, and we didn’t say anything else till Arthur pointed back up at the night sky with excitement.

“David, look, there’s a comet!” I looked up and saw what he was pointing at, couldn’t stop myself from making the correction.

“Arthur, I’m sorry but that’s a plane.” He looked at me with patience.

“I know, but to me it’s the same thing.” I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed once, when he didn’t respond the hand went back to my side and we just looked up at the sky again. Arthur Robinson died six weeks later, a week before I found Anna and went to see her where she lives in Arizona. She came to Maryland a little over a year later for the grand re-opening of the amusement park. She was the first person to ride St. Robinson’s Cadillac Dream, rode it alone while a small crowd watched. I was in the crowd and so was Carrie, two months out of the hospital and doing as well as someone in her position could. She’d be back in the psych ward in a year, but even so she’s making progress; it’s a long, long road and it’s not always clear which is the right way to go. That night though she was fine, happy and proud of her father’s final statement.

“She looks beautiful up there,” she said to me without taking her eyes off Anna’s smiling face.

“Yeah she is,” I said. “You want to ride the carousel after this?”

In the Service of the Lord

Sheriff Cyrus Blackburn Terwilliger II was not happy. He was hot as hell, sitting at his desk drenched in his own sweat, trying to concentrate on the papers spread out in front of him, reports of the events from earlier that day. His ulcer was acting up again and he probably would've been sweating if it were the dead of winter; it was July though, and the third day of what would go on to be a two-week heat wave of biblical proportions, where the mercury never once got lower than eighty degrees. All three ceiling fans in the station were spinning at top speed, every desk had a smaller fan going full blast as well, and they were all doing a great job of making the hot air go fast. Cyrus wiped his forehead and smeared the sweat on his khaki pant leg, blinked a few times and tried to concentrate. He had to truly know the story he'd only heard fragments of up till then.

He was forty-three and carried it better than most, little taller than average and still fit even though a small potbelly had appeared out of nowhere lately. His hair and eyes were the same shade as wet sawdust. He'd recently shaved off his trademark handlebar mustache and his clean-shaven face still felt naked and exposed; he would catch himself more times a day than he wanted to admit fingering his upper lip like he'd used to do when it still had hair. He was doing it right then but wasn't aware as he read on.

His boys pulled a car over for speeding at quarter after three, made a routine license plate check and got a hit: wanted in connection with an assault and kidnapping

in Mississippi. They attempted to arrest the three persons in the car, three men, all of the Negro persuasion, and a gunfight ensues, one of the three using a machine gun. Deputy George Footman wounded lightly, taken to Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy Hospital, while his partner Deputy Henry Bowers returns fire but doesn't appear to hit any of them. Two of them escape in the car, while the third apparently surrenders to Deputy Bowers.

Cyrus glanced up from desk, out the open door of his office to room one across the hall, also known as the interrogation room. The door was closed and locked; the blinds were open but his angle prevented him from seeing the perp inside, handcuffed and sitting alone at the table. Truth be told, he'd barely seen the bastard at all, had been in the W.C. when Bowers brought him in, and once they had him properly squared away all importance had shifted to his two escaped accomplices. Cyrus had sent all his deputies out on the chase, all except Bowers, Patterson Hood, and the old man Franklin Cope on dispatch. He'd then put out a statewide all-points bulletin on the two men and their car, a black Chevy hearse, weird as that sounded. The incident had taken place almost three hours earlier, the chase beginning maybe an hour later around four thirty. The station had been pure chaos then, Sheriff's deputies and state troopers and even the damn mayor all running around like mice trying to find the cheese in one of those mazes. Now at six it was almost empty: there was Cyrus in his office, Cope up front at the duty desk manning the radio, the perp in room one, some colored wino sleeping it off in the drunk tank and Deputy Hood at his desk, typing up the report for his arrest of the aforementioned wino. Who was snoring, and loud.

Cyrus felt his guts roll and squirm again, grimaced, put a hand over his stomach like it might help and took a sip of milk from the glass on his desk. It didn't do much but it helped more than water and those two were about all he could drink on the bad days, of which this particular day happened to be. The two other coloreds could be out of the state by now, into Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, or even back to Mississippi, impossible to tell. But they would be found, and soon, just a matter of time. Driving the sort of car they were, they'd be harder to miss than tits on a bull.

Cyrus flipped to the next report, dictated over the phone to Deputy Cope from a sheriff in Mississippi, the account of what the three Negroes had done in the first place, four days earlier. Cyrus read the dry, legalese description of their assault on the owner of a hardware store and their subsequent torture of one of his daughters and the kidnapping of another. As he read the details of what they'd done to the eldest of the store owner's three daughters, he shivered despite the heat.

"Makes your blood curdle," said Deputy Hood, now leaning in his doorway.

"I never heard of such things, especially not from a colored to a white girl,"

"We oughta string up that son of a bitch right now." Cyrus looked up at Hood.

"Maybe we oughta but we ain't gonna, and you know it. That ain't how we run things here."

"Yes boss." Hood walked back toward his desk, muttering under his breath how it oughta be. Cyrus ignored him; the kid was a hothead and a little stupid

besides, nothing to be done. Thugs like him were useful and necessary to the business of law, and you took the accompanying drawbacks in stride.

“Hey,” Hood called as he sat down. “Where’s Bowers anyway?”

“Outside on the steps, talking to some newspaper reporter.”

“Tryin’ to make himself look heroic, huh?” Cyrus threw Hood a baleful look.

“Dammit boy he was heroic. Hell you ever even fired your gun at anything other than a tin can?”

“That old boy in the drunk tank sure put up a fight when I brought him in, almost had to shoot him,” the kid replied indignantly. Cyrus leaned forward a bit in his chair to get a good view of the sleeping Negro through the cell bars, painted beige but now years later closer to yellow.

“Oh I’m sure he was a howlin’ devil when you came upon him, passed out in that alley offa Main Street like he was. How long he been in there?” Hood checked his watch.

“Maybe half an hour,”

“And dead to the world already, sure enough you been through Hell today, son.”

“Probably what Hell feels like, so damn hot out there.” Cyrus suppressed the sigh that almost came out.

“Well nothing to be done, Patterson, you just finish your report and once some of the boys get back you can go home.” Patterson didn’t respond, thank God for small favors, and started typing again in his slow, two-fingered pecking way. Cyrus went back to his reading, though there wasn’t anything of interest left.

He arranged all the papers in order once he was finished and slid them into a blank file. He then wrote the date on the tab in red ink. He was supposed to write the perpetrator's name on the tab as well, but as of that moment no name was forthcoming. Usually in such a situation he'd just write "John Doe", but this time Cyrus didn't think that'd be necessary. He and the perp had lots to talk about, and his name would be as good a place to start as any.

Sheriff Cyrus Blackburn Terwilliger II (never junior and always "the second") stood up from his desk and tightened up his belt. He fixed his wide-brimmed brown hat on his head and picked up his service revolver off his desk and holstered it on his right hip. He always took his gun out when he was sitting down, as did most of his deputies; damn thing always dug into their legs and it drove them batshit. He was approaching room one, the case file in hand, when Deputy Henry Bowers walked in through the front door, taking his own hat off and mopping his brow with a handkerchief. Bowers smiled at him.

"Reporters," he said, "they still surprise and stupefy me."

"Oh yeah? What this time?" Bowers turned back to the glass front door and watched the reporter as he drove away. He turned back to Cyrus before he answered.

"Ignoramus got all crazy on me, said maybe we could play some religious angle into this, that maybe I'd been fightin' the three horsemen of the apocalypse."

"Ain't there four?" Deputy Hood called out from his desk.

"Well that's what I told him," said Bowers, raising his voice. "He got all red and changed the subject." Cyrus chuckled.

“Well I’m about to go in and talk to this bad boy, see what he’ll tell me. You want to?” Bowers shrugged and nodded at Hood.

“Let him go with you, he’ll enjoy it more.”

“You sure Henry?” Bowers hesitated before he responded, staring off into space, and when he did he speak his voice was much lower.

“Yeah I’m sure. Honestly, he gives me the creeps.”

“What, Patty?” Cyrus always called him Patty when the boy wasn’t in earshot, as he hated the name and insisted on being called Patterson.

“No no, the Nigra. Something’s not right about him,” Cyrus searched Henry’s droopy hound dog face to see if he was serious. It looked as if he was.

“Well sure, colored man in Mississippi cuttin’ up a white girl then shootin’ it out with cops in Georgia? He ain’t right, Henry.”

“I guess...I’d rather just watch the front with Cope till everyone gets back, it’s all the same to you.”

“Sure, sure,” Cyrus clapped Bowers on the shoulder. “Hell, you done enough today already. Patterson!” The deputy looked up from his typing. “Whyn’t you come have a chat with me and the bad boy in here?” Hood jumped up, almost knocking his chair backwards and ran over as slow as he could manage.

“I was fixin’ to ask you that just now, Boss!” He sounded overjoyed.

“Well you two have yourselves a little connection, don’t you?” Bowers sounded amused. Hood glared at him and Bowers pretended not to notice. “Well I’ll go sit’n talk with old Cope now I guess.”

“Make sure he doesn’t die, Henry,” said Cyrus.

“Been doin’ that for more’n ten years, it’s a damn full-time job.” Bowers walked away around the corner, leaving the two other men just outside the door of room one. Cyrus didn’t look in there, didn’t want to make eye contact yet, keep the perp guessing. He waited a few seconds, ignoring the pain in his stomach and getting into angry cop mood. He’d been doing it for so long he could turn it on and off, but it was easier than usual this time. Footman might be fine but he was still in the hospital with a chunk of lead in his shoulder, and wasn’t no one who got away with that in Cyrus’s county. Not to mention the white girl in Mississippi, and her younger kidnapped sister who was noticeably absent from the events of that day thus far. Cyrus felt his face tense up, his eyes go dead; he was ready.

He turned around, opened the door to room one and swung in fast, Hood a step behind. He crossed the room to the table in a second flat, yanked out the chair on his side and sat down with a resounding thud. He slammed his folded hands onto the table’s surface harder than he had to, all of this intended to throw the perp off-balance, all this violence and motion after a long period of stillness. Only then did he focus on the prisoner, really see the man himself rather than a dark blur out the corner of his eye.

The man was black, dressed in black pants, tie and jacket with a white shirt underneath. His hat was a black fedora and it sat low on his head, cocked to a sideways angle. His eyes, wide and burned deep into his face, the color of wheat field in August, met Cyrus’s gaze and held it steadily. Cyrus saw in them intelligence and what looked like amusement. And anger.

The black man's hand appeared from under the table, rising to his face. It wasn't fast but Cyrus jumped anyway, partly because the hand was holding something he didn't immediately recognize but mostly because he'd been sure the prisoner had been handcuffed when they put him in the room. The hand reached the face and Cyrus relaxed a little when he saw the man was holding an orange, but only a little. The man ate a slice without taking his eyes off the sheriff. Cyrus in turn held his gaze while he addressed Hood.

“Wasn't there handcuffs on this piece a' shit when they put him in here, Deputy?”

“Yessir there was, I saw Henry lock 'em on.”

“I only ask cause there don't appear to be any present at the moment.” Before Hood could answer the prisoner's other hand appeared and tossed a pair of silver handcuffs on the table, their loud rattle huge in the small, quiet room. Both Cyrus and Deputy Hood stared at the black man.

“Sorry boss,” he said, “they just slipped right off my wrists.” His voice was Southern and smooth, the words rolled across the air like rocks down a hillside.

“You keep quiet 'till I tell you speak, boy,” Cyrus said immediately. The man lowered his eyes and nodded in compliance. “Patterson, I know it was you personally who searched him when he got here.”

“Yeah?” Cyrus looked around at the deputy over his shoulder.

“Well why the hell did you leave him an orange?”

“I searched him for weapons, what do I care if he has an-”

“It's a clementine, boss.” Cyrus jerked his head back around to the prisoner.

“What?”

“It’s not an orange, it’s a clementine, from Spain. I get ‘em at a little store near Birmingham and-”

“Shut the fuck up, boy,” the sheriff spat angrily, aware that he never swore like that except under the most extreme circumstances and thinking this shouldn’t be one yet. “Did you not hear me the first time?” The black man lowered his eyes again and ate another slice of the fruit. “Gimmie that,” Cyrus demanded. The prisoner looked back up at him and obediently handed it over. Cyrus turned a little in his seat and handed the clementine to Hood, who looked nervous and flushed. The deputy tossed the clementine at the nearby garbage can and missed. He walked over and picked it up, then slammed it down into the can hard enough to make the orange-colored fruit bounce. Cyrus wanted to tell him to lock it up, get some control, he was supposed to be intimidating for love of Christ, but knew it would only worsen things. He turned back to the prisoner, not liking the direction this session had already taken.

“What else have you got?”

“Sir?” The prisoner looked a little confused.

“My deputy just told me he only searched you for weapons, have got anything else at all on your person?” The prisoner’s eyes cleared, and he reached into his jacket. “You take it slow now,” Cyrus added, the fingers of his right hand brushing the butt of his gun before he even knew they’d moved. The prisoner didn’t acknowledge him but slowed his movements down, in the end only removed a group of half a dozen hand-rolled cigars bound together with twine and a shiny silver harmonica. Cyrus examined the objects then slid them over to the edge of the table.

“That’s it?” Nod from the prisoner. “You’re sure?” Nod. “If you’re lyin’ and I find even a ball of lint in your pocket I’ll kick your goddamn teeth out, you understand that?” Another nod. “You ain’t gonna give me no trouble now, are you boy?” The prisoner shook his head slowly.

“Well that’s fine.” Cyrus leaned back in his chair and tried to relax, or at least look like it. He paused, let the moment swell, grow tense. Hood caught the vibe, first time for everything, and walked across the room and stood over the prisoner, behind him and just barely out of his sight.

“So,” Cyrus finally said. “You know why you’re here boy?” The prisoner did not hesitate.

“To serve the Lord, sir.” Hood backhanded him across the face, hard enough that small droplets of blood splattered on the table and floor. Despite that the prisoner barely moved, and registered little reaction; his hat didn’t even come off, which threw more kindling on Cyrus’s growing anger.

“Take that hat off, Patterson.” Hood did so and threw the hat at the garbage can, making it in this time. The man’s head was bald but obviously shaven to achieve such effect; there were numerous scars and slight re-growth of hair. “I’ll ask you one more time, and just to clarify I mean here in this room, not in general. You know why you’re here?”

“Same answer as before, sir. Can’t say nothin’ but the truth, I’m sorry.” The man’s voice was soft and apologetic, passive. Hood drew back his hand again and Cyrus held up his own, stopping him.

“It’ll do for now. You have a name, boy? I can’t seem to find one for you anywhere I look.”

“Virgil Caine, sir, but most call me The Apostle.” Cyrus glanced at Hood, who shrugged and spread his hands.

“You an ordained minister then, that what you tellin’ me?”

“Never said that, sir. I am servant, not a preacher.” The Apostle smiled a little, and Hood leaned in close to his face.

“Somethin’ funny boy?” The Apostle remained unruffled.

“It’s just that the last white man I talked to had the same problem boss sheriff’s having.” Cyrus raised his eyebrows and set the case file down on the table, opened it up.

“Would that be-” he consulted the sheet, “-Dupree Huthwaite of Clarksdale, Mississippi, on July the sixth?”

“May have been, never caught his name.” Cyrus leaned forward.

“Let’s just assume it was for the moment. What other problems did Mr. Huthwaite have?”

“I believe his offspring were not, ah, the most moral of people.”

“Oh indeed? Do tell.” The Apostle looked away, at the small window in the door to room one. His eyes continued upwards to rest on the unlit light bulb in the ceiling fixture. Finally he opened his mouth, and asked if he could have one of his cigars.

“Answer me and I’ll think about it.” Hood leaned in again.

“Answer him, you colored son of a bitch!” His voice was loud but quavery.

“Hush Patterson, no need for that.” Patterson looked at Cyrus but backed away. Virgil Caine, The Apostle, made no motion to indicate he would answer.

“Forget that for now,” Cyrus tried another tack. He had to stay calm, had to trick this guy, otherwise he’d have to beat the information out of him, and it was too hot for anything so tiresome. “What about the two men you were traveling with, tell me about them.”

“What about them?” Hood slapped The Apostle on the back of his head.

“Don’t speak unless you’re answerin’ his questions, smartass.” Caine took a deep breath and refocused on Cyrus.

“My two associates are named Jeremiah Dixon and Charlie Mason, Jeremiah’s thirty-six, I myself am thirty-three and Charlie’s thirty, the three of us are musicians.”

“Yeah that’s what the report said,” Cyrus spoke as he rifled through the papers. Reading off of the sheriff’s report from Mississippi, he went on. “So Jeremiah’s the one with the guitar case?”

“No sir that is Charlie,”

“I see, and I suppose Charlie keeps the tommy gun he used on my men in there.”

“Hm-mm boss, Charlie keeps his guitar in there.” He waited a beat. “He kept the tommy gun in the back seat.” Cyrus almost laughed, and he saw Caine smile again.

“Better than a guitar case I suppose. So you’re all musicians?”

“Yessir, we play the Lord’s music for whoever will listen.”

“Of course you do,”

“Charlie on guitar, Jeremiah does some dances, I blow the harp, and we all do a bit of singin’.”

“Good for you.” The Apostle nodded with enthusiasm.

“It is good, boss, keeps the Devil away, eases my mind plenty. I’ll have plenty more to sing about once I get outta here.”

“You think you’re gettin’ outta here, do you,” Cyrus said mildly. Virgil nodded.

“I do. ‘Less o’ course some sort of accident should befall me,” Hood tensed, Cyrus could tell he was about to blow. He had to wrap this up as soon as he could.

“An accident?” The Apostle’s eyes looked downright merry, and Cyrus’s stomach started roaring again. He wondered how long he could go without showing the pain.

“Yes boss, such as I happen to trip off a tree branch and a rope breaks my fall.” If only, Cyrus thought but did not say. Lynching didn’t happen much anymore, least in his area, and he agreed with Deputy Hood’s earlier assertion that the less was the pity. He figured all the twisted dealings of the krauts during the war a few years back got America feeling all guilty. Cyrus himself had been in the Pacific, no less a Hell on earth than the other side, and he remembered the pleasure he’d taken in exterminating all those Jap prisoners his platoon had captured. They’d gotten the bastards back, sure they did; his commanding officer had even given it the okay.

“Back home,” he’d said, “this is murder. Here it’s war, so get all the killin’ outta ya

while you got the chance.” And damn if that old boy hadn’t been spot on, on both accounts. So no hangings were to be done here today, even if it was deserved.

“Why Mr. Caine, don’t tell me you’re afraid I would do anything drastic?”

Virgil raised both hands in surrender.

“I was just talkin’ boss, you are a paradigm of upstanding and moral law enforcement.” Hood walked right behind The Apostle and put both hands on his shoulders. He leaned down and spoke right into his ear, in what Cyrus knew was his best tough guy voice.

“I think the good sheriff is worth a bit more’n that, don’t you, boy?” Caine frowned, and Cyrus too was confused. He looked questioningly at Deputy Hood, who started to look uncertain. “You know, un, he’s worth more than twenty cents.” The Apostle got it first, closed his eyes and took a deep, long breath. Cyrus got it a second later and turned away, clamping down on his lip to keep from laughing. Hood stepped back, still confused. He looked back and forth between his boss and his prisoner several times, and without a word left the room a moment later. Cyrus and The Apostle stared at each other for a moment. Cyrus realized it wasn’t funny anymore, and in fact he was sick of this. This had to end.

“So why’d you do it,” Cyrus asked, trying to blindside him.

“Do what, boss?”

“Stop fucking with me Virgil.” He glanced down at the file again. “Marie Huthwaite, you cut out her eyes, cut off her ears too, why? Did God tell you to, is that it? Sweet girl like that, sweet white girl like that, who do you think you are?”

“She was a sinner, boss, honest truth. Her and her father both.”

“And Eleanor? What’d you do with her after you took her?”

“She wanted to come-”

“What piece of her did you cut off, you sick son of a bitch?”

“She wanted to come along, boss, then she wanted to stay in Alabama so we let her when we went through. She’s still in Mobile, untouched and alive, I swear.”

“Even if I believed you, you still got a lot to pay for. You were in trouble for the thing in Mississippi, yeah, but today you took down one of my boys. Now you’re in real trouble, and God knows as well as you it’s a fuckin’ miracle if you ever leave this station on your own two feet.” He stopped but kept his glare steady, right in Caine’s eyes. He had him, Cyrus knew it. He went in for the kill. “So help me out and I’ll take it a little easier on you, tell me where Charlie and Jerry are headin’.” Caine sighed and looked away at the bare concrete wall.

“Virgil? Come on, talk to me.” Before either of them could do anything else, the door behind Cyrus opened.

“Boss?” Deputy Henry Bowers stood behind him. Cyrus cursed inwardly as he turned around.

“Yes Deputy?”

“Good news for you, I just got off the radio with the Macon police department, they found the other two Nigras and they nailed ‘em. One of ‘em got killed shootin’ it out with the boys there, the other’s in the Macon station’s jail. We got ‘em.” Cyrus turned around and looked at The Apostle, who’s face was stone, but looked a shade grayer than before.

“Thanks, Henry.” Cyrus started to walk back to the chair.

“Boss,” Henry called after him. “What do you want me to do with the Nigra in the drunk tank, by the way?” Jesus, Cyrus thought. He’d forgotten all about that.

“What’s he doin’?”

“He’s up, walkin’ around, got his legs under him, think he’s sober enough.”

Cyrus nodded.

“Yeah, spring him. Tell him to stop makin’ an ass of himself in public, that’s what bars are for.”

“Right boss,” Henry left the room and Cyrus shut the door behind him.

“Well,” he said as he sat back down, a smile growing around his lips. “We got your boys, Virgil, killed one and the other’s probably worse off than you are, as most county sheriffs aren’t nearly as nice as I am. What do you think of that?”

“If it’s the truth,” replied The Apostle, “then I’ll pray for them and hope God does not hesitate to take them in his arms.” Cyrus laughed in a manner that sounded like a snarl.

“No sooner will a camel pass through the eye of a needle, Mr. Preacher Man. They’re both damned and you’re about to be, so why don’t you just stop foolin’ around, make it easier on yourself? Tell me you did what we both know you done, tell me how and why, and I’ll see to it the district attorney here goes as easy as he can on you.” The Apostle looked back at him, an unreadable expression on his face, and Cyrus was about to start in again when he heard a loud bang followed by a muted thud. Cyrus was on his feet with his gun halfway out when he heard a thick Southern Negro accent start sputtering.

“Lord I’ma sorra suh, I dinna see that they chair there, I fix it I fix it...” The voice went on but Cyrus ignored it and sat back down. A drunk is a drunk, he thought, some of them weren’t ever really sober, even when they were. I’m too damn jumpy anyway.

“Anyway, Virg, what was I saying? Oh yes, your confession, whaddaya say?” Cyrus was feeling positively jubilant; his stomach, at least for the moment, wasn’t even hurting anymore.

“You want my confession boss?”

“You are a quick study boy,”

“Truth be told, I did those things you thought I thought I done.” As he went on, Cyrus heard Cain’s Southern accent slowly drop away while his voice lowered an octave. “That sweet young girl you spoke of was a harlot, plain and simple, and a sinner. Prideful she was, so I made her outsides look like her insides, blind, deaf and ugly. I done more too, so much more, more than I could ever tell you in here.”

“Cut up other people, you mean?”

“Killed a slew as well, I’ve been at it for years.” Cyrus couldn’t believe this, looked like there was a chance he had himself a genuine mass murderer on his hands, and he’d be the famous, brave sheriff who caught him.

“And the Lord told you to do this?” The Apostle smiled, and even in the bright mood he was in Cyrus felt a small chill. The man’s grin was demonic.

“I am but His humble servant.”

“Seems to me you take too much pride in your work for it to be of, ah, divine inspiration.”

“Doesn’t say nowhere you can’t enjoy serving the Lord, I imagine Joshua had much more fun during the ban of Jericho than the Bible lets on.” Cyrus didn’t recognize the reference but didn’t care much.

“You really think God wants you to do these things?”

“Reckon I’ll find out one day for sure, for now I just make my best guess.”

Cyrus’s good mood was still strong but at the same time his earlier sense of unease was returning; he had to take a break, The Apostle was starting to frighten him a little, even if he couldn’t admit it to himself.

“Make all the guesses you want boy, you ain’t never again gonna see the light o’ day without bars in between.”

“I’m sorry boss but I must disagree, ain’t a man alive can keep in captivity.”

Cyrus got to his feet, planted both palms on the table and leaned forward till his face and Virgil Cain’s were only inches apart. His stomach started acting up again, worse than ever, but he barely felt it.

“And what exactly would you call this, boy?”

“I came of my own volition, if you recall. And I don’t plan to stay much longer.”

“Sorry to disappoint you but-”

“Boss?” Deputy Patterson Hood was opening the door behind him.

“Goddammit can I get a moment’s peace? What is it Deputy?” Cyrus broke his eye contact with The Apostle and turned to find out what bug was up Patty’s ass now.

Deputy Patterson Hood didn't answer Cyrus, and in fact had already collapsed by the time Cyrus was looking his way. The sheriff was starting to bend over, help the boy, a look of shocked concern on his face, when he froze with his knees half-bent and his back hunched. He saw into the station through the open door, saw Deputy Henry Bowers lying face down, blood encircling his head like a halo. The drunk tank's cell door was open, and the cell itself was empty. Then he remembered The Apostle. He spun around, drawing his pistol, not knowing what he intended to do with it and hoping it'd be the right thing whatever it was.

Cyrus stopped and stared at the empty room before him, dumbfounded; The Apostle was gone. He saw motion from the corner of his eye and didn't even get the chance to flinch when the world exploded and he felt himself fall. When his vision cleared he was staring at the ceiling of room one, the old paint cracked in several places and the unlit neon light. He started to sit up but was pushed back down hard by a boot in his throat. A colored man he'd never seen before, dressed in black pants, tie and jacket with a white shirt underneath was connected to the boot, and he smiled down at Cyrus without a shred of good humor.

There was a rustle near Cyrus but out of his sight, and he couldn't place the next sound he heard until The Apostle, his black hat back on his head at its cocky sideways angle, stepped into view beside the other man. They were dressed identically, even looked a little bit alike, and Cyrus had a nightmarishly clear vision of some advertisement for chewing gum. He saw the lit cigar in The Apostle's mouth and knew the sound he'd heard was a match lighting. A third man now joined the

pair to stand above him, and Cyrus felt his guts go slack. The Negro from the drunk tank.

“But you-” he tried to say but the pressure of the first man’s boot kept him from going on.

“All just a bit of a ruse, suh,” said the drunk, smiling with genuine pleasure. “Your boy did take me in wasn’t too big on thinkin’, I reckon.”

“Boss sheriff,” said Caine with pride, his jaunty Southern accent back in full force, “allow me to make introductions. The man who’s heel you currently reside under is Charlie Mason, and my sheep amidst the wolves here-” he indicated the false drunk “is Jeremiah Dixon.” Both men smiled, nodded, and said “Pleasure,” in complete synchronicity. Sheriff Cyrus Blackburn Terwilliger had never known fear so total, so absolute.

“But,” he gasped, “but, the cops...Macon...shot you...”

“That was just a voice on the radio boss,” said Charlie Mason. “Coulda been damn near anyone, can’t believe everythin’ you hear.”

“Y’all thought we was escapin’,” continued Jeremiah Dixon, “but we just turned around and followed your boys right back here.” Jesus, thought Cyrus, the whole goddammed time this had been going on and no one had seen it. How could no one have seen them?

“The hearse...how...” The Apostle nodded in agreement and addressed his two cohorts.

“The sheriff does make a good point, if I’m understandin’ him correctly. How did you two get all the way back here without bein’ spotted in that big black vessel of ours?” They both shrugged, again completely in sync with one another.

“Don’t rightly know,” Charlie said.

“Reckon it’s the grace of God and nothin’ else,” Jeremiah said. The Apostle smiled down at him.

“There you have, what did I tell you? The Lord works in mysterious ways, as the saying goes.” All three men nodded together, their heads moving up and down three times in unison. Virgil Caine, The Apostle, was suddenly no longer smiling as he bent down over Cyrus. Charlie removed his boot from Cyrus’s throat and The Apostle got close enough to Cyrus their noses almost touched.

“We must be going, there is still much work to be done in many other places. But not quite yet.” He held his hand out behind him and Charlie Mason handed him a mean looking knife, double-edged and caked with dry blood, drying to rust color. The Apostle positioned the knife directly under his jaw, the sharp tip puncturing the skin at once. Cyrus felt blood began to seep.

“Have you any sins to confess, make yourself right with God?”

“Fuck you,” Cyrus whispered fiercely. Virgil Caine, The Apostle, suddenly grinned huge, stretching his lips, his teeth a stunning white that sparkled like sun on fresh snow. He removed the knife from Cyrus’s throat and it slid downward, out of his sight.

“Then we best do our business and get on,” he whispered and Cyrus heard a ripping sound from the area of his waist. Then he felt heat shooting out into his body,

starting in his midsection and going up to his face and down to the tips of his toes. The pain in his stomach, his ulcer, suddenly went away all together, replaced by just a warm numbness. His vision started to waver, fading in and out of black. He heard the other two men, Jeremiah Dixon and Charlie Mason, moving away. He heard one say he would bring the car around, and then he heard an old man screaming. Deputy Cope on dispatch was screaming, and whichever of The Apostle's followers was still in the station was saying something in what sounded like Latin between fits of high-pitched laughter. Then Cyrus could see clearly again, the world came into focus, and the world was the face of Virgil Caine, The Apostle. The world was his eyes, his eyes that felt like they were melting his bones just by affixing him with their attention. The Apostle wiped the blade, now with much more blood on it, much fresher blood, and Cyrus's khaki uniform shirt, got it halfway clean.

“See you on the other side, boss,” he whispered, and, still smiling, winked down at him. “You be good now.” The Apostle rose and walked away, and first he could be heard talking to the man of his that stayed behind, then the station door opened and an engine roared and all was silent. Cyrus wondered to himself why they were driving a hearse and didn't know why he cared but he couldn't let it go. Where do you even get such a thing?

Sheriff Cyrus Blackburn Terwilliger II didn't move, wasn't sure if he could but didn't much want to anyway. I'm going to die, he realized, I'm going to die here on this cold, shitty linoleum floor. But it didn't bother him. He even smiled a little when he realized that, yes, the floor was cold, and by God it was the first time he'd been able to cool off in what seemed like a dog's age. He grayed out a few moments

later, and the last thing on his mind before he slipped away was the recollection of moments ago, when Virgil Caine had gotten so close to him their noses almost touched, what his grandmother had called “kissing distance.” The Apostle, the man in the black suit, had breath that smelled just like oranges.

Miss Dent

When the man in the black coat glanced at the bench on his left, he saw her. Miss Dent looked away before their eyes met, looked instead at the advertisements on the opposite platform. There was a picture of a man and a woman drinking something dark out of narrow glasses, a picture of a Cat's Paw rubber heel, and a brown-skinned woman standing stretched into a strange position who wore only seashells, a grass skirt and a thick necklace which appeared to be made of yellow and red leaves. The woman standing alone was smiling a little, but she looked afraid nonetheless. In a way Miss Dent could not quite say the woman reminded her of a dream she'd had a few days before, and she briefly wondered what the woman was like, and wished she could meet her. She had seen Mr. Blake look at the pictures when they walked by a few minutes before and further wondered what he had thought about the woman. Probably nothing good, he was not after all a good person anyway. Not the worst she had ever met, not like some of the doctors and nurses at the hospital, not like Dr. Grosso, but still bad enough. She had shown Mr. Blake though, made him cry and made him see that he wasn't better than she was at all, it was the other way around. He didn't know love, how to love, not the right way. Miss Dent looked down at her pocketbook and, to her mind, smiled. In truth had anyone seen her expression upon glancing at her pocketbook they would have no doubt been disturbed by the grimacing, near snarl on her mouth and in her eyes.

Miss Dent smiled her little smile again, proud of the events of the evening. She had punished Mr. Blake, and she had also demonstrated to him but more importantly to herself that she could be kind and sane, was kind, was sane. She hadn't been sure of such things for a while now, and her inability to handle Dr. Grosso the way she'd wanted the day before had only made things worse. After she'd cleaned herself off as best she could and left his apartment she'd spent the train ride home weeping, weeping because maybe the doctor had been right, maybe she was crazy. She had got too excited with him yesterday, got confused, and thought she'd had no choice but to act as she had, but then realized this may have simply proved the doctor's point beyond reasonable doubt. To her credit, Mr. Blake had been much more cooperative than Dr. Grosso, did what she told him to do, and didn't shout or threaten the way the doctor had. But it didn't matter, because after tonight with Mr. Blake Miss Dent knew everyone, the doctors and nurses at the hospital, her parents, that old man she'd met on the train when she was thirteen, they had all been wrong about her.

It was all the way dark now, and the station was empty except for her and the man in the black coat standing a little ways away on her right, not looking at her anymore, looking down at the newspaper he held folded in one large hand. Everything about the man in the black coat was large actually; he was tall and broad with a black hat that looked big enough to sleep in, and his black coat was very long, almost touched his wide brown shoes.

Suddenly Miss Dent realized the man in the black coat was looking at her again, and she made eye contact with him before she could look away. He smiled at

her and nodded greeting and returned to his paper; Miss Dent was filled with fear. Where was the train, she wanted to go home very much, to her room where the thick curtains kept out the light and she had painted the walls dark enough so she could sleep. She thought of the one lamp she kept in her room, with its lampshade of carnival glass that made her dark walls look like the inside of the kaleidoscopes she had loved so much when she was young, the ones she always tried to hide but her father always found and either took from her or smashed while she silently watched.

Miss Dent heard the clanging bells of the railroad crossing signs on the street nearby, saw the red and white wooden barriers lower to block traffic. She looked down the tracks and was relieved to see the light of the approaching train, close and getting closer. She heard its strange, flat-sounding whistle blow and was comforted. She loved trains, loved traveling, loved the trip more than wherever it took her, but could never afford to travel much. She thought maybe she could work on a train one day, be the conductor or the even the driver; not anytime soon, certainly not, she could not handle being out during the day yet, or having to talk to so many people, or handle money so often. She knew she could get confused too quickly and too easily. But she was getting better, she was making progress, she was gaining her self-respect back.

The train had arrived, the doors opened. Miss Dent went inside and sat down and noticed the large man in the black coat was still on the platform, reading his paper. Must be waiting for a different train. But the paper in his hand gave Miss Dent an idea, and she stood halfway and looked around the car at the seats. After a few moments she found what she was looking for and moved down the car to another

seat, sat down after she picked up the newspaper that had been left there. She turned past the news and sports and theater reviews and funny papers and the mini-stories about people who had died, missing her own name printed on more than one of the pages. She stopped at the Help Wanted section and removed a red pen from her pocketbook, careful not to disturb the pistol on one side of the pen. Using the pen she scanned the pages, every so often circling an ad for a secretary or typist; she finally felt better after a long time of sickness and was so eager to get back to work.

Waste Disposal

Sam leaned down to the bonfire, close enough to singe his eyebrows, and lit his cigar off the blaze. The wind was blowing hard, screaming across the emptiness of the plains, and he had to try three times before he got it going. The kindling popped and shifted the way it will and sent sparks flying off in all directions, one of which happened to land on his wrist. He yelped and leaped back, dropping his cigar and shaking his hand. He cursed and picked up the ill-fated cigar, once again extinguished, and moved to put it away. I called out for him to come over.

“You could’ve just asked for a light,” I said as he approached. I had a cheap little butane I’d bought in town the day before, which I gave to him. It was technically against regulations, smoking on duty, but what the hell, the poor guy had to pull this shitty detail with me, he may as well get some enjoyment out of it. He smiled, grateful, and lit the cigar.

“Thanks J,” he said between puffs, “I was losing my mind.” He shivered as the wind bit into us. I didn’t, but cold never much bothers me. “How long we gotta stay out here,” he asked, and glanced at the Jeep parked thirty yards away. It was so quick I’m not sure he knew he’d done it.

I gestured toward the inferno, not towering but pretty big. “Till that burns out. Gotta make sure we keep it contained, you know how dry the grass is out here.”

“Right,” he said. “I just can’t stand the smell of it out here.”

“What, the fire?”

“Nah, I’m used to that, the smell of this place in general.”

“Nothing like it,” I agreed. “You’d think what with nothing out here there’d be nothing to smell bad.”

“Chaffey told me why it smells so bad, something about rising geothermal gasses or something, maybe sulfur, I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“I guess it makes sense,” I replied. “Least it’s not a paper mill.”

“Oh yeah,” Sam said, a disgusted look contorting his bland features. “God that’s the worst. But from that you get paper itself, which doesn’t smell at all.”

“It is weird,” I confirmed. “Anyway, even so you’ll get used to it. I mean, you’ll never not notice it but you’ll be able to deal with it.”

“Let’s hope so,” he said, nodding. I nodded back and we stood watching the flames for a while. “Wait,” he said, “howcome the kid gets to stay in the car?”

I shrugged. “He said he wanted to stay in the car.”

“Who cares? I’d like to stay in the car too, for crissake.” I shrugged again.

“I think we can give him a little break,” I said. “He’s had a long day. He can’t be older than nineteen, and he’s probably passed out anyway.” Sam sighed and sucked back on his cigar. It was one of the cheap ones, and the smell of them always made me think of the poor section of town, of closed-down businesses, police sirens, cheap liquor bottles in brown paper bags lying in the gutter and brass shell casings falling to the asphalt like macabre confetti.

I looked up at the sky, watched the stars glow with their strange pale luminescence. I tried to find Venus, the north star, my wife's favorite star, but I couldn't be sure where it was. I never could though, to be fair; she always had to point it out to me. I missed her, even though it had only been two days since I'd seen her last and would only be one more before I saw her again. Maybe that's what love really is, someone you never stop missing. You could say it's just lust and I couldn't call you wrong, but after eight years of marriage (and three of dating before that) the sex drive isn't as all-encompassing as it once was. It's hard to believe, I certainly didn't during my honeymoon, and it's not to say the sex was bad, it's just the way it works. The weird thing is I almost prefer it this way, this far more calm and comfortable passion; maybe the embers are better than the blaze.

Sam started moving toward the fire again, probably for warmth, and I followed behind without much thought. What I told him hadn't been a lie, we were out there to make sure the fire didn't spread, but it was a formality. The thing was self-contained, built to perfection about eight hours earlier, not by me or him mind you, and I doubted it would spread if it was submerged in kerosene. Sam looked annoyed at being out here, as if he knew this. He probably did, I reflected. And I couldn't blame him for being pissed; this was a crap duty to pull. I always had to, it's in my job description, so I was used to it. I often forget how much it sucks for whoever comes along. I can do it alone, I told the guys up top this plenty of times, but they insist I have an escort, more for their peace of mind than mine. Well, they don't call it an escort, that's a little too risqué-sounding for them, they call it field support.

That's one of the few problems I have with people in my line of work, they all love hiding behind jargon. It's always seemed like a cop-out to me, glossing over the facts with this layer of professional language, as if applying the technical term to something renders it powerless. The guy with you is field support, a criminal is a perpetrator, someone who gets hurt or killed becomes victim number one or two, shell shock becomes post-traumatic stress syndrome. They'd probably call the fire an incendiary event.

Sam stopped just beyond the reach of the meandering flames and watched them slither and slide around the air. I stopped next to him, and we both stared into the fire. You know how it can hypnotize you, right? You stare at fire too long and you get mesmerized, the original television set. I'd had the idea to throw away my TV and put a fireplace in my living room where it sat, spend my nights reading or talking to my wife and kids in its soft red-orange glow instead of being a zombie welded to a bunch of meaningless wires and lights in a box, but of course nothing came of it.

"How're the kids," asked Sam presently. I smiled a little, smiled because just thinking of my two daughters always did that to me and because I was touched Sam even remembered I had kids, let alone thought to ask about them.

"Well Sarah, my youngest, just learned to read, and she can't get enough. All little kids books, of course, but she's so smart she'll be past me before she's ten."

Sam smiled and said "Yeah, my wife's expecting, did I tell you that?" I looked at him in surprise.

"No, Samuel," I said, "you most certainly did not." His smile widened.

“Well I’m trying to keep it kind of a secret, I hear it’s bad luck to talk about it before the fourth month.”

“And is it?”

“I dunno, I mean I don’t really believe in superstitions but-”

“I mean is it before the fourth month,” I interrupted. Sam grinned, partially I should think out of embarrassment.

“No,” he said and started to laugh. “It’s the sixth but I didn’t want to take any chances.” I stared at him for a moment and then laughed with him. Quickly our laughter grew in volume and frequency, the way does between people alone in lonely places. We laughed harder still, Sam putting his hands on his knees as my face started to ache in the pleasant way that laughter hurts.

A small but exceedingly loud explosion from inside the fire cut our laughter short. Sam twitched like he’d stuck his finger in an electrical socket, and I’m not too proud to say I jumped about two feet in the air. Then there were three more explosions, one after the other, BANG BANG BANG, like someone was shooting at us. I knew no one was but ducked anyway, pure instinct. Sam hit the deck too, covered his head with his hands. We looked at each other from a bug’s eye view of the world, the hard dusty earth beneath us offering no comfort.

“The fuck was that,” Sam whispered.

“Nothing to worry about,” I said reassuringly. “Something flammable probably got missed and put in there.” I tilted my chin toward the fire. I stood up slowly, feeling my joints ache, and after a moment Sam was on his feet next to me. Without a word we started walking around the fire in opposite directions, looking for

the source of the disturbance. Sam yelled out for me and I jogged around to his side, where he was pointing into the flames.

“He had extra bullets,” Sam said and pointed to the dead man near the top of the heap, the one with the ragged pseudo-military uniform on. The dead man’s face was blackened with the flames but I recognized him anyway, one of the rebel higher-ups, not a general but something close, a colonel maybe. I saw the blown-out squares on his belt, burnt at a higher temperature than the fire itself, and understood. His pistol had been taken away before they’d thrown him in but someone hadn’t checked if he had spare ammunition. It wasn’t really a big deal but it had scared the living bejesus out of the two of us; I planned to ream somebody out when we got back.

I looked again at the bodies, stacked like laundry, burning up and away into the night. There were maybe thirty-five, maybe forty of them, but only about half that were men. The rest were women and children, rebel sympathizers or even combatants themselves in some cases. With these people you never knew who your enemy was; the biggest and scariest looking man might drop his gun and surrender in fear while a cute-as-a-button ten-year-old kid drops a live grenade in your lap. That very thing happened to a colleague of mine a few earlier.

Seeing the burning women, the burning children, doesn’t bother me anymore. It used to, quite a bit, and I sometimes wonder which reaction is worse, which one is the sane one. Lisa, that’s my wife’s name by the way, had comforted me as best she could but what could she say? She didn’t know what I knew, or at least not the full extent, and I’d wager she felt a large amount of relief when I seemed to get over it. When the nightmares stopped.

I once read about a concept known as pseudo speciation, which first divides human beings into smaller groups, and in the extreme cases robs them of their humanity itself, making them easier to dispose of. The Nazis, for instance, never called the Jews by their given names unless absolutely necessary, in fact technically they never even called them Jews, they had their own word, juden, and it made their extermination easier. It doesn't really work for me, I know better than anyone that my enemies are if nothing else human, but I find the concept fascinating. I'm no Nazi sympathizer, don't get that idea, those people were monsters, but no matter who you are you have to admit, they had focus, they were organized.

My eyes stopped on the face of a little girl who couldn't have been older than twelve, which was how old Becky, my oldest, was. Her eyes were open, staring right at me without seeing a thing. Most of her hair, whatever color it had been (my Becky's a natural blonde) had burned away, and her flesh was charred. But not her eyes, for the moment they seemed fine. I stared at her and she stared back at me for what seemed like an ice age. Finally I shut my eyes and realized there were tears in them; maybe I hadn't gotten used to this after all. It could've been the smoke. I opened my eyes and looked back up at the stars. This close to the fire it was harder to see them.

Enough was enough. I told Sam to follow me and half-walked half-jogged to the dark green Jeep we'd shown up in. I opened the back door and the kid inside looked up at me with his left eye, the only eye he had left, bloodshot and glassy in his brown face. His remaining eye looked terrified and I was glad, because if he wasn't I

wasn't doing my job. I grabbed him by the back of his neck and yanked him outside the Jeep, where he fell hard on the ground with a dull thump.

“On your feet,” I said after a moment, knowing full well his bonds would not allow him to make such a movement. He started to sputter out that very fact in his guttural language, like a cave man scat singing, who knows what the hell he was saying, and Sam kicked him in the stomach. His breath whooshed out and he doubled up into a ball. Grabbing him by the hair this time I hauled him up to a standing position and pushed him forward, toward the fire. He didn't want to go that way, understandably, but we maneuvered him there soon enough. I pushed him down to his knees, the fire light making his skin flicker and shift, as if there were tiny, restless organisms beneath the surface, trying to break free. I squatted down in front of him, waited to speak until he met my eyes.

“Can you understand me?” He nodded after a moment and said something that sounded like yes. Thank God for small favors; I can speak his language but they never understand me, I was never good at foreign tongues. “Good. Do you know who I am?” He shook his head, no.

“You will,” said Sam. I didn't break eye contact with the boy.

“I know you,” I said. “Your brother has been causing us a lot of problems lately, you know that? Real pain in the ass in fact. But,” I pointed at the fire, “we've taken care of him.” The kid's eye widened and his mouth fell open; after a moment he started shaking his head in denial.

“Oh I'm not lying,” I said. I reached into my pocket and removed the ring I had taken off the kid's brother the day before, after I had finished with him. It was a

nice ring, silver with a pretty blue stone design in the middle, probably fetch a fair price in a pawn shop somewhere, but, no, Sarah would love it. The kid in front of me was crying quietly now.

This was the hard part. For men in my line of work, we all feel differently about it. In my case, I usually feel guilty or sometimes a bit sick after doing what I do, but while it's going on there's no greater thrill. To the person before me, I am God, I am everything, I am all-powerful. I work on them with pliers and knives, electricity or a blowtorch, clubs or my bare hands and it is only I who decides if they are given respite, if they've given whatever information they know, if they live or die. I put my hand on the kid's head and turn it slowly until he is gazing into the fire. I remain quiet a moment, letting him soak in the view and prepping myself for the speech I have to make, the one where I break him. His body is already destroyed and all his mind needs is one last little push.

"Your brother is in there," I tell him. "Soon he'll be nothing but ashes, just like everyone else you know. Your cause is lost. Your hold on this wasteland has been shattered. There will be deaths, burnings, destruction; nothing can stop this." I turn his head back to face me and I meet his eye. "You say you're a student, uninvolved in the politics. I say you're lying. And you will tell me the truth. Know why?" The boy shook his head, paying rapt attention. This is who I am. "Because I'm going to make you." His eye widened when I removed my hunting knife. In a few minutes he started talking a mile a minute; he'd learned the right language and rather quickly in fact. I taught the boy to speak with eight inches of steel, worked better than a book or interactive audiotape. What he said is classified of course, but

he was much more than a student, I'll tell you that. He gave me all I wanted and more. I smiled at him and asked if he had anything else to tell me. He said no, and while I almost believed him, almost ain't quite there, so I used my knife again and opened him up. The work was messy, most of my uniform got ruined and Sam had to hold him down, but eventually he gave up all he'd held back. I thanked him.

I'd be able to go home tomorrow, home to my three sweet ladies, and tell them I'd done a good job. I might get some time off, hell, maybe even a raise. They'd be so proud. And Sarah would love her new ring. I gave the eviscerated kid on the ground time to make peace with whatever gods he worshipped, and he cried out something religious. Using Sam's pistol I put a bullet in his head, and we threw him into the flames. After that we watched them burn some more, and we hardly said anything. We were out there till dawn.

Fried Rice

The girl had a blue coat on, wide black buttons, red scarf. All the colors were bright and vivid. He'd never seen her before, and she was one of the million people he'd seen that day he'd never see again.

"Frank?" Voice from his other side, also belonged to a girl, but this one he knew well.

The girl in blue walked past him without looking and melted into the crowd, only there for a second. He was not sure he'd even gotten a good look at her face, might've not even been a girl at all.

"Frank?" This coming from the girl next to him. His girl, supposedly. This place was so vast, it made him feel small, faceless; he was happy to hear her voice despite the current state of his feelings.

"Hmm?" He spoke without taking his eyes off the spot in the crowd where he'd last seen the stranger in the blue coat.

"Which one?" She sounded irritated.

"Which one what?"

"You need to look to see," she said, kicking him lightly and he turned to her. She held up two watches on either side of her face, different styles of gaudy knock-offs. She stared at him, the Asian vendor stared at her, the woman next to him stared

at him, but all of them were waiting on Frank. Christ I need a drink, he thought in a reflexive, bored way without much desire.

She shook the watches and went “Hey,” and he thought of the gin in the cupboard over the fridge at home.

“The silver one,” he said, “take the silver one.” She bought the “Relox” for eight dollars and they started walking again. The street was crowded, not much room to move on the sidewalk. To avoid bumping into the other pedestrians Frank had to leave her side and fall in behind her. He wasn’t sure if she noticed until she spoke to him without looking back.

“Aren’t you going to get anything? I know you don’t want to look touristy but we are tourists after all and who knows when we’ll ever be back here.” Frank didn’t respond to her loaded statement, pretended it had no subtext, and they kept walking a block or two more in silence. Who knew, indeed.

“I’d like to get some Chinese food before we get back on the Underground,” Frank finally said, “it’s supposed to be good here.”

“It’s the subway here love, we’re not in Shepherd’s Bush anymore remember. Give me your flask.” After searching his pockets a while he did. She unscrewed the cap, took a sip and coughed.

“I need a Coke to mix this with.” She pulled him into a bodega they were passing.

She got a Coke from the glass fridge in the back, lit weakly by flickering fluorescents. Frank grabbed a pack of gum and met her at the counter, a small old bald man waiting for them behind it.

“Is that all?” He rang them up. The label on the Coke was wet and slightly damaged, the little bald man pressed his scanner gun against it again and again, its flickering red light running across the bar code’s network of lines. He gave up and typed some keys on the cash register.

“Is that all?” he asked again.

“Yeah gettus a packa Camels, then?” The man smiled tiredly and grabbed the cigarettes from a rack above him, scanned them, and slapped them down on the counter with a book of matches.

“From out of town?” Frank looked behind him where she was studying a magazine, not paying attention.

“I guess it’s obvious,”

“Pretty obvious pal. One thirty-six. American dollars.” The old guy was chuckling.

“I got dollars,” Frank gave the man a five and he made change. Her hand reached past him from behind and took the Coke, he heard it hiss when she opened it. She started walking toward the door.

“Where can I get some good Chinese around here? What’s the top place?”

“The best fried rice in this city,” the old man said with authority, “is Wo Hop Sing’s, about five blocks from here on Mott Street.” He gave Frank the address.

Frank came outside where she was leaning on the wall in a nearby alley, pouring the contents into the half-empty bottle.

She goes “Block me so no one can see,” but Frank just stood on the sidewalk watching the city breathe. I need a damned drink, he thought again, but made no

move for the bottle or his flask. She didn't drink the same stuff he did, and he didn't feel like coming across this late in the game.

"Are you ready?" She asked just after she walked past him, the vodka smell strong in the air. Frank didn't want to answer, didn't want to say any more than he had to. If he started talking he might not be able to stop, might accidentally tell her what he knew. That he knew. Now certainly was not the time. He caught up to her, they walked. She offered him the plastic cocktail twice but he didn't want it.

"You talk to Dr. Stevens yet?" She asked the question casually, maybe she even meant it that way. Frank paused but recovered before she could notice.

"Yeah, ah, he says by Monday we'll know for sure."

"It'll be fine," she said without the warmth or encouragement commonly found in such a sentiment.

"Guess we'll see." Whether he referred to the news in question or their future in general or both he wasn't sure. Didn't matter anyway, in the short run.

Soon they found it: a door no different from every other door on the street but this one had *Wo Hop Sing's* written in red letters on a white sign above it. They saw the steady flicker of red light reflected on the sign, a police car or ambulance or fire truck, but they paid it no mind. This was the Big Bad City after all. And there was Chinese food to be had. Frank tried the door. Locked. They both peered inside.

"It's only six," she said, checking her watch.

"Closed for Christmas," Frank read from a small sign just inside the door.

“Christmas? Christmas was three months ago. And aren’t they Chinese?”

She was incredulous. “Not to mention, what the fuck?” She was drunk, Frank could tell, she never did have a high tolerance.

“I wonder if the old man knew they’d be closed,” he muttered. She laughed.

“What, like he tricked you? Come on, let’s just go somewhere else, they’re all the same anyway. What about here?” She pointed down a flight of stairs two doors away that went below the street to an open door at the bottom where a sign reading Ho Wop Chang’s glowed above it.

“I don’t know...”

“Yeah I know you wanted the best in the city but that place is closed, besides what did that old git know anyway, it’s got the same damned name anyway, maybe it’s the same family.” She started down the stairs. He was about to follow when he heard glass shatter behind him. He turned to look.

Across the street a bar called Plug Ugly’s no longer had a front window.

Three uniformed policemen were dragging two men into two police cars parked at the curb; Frank somehow hadn’t previously noticed the vehicles, though their lights were flashing. One of them men was black and the other white, though blood covered most of the white man’s face. As the black man was being pushed into the first car, he looked up in Frank’s direction, right at Frank actually, his face illuminated by the flashing light. You and I both mate, Frank thought. He tried to make eye contact with him, though it was impossible to tell if he did. Frank decided he did not, and then the man was in the cop car and the other man was in the other car and they both drove away, leaving a small crowd milling aimlessly across the street.

Frank turned, expecting her to be there, she surely had come back up the stairs to see the commotion but he was still alone. He looked down the stairs and didn't see her there either. She was already in the restaurant, maybe waiting for him. I need a drink, Frank thought for a third time. He looked back at the street, at the city, took a deep breath, took the first step. After a moment later he was down under. The stairs were wet, though it hadn't rained in days, and narrow. Sticky. He moved carefully and deliberately, feeling certain he was going to fall and not knowing why.