



Freight Stories

No. 6

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Freight Stories

is a free, online, fiction-only literary quarterly featuring the best new fiction on the web (or anywhere else, for that matter). Editors Andrew Scott and Victoria Barrett constitute the full partnership and entire staff.

We are mission-driven to promote the work of contemporary authors, both established and emerging, and to offer writers the confidence of print editing practices with the exposure of web publishing.

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Freight Stories Submission Guidelines

Freight Stories seeks to publish the finest contemporary fiction. Send us your stories, shorts, stand-alone novel excerpts, and novellas. During our first year, we received a surprising number of very long stories and novellas in our inbox; though we welcome longer works, please do consider sending shorter material as well.

We do not publish work that exists solely for readers of romance, mystery, crime, erotica, or other genres you can name; we do, however, happily consider works of literary fiction that employ the tools of successful genre fiction in their exploration of rich characters.

Fiction of all lengths and styles is welcome. We wish only that your work be driven by the exploration of the lives of believable, compelling characters, and that it help to illuminate, broaden, or in some way enrich its readers' perspectives.

We do not consider work that has been previously published in any form. Submit only one story at a time. Simultaneous submissions are fine, but please let us know immediately if the work is accepted elsewhere.

Submit your best work via e-mail to submissions at freightstories.com. To help us streamline our record-keeping, please include your name, contact information, and title of the work in the body of the e-mail, as well as on your manuscript. PDF and Word attachments (.doc, .docx, .rtf) are preferable to cut-and-paste submissions. As is the case with many literary magazines, we cannot offer payment to our authors, though we hope to in the future.

We welcome submissions year-round and hope to respond within three months. Submissions of more than 40 manuscript pages will require extra time, up to six months or more.

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Chad Simpson

Phantoms

The boy had heard about phantom limb pain long before he had the majority of both of his arms and legs amputated.

The way he understood it, a guy with, say, a missing arm would imagine that his arm was right there attached to his shoulder the way it always had been, only the imaginary arm would be shorter than his real arm. And the guy would feel real pain in that arm sometimes, too. He would think his arm had been contorted, or was trapped in a block of ice, or had been set on fire.

Thankfully, the boy hadn't experienced this, though somewhere between fifty and eighty percent of people who are missing a limb do. Even those people who are born without a limb in the first place, who have never known while they are living and breathing what that arm or leg is supposed to feel like.

But the boy did experience—his second month in the hospital and during the first few months he was at home—something he hadn't ever heard of: Phantom limb pleasure. He would just be sitting there, doing nothing, and suddenly it would feel as if his arms were fully at his sides. He would think he was doing a tombstone rubbing at the old Civil War cemetery, holding a sheet of rice paper in one hand and a thick piece of drawing charcoal in the other. In his head, he would be transferring what was etched into the tombstone onto

the paper, and he would imagine the battles that the former soldier had fought in. He would imagine the smell of gunpowder, the sound of a boy beating a single drum.

Or he would think that his legs were carrying him out into the Snake's Head River. The water would be low, and Wildflower Island would be right there in front of him, just a few steps away. He would imagine getting to the island and lying down on his back, putting his feet up on the low-hanging branch of a shrub.

Sometimes, the pleasure the boy would feel during these moments would be like its own kind of pain. There would be such joy running through his imaginary arms and legs that they would ache, throb with it.

Sometimes, too, he would feel in his imaginary arms what he felt right before he was electrocuted.

He knew better than to grab that power line, but when he got close to it, when it was lying there in the rain and grass right in front of him, just a few inches from his feet, he could feel this energy coming off it.

It was like the field you can sense when you try to bring two similarly charged magnets toward one another—invisible but forceful—except the energy the boy felt coming off the power line was

warm. And instead of repelling him the way those similarly charged magnets push one another away, it was drawing him toward it.

Right before he was knocked unconscious, right before all those volts of electricity surged through his body, the boy felt in his arms a kind of heat he had never known.

And sometimes, that heat would be out in front of him again, asking him to take hold of it, and his imaginary arms, even though they knew the damage that awaited them, couldn't help themselves. They reached out for the warmth without hesitating, wanting to feel, if only for the fraction of a second, the wire's magnificent and terrible heat, wanting it again to enter them.

Terese Svoboda

Christ and Three Geese and What Happened to the Boy Afterward

They are not twins but sisters though they like to match when they dress, when they do dress, that is, when a robe will not do for the little door-answering life they live, the door left open and the salesman or postal deliverer blinking at whatever peignoir meets him, a floating pink something turned on and forgotten. When they shimmy out of these, they wear dress suits and sensible shoes, so sensible that a clerk once said they could cross the continent in them, if the laces didn't give.

Then he sold them hide laces.

In the old home movies they love to watch, the elder sister dances in her own shoes, neither the sensible nor the peignoir but what you wear for a tutu. She dances all the right steps, showing them off to the father not shown, who works the camera. Later she wears the tutu shoes to beauty contests and maybe she wins them and more often she doesn't, according to her younger sister. This sister keeps the sensible shoes because two pairs are bought for less. However, she has been known to refuse to walk altogether or else will walk right on through the door and belt the mailman in the chops for being so forward, for taking the postage due, in her opinion, too slowly.

Their mother—the single one they have and who needs more?—stays in her room and does not insist on warmed crackers or seeing the milk poured from the carton, not the way the girls say she does. That odd bit of a life in which the girls appeared—a brother too—has more to do with the grandmother who rosaried the mother into a gasp of marriage than with the professor who quickly shook them off and died of drink. Now in amongst the TV dinner droppings and the pitchers of water—this is an earthquake state—the mother keeps her ups and downs to herself, as much of herself as her daughters will allow, as much as they can complain and still roll her around in her mechanical chair, mechanical they call it, not wheel.

The boy had waited in the Boy's Room, dressed but never answering the door. He kept a dog who peed when petted but still required walks which he took, the boy dragging the dog begging to be petted past the salesman out into the baked block of whatever sunbelt they had moved into. This relieved the dog, yes, but the boy more.

In their youth, no other children inhabited those just-asphalted perimeters of the cities they relocated into with what little money the professor had left them. Other children make noise and

trouble, said the mother. A girl will attract traffic and a boy might throw a ball through a window and which would you want? The boy didn't have any balls to throw but did know boys who did, bad boys but not by name, anyway not by their given names but by the ones his sisters used, pointing them out at a distance, boys who lived somewhere in the cities they lived alongside.

The dog was a big white fluffy affair, about as peignoir a dog of that size could be, the only kind his sisters would allow, although the boy only saw its black tongue and the way it closed its eyes just before being petted. Men could not so easily get past the dog after the door-answering because of its size, men could not then take advantage of women not quite ready for proper presentation, though the younger sister fell into prayer for extra measure: Oh, my god, don't let him have a letter I have to sign for.

Men are not the point of the elder sister's beauty contests. Her talent in those contests for beauty has always been dance, not seduction. She dances for money with partners with blue boleros and very tight black satin pants who turn up their pinkies when they twirl her.

But the little money she makes does not add enough to the little money the father has left. They all have to okay law school for the boy. The father had taught at that school and when the son is admitted, he grows a beard like his father's at the end of his face, a scrabble of face hair that grows as if it is left over from somewhere else, someplace better for hair.

The girls shave it off him one night, the elder bearing down, with the younger holding his arms behind him with arms she has built up, the way they do on TV, lifting cans of beans instead of weights high over her head. The brother weeps through the shaving but their mother, rolling herself in, laughs at him for weeping, tells him to be a man. Or whatever.

He hasn't been in practice for more than twenty years before he marries his secretary. She's after his money, whispers the elder to the assembled, pushing the mother up the aisle in a corsage and purple veils, all smiles. She's got him by the bullocks, says the younger. He'll take up drink like his father, they tell the justice of the peace.

Since the two girls hadn't managed to get out of their robes to get to the rehearsal the night before, none of the bride's party has had the pleasure of inspecting the groom's. They stun: the elder still sports quite a bosom and legs and has selected a lowcut short sheath bearing polka dots of the clown kind, dots meant for viewing from stadium seats at a contest. Her face she covers with pancake makeup until all the expression underneath slips around at the lipstick and lashes. A large rhinestone butterfly lights up her false blonde chignon in accent.

The younger glitters, she French-twist glitters, shoulder glitters, eyelid glitters, she glitters with whatever catches in the net of her strapless, full-length ballgown. The late afternoon light, golden in this season of suburban fruition and waiting, reflects every millimeter of every square of the glitter. Her taut, bean-heaving biceps glitter.

An usher leads them to the front, to the groom's side. Stragglers from the bride's side fill out their side. The two sisters twist around to see who is watching but everyone is looking elsewhere. Then they use compacts with mirrors to find the bride's eyes as she walks up the aisle, to blind her with light. But their brother is getting away anyway, there is no doubt about it. The two girls curse the flowers, the choice of ring, the sermon, the length of his pants, and then it is over.

But it is not over for the elder. First the bride's father croons a little song he made up the last time he saw her, a diaper changing song, if not prenatal, and then the bride and groom dance and then her parents dance, his mother sitting in her chair smiling, although not idiotically—she knows enough to roll herself into the ladies right after. Then the music speeds up and those with drinks set them down and dance, surrounding the bride and groom who move as if they are alone, theatrically alone, slow against the fast beat, and the elder says: I know the man's part, and she puts out her hand for her sister.

Her sister takes it.

All glitter and dots, the two women clear the floor with their precise wide turnings and leanings back, both faces grim or professionally pleasant. Where is the father to watch? Where is his camera? When the dance ends, as much as they do end at receptions, no one claps and urges them on, no one comes forward to cut in. But no one dances next, a kind of triumph for the two of them.

They fetch their mother from the bathroom and find their way out of the place in the dark, pushing and jerking the wheelchair over gravel.

Three geese fly at the chair when they open the car door, Christ is what the elder says when she can't find the keys under the mat and her breasts pop out of her sheath, and the boy says nothing at all afterwards, the best he can manage, this time saying it twice, his bride helping.

Midge Raymond

Crossroads

Liz calls me from the platform at South Station. I hear the echo of a boarding announcement sizzle in the background as she says, “He’s at it again.” She’s on her way to Providence for a friend’s wedding, alone. Her husband, Marc, is staying home, which doesn’t bode well for their own marriage.

“You know how he always wants me to call him on his cell?” Liz continues. “He says it’s because it’s the only phone he answers. But I know it’s so I’ll never know exactly where he is.”

I’m sitting in my tiny studio, feet propped up on the secondhand coffee table that also serves as my dining room table and writing desk. A flash of lightning turns the dark, cavelike space into a glaring valley of white light.

“Story of my life,” she says. “It’s like these new books we’re acquiring. Remember those Choose Your Own Adventure books? The ones we read when we were kids?”

“Not really,” I say.

“Oh, you know—after each chapter, you get to decide your own fate,” she explains. “Say you arrive at a haunted house or something. The book says, ‘If you decide to open the door, turn to page ten. If you want to turn around and walk away, turn to page twelve.’”

“So?”

“So we’re publishing a knock-off series,” she says, “and when I was working on one of the manuscripts today, it struck me that I made the wrong decision. You know—that one time.”

“That was months ago,” I say, “and you’re married now. Everything’s different.”

“I read every one of those damn books as a kid,” she says. “I always chose to turn around and walk away. The path of least resistance.”

“I never should have told you.” I think about her situation, as I had back when I’d debated making the call. She hadn’t been in a good spot. *If you decide to confront your fiancé, turn to Humiliating Breakup and Cancellation of Nuptials. If you decide to keep quiet, turn to A Life of Misery and Repressed Anger.*

“I wouldn’t have said anything at all,” I continue, “if I’d known you weren’t going to do anything about it.”

“I’ve done plenty,” she says.

“Spying on him and opening his mail doesn’t count.”

“Did I tell you he keeps his phone in his pocket now?” she says. “That he undresses in the bathroom, so I can’t check it while he’s in the shower?”

“Well, whose fault is that?”

“God, I should have said something. I just didn’t know what the hell to say. ‘Gee, Marc, I didn’t know you were such a fan of women’s tennis?’ I mean, what do you say at a time like that?” She sighs. “It just seemed so much easier. The path of least resistance.”

“You walk it with your eyes closed.”

It all began a month before their wedding. I’d been in San Diego for a story on marines at Camp Pendleton, about to be deployed to Iraq. I write for the *Globe*, and with the recent cutbacks, I didn’t think I’d ever get to travel again, let alone to California. Still, it wasn’t what I expected. I interviewed four young guys, their shaved heads like well-worn tennis balls, and a woman preparing her three-year-old daughter for life with her grandmother. The interviews left me with a lump in my throat, but the photographer wasn’t interested in talking, or grabbing dinner with me. So I headed back to my hotel room alone.

It was nine o’clock on a summer evening, the sun having barely set, and I’d just pushed the room service tray out my door and locked it behind me. I started channel surfing, and that’s when I saw it. I immediately dialed Liz’s number, forgetting that it was close to midnight in Boston.

“Oh,” I said when she picked up, “were you asleep?”

“Kelly? Is that you? What’s wrong?” Her voice awakened into alarm.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I didn’t realize it was so late there.”

“What’s going on?”

That’s when I hesitated, a moment I’ve gone back to ever since. “Well,” I began, “I think you should turn on your television. I think I might have seen something.”

I directed her to the Tennis Channel, to the women’s quarterfinals at the Acura Classic in Carlsbad.

“Look,” I said slowly, as a game ended and the players headed to their chairs. “Do you see, just a couple rows up, behind Mary Pierce?”

“I don’t—” Then she stopped. The silence on her end told me she’d seen what I had: Marc, then her fiancé, in one of the box seats.

“It is him, isn’t it?” I asked. “I wasn’t completely sure—”

“It’s him,” she said. “He’s wearing the Tommy Bahama shirt I bought him for our trip to Barbados. The trip on which he fucking *proposed*.”

It was just like her to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition, even at a time like that. I didn’t know what to say. On the screen, just beyond Mary Pierce’s tight, braided ponytail, Marc was nuzzling a blonde woman I’d never seen before. We both watched in silence as he kissed her, then put his hand possessively on her bare, tanned knee. Then the next match started, and we lost the view.

“Liz?” I worried she was no longer there. “You okay?”

“I’m just trying to figure out what’s more fake, her boobs or her bleached-out hair.”

“I shouldn’t have called.”

“No. You should have.”

“I thought he was in San Francisco.”

“He was,” she said. “I mean, I thought so too. He called me just a couple hours ago. Said he was heading out for dinner with clients, then going straight to bed.” She barked out a humorless laugh. “Well, that part’s true. He’s certainly looks eager to get to bed, doesn’t he?”

I stayed on the phone with her for another two hours. It’s what best friends do. I didn’t wonder until later what kind of friend offers up this sort of news and what sort of friend keeps it to herself.

We’d met in college and then moved to Boston together, sharing a two-bedroom conversion in Brighton, with cold, high-ceilinged rooms and a wood-burning fireplace. Three years later, when Liz moved in with Marc, I advertised for another roommate and interviewed five people, among them a sixty-year-old cat lady and an eighteen-year-old college student with either blood or spaghetti sauce on her sleeve; I didn’t want to know which. In the end, I gave up. By then, I couldn’t imagine living with anyone else.

I moved into what I thought would be my dream neighborhood, Beacon Hill, renting an overpriced fourth-floor walk-up with no parking. After getting ticketed six times in two months, then towed, I finally leased a parking space in a garage nearby, nearly crippling my already meager budget. *Why don’t you just move?* Liz finally asked. But it wasn’t the apartment I hated.

Finding someone who fills a gap in your life is a lot like falling in love: you spend all your time together, talk every few hours, share

everything. Liz and I had the same taste in music, books, and men, though back when we met, we’d experienced only two out of three. We’d both been shy, hiding behind Bob Dylan and Dylan Thomas, always painfully aware of what we were missing.

I still remember the moment our friendship began—on a Friday night outside our college library, where we’d both been trying to study. It was snowing, and as the storm whipped into a bigger rage, the librarian announced an early closing. Liz and I stood outside the door, watching the drifts pile up: dunes of clean, sparkling snow that changed shape every few seconds in the wind. We shared a look, then dropped our books and ran out into the snow. Struggling against the wind, we built a snowperson, giving it a slender androgynous body, unearthing stones and gravel for its eyes and mouth, picking up pine needles for its longish hair. I donated my hat, and then we went for coffee at the student center.

We both felt out of place at school; she’d come from a small town and found the other students snobby and closed off. I grew up in New York and chose a rural college as an antidote to the battery of noise and people, later discovering that even within the intimacy of a small college, I was as invisible as I’d been in the city.

Liz and I decided to divide and conquer; she’d join the literary magazine, I’d write for the student newspaper. But the lit mag didn’t work out; she quit after a couple of weeks. I thought she might join the paper, and when she didn’t, I had a hard time admitting that I was relieved. I was writing daily, going to parties, and though I always invited her along, I could tell she felt out of place. And I felt as

though I were looking after an awkward younger sister, explaining her away to new friends—*She’s just a little shy*. No one was meeting the Liz I knew, the spirited, goofy wordsmith who in so many ways had been my rescuer. Eventually she began to fade from my own memory as well.

We grew apart during our last years at school, but after graduation, when we both decided to move to Boston, where the jobs were, it still felt natural to rent an apartment together. And soon after we settled in, things changed. She dropped weight and got a sleek new wardrobe for her job in publishing. As I worked longer and more irregular hours, I began to skip happy hours and weekends altogether. I’d come home to find new people at the apartment for cocktails or brunch, and most weekends I woke to find a guy in our kitchen—Liz’s now, not mine. For the first time in years, whenever we stood together on the street or sat at a bar, I could feel men looking at her instead of me, and I felt something shift between us, a crack in our foundation that widened and split as time passed. She began to make me feel greedy.

We met Marc at a party thrown by a friend of Liz’s. I saw him across the room, then arranged to bump into him at the makeshift bar. Already a little drunk, I poured him a shot of tequila, then another. We raised our glasses and licked the salt off each other’s hands. Then he grinned, grabbed three beers, and said, *Catch you later*. But when later arrived, when I caught his eye and waved him over, he honed in on Liz, apparently having forgotten me completely. *Easy come, easy go*, I told myself. But I resented it when he took her

number. When he called her the next week. When he turned out to be The One.

A part of me knows why I’d made the call. *If you pretend you saw nothing on the Tennis Channel, turn to A Sense of Superiority and Guilty Pleasure. If you decide to let your best friend witness her fiancé’s infidelity, turn to The Lowest Form of Revenge.*

“I think I have a ghost.”

“Oh, come on,” Liz says.

“Seriously. Bess was hissing at the wall for no apparent reason. And then it got really cold in here.”

“First of all, that cat is psychotic,” she says. “Second, it’s forty degrees out.”

“Bess only hisses at people, not walls,” I say. “And the heat is the one thing in here that actually works.” My apartment is on the top floor of two-hundred-year-old building. The roof slopes, and there are only two spots in the entire unit where I can stand up straight. My landlady looks two hundred years old herself; she knows where all the creaks are and walks around the building without making a sound.

“Well, I’m sure it’s nothing,” she says. “What’re you doing tonight?”

“Having a séance,” I say. “Want to come over?”

“Come out for a drink,” she says.

“I thought you had plans with Marc.”

“He’s still at the office. Let’s have a cocktail before I meet him for dinner.”

As usual, she doesn’t invite me to join them. I’m not in the mood to have a drink, then come home to spend Friday night alone, tipsy, while she dines with her husband. But I don’t have anything else to do.

So I agree to meet her at No. 9 Park, then hang up and head into the bathroom to get ready. Bess is already in there, staring at the wall behind the bathtub, every inch of her black-and-white coat on end. When I nudge her out with my foot, she growls from deep in her throat.

Her behavior puts me on edge, as if something’s about to happen and she already knows what it is. As I plug in my flat iron and rummage through my makeup bag, I try to forget about Bess and ghosts, and I remember last night’s dream.

It’s a recurring dream, a little different every time, in which I discover a new room in my apartment, one I’d never known was there. Sometimes it’s a door off the kitchen that leads to an enormous pantry, or a hallway that opens up into a guest suite. Last night, I dreamed of opening a hidden door in my closet and discovering a bedroom. It was larger and neater than my combination bedroom, living room, and dining room—no papers and books strewn about, no clothes hanging off every surface. It seemed simple and clean and uncluttered, though I can’t remember much detail. I only took a few steps in before I was called back by my alarm clock.

Leaving the bathroom, I glance around, trying to recapture the dream. A few months ago, I did a feature on sleep and dreaming for the paper, and I mentioned my dreams to the shrink I interviewed. She said that in dreams, a home represents the different aspects of your personality, and that finding a new room is like discovering a new part of yourself. But while I always seem to be discovering new rooms in my sleep, my dreams only allow me one or two steps through the door.

At the restaurant, I take a seat in the window to wait for Liz. I order a lemon drop martini. It strikes me as funny that she needs a drink before meeting Marc, that I want a drink before meeting her. Soon we’ll all be carrying flasks of vodka under our coats.

I look out at the streets. The temperature’s lower now, and I can almost see it; for some reason, I’ve always been able to sense the weather without opening a window. I can see brutal cold reflected in sidewalks, incipient rain in the leaves of trees.

Liz arrives, and as she sheds her coat, I notice the new dress, the dipping neckline. “Whoa,” I say. “What’s next, implants? Botox?”

“I’m not *competing* with the bimbo, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she says. “I found it on sale.”

“Right.”

She orders a cosmopolitan, and we talk about work, about friends in common. Marc is late, so we order another round.

“Remember how I told you how Marc kisses with his eyes open?” she says. “Was he doing that on the Tennis Channel?”

She did pretty well, waiting until the second round. “I don’t know,” I tell her.

“I used to want to say something about it,” she says. “But then I knew he’d say, ‘Well, the only way you can know I’m kissing with my eyes open is if you’re kissing with *your* eyes open.’”

“I was with a guy like that.” I don’t tell her who it was.

“Did it drive you crazy or what?”

“Not really,” I say. “I like being looked at.”

“Yeah, except he’s looking at you *and* every other woman out there at the same time,” she says. She finishes her cosmo. “I should’ve started kissing with my eyes open a little sooner.”

She orders a third. “So I’m still editing these choose-your-adventure books,” she says. “And here’s the thing. At some point, even if you choose the path of least resistance, you’ll end up in a freaky situation.”

“How’s that?”

“If you turn away from the haunted house, for example, you’ll still run into a goblin on the street,” she says. “That’s the way they work. There’s no happy ending. You get dragged into the chaos no matter what.”

Through the window, I see a jacket I recognize, and I stand up. “Marc’s here.” I hand her some money and put on my coat.

“Finish your drink, at least,” she says.

I down the rest of my martini in one gulp.

She gives me a look. “You know, he’s going to get suspicious if you keep avoiding him.”

“Maybe he should.” I lean over to embrace her in a quick half-hug. Marc has already spotted us, and as he approaches, my shoulder brushes against his.

I walk home, thinking about the adventure series. Liz had never wanted to work on children’s books, but I suppose, at twenty-eight, we’re both past realizing we can have everything we want. I still can’t recall having read those books as a kid, but the choose-your-adventure idea seems even more foreign to me now. Books for adults are not constructed that way. In the books we read now, one page follows another, and we turn them in the expected order, with no thought to the story having more than one ending, and no recollection of ever having done it differently.

Days later, I find myself staring at the phone in my hand, wondering if I should make the call. *If you call, turn to A Pathetic and Misguided Attempt to Regain a Sense of Self-Worth. If you don’t call, turn to Leaving the Past in the Past.*

I pour a glass of wine and think about what Liz had said—that no matter what path you choose, you end up in a bad situation. And as I dial, I feel a tremble in my fingers, as if I’m holding the corner of a page.

I have to leave a message, wondering all the while whether he’ll buy it—a mouse is a flimsy excuse, especially for someone with a cat. But I think he probably doesn’t remember the cat.

He shows up at the door an hour later. He knows it’s not about the mouse. For once, it feels nice not to pretend. His arms

around me reignite the spark that I'd felt when he'd brushed my shoulder at the restaurant.

Afterward, I leave him dozing in bed and look out the window. It's beginning to snow—soft thick wet flakes on the edge of rain. A few minutes later, he gets up and stands behind me. It's dark outside, and I shift my gaze to our reflections in the glass. He looks different, his features distorted, and it's jarring, though I know it's only because I'm not used to seeing him this way. A photojournalism professor once told me to remember one thing about portraits: *If you want satisfied subjects*, he said, *flip the image. They need to see themselves the way they think they look, like they're in front of a mirror. No one wants to see reality.*

I turn around. "You'd better go."

"I know."

"This is the last time."

"That's what you said before."

"It's different now." I don't tell him why. But maybe he already knows.

I walk him downstairs. I see the blur of my lipstick on his shirt sleeve as it disappears into the arm of his jacket. I don't mention it. Liz may see it; she may not. She may confront him, or she may again choose the path of least resistance. I watch Marc hurry down the street, the wet snow sticking to the ground, his shoes melting prints into the sidewalk, marking his trail. I stand in the doorway until his footprints disappear.

Glen Pourciau

Mercy

Vacation, Mexican beach, drinks in our hands, the cell phone rings, our neighbor Mercy calling, across the street, one house over, hesitates to disturb us on our vacation, but something is bothering her she needs to tell us about. She's been looking at our house through binoculars. Probably no reason to be alarmed, but it should be up to us to decide what to worry about when it comes to our house. There's a light on in there, she says, a light she doesn't remember being on for a couple of days after we left, and she can see that it stays on all night. Mercy keeps an eye out for everybody and everything, it's in her nature to stand near the window and peer at passing cars, to peel back the drapes at every sound, to find out what any and all movements could be a clue to. She wishes her binoculars could see around corners, she tells me, because from where she is she can't tell much about what's going on in our house. She doesn't want to bolt across the street and peek through our windows, she says, someone might call the cops and they could drag her into jail. Did you leave the light on? she asks me. I tell her I didn't, not as far as I remember, and I ask my wife if she did, same answer. Want me to go in and check it out? I talk with my wife, fill her in, my hand over the phone, unsure if Mercy can hear us. We roll our eyes and make faces at one another. We don't want her in the house, she's a busybody, and

she might take her camera and shoot pictures of all the rooms and put them on her computer and stare at them for hours, like some creep I saw in a movie. My wife takes a hit off her drink and looks out at the waves rolling toward us, and I decide it's up to me. Go on in, Mercy, thanks, and I tell her where the key is hidden and give her the alarm code. It sickens me to imagine her excitement, her sense of mission. I'll call and let you know, she says. As soon as you can, I say. I hate thinking of her in our house, my wife says. I don't answer her. I sit back, close my eyes. I can't stop imagining what Mercy could be doing, all the information she has access to, account numbers and passwords if she looks deep enough. She could rob us blind and anything missing could be blamed on burglars. We should have told her we'd call the police, my wife says, and ask them to look around. I'm sure she's already in there, I say, it won't be long before she calls us back. I think about changing the subject, but we both know that whatever I say the subject won't change, at dinner we'll still be talking about it or trying not to talk about it. I see Mercy going through our drawers and nightstands, smelling our clothes, looking through the refrigerator and the pantry, sitting at my desk, did I leave the computer on, has she brought listening devices to stick on the bottom of our lamps and furniture? What do we know about her and what do

we know about who she knows? A truck backed up to the garage behind the house, men loading up our belongings, and Mercy directing traffic, telling her henchman which pieces to steal. A piercing pain hits my stomach, and I'm thinking we may need to go back, depending on what she tells us. The phone rings and it's Mercy. Hellfire, she says, I don't know what hit the place. I'm just kidding. I've turned off the light and looked around, no sign of a break-in, no broken windows, all doors shut, all drawers closed. Anything you want me to check? I thank her, not necessary, just put the code back in when she leaves. Okay, she says, don't worry, I'm leaving almost no fingerprints. There is a smell in the bedroom, she adds. What kind of smell? I ask. A little like sweat, she says, something from the body, maybe it's in the mattress, something you're probably used to and don't notice. I mentioned it in case you notice when you get back. It was here before I came in, she says, but put your mind at ease, we worry about things more than we should because at some level we fear we deserve the bad things that could happen to us. We'll give it a sniff when we get back, I tell her, and my wife's head snaps in my direction. Enjoy your vacation, Mercy says. Give what a sniff? my wife asks when I hang up. Mercy says there's a human smell in our bedroom. She says we worry the worst will happen because we think we deserve it. She said that while she was standing in our house? my wife asks. I nod and sip my drink and squint at the horizon, my stomach rumbling. What have we ever done to her? she asks me. Nothing, I say. Do you think the light was on? I don't know what to say to her. Why would she say it was if it wasn't? she asks. I think

about her questions and ask myself if Mercy is still in our house, her eyes and hands and nose, and what she thinks we deserve, but I have no answers, and the questions only breed more questions.

Eugene Cross

430

Route 430, a weathered run of highway, twisted through Clymer County like a dark river. Roddy Daniels knew its turns by heart. This was in western New York, where the state made its border with Pennsylvania in a sharp right angle. Roddy had lived here his whole life. Sometimes at night he would drive 430 and close his eyes for short stretches and let the road lead him.

In late August the temperature dropped. A dense fog gathered in the banks of the road and lay in patches across the fields. Roddy was concentrating hard, doing his best to keep the Chevy half-ton right of the yellow line when he could make it out, though he'd not seen another car for miles. His wife, Linda, sat beside him, staring out the window. They had driven into town to see a war movie full of loud explosions and young men getting killed. In one scene, a group of soldiers, exhausted from that day's fighting, dug into trenches where men lay dying. All night long the dying men called out names into the dark. Halfway through the movie, Linda had stood up and walked out and so Roddy had followed her wordlessly to the truck. They were already halfway home, the road sliding silently beneath them.

The moon was a quarter full and free of clouds and it made the fog in the fields glow pale and ghostly. Linda had not said a word since before the movie some two hours earlier.

"The deer will be out tonight," Roddy said. "This cold will have them in the fields." He waited for a response, but Linda only nodded slightly, her long dark hair barely moving.

Roddy had grown up in French Creek, a small community several miles from the old farmhouse where he and Linda now lived, and he knew the county as well as anyone. As a boy, he'd walked through the woods for hours, studying tracks until he could tell the difference between a yearling doe and a full grown buck, running his fingers along the smooth imprints their bodies left in their earthen beds, still warm from their slumber. He would scan the treetops for hawk's nests, and sit for entire afternoons watching the shifting pattern the sunlight made on the forest floor as it spilled through the canopy of trees. When he'd first started bringing Linda here they would take long hikes through these woods and she'd been amazed at the things he'd shown her, the shed antlers laying on the ground like forgotten artifacts, the way a perched great horned owl would swivel its head to watch them walk by. Linda was from the city

and had only passed these woods while driving, never stopping to look, or even consider that a world all its own existed somewhere within. Roddy had changed all that, hoping that if he showed her that world she would learn to be happy there, away from the city. And so he had taught her everything he knew from an entire boyhood spent stalking through these forests. But that was before Linda had left and come back, and now Roddy could not remember the last time they'd gone to the woods together.

Two months earlier, on a Wednesday afternoon, Roddy had returned home from the lumber yard where he worked as an inventory manager to find Linda gone. No warning, no fight the night before, no phone call at work. Just her half of the closet empty, her suitcase missing from the hutch beneath the stairs, and a note on the counter in her hand asking him not to come looking for her. And so he hadn't, and for forty-two days there had been nothing. Until two weeks ago, when he'd come home to discover her sleeping in bed, the closet full, her suitcase back beneath the stairs. He had not asked her where she'd been. He was too afraid of the answer, and afraid also, every day when he came home from work, that she would be gone again. Now when he opened the front door and stepped into the foyer, his stomach knotted and churned until he found her reading in the kitchen, or watching television in the den with the sound turned down.

The wind was blowing hard and Roddy could feel it take hold of the truck as though an invisible hand was trying to push them

off the road. He gripped the worn steering wheel tightly. Twenty minutes more and they would be home.

"What'd you think of the movie?" Roddy asked, regretting the question immediately.

"It was all right," Linda said, her voice low. "I guess I just didn't feel like a movie tonight." It had been Roddy's idea to drive into town, to get out of the house. The silence between them had become an oppression, a heavy blanket that covered everything. He had wanted to be somewhere loud. While Linda was gone, he kept the TV going at all hours, let the clock radio on the nightstand play continuously. The sounds had been small comfort to him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't recognize any of the titles."

"It's fine," Linda said.

Roddy followed the soft bank of the road past Clyde Benson's place and then the Holbrook Dairy, with its flat barn parlor where the milking was done, all lit up with fluorescent lights as though there was a fire within. 430 wound on and they followed it.

"What would you say to a drink?" Roddy asked. A cinder block roadhouse with a dirt parking lot in back sat off the road. It was the only bar for miles.

"How about another night?" Linda said. "Couldn't we stop another night?"

"We'll save it for another time," Roddy said, and he hoped that they would.

What Roddy had always loved most about Linda was her unpredictability. Early in their courtship she surprised him at work with a picnic lunch. They found a spot in the pasture that bordered the lumber yard, and when they finished eating Linda pushed him down and climbed above him. She held his head to the Earth with her kisses, and they made love there for the first time, hidden in the tall grass not one hundred yards from where he worked. Roddy felt then and for months afterwards, that the stagnant normalcy of his life had been suddenly and intoxicatingly disrupted by a force much stronger than himself. Linda, who took him into town to meet her friends at a bar and then serenaded him with karaoke while he beamed, his cheeks turning as bright red as currants. Linda, who called him one afternoon to help her move, and once the bed of his truck was full, when he asked where he was taking her, gave him directions to his house. Linda, who wore a sun dress and no shoes on their wedding day, whose every arrival and movement was as unexpected as lightning from a clear sky, who in three years never ceased to surprise him. Linda, whose thoughts were as mysterious to him now as a foreign tongue, who somewhere along the way stopped loving him or this place or both since they were the same, and who left him alone for six weeks without so much as a phone call.

430 dipped down between two low-lying pastures where the fog was thicker yet. Soon they would reach the turn off for West Mina Lane, and from there it was a straight shot to the

farmhouse, hidden from the road by a stand of hemlocks. Roddy thought of how the rest of the night would go, the ritual of preparing for bed, slowly undressing and then climbing beneath the covers where he would lie next to Linda, perfectly still and silent, aware even of the sound of his own breathing. Thinking of it emptied him out.

They came to a thick pocket of fog, but Roddy knew the road ran straight here and he kept the wheel steady. He turned toward Linda, her profile a silhouette against the fields that stretched beyond the window. Arriving home had become the worst part of his day, the uncertainty of walking in and wondering if he would find her there. Every moment felt like waiting. “Linda,” he said, but she kept staring straight ahead, her eyes focused on something outside.

“Roddy,” she said, and when she did the sound of it struck him. It had been so long since she’d said his name. A shadow flashed from the corner of his eye before they felt a solid thump as the front of the truck collided with something on the road’s shoulder. He hit the brakes, the high pitched squeal of rubber sliding over asphalt, and when the truck had ground to a halt, Roddy pulled over clear off the road.

“What the hell was that?” he asked. The bitter odor of burnt rubber filled the truck’s interior. Roddy switched on the hazard lights.

“I don’t know,” Linda said. “It came out of the field.” She looked at him, the startled expression on her face turning angry. “You weren’t watching the road,” she said.

"I didn't see anything," Roddy said, and she turned away again.

Cornfields stretched away on either side of the road amid the now thinning fog. In the distance Roddy could make out a grain silo against the dark night sky. He checked the rearview, the road empty. He put the Chevy in drive and pulled around in a U-turn until they faced the direction they'd come from. Driving slowly along the shoulder, they went on that way until they saw a dark figure lying on the opposite side of the road. The truck's headlights illuminated the form. It was too small to be a deer. Roddy left the headlights on, opened the truck's door and stepped out. The cold bit at his skin. He'd forgotten his fleece at home. He crossed his arms over his chest and walked with his head down against the wind. He heard the passenger door open and then shut and then the sound of Linda walking behind him.

A dog lay dying on the shoulder of the road, a large brown animal, a male dog, but not of distinguishable breed, a thick stream of blood running from its mouth to the road. It kept trying to lift its head and when it did, Roddy could see that the ear closest to the pavement had been scraped off. Its front legs were immobile, but its back legs kicked at the air slowly, mechanically, as though they were no longer under the animal's control. The dog's midsection was caved in, the ribs giving way where the truck's bumper had struck. The dog did not belong to any of Roddy's neighbors. He'd never seen it before.

"My God," Linda said, startling Roddy. He'd forgotten she was behind him. "You weren't looking," she said. "You should have been paying attention. My God."

Roddy knelt down and reached toward the dog and when he did it tried to snap at him, but it was hardly a threat, the animal's jaws opening and closing slowly as it labored for breath. "Easy," Roddy said and laid his hand softly on the dog's side. The animal whined and Roddy lifted his hand. Slowly, and with as much care as he could muster, he parted the matted hair that covered the dog's neck. There was no collar. Blood continued to ooze from the dog's mouth, from some injury deep within that Roddy knew could not be mended. He stood and looked at Linda who was now crying silently, hugging her chest as she swayed. Even crying, she was beautiful, her skin almost luminescent under the night sky. He looked back at the dying animal.

"You have to do something," Linda said. "We can't just leave him like this. He's in agony."

Roddy lifted his gaze and stared at her. 'Agony.' In all the time they'd been together, he'd never heard her use the word, and it sounded strange now. He understood that it existed for her only as an idea, an approximation of pain.

Roddy walked back across the road. When he reached the truck he opened the door and the interior light snapped on. Across the roof of the cab, near the rear window, was the gun rack which held the Browning Bolt Action. Roddy stepped onto the running board, pulled the driver's seat forward and carefully unfastened the

rifle from the rack. Once he had it down he laid it across the rear seats. Then he took a loaded box magazine from his hunting pack and slipped it into the back pocket of his jeans.

Roddy had gone hunting for as long as he could remember. He started as a kid, shooting squirrels and other small game using a hand-me-down .22. For years he'd gone to the camp in Kane where his father and uncles stayed during deer season. Linda had never approved and asked only that he not talk about it around her, one more thing they did not discuss.

Roddy took the rifle carefully from the rear seats and shut the truck door. He pulled the bolt upward and back and checked the breech. He lowered the rifle and ran the fingers of his free hand over the smooth finish of the walnut stock. He removed the magazine from his back pocket and clicked it into place below the breech. Then he pushed the bolt forward and closed it. He slung the worn leather strap over his shoulder with the barrel of the rifle pointed at the ground, and walked back across the road.

The dog was still trying to lift its head, his eyes rolling loosely for a moment before locking on Roddy, though the dog seemed to stare at something beyond him. With the dog's every breath, Roddy heard the gurgling of blood. For a moment he measured his breaths slowly until they matched those of the dying animal. Linda was still crying. She'd taken a step back from the dog when he'd returned.

"Why are you waiting?" she said between sobs. "Can't you see he's suffering?"

Roddy lifted the gun from his shoulder and switched off the safety. He pressed the recoil into his shoulder and aimed the barrel at the dog's chest. His breathing was still in rhythm with the dog's and he inhaled and pressed his finger lightly against the trigger. The wind rushed through the adjacent cornfield and passed over them like a baptism. Roddy heard Linda crying behind him, her sobs quiet and even. He stopped what he was about to do and lowered the rifle. With the barrel pointed at the ground he turned and took a step toward Linda. Her hands were at her sides and with his free hand he lifted them both, one at a time, and placed the rifle in them. Linda held the gun awkwardly, letting the stock slide down into the crook of her elbow, almost cradling the barrel.

"Here," Roddy said, "you do it." He turned and crossed the road. When he reached the truck, he climbed into the cab and shut the door behind him. Then he turned to face Linda and waited to see what she would do.

Kip Robisch

Body and Soul

The house is sided in cedar shakes and has deep white eaves. A stained glass window in the oaken front door, and a wrap-around porch, and light like the heart's glow from a walk, or like the sun behind the house that now melts its way down into the valley. Along the sides of the house, tall lodgepole and hemlock and spruce stand fragrant in a bright sun after a good rain, their duff the color of the shakes, all of it trimmed and crisp in the mountain air. There is soft music inside, and two people in love. One of them is a good cook. From the front door will emerge the woman, tall and blonde, to get the mail from the box down the stone steps glowing between the Japanese lawn lamps, down the slope of the yard to the steep brick street that arches like a brow to the village. The letters will be from family, a family that still sends letters. One will be bad news, but you know just from looking at the house that bad news will be consumed in a wash of devotion. Her sundress flits new and white up the steps, her bare feet safe from a sharp rock or the falling night or the hint of a drunk staggering from the family tavern in the village, music pouring onto the street behind him, first a lone saxophone, then a symphony swelling.

The house is on a television screen, and the music is played by an orchestra sparkling under the baton held by a conductor of the

poignant chord progression, a former French horn player who learned all the brass, and then the strings, and found that she could play the human heart through all the instruments at once with just this baton. She visits actors and directors, she lunches with the governing bodies of the city, and she knows the major lift, the flattened fifth, the fluttering triplets of flutes as the credits roll while the athlete sits through them on his sofa, his chicken and rice half finished, the lining of his soul a tattered mess inside of his trap-tight musculature as the movie ends with the beautiful symphonic soundtrack making him want that love. To live in that village of mountain air and knotty craftsmanship and comfort without track of money or complexity, without paper, and without time. No credits roll for the people in the house. No bills arrive. And the body's pain which cannot be translated into film is the only pain he wants to feel, the pain he wants to share with someone who will touch the muscle and through it the condensed light the old alchemists used to call electrical fluid, the charge of contraction and fibrillation and axons blasting in ecstatic chorus.

On the field, the routines take over. There are moments of bliss, of trance, of transcendent suffering through which he puts every striated fiber as the clap of flags and the metallic clink of their

rigging and the hot silver brand of bleachers slide by him and his legs cover the synthetic red track, the careful attention to joints that should never suffer, the nerve-shot alarms of a chance lost or a season interrupted or a life changed. The javelin flies. The tape breaks. The long pole bends beneath his momentum and weight and his chalked hands hold on against the laws of motion designed to send him forward as he climbs up, the sky above something like the bright blue of him inside when this is happening, before the twilight of the shower and then the falling blackness in him as the key turns in the front door, the smell of his kitchen and the coal of him smoldering on until sleep. The loneliness perfected.

In sleep his body tells its story. An ache that wakes him. A strand of complaint from a ligament, from a deltoid after putting the shot twenty times. In sleep he spins in the dusty circle, spins until he occupies another body, and when he is awake and wants to dream he watches other lives and occupies them, searching for his mated soul, his invisible half of Janus, the love he wants. The hollow in him makes him light, and his deepening grief makes him fast as he runs not toward the end but away from the beginning. They say he is best out of the blocks. Behind him is nothing, and there comes again the bright blue light inside, the sky opened to him as he clears the bar and reaches his hands toward it, trying to hold on when his back thumps down into the wedge of mat that gives beneath his elliptical muscles and that he sometimes wishes was not there, only so that he could fall forever, his hands out until the light in him and the sky above might meet in his grasp, and he would know the blessing of

completion. The romantic, he thinks, falls farther. In the locker room one keeps this to oneself. He showers, the sharp smells of sweat and colognes, the steam of release and the creeping dread as the locker smacks shut with a metallic crunch, the long hallway with its exposed bulbs, the crash door opening to a view of the mill, the plume of steam from its stack, the river below blocked from sight by terraces of houses and trees.

He fears only recovery or rehabilitation; the only nurture he knows is physical healing and focused response—freezing tubs of water, a bright white room and suction cups on his skin and a treadmill under his feet, the weight of a kitten enough to make him wince and sweat to push the machine forward as all he becomes is calcium and nerve endings. He sings when he is hurting. He hums. The songs are from the movies, from the moment when he knows it will ache to watch alone, to heat another meal, to imagine a world without guns and stupidity, without a car chase or a spaceship. To watch people fall into a love that exists only somewhere unreachable. He takes an instant with the remote in his hand to reconsider, not to do this to himself, but he has to have this, like a cutter, like a drinker, and he listens to the studio congratulate itself with the opening overture and the roaring lion, and then there is a car on the highway, or the panorama unfolding, and the strings, and the horns, and she waves the baton over them all and they respond like the parts of a man that know how to respond.

She will walk home through the city of paper and watch the tall cranes adding glass windows, glass walls, progress to the next

millennium. She walks through its dirt and beauty, the height and corners and its guts laid open in some places of reek and fluid that make it live as much as the rosin-scented hardwood and carpet and drape of the grand hall. Alive like a body. She will carry her leather case of charts under her arm and her baton case in her bag, perhaps her violin on her back snug against the warmth of her long wool coat. The paper walls of the houses at the edge of downtown in the little bohemian neighborhood whisper the wind off themselves, clear her mind, and the flapping shingles of the roofs tap cadences with her heels on the cobbles to her clean apartment with plants and animals happy to see her, an able life, a tasteful and sensual room with tailored clothes on cedar hangers, a stone bath, a good gin and a new lime. She sleeps wearing nothing, sexual without sex, knowing that it is always there, the possibility of touch, and while across town the athlete takes two white pills and hums and cracks his back in three places before sleeping sitting up, she sings a partita over and over, working it happily and efficiently in her mind, pale and natural above the sheets, one of the cats taking a bath in the bay window, one of the dogs sighing with joy on his great round bed. She pulls the sheet over her middle and reaches down, recalls the waitress from lunch today with beautiful breasts, pictures a man on television in the trials who chalked his hands by the pole vault track and looked briefly past the camera, his lower lip and the muscles in his neck, his thick hair. But mainly something in his eyes, the concentration, the complete absorption in that moment. She shudders.

Will they find each other, you wonder. Will the movie play out to the final notes? The athlete might win a medal, or simply retire well, his happiness being found in the days of breathtaking speed, in the power of what a frame holding only muscle once accomplished. He will walk down streets and draw the gaze of hundreds of men and women who see him as an image from the screen, from the paper shadows of shapes they want to feel and know and that they hope will become a person they will know, and he will know that they see him and wait for that moment, that song. He will pass by the symphony hall, thinking and not listening.

She will watch him on television the next night, his eyes lifted from his stance in the blocks, riveted on something over her shoulder, and she will be the one to marvel not merely at his form but at his will, the force of his mind that pierces the veil so few can and so shapes his form itself into that grace that slices air, that leaves the ground. She will see his face, a spoon of yogurt suspended before her mouth, in a close-up after the run, in the fatigue trance and afterglow of his brand of loving, and she will feel herself alive down there and wanting to meet this man who has transported himself as she does with her eyes closed and the instruments coalescing like rain softly from a summer cloud in graceful response to the music of her mind, the rhythm of her body conjuring the notes of twenty staves.

In the movie each will finally buy a ticket to the other's theater and then speak in poetic tears from airplanes. But will they find each other here? Isn't that what they have been asking through this whole story? Isn't that what they will always wonder, these

lovers made of paper before you that make you wonder too, in pain or in happiness, until the day when it should occur because of nothing physical they can do, but only because of the natural shapes of their souls happening together by chance, a moment that might never come until which life is called something else, some word that cannot quite embrace the longing. And there is the sky above the bar that he clears, and above the baton that she waves in the amphitheater of the city park, and the horns play, and the credits roll, and we wait and don't want to leave.

Lori Rader Day

The Summer Ahead

Wil wanted the car, no question. A Corvair Monza 900 convertible. The body perfectly restored, sleek as a shark. A gray-silver-green that existed only in the moment the car's panels were pressed. Chrome finishings, custom. The car had muscle. From a certain angle, it had hips, curves. Not a girl, a woman. The car knew secrets, dirty transactions in its back seat. They had been restored and recovered and reclaimed away, but Wil imagined them anyway. He wasn't a grease monkey. He had no idea what Kyle was doing to the car in his dad's garage, and though he knew Kyle from Beaumont High—class of 2007, and Kyle just a year ahead—he didn't know him well enough to stop by and admire his progress. The car had oily inner workings that Wil didn't pretend to care about. He wanted to put his hands on the wheel and feel the car purr.

He might have only heard about the car's maiden voyage through town if he had not been walking—*walking*—home from work and got caught at a red light, only to see Kyle glide past, a one-man parade. It was a moment Wil had relived many times since: Kyle in the Corvair, him on the sidewalk or, if he was lucky, in his dad's old truck, which was mostly his. Wil spent seven more months watching Kyle tooling the Corvair around town, up and down Beaumont Street with a sunburned arm out the window. He had known from first sight

that he'd have that car, or one like it, if there was another like it, someday.

It was a 1969, twice as old as he was, but the car made Wil think of his childhood anyway. When he was a kid, boys sorted themselves into packs. There were scout troop boys and war-and-guns-back-by-creek boys and video game boys and school boys and church boys and boys in the band. Wil had always known he was a *car* boy. He built models and saved his allowance for zippy remote controlled toys. He collected castoff *Wheels and Deals*, the magazine his dad searched weekly for a used car a bit better than the used car they already had. He drew cars from memory and TV and imagination. He created cars that didn't exist in the real world. When Kyle Decker finally unveiled the restored sharkskin Corvair, Wil felt such a pull in his gut that he would have believed he'd owned the car in a past life, or had invented it with colored pencils back when. But no—someone else had, twenty years before he was born.

And now the car was for sale. Wil didn't know why. He didn't care why. There was a machine straight out of his dreams parked on the street in front of the Deckers' house, a handmade sign in the window. *For Sale*.

Wil had seen the sign on the way to work that morning, and so he was stuck all day at his spot on the factory line alternately thinking about the car and what he always thought about. Girls. How to meet girls. How to make more money. How to get rich, actually, it would just be easier that way. And famous, too, but good famous, not bad famous—how could he get to be good and famous? Also: how many plastic Christmas tree parts had he put out into the world working at Shandle's the past two years? And plastic kiddie pools, because that's what they made in the winter, no kidding. How many of those? And how many fake Christmas trees and kiddie pools did the world need? And girls again, because he didn't have one. He really needed one, he thought, because if he had a girl to take out on Saturday nights, he might not have to stand around twisting hot plastic Christmas tree needles onto their wires thinking half of what he thought about.

Dean, the guy who brought them the hot pine needle bunches in a rolling bin, swept past. Wil looked up. "Hey, guess what I saw this morning—" he started to say. But then he thought better of it. What if Dean wanted the car? Dean probably picked up the *Wheels and Deals*, too. Dean lived in town, drove a beater, needed to meet girls, too.

Dean pulled the empty bin out and swung the full one into place. "What?"

"Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's hot."

"It's always hot," Dean said, and shot him a look. Wil had wasted his time. Not that anyone at Shandle's minded having a little time wasted if they could get by with it. But Wil knew he'd done it wrong. To start up a guy's imagination out of the boring middle of the day, when there wasn't a break for another hour, when there wasn't anything interesting to talk about. Well, that seemed dirty, now that he thought about it.

Dean peeled off his gloves and settled against the pillar behind him. He wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. It wasn't always hot, not really, but it was always hot in Shandle's. Outside it could be cool and bright, the sun suggesting ways for how to spend time, but inside Shandle's, it was always a hundred degrees. The fans ran all day, every day. The girls who worked the tinsel garland machines came out of their room with bits of sparkly green and red stuck to their legs and chests and held their shirts out from their bellies toward the fans. It was enough to drive Wil mad, until he dreamed of the days when they'd be back to kiddie pools, and the glitter was put away.

Dean was staring at him. Wil cleared his throat for time. He thought back to the morning, before he'd passed the Deckers' house and seen the Corvair. "Well...I saw Missy Shandle in the White Castle drive-thru."

Dean glanced around. The rest of the line workers were too far away to hear. He started pulling his gloves back on. "So?"

Wil deflated. Missy was the boss's daughter. Most of the Shandle's workers were ready for a Missy joke when you had one. He

thought for a moment. “What about this? I heard—remember that guy Marcus used to work here? He joined the fucking Marines. Can you believe that?”

Dean shrugged.

Maria, one of the women on the line, hissed in their direction. She had her long black hair tied in a knot at the back of her head. Her neck was shiny with sweat. “Lazy boys. Stop talking shit and get back to work.”

“Si, si, *mamacita*,” Wil said. He turned to Dean with a wink, but Dean had slipped away with the empty bin.

“Don’t you *mamacita* me, you little twerp,” Maria said. She plucked a twig of pine needles out of the pile on the conveyor belt and wrenched it into shape. “I’m not old enough to be your mama, but if I was, I would have raised you right the first time so some stupid bitch doesn’t have to do it again.”

Wil was watching the particular way Maria’s breasts bounced when she twisted the pine branches. She caught him and rolled her eyes at Marcella, further down the line. Marcella shook her head. Maria launched into Spanish.

“What does that mean?” Wil said.

“The Spanish is so I don’t have to talk to you no more,” she said.

Her boobs still bounced with every twist. At the other end of the line, their supervisor, Pete, called out, “What’s going on down there?”

Wil stepped back to the line and reached in for a pine branch—virgins, they called them, before they wrenched their necks so that the metal tip would slip into a piece of plastic made elsewhere inside Shandle’s and, somehow, after all the pieces had been twisted and packed and shipped and bought, this all added up to a Christmas tree. It never felt like Christmas inside Shandle’s. By the time it really was Christmas, they were balls-deep in baby pools, and those things were sharp if you didn’t pay attention. The only fun they ever had was talking shit.

“I didn’t mean the Spanish,” he said. “What did you mean about—my mom?”

Maria sighed. “No, no. Not what I said, Lazy-boy recliner. I said someday another woman would have to teach you all over again. When you get married.”

“I’m not ever getting married,” he said. He grabbed at a virgin without looking and poked the heel of his hand on its metal tip. He recoiled and studied the pearl of blood that grew from the scratch.

“Maybe no girl will want to marry you?”

He sucked at his hand, turning to look up and down the line. The women—Maria, Marcella, the old woman everyone called Gal, even the two women across the room who claimed not to speak English—they were all smiling secretly into their work, listening.

“Plenty,” he said. “Plenty of girls will want to marry me.” He thought of Kyle’s car. Girls must flock to it. *Flock*. He wondered briefly why Kyle would ever let it go. But he was, and that’s all that mattered. At quitting time, he was going to go make the Corvair his.

The Deckers lived on Beaumont Street, which was really State Road 32 cutting straight through the town like it wasn't even there. Wil drove into town on 32/Beaumont Street from his parents' house outside of town every morning and, in the afternoon, turned his truck toward the setting sun for the return. Today he slowed as he neared the short row of white box houses nestled in the shadows of a raised railroad berm. He did a sweeping U-turn to pull up behind the Corvair.

Nobody around. Wil sat in the truck and went over it again: What he could afford, which wasn't much, plus the savings he'd managed to pile up at the bank. If he could talk him down—God, Kyle would be a fool to sell so cheap. He was a fool, too, to think he might. He was a dog to come scraping like this. Wil pulled the truck into reverse and let it roll a few feet. But what if he could talk Kyle down into the neighborhood? If he got an advance from Shandle's *and* asked his dad for help, he might be able to make nine thousand dollars. Wil put the truck back into park and counted it up again. Nine thousand was a lot of money, but probably still not enough. But if he could command nine thousand dollars, what was he ashamed of? That was a man's salary, earned, saved. And borrowed against, sure—but a man's wages borrowed against what he promised to do. No shame in being a working stiff. He turned the key in the ignition and let the truck rattle to stillness.

Wil saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, and then the curtains at a window on the Decker house dropped. A second later, the front door pulled back, and a girl about Wil's age with a

blond ponytail stood at the screen. She wore a tank top, no bra, cut-off shorts. When she came out, letting the screen door slap, she was barefoot.

"Did you decide?" she called.

Her voice reached inside the open window of his truck. Oh, man, he thought. Kyle, please let that be your sister. He slid out of the truck, closed his door, and came around to the yard. "Did I decide what?"

"If you were going to ask about the car. Did you decide?"

The back of Wil's neck went hot. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"What do you think of her?"

Her. Wil pried his eyes off the girl and went to the hood of the car. He pretended to study the angles, check a few nicks in the paint. He kicked a front tire.

"The tires are all new," she said.

"I know. I mean, I can tell." Wil felt the red creeping up his neck and across his face. He wasn't good at talking to girls. He hadn't ever been, no matter how many women he worked with.

He walked the length of the car on the street side and wished he could rip the homemade sign out of the window. He patted the convertible roof, checked the seal. He finished his tour around the back, admiring every line, every curve. From the outside, he could smell the new leather upholstery. Baking in the sun, the seat sent out a sweet smell, a fresh-pack-of-cigarettes smell he had imagined from afar. He cupped his hand to the window and peered into the back seat. Pictured the blonde back there, the insides of her tan thighs

splayed against the white leather, and then quickly stood up to shake it from his mind.

“How much do you want for it?” he said.

“Kyle wants at least eighteen for it. It’s a classic.”

Eighteen. Of course. So far out of his league that he was ashamed to have stopped. Kyle would have listed it in *Wheels and Deals*. He’d get a serious bid on it from someone in Indianapolis, maybe even Cincinnati or Louisville. A collector, a racer, some hobbyist who would take it out once a year for a rally. Someone who knew its worth.

The good feeling he’d had since morning dropped away. Wil walked again around the front of the car, studying the hood, the grill, as close as he would ever get to it, ever, because any minute Kyle would hand the keys over to someone with deep pockets, no question, and he’d never see it again. He knelt at the bumper and patted it wearily. He noticed his own pulled-face reflection in the bumper and for a moment remembered Dean that morning, his face slack with indifference to everything Wil could think to tell him. How soon, he wondered, before he fell into the grooves, too, and couldn’t be bothered to think about something other than the very spot where he stood, only the moment he was living?

He turned his head and watched his reflection stretch and gape in a new way. He’d be damned if he’d go that easy. If he was going down, he’d go out fighting.

He lifted his head. “Would he take twelve for it?”

The girl laughed. “I doubt it, but I don’t know what’s going on in his head. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“You’re Kyle’s girl?” Of course she would be, he thought. What didn’t Kyle have that Wil wanted?

“Six months.”

Wil nodded. They’d met after Kyle had his car finished. When you have a little bit of luck, the world tumbles over itself to hand you the rest.

There was a slap of the screen door, and Kyle himself came out to stand on the porch. His hair stuck up on one side. He yawned and scratched at his bare chest, pulled up his loose jeans by the belt loops. “Hey,” he said. “I know you.”

Wil stood. “School.”

Kyle came across the yard and then gingerly across the rough sidewalk in his bare feet. “And around.”

Wil shook the hand Kyle offered, trying not to think how many times he’d gaped at Kyle’s car from the sidewalk.

Kyle said, “You work at Shandle’s, don’t you?”

“Trees and baby pools, I’m your man.”

Kyle nodded, almost smiling. “Hey, Baby,” he said over his shoulder. “We need a fake Christmas tree or one of them wading pools?”

The girl came out of the yard and tucked herself under Kyle’s arm. “Not yet.” She looked up at Wil. “You offering that in trade, are you?”

Wil shuffled his feet under the weight of the girl’s attention.

She said, “He wants to know if you’ll take twelve for it.”

Kyle looked long at the car, and then at Wil.

The girl nudged Kyle’s shoulder with her head. “That’d be a lot to come back to.”

“You could do twelve?” Kyle squinted at Wil, glanced toward the truck. Next to the Corvair, the truck looked like it had been put out for the trash.

Of course there was no scenario where Wil could put together that much. He felt like a guy down on his luck who realizes that his life insurance policy meant that he’d be worth more dead than alive. Except he didn’t have any insurance whatsoever, no plan at all past this conversation. He’d been thinking all day about driving tomorrow in the Corvair, seeing everyone’s heads whip around to give a second look. He took a slow breath, hoping a plan would come to him. Finally, he had to shake his head. “I really can’t. I would, if I could.”

The girl stood straighter. “But you said—”

“I just wanted to spend more time with the car.” He wouldn’t look at the car again, he promised himself. He’d already lost it. They stood silent, until Wil knew it was his move. “Sorry to waste your time.” He started for his truck and had almost reached it when Kyle stopped him.

“Hey. Wilson, right? Wait.”

The girl frowned. “Babe?”

Kyle rubbed her back. “Will you get me a t-shirt and my shoes? I want to take Wil for a spin.”

Kyle took the Corvair up to eighty, but no higher.

They had the top down. They drove into the low-hanging orange sun, the rushing wind trying to take the top off Wil’s head. He couldn’t wipe the smile off his face. They blasted out of town and down 32 until they’d run out of things to see except knee-high cornfields. Knee high by the fourth of July, Wil thought, his head full of songs and jingles and the roar of the world going by. He wanted to make a song of it: *Knee high by the fourth of July*. The low corn was a green carpet all the way to the end of the world. It reminded him, against his will, of the long conveyor belt of pine branches rolling toward him. But he refused to think about Shandle’s now, and the summer ahead of him: plastic pines until the season turned. He turned to watch the fields and the road narrow behind them.

The backseat glared white, hot, empty. The girl hadn’t been invited. Wil turned back around. “You didn’t want to bring your girl?”

“She’s all right, you know?” Kyle yelled over the rush of wind. “But she’s all over me about commitment. We’ve only known each other five months.”

“Six,” Wil bellowed back. “She said six.”

“She would. I’m surprised she wants me to sell the car at all. It’s about the only thing she likes about me.”

“Why are you selling the car?”

“I’m going to be gone for a while.” Kyle’s jaw muscles flexed. Was he grinding his teeth? Wil wondered.

“Jail?”

Kyle laughed. “You’re one messed up fucker, aren’t you?” He downshifted quickly and swung into a gravel road with a fishtail flourish. They slid to a stop, a billow of pale dust sent off into the fields. “Want to drive us home?”

Wil didn’t wait for him to change his mind. Seated at the wheel, he felt a sense of rightness, of justice. Yes, finally, Wilson Tierney will come out on top.

They were back on the road and heading toward illegal speeds before Kyle said, “I’m joining the Army.”

“Do you know a guy named Marcus, used to work at Shandle’s? He’s in the Marines.”

Wil held the gearshift tenderly, checked the mirrors twice. He liked the way his unremarkable hair fluttered back at this speed.

“Not the same thing,” Kyle said. “At all.”

“I thought it was interesting. Two guys from Beaumont going into the military.”

Kyle snorted. “I’m starting to get you, I guess.”

“Yeah?”

“Two guys from Beaumont.’ You’re funny.”

Wil was gaining on a slower vehicle and had a double yellow. He could pass—he was going twenty miles an hour faster than the car in front and could see far enough to gauge that they’d make it—but he was in no hurry to get back to his truck. He slowed. “What’s funny about it?”

“Like any of us have a choice. It’s not funny.”

Kyle was smiling. Wil thought it through but still couldn’t see what he was saying. “You could do something else. Shandle’s is always hiring.”

Kyle shook his head, then caught sight of Wil watching him. “Shandle’s isn’t for everyone.”

“Everyone works there.”

“Everyone works at Shandle’s for a *while*.”

“Your mom worked there. I remember her retirement party.”

“My mom earned twelve bucks an hour for most of her life. You know how much Uncle Sam takes out of twelve bucks an hour?”

Wil tried to remember Mrs. Decker. She was a large lady with a hairnet, though it was not required, thick hands, thick glasses. She and Gal had been friends. He tried to picture himself there as an old man. Maybe he would have filled in a bit by then, grown a moustache worth having. Promoted off the line and up into the office as a supervisor, and he’d be the one to bark down the line when one of them screwed around. Who would still be there? Marcella, maybe. Maria. A crew of young people, too, to replace those who’d left or died. Always a crew of young kids who started the Monday after school let out. By the end of summer, the long-timers hated the kids, if there were any kids left to hate. One or two might hang on to go full-time, like Wil. But most of them went somewhere else.

They were coming back up on the fast food joints and gas stations that heralded the edge of town. What he wouldn’t give to go through the White Castle drive-thru so that someone could see him. If he was Kyle, though, he wouldn’t let anybody touch a morsel inside

this car. He pulled into town going much slower than he needed to. “I don’t have big plans,” Wil said.

“Not any?”

This car, but he couldn’t say that. He tried to think: When he was at the line, what did he dream of? “Get a girl. Win the lottery.”

Kyle slapped the outside of the Corvair, laughing.

Wil couldn’t even smile. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Kyle choked. “That’s a good goddamn plan.”

The sun beat on Wil’s forehead. His mouth felt dry, sour.

“What do you want so bad you have to join the Army to get it?”

Kyle quieted, sucked in a deep breath and let it out like a tire going flat. “You don’t want to hear about this, and I’m not sure I can tell it right.”

“You’re giving up the Corvair.” He thought of the Army commercials that played before just about everything he watched on TV these days, the ads in the video game magazines he sometimes flipped through at the movie rental place. The ads always promised big. A high-technology kind of job, maybe, or to be ripped so no one ever picked a fight. Travel to foreign countries, if you were into that. “Must be something.”

They passed under the railroad tracks. Wil eased into the spot in front of Kyle’s house. He could see his truck in the rearview. He was distracted for a moment by the feeling that something miraculous would happen. Kyle would offer to sell the Corvair to him cheap, just to have it taken care of. Or even sign over the title for free, in exchange for some loyalty or promise. Like buddies in war movies,

shaking hands. *If I don’t come back, Wil, watch over my girl.* He struggled for a bargain he might be able to strike, but nothing came to him. He turned the key in the ignition and handed it to Kyle. They both got out. Wil paused by the open driver’s door and stared hard at the *For Sale* sign. No miracle would occur today.

Kyle said, “It’s about everything. I don’t know.” He slapped the back of his hand across his own thigh. “I used to take the Corvair out for test-drives at night, so no one could see what a bucket it was. But every time I took it out, I heard a new noise. A rattle in a place that didn’t used to rattle. That awful sound the brakes make when the pads wear out, only that sound was in the dash.”

Wil pried his eyes from the sign. “You used to take it out at night?”

“Don’t you ever feel like you can’t get yourself together? Like something’s gone loose, and no matter how hard you try to tighten it back up—” Kyle patted the Corvair’s hood lovingly. “I’m sorry we can’t work something out on the car.”

“It’s okay,” Wil said, though he didn’t mean it. “Thanks for the ride.”

He turned toward the truck, hoping the whole time he took to get inside, start it up, and pull away that Kyle Decker would think of some reason to stop him. But there was no reason to, so he didn’t. Wil nodded to Kyle, backed up a few feet from the tail of the Corvair, and U-turned toward home.

“Hey, shit-talker boy is not shit-talking today.”

Wil, stuck below his dark mood, rose to the surface. Maria plucked a virgin from the line, gave it a quick twist, threw it to the side.

“What’s wrong with you?” she said. “You haven’t been staring at my boobs all morning.” Marcella snickered, but stopped when Wil shot her a look.

“Nothing’s wrong.” But it wasn’t true. He had arrived not in the Corvair but in the old truck again—and not even in the driver’s seat. His dad needed the truck for the day. Wil had been dropped off. A half-hour early, Wil had stood against the wall of Shandle’s as his co-workers arrived. They all had their own cars. None had anything like the Corvair, it was true. Minivans with dings in the bumpers, old sedans with empty baby seats in the back. He crouched against the wall as if sick. By the time he clocked out that afternoon and started walking home, the Corvair would be sold. And it didn’t matter if only the sale sign had been taken out or if the car had been driven to its new home. It would make no difference to him. Not the kind of difference he could do anything about.

They worked without speaking until the first break. At the bell, Wil bolted for the outside door ahead of all the smokers, gulping for air as though the factory was on fire. He walked to the far edge of the gravel parking lot and kicked at a few tall stalks of weeds growing around a rock that had been deposited there.

“You’re having some sort of bad day, huh?”

He turned. Maria handed him a can of soda. He opened the tab and took gulping drinks, feeling that if he stopped, he might cry or punch something.

“I saw you after work yesterday. You looking at that fancy car for sale on Beaumont?” Maria sat on the rock. She let her hair down, then pulled it all up again and clipped it back. “Are you mad?”

“No.” He thought for a moment. “Yes.”

“The car was taken? Too bad. Or the girl?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Tell me anyway, and I’ll just stare at you.” She waved across the parking lot. The two women on the line who said they didn’t speak English were smoking at the corner of the building. They started to laugh. When he turned back to Maria, she was orbiting her finger around the side of her head, the universal sign for *loco*.

He flopped into the grass and weeds and cigarette butts near the rock, Maria a dark shadow outlined by the sun.

“The car was not sold,” she said. “But it cannot be sold to you. Too expensive.”

He hated the sound of it coming from someone else. “Yeah.”

“It’s a nice car. It should be expensive.”

She wasn’t helping at all. He had five more minutes of break. He wanted to spend them feeling bad, not talking about feeling bad and ending up worse.

“Maybe this is not the car for you right now.”

“Thanks a lot.” He stood and dusted the dust and twigs off his jeans.

“Not in a bad way. Maybe you have to fix up your own car.”

“I don’t have a car,” he said. “And I don’t know how to fix cars.”

Maria sighed something in Spanish

“I don’t know what that means,” he said.

“There are plenty of things in English you don’t understand, either.”

Wil kicked at the loose rock under his feet. “Tell me what *that* means.”

“You want the short cut for everything, like a little boy. Someday you will take the long way around. Like a man. Fix up your own car.”

The bell inside the factory rang, distant. The women from the line and a few others stamped out their cigarettes and filed back into the factory. He didn’t want to follow them. The factory seemed about to cave in on itself. The walls, made of block and brick, had been painted over and over, and revealed every layer, here yellow, there dark green. Weeds grew where the walls met the parking lot. All the windows were dirty and gray. In the winter, when they were closed, you couldn’t see across the street. Now they were propped open to let the breeze inside, hot as it was. He couldn’t believe he had ever walked in. It occurred to him that if he’d bought the car, if he’d used every cent he had to his name to drive the Corvair into the lot today, he couldn’t have thought for a second about walking out. But just now, he thought, he could. He could walk home right now. Never clock out, expect his last check mailed. But then what?

Maria shook her head, stood, and took the can of soda from him. She walked toward the door, tilting her head to drain the last bit of drink. Wil watched her disappear inside, but couldn’t yet force himself to follow. In a moment, he would hear the whir of the line starting up again, and in a few minutes after that, he could count on Pete barking down from his office about his absence. Wil could predict what Pete would say or, if the rest of the line made up for him being gone, he could predict how the women would make him pay for it later. He could see how everything would go, as if it had already happened and would happen again. He choked to think of the summer ahead, the wading pools next winter and the cuts on his hands when he forgot his gloves. He felt a wave of despair. But he knew it wasn’t Kyle’s fault. He felt as if he’d been walking his whole life.

If he’d had the truck there in the lot, he might have driven away. But he didn’t. He didn’t have the Corvair, and he didn’t have the truck. All he had were his own two feet. Wil put them to work, hurrying toward the door and the line before anyone bellowed, before anyone had to cover for him, before anyone had to make up for what he wasn’t doing. *Where’s my short cut, Maria?* he thought, and knew that he’d be asking her for many days, weeks, months. But he wouldn’t have to ask forever. Because he’d either find it, he decided, or wouldn’t need it, having gone the long way around.

Fred Arroyo

A Case of Consolation

Boogaloo lived in a small quarter of the city, an indistinct district bordered by certain streets he never liked to cross, and where no one asked his name. Boogaloo—born Manuel Perez—lived in an old brownstone on the top floor, almost level with the El, where in the spring he watched for the tops of the trees to suddenly bud in green, the bowl of sky above Chicago turning slowly to blue with a vast space that mirrored his anonymity. The high beige walls of his room held no pictures, and the clean and shiny wood floors caused the room to shimmer on bright sunny days like a lone patch of undiscovered sea. He sometimes sat on a folding chair in the sunlight, strips of light falling through the blinds, and when the train rumbled overhead, he leaned back, turned his head, and seemed to listen to something important.

Braced on the wall was a single bookshelf, and on the shelf he had placed a few seashells, a copy of M. F. K. Fisher's *Letters*, the well traveled *Comida Criollas*, a cracked, leather-bound volume on new Hispanio vegetation and food stuffs, *Fruiticas Paradisio*, from the late 18th century, Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*, and the three volumes that make up Seneca's *Moral Essays*. In these essays some passages were starred, a few sentences underlined. A particular passage had exclamations along its edges, which Boogaloo had copied

by hand in blue ink on a three by five card, and with a few small pieces of tape, he placed it in the middle of the wall next to his shelf. He would reread the passage often when his room seemed to fill with the incomprehensible weight of shadows.

In the corner of the room, on the edge of the shelf and below the passage, Boogaloo had a small folding table of wood. On the table were sheets of butcher paper he had cut as close as possible to ten by ten, a white paper cup from a coffee shop holding black and red wax pencils and a few number two cedar pencils, some gold clips and an orange barrel-shaped sharpener on a shallow, clear dish, and a stack of three by five cards next to the cup.

In the center of the table there was a recent recipe he had composed, the wax cursive script working through the intricacies of mangos and smoked Spanish pepper for a rice dish Boogaloo was striving to master. There were several sheets with drawings of a simple, ideal kitchen he dreamed of working in, the majority of the space dominated by a thick butcher-block table (he could see how in the future it would be oily and rich with colors—saffron, oregano, cilantro, garlic and olive oil—that became a part of the wood's nature), a six burner stove with a flat grill, and a small stone oven. He drew a small alcove in one of the kitchen's walls, where he sketched

in a chair and a desk with a small goose-necked lamp. He set his pencil down. He listened to the robins chirping outside his window. He picked up his pencil and wrote 10 and 15 on a card, then totaled them. Direction: Soak rice in a $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of coconut milk for 30 minutes before cooking.

Soon he would arrive at the moment when he had not had a drink in ten years, and the fact he had not seen his daughter in over fifteen.

Most of Boogaloo's life was contained in, during the somewhat good times, a suitcase, and, in the not so good times, a paper bag. He moved from job to job, although work was always defined for him not by the specific tasks but the places he experienced: a kitchen dish room in a squat, steam shrouded basement where his eyelashes collected little silver flecks of water and soap bubbles; the long and thin red rows of dirt between tobacco plants, his shoes caked with dirt, and his socks never seeming to lose the red ring of dust just below his ankle; the deep and endless blue sky over a beet field; the low and dim light of his helmet, his hands black with manure and dirt in a mushroom cannery; and the brief space—a bubble of musical time shaped by the rhythm of a knife—between a cutting board, prep table, and stove. New York, Connecticut, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois—the slow movement of sweat coursing down the back of his scalp, his sore neck and shoulders, the dull, constant ache in his lower back, and always in need of a new pair of shoes as he found himself moving west. Without ever understanding the gradual changes to his emotional life,

Boogaloo was slowly transformed into a man without likes or dislikes, without a strong sense of desire or remorse, a shell alone on an empty beach without the inner, passionate song of the sea found in that place where shell, ear, and sea meet in the radiance of music. Continually in motion—adrift in work—he seemed to simply stand still.

For some reason the dream of his kitchen, the quiet new kind of work of his recipes, filled him with a sensation he couldn't quite name, and yet he described the sensation—one sleepless night he saw it on the edges of the shadows that slowly moved across his apartment's walls—in the memory of a childhood hurricane, that quiet moment just before the fury of the storm, when the golden sky looked streaked with guava paste, the sea dark green and thick with deeper currents, and Boogaloo mesmerized by a palm tree swaying in the breeze, its fronds shivering like a horse's mane, his feet solid and heavy in the sand.

Boogaloo's days were spent working in a restaurant on North Clark Street. A very small place, Cassava, with only five tables, most of the business to go, and the customers ordering either at a small counter separating the dining room and the kitchen, or sitting at one of the formica tables. Cassava was one of three in the city, specializing in a fusion of Caribbean and Mexican food made up fast and hot. The top two sellers being a *ropa viejo* burrito and a *cubano* sandwich. Boogaloo cooked and managed a staff of two. A young Peruvian man, Tomás, kept the kitchen and dishes clean, and helped with the preparation of vegetables and seasonings, and an older

Nicaraguan woman, Rosita, took orders in the dining room and at the register. Beyond work, Boogaloo lost time when he sat at his table and began the draft of a new recipe. He strove to capture the various smells, flavors, and colors evoked from an established recipe and his memory—how his mother had simmered a *soncocho* of chickpeas, pigs feet, habaneros and cilantro in the afternoon, and then in the thirty minutes it took the white rice to cook, she dropped slices of mango into the *soncocho*, thickening its consistency and flavor, the habaneros still evident as they painted a thin strong line of heat along the tongue. Once a recipe was drafted on a piece of butcher paper, he took it the next day to Cassava and tried it out; it became the meal he, Tomás, and Rosita ate in the afternoon lull between 3:30 and 4:30. As they took bites he watched their expressions, tried to note how Tomás licked his lips, casually focused on how Rosita's eyes glazed with the strong sensation of flavor. Boogaloo let the recipe exist in his mind for a time, sat down with a three by five card, and in the presence of Rosita's green-blue eyes he composed the recipe in a steady hand, his version of the recipe now translated into English.

Boogaloo had no friend or lover in this city. When he left Connecticut with a handful of men to work and live in Michigan, he never imagined how quickly their brotherhood would fall apart with loss, a rending of friendship difficult to bear; he never imagined he would have no choice but to witness their disappearances by death, marriages and families, and the madness of drink and wandering. Common fates, he thought, yet he couldn't seem to inhabit any of them—save his years of drink—with any passion. He had once had a

great love in Michigan. He remembered her shyly undressing on the edge of a sand dune, her breasts dark purple plums in the night, and how the cold wind of the freshwater sea ran along his spine, his eyes almost watering with desire for Ramóna. He listened to the waves crashing against the pier, then hushing on the sand, and his ears filled with the sea of his heart. That was many years ago, and he still could evoke the smell of the cold air, the grit of sand between his fingers and trapped in his underwear. And their daughter, Magdalene? She became entangled in their longing that night, even though she was not even an idea or a hope then. Now twenty-five years old, making her way into a world he did not know. His loneliness, his exilic fortune, was the grand meal of his life no one could take away, and it was Boogaloo's fate to chew it—macerate it—every day.

His desire for Ramóna he never felt again. Sometimes, on windy, nighthawk fall evenings, the air wet from the sea, he walked along the shore in his shirtsleeves, his flesh rising to meet the wind and the memory. Magdalene never learned that Boogaloo was her father, and if there were times when he walked along the shore and wept, it was never just for himself: His tears raised the questions and fears and losses his daughter couldn't control.

One evening, a clear blue night in late April, the air smelling clean and tinted with the lilacs, Boogaloo had stopped to savor in Lincoln Park that afternoon thoughts like these shadowed his footsteps down Clark Street. He had decided to stop at Café Intelligentsia for a *cortado*, a few note cards in his shirt pocket to

help him mull over the possibilities of yuca and curry. As he turned toward the door, Rosita walked out with a coffee. They greeted each other with surprise, exchanged pleasantries, and remarked about the change of weather, the beginning of spring. Outside the café they sat on a bench, their coffees between them, and continued to talk, sometimes their words lost as cars passed by. That first meeting lasted until midnight, and then two or three times a week they would meet for coffee and conversation once Cassava was closed, Rosita leaving work first and finding them a table in the corner of the café, or if it was too warm inside, at a bench or table on the sidewalk. Once Boogaloo and Tomás had cleaned up the kitchen, the floor wet and shiny, they stepped into the alleyway. Boogaloo locked the door, and with their good-byes Boogaloo picked up his step to meet Rosita.

Over time, Rosita's conversations and presence broke through his loneliness, as if a blue egg shell surrounding his existence had cracked, and perceptively the gold yolk began to trickle out, and in its place there was room for Boogaloo to become aware of her slender neck, the thin streaks that highlighted her hair gold and red in certain slants of light, how she smiled with wistful pleasure after the first, hot sip of coffee. The way her green-blue eyes ravished his face into a smile. Rosita gradually shared with Boogaloo her life in Nicaragua. Back home she had a ten-year-old son, Roberto, and an eight-year-old daughter, Margarita, who were living with her parents. Her husband, who worked as a mechanic near the city center, died during an earthquake, his body discovered under the collapsed garage. She worked at Cassava and as a seamstress six mornings a week in a t-

shirt factory on the near northside. She sent home as much money as she could, and hoped to save a little to bring her children north.

He could never find the right moment to reveal himself; then one day the egg's shell shattered to pieces: A few tables over a young boy and his father shared a single steaming cup of chocolate, and from a plate stacked with Scotch Shortbread cookies, they would each take one, lean closer, dip the cookie into the cup, hold it for a moment, and then raise the soft, wet cookies to their mouths.

Rosita, my name is Manuel, Manuel Perez.

She had followed his eyes to the other table. She smiled.

Please, call me Manuel.

Boogaloo and Rosita met for coffee often. One Sunday evening they met at the Grant Park Pavilion, and watched a strange movie about the arctic, windswept regions scratchy with the shifting and buckling ice, an almost tender violin in the background. They were both freezing, their breath clouding in front of them, and they laughed with great joy at how strange and beautiful it was to sit there in December watching the film of what seemed an even colder place. They left the pavilion and made their way down Michigan Avenue. The dusk began to rise all around them in grays and deep blues as they strolled down the avenue, window-shopping in the blaze of Christmas lights. Little by little Boogaloo revealed the details of his life, memories of a childhood always close to the sea, how he never imagined making a living as a cook, and how by accident, given his vivid memories of his abuela cooking, it seemed natural, even though he had no sense of where it might lead, what was next.

They separated to make their way home—Rosita taking the El north, Boogaloo walking the last mile along the edge of Lincoln Park to his apartment. They stood under the tracks, a train thundering overhead. His hands shook at his sides, and he did not want the night to end just yet. He had been alone for so long and did not know how to make the night last, and in this state the sudden weight of fright lay heavy on his shoulders. Rosita clasped his arm just below his elbow.

Don't go, she said. Not yet.

He looked at the ground, shifted his weight to his left foot, wiggled the right in the air, and then stomped it in the cold. Their breath turned silver between them, ghostly butterflies rising, then disappearing. He nodded.

I have something for you, Rosita said, and then pulled a long red box from her bag. She handed it to him.

Feliz Navidad, Manuel.

He looked at her without expression—perhaps quizzical, a kind of misunderstanding, hesitancy. She held the box between them, and then tapped his chest lightly.

For you, for all your friendship.

Boogaloo held the box in his left hand, and with his right gently shook the lid off. Inside, folded in a neat square, was a scarf elegantly patterned with shades of purple, the fabric a soft silk, the pattern feeling rich against his knuckles. Rosita lifted it from the box, and they both looked quickly as the tissue paper lining the box jumped with the wind and flew down the street, the scarf unfurling like a flag. She flattened the scarf against her thigh, and then raised it

behind Boogaloo's head. She tied it in a loose knot around his neck, tucking the ends of the scarf into the small V of his black overcoat. She flipped up the collar of his coat, smoothed the scarf down on his chest.

Thank you, Rosita. It is too much—the money, your children...

She raised two fingers to Boogaloo's lips and shooshed him quiet. No worries, she said. *Elegante y suave* for you.

He began to loosen the knot.

No, you have all the work you do. . .

She grabbed his hands, held them tightly. Don't. Don't, please don't tell me what I can and can't do. I think of them every day, am so alone here, but you have become my friend in ways I might never be able to speak. Tears formed in her eyes, green, blue, then silver in the cold. No, it is for you, Manuel.

His lips burned from her touch, and as she started to shiver, he had a great desire to hold her close, for Rosita to feel the heat rising into a bloom on the place where the scarf touched his neck. But his feet felt like concrete, and he couldn't overtake the brief space that separated them.

Thank you, was all he could say.

I'm going to go now, she said, I'll see you tomorrow. She turned, took the first two steps towards the platform. She stopped, turned around, waved.

Unless you want to ride with me?

He closed his eyes for a moment. In the distance he heard train wheels grinding against steel, a horn honked, and a roar of wind

filled him with the smell of warmed chocolate from the candy factory on the river. He pressed his hands against his chest, felt for a moment the purple rising in his fingers. Before words arose in his throat, as the wind seemed to die, he heard Rosita say, No worries, Manuel, we'll ride together another day. Her eyes were of the saddest shapes—like split, sea battered almonds—he had ever seen on her face. He wanted to apologize.

Okay, Rosita. Thank you, I'll see you tomorrow—the only words he could utter.

Alone again, filled with the loss that followed his indecision. He smiled, and waved. He turned and walked from underneath the El to meet the street and his walk home.

On his walk home the cold did not bother him, as if he were filled with some great fire that shaped his every step. He made a decision: When they met in the evenings, he would wear the scarf with pride, and as they walked down the street, or sat at a table in the café, he would keep his hand close to her side, there on the table over the line that separated them. He would help to make a moment of accident, hopefully touching a space where they held hands, and in that moment of holding she would know his apology, his desire. He would make an effort to remind Rosita to save her money and bring her children to Chicago—only as friend, however, and never at the risk of telling her what to do. He stopped in a crosswalk, the streets seemingly deserted, and caught sight of the moon, a blue face looking down between two skyscrapers with delight at his decision. He continued to walk and imagined his upcoming meeting with the

owner of Cassava, an East Asian who always took Boogaloo's new recipes to his other locations, and who seemed to trust Boogaloo's judgment. Boogaloo would tell him that in the new year he did not need a raise, but Tomás and Rosita needed one for sure. He could not run the restaurant without them; they kept Cassava spotless, and customers felt they were eating food from good people. They deserved a great amount of credit for that.

When Rosita did not show up for work the next day, Boogaloo felt a rush of worry, for she had never missed a minute of work before. He thought that perhaps he had been too pushy; she had lived all those years without her husband, worked hard with the conviction she must provide for her children: What gave him the right—*carajo*—to tell her anything? Perhaps she was angry, didn't understand why he couldn't simply accept her gift, and didn't want to see him today. Tomorrow, tomorrow, she will return he said under his breath, grating the pieces of ginger on his cutting board. She will return tomorrow, and you will apologize.

That night Boogaloo's sleep was restless, the wind off the lake rattling his window, and in each moment when he felt himself falling into the dark hole of sleep, he heard grains of sand striking the pane, saw a dune where Rosita stood naked, her hair rising in the wind, the purple scarf wrapped around her neck, her arms wide open, and then himself trying to run, stumbling in the sand, falling just before he reached her.

The next morning he arrived earlier than usual, and he went to work lacing a pork shoulder with cumin, garlic, and olive oil. He

placed it in the oven, and then after the long task of chopping a ten-pound bag of onions for a new batch of salsa, he realized he was sweating. He and Tomás looked up to the sudden tapping at the front door. 11:35. Thirty-five minutes past their daily opening.

After you open the front door, Tomás, please put on a clean apron. Do you think you can run the register and wait tables today?

Tomás nodded, set down his knife, wiped his hands on his red splattered apron, a pile of cubed tomatoes next to his knife. He moved towards the door. Boogaloo felt something was wrong, the deep pocket of his stomach awash with shame—he didn't know for what—as he replayed in his mind that last day with Rosita. Because of some anger, some hurt, she has not returned, he thought. He saw himself in his room, the El rattling overhead outside his window, as he looked into a delicate glass box he held in the palm of his hand, the glass flecked with bright pieces of papier mâché, and in the bottom of the box a mirror capturing his face in tears. He had bought the box for Magdalene. He wanted to see her one day and give her the box, so she might forget all the years she did not know him—her father, not lost and not important, but instead, in that one instance, she could see how beautiful her face had become, how she could live with that face and with more than her memory. Rosita was hurt, yes, perhaps embarrassed, because on that night she gave him the scarf he couldn't let it wrap them together, and when he didn't speak she saw her own mirror: A reflection of exile and loneliness she couldn't bear to continue looking at.

He looked at the clock again, felt his heart jump a beat, and then the blood seeping from his thumb the moment he sliced off its edge. *Shit*, he yelled, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around his pulsing thumb. In one slice of time she had offered him an emotional life he had not felt in years. A train had stopped, a door had opened, and he couldn't step across the threshold to where she stood waiting. Tomorrow, tomorrow, I will apologize, look for the slight opening, the thin slice where I can walk through, Rosita, where skin and blood exist on the other side of a wound.

Two days later Rosita had still not returned. Thinking then, with almost a sense of glee, that she was sick and not angry, Boogaloo called Rosita only to discover that her number was for a shoe store on Armitage Avenue. He called the number once more. The Shoe Palace again.

A week later Boogaloo took the El up to Bucktown, the whole swaying ride his stomach sinking with the feeling that the address on Rosita's application did not exist. The sun was warm pouring through the train windows, sunlight glinting brightly off the tracks, on tin roofs, and at each stop the quickly melting snow from a station's awning dripped like rain in the open door. Down on the street Boogaloo passed a Starbucks, a womens' boutique, and then turned the corner and made his way down a block filled with discount furniture and vintage clothing stores. He unzipped the windbreaker he had chosen that morning, the afternoon beginning to turn hot, a warm spell arriving in late January. He loosened his scarf. Scraps of

paper scraped in the wind along the sidewalk. A can clanked in the gutter.

N. 1885 was a large vacant lot surrounded by a chain-link fence, the lot full of dead grass and weeds, a high pile of dirt in the middle littered with broken pieces of concrete and asphalt, jagged strips of black and silver shingles, a confetti of colored bottles, and what looked like a car fender partially buried under the debris. There was a small circle of gritty gray snow melting around the pile of dirt.

Boogaloo stood with his fingers in the fence. He remembered Rosita bent over a table, her hand moving a warm cloth slowly over the top, a red tray of dirty plates and glasses balanced in the other. Her jeans dark and new, tight and smooth, and how her white and blue suede sneakers were always brushed and clean. He had only touched her once—really by accident, or perhaps on impulse. Thick wet snowflakes had fallen for a few minutes as they walked down Michigan Avenue, Rosita's hands bundled in mittens as she stood on a corner, trying to move her hair away from her eyes. She was telling Boogaloo how she sometimes hated herself for liking the life of these streets, when back home her family lived on an empty red dirt road. He never wore gloves, his dark hands dry and cracked from the cold wind, and as she spoke he raised his hand and tucked her hair back along her ear, and then smudged away a snowflake that had landed just above her eye. They stared at each other, the world seeming to fall away, and they both laughed as the light changed and a surge of people pushed them out into the crosswalk.

A mangy brown dog squeezed beneath the fence, circled the pile of debris with its nose slung low and its eyes on Boogaloo. After circling once, it stopped and stared at Boogaloo, raised its right leg, and then let out a long stream of piss on a green bottle, the deep yellow liquid running down and staining the snow.

He looked at the number again, written in red on a three by five card. He tore the card into pieces, and then slowly pushed them through the fence, let them scatter on the ground. He knew then that Rosita had disappeared from his life as quickly as she had entered it.

Four months passed. Tomás had a cousin, Javier, who came to work at Cassava. He was young, handsome, with a bright smile and a strong command of English. The customers liked him waiting on tables and ringing up orders. Boogaloo would look out and see them smiling and laughing with Javier, their menus open as they pointed at dishes, asked questions. Boogaloo still had his recipes, his Sunday walks in the park or along the lake. Possessions never became a necessity—what fit in a paper bag or suitcase was still all he needed.

Or so he thought. All that winter he had contemplated throwing Rosita's scarf away, yet each time he stood in front of a dumpster, felt the wind tugging it away, his fingers found the fine silk and caressed it with delicacy until his hand warmed with purple, and then he tightened the scarf with force as if he could hold Rosita near. Now, in May, it was folded and wrapped in butcher paper, up on the top shelf of his closet, awaiting the first cold winds of fall. The presence of purple filling his broken shell—that was all that had changed.

Sitting at Café Intelligentsia one Sunday afternoon, he looked up from the newspaper, rubbed his eyes with his fisted hands, and then struck his forehead with his palms several times, a loud smacking sound rising in the air. A few people turned. He took a drink of his coffee, now cooled and somewhat bitter, little bits of the grounds trapped in the side of his mouth. He gagged, felt a great wave of nausea, and dug the grounds out with his tongue. The espresso machine hissed. A couple at a table in the corner laughed, then leaned in close, kissed. His knees shook with a knowledge he couldn't quite comprehend, and although he had been frequenting this café for the last three years, it was the first time the conversation around him broke through the veil of his isolated existence, as if every conversation he had not noticed before now instantly translated into English, and these gallons of words drenched him with the sensation that he was a newly arrived migrant. He covered his ears, his knees shaking even more. The words in the Spanish weekly swam before his eyes. He held his legs still, focused hard, and read these paragraphs again:

ICE STEPS UP INITIATIVE

A US Immigration and Customs Enforcement superior, speaking with anonymity because of impending court cases that must not be compromised, discussed the current administration's recent arrests at meat packing plants along the Iowa-Minnesota border. "These operations are in line with an established initiative to address the alarming number of illegal aliens flooding certain parts of the country," the superior said.

"Individuals," he continued, "who are breaking the law, and who are also victims of employers who knowingly break the law."

When this reporter questioned the superior about the parameters of the "established" raids, the superior wanted to correct

the misuse of the term "raid," since "these are initiatives to arrest, detain, and prosecute individuals who are breaking the law." He added that this is an initiative in progress, and that beyond the media's focus on the Iowa-Minnesota events, "we have been engaged for some time now in smaller, less visible enforcement in Missouri, Georgia, and even in the larger urban areas of Seattle and Chicago. There are many industries—from meat production to agriculture to apparel—employing peoples living illegally in the US."

When the superior was questioned about why arrested individuals are moved outside the region of their initial arrest, and why families have been separated, often to undisclosed areas, the ICE superior said, "It is a most painful case when families are separated. Of course, we sympathize, and yet our charge is to best serve the established laws." The superior expressed his regret for this separation, and hoped family members would receive consolation in the fact that the ICE treats every detainee "fairly."

In the end, however, the superior stated that it is "imperative for legally residing relations to think very hard about encouraging or supporting individuals who enter the US illegally."

Various sources suggest that in the past six months between 5,000 and 25,000 individuals have been arrested by the ICE, and there may be as many as 2,000 children affected.

Boogaloo looked up from the paper. The voices in the café now spoke in a quiet din. The young woman from behind the counter approached his table and asked if he was done, and if his coffee was good. Yes, very much so, he said, handing her the cup on the saucer, the small silver spoon on the side rattling with his shaking hand. Thank you, he said. Yes, he was done with the paper. He rose and made his way outside.

The tables were crowded, spoons and cups and saucers clinking together, laughter, and too much bare skin for Boogaloo as everyone bathed in the late afternoon sun. At one table a young man had a cantaloupe on top of a *Tribune*, his wife sitting across from

him, and the boy with long sandy brown hair and the girl with light blue ribbons in her curly black hair his children. He stabbed into the cantaloupe with a Swiss Army knife, followed the line of fruit around its skin, and when the two halves opened his children clapped, the newspaper becoming wet and dark, the print disappearing in the presence of juice and seeds and shredded pieces of flesh.

Boogaloo headed south where he would turn east towards the freshwater sea.

At one of the last café tables was a young woman wearing a sheer, peach colored dress, and on the table in front of her, next to her glistening tall glass of iced tea, lay a mortarboard. She pulled away the lemon yellow scarf from around her neck, letting it fall on the mortarboard. May, graduations, and Boogaloo continued on, thinking of how that young woman would leave the older couple sitting with her, how she would thank her parents for everything, her emotional life chaotic with nostalgia and fear, and then a new opening of joy appeared because she realized she had the whole world in front of her, and when looking at a map she imagined a shifting mass of possibilities moving across and within the colored borders, and she felt great power in placing her finger in that one region she would learn to control. Magdalene was maybe somewhere in a region like that; Changó, an old friend from Michigan, had told Boogaloo that Magdalene was graduating with a master's degree in education. To think, most of his life working in fields, and here she, his daughter, becoming something much more. He wanted to smile but winced at the thought. She had been alone, far away, adrift in her

own recipe of memory and desire, living for many years in a town he never heard off: Ann Arbor.

A long red dirt road where two children played with an empty can, and Boogaloo tried to see the bend in the road where Rosita appeared and walked home.

Two Latinos passed him on the sidewalk, one raising his chin in hello, both probably on their way to work given the white shirts and black ties they carried in clear laundry bags.

The sidewalk seemed like a slice of the world he would learn to accept, a form of consolation no one could ever take away: one step in front of the other, one step in front of the other. Ann Arbor. A tree with its branches high and broad and filled with thick purple blossoms, the fragrance of the split cantaloupe, Boogaloo imagining slices of mango sprinkled with smoked Spanish paprika and wrapped in thin slices of Serrano *jamón* on the menu tomorrow. Perhaps on the plate a small pool of olive oil and a few almonds. Something *suave, elegante*, rich.

Boogaloo turned east, one foot in front of the other, and he saw within the trees arching over the avenue infinite doorways opening and closing, some with and some without promise. He took each threshold encountered with surprise and wonder, crossing over without any sense of right or wrong. Tomorrow, Rosita, tomorrow if it's warm like today I will slice fruit, wherever you are, wherever we won't meet, Rosita, tomorrow please don't be alone.

Robin Black

Immortalizing John Parker

It isn't a new sensation. For the past many weeks, Clara Feinberg has found it harder and harder to paint human faces, her bread and butter task. Increasingly, she is struggling with what feels to her like a repugnance to the act. Though it's all very sophomoric, she believes. Her own thoughts on the subject sound to her like the voices of pretentious but earnest youngsters debating the meaning of life.

It's morning—again—and Clara is perched on the side of her bed, as though undecided about whether to stand or lie back down. Her hands grip the edge of the mattress, maybe to push her up and maybe to hold her there. She can see herself in the dresser mirror if she lets her eyes drift that way. It's not her favorite sight, her own face, not normally of particular interest to her. As drawn as she is to study others' faces, she would be perfectly happy to go through life without ever seeing herself. Not because of anything amiss about her appearance. For a seventy year old woman, she looks better than well, straight and a bit stern and more handsome than ever. Age suits her. But she knows too well what a face can reveal.

As a child, if she caught a glimpse of herself when alone, she would stick out her tongue; and to her own surprise, she does it now. It's an odd sight. An old woman making the face of a spiteful little

girl. An upsetting sight. She closes her lips and looks away, looks to her feet, hanging bare and gnarled just above the floor. She still can't quite force herself to stand. Not yet. Can't quite force herself to dress, to leave the apartment, to walk among the living. Go to work, step into her studio. Smell the paint, the turpentine. Populate the blank canvases waiting there with her people, her creations.

The prospect pins her where she is.

It isn't that she has tired of studying faces—other than her own. Not at all. How could she have? She still thinks daily about how it felt thirty years ago, how like learning a precious secret it had been when she first discovered her longing to sit for hours and ponder another person's features, to study their particular texture. It was as though she had found a hidden primal drive in herself, something to align itself with hunger, thirst, sexual desire, the instinct to stay alive. And this drive has never flagged.

But the paintings themselves upset her now. The act of painting them upsets her now.

She forces her eyes again to her own image, holds her face steady, drains it of what expression she can. It's this same eerie stillness she detects in her portraits now. A kind of death. Death, which used to seem so remote, now feels to Clara as though it is

everywhere, like the universally disliked relative who arrives early to every gathering and shows no discernible sign of ever going home. She can sense it turning her against her own work, lurking in the notion of permanence surrounding portraiture, skulking around the very idea of catching a person at one moment and documenting them, just then. This is what death does, she thinks, stony-faced, staring right into her own eyes. Catches us all. Stops time.

“Pull yourself together,” she says out loud. “You still have a living to make.”

And finally, that gets Clara to her feet. She is paid preposterously well for those paintings of hers, and so this recent repugnance must be overcome; and the day, the new clients, must be faced.

As if revealing a precious secret, Katherine Parker states that she and her husband—John—have been married for fifty-one years. Not that Clara has asked. She’s asked them very little since they entered the small sitting room adjacent to her studio. And when told how long they’ve been married, she doesn’t offer up much of a reaction. Divorced herself for nearly three decades, she can think of too many reasons, good, bad, and indifferent, why people might stay married half a century to assume that she knows the appropriate response.

“We didn’t make very much of our fiftieth. But then when this one came around, I realized I would like to have a portrait of John. That’s the gift I want. John, immortalized.”

Katherine Parker is a small woman with surprisingly short hair, entirely white. The wrinkles that web her pouching cheeks run without a break or variation across her pale lips, as though a veil of lace has been etched into her face. When she speaks, her eyes blink rapidly, seeming to seek refocus every time. And the truth is, Clara realizes, she would rather paint her than him. It might be interesting to try to capture this topography of time and the sense of urgency that seems integral to her.

“Not of you both?” she asks.

“Oh, no. I had mine done years ago. I’d much rather be remembered that way. Young, and elegant. Not like this.”

Clara nods, skipping over her own arguments with this view. The point, it turns out, isn’t youth or beauty. The point is happiness. And to the extent that happiness ever came to her, it came to her late.

She looks over at John Parker—the subject—on the sofa beside his wife. He hasn’t spoken. Not a single word. Nor is his face particularly expressive. His skin has an odd smoothness to it, a yellow tinge, his eyes are round, brown and moist.

He’s dull, she thinks, that word stepping out of line, as if louder, bolder than the others in her thoughts. And, sitting there, Clara recognizes this as something with which she’ll now have to contend. Often, with her subjects, there’s a first impression that dominates her ability to see clearly. And here is one, again. This quality of dullness she perceives will have to be continually questioned and examined. In the end she may conclude that it does define him in some way that deserves expression in the work. Or she

may not. But for as long as she is painting him, she knows, she will be in a continual dialogue with this word. Dull.

“Do you want your portrait painted?” she asks and he startles a bit. Then looks over at his wife. Then he nods.

“Yes,” he says.

Clara sits back in her chair and she begins to describe the process. How many sessions; how much time she’ll need; how much warning if a session is to be missed. And then she names a very high figure, to which neither of them reacts.

“And I’ll need to see you alone,” she says to him, sensing in herself a slight annoyance at his silence.

“Oh.” It’s a small sound that Katherine Parker makes, but an expressive one, an objection. “Is that necessary?”

“Yes, it is,” Clara says. She could go into an explanation—she could talk about the relationship between subject and artist, she could talk about any number of things that might justify this, some real, some made up. But she prefers simply to state the condition and not discuss her reasoning. Too much in her life has had to be justified.

“Well, then,” Katherine Parker says. “Then I suppose that’s what we’ll do.”

They have only the scheduling left. This is Monday. They’ll begin on Wednesday. As the Parkers leave, each shakes Clara’s hand, and the wife declares herself so excited, so grateful that Clara has time for this. It’s a gift she’s giving herself, she says. She rarely does that. But this one is different. This will be something very special.

If George Cooperman could tell this story, he would doubtless start with a description of those portraits that Clara paints. A psychoanalyst, he would sneak up on the events by walking through an exhaustive analysis of her work, which would lead naturally for him into an exhaustive analysis of her character. She paints like *this*, he would say, she invariably sees other people in *this* particular light. It doesn’t matter who they are. The portraits all share these characteristics. And you see, he would say, you understand, that is because she herself is *this* kind of woman. Her work is consistent with who she is. It is the key to who she is. It explains everything that she has ever done. That is how George Cooperman would start.

If Harold Feinberg were telling this story, he would unlikely make much mention of Clara’s work, largely because he’s never really thought all that much about it, not the work itself, not the way she sees and recreates the people whom she paints. And also, he still resents the work a bit, still smarts at the way it seemed to make her happier than he ever did. So, Harold would doubtless talk first about the early days of their marriage. He would say that in the beginning she had seemed intent on having what he thought of then as a proper home. It was 1966, he would say, and things were just beginning to loosen up; but not Clara. Not then. She had her trusty copy of the *The Settlement Cook Book* out and opened every night. She had her hair done once a week, so it looked more like a wig than hair. And whatever happened afterwards, whatever she later felt or said, she had wanted the children, wanted them as soon as she and Harold

were wed.

Oh, and the sex with her—if he'd had a couple of drinks, and odds are he would have, he would go into this—the sex with her was efficient and somewhat businesslike, but not prudish. He'd been with a few prudish women in his time, and that was never her. But there was an element of practicality to the act that always left him a little unsatisfied. It was all a little too hygienic for his taste. And then he would say that maybe that had something to do with what got into him back in the seventies. All of that infamous cheating that he did. He was just looking for something a little more exciting. Not that that was any kind of excuse. Just the truth. He was bored.

But the funny thing is, he would say, the thing he has thought about a lot, is that he probably wouldn't have been bored by the woman she became after everything blew up. That was when she went a little wild. And of course that was when she started in with the painting seriously. That was when he would come by the house to pick up the children and see her in overalls and a man's undershirt, braless as far as he could tell, bits of paint clinging to hair. Something changed in her, he would say. Something changed, and it wasn't for the worse. Once or twice he even asked her if she would consider trying to make a go of it again, but the answer was always no. It wasn't an unusual story, he would say. At least not in the beginning. Boy meets girl. Boys cats around. Boy loses girl.

In Clara's mind, the story begins January, 1979, with George Cooperman giving her a lift to pick up her car. It begins with the odd realization that she might as well be sitting in the front seat of her

own Volvo station wagon rather than his, that the cars are identical inside. Though she then remembers that in her own car she wouldn't be in the passenger seat, not anymore, because since the separation in November, she has always been the driver and never the passenger when in her own car. This is where she used to sit when she was married to Harold.

It starts then for her with this odd mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity, with a chain of thoughts set off by a particular shade of beige, and by the sensation of being back on the passenger side of a vehicle—riding shot-gun, in the dead man's seat, the wife's place—and by the oddness of it being George Cooperman and not Harold at the wheel of the car, beside her, driving to the garage where she has had snow tires put on her car, though it's probably silly this late in the season, another chore that got lost in the mess of the marital collapse.

It starts there, and then it shifts very quickly into discomfort, the scene being *almost* something she knows so intimately. It's that unbidden intimacy that slips in. George has pulled into the wide oil stained drive outside the garage and they are facing each other to say goodbye. She notices the precise shade of brown of his eyes. She sees how his upper lip is so much thinner than the lower. She understands exactly how she would paint that lip. Having known him for so many years, she is learning too much about him, in only seconds. As though she is seeing him for the first time now.

She hears herself mention Janet's name. *I'll call Janet in the morning*, she says. And he says, *I'll let her know*. And as he speaks,

she notices the different tones of darkness in his mouth. He asks her if she wants him to wait and be sure her car is ready, just to be certain she isn't left here alone in this sketchy part of town. But she says that she's already called and checked. The car is ready. She says, *Thank you, though*, and opens her door and feels the coldness of the air outside. *Here*, he says, reaching over. *Don't forget this*. And he hands her the pocketbook she's left in the car.

As she makes her way down Locust Street, after meeting the Parkers, Clara thinks glumly about the husband, John, about his silence and his evocation of that word *dull*. The truth is, she isn't relishing the job. He doesn't seem like a very interesting subject, to her. But then maybe nobody would at this time.

It's a familiar route from the studio home, one she can walk with her mind entirely occupied, one she suspects she could walk in her sleep. Clara has lived for well over twenty years in her townhouse off Rittenhouse Square. After the children moved out to college, first Jason, then Ellie, she spent a few years on her own in the big house out in Bryn Mawr. But it never felt like her own home, even then. It belonged to them all, to Clara, Harold, Jason and Ellie; to them and to the way their lives had unfolded there, intricately wound together, then pulled apart, in small and larger ways.

Family life. Looking back, it seems like a dance, a four person minuet comprised of steps towards and steps away, approaches and retreats, ending, finally, with each of them standing entirely alone. By the time she was the sole occupant, the big, cold fieldstone house was

more museum than home to her. Even the rooms themselves bore names that no longer applied. Harold's study. The playroom. The *au pair's* bathroom. Phrases, like old photographs, offering remnants of a different time, relics, and evidence.

When she left, she took almost nothing. The children could have whatever they wanted. Goodwill could have the rest. A few boxes of papers, albums, some keepsakes from her own childhood, her mother's candlesticks, her father's pocketknife. Her own paintings, of course. Even the ones she no longer liked. That was all. It didn't occur to her until after the move, everything long gone, that she might have offered Harold a pick at what he wanted. But when it did occur to her, the thought came without regret. Harold wasn't her problem anymore.

The Bryn Mawr house had been done up in a somber, traditional style, the new bride following the old rules. But Clara drenched the place on Spruce Street so it was giddy with color, as though all that mattered was a sensation of abundance. Too much. Too bright. It hardly looked like the home of a well respected artist. Certainly not of the creator of the careful, muted portraits for which Clara was becoming known. No. It looked more like the set of a children's television show.

"God, it's like a paint store threw up," Ellie said the first time she visited, and then apologized. "I shouldn't have said that. I just don't think I'd be able to sleep in this. That's all I meant."

"To each her own," Clara had said. "It doesn't really matter what anyone else thinks. I find it cheers me up."

But now, as she enters her home, Clara herself finds all that imposed cheerfulness jarring. She stands still in her doorway for a few moments—as though there’s an obvious next move to make, and she just can’t remember what it is. This is a familiar sensation, since George’s death. She waits and nothing comes to mind. Nothing ever comes to mind. It is the sensation of absence, she knows, disguised as an impulse to act. There isn’t a damned thing to do, except see it for the trick it is, wade through the illusion.

She hasn’t eaten all day, and decides to make herself a tuna sandwich—the perfect, semi-conscious kind of task. The body moving almost on its own. Bread in the toaster. Can opener from the drawer. Simple, simple, simple. Drain the tuna of its water in the sink. Take out a bowl. Find the mayonnaise, and check the expiration date. Unscrew the lid. Look for a lemon, and throw out the slightly shriveled one in the fridge. Just enough thought required. The brain occupied, but not challenged in any real sense.

This is the best way to get through these days, she knows. Stay active. But not too active. Stay busy. But not frenetic. She is familiar with the routine. George Cooperman, old friend, lover too, isn’t her first loss. Not by any means. This isn’t even the first time she’s lost George Cooperman, though now, of course, he can’t come back. Still, she well understands that grief must take her as its plaything for a while—like a kitten with a mouse. A hopeless matchup.

Clara Feinberg doesn’t believe in God; she never has. She believes in time. Omnipotent, surely. Friend and foe, both, as deities of all religions seem to be. Determining everything about one’s life,

from the sudden absence of a man like George to the expiration date on a jar of mayonnaise. For now, time will be an ally of a kind, she knows. At the very least, it will soon take care of this sense of disbelief, this punch to the gut when she thinks of George and remembers again that he’s died. Given time, she knows, that will fade. A day, a day, another day, another day, and soon, she’ll be used to the idea. She won’t like it, but at least she will know it without having to keep remembering again.

She slices the sandwich from corner to corner, and corner to corner again, making four triangles on the plate; then she brings it into the other room, over to the window, and she stares outside. Snow is falling, the first snowfall of the season, not yet sticking on the ground. It isn’t quite dark, but it will be soon.

She’s always loved this time of day. George also loved this time of day. Some of their best hours together had been passed sitting in this room, her living room, both of them reading, waiting for the sun to drop from view, the daylight to fade, staying there, in that early darkness together, not switching on a lamp, not yet. Tacitly agreeing to fight the evening off. Fight every ending off. Live within all transitions for every possible second. But then as true darkness fell, they would be forced to look up from their books, forced into conversation, into each other’s company.

It had all been a great big tease, she thinks now. Fighting off the moment of conversation had been like fighting off an orgasm, the delay designed to increase the pleasure.

A streetlight comes on. Clara waits to see how long it will take

another to join it. A minute passes, two minutes. Nothing. They must have different levels of sensitivity, she thinks. They must believe different things about what darkness is.

Turning away, she leans back against the window glass, feels the cold there and also the heat of the radiator below, on her thighs, on her rear. At this moment, there is a perfect absence of consensus in the world. The streetlights busily debating among themselves over definitions of night and day, while these parts of her own home argue over whether she should be warmed or chilled.

It's close to ludicrous, of course, imagining *things* in conversation. Things having arguments. But it's true that she sees the world around her as animated. Spirited. Nothing truly dead. Nothing truly dead, except the dead.

Arguably, it began when Clara kept the Coopermans in the divorce. The house, the car, the dog, the children—for the most part—and the Coopermans who said there was no real decision to be made at all. Not after what Harold had done to her. He was no great loss to them.

Janet had been particularly vehement on the subject. She called him a cad and a scoundrel and a bounder. She swore that she would never speak to him again, unless of course it was to tell him what she thought. Clara, listening in their living room, sipping none too judiciously at her scotch, had found herself irritated by the vocabulary with which Janet dispensed her loyalty. Janet sounded to her as though she had stepped out of some drawing room comedy.

Harold was not a *bounder*. Harold was not a *cad*.

"He's an asshole," Clara said. "He's a prick."

It had felt important to her at the time. This wasn't some dinner theater Noel Coward production, for God's sake; this was her actual life. It deserved a coarse kind of discourse to match the coarseness of events. "He fucked all those other women," she said. "Fucked them for years and is fucking them still. And not just strangers, but women I know. He's a shit."

It was only a small annoyance, but it heralded more to come. Maybe it was inevitable, Janet still living the life that the four of them had shared. Married, with children. Married to George. Stability personified, George. No shattered hearts to sweep up and throw away in the Cooperman home.

Wednesday morning, the Parkers arrive on time and without Clara having to prompt her, Katherine Parker volunteers a hesitant "Well, I suppose I have to go." She'll just be down the street, she says. She'll shop a bit. She may have some coffee. She'll be back in two hours. She looks at her small silver watch more than once. She blinks toward her husband, and then at Clara. She lists a few more things she may do during this time. She finally leaves.

It's now time to get to work.

Clara has already decided that she'll be damned if she's going to try to make John Parker speak. If it's his habit to be silent, she'll paint him silent, then. And she'll even view his silence as a relief. It is often the most trying part of her profession—the chatter. Portraitists

and hairdressers, both are expected to talk about irrelevancies when they should concentrate.

In thirty years, Clara has not befriended a single subject. Not really. Nor has she painted her own family or friends. She never drew George, much less attempted a full portrait, not even a sketch, for which she's now glad. She never drew him and she has no photographs of him, and the degree to which he exists only in her memories comforts her. Nothing left of their history, outside herself.

In the studio, she seats John Parker on the red velvet armchair. "I'll just be sketching odds and ends," she says. "You don't have to sit still. Not today. I may take some photographs as well."

His hands are resting on the arms of the chair, loose not gripping. And his head is turned away, so she sees him from a three-quarter view. Clara spends some time, fifteen minutes or so, trying to understand the nature of the line that runs from his jaw, down his neck across his shoulder and then through his left arm. It's oddly difficult. There's a sense of elongation to him that she hadn't noticed on Monday, and it's hard to capture without exaggerating it.

"The woman who brought me here. . .?"

It startles her. He's still looking away.

"Yes. Your wife."

"Yes. My wife," he says. "That's right. We've been married more than fifty years." Clara waits to hear more, but nothing comes. He shifts slightly, so one hand falls away from the chair arm. After a moment, she gives up on the exchange, and decides to start acquainting herself with his face. The smooth skin, the pointy chin. A

small round nose.

The word isn't *dull*.

It's *dulled*.

This quality she's sensing—much like the lines criss-crossing his wife's soft lips—seems like something he's acquired. Something imposed. This is her instinct, that time has played a role here in blunting the man somehow. Something has changed him. Her mind is wandering now, not wandering away, but winding its way through this problem's labyrinth. To capture each quality in equal measure or at least with an equal degree of acknowledgement—this is her challenge. *Dulled*. A process. There's a contradiction she wants to display. Or maybe a conversation she wants to depict. The debate between who he appears to be and who he appears to have been.

It would be good to discuss all this with George.

She's written George two letters since his death. Two letters in seven weeks. The first was angry. *How could you leave me. . .* The second, contrite. *I know it isn't your fault. . .* As she works, she thinks she may write him another one, this evening. *Since your death, I am obsessed with time. . .* There's no one else with whom she wants to share any of this. No one else who will understand how important this business is of trying somehow to combat the static, still quality of her work. To *not* capture a particular moment in a life. To give up on that attempt. No; to fight it.

It does indeed sound sophomoric, she thinks, as she draws. It sounds as though she is playing word games in the territory of third-rate philosophy. But then George would see past that. He would. He

would recognize that underlying all these musings on time and death and portraiture, pretentious as they might seem, she is struggling.

The two hours quickly pass. It is a luxury indeed to work in silence, she decides.

However it began, it didn't go on for long. Not then.

George made his decision in early August of that year. August, 1979. He would stay with Janet. He would end the affair.

Only six months in. That was it. No amount of time at all.

But long enough. Long enough to have given Clara Feinberg a glimpse of joy.

For the good of the children.

The phrase had covered her heart like a shroud.

That afternoon, heading home, Clara spots Harold in the bakery where she's stopped to buy bread. Harold, of all people. It shouldn't be a shock. He's lived fairly close for years. But it is a shock and the sight of him brings on a kind of exhaustion. Here is something else to do, another piece of history to navigate.

She taps his arm, tugs gently at the navy cloth of his storm coat. He turns toward her, a look of confusion in his eyes; and then surprise, then something strangely like gladness.

"Clara!"

"Hello, Harold."

Leaning in, he kisses her on the cheek. Like an old

acquaintance, she thinks. As though there had never been any passion, nor love, nor rage, nor anything much, just some traces of innocuous familiarity between them. Live long enough, it seems, and every fire can burn itself out.

His narrow, gaunt face looks thinner than ever. His cheekbones jut out under ruddy skin, mapped with purple capillaries. Drinker's skin. How long since they've seen each other? More than a year. Since the newest grandchild arrived, and they stood together, side by side, compatibly squeamish and tipsy at the *bris*.

"How are you, Harold?"

"Oh, you know. Not bad. I'm doing fine. Not bad at all. Given everything."

"That's good," she says. But she wonders. He looks like an old man, to her—every day of his seventy-four years. Much older than George ever did. His posture seems a bit crumpled. And his brows have grown so bushy that if she were still his wife, she decides, she would insist that he deal with them—somehow. If necessary, she would cut them herself, in his sleep. She finds it ridiculous the way they trail down over his eyes, so one must look at him as though through an upside down, overgrown hedge. She wouldn't be able to live with them, she's sure. For a moment, she is sure. But then something else occurs to her. Maybe she would love them, she thinks. If she still loved him. Maybe she would want him as he is.

It's a painful thought. The ravages of time rendered irrelevant by love. It's something she will never find again, she understands.

As she and Harold exchange fragments of information about

their children, each buys a baguette—his sourdough, hers not. Did she hear that Ellie’s youngest won a statewide spelling bee? Does he know that Jason is considering a move back east? Yes. Yes. It seems they’ve been told the same things. This is their peculiar mix of intimacy and distance. In many ways, it is the opposite of the mix she shared with George, their families separate, themselves so intertwined.

In the bakery doorway, as they part, they chat a little more about the children before he mentions George. “Terrible news about George, wasn’t it? George Cooperman? You heard, I assume?”

Clara nods. “Yes. I heard.”

Her voice is steady, though she feels many kinds of unease. Not only the opened wound; there is an ancient, weary guilt at work here, too. Because Harold never knew a thing. Not back then, and surely not when she and George started up again. It was always Harold in disgrace, Harold who had cheated, Harold who had skulked around the outskirts of her life, hangdog for years and years. Clara was the injured party. Always. Clara was deserving only of sympathy and only Harold deserving of contempt. It’s a hook she’s never let him off—in part because she’s never trusted him with the information, and in part because she’s never quite wanted to let him off that hook.

“Poor old George,” Harold says.

“Poor old George,” she echoes.

“I don’t suppose you’d have dinner with me sometime?”

“What?” But she’s heard him, of course. “Dinner? When?”

What’s the occasion?”

He frowns, and the eyebrows lower, threatening to obscure his eyes entirely. “No occasion,” he says. “Just feeling a bit lonely. Everyone seems to be dying. Maybe that’s the occasion.”

After a moment, she nods. “Yes. We could have dinner, I suppose. I don’t have my book with me, though.”

He’ll call, he says. Maybe they’ll find a night next week. And then, somewhat awkwardly—a peck on her cheek, a few more mumbled words—they part at the doorway, walking in opposite directions toward their homes.

The weather has turned, and freezing rain begins to fall, stinging Clara’s face, a typical November sensation, a time of disheartening weather, disheartening events. It was the month of her wedding, back in the dark, dark ages. And also of her miscarriage, between the children. And then of her divorce—not the final papers, but the true dramatic end, Harold’s two suitcases stuffed with random underclothes and shirts, his McArthur-like stance on their front porch. *I shall return!* Oh no. No, you will not.

As she turns onto Spruce, hurrying past the brownstones, she wonders what it would be like to tell him everything, finally. She could write him a letter now that she’s taken up letter writing. *Dear Harold, There’s a little something that you don’t know . . .*

He would hate her, she decides. It might be the generous, right thing to do. It would even up a score in a way. She’s no better than he. She and George both. Not just years ago, but then again, their shared secret life, for the past five years. Harold would hate

her—not for the love affair, but for the smarminess with which she’s treated him all this time. He would be entitled to. He might even tell the children. He might tell Janet, drinker that he is. He wouldn’t be able to keep it to himself.

It would do more harm than good, she decides.

It began again, the second time, with a chance encounter at the funeral of an old friend. Millie Davidson, a woman in the same set back in the suburbs all those years ago. Clara attended alone, but sat in the church beside Harold, and soon spotted the Coopermans a few pews away.

It was hardly the first time she’d seen them since the summer of ’79. There had been years still to get through of living close by, of having their children sing in school concerts together, running into one another at the grocery store. There had been one high school graduation they had all attended—Ellie and the middle Cooperman boy.

The encounter, inevitable, took place in the vicinity of the receiving line. The four of them stood in a group—she and George, she and Harold, George and Janet—the four of them and the weights of history and secrets and judgments and of so, so many forms of love now abandoned, all crowded in together in the cool of this church.

She didn’t look at any of them, not really, just in a fleeting, disconnected kind of way. She listened to the words that seemed to float among this uncomfortable quartet, and contributed a few. She engaged only enough to be attuned to the proper moment to say her

goodbye, not so soon as to be rude, not long enough for ancient pains to surface. She made her excuses and walked alone outside, into the air and light.

But then he called her that night. More than two decades after the fact. He called to say he’d like to get together for lunch, that he expected her answer to be no, that he knew she would say no. But then look at poor old Millie, he said. Look at them all. How much time did any of them have? He had decided it was a call he had to make. He had to try.

He said nothing about his emotions during that call. The word love did not come up. And if it had, she might well have said no. That word would almost certainly have angered her after twenty-one years. But he didn’t say *love*; he said *lunch*. And she said yes.

John Parker is wearing a soft gray suit and a pale blue tie. This is the outfit in which his wife wants him immortalized. She’ll probably have him buried in it too, Clara thinks. It’s the third session, the third week, and she’s almost finished with the initial oil sketch.

She’s asked him to look toward her, to stare directly at her as much as he can. It isn’t often that Clara paints a subject with their eyes engaged like this. She’s never been all that interested in portraiture that results in a viewer trying to read the expression, the *wow, it really looks like he’s looking at me* pictures as she called them to George. This is part of what George found so characteristic of her, about her work, this slight sense of disengagement. “You see, they’re always looking someplace else. Because Clara herself prefers

to keep her distance from most of the world.” But in this case, she early on decided that the only route through that dullness she detected in John Parker, back to whatever had preceded it, is through his gaze.

Fifteen minutes or so into the session, his stare shifts away, just as she’s working there. “I’m sorry,” she says, “Could you just look here again? It won’t be long.” And obediently, silently, he does.

She’s become quite engaged in this portrait of John Parker. There’s a challenge here that interests her, in large part because she’s become convinced that there’s something wrong with the man, something desperately wrong. He’s lost, and growing more lost by the moment. That’s what the eyes of her painting will show, she hopes, a man in the process of becoming lost.

Possibly, she thinks, this is just another portrait George would characterize as disengaged. The direct gaze there, but the response it will elicit, not: *It really looks like he’s staring at me.* But: *Where has he gone?*

Alzheimer’s, maybe. Some other form of dementia, perhaps. The wife has said nothing, though Clara suspects she knows. Or perhaps she herself suspects and doesn’t want to know. It explains the protectiveness, and also this late in the day desire to capture him in oils.

He himself has spoken very little, silence remaining his dominant mode, and what he has said has had a fragmentary, illogical quality to it. The early comment about his wife, a couple of sentences about a case on which he worked when he practiced law

God knows when.

Behind her easel, Clara is distinctly clinical in her response to him, her sympathies taking a distant second to her interest in capturing the image of someone so caught up in a process. To convey that sense of transition and not merely try to characterize the man seems to her to be an infinitely compelling task. She has had other subjects whose bodies and faces seemed defined by sadness, but this is something else. This has become, for her, a portrait of time itself. The past, represented in the identity he is losing. The present, there in the glimpses still of someone trying to remain. And the future, well, the future is all too evident in the man.

The desire to talk with George about this particular portrait has grown strong, strong enough to be painful. In these last two weeks, it has become the focus of her missing him. His absence is woven throughout her life. It is there, of course, in her bed, where they made love, and talked for hours on end. In her living room, as well. On certain streets where they would walk together. In the restaurants they frequented, to which she doubts she will return. But the pain of losing him, finally, this time, not in some way that can itself be fixed by time, has coalesced around her longing to talk to him about this.

John Parker’s gaze shifts again, but Clara says nothing. She has had enough of it herself for today, enough of that unmoored stare of his.

When it began again, it was as though no time had passed. And yet, in some ways, those twenty plus years had changed everything. He would leave Janet now, he said. He didn't like the thought of hurting her, but he would do it. He would marry Clara. Maybe too little, too late, he said. He would, though. He was serious.

But Clara said no. She listened, noted his sheepish demeanor as he spoke; a marriage proposal, after all these years, the articulation of her own fantasies from the past. And then she said no. She had no interest in getting married. She preferred to live alone. She had come to value her independence. She now needed more solitude than a marriage would allow. The whole discussion took less than ten minutes. How funny it was. The very thing that had broken her heart, now no longer wanted. A trick of time.

It was time too that made them able to justify all of it, to themselves. Time and death. Life so short, eternity so long. That and the decision that what Janet didn't know, et cetera, et cetera. He had looked at Millie's coffin, that April day. He couldn't do it. Couldn't face eternity without having this. Without having her.

He was late getting there. But he wasn't too late. They could have something still.

Harold has chosen a restaurant Clara doesn't know, somewhere dark and clubby, up near Market Street. He's a regular it seems. The waiters call him Mr. Feinberg and suggest foods they claim to be certain he would like if he would only try something new.

She watches his banter with them, and she tries to imagine herself as his wife. It would be forty years. Forty years this very month. She tries to imagine that they are married and they have gone out to dinner in this place where he is a regular. This is the life they had planned, after all. They took vows, swearing to live this life. So, they'll meet for this dinner and talk about their day apart. And then they'll leave and head together to their home, where they'll switch on the lights, read their mail, share a nightcap, perhaps, brush their teeth. Then they'll undress. They'll climb into bed. Their bed. Maybe they will make love, and if so, they will see each other forgivingly, as she and George had. Eyebrows and all.

Harold orders steak and the waiter smiles, teasing that someday they'll get him to change his predictable ways. Someday. She orders lamb. They'll both have Caesar salads, an afterthought. Each of them already has a hefty scotch on the rocks, not an afterthought at all.

"Health," Harold says, lifting his glass.

"Health," she responds, and they clink. It sounds a little bleak, she thinks. The bar has surely been lowered, if health is now the most for which one can ask.

"This last one was the worst," he says, and she has no idea what he means. She raises her own brows in a question. "George," he says, then takes another sip. "Jesus, I'm seventy-four years old. I should be used to people dying. But I'll miss him, that's all. And it was so fucking sudden. Now you see 'em, now you don't. Hell of a game we're in."

Clara looks down at her drink, and at her hand wrapped around it. There's a speck of light blue paint on the knuckle of her index finger, a trace of John Parker's tie. The ice cubes, hollow cylinders, are melting quickly, the whiskey near them at the top lighter in color than that below. "I had no idea that you and George were in touch," she says, as she shakes the glass gently, so the amber of the liquid evens out.

"George and I? Oh, yes. For some years now. We were close, I'd say. I suppose that after enough time, all that ancient business, well . . ."

She had kept the Coopermans in the divorce, but apparently something else happened after that. "And Janet?" she asks, looking up. "Are you and she also close?"

He shakes his head. "No. No, indeed. Janet would never have a thing to do with me. I attained permanent pariah status, there. Loyalty to you, I suppose. I was never welcomed back. Didn't even go to the funeral. Didn't think she'd want me there. You?"

"No," she says. "I didn't go. She and I haven't spoken in years."

The waiter has appeared with their salads. It takes some time for him to leave, as Harold decides on a glass of wine, and Clara declines one.

It's ridiculous for her to feel anger at George, she knows, to feel betrayed. But she does. How could he have rekindled a friendship with Harold, after what Harold had done to her? She wants to ask him—to ask George. How could he have said nothing to her? She

wants to dial him up and have him explain this, have a fight about it, if it comes to that.

"They make a good Caesar here," Harold says. Lifting her fork, Clara forces herself to take a bite. "The thing about George," he says, "the thing I'll really miss, is that clarity of his. You remember? That way he had of just seeing a thing for what it was." He's chewing as he speaks, wipes a bit of dressing off his lip with the back of his hand. "Maybe I'm just a grouchy old man, but it seems to me there's even more bullshit around than there used to be. But not with George. Clear thinker. Straight shooter. It always surprised me, because in general I think of psychoanalysts as slippery characters. But not George."

It is unbearable.

"Harold," she says, putting down her fork. "There are things you don't know." He is looking directly at her. "Things about George," she says. "He and I were . . ."

We were lovers. Twenty-six years ago, after I threw you out. And then, again, for the past five years. He was, he is, the love of my life. He was, he is, the only possible reason a woman of my cynical nature would ever think to use a phrase like that.

"He was a good man, Clara. Wasn't he?" Harold lifts his wine glass. "To George Cooperman."

"We were lovers."

And so. It is done. She sees that Harold's face has stilled. He is as still as a portrait, as though she has painted him with this news. Seconds pass.

“When?” he finally asks.

When? It is always about time, she thinks. Why does it matter, when?

Because it does. “After you and I separated.”

“You and George?” he asks. “Right after? Back then?”

“Back then. Briefly. And then again. For the past five years.”

His face is mobile now, but in small, twitchy ways, the mouth twisting and shifting, the eyes looking down, then off to somewhere else, closed for a moment, open wide, looking at her, not looking at her. He is struggling to absorb what she has said.

It’s revenge in part. She knows that. He revealed his renewed friendship with George, and she has rendered that disclosure piddling. But she has also given him a gift. He’s off the hook now. She is no better than he. George too. Look at what they both did to Janet. Just another pair of sinners. Harold can stop feeling inferior. After how many years? She has finally given him that.

“I don’t know what to say, Clara. I should ask questions. Or I shouldn’t. I don’t know what to say. You and George?”

“Yes, me and . . . yes. But please, no questions.” What other memories of her own might be revealed as illusions? Might be taken from her as casually as Harold has just taken from her a part of George she thought she held? As effortlessly as she has just rewritten decades of Harold’s own life for him? At this table, with this man—her husband once, father of her children, her future at one time—she feels her own history sliding away from her.

“Clara, I don’t know what to say.”

“We don’t have to talk right now, you know,” she says. “We can just eat our food. It’s entirely possible that we’ve both already said enough.”

He looks at her for a moment, as though he might be ready for a fight, but then he nods.

A month in, and she’s on to the real canvas now. An art student has primed it for her, and Clara’s done a little preliminary work on her own, using only the sketch, but now John Parker is sitting there, staring at her. She’s told him he doesn’t have to, she’s only blocking things out, just broad strokes. But still he stares, and for the first time in all these weeks, she finds herself unnerved. The other times, she had insisted he look at her, but now, he seems to be looking for himself. She doesn’t like being looked at. Clara is her eyes, she is what she observes. Before, his eyes had seemed sightless; now she feels exposed.

She avoids his gaze, stepping all the way behind her canvas. She works a bit on the area below his jaw. George used to say she had a therapist’s instinct for invisibility. “I am often whoever my patients needs me to be,” he’d said. “Which is rarely me.”

“I’m not even that,” she’d replied. “I’m not even in the room.”

She is absorbed in the canvas now, actual brushstrokes, the movement of paint, when she’s startled by a sound, and looks over. John Parker is sobbing. His head is down, his body heaving. He is consumed by sobs.

“What?” she asks. “What?”

He doesn't respond. There's no sign that he has heard.

She puts the brush down and walks toward him, only a few feet, only a few seconds. He's still turned toward the easel, his elbows on the one arm of the chair, his head lowered into his hands, so all she can see is the yellowed skin of his scalp, the brown spots, the veins, the few strands of remaining hair. She kneels beside him, not knowing what she should do, or what she can bring herself to do, and kneeling there, is filled with something new, something like guilt. She reaches out and wraps her arms around his body. *Shhhhhh*. She says it many times, each time she exhales. *Shhhh*, with every breath.

His head is heavy on her shoulder. He bleats against the cotton of her shirt. He trembles against her flesh. As she holds him, it comes to her, gradually. She knows why he is crying, and she knows why she feels guilty.

John Parker knows. He sees himself leaving, understands about time—as she does. What it is doing to him. And he is grieving, for himself.

While she, for all these weeks, has found it interesting, only interesting, to observe him as he disappears, relishing this opportunity, for herself, treating him as a convenient vehicle for her own philosophical inquiries. She moves her hand up and down on his back, feeling the knobs of his spine poking through the shirt, through the wool jacket. She presses her palms firmly onto his body, But she isn't calming him at all. It isn't her touch he needs, it seems.

What does he need?

“Shhhhhh,” she says.

He had been calm, she remembers, while staring at her. Before she stepped away, hiding from him, leaving him alone. Perhaps it is now unbearable for him to be alone.

She moves her hands to his face, tries to lift his head.

“Look at me,” she says. “Look at me.” It takes her a moment to remember his name. “Look at me, John. John. Look at me.”

He does, only inches from her eyes. He looks at her, and she is startled by the gaze that she has learned so well, startled to find a living man there, a feeling man. “I know,” she says. “I know.”

He stares at her, still, and it is hard not to read his sorrow as a wisdom of a kind, in this era of loss when knowledge and pain seem intrinsically linked. She thinks that maybe here is someone to whom she can speak all those thoughts, explain what she has been trying to do, what has upset her so, about her work, since George's death. What stillness means. What time itself means, how it rules us, how it flows away, away. How unkind, how dispassionate it can be. How, in the end, for all that we're given, we are all robbed blind. Of everything. John Parker understands, she's sure. He won't think her sophomoric or pretentious. He'll recognize her struggles. He'll know that she, like he, is at war.

But his gaze belies her thoughts. He is too dulled already, too absent to hear her out. John Parker is as unreachable as George. But he is still alive, still needs the comfort he cannot give. His face is drenched with tears and snot, his lips quivering still. She pulls the cuff of her sleeve over her hand and rolls it into her fist as she used to when the children were small. She wipes him clean, careful not to

drop her gaze from his for long. “I know,” she says again. “I know.”

Time, she thinks. Both foe and friend. It will destroy John Parker, but it will also soon relieve him of the knowledge that he is destroyed.

It isn’t long before she stands, reaches for his hand, gentles him up and walks him out into the small sitting area, where they sit, still holding hands, silent, on the couch where he and his wife sat weeks before.

An hour or so later when Katherine Parker walks, in carrying a few small shopping bags, Clara only says “Your husband isn’t well,” and after a moment, the other woman nods.

“I know,” she says, and she too sits. “I shouldn’t have done this.” She touches her forehead with one hand, her pale polished nails brushing against the fringe of short, white hair. “I’ve upset him. It was too much. I should have known.”

“It can be difficult to know what’s right.”

“I wanted. . .” Her voice is now quivering, threatening to break.

“You wanted to immortalize him,” Clara says. “You told me that.”

The other woman looks over, blinks and nods. “That’s right,” she says. “As a present, for myself.”

It can’t be done, you know. Not with any of us. It’s a false hope. A parlor trick. You’ll think you’ve done it, you’ll think you can hold on, but it’s always just a trick. She doesn’t say it though.

“You’ve had him for fifty-one years,” she says, thinking of George, of

course, of the twenty-one years they didn’t have, of the miracle of the five they found, of all the pictures of him she never drew, of her attempt to hold him entirely within herself, to preserve him that way, of how Harold proved that impossible, of the legacy of mystery every person leaves behind.

“I was seventeen when we met,” Katherine Parker says.

“It’s your whole life, then.”

It isn’t right, she knows, to tell her how lucky she has been, not at this moment, as her husband quivers beside Clara on the couch. It would be unsympathetic to call her blessed, to rush her through grief and insist on the silver lining. Clara won’t do it. But she does envy her. Despite it all, she envies her. It doesn’t matter about the many reasons, good, bad and indifferent, why one might stayed married for half a century. Right now, she can only see all the years.

“I should take him home.” Katherine Parker is sitting straighter now. Clara notices again that veil etched into her skin over her eyelids, her lips. Beside her, John Parker sighs out an almost musical tone.

“If you like,” she says. “I could try finishing it. Without him, I mean. I have enough sketches—I think. I could do it. Not the same way, but something.”

Katherine Parker frowns. “But it’s ridiculous, isn’t it?” she asks. “It’s too late. Isn’t it?”

Clara thinks about the stark clarity with which she has been depicting John Parker’s decline. Is it too late? Yes. It is. Of course it is. But arguably, it is always too late.

“No,” she says. “It’s not too late.”

“Oh, it’s terrible. I feel like such a fool”

“Time makes fools of us all,” Clara says. “Every single one of us. It’s possible we need to ignore that fact. And get on with our lives.”

It is another moment before Katherine Parker nods. “Yes,” she says. “I would like it, still. I would.”

“It will take a week, maybe two. I’m not sure how long.”

It won’t be the same picture, of course, not the one that so interested her. She’ll have to give up on the notion of depicting time itself—as a kindness. She’ll have to pick a point along the continuum of John Parker’s life and stop the clock there, search the evidence of her own observations and try to recreate him, as he was—as though that man were more real than the man he is now, as though there’s a moment in anyone’s life that is the truest one. As a kindness, she will pretend to this belief. A death mask? Perhaps. But also a token thrown to weigh in on the side of love.

Katherine rises, takes a few unhurried steps, then reaches for her husband’s hand, and Clara, who has forgotten that her fingers and his are still interlaced, misses a moment before she thinks to let it go. She watches their hands clasp together, loose skin, knobby knuckles. She sees him respond to the familiar, gentle tug, rising easily, as though sensing safety in the air around his wife. The couch cushion exhales, the dent from his weight disappears.

“Let’s go home, John. Let’s take you home.”

They begin to walk away. She will never see John Parker again, she knows.

When Katherine glances back, Clara gives her an encouraging look, a look that promises her the portrait that she wants. Clara will do it. She will turn back the hands of time.

Katherine Parker smiles at her, seems almost to laugh, then turns away. The couple moves as one through the glass-paned door, their images visible only briefly, a bit distorted. Gone.

Contributors

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