

# GETBACK

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Dale Stromberg

## **Getback**

A novel in five chapters

mostly set in Valentina, California in the year 1999

written in Sacramento, Shimonoseki, Tokyo and Petaling Jaya  
and published by the author.

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# Chapter One

There was a cardboard sign above the door of the Mission: Christian Refuge on 23rd Street that read *Abandon All Dope, Ye Who Enter Here*. Will Herrera read it twice, not catching the pun the first time. He stood on the sidewalk with a scowl of concentration tightening his lips in the cold air, checking the address of the Mission against the blue ink scrawl on the palm of his hand. He hesitated to step inside but could not walk away: as chary as he was to get involved with some holy-roller charity program, his wallet was empty, his stomach howling—he couldn't shun a free meal.

Since Will couldn't see through the papered-over windows, he had no way of knowing that, within, a stew had already been served and was being shoveled down gullets at that very moment; its quality, or at least edibility, would determine whether Rodney Toth would be thrown out of the program today. One of the inmates there, a former Hells Angel called Jacob, had woken Rodney just before the five a.m. reveille with a white-laced engineer's boot to the ribs—Rodney would later find a bruise there—and like friendly disaster incarnate had snickered, “Fool, you're so *fucked*. You'll never make it.”

Rodney's eyes were open in an instant. “Dang!” he croaked, staring into Jacob's spotty, banana-colored teeth and wondering what on earth the oily skinhead was talking about. The faint light of early morning traced pale grey perimeters around the windows of the Mission's front room, where the other recovering junkies rolled from their beds and patted pockets for morning cigarettes. Rodney lay straight as a rail in his bunk, wakefulness slow to arrive; then it came to him. The rules at the Mission were hard, and Rodney's job for the day—to slap together a morning meal to feed around twenty hungry guys—had been assigned, as usual, as an inviolable condition of his continuing to live there. His first thought was that he'd overslept and blown his deadline, but that turned out not to be the problem.

That week, Joe Cholula had scored an imposing slab of beef, as he acquired most of what the inmates at the Mission subsisted upon, picking it up at the sort of don't-even-ask discount that three decades in the favors-for-favors dope trade could make available. The meat sat in the walk-in freezer in the kitchen, hard as iron; as part of the meal, Rodney was to have defrosted it, an operation that would have taken all night—had he known. The first he heard of it was when Jacob, in a concerned gloat, clued him in as Rodney shimmied into his jeans and brushed his teeth with

his finger.

“It’s a simple concept, fool,” offered Jacob, to whom any bad news was a ‘simple concept’: “You’re in deep shit.” Jacob and Marlon, a vet with only one foot, loafed in the doorway of the kitchen, leaning against the jamb to watch Rodney peel carrots with a steak knife at the long stainless steel kitchen counter—both men drawling comments with an air of having nothing to do but bust Rodney’s balls and all the livelong day to do it.

“You don’t pull this off, Joe’s going to hand your ass to you,” observed Marlon.

“One more Okie motherfucker’s going to be living on the river,” added Jacob with an absent crack of the wrist. “In a cardboard *chapeau*.”

Rodney would not rise to their baiting. “I *know*, brother, I *know*.” He beckoned. “Tell you what, though, dude—if you could fill up that one pot right there with water, that’d be a major help. About halfway up.” Before Rodney had finished speaking, he was alone in the kitchen. Satisfied to work unharassed, he bent again to his carrots, which he peeled and sliced as madly as if he had fingers to spare. He was habitually hyperkinetic: anything worth doing was worth going hells-bells on; also, he didn’t want to look like a loser—he didn’t want the guys to see him fail at a job. This probably motivated him more than the threat of ejection from the program. True, Rodney only had to make a bad job of it to be homeless again by nightfall—*Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire*, read one of the many cardboard signs posted around the Mission; and he’d be stupid not to avoid losing out on a rent-free bunk and two hot meals a day—but nevertheless he knew from experience how to live on nothing and had no real fear of hitting bottom, in the way of a fellow who’d been through the wringer already.

Scuttlebutt got around that the coming breakfast would make or break Rodney’s chances in the program; the other junkies in the place passed the time cracking jokes at Rodney’s red-alert cooking. “If he’s not in there tearing down the walls, Rod’s doing some goddamn *cooking*,” intoned Marlon. From the kitchen they heard Rodney yelp as something heavy and metallic struck the floor, which got a laugh. Then Joe Cholula announced the morning prayer, and everybody gathered in and quieted down.

There remained the problem of the meat, which sat now wrapped in paper on the cutting board. Rodney had taken a mighty swing at it with a meat cleaver, jarring himself to the teeth but not making a dent in it, and retreated. Now he eyed it adversarially as he assembled the makings of a

stew and tossed them into the large pot he most often used for mess duty. Faced with an obstacle he had no idea how to surmount, Rodney said to himself, “Shoot, I better just crank it, man.” He fired up the gas range and dropped the entire frozen slab into the pot, where it plopped like a boulder. This would have been a daring gambit indeed for someone who knew more about cooking than Rodney, but in his ignorance he knew not how cavalierly he was courting indigestibility.

At just the moment that Rodney was ladling out his stew for the judgment of the others, Will was ambling up 23rd Street toward the Mission. The morning sun, bright but not yet warm, shone horizontally through the gaps between the warehouses on the opposite side of the street to illuminate the Mission; it wasn't much to look at, being only a converted pizza-by-the-slice diner on a decaying block not far from Midtown. The outer walls were a patchwork of gray and off-white where graffiti upon graffiti had been painted over—which distinguished the building from its neighbors, where nobody had bothered to blot out the urban murals. Apart from the hand-stencilled motto above the door, its pun so corny that Will was not comfortable understanding it, the Mission: Christian Refuge was unremarkable; Will could imagine nothing as fancy as a ‘rehabilitation clinic’ being housed here. At best it might have been mistaken for a tidy squat, or a clubhouse for mad bombers.

Will glanced back up 23rd Street toward the northeast corner of Garfield Park, where a spray of foliage brightened the concrete drab of the block. People were scarce at that hour. A few cars slid past, their drivers cradling paper Starbucks cups or fussing in the rearview mirror with persistent cowlicks. He again considered heading back home; the growl in his stomach was at war with his trepidation at walking into what could be, for all he knew, a Bible-banging Narcotics Anonymous meeting with thin vegetable soup served in paper cups at the end. He'd heard a bit about the program from a former housemate called Tim Thompson, who had told him of “this one place by the train tracks... free meals and shit... for guys only, and you got to be clean... hella military shit, curfews and rules and shit...”

Will pushed open the glass front door, which was opaque with newspaper, and found himself staring into a confused mess of clattering dishes and loud talk, the air laden with acrid tobacco smoke and the remnant scent of an onion-heavy beef stew. The meal he had come for had vanished, but he had no time to process this fact and make his exit before he was corralled by an officious, diminutive guy wearing blue sweatpants

and a gray-shot handlebar mustache whose brief and skittery welcome speech gave way to a fast hustle into the kitchen, where Will found himself, quite against his wishes, roped into his job of the day—because at the Mission, everyone had a job every day, inmate or visitor, first time or not.

Will was scrubbing plate after plate from a stack of greasy flatware at the stainless steel sink, his arms elbow-deep in steaming, soapy water, considering whether he'd lose any future claim to the food at the place were he to slip out the back door (of course he would), when a tall guy with a throaty drawl materialized from the front room to lounge against the counter, smoke a rollie and chew the fat.

"It's typical," chuckled Rodney. "You put tweakers in charge of anything, the simplest job, it don't matter. Haywire, brother. Everything goes haywire."

"Right." Will, on guard against the overdriven earnestness of Rodney's manner, lobbed him noncommittal replies.

"That hunk of meat's just sitting in there, nobody says nothing to me. *Shoot*. But I must have beginner's luck. That's the only explanation. By the time them suckers scraped their bowls clean, they was all saying it was the best meal they ever ate at this place. Can you believe that?"

Will had no grounds to disbelieve it; he hadn't tasted a bite. "Man, I only got here ten minutes late, and that shit was straight up gone." He did his best to match Rodney's conversational intensity, speaking with roughly double his normal enthusiasm, which came to less than a tenth of Rodney's; he was doing his level best to look interested.

"Anyway, I'll give you good odds on hanging with the program here, seeing you missed the food but didn't bail on the work." When Rodney chuckled, he made a low, hitching noise; he seemed to Will to be chuckling not at something that was funny, but that ought to be funny. "Not everybody can hang with the regimen here."

"Right."

Rodney seemed friendly enough, but something about him was off-center. All of his *right on, brother* and *gee gawl* talk sounded like an affectation that had grown by dogged repetition to a habit of speech. He looked and pronounced like an Okie, not an uncommon sight in Valentina, an urban enough city nevertheless situated in northern California's rural Central Valley; he had a coppery tan on his forearms and enough length of bone in his rangy, active frame to stand half a head taller than Will; beneath his over-animated eyebrows, his eyes were set close on either side of the narrow jut of his nose; he wasn't exactly ugly, but was rather the

sort of knocked-at-the-edges guy to whom estimations of ugliness don't apply. His face, like a billboard, seemed oversized and overdone, too easy to read. It was even intrusive, and could have been taken as a parody of expressiveness. Rodney was either uncommonly frank and urgent, or he was an insincere screwball.

Rodney blew smoke from his nostrils and said, "So, yeah, being late. Up here they run a tight ship, dude. You snooze, you lose." When Will made no reply, Rodney asked, "Sleep in?"

"Sort of." In truth, Will had woken in time. Though his one-room studio apartment had little furniture and less decor, with neither TV nor refrigerator by way of household appliances, he had scrounged a digital alarm clock and liked to rise early. But he'd dallied too long near the heater vent in his room, straining to hear the sound it conducted from the next apartment over. So he'd run late. Anyway, it was Will's habit—a bad one, he told himself, but did not mend it—to allow others to persist in misconceptions rather than actively contradict them. "I guess I'm not used to waking up for reveille."

*Reveille*, in Will's mouth, was ironic. To Rodney it was not.

"Worst part of being a soldier," Rodney agreed. "Army. Seventh Infantry. We fought in Panama, which was, man, what a shit show. You probably won't believe this, but I almost got in the Green Berets—a guy like *me*, which is like, God help the Green Berets." He chuckled at his own joke; Will tried to smile. "But they gave me a less-than-honorable discharge because I tested positive for cannabis. And I told them suckers, 'Shoot, I'm never going to stop smoking, man. Nev-ver.' Swear the best thing that ever happened to me was getting busted out of the military, brother."

That word again: *brother*. Will wondered if Rodney was trying to imply some kind of what-up-my-nigga interracial camaraderie; or was it a religious thing? Did he expect to be called 'brother' in return?

"Really." Will was a pacifist but was cautious about airing his views among patriotic strangers.

"Sure. I mean, I fought it at the time, since I figured there wasn't no place else for me to go. But if you come down to it, I could of been blown to bits. That's pretty much what they were paying us to do. You get wasted, or you waste the other sucker. The way I see it, weed saved my life." Rodney's sloppy grin widened—he'd surprised himself, and liked the sound of it enough to say it again: "Weed saved my life!"

"I know plenty of people who say the same thing." Will's carelessly

splashed a little dishwater onto his canvas-topped sneakers. The furrow between his eyes deepened in annoyance.

“Yeah, but that whole outfit was full of corruption.”

“Your, um, platoon?”

“The whole damn army, pardon my language. I mean, shoot. They said we was in there to whack Noriega, but everybody knew the real score.” As soon as he’d finished a cigarette, Rodney would roll another. Will noticed that he had a one-handed technique for rolling them that looked well practiced. Rodney was a generation older, if looks were any indication, and must have used crank for decades, but he’d held up better than some of the dinosaur tweaks Will had known, the sort of busted-down headcases and jinky white trash with teeth bad enough to make his flesh crawl.

A limping fellow came into the kitchen to fill a mop bucket from the hot water hose behind the sink. After he left, Rodney told Will that he was called Raunch. “He’s all right, though. I’ll introduce you guys later. Just be a little careful.”

“What for?” *Dare I ask*, thought Will.

“Let’s just say Raunch lives way the hell up Gay Street.”

This did not warrant a reply. Will rinsed a spoon.

“Don’t make a difference here, though.” Rodney seemed to feel that the program needed defending. “It’s Christian here, but it ain’t like *church*. We’re on a mission, like the name of the place says. You can be gay, straight, hermo-homo-fag-o whatever. The goal is just, get off dope.”

Will nodded. “That’s what I need to do.” It was surprisingly easy to say this—he realized that Rodney was the type of person it was easy to say it *to*. Will could admit his addiction to a guy like this. For the first time, he began to feel he might not be in the wrong place.

“Right on. Maybe you ain’t Christian, but the Bible got it right. ‘Abandon your dope.’ You seen the sign?”

Will frowned. “The one outside?”

“Above the door.”

Will recalled it: *Abandon all dope, ye who enter here*. “Mmm-hmm.” He surmised that Rodney hadn’t caught the Dante reference.

“Shoot, I can’t tell what the heck the Bible says half the time. Got all that olden days language in it. But there’s no two ways about *abandon your dope*.” Rodney cleared the phlegm from his throat. “‘Failure is impermissible.’ Joe says that a lot. The dudes in charge of the program have all kinds of channels of information, you know. Ways of uncovering if you backslide. And the thing is, whatever happened in the past, you’re a sin-



ner, we all are, so they can look past it. But Joe say, ‘Sins of the past are in the past, but rules are rules in the present.’ He says that a lot. I’m telling you this so you know, Will: it ain’t no joke here. They’ll axe you from the program in a heartbeat and you’ll be out on your ass again. So don’t get wired or high.”

Rodney watched Will work with the complacent interest of a guy whose own chore for the day was already done. He’d assumed Will was black until he learned his last name, but whether he was Brazilian, Cuban or whatever, it didn’t make the difference it once would have to Rodney. In jail, the white guys made jokes about ‘kicking cans’—Africans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans—and when the opportunity arose they’d go beyond joking; Rodney now felt lingering guilt over the way he’d gone along with all that. In hindsight, it just didn’t seem Christian. Most of the people he associated with did not share his scruples.

Will was a handsome, loose-jointed kid in what was probably a T-shirt for a band—one of these bands you’ve never heard of, though Rodney—his curly jet hair cut close and jagged, likely a homemade job. Rodney judged by faces: he didn’t mind that Will seemed so out-of-place because his sensitivity, plainly stamped in the pacific set of his features, counteracted what untrustworthy air Will might otherwise have had, holding everything in life in quarantine. Rodney was amused at the way Will washed dishes, a single bowl, a single fork. Rodney’s wont was to dump everything into the water, go balls-out with soap, and scrub like hurricanes.

“They’re clean-crazy around here. I bet you noticed. Every day they got us swabbing the decks, scrubbing the walls. Joe Cholula says, ‘You want to stay clean, you got to keep clean.’”

“Hmm,” said Will.

“You get it, right? ‘Clean’ as in clean from dope, ‘clean’ as in cleaning crap up, pardon my language. You seen outside, where if somebody tags the building, Joe’s got us painting it over lickety split.”

*Lickety split*, thought Will. *Gee willikers*.

“Jesus knows where we get the paint.”

“Joe Cholula.” Will had heard from Tim Thompson that the founder of the Mission had used to cook dope. Now he was a local notable, occasionally profiled in the area press. Tim made him sound like the world’s iron-tightest asshole to anybody who didn’t walk the straight and narrow.

“Yeah, you could of met him before,” said Rodney, “but I saw him duck out a while ago.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, apparently signifying *he went that-a-way*.

Will hesitated. “Is he—for real?” For all Will knew, Rodney and Joe Cholula could have been bosom pals; he didn’t know how to ask with tact whether the Mission were a scam.

“*Well*,” said Rodney, the one word bitten off to mean something like, *Hey, what do you expect?* He gave Will a frank shrug. “Like anybody. He’s just a drug politician, is how I’d put it. Lots of people, you know, they believe their own bullshit.”

“Right,” said Will, slowly. His work at the sink was nearly done. But there remained the large food-crust-ed pot that Rodney had cooked his stew in. Will cocked an eye at it and said, “You could boil a heretic in a pot like that.”

Rodney drew his eyebrows together in consideration. “Have to be a little guy.”

Over the week that followed, Rodney made good on his promises, introducing Will to Raunch, Jacob, Marlon and most of the other regular inmates and visitors to the Mission whom Rodney deemed worth befriending, meanwhile dropping broad hints about who to avoid, who to keep an eye on; this advice Will took with a grain of salt, aware that feuds among tweakers ran deep and were often founded on trivialities. Every morning, after the guys broke up breakfast—a meal for which Will was never again tardy—and began the building’s daily scouring and maintenance, Rodney and Will would find a quiet corner, on opposing bedrolls or behind the kitchen in what had once been a dough-rolling room, with cement-hard flour petrified between the cracks in the floor, and there they swapped stories about, in Rodney’s words, “them scandalous lowlife assholes down on the river, excuse my language, dude.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s not too many model citizens out that way.” Will had inhaled or imbibed every variety of controlled substance he’d ever come across, but nevertheless held cigarette smoking in unvoiced contempt. While he abstained, Rodney’s hand-rolled smokes soon filled the dough room with a haze that hung over the long high unfinished wooden bench there. Rodney leaned forward on his elbows and said, “Those suckers will steal *anything*. Just take this one example. Let me tell you the one about the chickens. You been to the university?”

He meant Valentina State. Will was nonplussed; at first he wondered whether Rodney meant to ask if he’d ever been a college student. “Actually—”

“It’s over off of M Street. Maybe you thought it was a park or something.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. I’ve been by there before.” Of *course* it wasn’t a *park*.

“So you seen them chickens.” The grounds of the university campus, for reasons unknown to Will, teemed with poultry. He’d first seen them scratching in the dirt when he’d worked a brief stint for a catering company that had brought him there to fill wine glasses for professors during a retirement party. Now *that* had been a new experience: of course he’d been to house parties, and then he’d seen depictions of high-class rich-folks parties in movies, but this ‘party’ had been like neither—not particularly fun, nor particularly opulent. He’d quit that job before long; what soured him on it was the realization that what annoyed him most about it—being invisible—was in fact its true function. What was it he’d told his boss? “If somebody gives me a free glass of wine, I tell them, ‘Thank you.’” That had been rare for Will—to sound off and then quit in a huff, rather than choke it down for the last two weeks.

“Yeah, it’s weird,” he agreed. “Hella roosters.”

“Well,” said Rodney, leaning further forward as he warmed to his story. “There was this old dude that lived with all of us down on the river, name of Greg. You ever met Greg Glavinovich? Tall guy? Well, we was all living in pup tents, you know, as usual not much to eat. And it was getting cold. So Greg—” Rodney laughed in advance of his punch line, a throaty, gulping chuckle—“he gets all these screw-ups and tweaks together and says, ‘We got to get *organized*.’”

Will smiled.

“So maybe forty, fifty of us troopers, with them cheapo tents and all that, and about a million Coke bottles in these shopping carts that nobody could get around to selling. Generally just about as organized as a riot. What Greg does is, he takes me up to the university, and we get these Glad bags with us. Middle of the night. He runs around like some kind of commando in the wild, this fat-ass guy with a bald spot, and he’s grabbing sleeping chickens off the ground, and like *this*”—Rodney demonstrated with his hands—“wrung their necks. Snap, snap, snap, fast as all heck. Chickens making a hell of a noise. And I’m holding the sacks, looking out for campus cops or whatever.”

Will had no idea what he was meant to make of this story.

“So we run back to the river, which is no joke of a hike all the way from M Street when you’re holding a ten-gallon sack apiece of dead chickens.”

“Jesus.”

“One *apiece*, brother. And Greg had every junkie down there pulling out feathers.” Rodney struggled in vain to hold his laughter together long enough to finish the story.

“Shit.” Will’s ambivalent smile was three-quarters faded.

“Yeah. We roasted them suckers on a campfire. On *sticks*. No salt, no sauce. It tasted like, well, you can imagine. *Shoot*. What a comedy. Comedy of errors. But that’s how we had to do it that winter. Cold as all hell. The city shut down the Army of God kitchens downtown.”

“I remember that.”

They were quiet a moment. Homeless people had died in the cold that winter. Rodney’s guffaws wound down to a slow grinding in his sinuses, like a truck engine that kept turning over even after the ignition had been killed. He bowed his head a little.

Will ran his finger around a crack in the door frame next to where he sat; the back of his aluminum folding chair had been tilted rearward a notch by some past violence done to it. He cleared his throat and said, “Once at this house I lived at, some tweakers stole our front door.”

Rodney pulled himself back, a rigid, lost look on his face, as if reaching to recall something distant, momentous and uncanny. “I done that once.”

Will laughed loud, from his belly. This took Rodney by surprise. He had been wondering for a week what sort of clowning it would take to get Will to relax. The chicken story was supposed to have been surefire; but now he’d gone and done it without trying. *That’s how it goes, though*, he thought. *You want to get to folks, you do it without trying*. Rodney pushed his fingers through his short hair and grinned. “I can’t remember why, though,” he confessed.

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At the far edge of the narrow man-made lake in Garfield Park, a wooden bench sat concealed by a chaotic, drooping canopy of tree branches and cracking vines, nestled into a narrow copse between the weedy ball field and the buzz of traffic on King Street. It was a spot well suited for drug deals, for making out and for sitting to ruminate.

The bench was perpendicular to the lake’s edge, so that, when Keiko Tshara wanted a view of the lake, she had to straddle the bench like a rider. When she did, she could peer from between the vines down to the placid brown water that lay flung out before her, stretching the length of

the park. Garfield Park was the best feature of a declining neighborhood. On warm days, young mothers brought their toddlers to play in the lake, the open sky and long green gap of land, rare in the tight-packed city, affording room for kids to give vent to their boundless enthusiasm; Keiko would watch them with a mixture of admiration at the simplicity of childishness and relief that she had traded the petrifying and impenetrable confusion of childhood for the more manageable confusion adults navigate. When it rained, the park would clear out, and Keiko, partly sheltered by the thick roof of boughs so that she'd get wet but not soaked, would watch the roiling surface of the lake and listen to the spattering of the water until the subtle monotony of the downpour became the floor of her perception, an open floor upon which thoughts wandered. She didn't mind the wet, or the bugs. The bench was a favorite hiding spot of hers; she spent time there most days.

Late summer hung in the air, the year's lazy afternoon. Keiko felt such difference between Valentina summers and those in Osaka that the Japanese word for summer, *natsu*, seemed not to translate into English at all, and vice versa. How could two seasons share a name when the very air was different? The day was hot and dry, with wisps of cloud lacing the wide empty sky. Keiko lay supine on the bench as she often did, slipped off her shoes and rested her bare feet on the earth, pushing her toes into the fine dirt, almost silt, under the trees and gazing into the profusion of branches above. The blue of the sky penetrated down to her only in patches. With her fingers she pushed strands of sweat-damp hair off of her forehead and cheeks before letting her arm descend to her side. She daydreamed.

She relaxed her breathing and felt her heart slow its rhythm; she strove to forget striving, to slip into time's continuous vanishing always. A trickle of lazy cogitation began a slow drip into her consciousness, prompted by the vigorous tangle of branches she saw. *Trees don't stop growing when they have enough*, she thought. Her eyes rested on a towering black maple stretching above and around her; it dominated the copse; to Keiko it seemed the archetype of organic enthusiasm and natural glory. *They keep growing until the day they die; they grow older but not old*. She pictured the roots of the maple pushing ceaselessly through the soil in slow-motion glee, stretching to wring from the earth the maximum of life. *A tree loves growing. It has an emotion—only one: "I like to grow."*

The moon appeared through an opening in the branches, ghostly in daylight, and Keiko followed it lazily with her eyes. Even in the shade she

was sweating freely. From the time she was small, it had always piqued her to see the moon come out in the afternoon, hanging pale and out of place. It was an actor that had bumbled onto the stage before its cue. Its motion, too imperceptible when viewed in the frameless sky, seemed minutely discernible to her through the narrow chink in the canopy. *I think I might be able to imagine the life of a tree*, she thought. The wind blew the branches of the maple across the moon's full face. All of the other trees nodded in agreement. *Does it think? Without a brain or central nervous system, I don't suppose it can have organized thoughts like a person, but it's alive; its leaves bow to face the sunlight; so it must be somehow aware of the outer world.*

She imagined how it might form vague, clear, simple thoughts that wended up the inner cells of its trunk at a rate measured in months. It might think in the way her muscles and organs thought, quite apart from intellect. She folded her arms across her belly and let her eyes fall shut by tiny degrees, until all she could see were blurred streaks of ochre, cream and beryl. What were alpha waves again, she wondered, not sure where this thought came from, and not interested in pursuing it. Somewhere in the park, someone was barbecuing, and the earthy scent of coals and mushrooms swept her nostrils. The maple and other trees seemed in her imagination to settle and yawn in vegetable awareness around her. The brush at the end of the canopy crunched, but she took no notice.

*I suppose trees never worry or have any fear.* Her body relaxed and she settled deeper into the rough surface of the bench. It wouldn't have been bad at all to doze. A thick metal bolt pressed slightly up into the back of her thigh, and a troop of ants discovered the side of her foot and set about negotiating it: small sensations that, at the edge of her mind, she knew would prevent her from falling asleep—to sleep was always such a struggle for her anyway. *Even when an axe bites into its side, it surely doesn't bother the tree. I'm sure of it. Apart from growing it doesn't know anything, not even death.*

A deep, man's voice said, "Hey." Keiko jolted up. It was Sherwin Fender.

"Hey," she said, repose rattled. *How did you find me here?* she wondered, but didn't say it quite in that way: "You could find me? It's—surprised to me." She moved up onto her elbows and lifted herself to see him more directly. The sweat on her brow had chilled all of a sudden.

Sherwin sat next to her on the bench and surveyed the copse in his quick, impatient way—*like a cop busting a party*, Keiko thought, and then

told herself, *That's unfair*. She sat all the way up and he took her hand. His face was boyish, a handsome sort of callow, and she liked his height and his musculature: she liked him larger than her. He seemed hulky to her, like a walking interruption; she found this cute. Keiko could see that Sherwin had wet-combed his copious blond hair moments before. Constant fixing was a nervous habit of his. Both of Keiko's past boyfriends, one on each rim of the Pacific, had been as sloppy in dress as she was; and so, though she sometimes got exasperated, perhaps she was kept amused by the novelty of Sherwin's endearing, punctilious struggle to control such things: to tuck or untuck his shirt, and if he wore it untucked, to ensure that it hung from his body just so—or else tuck it in after all. Decisions of this sort might take him ten minutes or more, and foul his mood when they stumped him. He grinned at her, and she looked at his hands, not his eyes. “Birdwatching?” he asked with a twist of unbecoming sarcasm. She knew he saw as much sense in birdwatching as in burning money.

Keiko held her breath a fraction longer and glanced around her. “The tree.”

“Which one?”

“All.”

“Yeah. Trees are nice.” Sherwin mashed an ant with his forefinger. He spoke with a note of conciliating agreement: *if you like trees, I can like trees*. He may have been a touch dyspeptic in temper, like plenty of the Americans she saw, but he usually wasn't out to mock her or pick fights. If she said she was watching trees, he would work to agree, or at least see her point, or at the very least show that he *wanted* to see her point—also like plenty of Americans. Fearless to disagree, but anxious to see your point.

“The tree are alive but they don't care.” Keiko's tone, full of approval and maybe wistful, maybe even husky with sincerity, caught Sherwin's attention, and he gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. “Yeah, they're pretty nice,” he said more carefully, watching her surreptitiously, as he would do when he made an effort to connect with her. *Maybe it's a Japanese thing*, he thought. “That's why I hate the scenery in the city, not enough leafy greens,” he continued, gauging her for a reaction. She seemed distant. “It's nice and quiet here.”

“It's quiet. Also it's nice.”

Such distance. Sherwin pressed further. “You probably do a lot of thinking out here? Like some Shinto stuff?”

Keiko didn't answer at once, but then she turned and kissed his cheek.

He kept his eyes open when she kissed him, to thrill at the innocent open-lipped way she moved her face to his. It was as though she had no idea how to kiss at all, though they did all the time.

“What’s a Shinto?” she asked.

He’d read about it. “I read about it,” he told her. “Isn’t that the Japanese religion? Nature and stuff.”

Keiko didn’t answer. She didn’t really know anyway.

Sherwin loved her. She was a slight, pale girl with honest and healthy features, the firm and pliant flesh of her face damp with the heat; she was no astonishing beauty by lascivious standards, but Sherwin felt pangs of admiration at how entirely pretty she was. Her features seemed like perfected versions of themselves, just as a drawing shrunk to eight-tenths of its size assumes a fine clarity it never had at its full dimensions. He ran a finger over each of her broad, smooth cheeks, which she suffered him to do. He decided it probably didn’t matter much to either of them what she did out in the park, considering how happy they were now to see each other, so he encircled her shoulders with one arm to draw her to his chest. This also she suffered him to do.

“So, what are you doing?” asked Keiko, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Playing a game.”

“What game?”

“It’s called, ‘I’m the boss.’”

“How you play?”

“I’m the boss.”

She lifted her head to dart a glance at him. “You’re not a boss. I’m the boss.”

“I’m the *boss*.” His tone was stern. Keiko smiled at him, but he kept his face straight. “Say, ‘Sherwin, you’re the boss.’”

She stuck out her tongue at him. “You’re not a boss of me.”

“Don’t make no difference. I’m the *boss*.”

Keiko stopped smiling. “You can’t be boss of me because stupid can’t boss the genius. It’s a universe’s rule.”

Sherwin liked how Keiko mispronounced things. “Be-cyows? I’m sorry, did you say be-cyows?”

“That’s a perfect English. And only a motherfucker likes the stupid boss game. *Hai, kaero.*” She stood up. Just when she began to think he was the stiffest dweeb on the planet, he’d cut loose with a gag like this—not exactly *funny*, but endearing in its note of self-mockery; he had depths



she sometimes failed to give him credit for. “Let’s go home.” Sherwin did not stand—he was too amused with his joke to give it up. “Can we go, Sherwin?”

“Say, ‘Please, boss, may we go, boss.’”

“Eat a shit.” With fists on slender hips and head cocked belligerently sideways, she was a sliver of vitality in his eyes.

“Say, ‘Please eat shit, boss.’”

“Okay, so, you want me to chop off your ball?” She took a menacing step forward. “Japanese karate chop. I put your ball in my miso soup.” Sherwin giggled and scrambled off the bench. “Let’s go,” repeated Keiko. They went.

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Will fell into a routine, waking up early every morning to the tinny, exasperating strains of country and western music from his clock radio—he kept it tuned to music he hated, as this was the only thing that could rouse him from his mattress—in order to beat it down seven blocks and over four to the Mission in time for a free breakfast; or rather, a breakfast paid for with an hour of half-hearted labor.

His single small room was bare beyond a fold-up card table stacked with library books under the street-facing window, a folding aluminum chair, an inherited mattress heaped with second-hand blankets, and a plastic egg crate that contained his loosely folded clothing inside the doorless closet. All these things he’d culled from dumpsters or junk sales; his landlord had not seen fit to furnish the room with electrical appliances; but there was yet his one luxury: a hi-fidelity phonograph and tuner with a portable CD player jury-rigged to the input stage. That was all; no bric-a-brac or niceties beyond what he’d judged, item-by-item, to be essential.

The radio woke him with a pre-dawn blast of kitsch: Shania Twain—he’d heard this song enough mornings in a row to learn and to loathe the singer’s name—doing a slick, insipid impersonation of a redneck. Will stretched for the off button, the voice of reason whispering to him that he actually *wanted* to get up—he’d be *glad* once he did—there was *food* waiting—and somehow he was up. His first waking impression was to be reminded of his contentment with his room, its shape, the utility of its accoutrements. He was a trapper in the wild, and he’d build this here log cabin with his own two hands.

Time was tight, as he’d planned it. Give himself time, and he’d just

waste it. He began his manic morning routine, tear-assing through his apartment to brush his teeth, douse his head in the sink, check his clothes for smells. He paused as always under the heater vent that formed a conduit for sound between his apartment and Keiko's, his neighbor on the floor, but did not linger. There was no time. His clothes had passed the smell test, so he put them on; he'd worn the same stuff for a few days in a row now, but as he never paid attention to what others wore, it seemed reasonable to exempt himself from like scrutiny.

Every day went like this, a mad dash to the Mission for breakfast, then a chore; after cooling their heels for a while, he and Rodney sometimes braved the zombies at the Army of God for a lunch variously under- or overcooked; or else, if they had any money handy, would treat themselves to microwaved burritos at a convenience store. Afternoon was likely to find Will in the same choice spot he'd haunted for months, a table on the fourth floor of the main branch library next door to the Downtown Metro parole office. Will was tolerated by library security because, unlike the other homeless guys, he seldom fell asleep there, didn't truck any junk up in a cart with him, and had never been caught stealing a book. Instead he read, or tried to: he'd taken in a sampling of nearly every kind of literature, history, political and social science, and whatever else struck him as having an elevated reputation; and whatever he failed to understand of it, he was conscientious not to scorn.

Will shot out of his apartment and rattled down the stairs at top speed and into the open street, where the watch-spring of morning was still on the wind. The air was chilly, but it would soon vibrate with palpable dry heat. *Good walking weather*, he thought. Another habit surviving from his days of drug use was to take epic walks through the city, sometimes for seven or eight hours at a stretch; he'd begun this practice in the days when crank had filled him with nervous energy, had continued it of necessity when he'd had no place to live and nothing else to do with himself than walk, and, now that he was no longer using, and contrary to his expectation that he'd lose the fund of unhealthful invigoration that dope had shot into him, he found that the habit of long rambling, so long held, was ingrained; he was inured to fatigue; if anything, he was more than equal in energy to his prior self. At night, he would return again to the Mission for dinner and more shooting of the bull. The need to avoid temptation meant that Will had to do his best not to come in contact with any of his old friends; this wasn't a burdensome necessity: he was comfortable with loneliness; it was quite in his nature not to strike up much rapport with the

guys in the Mission either, other than Rodney.

He came for the food—he *hustled* for the food. Living on nothing was a challenge he rose to vigorously. It wasn't exactly easy to live on food stamps and Section Eight rent subsidies, but it wasn't exactly hard either. One cure for having it bad was once to have had it worse. Dope had overwhelmed him when he was in high school. He'd tried outrunning it from job to job and scene to scene; had taken two cross-country hitchhikes, had made abortive attempts to relocate himself from the circle of people he depended on and who depended on him to bumble their way to the next white puff; but crank was everywhere in the nation, boiling on tinfoil in the back of every car, on subway trains, in ladies' restrooms, at parties, behind department store loading docks, and even under locomotive bridges crimson with rust. At no minimum wage job he'd ever held—be it slicing pizzas or detailing minitrucks, mopping urine from hospital corridors or running every model of cash register—did he ever miss the tweakers on staff at first sight, the employees with sucked-in cheeks and hard-edged energy, industriously scrubbing already-clean baseboards or rearranging the backroom inventory in order to spend a dope rush on anything squirrel-like and repetitive. Will could not get away from it, or could not choose to, or could not manage to choose whether to choose to—et cetera, et cetera. So he slid through a chaotic life belly-down and blindfolded, at the mercy of a cheap, low-class high that wasn't even thought to be addictive. The last two summers, he'd climbed up onto hot tar supermarket roofs to sleep, where no one could get to him; he'd passed two winters inviting himself onto the lumpy couches or cold garage floors of a set of tolerant but more responsible friends whose numbers grew fewer with each lapse in moral judgement he perpetrated upon them. Now, he made rent regularly and scared up food in ways to which the law had no objection. This mode of living, which to a more conventional person would qualify as a life of desperation, was to him a long-shot step in the direction of respectability. Perhaps what tinted his daily teeter on the brink of insolvency such an optimistic hue was his sense of splicing together, for the first time in a couple of years, a cohesive story from the blooper reel of existence.

In the other direction along Fuller, opposite his route to 23rd Street, Will caught sight of Keiko stepping off the sidewalk into the gutter to circumnavigate a bunch of pea-green plastic garbage cans left out for the trash collectors. She had the air of coming home, not going out; she must have been out all night. Will felt, in a flash, a stupid urge to duck back into

the building before she saw him. It was too late for that. She waved gaily, and he could only grin back and mark time looking at the sidewalk until she approached to within speaking range and lifted her headphones from her ears.

“*Ohayo*, Will.” Keiko winked winsomely. “Making any money?”

“Uh—no?” He wanted a snappy reply, but gave up without trying. “*Ohio*,” he returned lamely. Keiko stood on the sidewalk under a white oleander to talk to him, her bearing light and easy as a person with nothing pressing in all the world to do. She might have been a little drunk—not sloppy, but loosened up. He smiled to return the friendliness she seemed to radiate, but couldn’t release the gush of language from the tip of his tongue.

“Don’t you go to sleep yet?”

“Just got up. Going for breakfast.”

“You got up? You’re too lazybones. I think so, you never get up the early morning.” The accents in her voice jumped and fell at the wrong places like a whimsical fey lyric. She rocked back on her heels and fixed a steady, stern gaze upon him. “You’re still awake from the last night’s party. You’re too much party.”

“Whatever.” If he was going to take it, he resolved to give it; but how? “*You’re lazy*. It’s too bad you can’t even get a job.” Still lame—but at least words were exiting his mouth now. Will knew that Keiko worked *two* jobs, enduring the graveyard shift at a convenience store and bussing tables in a sports bar. He’d learned this much from what she’d dropped in the long-running conversation they conducted in scraps every time their paths crossed at the building. He also knew, from his eavesdropping, that she barely made enough money to stay afloat.

His habit, which began innocently, of cooling out in his room and by chance overhearing snatches of what went on in the apartments on either side—Keiko on one, an elderly German couple called Schultz on the other—was no longer entirely innocent. He needed to take care not to mix up information she’d vouchsafed him with what he’d eavesdropped, lest he let slip some personal detail of hers he ought not to know: it was fine, for example, to mention the time a drunk came into the convenience store and wiped out a display of candy bars trying to dance the running man; but it wouldn’t do to mention the fact that the same drunk had first aggressively hit on Keiko and made her acutely uncomfortable.

“Where you’re going so early, Will?” She pronounced his name like *wheel*.

“To the Mission. I told you about the Mission, right? Free food, baby.”  
He grinned.

“So, the boy’s club. Boys only.”

“No chicks allowed.”

“You shouldn’t lie. You’re going to hospital. You broke a boner on the toilet bowl.”

“Well, you—cut your clit on a banana peel.”

“But I remember, you ate the banana from the monkey’s ass.”

This was a running joke of theirs, stupid insults. Keiko seemed to delight in scatological absurdity, and Will felt very warmly toward her as a result. “Yeah, but...” He did his best to think of a good one: “At least I didn’t suck a fart out of a dog’s penis.” *Good*, that is, by the relative standards of their mutual joke. *Holy shit*, thought Will, even as he said it: his conscience protested that he couldn’t possibly talk to a woman this way without *getting in trouble*. Still, she laughed.

“I never did it. But I like that one.”

“You like that? You should catch me on a good day.” Who was this glib-talking fellow? Will was both within and without himself: frankly pleased with his facile gross-out cleverness, but incredulous at his own easy manner.

“Hey,” she interjected. “Did you see the cat?” She meant a stray she’d taken in; it had disappeared a week before, and she had surprised him by coming to his door to inquire after it. How odd and uncomfortable—and opportune—it had seemed to open his door with a mouthful of soggy fishsticks and find her there.

“No, not today.”

She frowned. “That’s not good.” He’d noticed these pronouncements of hers before: *good, not good*.

“Yeah, no. Did you ask around at Reimi’s? You should ask the cooks there.” Reimi’s was a Japanese teriyaki takeout shop in the neighborhood.

“Hah?” She sucker-punched his shoulder.

“What? You guys eat cats, right?”

“Who? Japs?” Another sucker-punch. “What do you want? Hah?”

“Well?” He laughed, twisting to dodge her.

“No. That’s Koreans. They eat the dogs.”

“What about Chinese?”

“They eat a bird nests.”

“Japs?”

“Monkey brain. Raw horse.”

Will giggled. *Stop giggling*, he ordered himself. “For real?”

“I never ate.”

“But you ate whale meat.” He meant to goad her.

Keiko looked wistful. “It’s so good. It’s a delicious. Now we can’t eat them, from the environment problems. Because the danger species. So that’s not good.”

*Not good*, thought Will.

“But I miss it,” she continued. “It was in our school lunch. Long time ago.”

“Huh.” Will recalled, of a sudden, that he had someplace to be. The lull this occasioned in his speech was enough to end the exchange. Keiko breathed deep and shoved her hands into the pockets of her pea coat. A beat passed, then two. “*Hona*,” she said, and let herself into the building. Will, deciding not to watch her go, took off up the street toward the Mission.

Keiko worked her way up the stairs toward her third-floor apartment. The wooden stairs creaked like they’d collapse forthwith. The building had begun life at the turn of the twentieth century as a Victorian manse of graceful countenance and reassuring stateliness; during the twenties, an enterprising landlord, riding high on the bull market, had prosecuted a series of renovations at enormous expense and to hideous effect, resulting in a formless huge loose pack of anachronistic pediments and cornices thrown together and then allowed by a program of bare-minimal upkeep to slowly disintegrate. Even then, it had been decent quarters, each floor a suite of rooms to be let; it was left to the parsimony of subsequent landlords to divide each suite into the tiny individual units into which Keiko, Will and the other tenants were now cramped. Every year or two, the landlady threatened to turn everyone out and sell the building to a property management corporation, who would doubtless replace it with something modern and unimaginative—and less liable to prosecution for violation of building codes; but the deals always fell through because she believed the building to be worth considerably more than its market value and refused to accept a penny less; as a member of a monied family with extensive real estate holdings, she could afford to wait a few decades for the market to agree with her. Keiko called it a ‘*bukkake* house.’ She was tickled by its illogical construction and baggy mien.

Keiko took each step with care and paused on each landing before ascending the next flight. The stairwell doubled back on each floor. Notwithstanding her night of drinking, which she only got to enjoy once ev-

ery other week or so, she wasn't particularly weary. But she dilated on the stairs in order to enjoy the climb. Old, musty buildings made her feel at home in a way that sterile, air-conditioned modern structures failed to match. She found it hard to fathom how anyone could feel at home living inside of an exercise in cold geometry.

At the bottom of the flight leading to the third floor, Keiko saw Sherwin plodding slowly down the stairs up above the next landing, entering the corner of her vision as she looked up. His nimbus of blond hair was ghostly under the dim fluorescent bulb that lit the hall. The sight of him sent through her a faint tremor of blind apprehension—she had no clue what he might have been doing up at the door of her room at this hour, not having a key and knowing she planned to be out, but the sight of him was enough to incite a panicky second of entrapment. She barely had a moment to understand this feeling before it was gone again—because he didn't look right, the weaving motion of his legs navigating the stairs was different, and, come to notice it, his features weren't right either. It wasn't Sherwin after all, just a young man who resembled him.

“Morning,” said David Dunlop when he noticed Keiko gazing at him.

In an instant, Keiko felt awkward. She self-consciously fixed her hair, though it did not need fixing. “Hello.”

“I think I've seen you before. We live on the same floor.” He pointed up the stairwell—the wrong way, coincidentally, as if he were indicating that they lived on thin air beyond the landing where the stairs doubled back.

“Oh—yes. That's right. You... live here?”

“Yeah.” David elongated his answer just a touch, and Keiko realized he'd already said so. “I just moved here this week,” he continued. “Always staying one step ahead of the landlord.” He smirked.

Keiko didn't understand this last remark. “Sorry for looking funny to you.” Her imperfect English syntax tended to slip further when she was flustered. “I thought you're the someone else.”

“I, uh, get that all the time.”

She detected from his manner that he did not in fact ‘get that all the time’, this was a joke, spoken in the only-half-serious manner of many of the young people she'd met in Valentina; a joke not because it was funny, but because it was spoken to indicate that something funny might well be said at this juncture of the conversation. To Keiko, such people seemed to believe that a jest ought to be made out of anything mundane, and she didn't quite approve—she saw no reason to flee the mundane. David Dun-

lop was a handsome guy, close to Sherwin in type but without Sherwin's stiffness; David was obviously hip, stylish, and his bearing was typical of the forward-leaning, socially competitive types Keiko has met on the local independent music scene. He made an external display of pulling himself together for a formal introduction, thrust his hand out for a shake, and told her his name. After three years' conscientious restraint, Keiko had broken the habit of dipping her head down in a shallow bow as she shook hands, a personal triumph no one not from a bowing culture would fully fathom.

"Is that a Japanese name?" David asked when she'd introduced herself—and then regretted the question; he tried to remain sensitive about ethnicity. But the girl was cute, which lent him moxie to be forward.

Keiko answered with a slight tilt of her head, her short hair swinging playfully round her face. "I use to be Japanese. *Use* to be."

"Now?" He cocked an eye at her, expecting a punch line.

"Now I'm all-American bitch."

"Go U.S.A."

"Go G.I. Joe."

They both laughed a little. David saw that Keiko was nervous; he felt nervous as well; he wondered if this might be a bit of sexual tension. *Fish or cut bait*, he thought, smiling inly at the corniness of the expression, made a movement from one leg to the other, and said, "Well." With that, it was time to go. They said pleased-to-meet-you and passed each other without further eye contact, David descending to the street and thence to work, Keiko continuing up to her room. As she turned the key in the lock and flipped open the letterbox flap, she thought again of the little shudder of relief she'd felt when the young man on the stair had not been her boyfriend.

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David Dunlop pulled into the parking lot of Angela Keene's place just after eight o'clock with his evening clothes folded into the knapsack on the passenger seat, along with his contact lens solution and a bottle of hair gel. Her building was much newer than his and had an *elevator*—he was sure that he'd never care for such a bourgeois commodity, but as he rode up to her floor he indulged in a little resentment toward his landlady anyway. Whenever they were to go out for an evening, David was in the habit of bringing his clothes and toiletries with him to her place. If he arrived



at Angela's ready to roll, he'd nevertheless have to sit on the sofa and wait for her, with only C-SPAN to amuse him, so he dressed with her. He reasons for doing this were one part economy of effort, four parts silent reproof to Angela for taking so long to primp. His message, if she even got it, made no discernible dint in her equivoise.

Angela Keene was—David searched for the best word—the most *potent* woman he'd ever dated. Each day of her life, no matter how productive, ended unfinished; she went to bed nightly with her head full of things yet to get done; what she'd accomplished, she was too proud of to dwell on; what lay before her was territory to conquer, spoils to win. She slept heavily—a *clean conscience*, David quipped to himself—for precisely six and a half hours a night, a habit fixed upon according to a calculation of her own circadian rhythms. David, in his folly, had once broken a jest upon the topic of circadian rhythm, which he knew nothing of but took to be hippy-dippy nonsense; her very great lack of amusement at this offense had cast a chill on their sex life for the entire following week.

David liked to sleep late. This ticked Angela off. He blamed his sleep habits on low blood pressure, interpreting this as portending longevity. “Shouldn't we both be thrilled?” he both suggested and mock-suggested. She also made plain her scorn, not for his job per se, but for his contentment with it. Not for nothing had her own father worked his way up from car mechanic to garage owner to proprietor of a chain of repair stations; ambition, in her rubric, was manliness. Post-coitus, halfway to sleep and in a happy fog of prolactin and oxytocin, he'd loose his tongue and prattle about moving up from the café to something more lucrative, expecting this would make her happy. He meant these as proposals; she interpreted them as declarations. Both of them saw marriage, or something equally committed though not necessarily mired in religion, in their futures: and yet their union in its present state was doomed because David thought love meant she'd accept his flaws, while Angela thought love meant a responsibility to help him shed them.

David let himself into Angela's apartment—he had a key—and found her just getting into the shower. “David?” she called, her voice a tinny echo on the bathroom tiles.

“Uh, he's coming later. I'm a random stranger. Are you naked?”

She did not answer. Before her full-length mirror, David changed from the grungies he'd worn at work into more voguish clothing. His mind was on their dinner reservation at nine. This business of waiting for the woman to dress... if anything, a role-reversal would have appealed

much more to his sensibilities: between the two of them, he ought to have been the one to dally with his wardrobe, she the one to dress promptly. To subvert societal roles—to exemplify how foolish it was to generalize about the sexes—would have been cooler. Their present dynamic was too *typical*. He also prided himself, a bit deliberately, on loving her as she was; all she ought to have done was to throw on any old clothes, apply a dab of makeup as perfunctorily as you please, and she'd be naturally beautiful to him. Another part of the problem was that she was knock-out beautiful, to the extent that he could easily imagine strangers assuming she was a trophy, and that he pressed her to spruce up in order to satisfy his male ego. *It makes me feel so self-conscious*, he thought, with an inner ha-ha.

David's efforts at procrastination availed him nothing. He was dressed and ready while Angela was still in the shower. He watched the television for a bit. Angela claimed that C-SPAN had the only non-crap content on television and would watch nothing else.

"You know," David loud-talked to Angela, trying to be heard over the hiss of water, "C-SPAN could actually be alright if it just wasn't TV." A good relationship tactic, the tacticians all concurred, was to make concessions to the opinion of the other party. "As good as they try to make it"—blatant concession: tactical maneuver executed—"the C-SPAN people can't overcome the fact that they're stuck broadcasting on a shitty medium." *I should have said, 'flawed medium'*, he thought.

"Okay," answered Angela from the shower.

"It's like, TV is just stuck being what it is. A flawed medium. Putting across the truth on TV is like trying to paint the Mona Lisa with mud instead of paint." A trio of thoughts skittered across David's consciousness: Had he heard this line in a movie? Would Angela come back with the argument that the Mona Lisa wasn't objectively better than any other painting? Or that painting with mud could be a valid form of expression? As soon as these doubts surfaced, they vanished again. At any rate, those were the sorts of arguments he himself was more likely to make, depending on the time, occasion and point to be proven.

"You watch TV at home all the time," reminded Angela from the shower. "Shitty shows. You even call them shitty."

"Touché." David bethought himself of a rejoinder: "But I'm not expecting the *truth*. You know what I mean?"

"Okay," said Angela.

He observed her as she toweled off and began to dress. For a feminist

guy in 1999, it felt wrong (*but oh-so-right*, he quipped to himself) to ogle his beautiful girlfriend. Angela had luscious, lustrous brown skin and facial features that were the picture of loveliness: wide nose, full lips with an unusual turn to them, hints of haughtiness, arched cheekbones, coolly tilted eyes. *A de-va-sta-ting beauty*, he thought, recalling a song lyric. She'd chemically relaxed her naturally curly hair a bit and had it cut short and tied into bonsai bunched around her head, so that the graceful bend of her neck and shoulders was uncovered to view. Delicate, sensuous femininity seemed to burst from her every part. The first time David had seen her unclothed, he'd thought, *Only in porn do women look like this*; and yet in the flesh, her lascivious magnetism easily overmatched anything he could have downloaded. His chest had felt ready to collapse the first time they went to bed, such was the pressure of his lust and astonishment. Even now, at the memory of the first time their bodies had—hmm, done that—David made ready to stand up, halfway resolved to try to initiate sex and to hell with the reservations. Then he thought better of it. *Know your limits*, he decided. With Angela, there was a time and place for everything.

She applied her mascara in the bathroom mirror as he prowled aimlessly around the apartment, having lost interest in C-SPAN. *'Lost' interest isn't the word, exactly*, he thought. The bathroom, like the rest of the apartment, was appointed in stylish modern taste; Angela had taken the effort to coordinate her furnishings, inclining to rich colors and deep-stained wood. An acquaintance with a background in interior design had provided key assistance. David observed the way she paid no mind to him as she made up, and was put in mind of how wrapped up in herself she'd seemed to him when they'd first met. It had been at the café; David was her waiter. He'd reminded himself of something he'd heard, that very beautiful women don't often get hit on due to the intimidation factor. So he'd gone for it. It had turned out that Angela worked at the same insurance brokerage as David's sister, a coincidence which seemed to him like a graven invitation from the fates; Angela, on the other hand, had held sober doubts at first about the wisdom of mixing the professional and the personal. They had nevertheless hit it off at once. David's bad-on-purpose joke for the next week was, "That morning I was serving up coffee, and that night I was serving up cock." One mental association would lead to the next, and in all likelihood he'd arrive for his next joke at, "Yep, I like my women the way I like my coffee: black and bitter." If you couldn't tolerate and, ideally, reciprocate in this kind of crass irony, then you couldn't be friends with David Dunlop.

Their relationship had solidified as winter gave way to spring, and David barely noticed at first that he was seeing less and fewer of his friends. He put in more hours at the café to afford being in love; and more of his time outside work was devoted to Angela. At work, he even took the extraordinary measure of working *harder*, not just longer, actually doing a good part of what his employer expected of him rather than slacking off. *Love is suffering*, he thought, *like Romeo and Juliet. Lady and the Tramp. Et cetera.* Perhaps it was the habit, instilling in childhood, of holding an intrusive popular culture at bay, that had habituated David to both believing in and mocking such ideas.

“Ready to go?” Angela was now prepared to acknowledge his presence. “You should drive my car.”

David shut off the television. “A’ight den. F’sho.”

“No Ebonics, please.” Her tone was of not even bothering to be annoyed.

David clammed up. Nothing clever to say occurred to him.

In Angela’s late-model Saab, they discussed *The Fountainhead*. Angela was reading it for the fourth or fifth time. She found it more compact and accessible than *Atlas Shrugged*. “You don’t *have* to like her writing style,” she argued.

“Yeah, well, you know, it’s the opposite problem.” David had given the book a shot in deference to her opinion but hadn’t made it past what he’d dubbed the ‘Psychic Rape Love Scene’ before throwing the novel over. “Rand is a great writer. I’ll give her that.” Tactical maneuver executed.

“People say that. ‘She’s a great writer, I’ll give her that.’” Angela was sure this was meant as a backhanded compliment. “It’s a book of ideas. Rand was a philosopher first.” As a sort of agreed-upon joke, neither of them ventured to pronounce *Ayn*. Angela was disappointed that David hadn’t seen the point of the novel, either because he couldn’t or because he wouldn’t. “I personally don’t even think the *writing* is that good. But Rand is definitely one of my favorite historical figures.” The car rolled through Midtown traffic, the lights of the street reflecting in luminous streaks on the hood. David tended to ride almost on top of the driver’s-side lane divider line, to Angela’s irritation. She bit her tongue on the cusp of a scold.

“Do I interpret this correctly? You actually prefer certain historical figures over other historical figures.”

“Yes.”

“And this is something that people do.”

Angela was irked. She knew this tone of voice of his.

“So, like,” he continued in like vein, “name your top five historical figures.”

“First tell me yours.”

David smiled. “You got me there.” He paused, thought of something to say: “Hem. Haw.”

“Hemming and hawing, are we?”

“Hem,” said David. “Haw. Well... Dostoyevsky? I guess. Um. Lao Tzu? Possibly also.” He drummed the steering wheel with his fingers.

“Gave up already, huh?”

Measuring up to Angela’s standards meant a great deal to David, but he felt certain that to betray this fact to her would be to lose all. “My top two. In no particular order. Except alphabetical.” A least a bit clever, that. “And yours?”

“Rand, Queen Elizabeth, Machiavelli.” This sounded rehearsed. “J. Edgar Hoover. And Adolf Hitler, for his public speaking skills.”

David’s eyes widened. “Did you just say what I think you said?”

“I did, and don’t crash my car.” She decided now was the time to scold. She followed this up with, “Those Adidas are new, right? They go well with your outfit.”

“My outfit.” David was not accustomed to thinking of his ensemble as an ‘outfit’.

“You have good coordinating sense. It’s one of your strengths.” Angela did not want the subject to return to Hitler, sensing the risk of resurrecting an argument from two weeks before. It had stemmed from a documentary on the History Channel that David had insisted they watch on Holocaust survivors; Angela hadn’t said anything directly about it at first, but he interpreted her aloofness during the program—not incorrectly—as callousness. Wanting to draw her out, and thinking he’d score an inarguable point, he compared their plight to slavery. Comment had led to comment, irritated volley to return volley; Angela uttered the words ‘soft-touch liberal lemming’ and from there it was a short road to full-on shouting that lasted ten whole minutes. David had stormed out and gone home; it was the first time they hadn’t made up with sex after a fight. He had acted, of all things, *betrayed*.

“I’ve never thought of myself as a talented coordinator.” He sounded touchy.

“Well, I do. I mean, I think of you that way.” Her tone of voice was

warm with affection. "I'm always proud of how you look when we go out."

"I did not know that," he over-pronounced, to hide his pleasure.

"Drive faster. We'll miss our reservation."

"Oh, ho. Drive faster, says the girl who wasn't ready to go until eight forty-five even."

"We will miss our reservation, David."

"Would that be so bad?"

"Where would we eat?" Angela was ravenous, but she wasn't about to tell him that. It was none of his business.

"We could eat out back of the restaurant," suggested David. "Like, sit on wooden crates under the moon. I'll be Lady, and you'll be the Tramp."

"David."

"I'll boil you an old shoe."

"If I don't stop you now, you'll keep going like this all night. This I know." Her voice was distilled imperturbability.

"What?"

"Your jokes."

"I never joke."

"I let you blab on to make you feel better, but seriously. There are limits."

"I'm funny. I went to Is-David-funny-dot-com, and it said, 'Yes.'"

"Darling, you drive like an old lady," Angela said sweetly. "Hit the fucking gas, please."

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It was the winter of 1979 and damned cold. Dickie Smalls and Rodney sat in Small's Dodge Dart, waiting for the engine to warm up. Smalls intermittently worked the controls of the windshield wipers, not setting them to automatic but clicking the dial forward and back by hand, partly to have something to do with his hands. The wipers scraped across the film of ice on the windshield and back again with no effect. Rodney huddled over a cup of coffee and breathed through his mouth. Outside, the whole world was a single colorless shade, the sun only just about to rise over gray streets and buildings; but the coffee was only a rote concession to the early hour; Rodney was wired and needed no caffeine. He and Smalls had been awake for thirty-six hours.

"*Damn*, brother, I need a smoke *bad*," said Rodney. "I'm *hurtin'*."

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch. Let’s see.” Smalls shifted in his seat to rummage underneath it with one hand. He ran his hand around the edges of the seat, between the car door and the metal bracket, under the cruddy piles of junk mail it would have been against his nature to toss out. The car had a colorless interior, a pasty gray dash above pasty gray upholstery, and the ceiling lining overhead was starting to sag down in patches. “I knew it,” he snorted, talking to himself. From the crevice between Rodney’s seat and the hand brake, he produced a single battered cigarette.

“That’s what I figured, brother,” said Rodney, and let out half of a laugh: “Geh, heh, wuh.” He had the odd habit of syllabification when he laughed, as if he were stifling a laugh to speak but failing. Rodney had known Smalls for a year now but had never seen him pay for a pack of cigarettes. He managed to bum smokes off of even the most unwilling of donors, or even just pulled them out of thin air. “Magic trick, man. Total magic trick.” Smalls also had the deft knack of rolling up a cigarette with one hand and making it look neat and smooth, a trick he said he’d taught himself after he’d broken his hand while he was locked away in County for a year; amphetamine users’ bones took longer to heal than normal, so he’d had a long stretch of one-handedness. Rodney wanted to learn how to do that.

Smalls frowned. “Where we got to be by what time, is what I was asking.”

Rodney didn’t remember Smalls asking anything. “Shit, it’s basically Cabacho.” Rodney explained again the situation: Cabacho, who was a manager in a landscaping service and was probably skimming the till to buy speed, refused to pay back wages to Cindy, who’d worked overtime off the clock on a number of occasions as a favor, but also had missed some work due to ‘heart palpitations’ that had laid her up, which was probably a lame excuse for getting high and blowing off work a few times, but nonetheless Robert from Palm Circle had cashed a check for the insolvent Cindy, which he shouldn’t have done because he was actually using Lorette’s bank account, which she had authorized him to do only for certain occasions, and why she had done this was unclear to Rodney but there was probably, no, *definitely* something up between the two of them, which if Lorette’s boyfriend Sam found out would be some deep shit, and Sam himself was a whole separate story, as he’d begun dealing and gotten extremely paranoid as a result, convinced at any given instant that any given number of acquaintances were undercover cops, not to mention all the times he’d talked shit about every single person who didn’t happen

to be in the room at that moment, which brings us back to Cabacho and all this bullshit, because as chance would have it, Cabacho's friend Larry used to work at the plumbing service where Sam worked now, though they hadn't ever worked there at the same time, and—

“—and I'm sick of even dealing with those bastards, truth be told, pardon my language.” The doings of the residents of Palm Circle were all of this strain; Rodney and Smalls were embroiled in the latest skirmish between two feuding circles of friend-enemies in one of Valentina's lowest-rent neighborhoods.

Smalls coughed into his fist. “Cabacho's got a stick up his ass.”

“Yeah,” said Rodney, “that sucker burps up termites.”

Smalls hacked out a laugh, and then laughed again, in great gulping cries like someone choking on food. He wanted to get Rodney to say it again, but could not make himself intelligible. Rodney didn't laugh; he looked almost stunned. “I didn't even know I was going to say that.”

The hunger to make a run would get into the bones. It was a jitter from inside the skeleton that *had* to be appeased—or at least, they had no intention of failing to appease it. Their general plan for the day was to lay hands on some money so they could pay a visit to Joe Cholula. They were both well into their run, having risen two days ago after twenty-four hours of cadaverous slumber, had been speeding since then, and would probably continue for another day or two until biology caught up with them and they'd have to get in some sleep again. Those were the early days of what they called prope-dope. The drug was clean and gorgeous. Though in later days it all turned to bunk and left you feeling like you'd been shooting up 409 cleanser, in 1979 a dope rush was like a surgical wash of vitality gushing through each limb and tightening each scintillating sense like the head of a drum. The sooner they got a taste today, the better.

Smalls was perhaps Rodney's father's age. He was a long-time speed freak with a baked, drawn face and melted teeth. His teeth especially were like badges of his avocation: *you know what I do*. He had a mane of feathered, straw-colored hair that hung in tortured frizzles to his shoulders. Rodney liked the guy but hoped never to turn out the same way. It took years of abusing uppers to burn a guy into that kind of stick. *I only really been into it for a while, a couple three years*, Rodney told himself, echoing the refrain of addicts the world over. *I'm cool to quit any time*.

They decided to visit the Gemco on 67th Street before going to Palm Circle to confront Cabacho about the—well, about the problem, whatever it was. The usual operation a Gemco was for Smalls to buy a bunch of



stuff—small, inexpensive items were best—while Rodney shoplifted the same items. Then they'd return them. Gemco had a flawed receipt system, an exploit that Smalls had first discovered, that, if played correctly, allowed one to return two identical items for a cash refund using the same receipt; the trick was to return one item at the service counter, the other at any idle register out on the sales floor, where the receipt was marked in a different way. After returning everything they'd bought and stolen, Rodney and Smalls would have doubled their money. They needed to have some cash on hand in the first place to run this scam, and they couldn't run it very often at the same store or risk being noticed. Above all else, it was imperative that this scam be kept secret from everyone on Palm Circle, or else there would be such a rush on Gemco stores that the whole thing would come to light and be ruined.

"Damn cashier bitch remembered me," Smalls was telling Rodney. Two weeks before, he had unadvisedly tried running the operation on his own. "She saw me from the first time and called a store detective. It was fucking close. I had to split. So I can't go back in that store no more, man. They know me."

"What one?"

"Over in downtown. They probably got my picture." Smalls pronounced 'probably' like *prolly*. "Fucking hidden cameras and shit everywhere these days." His voice unambiguously broadcast how unfair he found this.

"How much we got now?" Rodney asked. They fished out their remaining cash and tallied it. Rodney, eight dollars. Smalls, six.

"We could maybe get up to fifty if we ran it twice," said Smalls. "Eight and six, fourteen. Go once at 67th, that's twenty-eight; then run it again, eight and eight is sixteen and carry the one, so two and two, that's four, and one, five, fifty, so—fifty-six." Both of them knew what fifty could buy from Joe Cholula.

Rodney screwed himself into a concentrating pose, hunched over like a parenthesis. Math wasn't his *métier*. "How we going to go twice, though?"

"Okay," said Smalls, laying out his plan. "You and me, 67th Street. Then you and somebody else, downtown store."

"Somebody else who?"

"I figure your girlfriend Ruthie could get in there and do it for us. She don't even look like the type. They'd never in a million years—"

"Ah-h-h-h-I don't think that's really—"

“Man, listen—”

“Hell, brother, it’s—”

“You’re not listening—”

“—she’s not even really my—”

“—totally fine, she just buys shit for us and—”

“—plus you’re talking about hidden cameras and whatnot—”

“—some other way to get fifty bones for Joe Cholula? ’Cause I’d love to hear—”

“—and, I mean, she’s a *Christian*, dude.”

Rodney shifted around in his seat, halfway between surly and embarrassed. There were half-desperate hackles in his voice that made Smalls hesitate on the cusp of cracking wise. “Shit, man, sure. I’m a Christian, you’re a Christian.” Smalls was a coward in the face of arguments. He didn’t want to tick Rodney off. There was just this pressing, *pressing* matter of putting together fifty big ones to buy enough prope-dope for the two of them to have a satisfying run. Why argue about anything else? “Okay, so, who, then?”

Rodney’s whole chest was expanded, thinking of Ruth. “We could ask Nila.”

“Skank whore Nila?”

“Shoot, yeah, it’s not worth it. Maybe Greg.”

“Maybe.” Smalls eased the car into gear and they pulled out of the parking lot.

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Will kicked dope for the first time two years before he met Rodney. He met the morning lying under a blanket discolored and stiff from kitten shit stains, lying on the concrete floor of the drafty garage of a house across the street from the Midtown freeway. The blanket didn’t actually have any shit on it—he’d washed it with the hose in the yard—and he’d slept in worse digs before. But on this morning, as he pressed his eyelids with his palms and phased reluctantly back to waking life, to his memory came unbidden the picture of Jerry Peck’s injured and accusing face. Unlikely enough, but that did it. “I’m a prick,” Will groaned to the walls in his just-woken voice. “Jesus.”

The timbers of the house creaked under the force of the storm outside. Torrential rain had fallen on Valentina all night and all of the week before, biting cold rain that would scarcely cease, and this had driven Will to seek

sanctuary in the House On T, an illegally squatted building that all who lived there or knew of agreed was due for a bust at any moment—word of this bust had in fact grown to a tradition at the house, a doom and a running joke:

“What you doing, dog?”

“Waiting for the bust.” (*I am doing nothing.*)

“When you going to clean this shit up, bro?”

“Soon as the bust comes.” (*I have no intention of ever cleaning it up.*)

“What time is it, dude?”

“Two minutes to the bust.” (*Buy yourself a fucking watch, asshole.*)

But the landlord or owner, if such a one existed, never appeared in order to drive them out. Any number of people lived there, at around a four-to-one ratio of males to females, with squatters coming and going as the will of the wisp led them. It had been six months since Will had given up on high school and home life with his mom and begun spending his nights out of doors. As foolish as it might have been of him, he felt he was undeniably getting away with something naughty. Only a teenaged crank like Will, incommensurably more in love with ideals than with material comfort, could have felt so glorious about thumbing his nose at the straightlaced city as he escaped from all routines, schedules, norms and proprieties. At the start he'd shunned scummy places full of undesirable people; but that had been in the spring and summer, which were long in Valentina and livable. Now, six months into his adventure in homelessness, the romance had faded a tint. When the alternative was a cold, wet bed on the ground, he found it in him to resort to the House On T.

He knew one of the tweakers there from the most recent job he'd lost. Tim Thompson had tended bar at the Cat's Cradle on R Street, not two blocks away, where Will had worked the door, checking IDs. The income at this job had been a boon, but greed for more dope money had done Will in: underage kids learned that any kind of cash gift could get them through the door to see the bands from Louisville, Olympia, Austin and even New York that played the Cat's Cradle on off nights on their way to tour dates in San Francisco or Los Angeles; in short order, Will's boss, a mustachioed fellow nicknamed by his employees 'T.C.B.' who was truly more Harley-Davidson than flesh-and-blood man, and who probably slept with his liquor license under his pillow, detected the threat that Will posed to the legality of his establishment—when *anyone* could see that the youngsters getting lit in his bar were in some cases barely fourteen—and fired Will: fired him *forcefully*, fired him *painfully*, with vigor and violence

that made the episode a fine story to tell later on—fired him, in short, with his *elbow*, with a head-check that spilled Will onto the sidewalk in a gangly heap. T.C.B. had then stood, glowering, his nostrils operating like the raging bull in a cartoon, and Will had taken to his heels grateful to have gotten off so light.

It was a few weeks after this that Will had dropped around to the bar around closing time, sopping wet, and found Tim Thompson on his way out.

“Yeah, dog, I could take you around,” said Tim. “But you can’t *stay* in our house unless it’s cool with everybody.”

“I don’t care, man. I’ll sleep on your fucking garage floor.” Will hoped for at least a couch.

Thus Will found himself in the crowded living room of the House On T, chumming it up with a pack of idiots. Tim’s housemates were like Tim: uncouth, reckless and rowdy. The house, at least, was serviceable. Will would have to serve time in a few much less insalubrious squat houses and other such refuges for those with no legal right to a place to sleep, before he’d realize, in retrospect, how unusual the House On T had been. There were squats that were barely distinguishable from demolition sites, dark, damp, septic, sloshing with trash and excreta, with ownership of any patch of floor devolving onto whoever landed there. The House On T had electricity—‘siphoned,’ Will supposed, from a ‘nearby main,’ which sounded plenty plausible to a guy who knew zilch of the science of electricity—and living conditions were organized: each person had a room, or part of a room. As many as ten people currently called the place home. The building was dirty and run down but still functional. It had no running water inside, though, so the toilet was no-man’s-land.

“Pattie Boy does it all,” explained Tim, referring to the stolen electricity and the degree of organization; ‘Pattie Boy’ was a bald fifty-something called Patton who occupied the position of ‘head tenant.’ He was an electrician by trade, nearly never worked, could lay hands on just about anything, and announced to every new acquaintance that he was full-blooded German and had a Prince Albert piercing (he’d only show it to you if he liked you). It was Patton who, running his gaunt hands over his hairy, receding chin, told Will he could stay the night under their roof. “Just don’t rip anything off.”

“Okay.”

Patton’s watery blue eyes did not waver from Will’s; a beat passed, and again Will felt compelled to say, “Okay,” this time with more iron in

his voice than the first.

“We already have one fucking sneaky-ass thief,” rejoined one of the guys on the couch. The other guys laughed. The couch looked suspiciously new. It was crammed with dudes equipped with beer cans and video game controllers.

“Fuck Jerry Peck,” said Tim Thompson.

“That fool is a sheisty motherfucker.”

“He always holding dope, and then he always ask you for some. That shit piss me off.”

“Fuck, he never has nothing. Always asking *me* for a teenth.”

“Shit, dog, look in his pockets when he ask you,” said Tim. “He’s got a fucking eightball up in there.”

“Up his ass.”

*What a bunch of intellectual giants*, thought Will, wondering how much social interaction was going to be called for before he could sneak out of the living room and get some sleep. He felt, in some way, obliged to hang around, as if he were paying for his berth by tolerating the guys who’d let him have it.

Jerry Peck, whoever he was, presumably lived at the House On T. Will inferred that he was tolerated despite his sheisty ways because he brought home stolen loot: stereo systems, microwave ovens, boxes full of new shirts, frozen burritos still packed in cardboard crates. No one was sure where he got it. For someone so practiced at stealing the city blind, Jerry Peck was always broke, asking anybody and everybody for a teenth. Always a teenth.

*I could use a teenth myself*, thought Will. Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him. But he had no money and sensed what a rotten idea it would be, just at that moment, to ask any of the rest of them to get him wired. His hunch was confirmed when he saw a pair of fellows get up without a word and disappear to the back of the house, returning a moment latter chattering like monkeys and wiping their noses. That’s how things were here: nobody shared with anybody. Will was miffed. *Jerry Peck isn’t the only sheisty bitch here*, he thought.

Tim Thompson slid next to Will on the couch. His backwards Deftones cap and the predatory jut of the clump of hair on his underbitten chin gave Tim’s entire wedge-shaped head the illusion of forward momentum. Will knew Tim had a little-big-man complex and was quick to quarrel. In his eyes were perpetual glints of rapacious hunger, not for food or perhaps even dope, but for, Will guessed, vandalism and rough, exploitative sex.

Tim Thompson, though not a dangerous guy, was a little disturbing. He leaned too close to Will and grinned. “Damn, you look burnt, bro.”

“I’m—” Will searched for words. “Tired out.”

“What to relax? Because I feel like blazing one.”

Will felt no great love for marijuana but figured he might as well. To loosen up and get talkative might make the environs more bearable. *I’ll only hit it once*, he decided.

Tim Thompson dug into his jacket pocket and produced a pack of Marlboro Reds stuffed with hand-rolled joints instead of cigarettes, along with a book of motel matches. Will watched with amazement and concern as Tim’s hands dissolved into stuttering ether and then he catapulted back through history.

“I did?” asked Will.

“You smoked it all, bro.”

“Where’s the joint?”

*Time*, Will realized, *has reversed*. His thoughts bent inward like spline curves. *Did I smoke a joint?* This was not a normal high. Tim was holding a joint to Will’s lips, or taking it from him.

“Hit it, don’t babysit it.”

Will saw the match lit. *This already happened*. He wondered if his entire life would now run backwards, rewinding right to the moment of his birth. He walked into the kitchen with upside-longways steps and fell into the sink through his tunneling eyes. A voice followed him down: “What’s his problem?” Will was vomiting air—he hadn’t had anything to eat that day.

“What did you give him?”

“He must be allergic to bomb. I heard of that before.”

“It was *special*...” This last word, coming to Will in Tim’s voice as sound through the blades of a fan, sounded mirthless and sinister. The outdoors rain was cold, so Will came in again and heard the conversation seamlessly resume. “Double-dipped...”

*Did I go outside?* wondered Will. “Hey, where you headed, bro? It’s hella cold out there.” The door closed before he opened it. *Did I want to go somewhere?* The rain tapped at the window like hail, and there were too many people around him, a crowd of stern judges of grave semblance, so Will decided to leave this house, somehow concurrently realized that he had already tried leaving and been brought back in. *So it’s futile*, he thought darkly. *I’m trapped by destiny*.

“I ain’t down with that *horse shit*. You know that’s for horses?”

“He smoked too much.”

*I couldn't handle it. It's my own fault,* Will added, silently joining the dispute in the other room. He was alone on the floor of the kitchen. His line-of-sight tilted up, panned left, panned right; dollied left, then forward; craned suddenly downward as he stubbed his toe on an outcropping of an unintelligible reality; racked focus as the sink came back into view and he whooshed forward into it through his mouth for a second time. The sounds of the video game mixed with the drunken giggles and strident debating of the house residents. A female voice rose above the rest, squawking an incoherent complaint. *Did I smoke horse shit?*

“Tim thought he was cool.”

*I'm cool,* Will protested silently, now irrationally desperate to be liked. *I'm not normally this way.* He felt shameful in his incapacitation. The kitchen walls tunneled to infinity; Will, caught in a slow nauseating slide ever downward, fishbowed the length of the night toward morning.

A voice woke him once in the small hours and he felt a rolled blanket land on his stomach. “Hey, dog, you can use this blanket if you want.” Will saw a rawboned guy about his own age bending over to peer at him. The guy wore a deep purple jacket with a sports team logo that puffed out above his spindly khaki-clad legs, making Will think of a plum on a stick. He was shaved bald but for a jutting forelock, a hairstyle Will associated with local gangbangers, but no one could ever have taken his pinched and nervous features for those of a thug. Will's bleary skull was wrapped in invisible felt, in a dry and close heat that parched his tongue and eyeballs. He had no idea how long he'd been out of it, but it was still night and still raining outside the kitchen window. The bald guy crouched down and, nodding his head up once in the terse, polite way guys had, asked, “By any chance you got a teenth, dog?”

“Jerry Peck,” guessed Will, and closed his eyes again, overwhelmed by leaden fatigue. He never even stirred when a pair of guys dumped him in the garage early the following morning.

The following afternoon, as Will trudged through puddles on his way back from the Army of God food bank, he ran across Tim Thompson, who looked to be heading home from a convenience store run. By way of apology for giving Will the laced joint, Tim offered, “Dog, you look tore up.”

“From the floor up.” Will was feeling better with food in his belly.

“Huh. So, hey, were you wanting to come back to the house tonight?”

*I thought that's where we were going right now.* Will had presumed that the invitation had already carried over from the night before. He was

disconcerted to hear it extended again. It appeared he would only be welcome at the House On T on a night-by-night basis. “Yeah, I was thinking.” He didn’t want to sound too eager.

Tim walked with Will along the block. The rain had let up for the moment, but the heavy gray sky cast the buildings and streets in muted, monochromatic shades. “Yeah,” said Tim, “there’s some stuff I wanted to show you at the house.” That was all he said, but from it Will gleaned that he was going to be expected to do something in exchange for his place on the garage floor.

Will had his first proper look at the house in daylight when they arrived. It was an incongruous building on a block that was otherwise commercial. On one side were an auto body shop and a tanning parlor; on the other were a perpetually closed Thai eatery and a Church’s Chicken. Across T Street, the interstate business loop rose thirty feet into the air, emanating a steady tide of auto noise and gritty air. The house had a dirt and weed yard out front, perhaps ten feet in depth, enclosed in waist-high chain link fencing with a gap where a gate had once latched. It was ugly but generally clean, save for the fecal evidence of the many cats who lived in and around the house, breeding faster than the bored tweakers could light them on fire. Tim Thompson wordlessly led Will up to his room, the door to which stood at the end of the second floor hallway and was papered with posters for metal bands like Limp Bizkit. Tim shared the room with a girl called Teresa, who wasn’t around just then. Once a large bedroom, the room was bisected now by a makeshift wall of unfinished plywood, out of which snaked a number of electrical cables. On this makeshift wall was mounted a small air conditioning unit, cooling whatever was on the other side; consequently, Tim’s room was hotter than hell. The other three walls and ceiling were papered with black trash bags, giving the room a cave-like, gothic pallor. Will imagined a puerile, melodramatic teenager in voice-over: *God! My mom is so lame! One day, when I have my own place, I’m going to decorate it just how I want!* The room was a bedlam of all the sort of clutter Will had expected to find: clothes and bedclothes wadded in piles, CD cases split apart and trampled, paper plates and food wrappers littered about, and ubiquitous burnt aluminum foil.

“You’re a slob,” remarked Will. “You live like this.”

Tim only laughed a little. “Shut up.”

“For real. It’s like an animal lives here.” Will stuck his hands in his pockets.

“All that shit’s Teresa. She don’t clean much. Check this out.” Tim



cleared the clutter from a mouse-gray plastic box—a personal computer, set on an upended cardboard box. It looked new to Will, but he wasn't familiar with computers and couldn't say for sure.

“You know all about computer shit, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Will replied. He knew enough at least to see that none of the components were plugged in or connected to each other, which spoke volumes. “Jerry Peck get this for you?”

Tim Thompson spat on the floor. “Man, fuck no. I got it myself.”

Will inquired no further, but eyed the spot on the badly used carpet where Tim had spat. *You give these guys a free goddamn house, and look,* he thought balefully. Time gestured to the computer and said, “So, you think you can make it run, dog?”

Will found the job easy enough, if he just gave himself time to think it through: all of the separate components of the machine clearly had to be connected somehow, and it was merely a matter of matching the logo on one end of a given cable to the same logo on the part of some other gadget. Will had thought at first to shuck and jive his way through the job so as to stretch it out over several days, securing his stay in the garage in the interim; but it wasn't such a difficult job, and his own irrepressible inquisitiveness made short work of that plan. He had the computer all assembled in about half an hour, the central unit connected to the mouse, monitor, keyboard, and a few other esoteric devices whose function Will wouldn't have cared to vouch. As Will worked, Tim kept up a steady chatter.

“You just got to know the ways and means of this shit to get rich,” he averred. “You saw *Hackers*, right?”

“I'm not sure if that movie was...” Will wanted to tread softly—“totally realistic.” He kept his eyes on his work.

“No, for real. Once I figure out how to get inside the database and shit, I'll be like,” and here Tim began a countdown of exploits: “setting up offshore accounts, robbing banks in cyberspace, multiple identities, secret passwords and shit. We could do it together.”

Will let this offer pass without comment. “I think it could work now.” He began searching for a wall outlet to plug the main power cables into, and Tim pointed one out, a multi-plug power strip behind the cardboard box. Will scrambled back to his feet and pressed the button marked *Power* on the face of the machine. Every light in the room went out. The steady whir of the air conditioner wound down to nothing. Downstairs somebody hollered, “The fuck?”

“My bad,” cried Tim Thompson in the dark. “I got it—just a quick sec.” He left Will alone in the room and dashed down to fiddle with a circuit breaker somewhere in the house.

At this time in his life, Will stole as naturally as breathing. To case the room of a roundabout benefactor, if not a friend, for something to sell on the side was standard procedure. With Tim gone, Will took this chance to press his face to the padlocked hatch cut out of the plywood wall that divided the room. He’d been the very picture of a guy totally not noticing something for as long as Tim had been there, though this plywood divider was the most conspicuous feature of the room; and anything kept padlocked must be worth gaffling. It was dark as pitch in the room—even the windows were sheathed in black plastic—and he could see nothing, but a familiar dank odor reeked from behind the door when he pressed his face to the crack, an earthy smell he placed at once: behind the partition was a hydroponics room.

This explained the electrical outage: the grow room would be equipped with power-hungry, high-wattage lamps for the plants; which in turn necessitated the air conditioner running at full blast in December, as the lamps would otherwise singe the leaves. *Will Herrera, true sleuth, pats self on back*, he thought.

His discovery was useless to him. Stealing weed from a grower was more trouble than it was worth to him, and Tim was the type to, as it were, *overreact*. The computer, on the other hand, made a prime target: it looked new enough that a pawn shop would take it; it seemed easy enough to move around; and, if he could get it out the door, news of his selling it wouldn’t get back to Tim the way selling bud surely would. Will began at once to covet the computer. Plans flowered in his mind to cart it off. The hydroponics room forgotten, Will began to test the weight of each component, his eye to the door lest Tim catch him at it.

Before long, guys began crowding into Tim’s room. Teresa came home while they were there and Tim had to take her outside for an argument; the others crowded around Will with requests, and he found himself a little flattered but not pleased to be taken for a computer expert and a smart guy.

“Dog, download some scat porn.”

“Dude, we should hack the mainframe.”

“The fuck is a mainframe?”

“The fuck is scat porn?”

“Bro, you seen Alta Vista? I seen that shit once. You seen that?”

“You dumb shit, you can’t hack no mainframe. That’s old shit.”

“Scat porn is shit eating, dog.”

“The fuck is Alta Vista? Sounds like a Camaro or something.”

Will wasn’t entirely sure, but it seemed to him that most of what these guys wanted him to do involved the Internet, and needless to say, it was no use plugging the modem into a phone jack in the House On T. But he kept that to himself and let the guys get as lathered up as they pleased. At any rate, the novelty of the computer and Will’s involvement in getting it running earned him a place at the table, so to speak—a girl called Jenny brought an eight ball, and they all got wired. The night didn’t end for thirty-six hours.

Will managed to feel very justified in plotting to steal the computer. In the first place, it was already stolen merchandise. And none of the dim-wits in that house deserved a computer, just as swine deserved no pearls. This was Will’s plan: his friend Junior, a rockabilly musician who lived in Midtown and had access to a pickup truck, would wait outside where the rear of the house abutted the Church’s Chicken parking lot while Will lowered the computer piecemeal from the roof outside Tim Thompson’s window, where the roof sloped down. Junior could cart it off in the truck, sell it as the opportunity arose, and buy dope for the two of them.

The ticklish bit was that Will, to double business bound, wanted both the computer and the roof over his head. Were he to vanish at the same time as the computer, his guilt would be undebatable and he’d be *persona non grata*. Tweaker logic ensued: to acquire the computer, get wired to his eyeballs, totally escape suspicion, and keep out of the December cold—why should this not all be possible? Somewhere in the tweaked-out confusion in his brain lurked the misgiving that he was being over-optimistic—but he dismissed it.

After about an hour of goofing off with the computer hadn’t turned up any video games or cybersex, everyone wandered off. Tim’s leaving him alone with both computer and crop was probably less a sign of trust in Will, and more mere complacency. Will was left alone to poke around in the software. He found Minesweeper and, in full tweaker mode, was in at least his hundredth round of the game when Jerry Peck came in.

Will saw Jerry crane his head into the room as if scouting out hostile territory and called to him, “What up, *Jerry*,” giving Jerry’s name the derisive turn he’d heard the other guys use, carried away by his dope rush into a crueller mood than he himself would have liked. This appeared not to affect the guy but for a slight tightening of the lines round his heavy-

lidded eyes, but Will felt a feather-touch of guilt and made a more ostentatious show of cordiality. "Sit down?"

"Heard Tim got a computer."

"Yeah." Will tried to remind himself that he had no cause for prejudice against Jerry. He felt an access of discomfort in his own skin, catching himself swept into chummy cruelty by his time spent with the others.

"I seen you the other night when you was all sick."

Will shrugged. "Huh."

"That's a bomb ass computer."

"You know computers?" asked Will.

"Uh. Is that a, what do you call it. It's got a printer?" Jerry pointed.

"Sure," said Will with nonchalance. "But no paper, I guess." Earlier they'd unintentionally activated the printer, but with no paper it had sputtered and jerked fruitlessly until somebody had turned it off.

"Actually, I." Jerry produced an unopened ream of heavy stock printer paper from under his plum-colored jersey. "I got some."

Will turned his incipient laugh into a "huhhh" and cleared his throat. *I guess nobody likes to be called 'typical'*, he reflected. "You want to, like, print something up?" Will heard himself talking to Jerry as one might address a child, patronizing and over-clear.

Jerry seemed to change shape under his jersey. He leant forward and said in earnest tones, "Hey, I wanted to ask you. What do you call it. You know, with all this computer shit, it's like. You want to help me make a résumé?"

*Oh, for fuck's sake*, thought Will. He felt an immediate, strong inner resistance spring up in him against being embroiled in Jerry Peck's patheticness. But in the instant he couldn't think of any way of refusing with tact. "I guess."

"It'll just be real quick. I made it already." From within the plum jacket appeared a folded and refolded square of blue-lined binder paper, covered in careful block printing done in pencil. "You think you could, you know, type it and shit? Or, it's cool, I could do it. If you show me how."

"Well."

"You don't have to."

"Let me see it." Will took the paper and scanned it. "You get the format from a book or something?"

"Uh, yeah. Scored this résumé-writing book off an outside display at Borders."

The résumé was an odd mix of polish and crudity, professional-looking bullet-point formatting but with misspellings like ‘sollution’ and ‘customer servise.’ But these were not serious problems. Will felt a little mean for being so unduly surprised at the résumé’s emergence. At the top, Jerry had written his full name: Jerry Gordon Peck. For his address, there was a post office box.

Will found a word processing program and began typing the thing up. He had attended very little of his high school typing class, but even so not all of the training had deserted him. As Will worked, Jerry made so many suggestions as to the finer points of formatting that Will finally asked him to shut up and let him concentrate.

So Jerry leaned back on his haunches as Will sat cross-legged before the machine—there were no chairs in Tim Thompson’s room—and started to shoot the shit about his prospective job, which involved some sort of desk work at a title company. Will was not even sure what a title company was. “They’re going to make you put titles on everything.” He felt like mocking Jerry’s ambitions, in a sneaky way.

“I’ll do that,” said Jerry. “Titles, shit, I’ll take the subtitles too.”

Will grinned despite himself.

Will finished fiddling with the word processor and Jesse agreed that it looked good. They loaded Jesse’s paper into the printer’s tray, Will frowning and poking around at it to ensure as best he could that he wasn’t sticking anything in the wrong way around; and then Will clicked the *Print* icon. The printer shuddered once—and the lights went out.

“Typical,” muttered Will.

“Goddamn motherfucking cocksucking son-of-a-bitch rat-bastard piece of shit,” muttered Jerry Peck.

On a drizzly Thursday morning not long after, Will’s opportunity came. His plan occupied his mind almost every moment, and it hinged on this conclusion: that somebody else discover the burglary while Will slept, or pretended to sleep, in the garage. Everyone in the house had seen the computer, as had numberless friends passing through the house, so everyone would be a suspect. But not the guy who’d been sleeping the whole time in the garage—surely not him. That morning, the second floor of the house was empty, and the only ones downstairs were the mob of cats, a couple of dudes playing video games who were certain not to stir from the couch for hours, and a leather-skinned, middle-aged woman with a fried perm and leopard-print stretch pants lying in Patton’s unmade bed with the door open, out cold and snoring like a troll. Whoever she was, Will

thought it safe to disregard her. Patton and the rest of the tenants were out on their various missions. Will scampered to the payphone at Church's.

"Fuck you." Junior always answered the phone this way, sounding merry: *Fuck yóo-òo*.

"It's Will."

"Are we doing that shit today?"

"Yup. Bring Simon's truck."

Junior stood below Tim Thompson's window, his spindly arms raised ineffectually, as Will handed down the machine. Each component was wrapped in blankets from the garage to keep dry. The roof was slick, each bark tile seeming ready to slide out from under Will like so much crumbling shale.

"Get that there. Got it? I'm letting go?"

"Yeah, okay. Wait! Okay. Yeah, okay."

"Don't drop it."

Junior stowed the bulky monitor next to the rest of the components in the passenger seat of the pickup and started the engine as Will refastened the garbage bag over the window and ducked back down toward the garage. The lady in leopard was still snoring away; the fools on the couch were still massacring zombies. The most dangerous part was done.

Will went into the garage to feign sleep and found that he'd used all his blankets to wrap the computer. The only one left was covered in dried cat feces, balled in a stiff wad under a stack of wet cardboard in a corner. He hosed it off outside.

The present discovery of the computer's disappearance sent the household into an alarm. Every newly arriving housemate was greeted with a barked recitation of the news. Never before had anybody been dastardly enough to rip off something of such value right there in the house, one tenant from another, under the noses of all.

"It has to be somebody who lives here."

"Dude. That shit is fucked up."

The guys found Will very difficult to rouse from his slumber, so groggy and bleary-eyed was he, but when they finally woke him they dragged him into the living room to sit and fume with the rest of them. Finally, everyone was there except for two of the guys: when Tim Thompson got home from an afternoon shift, Patton met him at the door and said, "Dude, Jerry motherfucking Peck straight ganked your computer."

It took Tim a while to be made to understand. And then he was furious. He aimed a kick at the projection TV and had to be restrained. "Yo,

yo, yo, fool! That's the TV!"

All of the housemates, male and female, ten in total, met there in the living room in plenipotentiary council (with Will sitting in to observe), where static rolled unchecked up the TV screen, to enumerate the counts against Jerry Peck and to pass doom.

There was his indebtedness: Jesse had borrowed money from everybody, and as they compared notes their righteous wrath grew. Just when it seemed the tally of Jerry's debt had been determined, somebody would recall fronting him ten or twenty more bucks.

There were his intermittent appearances: he was given to long stretches of absence from the house; he was known to have other friends in the neighborhood, but the council could not arrive at any staunch account of what he did or where he was. The only certainty was that he was out tweaking, for when he did come home, perhaps laden with ripped-off stuff to pay in tribute to the house, it was to crash into sleep for unnatural periods.

There was even his stealing: and that this also incurred to Jerry contempt and condemnation struck Will as a purblind self-serving distortion. Most of these people wore clothes, ate food, or used stereos or PlayStations that Jerry had picked up for them; Tim Thompson had barely caught his breath from berating Jerry for being a sheisty thief when he began laying into him for once trying to sell him a video camera rather than forking it over gratis—an episode which proved his degenerate, irredeemable ignominy.

Will had never before seen with his own eyes this phenomenon: just how useful it was to humans to have someone who could be scorned without limit. In Will, two impulses warred: the first was to execrate Tim, Patton and the rest of the bunch for their kangaroo court; the second, elation at being absolutely off the hook. There was no proof of guilt, only vitriol and prejudice, but, with no effort on Will's part, the blame had shifted squarely onto the worthless and weasely Jerry Peck. And who the hell was Jerry Peck? A sheisty thief and a free-loading tweaker. Will might sooner have pitied a fucking patch of mold.

It was in the thick of this meeting that the door opened. Jerry Peck came in. Every head turned. Jerry stopped; his long fingers fluttered on the door handle. He looked immediately guilty—he looked *caught*.

*He did something*, Will thought. *Somehow he's guilty, not for this but for some fucked up thing nobody's figured out yet.* Jerry came no farther than the threshold. He stood and waited.

“You leave tonight,” said Patton.

Jerry’s face pinched up—for a second Will had the goofy notion that Jerry would cry; but clearly he was scheming not to lose the roof over his head, weighing stratagems with the rodent-like cleverness of wheedlers and convincers. Jerry’s gaze searched out every face in the room, feeling for confirmation, or for chinks in the armor.

“You’re a dishonest motherfucker and you *steal*.” Tim Thompson’s jutting jaw was set tight. “Get the fuck out now or it’s on and it’s cracking, bitch.”

Each of the others spoke in turn, and then Jerry would look to the next.

“Got to go, fool.”

“This thieving shit can’t be happening up in here.”

Teresa shrugged. “I wish you wouldn’t of taken advantage like that.” *Like what?* was a question Jerry did not ask.

Will saw that, if Jerry continued to wordlessly, motionlessly work his way around the room like this, he too was going to have to say something.

“Even if you didn’t owe me money, dog.”

“I know it sucks, but you brought it on yourself.”

Jerry was staring now at Will. All together they made a panorama in the living room, Patton standing by the mismatched curtains with a can of Hamm’s, the others sprawled along the plastic-sheeted couches or standing, some with cigarettes or PlayStation controllers in their idle hands, the light from a single lamp tinting their faces a dim orange, the carpet littered with cigarette ash and cat hair, Jerry at the door in his plum jacket and Will on the recliner, locking eyes for a beat. Will looked at his hands and mumbled, “I don’t even live here.”

Patton said again, “Leave by morning. It’s unanimous. You’re not welcome. Take whatever you got here and find a new pad.” Without making an answer, Jerry Peck left, closing the door behind him but not slamming it. That was it. He never came back.

Will replayed this scene in his mind any number of times that night and afterward. Jerry Peck had left without denying anything, without even knowing the charge against him. Where he went or what became of him, Will never learned.

This being done, it was no longer personally dangerous to Will to sympathize; such guilt swept over him as he’d never known before. What made it even worse was that he realized that this guilt was entirely self-serving—he *felt* bad in order to feel better about *being* bad. When he



shoplifted in order to feed himself, for example, Will had until now always made it a point to steal from chain stores and corporate supermarkets, rather than from small, locally-owned shops, because, though the risk of getting caught was greater, he hated the idea of harming someone who didn't deserve it. Who knew what Jerry Peck deserved? Worse than what he'd gotten, maybe—but Will felt like a prick, a king prick. And it had all been to get high. He went to sleep in the garage while the other tenants in the living room were still winding down their communal recap of the events of the day, averring to himself that he could not bear the thought of getting wired on proceeds from the computer, purchased as it had been with Jerry's expulsion from his only home. It was all a question of whether Will, by his own standards, had sunk to the level of conscienceless bastard.

And thus it came about that Will, for the first time since his sophomore year in high school, had no desire to tweak. The next morning, Will woke up from a dream of Jerry Peck's lousy face at the door, leaving in infamy like a vermin under pursuit, and, whipping the cat blanket off of himself with a tremor of revulsion, resolved to go clean. "I'm a prick," Will said to the walls. "Jesus." When Junior showed up with the dope, Will would send him packing.

Junior didn't come. Will called him but only got his roommates; so he went over to the scrawny guitarist's room on Post Avenue to look for him. Junior's roommates could only tell Will that there was no computer in the place either; if they knew more, they weren't telling. Will was not entirely un-miffed, but he decided it was just as well. *He's welcome to it*, he thought. *That's what I'm going to tell him*. Junior would be back around whenever his run ended, maybe proffering apologies and explanations for ditching him, but Will would not resent him. He recalled a book of which he'd struggled through a half-chapter at the library not long before, pulled at semi-random from a shelf in *Religion & Philosophy*; some of the style of language came back to him now: *Forego anger, with its honeyed crest and poisoned root*.

His serenity did not last Junior's absence. Four days into it, Will had the creeps. Crank didn't hook users like cigarettes or heroin; you wouldn't get hardcore sweats or diarrhea during withdrawal, but once a person's body learned to like a steady diet of dope—not just for parties or swing-shift endurance, but as a staple of existence—its absence could not be easily tolerated, and the *creeps* took over.

Even more rattling was that, without dope, the drab, ugly dullness of

all things came rushing back upon Will like divided waters crashing together. Without crank to sharpen the senses and stupefy the intellect, his tweaker friends were just chattering fools with no jobs or prospects, his digs on the garage floor were plain filthy, his stomach empty, his pockets thin, his toes cold—*Fuck*, he thought in irritation, *I might as well go get a job. Is this all there is?*

When Junior finally reappeared, he found Will still at the House On T. Patton, explaining to Will in a patter of electrician's jargon that was perhaps partly of his own invention that the contractor who had originally wired the house had put all of the outlets on its rear half on a single circuit, which for reasons Will could only guess at was somehow an objectionable practice, had enlisted a noncommittal Will to help with an ambitious rewiring of the living room. Patton at any rate thought he could do the job better and, with enough beer in his belly, was ready to tear the house down trying. "Tell you something, Will, man," Patton said, his attention engrossed in a breaker box on the outside wall of the house, "if you take care of your house, your house is always going to take care of you."

"I didn't realize this was your house." Will was in a foul mood.

"I'm working on it. I bet you didn't know that if you establish a residence someplace and you can hold onto it for seven years, it becomes your legal property."

"No shit."

"It's on the books. If I can get the post office to start delivering mail to me here, that'll be establishing residence."

"Why not write yourself a letter?"

"I'm working on that. Toss me a Phillips screwdriver. Man, I didn't mean to *toss* it, shit."

Will was standing there, staring at the back of Patton's bald head and waiting to be told what to do next, when Junior rolled to the curb in his roommate's truck and hollered, "Will, you bitch!"

"I'll be right back," Will told Patton.

"Go ahead."

Junior motioned for haste with his arm as Will ambled over. "Let's go."

"Where?" Will took it on himself to pretend not to understand; he knew he must look dense. In fact, he hadn't looked for Junior's arrival, and certainly not in such a mood. Junior looked nothing like a guy who'd ditched his friend to go on a mammoth binge; he looked like a guy who was holding a shitload of dope and was ready to *start* his mammoth binge.

“Fuckin’, out of here. I got it all here, man.”

Will pretended not to know what *it* was.

Junior was incredulous. “Are you tripping? The *sniffy*, Will. I’ve been dying to get wired, dude. That fucking computer, man. Talk about your bullshit.”

In spite of himself, Will had to know. “How much did they give you?”

“Four bills.”

Will was impressed. He hadn’t expected that the computer would fetch four hundred dollars, though no doubt it was *worth* a sight more off the shelf. His mind calculated: “I mean, that’s a lot of dope.”

“Fuckin’, *indeed*. Look, though, it happens I owed this one guy, so I had to hook him up—”

“With what?”

“An eight-ball.”

“God.” It was too typical even to get mad over. Will winced.

“But check it.” Junior reached for his knapsack under the dash.

“No, no. Keep it down there.” Will didn’t want any of the guys at the house to see that he and Junior had something. He glanced back over his shoulder; Patton wasn’t watching. Through all four days of Will’s hardship—which stretched in his hungry memory to veritable weeks—no one had offered him so much as a line. He came around to the passenger side door, which Junior had to open for him from the inside by pulling its handle with all his might and aiming a swift kick at it.

On the ride over to Junior’s house, Will ran the conversation in his head: *You go ahead. I can’t smoke it.*

*Why?*

*I’m going clean.*

This sounded ludicrous, of course. He tried again: *Actually, I’m not in the mood.*

Another possibility was this: *I’m going to turn my life around.*

*That’s great, Junior would say.*

*I’ve gotten on the road to recovery.*

Junior would applaud. *Why don’t we both quit, then?*

*To church, shall we?*

*Why, just as soon as I can turn this old jalopy around!*

Will did his best not to eye Junior’s knapsack, which lay at his feet. He had to brace himself. If he was serious about not getting high, it was a given that Junior’s reaction would be worse than disappointed; Will was going to look foolish to his friend. He’d be forever known as the dim bulb

who went to *Mission: Impossible* lengths to spirit a computer out of his own house, taking recourse to elaborate cloak-and-dagger tactics to rip off his own housemates, all to score a bunch of dope he didn't want to smoke.

Junior lived in one of the Midtown Victorian houses so popular with Valentina hipsters. "I had to give my key to George," explained Junior, climbing clumsily to the ledge of a casement window of his apartment to fiddle with the hasp. Down the center of the window was a wide strip of tape, holding it together where it had cracked. This wasn't the first time Will had seen Junior adopt this mode of entry to his own home, nor was it out of character for him to say he'd *had* to give the only key to his place to another tweaker. They broke and entered, Will scrambling over the ledge after Junior and landing hard on his wrist with an 'oof!' that they both laughed at.

"Dude, that was an actual 'oof!'" cried Junior, delighted.

Junior wasted no time, but straightaway measured a mound of white powder onto a sheet of aluminum foil and handed Will the emptied-out cylinder of a ballpoint pen. Will watched Junior pat his pockets for a lighter.

Now was the time. *I'm clean. I won't hit it.* Will knew Junior wouldn't *really* care; he'd gladly smoke it all himself, laughing at Will the whole time; or, if he was lonely, he could call George or Anne Havery, or any other of their friends. There was plenty to go round. The lighter, modified to emit a two-inch finger of flame, flared. The dope began to melt on the foil. White smoke curled up. The thing was, any smoke that Will didn't chase now, with the pen cylinder between his lips, would just dissipate and vanish—a total waste. Junior wasn't burning it for his *health*; he was doing Will a *courtesy* to let him go first.

Will had no choice but to bend to the foil. Quitting dope was something he'd have plenty more chances at.

## Chapter Two

*Dazzler's* was Keiko's silly nickname for the neighborhood *Dashier's*, a supermarket with aisles illuminated to an excruciating degree, as if the laws of commerce warned that the slightest shadow lurking in an unseen corner of a shelf or behind a display of merchandise must, by a force unseen but ineluctable, diminish the impulse to buy. The floor was tiled in an immaculate white that, no matter how the banks of fluorescent bulbs above punished it, returned glare for glare, washing even the undersides of each psychedelically colorful bottle of detergent in antiseptic light.

"Wait," she told Sherwin as they came into the store from the parking lot, where evening's dim glow had barely begun to give over to the drape of night, and made a conceit of wincing and donning her jade-green glam rock sunglasses.

"Come on," said Sherwin, rolling his eyes. "It's not that bad."

But Keiko would not be denied her private amusement. She wore them still as she steered her cart through the pasta and noodle aisle, ambling without much aim; she left it to Sherwin, who honed in on store brands and sale items, to sweep food into the cart. Keiko offered suggestions when they struck her—cream of mushroom soup instead of chicken noodle, as either could be had at two for a dollar—but mainly left it to him to choose what she'd buy. They were shopping for Keiko's apartment, where he rarely ate, but he knew her tastes and the size of her budget; he also came to decisions faster in a store. She was satisfied merely to steer the cart.

"And we should vacuum too," she said. It was her belated response to a question Sherwin had posed in his car in the store's parking lot: *You still want to clean out the cupboards when we get home, right?* Her habit was to not always answer when asked, but rather when something worth saying occurred to her. She and Sherwin ran four or five simultaneous conversations with each other at any given period, resurrecting the thread of each as needed, then putting the discussion back to sleep for hours or even weeks.

"I wonder if you're telling me to vacuum."

"I can let you."

"Do you even own a vacuum?" He knew she didn't.

"Yes. At your house. I can use."

"That's a funny way to ask for something."

"I don't ask. I just use." Their voices meandered in quiet, bored, do-

mestic cadences, in the way people sometimes talk when they're looking at something else. "Why don't we go?" She meant, *to the State Fair*. It was due to open at the municipal racetrack in two weeks. The bank Sherwin worked for offered an employee discount on tickets, but if he hadn't expected Keiko to be uninterested in it, with its cheap corny swindles and hayseed livestock exhibitions, he never would have made offhanded mention of it. He hadn't counted on her taste for novelty.

"If you're hellbent, then sure. Can you afford the ticket?"

"Maybe." The question of who would pay for the tickets was, in Keiko's view, far from settled. "It sounds fun. Interesting."

"You're the only person I know who'd think so."

"It's a culture," Keiko insisted. "American culture."

"It's not culture. It's only a lot of redneck bullshit."

The song playing in the supermarket caught her attention: "Hot Fun In the Summertime." Keiko was annoyed because she liked this song—she liked it too much to be listening to it in a stupid place like Dazzler's. When it was up to her, she got food at a small grocery store on 19th Street called Mi Ranchito, or at the Korean market next door to the King & R light rail stop, which had the only decent sweet bean bread and kimchee in the neighborhood. But Sherwin liked Dashier's.

*...I cloud nine when I want to / out of school / county fair in the country sun...*

She caught her breath. *County fair*. So *that's* what that lyric was about. She'd known it but never known it. Now there was no question: they were going to the State Fair.

"You like this song," Sherwin remarked, not looking up from his scan of the bottom shelves. *Not here, I don't*, she thought but did not say. Keiko found one mental association leading to another; she recalled the time in Japan when she'd learned that the lyrics to "Imagine"—a song very popular in the soundtracks for commercials for all manner of bric-à-brac—included the line, *Imagine no possessions / It isn't hard to do / Nothing to kill or die for...* The Japanese, she thought, at least had the defense of ignorance, but it was still a bad business when great music was slaughtered by context.

They separated in the store, Keiko going to grab staple items like soy milk and margarine from the dairy aisle, Sherwin taking the cart toward the in-store bakery. Sherwin eyed the doughnuts a moment, trying to calculate how long it had been since he'd had a bear claw, but then thought of his abdominal muscles—at home, Keiko would sometimes poke and

his middle with her forefinger and ask, “Is that a six packs? Or three layers?” Surely she was only being ironic, only teasing—surely she didn’t genuinely care about his physique. But he felt touchy. Keiko also claimed that doughnuts in the U.S. were too sugary and lacked variety. He pushed past them.

A little girl with swarthy, handsome features, her hair pulled into two braids of middling length, was mashing loaves of bread between her hands just before where Sherwin stood, and it annoyed him. A parent or guardian ought to have been there to stop her. He was a poor judge of children’s ages, but the girl couldn’t have been in school yet, he thought. She sensed him behind her and looked up from a mangled loaf—guiltily, he thought. “Are you supposed to do that?” he said.

“Sorry.” The girl dashed away, probably to find her mother. Sherwin found an unharmed loaf of discount wheat bread and checked the expiration date.

In the dairy aisle, Keiko trolled the cheeses, her hands in her pockets. They were all expensive: the mozzarella, shredded in pouches, next to gold bricks of cheddar, sharp and mild varieties, and spotty Monterrey Jack, and above these a row of tubs of cottage cheese; it was all pricey, the rounds of Gouda, the Swiss, the unpasteurized Mexican cheese; it was all beyond her means. In Japan she’d never seen such profusion of cheeses in a run-of-the-mill supermarket. She could have torn open a package and stuffed her mouth, at least until store security hauled her off to the pokey. But who could eat cheese that way? You’d have to *savor* it.

Her gaze ranged over the back aisle of the supermarket, where white light scintillated from the reasonably fresh seafood, the ground chuck and turkey breast at the butcher counter, and the varieties of ice cream. She couldn’t afford any of it without sacrificing something else. She’d already given up on hair conditioner and shampooed once every two weeks; deodorant was an abandoned commodity, cologne an extravagancy not to be trifled with, soap an exercise in frugality, as she had to stretch each gritty, odorless store-brand bar to last as long as it might. She had passed the Valentina summer with her window open and a minimum of clothing, sweating like a stevedore in order to spare the air conditioner for times when Sherwin or friends were over—this saved quite a bit on the electric bill. Lukewarm or even cold showers helped with the gas bill. She regularly rang her sister in Osaka at times she knew she wouldn’t be home, leaving a quick message to prompt a return phone call on which they could talk to contentment with her sister picking up the charges—Keiko

thought that Masami hadn't yet tumbled to this stratagem of hers. Keiko's two jobs, both paying minimum wage, barely stretched to forty hours a week on the clock; her one salvation was that, her visa status being what it was, neither of these jobs were on the books, meaning taxes weren't withheld.

She had a friend, Amy, who would hold forth on the needlessness of chemical-smelling perfumes, dyes and fabric softeners, and the other pampered luxuries of the 'bourgie'—Amy's pet word—the fancy prints on their two-ply toilet paper (Keiko had experimented with using junk mail newsprint but found it loathsome) and their ugly brand-of-the-moment clothes. "It's just fucking baubles," Amy would say. "Why trade the days of your life away for that shit?"

But *food*—Keiko ached for it. Her attempts at strict rationing often gave way to bouts of indulgence; when she had cash in hand and the pressure within her had mounted, Keiko would forget her utility bill or even her rent obligations in her lust for a good, belt-loosening meal.

Tonight, in fact, she didn't have a single dollar on her. She picked up a quart of generic-brand milk and a discount tub of margarine and walked back to the front of the store in search of Sherwin and the cart. Near the bread aisle she found the cart, but not Sherwin; he'd left it parked to the side and gone off somewhere. As she put in the butter and milk, Keiko noticed an extra-sized box of brand-name cereal, Grape Nuts, which Sherwin knew was her favorite. She could picture him spotting the box, dropping it into the cart, never saying a word about it, doing something furtive and sweet in his taciturn way. A figure sprang to mind: six dollars and eighty-nine cents a box. Keiko sighed and grabbed up the cereal to return it to the shelf, feeling minutely deflated. She deplored the necessity of scheming this way, but when she asked Sherwin to pay for her groceries tonight, it wouldn't do to have the cart full of luxury items.

At the cereals Keiko saw a little girl, four or five years old, with large, dark eyes and pronounced, well-formed eyebrows, wistfully spying out the colorful, toylike boxes of frosted cereals that were just beyond her reach on the upper shelves; the girl seemed to know by instinct to ignore the generic, substandard brands on the bottom shelf. Keiko wished she could have such full eyebrows. *I know what you're thinking*, Keiko thought, and felt a stab of solidarity for her little comrade in hunger. *If you were my little baby, we'd starve together. They'd find our emaciated bodies, death by cereal deprivation.* Keiko said hello to the girl.

"Hello." She looked fearless. Keiko didn't see anyone around who



might be her parent.

“What’s your name?”

“Alex.”

“My name is Keiko. Do you want a cereal?” Keiko crouched down to put herself at the girl’s eye level.

The girl folded her arms. “No, I’m just window-shopping. Grandma says my teeth will fall out.” She said *teef* for *teeth*.

Keiko winked. “Just wait until you’re grow up. And be sure to get rich. Then you can eat every day. And teeth falls out, you just buy the new one.” She pronounce *teeth* as *teese*.

“Okay.”

“What you want to be when you’re grow up?”

The girl answered seriously, “A grandma.”

Keiko widened her eyes. “Wow. It’s a great job.” The girl smiled, not at all shy. Keiko asked, “Can I be one too?”

“It’s okay with me.” The girl pointed, and Keiko, turning to look, saw a stout woman in a jogging suit, browsing the jams. “That’s my grandma,” the girl explained. “She’s a dental assistant.”

“Where’s your mommy?”

“She lives with a bastard in Reno, Nevada.” The child was innocent, Keiko saw, just repeating something she’d overheard. To her the meaning of *bastard* was as obscure as that of *dental assistant*—they must have been sounds without import. “Are you going to be a dental assistant grandma? I’m pretty sure I am.”

“Actually, I’m Japanese,” Keiko said seriously. “So when I’m grandma, I got to wear kimono and drink the cup of tea. Do you know tea?”

“No.”

“It’s drink. Better than Pepsi. You got to try. When you come Japan, come to my house and I give you.”

The girl weighed this offer. “You better tell me your address.”

“Alejandra,” the girl’s mother called before Keiko could devise a suitably cute reply to this cute solicitation. “Come on, *mija*. Time to go.”

“See you later,” said Keiko, standing.

“Okay.” The girl dashed away without a backward glance.

When Sherwin returned to the shopping cart with a flat of ten-cent ramen packages, he saw Keiko approaching from the other direction and raised his chin to signal greeting to her, but arrested his motion when he found the box of Grape Nuts gone from the cart. *She’s going to ask me to pay*, he guessed, knowing this before he really understood why he knew

it. Instinct, instructed by experience of her insolvency and the devices she used, told him his guess was correct.

“Thanks,” said Keiko, meaning the ramen.

*Thanks*, he thought. *Her favorite word*. He thought of ingenuously mentioning the cereal he’d got for her and asking where it had gone, but he feared that any word out of his mouth would precipitate a hail of abuse. He disliked public scenes. Keiko stared at him, sensing that something was the matter.

“Are you okay?”

Sherwin made no immediate answer, but after his wrath had cooled to hardened spite, he said, “Fine. I’m fine,” and, willfully ignoring her from that moment on, manhandled the cart around in the direction of the cereal aisle. Keiko trailed after, mute. He put not one but three boxes of Grape Nuts into the cart, fairly slamming them in.

“A present,” he said.

“Sherwin.” It was turning out as she’d feared. “Will you listen?” Perhaps worse than she’d feared.

He pushed away, taking the cart through the aisles with grim determination. He snatch up foods with no regard to cost, even ignoring what he was taking. He got two jars of spaghetti sauce, of different brands. “Please accept this humble gift.” The edge in his voice was as cold as a razor. “And this.” He slapped item after item into the cart, giving up on his bitter comments to toil silently, dourly. Keiko followed after, also silent and, to his eyes, sullen. He knew he was humiliating her—it was his aim to do so—but he also knew that she was getting, in a roundabout way, exactly what she wanted. She wouldn’t stop him.

Keiko felt that this wasn’t fair. The entire scene was too *much*—even if he deserved to get mad, she did not deserve to be *this* antagonized.

When the cart was full, he paid with his ATM card and, still wordlessly, pushed it out to his car.

“I can help.”

He shouldered past her to load the groceries into the trunk single-handedly. Keiko stood by, her face a mask.

The total bill had exceeded a hundred dollars. At home on his bulletin board by the kitchen counter, Sherwin had pinned up a paper on which he kept a running sum of the money he’d lent her. He knew it was hopeless to expect repayment, but he was sourly determined to add this figure to it later.

They drove in silence. Sherwin switched on the radio, but Keiko

turned it off. He left it off. Her sunglasses were on the dash. They slid from side to side with every turn.

No one was about at her building, though the voices of some men playing soccer in the dark carried over from Garfield Park. Sherwin would not allow Keiko to touch the groceries; she picked up a bag to help carry it in, and he snatched it from her. After that, she let him carry everything up to her room on his own.

They did not speak at all. Keiko was still standing motionless at the curb, burning with humiliation, when Sherwin drove away and left her there. He had forgotten his earlier promise to drop her off at the convenience store for her shift. *Or perhaps, she thought, he didn't forget.*

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Outside a claustrophobic punk rock club on King Street grandly named Worldwide Underground, Keiko stood with her back to the early autumn wind and lit a beedi cigarette on the cherry of her friend Amy's Marlboro. Traffic on King Street was light so late in the evening. The first draw on the beedi was pungent and a bit fruity, and the warm night wind across her damp skin felt refreshing after the close confines of the club. Keiko felt good, and Amy looked exhilarated: their *conte* had been a success.

The club was a popular spot for indie and hardcore bands, styles of music for which few proper venues existed in Valentina; even on off nights, it was generally full with hipsters and music fans. The cover was low and drinks were radically discounted for Amy and Keiko—they had hook-ups at the bar—so they dropped by whenever the bill looked interesting, and sometimes, for lack of anything better to do, when it didn't.

Inside, the headlining band was winding up its set with an interminable shout-along anthem, dragging it out in the way bands did when they saw (or assumed) that the crowd still couldn't bear to go home. Keiko and Amy had finished what they'd come to do, so there was little reason for them to endure the noise inside.

Keiko nodded in toward the club. "Boy song."

Amy chuckled. "Yeah, hella manly."

"It's a good exercise. Good for sweating."

Amy clicked her tongue. "It's totally impossible to take hardcore punk seriously. It's like, zero creativity. Just smash shit up."

From within came a shouted refrain, repeated enough times for the crowd to catch on and sing along, the singer holding the mic out to them:

“Fuck you! Not! Any! More! Fuck you! Not! Any! More!”

Keiko winked. “It reminds me of the pro wrestling. Like a gorilla music.” Winking was a habit she had purposefully acquired; it wasn’t present in Japanese culture, except as an import from the West, like raising the middle finger: gestures divorced of cultural import. In Osaka, Keiko had taken English lessons from an expatriate New Yorker who had fondly winked at all of his prettier teenaged students; she had taken to imitating him as a form of mockery, and the habit had formed from there. She thought of it as a droll, subversive cultural signal, like a secret handshake.

“Fucking, they’ll talk up a storm about change, change the world, change this, change that. And when it comes to expression, it’s like, okay, male aggression. That’s a *total change*.” Amy was garrulous tonight, and in even more of a mood than usual to expound on feminist themes—no wonder, given what they’d just done. There were patio chairs and café tables scattered around the sidewalk in front of the doors of the club where young people sat, bent over and intent on their conversations. The ear-splitting, triple-time music that spilled out of the club forced them to speak louder, to joke faster, pushing up the emotional energy of the night as high as they sought it to be. Amy motioned Keiko to a vacant table and they sat to smoke and talk.

“It worked.”

“*Mmm*.” Keiko nodded once.

“I mean, I know before how I was saying, it wasn’t going to, you know, find an audience.”

“From nervous. Ness? ‘Nervousness,’ it’s a word?”

“Yeah. I guess so, but I really, I didn’t have your confidence.”

Keiko cocked her head sidewise, which was the way she shrugged. Seated at the table, Keiko could look directly into Amy’s face, which made her feel a little more comfortable. Amy was at least a head taller and had the physical confidence to hold her bearing erect and graceful; Keiko had to tilt her face up a little when they were standing. Amy’s face was framed by rich auburn hair cut to a jaw-length bob, and she had a straight nose and large, green eyes. Keiko wondered if the world looked green to her. A sunburnt indigent strolled past toting a Glad bag full of recyclable plastic bottles, limping theatrically and eyeing Amy’s long legs. Amy didn’t notice him, but Keiko did and, for a crazy instant, wished she could talk to him.

“God, I hate this thing,” Amy was saying, fiddling irritably with a mobile phone. She exhaled sharply and tossed the phone into her handbag. “I

don't know why I bought it. They're so fucking bourgie." *Did I want to talk to that homeless guy just now instead of Amy?* wondered Keiko, not entirely sure herself. *Or with Amy, the three of us?* In retrospect it didn't seem a kind thought, to be sitting with a friend and wish you could talk with a stranger.

Inside, the last crescendo's final crescendo finally doubly-triply crashed its way to a conclusion, and with that the show ended. Hipsters from inside the club flooded the sidewalk, laughing and lighting cigarettes by the score. *In California you can only have your alcohol inside, Keiko observed to herself, and you can only have your tobacco outside. They never meet each other.* A friend of Amy's, who Keiko vaguely knew as Shirley, or Charlene, approached their table to talk to them about their skit. "Amy!" she laughed. "That was *so fucking funny*, I literally thought I was going to asphyxiate from, like, laughing, for real. I would have been, like, passed out." She demonstrated with a backward tilt and swoon, unknowingly putting a straight-edge boy passing behind her in danger of a headbutt. "I never saw anything like that at a show before. I couldn't believe it."

"Yeah," Amy said, her voice loud and in charge—performing on stage had, at least for one night, earned her the right to be expansive. "We just wanted to do something new, you know. Like, you go to a show and it's, fuckin', the same bands."

"Like fuck with the standards."

"Rulebreakers, yeah. We're all about revolution." This was Amy's style, to begin a sentence in earnest and then amplify it to an ironic mockery of itself.

Keiko had no stake in the conversation. She felt torpid all of a sudden. She wondered how well or poorly their routine had actually gone. Between bands, the two of them had put on a skit—a comedic form that Keiko referred to as a *conte*, though apparently this was not a borrowed English word after all—called 'Defend Your Daughters.' Keiko tried to recall as well as she could how people had reacted, where they'd had the audience and where they'd lost them...

*Enter Amy, dressed as Father, white collared shirt, conservative necktie, slacks, briefcase. "Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Gentlemen, may I have your attention. Ladies, this information is for your husbands only. Go somewhere else. Bake something, perhaps."*

*This gets a laugh, more than Keiko had thought it might. Amy's delivery must have been good.*

*Enter Keiko, dressed as Daughter, skirt down to ankles, long-sleeved frilly blouse, ribbons in hair. Flounces onto stage, curtsies, crosses eyes at audience. Another laugh.*

*They'd agreed that Keiko's accent wasn't going to work for the all-American role of Daughter, so her part was mainly non-speaking; but the majority of Amy's lines had originated in a series of jokes the two of them had riffed on for days before Keiko had suggested they work up a skit for fun. The wordplay was Amy's, the situations and visual gags mostly Keiko's.*

*"Gentlemen, brethren—a question." Amy squares her shoulders, spreads her legs wide, and pauses a beat. "It is a question every God-fearing breadwinner must work up the nerve to ask himself." A beat. "Is your daughter still a virgin?" More laughs, larger this time. Amy got this one right, mixing in just enough prudery and worry in her tone of voice.*

*Amy looks to Keiko. Keiko, standing, slightly closes her knees—ever so slightly. Another laugh. Keiko milks it, letting the moment drag uncomfortably. A bigger laugh.*

*"A very pertinent question! But you look uncomfortable discussing this." Amy singles out a nebbish scenester with her eyes, and the crowd turns to look at him. Sure enough, the attention makes him visibly uncomfortable. A laugh. "Don't be! We American fathers owe it to our families, our race and our Lord to keep our daughters' privates private." Amy shoots a glance at Keiko at stage left; Keiko hurriedly shuts her knees again—she'd been inching them apart. A laugh. "So. Gentlemen. We need a plan. A plan of action to preserve her hymen. What can we do to Defend Our Daughters?" On mention of the skit title, Amy and Keiko strike a pre-arranged pose, Keiko leaning way back, legs wide apart, eyes and mouth open in orgasmic gasp; Amy blocking Keiko's crotch with both hands and scowling. It had been Keiko's idea to strike this pose each time Amy says 'defend your daughter,' and the first time it gets a laugh; but after that, not so much—which frustrates her expectations, as she was sure that, with a Japanese audience, the repetition itself would have served to make the pose funnier each time.*

*"Tactic number one: Keep her ugly." A laugh. "You leave honey lying around, you're bound to catch some flies." Amy had insisted on this line; but nobody laughs. She waits longer than needful, then carries on. "Which we don't want. You—don't want horny boys prowling around. So—keep her ugly." Rewind, reset. Amy starts again. "First: Bad haircut."*

*Keiko flounces her lopsided wig and frowns.*

*“No shaving of legs.”*

*Keiko lifts her skirt, exposes one leg; they’d found what could only be described as ‘hairy tights’ at the thrift store, perhaps part of an ape costume. A laugh.*

*“No shaving of armpits.”*

*Keiko lifts an arm, exposing a veritable beard of armpit hair. A bigger laugh.*

Keiko was called back into the conversation when Amy asked her a question. “Um, yeah,” she answered, unsure what it was she’d been asked.

“Yeah. As if you could even *do* that with a vibrator.” Amy and her friend carried on laughing and talking. Keiko faded away again. *Why didn’t the pose work?* she wondered. It continued to needle her.

*“Tactic number two: Scare her into being virtuous. Our daughters need to know some self-evident truths. Tell her that sex causes poverty!”*

*Keiko holds out empty pockets.*

*“The female orgasm has been known to trigger fatal strokes!”*

*Keiko gasps and falls over.*

*“Strike that! The female orgasm does not exist!”*

*Keiko sits up, outraged, pouting. This gets a big laugh.*

*“AIDS can be transmitted through holding hands—”*

*Keiko thrusts hands behind back.*

*“—or telephone conversations with boys!”*

*Keiko fumbles with mobile phone—Amy’s, borrowed as a prop. Keiko wanted to drop it for a gag, but Amy vetoed that.*

*“Sex is enormously painful for women!”*

*Keiko whoops in pain. This is the first sound out of her since the skit began. The surprise factor probably helps get the laugh.*

*“If you have sex, God will hate you!”*

*Keiko crosses herself. Amy had to teach her how to do it.*

*“When a man reaches climax, he spontaneously urinates!”*

Shirley suddenly noticed Keiko at the table, though she’d been in plain view, and apologized for not remembering her name. “But I almost creamed my panties when you did that thing about the pee. Like, a guy pees inside you when you fuck. That was *so* funny. You were, like, my hero.”

Keiko thanked her for the compliment.

“So, like, who thought of doing that? Like, that whole thing,” Shirley asked Amy.

Amy glanced over at Keiko and said, “Um, I don’t know, who thought

of it? I guess it was kind of mostly your idea, K?”

Keiko enjoyed Amy’s company but sometimes regretted certain facets of her personality. Had she not wanted to take credit in front of Shirley, Keiko sensed, Amy never would have asked such a question. “In a matter fact,” Keiko replied in a natural tone, “I think it was your idea mostly.”

“I guess. But Keiko totally helped. Total joint effort.” Amy fussed with her hair and changed the subject before Shirley could get any more praise in. “What’s everybody doing now? Total after-party madness, or what?”

Keiko wasn’t interested. The music scene was normally so humorless; putting on their skit in between the third and fourth bands had worked like a dream: people were just tired enough of the monotony of the music, plus drunk, plus all worked up. Amy was friends with the guy who did booking at Worldwide Underground and had negotiated all such details. Keiko only now realized what a favor the guy had done them with the scheduling.

*“So, in order to Defend Your Daughters”—Amy and Keiko pose again; only a titter of laughter—“we come at last to our final lines of defense.” Amy produces a length of wire with bits of electronics on either end. “This—is a phone tap.” She delivers the line well; the crowd laughs. Keiko sits down in the chair at stage center, and onto her head Amy plops a sort of science-fiction headpiece with wires. “And this—is a lie detector. You’ll find everything you need to put one together at your neighborhood hardware store.” Keiko holds up a large white cardboard sign with names and phone numbers of hardware stores. A decent laugh.*

*“And if all else fails...” The final joke. While they’d been creating the conte, Keiko hadn’t worried much about how it would go over; unlike Amy, she was fairly confident about what she thought was funny; but she knew that the final joke had to click or the whole thing wasn’t going to work. Amy straightens, addresses the audience; Keiko eases her legs apart to prepare for the gag.*

*“The finger test.”*

*Keiko yelps and slams shut her knees. It gets them—the biggest laugh of the night.*

*This was where Amy had wanted to end it. Keiko felt strongly that another little accent was needed—a closing line. Together, what they’d come up with, which Amy delivers while the laughter hasn’t yet died, was this: “Remember, fathers—if you keep one eye closed, it’s not a sin.” The stage lights dim on this cue and the house lights go up. Applause.*



Shirley knew some of the members of one of the bands and made introductions, and Keiko and Amy accepted their invitation to all go together to a bar. Everyone took separate cars, save Keiko, who rode in Amy's.

At the bar, one of the band guys tried chatting up Keiko. "Are you two doing that, like, as a regular thing?"

"No."

"Really? There's no, like, next show? Because you totally should."

"Thanks."

"Is that—are you Japanese?" He sipped his beer; why, Keiko wondered, did so many guys in Valentina seem embarrassed to ask if she was Japanese? "I was just wondering, is that sort of comedy thing pretty common over there."

"Kind of. A little different." Keiko shook off a bit of torpor to attempt an explanation, not really sure however if it was worth the effort. "Japanese comedy is mostly a two people. You say 'duet'?"

"Yeah, duet. Or duo."

"Okay, yeah, duo. That's called *tsukkomi* and *boké*. One person is *boké*, that's the stupid. And other person hits."

The band guy absorbed this. "One person's stupid, and the other one hits him. Laurel and Hardy sort of thing, huh?" He nodded, nodded again, drank his beer.

Keiko didn't get the reference. *Laura and Hotty?* She felt briefly annoyed: this seemed like yet another attempt by an American, when exposed to an idea from Japanese culture, to insinuate that, *yeah, we thought of that first*. She continued to broadcast to the band guy that she was bored with him, and to his credit he read her expression and drifted off before too long. It was as he was pretending to see someone he knew and tipping his head toward Keiko in an *I'll-just-be-right-over-there* gesture to ease his retreat, that she was surprised to see her new neighbor David come into the bar; he appeared with an attractive black woman who must have been his date. Both were dressed more fashionably than the general run of the clientele; the bar was a dive, popular with local musicians of a less sartorial bent.

She thought to go over and say hi to David, but just then Amy introduced her to another guy who immediately bought her a drink—without asking what she was having—and began telling one pushy joke after another. Keiko amused herself for a few moments by speaking alliterative Japanese nonsense, schoolyard puns like, "Do you need a dolphin?" and, "My futon went flying." In the noise of the place this must have passed

for conversation, as her wooer laughed each time she spoke and never asked her to repeat or clarify. What he was talking about, muffled as it was by the music and noise of the place, was equally obscure to her. Sherwin would have been jealous if he'd known she was doing this, but she enjoyed the free drinks—and he was never going to know.

David saw Keiko and waved to her; she gave him a look to let him know that she was quite happy to see him, waving back and beaming; the alcohol was doing its work on her, and she was always a merry drunk. David nodded and smiled to her, and then, seeming to feign nonchalance, made a demonstration of laying his hand on the arm of the woman he'd come in with. "Good for you," Keiko called out cheerily across the bar, knowing however that nothing less than a shout would actually carry across to him. "Sexy lady. It's a score."

As they opportunely took a vacant table, Angela asked David who he had seen. "My new neighbor," he told her. "Or, I'm *her* new neighbor, I should say. She's Japanese."

"You would go for Asian snatch," Angela said archly.

David gave her a sage nod. "Yes, Asian snacks are delicious."

"I *said*, Asian—" David silenced her with a pleasant peck on the lips and got up to buy a pair of drinks. Angela sat alone, feeling wrapped in the wholesome completeness of a woman not on the market. It was a pleasure edifying to her image of herself to ignore the men in the bar who she could objectively assume were checking her out. David was leaning over to the bartender, interrupting what she was doing to place his order; Angela liked that. David was generally too timid. Angela believed in the power of one person to influence another; she wondered whether a well-placed dig might not go some way in getting him to toughen up and take charge more. That sort of thing had to be done carefully—tonight wasn't the right time. When they ate out, for example, he customarily made her choose the restaurant, claiming he had no preferences. She made a note to herself: *Even when you don't have a preference, a man is someone who makes a decision.* It was the second thing tonight about David that had occurred to her to set her hand to, the first being his lily-white vocabulary. Irony was fine and all, but he'd said, "Works for me," not once but twice that evening in doe-eyed seriousness, and had even once chirped, "Okely-dokely." Lines were being crossed here.

This was their third bar of the night, and probably the most crowded, though she could not fathom why. It was a dumpy, stale sort of place. Angela felt unexpectedly sleepy all at once. When David came back with her

Captain and Coke and a whiskey sour for himself, she told him, “Let’s go home after this drink.” *Damn, I did it again*, she thought. *Why do I always have to make the decisions?*

“You’re not having any fun.”

“I am having tons of fucking fun.” She smiled at him fondly. “Maybe. But anyway, I want to go to bed.”

“With me.” He nodded.

“Not with you. With him.” She pointed. He turned to look, but there was a mass of bodies behind, any one of whom Angela could have been indicating.

“He’s not as debonair as me.” David turned back. “Not as suave or dapper. You’re making a mistake.”

“You can’t go to *bed* with ‘dapper’. *He’s well hung.*”

“You can’t tell that.”

“Look at his package. He’s all there, babe.”

“It’s not a question of looking at his package. It’s *concealed*.” David was being humorous, speaking in jarred and bewildered tones. “That’s the whole purpose of baggy pants. The concealing effect of modern fashion. You never know who’s got one.”

Angela sipped her drink. “*He’s got one.*”

“You’re not *supposed* to know who’s got one. If chicks could tell just by looking, all hell would break loose.”

Angela said nothing but fixed on him a heavy-lidded, all-knowing stare—he’d once called it her ‘Queen of the Nile’ look.

“You probably think I’m worried.”

“You *look* worried.”

“Pshaw.” David pronounced *pslaw* as a two-syllable word. “It’s not the size of the boat, it’s the motion of the ocean—”

“Stop right there.”

“What?”

But she would say no more. She only smirked at him. David reddened despite himself. They finished their drinks, chatting about the scene in the bar. Angela wanted another drink, so they had another before they left.

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To a temp agency interviewer, Will overstated how well he could use a computer in order to get a job in one of the office buildings downtown, doing something called ‘data entry’, pecking on a ten-key pad. He hadn’t

had much to do with computers since his brief adventure purloining one a few years before, but he managed to pick up the job quickly and was soon doing as well at it on average as his coworkers, most of whom had associate degrees from Valentina City College. It was a better job than most of the other guys at the Mission could boast of, both for the pay and the ease of it, not to mention the white-collar respectability of working in an office on the tenth floor—instead of emptying the waste-paper baskets in just such an office, as he once had.

Will nonetheless felt compelled to get outside of the office building once in a while to remind himself of the color and smell of the sky. All the air inside the building seemed to come in through a dusty pipe with all the sunlight and dew filtered out, replaced with asbestos particles and chlorofluorocarbons. The walls and cubicle dividers at Venture Horizons Data Solutions seemed expressly engineered to provide no stimulation to the eye: there could be no distractions from the data. Will sensed, or imagined, a kind of vampiric static buzz radiating through the air of the building, oppressing the eyes and draining vitamin D from the skin. Every bathroom- or snack-break was an excuse to ride down to the first floor and step out of the building, where direct Californian sunlight could break onto the surfaces of his face and dry heat could thaw his air-conditioned flesh.

Will sat at a workstation on a long table with others doing the same tasks; there were no cubicle dividers for the data entry clerks, which Will was glad of at first, assuming this would make it easier to chat with his coworkers. But chat was not permitted. (There could be no distractions from the data.) Since he generally scarpered during breaks, it was only after shifts ended that Will had a chance to talk to his coworkers. Two or three would sometimes end up in an elevator together.

“Another day, another dollar,” one might say to another.

Will would venture a jest of the am-I-right variety, trying to join the conversation: “More like another day, another fifty cents, am I right?”

He apparently was not right. These coworkers did not take the bait, and, for the remaining seconds of the ride, the elevator would fall quiet as the grave.

Another time, Will would try cracking wise about, say, the name of the company. “It’s like they just took four business-y sounding words and put them together. Venture! Horizons! Data! Solutions! Am I right?” He exaggerated each word, trying for a laugh. No dice.

He began to sense that he wasn’t likely to get on with these folks. He

wondered what it was.

Leaning on the stucco outer wall of the building, watching passersby, he kept an eye on the electronic marquee in front of the convention center across the street, which periodically flashed the time. Two women strolled past, and he watched their bodies, trying not to be obvious about it. One was white, sort of chubby, but cheery-looking; the other looked Indian and wore a tight T-shirt beneath overalls, looking very fetching. Will realized he was indeed being obvious, and directed his leer away from them. In Will's life, sexual maturity had coincided with heavy drug use, so that he'd never known romance, infatuation or flirtation without the crutch of chemically-fuelled confidence to overrule the insecurities and apprehensive self-limits he'd accrued as a chubby kid in school who was not fully Mexican, not fully black, and so was exiled and self-exiled to the no-man's-land between cliques.

Another woman walked past, tough-looking and gorgeous. The smooth, convex planes of her thighs pushed out against her discolored army surplus trousers with every long stride. Will admired her aphrodisiac self-confidence, the way she seemed outside of convention. Her way of moving seemed to bespeak countercultural freedom, independence, a magnetic originality or even strangeness. Sexy women could be eye-catching, but it was self-confidence that most inspired him. He detected that she might glance in his direction and averted his eyes in an instant.

*I wonder if I'm ugly*, Will thought. Dope use had slimmed him down considerably since his school days, though he'd stopped using before it could whittle him all the way down to a trailer-park bag of bones. But there was still the shotgun-blast of fading acne scars across his forehead—he was sensitive about that. He occasionally dared to imagine that his russet skin and broad, intense eyes might someday get him noticed. But even if a woman did notice him—would he have what it took to follow up?

His break was almost up. As long as the elevator didn't keep him waiting, he could get from street level to his workstation in ninety seconds, hit control-alt-delete to log in and then clock himself back in with the time-management program that management used to police the employees' use of time. Paychecks were calculated in fifteen-minute increments, so if he were even one second late logging in after a break, it would cost him a quarter of an hour's wages.

Still he people-watched outside the building. To see and be not seen—Will found in the steadiness of the activities of life a kind of comfort, like being warm and dry in a car with someone else driving. *If I had to*

*take either ESP, X-ray vision, super-strength or invisibility, thought Will, mocking himself in a way, I know which I'd choose.*

Will thrust his hands in his pockets and looked up at the blank glass face of the building. It was time to go in. He fast-walked to the elevator and pushed all of the 'up' buttons one after the other. From a co-worker, he'd heard that on New Year's Day of that year, which was only a few months off, every computer in the world was supposed to go haywire. Will supposed he was going to quit his job before then anyway, but the thought of it put him in a jaunty mood nevertheless.

At the end of his shift, four hours later, Will dropped by the desk of his supervisor to pick up his paycheck. Gene Carrillo, a balding fellow with pinched features made to match his pinched voice and too-tight shirt collars, had no office of his own, but his cubicle boasted a desk and twin filing cabinets. *Even if I wanted to file something, thought Will, there would be no way for me to. I have no filing cabinets of my own.* The hierarchy of supervisors and managers at Venture Horizons Data Solutions mystified Will, but relative status was easy enough to estimate if he ignored job titles and judged by office digs. Who commanded whom, the department manager (DM) or the department administrator (DA)? It was a tricky case: the department administrator, Laurie Paterson, had an office half the size of Gene Carrillo's cubicle, but it was a proper office nonetheless, with a door. But how many filing cabinets did she preside over—more or fewer than Gene? Will would have to check the next chance he had. Such speculation occupied him whenever he beheld the crease of neck-flesh protruding over Carrillo's shirt collar. Will felt infinitely separated from such people; he could imagine no worse folly than to take such a job at such a company seriously. He distantly regarded this dimension of human folly as the *real world*. Yet he submitted to it.

"Thank you very much," said Carrillo as he handed Will the paycheck in its pastel envelope. Will replied, "Thank *you*." Neither of them felt thankful in the slightest to the other.

He planned to meet Rodney at the Mission but ran into him two blocks from there on 23rd Street. Rodney's lope was recognizable to Will before the features of his face came into view. Will held up his pay envelope and grinned: "Cha-ching."

"Got paid, brother?" Rodney cocked his arms expectantly.

"Big time. Ready to retire."

"Shoot, I retired years ago. All I got to do now is tune up the golf swing. Want to go cash it?"

Neither of them had a bank account, which meant a trek to the nearest branch office of Union Bank of California, the bank the check was drawn on. Will knew the routine. “I once had a job,” he said, “on the night crew of this Target up in Truckee. And I got my first check, it was on some bank in, fucking, Wisconsin.”

“Gawl. Figures.”

“Yeah. I was like, can anybody give me a ride to Wisconsin once a week?”

Rodney nodded. “And they said, ‘Get a bank account, sucker.’”

“Or go to a check-cashing. So you can pay a fucking fee just to get your own money. I had to cash them in my friend’s bank account. Then they started denying him. No third-party checks.”

“I don’t do that anymore. Once a buddy of mine took my check for me, but his account was gone negative, so there it all went.” Something similar had happened once to Will. “Now I make them pay me in cash,” Rodney concluded.

The afternoon temperature had peaked. Autumn that year was inflicting a heat wave on Valentina. Rodney suggested they sneak a ride on the light rail to get into some air conditioning. After being confined all day, Will didn’t mind a little sweat, but he got on with Rodney. They walked past the vending machine for tickets but ignored it; neither of them had money for a ticket. People could board the VLR without paying anyway, as there weren’t gates or ticket wickets. But they’d only ridden one stop when Rodney elbowed Will and said, “Hope you got your running shoes on, brother.” Outside the train Will saw what Rodney meant: a huddle of blue-uniformed fare inspectors.

When the train doors slid open, Rodney was the first passenger out, and he cornered hard with his hands in his pockets and looked past the cops. They were on him in a flash, but courteous at first: “Ticket, sir, I need to see proof of payment—”

Rodney ran. He was counting on the cop not catching on in time, as most of those guys never had to chase down riders. The portly fellow who’d accosted him couldn’t have outrun a kid on a tricycle. But another of the fare inspectors was in Rodney’s path, a much younger guy with a blond crew cut. He laid a meaty hand on Rodney and nearly spun him around. Rodney saw Will ducking around the fat cop. Rodney jerked his arm free. Will pulled past the other cop to break toward an alleyway across the sidewalk. Rodney wrenched his other arm up and away from the cop’s grasp, the arc of his hand coming across the cop’s mouth, right

on the knuckles, quite unintentionally—but this put an end to all possibility of reasonable debate. *They'll fucking kill me now*, thought Rodney, breaking into a sprint. A pedestrian scrambled out of his way, scowling.

Will heard commotion behind him. All he knew for sure was the fiery pump of blood in his temples. He dashed around and through the thicket of blue uniforms and into an alley between an hourly-rates hotel and a parking garage. A quick glance back showed no close pursuers. He flew down the alleyway, not easing his pace until he rounded a corner to emerge onto 9th Street. He saw Rodney hurtling straight for him. “Other way!” The dogged crew-cut fare inspector was half a block back. Will skidded back the way he’d come.

Together they lost the fare inspector and sprinted along Richards Avenue to the expressway, under the overpass, across M Street through howling car horns, and over a block to the light rail station called Cathedral Cross, where they intercepted the selfsame train they’d fled from. There were no fare inspectors in evidence, so they clattered back onto the train just as the doors began to shut. Will collapsed onto a seat, breathing in heaves, his face burnt umber beneath a sheen of perspiration. Rodney slumped against the train wall and cackled in a mix of exhilaration, relief and pure silliness. Will smiled.

“Oh, my god! That was the college *dash*, son!”

Will turned to see who was speaking. An older guy in a mechanic’s jumpsuit, black, long-limbed and heavy around the middle, was slapping his thigh in merriment. “You all set a new record! I saw the whole thing.”

Rodney crossed his arms and sat down across from the guy. “Wasn’t that some shit?” All three of them had a good laugh, heedless of the glares of the other passengers. The guy introduced himself as Herb. His smile at Will seemed genuine.

“Yeah,” Rodney said when he’d recovered himself a bit. “I had to run for it, man. I can’t get no tickets or they’ll violate me.”

“You got a H-number?” asked Herb.

Rodney shook his head. “T-number.”

“What office?”

“Downtown Metro.”

Herb whistled. “Downtown Metro parole office is no joke, son. You know what? You sign in at the lobby and you say, I’ll be right back, I need a soda. Then they call your name, you ain’t there, bam! That’s a violation. You go to *jail*. That’s some real shit.”

“I know, man.” Rodney chuckled. “That’s why I bailed.”



“You, too?” Herb asked Will.

Will shook his head. “I bailed ’cause he bailed. And I’m broke as a joke.”

“I got to say, that’s some balls, coming right back on the same train again.” Herb grinned. “The finishing touch.”

Rodney shrugged. “Well, brother, we got to get where we’re going, I guess.”

As they stood in line at the bank, Rodney scrutinized Will’s check. “Not half bad, dude.” For two weeks’ work, Will had earned around seven hundred dollars, before taxes, and Rodney knew Will was only working four days a week at that. “Course, that’s before taxes.”

“Taxes aren’t too bad.” Will regarded them as inevitable. It was a waste of energy to rue money he’d never see.

“Hmm. I sure can’t complain. I ain’t paid taxes since—” Rodney screwed up his eyes to aid his recollection. “—since a while ago, I guess. Years and years. Like I was saying, I make sure to get cash if I’m working.”

“You pay sales tax.”

Rodney blinked. “I guess I do.”

Lines were long in the bank. Rodney had plenty of time to spy out the lay of the building, noting which of the desks in symmetrical rows were empty in the afternoon, which were occupied. He tried to guess at the hierarchy of command in the place; some of these smartly-dressed women and men were undoubtedly empowered to make decisions; others had to ask first. One long oaken bar of tellers’ windows faced the heavily-tinted, steel-reinforced doors of the building, which could only be opened electronically from inside, a security measure. It was unpleasant. Rodney bore a touch of antipathy toward any door he had to be buzzed through, and no great love either for whomever was doing the buzzing. There was always a chance they wouldn’t open them for you.

Will chuckled lowly, through his nose. Rodney turned a questioning eye on him. “I was just thinking about something,” Will explained. “About the bank.”

“Such as?”

“Well, you know.” It was awkward to explain old jokes to new friends. “Long story, but. I used to do a lot of dumpster diving. Sort of to be able to eat, but also for... the hell of it.” Will shrugged. “Like a rebellious thing, probably. Seeing what people threw away, it was pretty crazy. Me and my friends used to dumpster, like, CD players, concert tickets, tons of fresh

bagels and shit. A new bike, once. Houseplants. Fucking, twenty boxes of Christmas lights. Anything you can think of, people chuck it. So the joke was, like, one day we were going to dumpster money from behind the bank.”

“Shoot.” Rodney thought it was a funny story in a you-had-to-be-there way. “Dumpster diving? I didn’t know they had a word for it.”

“We basically never had to pay for anything. You couldn’t even find a use for all the stuff we’d find.”

*Which explains why they threw it out*, thought Rodney, but said nothing.

“Whole boxes of receipts to scam refunds,” Will continued. “It was, like, against our principles to pay for a meal.”

Rodney stroked his chin. Will’s mention of receipt-scamming reminded him of an old story, but instead of sharing it, he only said, “I never really much liked doing that, if I could help it. Eating trash, I mean. Even if it was fresh, just the fact of it being trash. It’s like, people call it low, you begin to *feel* low.”

“Well, you take it off the shelf and it’s edible, people pay money for it, but you go put it out in the box two minutes later and it’s like, it becomes toxic waste.” Will’s tone was strident, perhaps even self-righteous, which told Rodney that this was an old argument resurrected, not an off-the-cuff observation. *Well*, he thought, *it’s never fun to be right about something everybody else is wrong about*.

There was one more person in line ahead of them, and then their turn would come; at the same moment, both Will and Rodney were aware of a disturbance up ahead at a teller window. Rodney gave Will the elbow and nodded at a young man—dressed in slacks and a pastel polo shirt, with a pager in a belt holster and a cell phone in his hand, which he waved like the baton of an orchestra conductor; Will took him for a department supervisor of someplace or other—who, in loud, condescending language intended to be overheard as much as heard, was berating the young female teller on the other side of the counter. “Then we’re just going to have to check our little computer *again*, aren’t we?” said the man, and this use of the condescending *we* to mean *you* confirmed to Will his guess that the man could be nothing else than a middle-manager.

“I’m sorry, but the only record I can find—”

“Look *again*.”

“I *have* already looked, and the system—”

“What? What is it? Are you *new* here? Is it training day?” The man

leant his frame onto the lip of the counter, so that his round belly plumped against it in two round bulges, exhaling forcefully to give vent to, and advertise, his exasperation. “Tell you what. Get your manager over here and we can do training day *after* I get my freaking printout.”

The bank manager, it appeared, was busy elsewhere; for, although the irate customer’s abuse grew louder and more bitter, no help arrived. Will looked for bank security to step in, but apparently a bit of a tantrum from a customer of this variety was within the limits of what was forgivable; the guard didn’t budge; which Will found ironic, considering the ostentatious lengths to which the bank, with its electronically guarded doors, went to keep out the riffraff in the first place. The woman checked and rechecked the information in her computer terminal, offering apologies that devolved by degrees into the simpering of trapped prey. Will thought he could see that the man, in spite of his demands that a manager come to take over from the woman in her ‘ineptitude’, was privately glad that no one else was stepping in to bear the brunt of his vitriol. After the man struck on the word ‘ineptitude’, he fixed upon it, almost chanting it in Gloria’s face—Gloria was the name of the woman, according to the nametag on her vest; he pronounced it *glo-ri-a*, the way one taunts a simpleton.

Will saw the teller’s harried eyes scan the room, searching perhaps for her manager, or for the behindhand security guard, still mysteriously absent. *Ripe opportunity to rob the joint*, thought Will. The woman’s eyes met his for a fraction of an instant. Will glanced aside. It didn’t seem quite proper to confederate with her—she being *at work*, he not. But he wished he could somehow communicate his sympathy to her—*but she must think I’m on that guy’s side*. Will glanced to the man. *We’re all customers*.

“Are you even paying attention, *glo-ri-a*?”

“Hey, friend.” It was Rodney. The man at the window contrived not to hear. Will saw Rodney step ahead of the line to tap the man’s shoulder. “Hey. Ease up, brother. You’re running a little hot.”

“Who the freak are *you*, anyway?” The man turned, almost as if he meant to divert his fire from Gloria to Rodney, but even as he did, his supercilious momentum tailed off, his irritated question starting out fortissimo but then going sforzando. Will couldn’t see the expression on Rodney’s face; be he noticed, as if for the first time how solidly Rodney filled out his clothes—no bodybuilder, but no trifling wimp either. Not that it mattered—nobody was going to brawl in the bank—or did it? “If you don’t mind, sir, this is between myself and Gloria.” The customer tried simultaneously to wave Rodney back into line, to not appear to be doing

this, to still glower at Gloria, and yet to remain cautiously courteous to this intruder upon his tirade—and ended up just looking foolish, like a politician caught on camera pocketing a bribe.

“Just remember your manners, friend.” Rodney’s tone of voice was civil throughout. He turned his back on the man and resumed his place in line; and the man presently left the bank, apparently without receiving whatever it was he had come for.

To spare Gloria further awkwardness, Will waited to mention the incident until after, having cashed his paycheck, they were stepping out of the bank into the waning heat of afternoon, where the young trees in the parking lot drooped against the stakes to which they were tied and the swell of grass that sculpted—pomaded into position, practically—along the bank’s front face shone a deep verdant hue. “I never would have done that.”

Rodney seemed to take this as censure. “Hell, it ain’t my business, but he was being a—pardon my language, but a little bitch.”

“No, no. I thought it was cool. I mean, of all the times I’ve felt like stepping up to guys like that, you know, and never had the stones.”

Rodney nodded. “Well, there weren’t no call for it. He was maybe having a bad day and he takes it out on whoever.”

“Maybe. Just an dickhead, anyway. Had his head up his ass.” Will clicked his tongue.

“Gawl, he had his head so far up his ass, he could’ve coughed himself up.”

Will choked on a guffaw. No amount of exposure to Rodney’s conversational cherry bombs could ever inure Will to them. “For fuck sake, Rod!”

Rodney looked puzzled. “What?”

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“Here’s the car story.” Rodney claimed to Ruth that he’d actually done this; alternatively, he might have been somewhat involved with, or had some association with, or heard of, a guy who had done it:

“You want to steal a really nice car, not so you can sell it, but so you can drive it. You want to somehow own that sucker free and clear. Drive it right past the cops and they can’t hassle you. Here’s what you do.

“You boost the car and take it someplace you can work on it, like in your garage. You strip it down to the frame—like, you strip every last thing you can take off this car. It’s just going to be a frame when you’re

done with it. Then you take the car out totally stripped and you dump it off someplace where you know the cops are going to find it.

“They find it, what do they do? They run the number stamped on the frame to find out the owner. Now, this dude who owns it is a rich bastard, he’s not going to want that frame back. He’s going to want to write it off to the insurance. So. When the cops tow it off, what they’re going to do with it is, sell it at auction. So, you can go down to the auction on Sunday and pick up this totally stripped Porsche, or what have you, for probably less than a couple hundred. *If* that. Nobody’s going to be dumb enough besides you to even bid on it.

“But now that vehicle is legally yours, paperwork and everything. You take it back to your garage and put everything back on that you stripped off, and you are now the owner of a Porsche for, like, a few hundred bucks. All legal, basically, with the papers and everything. See? That’s the beauty: once you got the papers, what are they going to do?”

Ruth didn’t believe the first word of it. “You never stole any car like that. I saw you driving your auntie’s Chevelle.”

“It was a while ago.”

“Okay. Maybe you went joyriding in a Toyota one time, and now you’re telling stories.” She pronounced it *Tie-ota*. Her hair was flaxen and she wore it long, falling from a left-side part in straight lines down past her shoulders, closely framing her cheeks, where Rodney saw freckles emerge from under her tan when she laughed too long and ran out of breath. That was his goal: to make her laugh, to see those freckles.

Rodney grinned and shrugged. The value to the raconteur of a tale was the fun in it, not the truth of it. Ruth clucked her tongue and rolled her eyes in an exaggerated *Ugh, boys!* gesture, but she was clearly entertained. Her smile revealed astonishingly straight teeth, and her eyes seemed to flash cerulean joy: *Untainted eyes*, thought Rodney: *In the world but not of the world*. In contrast to her pristine mien was her voice, perpetually hoarse and rowdy; she laughed like a naughty teenaged boy and winked like a pal, like a co-conspirator; and then whenever Rodney’s gaze wandered to her hips, wrapped in close-fitting bell-bottomed jeans, or to the flawless geometry of her bosom, then whatever piety or purity to which he pretended were put to rout by lascivious rapture. He reconciled himself to this by trying to picture, in Ruth, flesh and spirit in harmony. It was something close to chaste lust, a phenomenon perhaps peculiar to romantic youth. *Even Christians get down after they’re married*—these were the terms he thought in.

When they talked, they talked of religion and of drugs. Before he met her, it had never occurred to Rodney that he ought not to swear, or that decency of conduct might be its own reward; yet Ruth, though quick to rib him playfully, never censured him in earnest, even after he confessed the extent of his prope dope habit, the stealing and the shifty behavior parcel to an overamped life of practically mandated amorality. It was ironic that the more accepting she was of him in his error, the more intent he grew on reforming himself—if only deed would follow intention. They often met afternoons at her duplex to hang out and have these conversations, sitting chastely on the couch with the television on but the sound off, leaving enough space between them for Rodney to wave his arms when exercised by whatever outlandish tale had swum into his head to regale her with, Ruth occasionally one-upping him with stories from her own past—stories not always saintly, for she hadn't always been a Christian either. With one hand rooting through a bag of potato chips, Rodney slumped into the pea-green upholstery and declared, "Well, it don't matter if you believe me or not. Every word is the truest truth."

"Okay, sure. I'm glad it's not, or you'd be in jail."

"Never."

"Sorry, kid, but they'd nail you." Ruth knew it needled Rodney to be called *kid*, since at twenty she was less than a year older than him. "They'd be all, what's this youngster doing in his daddy's Porsche?"

"I keep trying to tell you." Rodney played at belaboring the explanation. "It wouldn't matter with the papers all squared away."

"Maybe it *wouldn't*. If you ever *tried* it."

Rodney wasn't Ruth's boyfriend, not precisely, but time was making her more comfortable with the idea of it. She well knew her own imperfections, one of which was to take a nitpicking and proprietary attitude toward boys, to hold them up to the light at all angles. When one passed snuff, she gave no such signal, but let down the drawbridge of her heart and waited to be assailed. It was vanity, she knew, and a sin; she tried to be fairer to Rodney than she was prone to be, for all his faults. Rodney, of course, was a whole twitching bundle of rude flaws, but he was winsome—no doubt of that. She felt little love, for example, for the more grotesque solo work of Lou Reed, but this couldn't prevent vulnerable pangs of affection from manifesting within her as Rodney dropped her phonograph needle onto a side of *Metal Machine Music* and then, raising his voice over the clamor, made a case for the album. He was cute.

"Maybe it's broken," suggested Ruth, just a bit cruelly.

Rodney either didn't note the import of her words, or he let them pass by. "I don't think so. Listen right here." He spoke a tad breathlessly, on his haunches by the wood-panelled turntable cabinet, defocusing his eyes and jutting his head forward like a man straining to see a long distance. From the speaker cones came what sounded like monsters battling in a Godzilla movie. He seemed to expect her to find something profound in it, so she waited politely for the track to end. *You have to be patient with boys*, she thought. *They need to feel like you're following them*. This copy of the record belonged to her; he'd bought it for her and brought it over today; his own copy was at his house. She liked Jethro Tull and Procol Harum, which Rodney approved of, but she also liked Abba. "Right there," said Rodney, stabbing a finger in the air. "Did you ever hear *anything* like that before?"

*I heard the whole rest of this endless song; does that count?* Ruth was saved from saying, and then regretting, something uncharitable like this, for just at that moment Aaron stomped through her front door. "Pull your trousers up, wankers."

Rodney gave vent to a groan. "Did you *knock*, Aaron? Did you even *knock*?" His mood darkened in an instant.

Rodney's younger brother wore his hair spiked into a stubby green mohawk—a *fake* mohawk, Rodney complained, as the sides weren't shaved—and, too broke to buy a leather jacket, sewed Sex Pistols logos onto his fleece-lined denim coat. "Yeah, I knocked." He slumped onto the couch next to Ruth—*right* next to Ruth—making twice as much noise as necessary with his heavy-soled boots. "Turn on the telly." He mashed the bag of potato chips in his mitt, turned it over-end and shook a shower of yellow crumbs into his open mouth. "And shut off that bloody awful noise!" Aaron had lately begun affecting a fake Cockney accent, just about skillfully enough to convince a real Cockney that he was imitating an Australian. Ruth never tired of the spectacle that was Aaron. She knew, though, that Rodney was liable to go into a transport of sputtering wrath at any moment.

"Gawl sakes, you dumb fuck, get off that couch and take a walk!"

"Why, so you can get back in Ruthie's knickers?" Aaron pronounced 'why' like *hwoi*, 'knickers' like *nekkaz*. Unperturbed, he turned to Ruth, his ersatz accent disappearing and reappearing at intervals. "The *clap*, Ruth. Watch out for open sores on this wanker, lice and chiggers and shit. I got a magnifying glass you can borrow, if—"

Rodney reached back and swung a mighty blow at Aaron's head. Ruth

had to scramble off of the couch. Both boys hit the floor in a tangle of violence, rude oaths and hoarse laughter—at least, Aaron was laughing. “A bit of the old ultra-violence!” he kept trying to cry, giggling and grunting, but Rodney only pummeled him harder. “Ow! You fucker!” Aaron took a good thwack to the face and stopped giggling, and then for a moment they were going at it hard.

At last they separated. Rodney’s face burned with anger, and more so with shame: Ruth had seen him acting like a chimpanzee. She saw his embarrassment. She knew he liked her—it was no secret—and had fair inklings of what he’d like to do with her; though she feared flattering herself too much, Ruth interpreted most of what he did as a display for her benefit. This was why she felt tempted, by an impulse both friendly but also a little cruel, to take Aaron’s side of the joke, perhaps with, *So, how’d you get lice, Rodney? From Nila?* Then came a twinge of guilt, in the pit of her sternum where she privately felt her spirit to reside, burning there in her bosom; she held her tongue. Such tiny squeezes assailed her often and, when heeded, spared her the later shame of regrettable words; not all humor, her conversion had taught her, need be predatory.

Aaron had fewer scruples. “Hot Rod got a dose from Nila.” He levelled his gaze at Rodney, daring him to offer a contradiction. Even out in Porterville where they lived, friends of friends in their circle carried back stories of Palm Circle in Valentina, where the greater part of the city’s government housing was concentrated; and on Palm Circle, Nila was notorious. The legends were sometimes too scandalous to be true. She wouldn’t cavil to suck dick for dope, but that was nothing: if the story was to be credited, she had even once sucked dick for a *lighter* to burn the shit.

“If anybody’s dosed, it’s you, Aaron.” Rodney glowered. “From your butt-buddy Paul.”

Aaron would not be turned from his accusation. “At least I never *boned Nila.*”

To prove he hadn’t done anything with Nila, all Rodney would have to do was *admit it*—to join in on the joke in order to dispel it. They’d clowned around like that before. But to Ruth’s great dismay, Rodney only colored, glared and could find nothing to say.

Then Ruth despaired in love. *That’s how boys are*, she attempted to console herself. Rodney was smoldering in the center of the room, his brother sprawled on the couch like a fallen drunk; she slumped along the wall leading to the unlit kitchen, feigning disinterest, at the mercy of sick, sad jealousy. She had to say something into the sudden silence: Aaron,



usually by intention flippant to a fault, seemed as angry as his brother now, meeting his stare defiantly. As for Rodney—she wanted to punish him. “Guess I better borrow that magnifying glass.”

Aaron whooped. “Shit! Shit on *me!*” He rocked forward off the couch and bounded past her to help himself to a Tab from the refrigerator. Ruth got one for herself and one for Rodney, came back, turned up the sound on the television. The three of them sat around in silence for a while, watching a soap opera.

Rodney slumped on the end of the couch, separated from Ruth by the interposing form of his hated brother, looking like a condemned criminal: penitent, defiant, and embarrassed by his own defiance. Aaron’s spite toward him was boundless. Aaron’s iconoclasm, which was to be lifelong, was in its first flower that year; it didn’t lead him to hate Rodney directly, but rather to hate the heretofore slavish light in which he’d viewed his big brother. In expiation, Rodney’s statue had to be the first that Aaron pulled down. And what a betrayal it was: for Rodney to bed *Nila*, of all people—a crime for which Aaron had obtained that most condemning of all evidence; namely, rumor—was a downfall that fed Aaron’s inchoate, greedy cynicism with unlooked-for efficacy; though it was a smutty letdown, it was also an opportune exhibit of evidence supporting a verdict already rendered. Aaron was getting Rodney back both for violating, and for inspiring, his campy Wally Cleaver ideal of an older brother. Aaron groaned and stretched. The TV bored him. He wanted to clear out of Ruth’s and go get drunk. He’d only been drunk a few times—not enough times, by his adolescent calculus. The walls closed in. Everything sucked. He kicked his heels into the carpet and glared.

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It was as hot as blazes the summer that Will decided to quit dope for the third time, a year and a half before he was to meet Rodney at the Mission: Christian Refuge. Valentina was pummelled with daily highs exceeding 115°; people in the city went a bit loopy in the dry, boiling heat. Incidence of boneheaded violence surged, as it is wont to do in times of such heat; electrical brownouts rolled in waves across the city’s power grid; and one man made the can-you-believe-it section of the news when he had tried to eat an egg he’d cooked on a roof tile, burnt himself, and fallen from the roof. Perhaps the heat had some power to put fool ideas into one’s head; and, to a tweaker, a fool idea was like the marrow of life.

Will was the only guy in his circle with a bank account, which ensured his popularity. But after a couple of Palm Circle girls finagled him into cashing their third-party checks, the checks bounced; Will, caught red-handed, invented such an elaborate and fanciful set of circumstances that the bank surprisingly swallowed his excuse, forgave the whole thing and reset his account balance. The affair seemed settled. Will mistook the bank's credulity for his own deceptive brilliance, which was an easy cognitive misstep for him: he slept on average one day out of five, thanks to the superabundance in his neighborhood of a cheap, knockout form of crystallized amphetamine that people were calling 'ice'. Whoever cooked up the stuff was running a monstrous tab on pool chemicals, Will was certain, because it was a dirty, sticky-skinned high, with a reek like melting PVC pipe, and probably life-shortening. But it was potent. Will was continuously wired to his scalp and made the financial decisions to prove it.

His first brush with collections officers having gone so preternaturally smoothly, Will called in Junior and Anne Havery, and together they hatched a plot to raise cash by bouncing checks like mad; to go on a rampage, smoking enough ice to cripple ten stout men; and, at the end of it, to report Will's checkbook stolen. He was convinced the whole thing would be brushed under the carpet as simply as before—and, though Junior and Anne may have doubted this, they were plenty pleased to ride Will's wave at no risk to themselves. The checks bounced according to plan, the fraudulent funds flowed, and the tweaking bloomed into a herculean undertaking, with Anne driving Will and Junior in a car 'borrowed' from a friend on Palm Circle on two trips to Reno and one to San Francisco, fleeing at midnight through the streets of San Jose from they knew not whom, rolling bodily over fences, braving store security guards, crapping behind dumpsters—and, with his last vestige of sanity burnt away in a puff of plasticine white dope smoke, Will retained only a vague recollection of handing out his remaining blank checks to total strangers in a homeless camp down outside Los Banos—all part of the plot to lend his checkbook theft alibi the ring of truth—before he bodily collapsed on the dew-moistened grass of a golf course upon which he'd trespassed, then remained unconscious all through the ride home and for a whole day after. It might have been the most fun he'd had in his entire life.

When Will finally got around to reporting the checks stolen, two weeks had passed—a piddling detail in his estimate, but in the end a fatal one. It went without saying that the bank would penetrate Will's artful

smokescreen. They socked him with a negative account balance of over eight thousand dollars. He naturally protested his innocence with all the righteous indignation of someone who, having violated the spirit of the law, is yet certain he hasn't transgressed the letter of it. By his reckoning, he was perfectly innocent: you report your checks stolen, and you're not responsible for them after that—those were the *rules*. The bank, against all reason, nevertheless demanded eight grand. To a guy whose material assets consisted of two changes of clothes and a collection of dubbed-over punk rock cassettes, this was a towering figure—he assumed he'd never pay it and it would go away.

His subsequent days brought collection letters that dogged him from one address to the next, each packed with increasingly florid threats to his credit rating and financial future. Will used them for scratch paper. The words *credit rating* may as well have come out of the fourth dimension for all they imported to him. Will dabbled in employment, one menial job lasting a few days, the next a month or so, and at one of these he was caught up with by a skeletal black fellow from a collection agency with a sheaf of papers showing, he claimed, a court order to attach Will's wages. Will now felt the sting of the most potent weapon of the powerful: official documents. Will later realized that this threat was likely a bluff, but at the moment he was dumbstruck: these people never arrived *in person*. They were really out to get him.

Rather than continue to work, in the belief that his wages would be taken away before he saw them, Will decided to beat it out to the east coast. He had a college town called Providence in mind, where he'd been the summer before on a sketchy cross-country trip, an unplanned ramble that he'd begun with high romantic expectations but soon found to be a hell of a lot of hard work. To even just be homeless wasn't easy, but being homeless and crossing long distances were two ordeals rolled into one. He'd ended up wandering the college campus in Providence, talking his way into the gym showers by pretending to have mislaid his student identification card somewhere, scrounging food at a commons dining area, browsing his fill of reading matter in the library, and generally feeling like a scholar in Alexandria—even when confronted by such opaque passages as, "... 'order' and 'disorder' being interpretive judgements, one most apropos definition of 'chaos' might be, not disorder, but rather the state of phenomena prior to interpretation – the 'way things are' (a phrase that courts meaninglessness) when we yet lack the definitional framework implicit in 'how one thinks things are'..." It was on one of his walks around

the campus that he was approached by a slight blonde student.

“Hi.”

Will gave his response to this greeting a bit more thought than it warranted. “Hi.”

Her name was Julie. “What’s your major?” she asked.

Will cast about mentally for something that would sound likely. “Um... dialectic. Yours?”

“Biochemistry.”

Before Will could form an idea of how to flirt with her, *she* was flirting with *him*; a short bit of friendly and enjoyable conversation later, she had invited him back to her studio apartment on Brown Street, and he had spent the night. Never before had a one-night stand fallen into his lap like that, not counting a couple of repulsive advances from used-up women on Palm Circle that Will, even at his lowest, had counted himself too good to take up. A night in a clean bed with a clean, rich girl had felt like brief access to respectability; since he never had to see Julie again, he was able to keep that sensation pristine in his memory and loved her intensely still, in the romantic, filmy way one could love an abstraction that was safely in the past.

It wasn’t on Will’s mind this time to track Julie down again—she had even suggested that he ought not to—or even to seek out the same university experience, so much as to return to Providence in vague search of a repeat performance. He ought to have known better.

Will only had money for a Greyhound bus ticket as far out as Reno. He was counting on pretending to sleep through his stop and thus stretch his trip as far east as possible—not a hard trick, he’d heard, as long as it never occurred to the driver to do a head count.

The driver threw him out at Reno. Will was undaunted. He bolted from a Denny’s diner without paying for his breakfast and made it out scot-free, so he figured the gods of theft were yet on his side. But they deserted him at a Long’s Drugs, where he found a discarded receipt for diet pills, lifted the same article from a shelf, and walked over to the counter to return it for a refund. The wet tire track across the receipt gave him away. The manager was used to spotting this kind of fraud, as Reno was a casino town and thus a magnet to losers. Locked alone in the manager’s office until the police arrived, Will unfolded his stash of dope from his sock and opportunely snorted the whole pile, rather than be caught with it on him.

This was a bad idea—but then, for Will to suddenly start having *good* ideas at this point would have been the height of inconsistency. He was

blasted with nervous energy the entire first day of his stay in the Reno Justice Center in a white-painted jail cell that stank of mop water and afforded him not room enough for even two complete paces before having to turn. Perched on the edge of his pallet, rubbing his hands together like a human fly, Will had plenty of time to think, but he thought of little else than how miserable he was. Part of it was the understandable discomfort of being locked in a cement room, the physical cramping; part of it also the psychological cramp of lost freedom, which made Will feel more emasculated than he ever had in his life—for he'd never been to jail before, though more than once he'd been within a hair of it; but what galled Will most was the undeniable fact that he was a moron. He'd gotten *caught*—only suckers got caught. Theft and fraud were Will's bread and margarine (or so he imagined) and so he practically had the *right* to waltz through exploits as petty as shoplifting or the time-tested receipt switch. He felt clumsy, dumb and low. And as long as he was locked up, he could not lose himself in dope, or books, or a long walk, or any other distracting pursuit; he was stuck, alone with himself.

Will entered the plea that his condescending public defender recommended and got off light, coming away after a few minutes before a judge sentenced to time served, a fine he couldn't pay and some hours of community service that it did not even occur to Will he might complete. He ambled from the Justice Center up Center Street to an Interstate 80 on-ramp headed west out of Reno and back to Valentina. He put his thumb out but had no real faith that a ride would materialize. He began to ponder *why*, and not only *how*, he had landed once again in this puddle of a town, his momentum spent, wending back again to the Central Valley and the hometown whose orbit he never quite broke from. He'd fled this time toward Providence in chase of a replay of the fantastic kicks he'd gotten there last summer; but, as with every travel, scam or exploit in his life, that first trip had been circular, beginning and ending in the same mediocre city he'd been born in, like a metal spring doorstop snapping back to its original position; and so why, if the kicks in Providence had been so fantastic, had he ever left? He was faced with an uncomfortable fact: Chronologically, though he as yet admitted no other correlation than the chronological, his ill-considered excursion from Providence back to Salt Lake City, which had precipitated the eventual disintegration of his entire madcap vacation, had happened to coincide with his hooking up an eight-ball.

The mind of a person with a dependency will never admit the depen-

dependency unless a certain kind of bottom has been reached. This is not to say that such a person won't sometimes form words to the effect of *I know I have a problem* or *I got into this mess because of dope*. But the actual taking of the drugs, if it is drugs upon which the person is dependent, can never really, *really* be blamed for anything. Alternative explanations will be sought and settled upon. This will continue for weeks, months or years depending on the individual, and may never cease. Common wisdom held that crank was absolutely not addictive. Hardcore stuff like heroin could enslave users, but amphetamines never would. Crank was a party drug, a boost of energy, useful, fun—whatever. Once in a while, Will ran across old-timers who required dope in order to function, but that sort of rotten-toothed dependency took decades to cultivate, and he presumed that this sort probably would have turned out that way anyway, whatever it was they took, drank or smoked. Dope wasn't addictive; ergo, the pursuit of dope, though it be the mainspring of his lifestyle, was merely a lifestyle *choice*. Such choices could be changed.

*Do you think I blew it*, he asked himself, *in Providence, in Truckee, in Salt Lake City, in Austin—because of dope?* The idea was novel and not easy to credit. *And now at home too?* For he had not forgotten the trouble with the bank, try though he might.

Will could only guess how long he'd been on the on-ramp waiting for a bit of luck with a ride, but it must have been hours before he heard two sharp taps on a steam horn and turned to see a tractor-trailer trundling along the shoulder. He jogged to the passenger side and vaulted himself up to enquire through the door the driver had reached across to open. "Going near Valentina, man?"

"All the way past there to S.F." The driver was a rotund, red-haired man with innumerable pink freckles on his face and arms. "Hop on up, there."

Will got in and thanked him, settling into the seat. He wondered if this trucker, like countless others, used speed when he drove cross-country. There were two patterns: the ones paid by the hour, who availed themselves of every weigh-station they passed, and those paid by the mile, who burned themselves out on sleepless runs to get where they were going and get paid. Will prepared himself mentally for what he knew was standard payment for hitchhikers: conversation.

The driver sounded a blast on his horn and angled into the sparse traffic of the freeway. "What you say your name was?"

"Will, actually."

“Sure. I’m Gus. Short for August.”

“That’s a cool name, man.” *Why shorten it?* thought Will.

“Sure, thanks. So, tell me, Will,” the driver said, craning his head to check his mirrors as he merged with traffic, “do you ever get out to church?”

“Ah,” said Will.

When the driver let Will off at the bottom of the off-ramp at King and 12th in Valentina two hours later, Will waited there until his ride, which had been uncomfortable but not by a wide margin the worst he’d ever had, was a vanishing array of red taillights before cutting across the street to a payphone outside an AM/PM.

Will called Wes. “Hey.”

“Who’s this?”

“Will. Wes, hey. It’s Will from Kal’s Kabobs.” Will was a frequent trader on the favors market; when he’d worked at a popular kabob shop north of downtown, he had regularly hooked up guys like Wes with free food; it was time to call that one in.

“Oh. Hey.”

“Remember me?”

“Yeah.”

Will inhaled. “I’m looking for a job.” Wes was the assistant manager at a Home Depot hardware store situated just off the new light rail extension past Crosby Avenue, in the type of neighborhood whose wide new boulevards would have baby trees staked in the center dividers.

“Really.”

“You’re still at Home Depot, right?”

“I don’t do hiring.” Wes sounded like he might have been trying to brush off a telemarketer.

“Yeah, but.” Will switched the phone receiver to his other ear. “I mean, I’m clean. You know.”

“That’s cool.” Wes could not have sounded more reluctant to continue the conversation.

“What I mean is, I’ve been clean.”

“How long is that?”

“Two months. And counting. Can’t you at least hook up an interview?” Will and Wes both knew this was possible; Wes had boasted of his ability to get friends into a job when he’d been a customer at Kal’s Kabobs. He owed Will at least enough for an interview.

After extracting a promise from Wes to grease the wheels at Home

Depot, Will hung up and then made another call, using the last of his change. June was a former tweaker who had herself gone clean; she understandably wanted nothing to do with dope, especially in her own home; but Will needed a place to stay, and he had known June when she'd been one hundred percent screwed up, had kicked down more dope to her than she'd ever done for him, had let her crash on his floor when he had one and she didn't. A favor was sacrosanct; June, clean as she was now, owed him from bygone days; he thought he could expect a little hospitality.

"June."

"Who's this?"

"Will," he said. "Herrera."

"*Will*. Hey." She didn't sound horrified to hear from him, at least. "What's up?" she asked brightly. "It's been hella days."

Will explained himself haltingly: that he needed a place to crash, absolutely temporarily; that he'd sleep on the couch, "or, shit, *under* the couch." He gave his oath that he'd gone clean.

"How long?"

"Three months. And counting. It's because I've been working. At Home Depot, actually."

June bought it. "My boy Julio worked at Home Depot. They're all up on you guys with drug tests, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't trip, though."

His first week without dope rattled Will to the frame, but he stuck it out: when the familiar creepy disgust that signalled how badly his body wanted to get wired crept over him, Will's mettle was perversely reinforced by his stubborn belief that, since he'd never really been addicted, he wasn't *really* in withdrawals. After a week had become a month and Will had seen two paychecks, he was able to get free of his reliance on old favors for a place to sleep and show, and to get into a semi-furnished weekly of his own on the ground floor of one of Midtown's characteristic tumbledown Victorians. The rent was higher than any reasonable standard might dictate, as the entire old manse had been divided into rooms not much larger than storage closets and on each floor there was but one bathroom, but was still low for the area. Will hardly ever spent any waking time in his new pad anyway, because a life free of dope kept him busier than ever.

To be in a steady job with a full forty-hour week was a novel situation for Will, and it quickly came to dominate his entire existence to a distressing degree. If he wasn't at work, he was going to work, coming home



from work, or killing the inevitable dead time when he didn't have to be at work yet but also didn't have time enough to do anything of his own. The more he worked, the less he lived. He worked on the stock crew, beginning his shift just as the store was closing and working through the night to move the next day's merchandise out to the sales floor from the loading docks out back. This sort of dull, repetitive work that paid little and meant less, where anyone who wanted a raise had to wait for the government to increase the minimum wage, where the store could catch on fire and, provided he wasn't inside, he'd feel as much personal connection to the loss as if it had happened in another solar system, was the only kind of work Will had ever known, so the work itself did not rankle. What set his teeth on edge was the feeling of being moveable property. The store manager at Home Depot was, against all odds, a prick—a pasty man near fifty with fat hips and a prissy walk whose unpredictable diabetes often made him subject to accesses of irascible unreason. His employees walked on eggshells. He spoke to Will as to a child and, like bosses the world over, would not content himself just to own Will's time and efforts; he assumed the right to tell Will what to wear, how long his hair could grow, when to eat his lunch and for how long he might sip a soda on break. But this store manager, whose name was Emerson, was meek as a kitten compared to Big Dan.

Will first encountered Big Dan, the regional supervisor, at the first employee meeting he attended. The employee meetings were periodically scheduled lectures—attendance was mandatory—at which Big Dan browbeat his underlings with exhortations, couched in team-building sports-metaphor platitudes, to break their backs hustling to fatten his bonus: “Let me tell you, in the clutch, it's a team player who comes through, it's that drive and that willingness, whether it's in business or in basketball or in football or in what have you, where you take one for the team, you go that extra mile, and at the end of the day it's what sets us apart from the pack and puts us head and shoulders over the top because the further we excel, the greater our excellence can climb.” Et cetera.

Will yawned. He hadn't understood why the other employees called Big Dan ‘big’ till he saw him: the regional supervisor was a runty five feet tall with a doughy, craven face and two holstered pagers. Will's yawn was apparently too audible for Big Dan's liking, because the man left off pacing before the semicircle of metal folding chairs in the back room to fix his dun-colored eyes on Will. “Sleepy? Mr. —” He searched Will's vest for a nametag with narrowed eyes. “This is an opportunity for us to

be getting to know each other, so you need to be wearing a nametag.”

“Okay,” Will agreed amiably. He remained in his chair. Somebody snickered on the other end of the semicircle.

Big Dan’s features pinched in on themselves; Will sensed that this snicker had saved him from being fired on the spot; though it was anybody’s guess when Big Dan would eventually purge him for this insubordination. “We have standards of attire set in place, which can be found by you in the employee manual which was signed by you. And any employee who doesn’t wear a nametag while on duty will be offered an opportunity to find employment elsewhere.” And then, perhaps to avoid any further direct challenges to his authority that would have to be somehow answered, Big Dan made a condescending show of letting the matter pass. He looked like a fool, which pleased Will immensely.

After deluging them all in half an hour more of unalloyed balderdash, Big Dan turned the stock crew loose, reminding them that they’d have to shake a leg to make up for the hour he’d taken out of their shift and still finish their work without accruing overtime. Any employee who worked overtime could count on having to sign a reprimand in the office before his next shift.

“Don’t even trip on Big Dan’s shit,” advised Nathaniel, a co-worker.

“Yeah, it’s nothing.” Will and Nathaniel were stacking a forklift pallet with ceiling fans. Some of the others called Nathaniel ‘Nate-dog’, but Will didn’t care for the nickname. “I guess I’m not used to this bad-student shit.” They conversed, as always, in bored, laid-back tones.

“What?”

“Like in school, you know. Treating you like a servant or something. I hated that shit in school.”

“Can’t do nothing about that.”

“Yeah, well, back then at least I was used to it.”

Nathaniel nodded. “Yeah, I guess we felt like we *had* to put up with it. That’s all you ever knew. But then you found out that’s bullshit.”

“By going to work. Where they free your mind.”

“Yeah. Free at last.” Nathaniel snorted. He was the co-worker Will got along best with, but he was also a tweaker. Will felt guilty about having to avoid his company off the clock. “I had this one teacher who straight up told me, ‘You’re not a person yet.’ Like, ‘One can find this thusly in the decalogues of Confucius’ or some shit. I can’t remember what it was. I was like, I have rights and shit, there’s no justification of, like, pretending you can order me around.” Nathaniel used a box-cutter to sever a plastic

tie that bound a pallet of merchandise together. “Fucking Mr. Ball’s English literature class.” Nathaniel pronounced it *littachure*.

“You’re like, basic human respect, anyone?”

“Yeah. And he’s all, ‘*Nevermore*’.”

“Dude, you just quothed the raven.” Will tossed boxes carelessly onto the pallet. Big Dan’s lecture had motivated him to work half as hard or as carefully as normal.

Outside of work, Will interacted with next to no one. Without dope to sustain him, a life of gainful employment ran him perpetually ragged. He lived retiringly in his narrow room, bit by bit accustoming himself to life at a fixed address, seldom venturing out. The room, bare at first, began to fill up with the various accoutrements of an income-earner. The amount of money his job brought in would never have impressed anyone other than a guy who had lived nearly without access to money for as long as he had, but Will felt flush now with economic power. When he had disdained consumerism, he hadn’t trifled with the pursuit of money; but now, at least a little capital above what survival demanded was his to blow as he would. Will began to lug home furniture, a chest of drawers which he barely had anything to put into, a glass-doored entertainment center to store his newly acquired stereo, a captain’s bed that June’s boyfriend Calvin lent his pickup truck and a helping hand to deliver. At first, Will confined himself to used articles from the Salvation Army, but before long he was strolling the aisles of retail stores—his covetousness perhaps stoked by his daily handling of great quantities of brand-new merchandise at work—newly confident that he could afford to shop there, that he had a *right* to be there—he wasn’t there to *steal*. At home, Will spoke on the telephone for hours, long distance, to old acquaintances as distant in spirit, merely because it was possible to do so once he’d shelled out the installation fee for a phone line. And, since the summer heat in Valentina persisted, Will ran the air conditioning unit that had come installed in his room.

From time to time it occurred to Will to fiddle with the thermostat. It was hard to get fresh air to flow through his room, even when he left the door standing open; most nights there wasn’t enough of a breeze up from the river, and anyway his window faced out on the exterior wall of another house and his door opened onto a corridor, not the outdoors. Though the heat wave had broken at last, the days were still hot and dry, so although Will could have tolerated the heat as he always had, by ignoring it, he *had* an air conditioner, and possession compelled use.

The luxury of climate control, which Will would once have dismissed as another of the environmentally irresponsible frivolities of conformist, consumerist life, seemed considerably less unreasonable once, for the first time since his childhood, it was within his grasp to exercise. The interior frigidity of which the room was capable was at first too much for Will, who was accustomed to a less sophisticated method of cooling off: sweat. The first time he fell asleep with the air conditioner running, he woke up with a cold in his throat. But the flesh was quick to accommodate itself to new comfort, to gusts of artificially dry and chilly air from the unit fan, and his own body's perspiration began to feel sordid and unwholesome, nearly intolerable when he was relaxing at home. He began to eye critically anyone who didn't run the air conditioner, when for example the air was too close on the bus. Environmentally irresponsible it may have been, but his new central moral precept was that, if he could *afford* something, he had a *right* to it.

*You're changing*, the cartoon cricket on his shoulder told him: *you're betraying who you used to be*; but the air conditioner, the phone line, the cable television he even sprung for when a confluence of fire sales and overtime pay windfalls put it within his reach—all these things and more like them were inconsequential but indelible signs of living as the rest of society lived: capable adult people who handled life maturely and according to proper social procedure; who sought and obtained apartments whose landlords actually bothered to check, scrupulously, rental and credit histories, and who lived without fear of such checks; who worked with no fear of employer-mandated drug screens and could thus enjoy drugs responsibly; who paid as much as they earned to maintain as large as possible a pool of possessions; and who ran the air conditioner as it pleased them, on a reflex, as assured of their ability to afford the bill as they were of their capacity to draw breath. The first time Will left the air conditioner running when he left home in order to keep the room cool till he returned, it was with trepidation, a vague, looming sense that something *bad* would come of it, but—here was the beauty—nothing went wrong. It was entirely in his hands. Full-time work promised spending power beyond his experience; to run or not to run the air conditioner was a question of paying for it.

Will had an insufficient conception of for what he was committing himself to pay until the month was out. The bill came: hundreds of dollars owed. And the cable bill was larger than he remembered the advertisement saying, and his evident misapprehension of the terms of his long

distance telephone contract had led him to expect much lower charges than what came. Will pledged to scale back his usage. The next wave of bills came, and they were smaller but not small. He paid each—barely, and sometimes late—and when one had to be paid in full another might be left wanting.

He saw next to nothing of his friends until, one afternoon, Anne Havery came by, inviting herself over. “I know you’re clean and everything,” she said at his doorstep. “But it’s been hella days since we even got a chance to kick it.”

“That’s true.” Will invited her in at once; he couldn’t very well show that he was considering whether or not to let in an old friend like Anne; but he did consider it, however briefly.

Anne’s eyes widened when she came in. “*Damn*, Will, your place is fuckin’ tight. Did somebody *give* you this?” She switched the television on.

“I bought it.”

“That’s cool. It’s so nice you have money now. So have you talked to Junior?”

“Not in a while.”

“His brother moved back from San Diego. We’ve all been kicking it. That fool smokes the *most* weed. He got some skank pregnant down there in TJ or someplace. You should see him.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. He’s the craziest motherfucker I ever seen. I mean, he’s cool, but it’s like he’s brain damaged or something.”

They had shot the bull for about an hour, the TV turned up loud, before Anne got around to asking Will for money. With a hundred dollars, in addition to money she’d already raised, she said she could afford to enroll in a program called *Eyes On the Prize*, a sort of motivational sales plan. Will had seen it advertised on TV.

“I’m pretty sure that’s a pyramid scheme.”

Anne shook her head. “You should hear Beth from Palm Circle. She’s the one I’m buying my kit from? She just bought a Miata.”

Will successfully resisted the slightly cruel urge to keep poking holes in Anne’s cock-and-bull excuse till it fell apart. He also did not bother to ask her for a specific date by which he could expect repayment. After all, Anne might have expected him to *believe* that she’d use the money for something other than dope; if she did, he pitied her condition. That he once would have shared *anything*—what was his had been hers, and

Junior's, in former days—but that now he weighed the cost of personal association with her ilk, as if letting her onto his lifeboat ran the danger of capsizing it, was a contrast too suggestive of corrosion of character to be deeply entertained.

Though he couldn't turn away as close a friend as Anne empty-handed, as she was leaving, he stole as near as he dared to referring to the reality of the situation: "After this, I probably can't kick down any more."

"I know" she chirped, smiling, looking right into his eyes. "You know me. I'll be back hella quick, to pay you back."

"Yeah, I know. Anyway. Take it easy. Don't power-walk too hard."

"Shit, that's what I *do*. 'Cause I've got hella *power*." As she stepping out into the hall, the afternoon heat confronted her. "Damn, you feel that? Ahh—actually, it feels hella nice outside."

"I guess," said Will dubiously.

"I can't believe you don't catch colds in your apartment. When I first came in it felt good, but just now it was like, I couldn't feel my toes."

Later that week, Will caught the Beltline bus after his shift ended at around six a.m. and rode it into the leafy, settled neighborhood called South Yosemite to register for classes at Valentina City College—an experience which, in a movie, would have been part of a turning-one's-life-around montage sequence in the second act, a *de rigueur* plot point after a history of drug abuse had been established in the first. *How tacky*, he thought—yet there he was. When he arrived on campus, the admissions office hadn't opened yet, so Will strolled across the boulevard toward a strip mall with a doughnut shop.

On the way, he passed the wide, unlit front window of a men's clothier, where a trio of debonair mannequins were posed in business suits. "How long till they get me in one of those," muttered Will to himself. He had often theorized that men who went in for costumes of respectability like these—the salaried men, possessors of important documents and of *status*—must have derived half the pleasure of wearing a suit from the impression of successfully playing their own part; of convincing onlookers that they were in fact who they aspired to be; of donning the weeds of one versed in stock options, palm-top digital datebooks, and 'getting ahead'; of being taken for real by other men in neckties and pastel collars. It was Will's pat conviction that guys like this were empty masks, inflated nothings: in short, that they couldn't be who they were except in suits. That was no real identity. It was cheap. He was proud to be freer than that.

Yet on this morning it occurred to Will that his own idea of himself—

his usual pride in not needing conventional accessories, gauche clothes and markers of wealth, in order to announce who he was to the world—was probably just as frail. He could be himself without any suits. But could he be himself *in* a suit? If a true individual would be who he thought he was no matter how he was dressed, then he would not need to be in a suit—but he would also not need *not* to be in a suit. If Will were to put on a suit and then find it impossible, or even just a strain, to continue to be who he thought he was, then wasn't he also suit-defined? An empty mask?

*I guess everybody's vain about something*, Will consoled himself.

The admissions office, when it opened, redirected Will to the campus library, and indeed a sign addressed to all prospective new enrollees that was posted conspicuously outside the building, had Will read it, would have announced as much to him. The campus library building had a stale, rumpled atmosphere that he liked, nothing like the state-of-the-art facility into which Will had once trespassed at the state college across town. On the mezzanine floor he found a maze of lines of people and an array of partitioned cubicles where sat the admissions officers. He had come with a ballpoint pen swiped from the manager's office at Home Depot, so he felt himself armed for any paperwork that crossed his path. Of this there seemed endless reams, all carbon-backed and in multicolored triplicate. As Will was shunted from one line to the next, seemingly at random, due to failures on his part to produce the correct and correctly completed forms, applications, documents and waivers, Will's smug attitude of a pessimist finding things as bad as he'd expected devolved to a less amused sort of spleen directed at the college's bureaucratic apparatus. For all his time on the streets, Will had made a principle of never going into aid offices or other government bureaus, so this sort of runaround was new to him. At the head of one line, a fortyish woman with disconcerting low cleavage handed Will's sheaf back to him and asked, "Social?"

"Say again?"

"Social?"

"Ah. Not really."

It took a half-beat more before Will understood that he couldn't be enrolled at the school unless he wrote his social security number on each leaf of every packet of forms. So *that* was what 'SNN' had stood for. He didn't know this number.

Will got hot. His daylong mounting frustration boiled over into bitterness; without a word to the woman, he rashly exited the line and stalked around the floor of the library, feeling tight in his throat. What difference

could a nine-digit number make? Here you had a guy, and here you had a school: put the guy into the school—this was everybody’s agreed-on aim. What kind of barrier ought nine digits present? Did it make sense to live this way? Did everybody else *like* it this way? Had the world taken a vote for bureaucracy that he’d missed? At last, Will bent over a table and forged a random number onto every sheet, at least retaining the presence of mind to copy the *same* number each time. He wrote grimly, gripping his pen with fell purpose; he knew that it was beyond his power to alter anything of the way of the world. He had plenty of time to cool off when he got back into the end of the ever-longer New Enrollments line. When at last he came to the front again, the lady with the pendulous boobs didn’t seem to remember him.

To pay for school, and for the shocking expense of the textbooks he needed (he’d had to restrain himself, just on principle, from shoplifting the lot of them), Will dipped into his rent money, which he kept rolled in a pair of socks in a drawer under his bed. He did this expecting to make rent with a third paycheck: by an accident of the calendar, there were going to be five Fridays that month, the last on the 31st. At work on that final Friday, Will leaned into the office and beamed at Kathy. “Give it up, ho.”

“I only give it up to ballers.”

“It’s your lucky day, because I just happen to *be* a baller.” Will held out both hands. “I want my cookie.” He felt chipper.

“You don’t mean your paycheck.” Kathy looked at Will like he was yesterday’s fool. “It got mailed out.” It turned out that this was part of Big Dan’s latest round of ‘efficiency’ updates—too many employees were cashing checks early, so store managers no longer distributed them; they were mailed from the district office. “It’s starting this week. He told us at the last meeting.”

Will was flabbergasted. He’d daydreamed through that meeting. “What address did they mail it to?”

Kathy shrugged. “Whatever one’s on file from when you got hired.”

When Will had been hired, he’d still been bouncing from couch to couch. He had no notion of what he’d written for his address then, or even if it had been a real address at all.

On the sales floor that night, Will found a valuable-looking gold bracelet that someone had dropped. The next morning he took it to a pawn shop, along with any other of his personal stuff that he thought would prove valuable enough to bother selling. The only other customer in the place was a withered Asian lady who sat sucking her teeth, not doing anything



else; probably a tweaker, Will guessed from the look of her. He parted with his TV and stereo, and with a new digital answering machine he'd only just bought, making back the barest part of what he'd paid for them. On his way out, he thought, *Christ, the things I do for cash*. By a quaint mental association, the old cheeseball 10cc song "The Things We Do For Love" ran through his mind for hours afterward, displaced only when, in a desperate attempt to dislodge it, but unable to play any of his own music at home lacking a stereo, he trolled the FM dial on an old Walkman radio and managed to get Manfred Mann's "Blinded By The Light" stuck in his head instead. *Wrapped up like a douche*, Will thought to himself any hundreds of times after that. *Another rubber in the night*.

Still, the money wasn't enough. Will was short one hundred and fifty dollars. The first of the month came and went; on the fourth, a photocopied three-day pay-or-quit appeared taped to the door of Will's room. The tape left a mark in the paint coming off.

*A dollar is a small thing*, he reflected, *but a hundred and fifty of them is not so small*. A landlady, a splenetic cracker church-lady from the get-go, had already rejected Will's sheepish offer of partial payment now with the remainder tendered in two weeks. He had three days to raise the money or take a hike. He thought, *Guess I'll call Tim Thompson*.

In the year or so since they'd shared a house, Tim had graduated from snorting dope to selling it—not random piddling sales to his bros, but as a full-scale business venture. Unlike some other drugs, methamphetamine didn't have to be smuggled in from anywhere; after providing them with the necessary household chemicals and a supply of ephedrine, Tim installed the cooks he hired in motel rooms off the interstate; more than once he'd courted Will to take the job. There was money in it for Will precisely because there was risk: one inept moving making crank and the whole operation could literally explode in his face, and anybody who lived to tell such a tale would have a long time to tell it, convalescing in a cell in Tracy waiting for his eyebrows to grow back. Tim Thompson's operation kept him strictly in management and sales of his product. He hired other suckers to risk cooking it.

If it were only this once, and only till he earned his one-fifty, Will felt it would justify the risk—and the renewal of his relationship with drugs. He felt very uncomfortable. *But it's better to slip a little now*, he thought, *than to eventually burn out completely*. He picked up the phone. There was no signal.

"O-o-oh. Yeah." Somewhere in the mess on his floor there was a bun-

dle of past-due notices rubber-banded together. He put on his shoes and set out for Tim's block—and remembered this time to shut off the thermostat.

Will made it into and out of the fateful motel room in one piece, eyebrows intact, and earned his one-fifty. The rent catastrophe diverted, he felt ready to return his energies to his schooling. Work and school had begun to cost each other already, and the exigencies of financial survival often perforce placed work ahead of classes. To make it to class in the first place, Will had to rebuff the job's inconsiderate insistence that his every waking moment satisfy the staffing demands of the store, and also had to combat his own growing jittery appreciation of how short his funds were falling and of how long his expenses grew. At times he was absent from class to put in hours at work—he'd begun taking day and swing shifts as well—and then in compensation he would refuse to work in order to make up lost time at school. Still, he fell behind. It soon became plain that five classes were too many, that his optimism about the amount of extra time each would cost him had in fact been rash.

At the end of a couple of months, a series of papers came due. Will wrote his first paper for a history class, on the subject of president Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction-era woes; he invested a ludicrous amount of time in hammering out the five most polished pages he'd ever authored; Will assumed, perhaps unfairly, that above all else his grade would depend on adopting the writing voice of an academic, as much as on a faithful regurgitation of his professor's and the text's views. It was a nightmare of a task, but he found he could finally turn to a practical end all of those hours burned in the city library, adopting the sort of diction he recognized in the serious books he'd slogged through. He prefaced his paper with a quote, which he hoped was relevant, that had impressed him in Dante: "I made a gibbet from my own mansion." *Professors get off on this kind of shit*, he assured himself.

Will handed in this first essay done in his careful longhand on a few sheets of unlined letter-sized paper purloined from the printer tray in the manager's office at work. In spite of himself, he was eager to know his professor's reaction to it. Dr. Tesing—Will supposed he ought to be called *Doctor*—had at first impressed Will as a living example of pedagogy and free-thinking sophistication, his mind a registry of historical detail of which he delivered himself in lectures that were uncompromising criticisms of the sort of movie-shallow historical generalizations that had accounted for the content of as much of high school history class as Will

had troubled himself to attend. Will could not quite *admire* Dr. Tesing, though. The professor, a large-handed, lanky guy whose taste in clothing ran toward typically scholarly stuff, motley sweaters, corduroy, once even a hound's-tooth blazer, and whose long, fluttering pianist's fingers he hardly knew how to dispose of once his lecturing momentum carried him wholly into his subject, was more *professorial* than seemed entirely natural. Will felt mildly disappointed to see the guy playing his own role so self-consciously. Will laid his paper on Dr. Tesing's lectern at the beginning of the hour and thought nothing of the sight of the other students' papers, all of which had been neatly typed on computer.

But Dr. Tesing checked him. "Ah. Uh, oh."

"Hmm?" Will was already gone halfway to his seat.

The professor held up Will's handwritten pages. "Is this—yours?"

*You already know that it is*, thought Will, but waited wordlessly for whatever Dr. Tesing had to say.

"You see, it's—my policy." Dr. Tesing laid the paper down, not on the pile, but crosswise. "Why not come and see me after class?"

Will frowned. "About what?"

Dr. Tesing looked nonplussed. "Well—haven't you read the syllabus?" And Will, incredulous, had no choice but to receive his assignment back again in humiliation. He felt peeved, stiflingly peeved; it was a mood that had been gripping him more and more frequently. Dr. Tesing was acting like his policy on typed homework were inscribed into the municipal code or something, and Will—who *had* read the syllabus, but who of course had no legitimate access to a computer or printer but for the computers in the college library, which charged for printing by the page—had only one option: to take it up the tailpipe.

He might have ventured to argue it out with Dr. Tesing, and perhaps he could have prevailed. He could have played the poverty card, mentioning some hard luck story or other. Or he might have shelled out to use the library's printers; the cost was really nothing, if he scrimped elsewhere; he had not considered typing it out in the first place only because, apart from the burden of riding out to the city college from home, an hour by light rail plus a considerable walk, he felt he couldn't handle having to perform his composition and his thinking in an unfamiliar place. Dumb excuses, really. But he felt sour; for an hour he nursed his sourness, barely listening to the lecture, and at the end of class he filed out past the lectern and walked across campus to the Admissions and Records window to withdraw from the class. There were a pair of forms to fill out, but by then

Will had committed his fake social security number to memory.

At any rate, he had that much more time to devote to work from then on. Will was actually desperate for hours and would have worked unauthorized overtime if to do so wouldn't have cost him his job. The job itself was normally uneventful, but at ten o'clock one night things went wrong. The shift had only just started, and Will and Nathaniel were sorting through the haphazard collection of merchandise someone on the day crew had loaded onto a pallet and the left for them to deal with; Nathaniel, who still kept his radio on when he worked—Will wore the earpiece but kept his unit switched off—relayed a bit of news: "Better put on your nametag, man."

"Thanks for the advice."

"No, serious. Big Dan's coming by the store tonight."

"Shit." Bad, it appeared, would go to worse. By Will's reasoning, nametags were for the benefit of customers—perhaps it brought comfort to the shopping experience to have employees at this symbolic disadvantage—but he, on the night crew, didn't need one. He had by and large forgotten Big Dan's scolding at the employee meeting; and, out of habit, he still neglected to wear his nametag from time to time. "I *hope* Big Dan tells me about a nametag."

"You going to get psycho on his ass?"

"I'll go apeshit. I'll spit in his face."

"And then?"

"Cut his tits off with a box cutter."

"And then?"

"Fuckin'... litigate. I'll sue."

"Punitive damages!" Nathaniel impersonated a Jerky Boys character. "I got a sidecar! Zoom!"

*What the hell is this guy talking about?* wondered Will. The news of the district supervisor's visit sent a subtle ripple through the store; Kathy swept from aisle to aisle, determined to get her shift looking presentable, setting her employees in order like teacups on a shelf, all placed and angled right; with shirts tucked in, aprons tied right; it seemed pointless to Will, as though an untucked shirt would somehow diminish the quality of his shelf-stocking, and as though the opinions of somebody like Big Dan, with his head far enough up his ass to believe in the value of such bootless strictness, ought even to be humored. In the face of these and the thousand other quotidian botherations of wage-earning, Will's fuse had been shortening and shortening; he ought to have known better than

to slip into any mawkish notions of self-pitying dignity under the lash of workplace subjugation, but a mounting tiredness behind his eyeballs, as of somebody who grinds his teeth all through his sleep, had been making him feel volatile. When Kathy came to the aisle where Will was working with Nathaniel and a guy named James, she had his nametag in his hand. She must have found it in his cubby in the employee room. She pinned it to his apron for him.

All at once he popped. “Fuckin’, not tonight!” he said, too loudly, and swatted the nametag from his chest even as Kathy was fastening it. It clattered along the floor, slid under a display of halogen torchiere bulbs and was lost to view.

Kathy’s face was a picture of shock. “For Jesus sake!” Will’s palm stung from striking the side of her hand.

His coworkers’ reactions were instant: Will was the immediate focus of their puzzled attention. He felt horribly uncomfortable. At the core he had no idea what about the nametag had set him off, but he was too worked up to admit he’d done wrong. For the moment his anger was righteous.

Kathy’s face worked wordlessly, and then she stormed away.

“Uh,” said Nathaniel. He turned back to stocking shelves, working together with James, but with both of them cocking an eye toward Will.

“What’s *wrong* with you, bro?” asked James. “You hate Kathy now?”

Will shook his head. “It’s not even that. I’m just sick of the fucking nametag.”

“It’s just a *nametag*.” His coworkers’ expressions showed that, to them, he might as well have announced that he was sick of having elbows or something.

Will grabbed a cart full of merchandise and attempted an excuse: “Dude, it doesn’t matter but it does.” This was lame—but it was as near to the murky truth as he was going to be able to come.

“No, dude,” commented Nathaniel drily, “it actually just *doesn’t matter*.”

“Dan’s going to fire your ass if you don’t wear it,” offered James. He sounded concerned for Will.

“I’ll spit in his fucking face.” Will believed that he would. Big Dan never arrived that night. Whether his plans had changed or the rumor of a visit had been unfounded, the whole thing had been for nothing.

But the next week, unsurprisingly, Will’s hours were cut to twenty on the schedule Kathy posted. That Will had made a fool of himself contin-

ued to nettle his vanity long after Nathaniel and everyone else had forgotten about it; and Kathy's continued resentment at what she had taken as a personal affront solidified over time into a causeless, nameless grudge. Will watched his paychecks dwindle. He'd made enough workplace enemies at past jobs to recognize when a manager was freezing him out; he began to use his extra free time to fill in applications for other jobs, but didn't get any bites. For two successive months, happy though he was to owe less of his life to employment, he barely scraped by financially; for the last week of each month he was forced to subsist on ten-cent packages of ramen noodles and tap water, a diet that tended to induce diarrhea. The next month after that, the landlord announced a rent increase as finals week loomed at school. Though Will wrote out an intricate scheduling request in order to have his exam days off but still accrue enough hours on the clock to make ends meet, Kathy ignored it. He saw, the moment he looked at the posted schedule, that he was in trouble.

Will convinced a few of his coworkers to swap shifts with him, which resulted in his working a string of consecutive day, swing and night shifts. On dope, such a marathon would have been taxing but feasible; but Will underestimated the toll fatigue would take on his unaided system. He burned himself out. When he showed up to work with a full-blown flu and a raging fever the night before exams, Kathy sent him home again. "I don't need you getting the rest of my crew sick," she told him, looking apologetic, angry, tired and calculating all at once; Will had no energy to argue. The next day, he shot up straight in bed and did not need to look at the clock to know that he'd slept past noon. His first final exam had begun at ten that morning; the other was due to begin at one in the afternoon; the next light rail train, assuming it possible for Will to step from his tangle of sweat-steeped sheets directly onto it at that very moment, would have gotten him to the campus at about two.

"Mother fucker," Will groaned. His body was shot through with illness. "Fucking, mother fucker. Fuck." He swore himself to sleep again and did not stir for a day, except for emergency runs to the toilet. He had another final exam the following morning, but only made it as far as the light rail station before turning back, his bowels in an agonizing commotion. Since he had dropped his other two classes, this was the end of his first college semester.

Without any sort of health insurance, he had no money for a hospital visit, and it didn't seem likely to Will that a doctor to do much of value for him anyway. Getting healthy was the least of his concerns.

His convalescence from work lasted only four days, but this was enough time lost to shear away what extra padding he'd hoped to find in his check at the end of the month. Standing in line on the morning of the last day of the month at the twenty-four-hour check cashing office in the same shopping center that the Home Depot was located in, Will found he was too weary to work out how much he'd have left after paying the check-cashing fee; he only stood and waited his turn.

There was a woman in line two places before him. Youngish, perhaps not much older than him, with an infant. He wondered if she were a single mother, all alone, working a job like his, but with two mouths to feed instead of one. He did not know how to feel about that. When it was Will's turn, the girl at the check cashing window, who looked Indian and was chewing gum, smiled at him like he was the handsomest customer she might ever hope to see. "Photo I.D.?"

At home he tried the lights, but the electricity had finally been cut off. He'd wondered, idly, what the VUA grace period was for unpaid power bills; now he knew: two months. He slid open his window. From outside came the sound of a tentative plucking on a banjo, as though someone were trying to determine how the instrument worked; Will recalled seeing one of his neighbors in the building, a hipster, carrying a banjo without a case past him and up the stairs. The morning was getting warm, but a rare breeze found its way into the room, stirring the papers on his floor. Will had meant to count up all his money and set the rent aside but felt suddenly compelled to tidy his room instead. He carried most of his trash out to the dumpster on the opposite side of the building, then organized what remained in a pile on his kitchen table: bills in one pile, clothes folded in another. Both piles were small.

He felt ready for breakfast, but his small refrigerator was almost empty—a blessing, since whatever was in it would rot in a day or two. The stove and microwave also both ran on electricity. Will stood near his sofa, staring out of his window at nothing; he dug into his pocket for his money—then suffered a panicky instant of suspecting he'd dropped it somewhere. But it was in the other pocket. He sat down.

"Well, shit," said Will. "I guess I better count it."

He had some loose change in a washed-out peanut butter jar, which he dumped out onto the sofa cushion atop his wages. Then he counted money out onto another pile—a rent pile—and, when he found to his bemusement that he had enough for the rent after all, bundled it all together with a rubber band and set it with great care back in the same spot on the couch,

as though that were the very best spot for rent money on this particular couch.

“Okay.”

How much was left, he wondered, and counted the remainder: four dollars and eighty-eight cents. He counted it again.

A memory came back to him. One afternoon the summer before, Will had walked around Midtown with two cents in his hand; after making a string of dope runs, stealing and losing and stealing again varied amounts of small change from friends and foes alike, suffering a strong-arm robbery at Palm Circle—two black guys had stopped him on the road and threatened to steal his shoes as well as his money, but he’d found the nerve to talk them out of taking the shoes—which had lost him ten whole bucks, treating distant and not-well-liked acquaintances to midnight brownies and coffee at Denny’s for no better reason than that it seemed a fey bit of fun to do so, and otherwise burning through cash with neither reck nor reason, those two cents were all the money he had left to himself, and he had felt giddy with joy. The two cents had been *hilarious* to him. “You can’t spend two cents!” he’d laughed to his friends, who had smiled along but not seem to find the same humor in it that he did, no matter how he tried to explain what, to him, seemed a grand joke of the universe with vast philosophical ramifications. “*You can’t spend two cents!*” In order to have an audience, he had dragged Junior and Anne Havery into a Taco Bell with him, then spent the better part of ten minutes trying in earnest to convince first the sales clerk, and then her even-less-amused shift manager, to sell him two cents’ worth of *anything* in the restaurant. Junior and Anne had laughed, but with the air of not being sure what they were laughing at. Will had commandeered a pen and paper and made a valiant but drug-addled effort at long division in order to show the shift manager, a younger lady who appeared unsure whether to call the police, how many nacho chips he ought by rights be allowed to purchase with the only two cents he had left in the world. “It’s not for the *food*,” he’d insisted over-earnestly. “I just really need to *spend* it.” Outside, Junior had said, “Why not just throw it at a car or something?” He’d gestured at passing traffic. “Or, like, into the river?” But Will had recoiled at the idea. “That would be *cheating*,” he had admonished. The point, he had insisted, was that unspendable money had no value. His two cents wasn’t even worth two cents. It would only be worth two cents if he were to put it together with, say, a dollar and eight cents, and then buy, say, a candy bar which cost a dollar and ten cents, tax included—*then*, at *that* point, his two cents would



be worth two cents—but if not united with other money, then his two cents were worth *no cents*. He'd gesticulated and expounded and laughed like a fiend to himself. "Um—ri-i-ight," Anne had nodded and shrugged.

Will could not now remember what had become of the two cents. He put his four-eighty-eight into his pocket and set out again for Taco Bell, having come, as it were, full circle. Fast food was expensive, at least compared to ten-cent ramen, but Will felt dangerously close to capsizing, to going all the way under, so he bought an enchilada meal set and some cinnamon churros, thereby just about wiping out his spending money. He ate slowly, as if eating were a serious business. Before he left the restaurant, he counted his change: seventy-three cents. There was markedly less humor in this amount of money than there had been in the two cents. *My two cents, that's what people say to mean their opinions*, he thought blankly. Before he left the restaurant, he gathered all the trash from his meal and threw it into the bin; he didn't like the idea of other people doing that sort of thing for him after he left.

*But I've got the rent covered*, he assured himself. His neighborhood was fuller than normal with people, as crowds had come out for the open-air farmers' market. He could hear a street musician somewhere nearby getting laughs with a mangled rendition of the theme from *Mr. Belvedere*: "Streaks on the china..." Two middle-aged women with young children stood talking in front of the entrance to Will's building, a block from the market's entrance, still holding plastic bags with raw fish and radishes. "We parked on this side *last* time, Jen," one was complaining. Will pardoned himself, obliged them to part to make way for him, and went in.

And then he remembered: because he had no checking account, his landlady would accept only money orders from him, and even at the cheapest convenience store, the fee for making out a money order was ninety-nine cents. He didn't have it—he only had seventy-three cents. He was short after all. He was twenty-six cents short.

*Is this living?* he thought. He was standing outside the door to his room with his keys in his hand. *Is this the reason I was born?* He imagined going back to the farmer's market and sitting out front to spare for change. If he waited long enough with his paper cup, somebody would surely kick down a quarter and a penny. Will thought about doing this, and thought about it, and thought about it.

When he arrived at the house Junior was renting with the other members of his band, Will found Junior sitting on his stoop cradling an accordion in his hands. "For Jesus fucking sake, Will, look at this." Will

climbed the steps, which he'd not climbed in months, and peered down at the accordion.

"Is that new?"

"I found it at a pawn shop. It *was* in hella sweet condition, man, but *look* at it." The body of the accordion was burnished a handsome red, and its chrome fittings were inlaid with what could have been mother-of-pearl—Will wasn't sure; anyway, it was really too nice to be found on the cheap in some junk shop, and Will could imagine how Junior must have felt when he'd scored it—but there was a short, ugly gash in the bellows, and one side of the instrument was dented badly. "I swear to God, I only left it *right here* on the porch so I could go in and make a call. And I come out, there's some *kid* making a play for my shit!"

"Really?" Will sat down.

"I fuckin' chased him all the way up there, past there. See that deli?"

"Yeah."

"Then the little spic dropped it. Just fucking crack! on the sidewalk." Junior seemed almost ready to cry.

"When was this?"

"Just now. Just two fucking minutes ago. If I could of caught him, there's be one less wetback in the world, I fucking kid you not."

"Huh." Will didn't trip on Junior's racial slurs. They were too close to be able to offend each other. "Well, I must say, Junior, you have once again got the shit end of the stick."

"That's the end I'm pretty much used to getting." Junior fit his hands into the accordion's straps as if feeling it there, but made no attempt to play it. As far as Will knew, Junior had never played accordion in his life. "But, I don't know for sure, maybe you can fix this kind of damage. When Robert gets home, I'll ask him for some phone numbers. He knows hella people. And by the way, man, it's been *hella* days since I saw you."

Will nodded. "They had me on the fucking treadmill since a while ago."

"Forty-hour weeks and shit. Anne came over and told me. So what about your apartment, is it hella nice?"

"Was."

"Was."

Will stretched his back. "I'm sort of going to be looking for a place to stay soon." They were seated on a ratty-looking couch that the elements had punished out on the porch for long enough to bleach it yellow. "I'm actually about to get evicted."

“For real?”

“I guess my landlady doesn’t like me.”

“For God’s sake, I hate that shit. Why does she hate you?” Will only shrugged. Junior shook his head. “You know, you can’t just evict people for, like, personal differences. You should seriously sue.” It had been months since they’d spoken, but Will and Junior had already slipped seamlessly back into the languid, ironic, time-killing mode of semi-seriousness that they habitually shared; and Will did not have to say that he was being evicted for not paying the rent; and Junior did not have to say that he’d tumbled to this fact without being told—because they both *knew*. “Get a courtroom brawler.”

“I’ll retain counsel.”

“Yeah. Nail her for violating your attorney-client privilege. You know, you can basically just ‘objection’ everything in court. You could even overrule the conviction, via objection.”

“I wonder why nobody ever thought of that.” Will was feeling better already.

“So, I’m *nobody*? Is what you’re saying? Because *I* thought of it.” Junior was evidently feeling all right as well. “I could have been a lawyer. If I wasn’t too damn old to go back to law school.”

“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

“You can’t teach an old trick—” Junior came up short.

Will waited—no, made a *show* of waiting. “I could of swore a witticism was on the way there.”

“*Sorry.*”

Will was smiling now. “But, you know, it’s like, everybody says they’re going to sue, sue this, sue that, and like, people will say that there’s *X* number of frivolous lawsuits in America, but nobody I actually know has actually ever sued anybody.”

Junior shook his head. “Robert. This Robert.” He jerked his thumb to indicate the house behind them. “That asshole has *sued* people. Something like four, five times.” Robert was the singer in Junior’s band, if by a charitable stretch his out-of-key caterwaul might be termed *singing*; in truth his function in the group seemed to be to lurch about the stage sweating like a blacksmith and lolling his tongue out like a dehydrating horse, periodically ramming into other of the band members and sending the whole song into a shambles; Will thought he was a prick, but interesting to watch; and it was likely that the band could not exist without him. He also knew that Robert, a union carpenter by day, was hellbent on scoring

a record deal and covered part or even all of Junior's portion of the rent from time to time because he considered Junior an irreplaceable element in the band's sound. Will also knew that Robert had used to tweak.

"Didn't he used to tweak?"

"Yeah, he used to. Quit." Junior had gone into the house, then come out again with a bottle of Sierra Nevada for himself and one for Will. They settled in for an afternoon of feckless indolence. "Though why anybody would want to quit is hell if I know."

"You'd have to be crazy."

"I just wish I had the courage." Junior drew himself up straight in the sofa. "To get back on track again. I mean, I just wish that God would grant me the strength to change the things I can, the courage to—"

"Oh, shit." Will burst out laughing; Junior could not hold a straight face either. "The courage to change the things I can't—"

"No, dude," Junior giggled. "The, uh, serenity—"

"Serendipity—"

"And, what? The wisdom to accept the changes of—"

"Of the things I cannot know the difference of—"

"You're fucking it up!" They both bellowed out laughter like two lunatics. Junior caught his breath first and polished off his beer. Will had already finished his own. "Shit." Two little girls on bicycles rode past the house side-by-side; one, looking taken aback, motioned to Will and Junior and mouthed to her friend, *They're drinking beer!* "But anyway. You're still not using anything these days, huh?"

Will swallowed. "Actually."

"Uh."

"I was thinking."

"You were, like."

"Sort of."

"You were."

"In the mood, kind of."

"To."

"Get... a little bit."

Junior coughed. "Wired?"

"I mean." Will cracked his neck from side to side, like someone who'd been sitting too long in an uncomfortable position. "It's been a pretty long time." He had all of the rent money—what had used to be the rent money—in his pocket.

Junior paged someone, and before long there was a knock at the door.

As Will blew out his first white cloud in months, a veil seemed to lift from his eyes. He comprehended his position. Things hadn't been 'hopeless' in the slightest: the debts not insurmountable, the job replaceable, school dispensable, and second chances as abundant as—as dope. The toil and trial that had so depressed him were in hindsight trifling. As a hard-luck story they'd have amounted to nil. Will felt mellow. Staring cross-eyed down the tooter, he was able to contemplate his situation: there is no life without problems; even people with no problems still have problems; and even when one feels as tough as nails, as though one can weather anything, the deep-down suspicion will persist that life is *meant* to be kind to one; and, to this unrealistically high expectation of the contentment that other people must know, the world never truly measures up—and this can tear one up inside so badly that one will indulge in what the ignorant call 'self-destruction', a misnomer that takes no account of what a blatant act of *optimism*—thwarted optimism—it is. Perhaps a little realistic disappointment would have been better for Will than what dope had cost him and was going to continue to cost him—but sometimes life zigged, and sometimes it zagged. He squinted one eye and took another draw off the foil. He noticed some element of his brain lying to him; perhaps it was his conscience: *I'll keep trying*—today was merely a sidetrack, a brief backslide, shortly corrected after he'd let off some steam. *What matters isn't a few false steps. What matters is, if you're clean in the long run.* That he would not in fact be clean in the long run, that he wouldn't go back to scrounging out the dull and unrewarding life he'd lately dallied with, was, obviously, his own responsibility. Such was Will's realization: nothing had enforced this outcome.

\*  
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They had already finished making love, and Keiko shivered and pulled a blanket over herself as chilly Midtown traffic noise rode a gust of wind through her bedroom; Sherwin was still sweating, breathing like an infrequent jogger after a sprint, so he kept the window open. The wind moved the posters tacked to her walls, making their edges rattle, and the room was unlit save for the glow of twilight that struggled horizontally through the leaves of a tree outside her window. At this time of year in Japan, the racket of whirring cicadas would have been constant accompaniment to such an evening; summers in Valentina were like a soundless dream in comparison. Sherwin was on his back. Keiko faced the edge of the bed,

watching the digital alarm clock blink. She kept forgetting to reset it after it came unplugged.

He always asked her, *Are you okay? Did you finish?* Finishing was the goal, it seemed. She usually told him not to worry about it. Now, as ever, he had rolled over to breathe and she was silent; she wanted not to talk, just to think; *I think too much*, she thought. But at once she disagreed with herself. *That's vain, to say I think so much. I probably hardly think at all.* Her blanket smelled of cigarettes, but not of her brand; she'd gotten it secondhand. Some nights, though she was honest and told Sherwin that she hadn't finished, she said she enjoyed it anyway. This was also, in its way, honest.

"Your phone bill came today," Sherwin said, breaking the silence.

Keiko didn't appreciate him opening her mail. Every day for a week the year before, a mail thief had torn back the envelope corners of most of the building residents' mail; this had given her a rather low opinion of the safety of the U.S. mails; and yet this had bothered her much less than seeing her letters opened and read whenever Sherwin got to her place before she came home from work. "I know. I saw them on my couch."

Sherwin spoke to the ceiling. "It's seventy dollars." This was high.

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry but you keep doing it." His tone of voice, reasonable after the pattern of an adult handling a stubborn child, carried harmonic overtones of coming dissonance.

"Why we are talking this now?" Keiko shut her eyes. *I just want to think*, she complained to herself.

"When else will we talk about it?" Sherwin as yet kept his voice even. She was not allowed to run the phone bill so high. He wanted her to write letters to her sister in Osaka, rather than call nearly every other day.

There was nothing right she could say. "I will pay." She supposed this were not entirely impossible for her to do.

"No, I'll pay it." Sherwin was stating a fact, not making an offer. "I am the one who will pay the bill."

Keiko apologized again, reluctant to speak at all.

Sherwin's tone tightened, but he still did not raise his voice. "God damn it." He stared at the ceiling. "Don't you think I hear that all day? At work?" His reasonable tone was on the wane. "And then I come home to you and, I'm sorry, but I expect you to be a little better than that. Because I believe you *can* be." Sherwin worked in the collections department of a bank called Valentina Mutual. His job, as he described it to Keiko, was to

investigate people who tried to steal the bank's money. Today he'd had to listen to a woman blubbing over the phone, actually crying, snivelling: *I can't pay it now. My uncle is going to help me next week—*

*—Ma'am—*

*—I'm trying so hard—*

*—You owe this institution an amount of money, a lot of money, ma'am, which is a liability that this bank has shouldered for your benefit from a relationship of trust, and you have to pay it—*he'd wanted to shout this, but only brand new employees in collections were ever caught shouting over the phone—*You must realize that you have to.* He was cool. He would win.

*Why can't you leave me alone?* The woman had wept, and the conversation had wound around and around this same question for what felt like ten minutes or more, and the sobbing had begun. *I – I – I have no money.*

Sherwin knew that they always had no money; when bills arrived, when obligations pressed in, then they had nothing at all. But when Friday night rolled around, it was time to party. If she were so sure that she was in the right, she'd hang up the phone. Nothing kept her on the line with him but her own guilty conscience. Sherwin imagined this woman lying in her house, a rented house, surrounded by home appliances, knick-knacks, a wall full of video cassettes or CDs, piles of clothing, wrappers and trash from fast food restaurants, lying sprawled with damp cheeks on the rent-to-own sofa, in one hand the cordless telephone, in the other the TV remote control, muting the volume on *Cops*. He imagined her whining to her girlfriends, *Yeah, but what would I do without cable? What would I watch?* He imagined her hanging up on him now, then rushing out of the house to the mall, or anywhere similar, to squander more of the bank's goodwill; she'd feel she deserved it after the grilling he was giving her, a little comfort shopping. He suppressed the poisonous scorn in his voice: *You have a moral and legal obligation to repay this institution the amount that you own. Not next week. Not tomorrow.*

*I know—*

*Not even last week—*

*I know!*

*Six months ago—*

*Please!* She was actually crying right on the phone, pleading to be let off, as if everyone in the world could be so easily absolved whenever they could no longer handle their responsibilities, as if twelve thousand dollars of someone else's money, which that someone else accumulated through

real, hard work, could simply be forgiven and forgotten as though it were mere numbers in a computer program, not actual *money*. Sherwin stood firm in these cases. He knew he was right. He himself owed nothing to no one. When he was under obligations, he satisfied them promptly. It was hard, but he did what was hard; he was governed not by what he wanted but by what he knew he *had* to do. It was this inner conviction that made it possible for him to work with and understand the people from whom he had to collect bad debt. He *overcame*. He toughed it out. This was what separated him from the deadbeats, losers and chisellers he chased professionally.

Keiko rolled over, pushing her feet under the knot of blankets at the foot of the bed. She wished they were still fucking, so that Sherwin wouldn't talk, or would only say nice things, but once a night was normally all he was interested in. "I'm sorry. I was trying."

"So, you're sorry, and then you do it again."

Keiko shut her eyes.

"The last time you were sorry, it must have been some real sorrow, because, look, here's evidence: you did it again."

Keiko nodded.

"And I, for one, I don't need any more proof that somebody's sorry, so long as they keep doing it. That just lays all doubt to rest in my mind as to how sorry you are."

Anything she were to say, Keiko knew, would only give Sherwin opportunity and impetus to take the lecture further. She breathed and counted seconds. On the other hand, it seemed likely that to say nothing was also the wrong answer. More counting of seconds. She couldn't afford to live without his help right now. Financially, that is. The two of them lay without speaking for long moments. Sherwin got up at last to shut the window, and when he came back to bed, Keiko thought she detected, in the long-suffering sigh he heaved as he worked down under the sheet, that his mood had eased up a bit; it seemed as though he had satisfied himself for the moment. "But I really wish you had a little more self-control." The carping, barbed tone was gone from his voice.

Keiko felt careful still, but wanted the argument to end. "You should stop paying."

"Well, I love you. I don't want you to get bad credit."

"Everybody should be born with a bad credit. And the prison record. There would be less worry in everybody's life."

"That's nihilism." Sherwin watched her nude shoulders as she



breathed, suspecting from her stillness and lack of reaction that he'd used an English word she did not know. The skin across her back was flushed, unblemished, with a nearly undetectable dusting of downy black hair between her shoulder blades. "That's like, the whole system was invented just to punish people, is basically what you're saying."

"Prison is for punishments."

"That's not my point." He mumbled into her hair, sounding basically friendly. "Turn around so we can talk."

"Can we go to sleep?"

"Turn around." They'd nestled close. Keiko had to disengage from inside the obtuse angle made by his knees and chest in order to turn around. They nestled together again. She pressed into him, laying her head against his chest. Sherwin twined her hair in his fingers.

"*Oyasumi.*"

"I don't speak Chinese."

"It's Chinese for, 'Eat a shit.'" Her voice was high and thin, childish, as if she were speaking in her sleep. In part she *was* sleepy, and in part she was hinting toward sleep. Keiko always had a monstrously difficult time getting to sleep; she would be locked awake for what seemed an eternity, then finally begin her descent toward sleep—and once the descent began, she was bound and determined to follow it.

Sherwin gave her a small shove. "You'll pay for that."

"I thought you were gonna pay." Keiko was halfway to unconsciousness, had no clear idea of what she and Sherwin were saying, only wanting to slip all the way into sleep.

Sherwin pushed her again. "Sleep over here." He tried to position her body a little apart from his, but her entirely motionless limbs were uncooperative.

"You're too bossy."

"Because I'm the boss."

"I'm tired, Sherwin."

"*Shah-ween,*" he mocked. "Not too tired to follow orders from the boss."

"We can play boss game tomorrow."

"What game? I'm not playing any games. I'm the boss." He began to affect a clipped, nearly robotic monotone, a silly impersonation that Keiko, heavy, ready to hibernate, thought might be his idea of how movie villains talked. He had no talent for impersonations—she could see this even in a language not her first. "The *boss.*" Keiko let him manhandle

her as he liked; even to rise to his baiting would have required more effort than she could summon energy for; to struggle against him when sleep—which, though it came to Keiko slowly and unreliably, advanced inexorably when it did come—was sapping her like this was beyond her power. “Over there,” Sherwin was saying. “No, on your back. Like that. Arms across like this, like a mummy.” He positioned her with playful roughness, his voice ever flat.

She sensed that he himself had no idea what the point of any of this was. “No mummy. No playing. Let’s just go sleep.”

“I’m the boss.”

“You’re not a boss. *Oyasumi*.” This was Japanese for *good night*; she’d taught it to him their first night together.

“I’m the boss.”

“Please let me sleep, Sherwin.” Annoyance began to mount in her.

“You may sleep just as soon as the boss approves your application.” More poor impersonation.

“I said no.” To her own ears, Keiko’s voice lacked all the firmness she would have wanted in it. Once he had ruined her descent into sleep, she knew it would be hours before she felt sleepy again. Sherwin, who could put himself to sleep like throwing a switch, had never appreciated this problem to Keiko’s satisfaction.

“I said, I’m the boss. Do as you’re told.”

“Please stop it.”

“Go over there.” He pushed her farther toward her side of the bed. That did it. She was awake. She lifted herself up on her arms and pushed back toward him, not in the slightest amused at this game; she felt anger stir. He pushed her back to the edge. “Your application has been denied. The boss has spoken.”

“Shut up about a fucking boss.” She knew and was frustrated that her cursing in English was woefully unconvincing.

“I *am* the boss. Repeat after me.”

“Stop.”

“Tell you what you say here.”

“This is not funny. Stop playing the boss game.” Keiko was enunciating each word, trying not to sound comical or foreign. “Tomorrow.”

“*Mañana, mañana,*” he sang tunelessly. “Tell me I’m the boss and then you’ll be free to sleep.”

“I can’t sleep now! And you’re not a damn boss.” The flat tone he played at only irked her more; Keiko began to carp at him, feeling ready

to smack him. “Shut up. *Shut up.*”

“I am the boss. Just say it.” When she slid toward him, hoping to smother him in an embrace or intimacy of some kind, he pushed her away again, harder.

“You’re hurting me. Stop,” she whimpered, wrangling with his hands, despising the weakness in her own voice. His elbow struck her on the wrist, probably unintentionally. “*Itai!* Sherwin, why you doing this?”

“I’m making a simple request.” He was whispering now. “You’re the one being stubborn.”

“Fuck you, asshole.” She pushed her body down and in toward him again. If only she could get past his flailing hands and hold onto him, kiss him, Keiko was sure he would quit. But he pushed her back. Once and twice more she slid toward him. He pushed her back to the edge of the bed. She almost toppled off. She panicked. “*Yamenasai!* Sherwin! Stop it now!”

Between his thumb and forefinger he pinched the flesh of her shoulder and twisted cruelly. Keiko was too shocked to cry out. Again his voice was unchanged. “Say it.”

“No!”

He shoved her again, in the chest. He rose to his knees to stabilize his position, then pushed till she fell off the bed and sprawled on the floor. She was humiliated to be seen silently crying and breathing hard. She did not want to be seen in this state by *him*.

“Tell me one thing. Tell me that I am the boss,” he said, explaining patiently. “That’s all. Is that impossible? Can it not be done?”

“Sherwin, what are you doing?” She lay recumbent where she’d landed. *He can’t be joking, not like this*, she thought. *How can he do this and still talk so lightly?* The moment seemed to roll to a stop, to poise menacingly above them both like a predator. *Does he have an erection?* She couldn’t see his crotch. Panic was gripping her.

“All you have to do is give up this arrogant pride bullshit that you always pull. Like, you’re never wrong. You never need to say anything you don’t want to say.” Sherwin carefully disentangled his legs from the bedsheets, then moved over her and pinned her arms under his knees. She whimpered.

“This isn’t funny. I hate this game.”

“It’s only the boss game.”

“Stop playing.”

“I’m not finished.” His voice had no inflection. People spoke this way,

Keiko thought, when they were waiting for the laundry to come out of the dryer. “I’m only playing around.” He gripped her arms and squeezed till she cried out. His jaw tightened. He shook her. Her head hit the floor. He cocked his hand up over his head and balled it into a fist and smashed it down onto her face.

Sherwin felt the shock of the blow through his entire arm, from the dull sting in his knuckles to a sudden hot crick in his shoulder. He was no athlete, and no brawler either, and this blow had done him a good one on the arm. He scowled. Keiko’s face twisted into a dumb gape and her eyes defocused; he saw her hands in claws around her open mouth like an inept, mongoloid boxer; she looked ugly as hell; the skin of her gut creased unattractively as she froze in a half-curved position, saggy around the navel. This crease of skin looked like a bloodless flap of dead flesh. It wasn’t enough. He had not made her sorry enough yet. Sherwin slapped her across the mouth, intending to put all the strength he had into the blow but somehow finding himself minutely restrained, perhaps by the belated apprehension of leaving a visible mark. His motions were weak and dull, as in a dream. Still, the sound of the flat of his palm against her clammy cheek resounded in the room like a heavy book falling flat onto the floor. Keiko yelped, gasped, then shrieked a short, unintelligible word. *More fucking Jap gook nonsense*, he thought. He rolled off of her and snatched his clothing on the bed, putting his back to her. He felt a stab of guilt at the racist thought.

*If anyone saw that*, Sherwin realized, *they would say I’m wrong*. The notion filled him with asphyxiating bitterness, similar to the wrath she’d excited in him earlier, but he knew he couldn’t hurt her again tonight. This had never happened between them before—in fact, in his life he had never done such a thing before. She would break up with him now, presumably. He flipped on the stereo and settled into the couch, making it a point not to look at her. *People always take the woman’s side*, he thought. She remained where she was. If she told her friends, or anyone, he could assuredly expect to be called a bastard.

*It’s as much as I deserve*, he thought.

Later, he came out of the bathroom and found that she’d finally crawled from the floor back into bed. Sherwin wet a hand towel at the sink and tried to wipe her lip with it, but Keiko wouldn’t let him, refused him with the barest turn of her head, and he did not dare try to force his care on her after that. He wondered which was worse now, to continue to be an asshole or to try and be kind after having been an asshole; and then he

thought, *They're both worse*. He put down the towel on his pillow. After a moment, she picked it up and began to dab herself.

Keiko looked up at him till he looked away, and continued to look at him after that. In her closet was a pair of powder-blue suede suitcases. Her sister, Masami, could probably lend her the price of a plane ticket, if she asked.

“I’m sorry.”

She didn’t respond.

“I said that I’m sorry.” To her great surprise, she heard that he was crying. “I only meant it as a game. I guess I went too far.”

Masami had a new baby, a boy named Satoshi who Keiko had never seen but for a photograph. She was an auntie. On the phone with Masami, Keiko had heard him gurgling, pulling at Masami’s hair hard enough to make her say, “*Chotto!*” and moan theatrically.

Sherwin was sobbing silently. Keiko’s tears had dried, and with them something inside her was very dry as well. The yen was weak. Now was probably a bad time to make burdensome requests. She’d have to do a lot of explaining when she asked for the money.

“You can be the boss. I don’t have to be.” His speech sounded nearly like baby talk.

“Stop.” She closed her eyes. *How tactless*, she thought. He hovered near her, looking like he wanted to touch or kiss her, leaning in, anxious. She shivered, but didn’t realize until he got up to shut it that at some time he’d opened the window again. His shutting of the window had all the air of a favor done to her. She had friends in the city, Amy, some other people she might stay with, rather than try to get the key to her apartment back from him—but if it came to that, she might as well just leave Valentina. It wasn’t his room. He’d paid some of the rent, though.

“I’m sorry. Will you at least let me say I’m sorry about it?”

“I heard it.”

“Okay. Good.”

“I’m going to bed,” said Keiko.

“We can go to bed. It’s okay.” He got up, switched off the stereo, gathered the blankets for her as though he intended to tuck her in. “I love you.” He turned his face sharply away upon saying this. She did not reply. “It may be hard to believe, but I’m sorry,” he said, facing away from her still. “I’m the asshole. I admit it.” He stood there, contrite. “I’m sorry. I love you.”

“Okay.” *But who would I call?* she asked herself. *It accomplishes*

*nothing to tell other people about this. You'd cause so much worry. You can't just call the police or something.* It wouldn't do to air dirty laundry. She did not want to become a needy burden to her sister or to her friends.

"You don't have to forgive me."

"Okay."

"Will you?"

She wanted aspirin. She felt as though there were not any part of her body not bruised, bleeding or hurt from his hand, his knees, the tumble onto the floor; her lip felt swollen and tasted coppery, and a livid welt had risen on her shoulder. Strangely, though she was still naked, all feelings of exposure or defenselessness had departed. Without looking at him, she asked for aspirin, and he brought some. He told her again that he loved her, and she told him that she loved him. The words just came out. "Can't we sleep now?" murmured Keiko.

"Sure."

"You don't have anything else you want to do?"

Sherwin looked ashamed. She'd said it to shame him. These were the last words to pass between them; Sherwin put out the lights, then spent a few minutes of shifting under the covers. For a brief moment he sounded like he was sobbing again, but it was over soon, and he slept. Not much later, Keiko slept also, her back to him, the lateness of the hour and her bodily fatigue conspiring against her. Neither of them could have known that, in the next apartment, Will was awake and listening through the heater vent.

## Chapter Three

“How much?” Rodney laid aside the issue of *Rolling Stone* which he’d been paging through in search of any mention of Neil Young or Lou Reed—it was the first number of 1979, and the Cars were on the cover, but he couldn’t give a rat’s ass about the fucking Cars—and scrambled up off of the couch to silence the hi-fi, which, since he was the only one home on this chilly afternoon, was cranked near to top volume; as he rose, he upset a can of Coca-Cola onto a stack of *National Geographic* back issues that he’d been using, contrary to his father’s express orders, as a coaster. “Oh, Jesus H.—wait.” He cast around for something to mop the spill with. “Wait up a sec!” The voice on the line was telling him something, but the thunderous coda of “Slow Ride” drowned out all other sound. There was nothing else to wipe up the cola with, so Rodney put down the receiver, whipped off his T-shirt and used it to mop up. “God. Dad’s gonna shit a brick.” He finally shut off the music and picked up the receiver, still shirtless. “So, hey. You there? *How much?*”

“Six goddamn *pounds*, my man, if it’s an ounce. How much we could get for that, take a guess.” From the way Smalls said this, he clearly already knew how much they could get.

“Well—shit.”

“Yeah.”

“*Shee-yit.*”

Small chuckled.

Rodney lifted the base of the phone so he could walk into the back of the house with it. The cord was just long enough for him to reach his room if he pulled it taut; as long as he didn’t try to walk all the way to his terrarium with it, there was no danger of pulling it out of the wall in mid-conversation. “Wait. So. You got this shit from...?” He let the question hang.

“Under my pillow.”

“Dude. Okay.”

“The coke fairy left it there.”

“Okay. You don’t want to tell me, that’s fine.”

“She made me trade a couple teeth for it.”

“You still have teeth, huh?”

“Eat a fat one.” Smalls’s voice sounded fast and angry: his glee flashed like electricity from the telephone handset. “Anyway, it’s *ours* now, and that’s the whole size of it.” He spoke like someone defending himself

from unfair accusations.

Rodney was dumbfounded. *You dumb Okie*, he thought; and then he went ahead and said it: “You dumb Okie, man—you just made us rich.”

When Smalls got to Rodney’s place, Rodney met him at the curb. “Let me see it,” he said breathlessly as the car door swung shut. The neighbor whose lawn abutted their own, a thin, pale man called Lieberman—“New York Jew,” Rodney’s father had said, sounding sorry to have to say it; Rodney, at nineteen, yet had but a vague notion of what his father thought was wrong with that—was out watering his grass with a hose, apparently enjoying a day off work in the middle of the week; the neighbors on the other side were Oriental, and the youthful wife, whose slim form Rodney never failed to ogle when she came outside, was just bustling into the house with an armful of enormous white tubular radishes.

“Not yet.”

“Let me see it! You brought it, right?”

Smalls gave Rodney the eyeball. “No, I dropped it off at the lost and found. Shit, take a breather there, Hot Rod. We got an audience.” He nodded toward Lieberman, who waved and then turned to his hydrangeas. “Wait’ll we get off on a different street or something and you can see it then.”

“How good is it? Like, what grade? High-grade?” Rodney was already thinking of cutting it; he’d only heard this operation described, but Smalls would know how to do it. “You ain’t told nobody, right?”

Smalls had called up only a limited selection of his wider circle, namely those with the biggest mouths. “Nope, nobody really except Larry Lawrence.”

Rodney hooted. “Larry Larry! That dude’s a nut job.” This figure was a hero within their circle for many reasons, stemming from his cavalier attitude in all things and his preternatural aptitude for getting away with murder: for example, for years he’d been growing an enormous pot plant in his front yard without the neighbors, who on one side even happened to be *Mormons*, ever noticing—he’d trained it to climb like vines around a wooden trellis and dotted it with silk flowers for a disguise. He was also the most logical person to call when one hoped to sell off the sort of boodle they’d lucked into.

“According to Larry, we front him the shit, he can get us some money on the quick. I figure we should take him up on it, but just now he’s headed out of town, so we just sit tight. You tell anybody yet?” Smalls accelerated to make a yellow light, but ended up busting through a red light



instead.

“No.” Rodney had only gushed the entire story to his brother Aaron and a couple of Aaron’s friends, guys he didn’t know who happened to be around the house. Aside from that, he, like Smalls, was a bastion of secrecy.

On the two-lane highway out of Porterville up to Valentina and Palm Circle, with no other cars around, Smalls told Rodney he could go ahead and have a look. It was triple-wrapped in brown paper sacks, three packages. Rodney tested the heft of each. He was useless when it came to estimating weight, so to him each brick could have weighed one pound or five; but the math was easy: three bricks, and Smalls had said six pounds. Knowing this, each brick just *felt* like two pounds—like the very *ideal form* of two pounds. “Be funny if it was baking powder.”

“Go ahead,” said Smalls, guessing the train of Rodney’s thought.

Careful of jolts in the road, Rodney unwrapped the corner of one of the packages, dabbed a bit of powder onto the end of his pinkie finger, and stuck it up his nose. A second later, it seeped into him, and the seep became a jolt. “Ah, whoa, guh,” he laughed, and then half-sang, “She don’t like, she don’t like, she don’t like—”

Smalls came in with him on the rejoinder: “Cocaine!” Then he deftly retrieved the bag from Rodney. “Easy there, chief. We got to worry about profit margins.” He looked ready to grin. “But we need to have a little confab. Look. I can’t stash this sort of thing at my pad.”

Rodney blinked. “Why not? Just hide it where nobody can get at it.”

“Terrible idea, bozo. That’d be a Jonestown.” By this Smalls meant it would be tantamount to suicide. “My P.O. likes to drop by and hang around.”

*Your parole officer’s going to search your sock drawer?* thought Rodney incredulously, but said nothing. He figured that the person Smalls was really worried about getting into his sock drawer was Brenda; give her a ten-minute head start on them and there’s no telling how much of the profit margin she’d snort up. *Best not to bring it up, though*, he thought. *Even if she is a junkie lowlife*. Instead he said, “My place is out of bounds too. That yahoo I live with’d get into it and blow it all in forty-eight hours, man, I shit you not.”

“I thought you ain’t told him.”

“I *didn’t* but he’d get in it. We got to find someplace else.”

“Somebody we can trust.” Smalls had turned the car around at a turn-off and was bound back for Porterville now, but Rodney hadn’t noticed,

so absorbed was he in their mission. “Ruth, maybe.” Smalls was speeding, going about ten miles over the limit.

Rodney thought, *No way*. He thought, *Not even if it was only for one day*. And then he thought, *It’s not like if it was only going to be for part of a day. Because for part of a day—*

“Just for part of a day, right?”

Smalls shook his head. “You just *ain’t* listening today, Rod. I just *told* you Larry’s out of town a few days.”

*A few days isn’t so long*, Rodney thought. “If she got busted—”

“Nobody’s getting busted.”

“I’m saying, if—”

“*I’m* saying, yeah. Fine. But, what are the *chances*, is what I’m saying.”

“Where, like, if *you* were holding it—” Rodney was coming round to Smalls’s point of view.

“Exactly. If it was *me*, forget it. Pssh. Jonestown and a half, man.”

Rodney nodded. “Totally.”

“I got a law officer right in my house on sometimes like a daily basis. A girl like *that*, like *Ruthie*, is never in a million years, the police wouldn’t look twice at her.”

*And if she did get busted*, Rodney thought gallantly, *I’ll just turn myself in. I’ll take all the blame*. He was ready to go to jail—valiantly—rather than put her at any real risk, even the slightest. He did not even bother to question whether, in the criminal justice system, there was any provision allowing a person to go to jail for another person. As Smalls said, there was no real risk anyway. “I’ll ask her about it,” he said as Smalls hit the turn signal and changed lanes in one jerky movement. *Six pounds*, thought Rodney. Six goddamn pounds of pure goddamn profit margins.

“All right.” Smalls had them back in Porterville, minutes from Ruth’s neighborhood on the south slope. “Copacetic.”

Rodney cocked an eye at him. “The hell kind of word is that?”

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Waiting in front of the Mission for Jacob to bring his car around, Rodney and Will had fallen into a bit of a reverie. Rodney had not made much of the taciturn, unresponsive way Will had been that morning because he, Rodney, had been full to the brim of conjecture on the job he might find for himself out at the Rancho Viejo employment office. The job tip had

come directly from Joe Cholula. However, the job office was an hour away and inaccessible by bus, so they'd had to beg use of Jacob's car, an ancient GTO built like an armored troop carrier; in return for this, Rodney would owe Jacob some favor to be specified later. The day was already ripening into afternoon, and Rodney, though not yet quite worried about getting to the office before it closed, found it hard to believe how long it had taken, and how much verbal wrangling it had required, to get Jacob to quit grab-assing around the Mission and fetch his car. *Even for something simple*, he fumed. Rodney fancied himself the type to act on an idea within seconds of having it. *But if it don't personally concern their own welfare, I guess some people just can't move a muscle. Don't matter how much it means to you.* He was about to mention something about this to Will, but clammed up when he heard a boisterous group of young men approaching from the Carter Boulevard end of the alley beside the Mission.

"For real, nigga, I remember that—"

"Yeah, yeah—"

"—this nigga up in my face like, what—"

"—'cause at the time—"

"—yeah—"

"—at the time I had my hand broke—"

"—I seen him do it—"

"—I had my hand up in a cast—"

They passed by, some six of them, on their way, Rodney assumed, up to Garfield Park. *Basketball or something*, he speculated. The drift of their conversation was unclear to him, but they'd passed by and gone before he could fathom it. Will watched them closely as they passed; Rodney noticed this. He nearly asked Will whether he knew those guys, but bethought himself better of it, realizing how the question would come out to sound; so he kept mum. *Better to keep your mouth shut and let folks think you're an idiot*, he thought, paraphrasing the legend on Marlon's coffee cup, *than to open it and remove all doubt.*

Instead, it was Will who mentioned it. "Once I tried to talk like that."

Rodney took it upon himself not to understand what *like that* meant.

"Like I was black." Will spoke with arresting nonchalance; Rodney had seen him this way before, turning thoughtful and adopting the tone of someone shooting the shit, but belied in this by a careful attention to his words that manifested as exaggerated evenness. "My dad was black."

"I figured your name was, uh, Hispanical."

"Herrera is my mom's name. My dad's last name was Willis." Will

sniffed to clear his sinuses. “If he’d raised me, I would’ve been Will Willis.”

“Shoot.” Rodney chuckled. “That’s good.”

“Not that it really made a difference, though. My mom wasn’t really *too* Mexican.” Will began jingling the change in his pocket; he seemed not to notice that he was at it. “She could understand Spanish, I guess? But it wasn’t all, like, *ese vato* and shit at our house. In the afternoon she watched *novelas* on TV. Other than that...” Will shrugged. Not one word out of Will’s mouth had Rodney ever heard with the slightest ethnic tincture, bit it Latino sharpness or an angular black drawl, and in Rodney’s view this was enough from which to infer all the basic facts of Will’s upbringing: the way a guy talked was the sound of how he was. “But like I said, I once tried to talk black. To a black kid at school, in fact, middle school. Seventh grade. It felt like, I don’t know. Felt like acting.”

“Is that right?”

Will nodded, certainly on the verge of adding something more; but at that moment a toad-green Pontiac lurched around the corner of King onto 23rd with a cacophony of engine noise. Rodney wondered what kind of road hazard had punched a hole in the muffler large enough to let out that kind of racket, like a bunch of iron kettles smacking continuously together. It was a real chariot.

Their conversation had put Rodney into a mood to talk about his own family; or rather, he’d been reminded by association of his own family, and whatever was on Rodney’s mind at a given instant tended to make its way out of his mouth. He drove to I-80 and settled into the center lane for the long straight trek to Rancho Viejo, sticking prudently to the speed limit and using manual signals when he braked or changed lanes—the turn signals didn’t work—in order to escape the attentions of the highway patrol; Jacob had warned them in passing that the registration tags on the Pontiac, though up-to-date, had been peeled from the license plate of some other car. To be able to signal turns, Rodney kept his window rolled down, and the noise of the road was nearly deafening; to be heard he had to shout, which at any rate was his favorite mode of expression. “Yeah. Shoot. But you can’t choose your kith and kin.”

“I think you can choose your kith,” Will shouted back. “Kith means friends.”

“That a fact?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, hate to say it, but if I could of chose my kin, I think I might not

of chose my little brother Aaron. I ever tell you about Aaron?"

Will hadn't known that Rodney had any family. That is to say, he'd never even tried imagining it.

"A punk, pure and simple." Rodney guffawed. "Pure hell, growing up with Aaron. Pardon my language."

"Like what?"

"Gawl, just everything. Tell you what he used to do. We lived at my folks' house down Porterville way, with our two rooms right next door to each other. Sharing a wall." Rodney took his hands from the steering wheel to demonstrate this arrangement, but the car pulled sharply to the left, so he had to be content with driving one-handed. "He got up real early for school in them days, whereas I liked to sleep in."

"I don't blame you."

"Well, I should of kept with school. Nobody really told me what all I was giving up. No, I guess they *did*, but I never *listened*. So he gets up real early and leaves. But he sets his alarm to go off like hell's bells about twenty, twenty-five minutes after he's out the door. And his had this dead-bolt that he put on his bedroom door."

"No shit."

"Yeah, he never listened to nobody. My folks were always after him to take that damn thing off. So behind this locked door his clock radio goes off, wakes me up, and there's nothing I can do about it!" Even the decades-old recollection of this got Rodney steamed. He thumped the steering wheel with his palm to make the point. "I was ticked off to the extreme, brother. This went on every day, pretty much."

"Just to piss you off?"

"*That's Aaron*. And it gets even funnier. I'd get real mad, I suppose 'cause I was lazy in them days and had to get about twelve hours of beauty sleep whenever I wasn't tweaking. So I used to beat on the wall like a maniac, still in bed, half-asleep. You know, banging for quiet."

"That's funny. Shouting for silence."

"Gawl. Now on the other side of that wall he had all these framed karate photos, from when he used to do karate. Like, the team photos. And I banged so hard I knocked the suckers right off the wall. Broke all the glass in the frames."

"Oops."

"And you know what that goddamn Aaron did?"

"Broke something of yours."

Rodney couldn't suppress his grin any longer, and forerunners of his

gulping laugh began to mingle with his words. “Nope. He wrote me a *bill for the damages* and nailed it to my door with a sixteen-penny nail!”

Will laughed along with him.

“He wrote me a goddamn bill!” Rodney banged the steering wheel again. “But, shoot, that was our whole relationship in so many words. You know, when I moved out of my folks’ house, it never had nothing to do with getting away from them. *They* were all right. But I had to get away from Aaron, or one of us was going up for murder.”

“And you never did *anything* to him.”

“I didn’t, I swear it, brother. He always started it. Whatever I did was for the cause of revenge.”

*Revenge*, thought Will, and wondered whether to speak his mind now—to unburden himself as he’d planned—or to wait. He made this choice by not making it. Instead, Rodney asked him, “You ever have any?”

“Revenge?”

“Brothers, dude.”

“Just one.”

“One’s enough.”

“I guess.” Will had told this story enough times to have grown wary of being perceived to be playing it for sentimentality. But he forged ahead and explained, “Actually, he died when I was really young, so I don’t remember him.”

“Shoot. Sorry to hear that.” Rodney was always reluctant to reopen the old wounds of his friends, both to spare them the resurgence of past pain, and also, perhaps uncharitably, to avoid the obligation to empathize; he’d rather not have been burdened. Still, he liked Will and thought he ought to add something else sympathetic. Before he could come up with anything, Will brushed off the idea.

“Well, it’s not, like, traumatic to me. Mostly my brother was just a story my mom wanted me to know about. I was about one year old when he got killed.”

“How’d he, uh.” Rodney wondered too late whether the question were in bad taste.

Will did not appear to mind. “Turned out it was a murder, according to my mom.” Rodney’s eyes widened, but he let Will continue. “He was playing on some swings at the school playground, and the swing set sort of fell apart on him. One of the supporting whatever-you-call-them. He landed on his neck and died. One other kid got hurt too. It was this great huge swing set, apparently.”

“And so they called that murder?”

“It came out that somebody loosened the bolts on all the swings and monkey bars and, you know, jungle gyms. And some time after that, they caught the school janitor doing it again one night.” It was impossible, on the freeway with the window down, to speak in less than a shout, so the conversation was bizarrely devoid of sentiment. Will paused, but Rodney had nothing to interject. “I guess he was, you know. ‘Disturbed.’ They locked him up. There was a trial and all that, and it was on the news, but obviously they didn’t want me to get exposed to it. I was ignorant anyway. When you’re one or two, you don’t have any idea.”

“Sure, course not. Well, that’s terrible anyway.”

“Um.” Will wondered if it wouldn’t have been better after all not to have brought up the story. It seemed reasonable for people to expect a little genuine sorrow from him in connection with his brother, but all he retained of any of it was a faint fragment of a recollection, one of his earliest memories, and that not of his brother but of his parents, his father tall and grave in a borrowed suit, his mother in the purple and white floral-print dress she wore to Mass, leaving him with their neighbors the DeSotos to go to the janitor’s sentencing. That was all, just a still-frame, and a neutral one. To try to wring any emotion from it would have been cheap. His parents had not stayed together much longer than that, so all that Will had ever known of family life had been to live with only his mother, and that was what felt natural. “He would have been six years old at the time,” he told Rodney, feeling compelled to add some detail to the story, so bare and implausible in the telling, but only managing to produce a lame statistic.

“What was his name?”

“Walt. Walter.” The same as Will’s dad.

Will sat outside the employment office while Rodney waited inside to be seen by a county agent. Rodney would likely have an hour or more to wait before anyone took the time to speak with him, so Will had brought with him a library book, a novel by Leonard Cohen called *Beautiful Losers*, and he settled into a bench along the grass-bordered sidewalk to kill time. One redeeming feature of the suburbs, which Will otherwise detested, was the free availability of this kind of open grassy space on, of all places, a roadside with no pedestrian traffic, with staked saplings that would grow one distant day into lovely shade trees—provided that the affluence that came pumping into these neighborhood tracts didn’t dry up and take with it the tax funding for the city’s automatic sprinkler systems—and with new benches of vinyl-coated iron, a modern design

molded for the comfort of the sitter; and invariably there *was* no sitter: for though the greenery that suburban city planners included as a standard ingredient in sprawl, the lawns and beds of flowers laid in the wide center road dividers and such like, would have qualified as a bona fide *park* by the desperate standards of the shabbiest, most cheerless and space-starved spots in the city, to the people who lived out here it was nothing but a pleasant bit of scenery to motor past; no one *sat* on this bench, no one *smelled* these flowers. Where in the city one found sidewalks, in the suburbs one found quaint lanes; but no one trod them. With friends, he'd once staged a picnic on the grass in the center lane divider on Stag Run Way, a main thoroughfare in the suburban South Valentina area his mother had moved them out to during his first year in high school, where he'd met a few other kids as uncomfortable with their habitat as he was; for a picnic blanket, somebody had brought an old beach towel with Bart Simpson's face on it, and they'd sat there with cars gliding past on both sides, eating potato chips and Starburst candy and relishing the irony. It had felt, believe it or not, *subversive*. In Valentina proper were plenty of men and women who appeared to have nothing to do—or, though Will, the world had nothing for them to do—but to sit on the ground or lean in the shade, with nothing to sit on but dirty pavement, and no shade but that of building walls; more proof, he thought, that those who ran the world were either incompetent or apathetic, to have put all the nice places to sit an hour's drive from all the people who sat for a living.

Or perhaps the system was not incompetent or apathetic but hostile. The *system*—that's what he'd hated in those days, even before the move to South Val; he had hated it with all the moral rage a young man could marshal. The system was *hostile* to real people, to atypical individuals. A local punk band had sung:

*I won't be rejected  
'cause I will refuse  
You can't call me a failure  
'cause this is what I choose  
I reject your society!*

And Will had listened. In town he could lay hands on photocopied zines, distributed by a network that called itself underground, that expounded on the freedom and the social ethics of squatting, of dumpster diving, of slipping between the cracks, using the homes, resources and products that nobody else was bothering to use, and bidding farewell to a machine that wouldn't mind killing you, that was ready to harbor you only



once you'd sold your ideals and your individuality as the price of stability. He'd read about socialism and class struggle, racial struggle, imperialism, industry and pollution, sweatshops in the garment trade, union-busting, the Ludlow Massacre, the truth about Columbus; he'd been ready at one time to blow the nation sky-high if only he could have laid his finger on the button. But instead he had heeded the lyrics of the song—he'd *refused*, dropping out of the system by degrees. His mother had noticed things: that she hadn't had to buy him any more underarm deodorant or hair gel in months, that he wouldn't wear the new clothes she got for him; in a single, vicious outpouring over breakfast he'd told her that he couldn't stand to soil his skin with garments that still stank of exploitation, nearly reducing her to tears—that tough woman who had weathered far worse than a tantrum from her teenaged son—and neither of them could have said why this single argument had blasted such a gulf between them. Later he had tried to explain to her, calmer, that by his ethics it was immoral to spend even a dollar on the wrong things. "I *work* for my money" she'd replied, indignant, neither of them understanding the other.

In school Will had begun tormenting his teachers, playing devil's advocate for the most ludicrous of causes, an enemy of any form of authority. He'd begun to haunt the branch library, writing requests for book orders like *The Anarchist's Cookbook* or issues of *Cometbus* and dropping them into the box, half in hopes that the books might actually be ordered, half out of a notion of shaking up the system. Yet the system persisted, wherever he looked. When he shunned TV, it came through the radio. When he resolved never to ride in another car, it hawked advertisements at him on the bus. Total evasion began to seem less like something radical than only other, one-hundred-percent punk people did, and more like the only option remaining to him. Every moment that he continued to participate in the system, he was an accessory to the crime. One evening, his mother had told him about some money his dad had been sending every few months, enough in the bank by now to send him to college, perhaps, if he could get his ass in gear and graduate high school—which had been a genuine *shock* to a boy who had grown up under the assumption that his dad had simply lost interest in him and gone away to live in parts unknown; the notion of accepting this money was both bewildering and entirely out of the question—and Will had replied, "What if I just moved out instead?" He hadn't meant, *To an apartment of my own*; he'd meant, *Out*.

In those first days on the streets, his resolve had been unshakable. When he'd refused to work and refused to *want*—when he ate from the

trash and slept on the ground, laughed at poverty and, having chosen it, liked it—he knew that he was breaking society’s last taboo. Whether he was waking up at dawn suffused with excitement at the infinitude of possibilities before him or bedding down wherever chance had landed him and succumbing to the honest weariness of a day fully lived, at every instant he’d felt in his bones that he was *right*. His lifestyle created the minimum of pollution or waste, his consumption spurred the minimum of exploitation or destruction, and his freedom was absolute: if he wanted to do something, he did; if he couldn’t do something, he didn’t want to do it. Who else around him lived exactly as they knew they ought, with no compromises? Ostensibly, crank had been unrelated to this. He’d spared himself the trouble of trying to harmonize drug use with his otherwise seamless moral concept by declining to think much about it. As months and years passed, doing things the hard way stopped feeling romantic or bold, but the early, pure Will never could have believed this could happen. And so it was that now, for Will to concede that some aspect of the suburbs was actually, however perversely, *nice* represented a truce that he’d struck with life. Even the act of settling in to read his library book on a bench was saturated with most complex significance. The book, written in a difficult, imagistic style, failed at first to hold his imagination, distracted as he was by the parade of recollections of his past—as well as by what had dominated him all morning, to which his mind drifted again and again; but, as with any decent book, it wasn’t long before he fell into it, skimming the densest bits but engrossed in the unfolding of the fictional universe. Before he knew it, Rodney was standing before him with a packet of forms, saying, “Ready to roll, dude?”

Heading back to the car, Will asked Rodney how it had gone.

“Jack squat, brother. I should of figured.” Rodney waved the papers in his hand. “Just fill out these forms and get in line for another ten years, they should have work for me by doomsday.” Rodney didn’t sound angry or even particularly disappointed; the job prospect had been a long shot from the get-go. “I could tell, too, when I first looked at this sucker’s face. I sit down, across this desk here’s this dude, looks like he swallowed a turd. I swear, these places where they’re supposed to help people, they don’t even *like* people.”

“Same old, same old.”

“Same shit, different day.”

“Pardon your language.”

Rodney grinned. “You bet.”

Will looked out of his window for most of the ride home, and Rodney, sensing that in this pensive mood Will would brook no interruption, tuned the Pontiac's radio to an AM classic rock station and contented himself with humming along to Judas Priest and Billy Squier. Will barely noticed. He had come to the Mission resolved to tell Rodney about the sounds that came through the vent in his wall. In the nights since the first definite beating, they'd argued from time to time, and Keiko had generally sounded afraid. From that time till last night there hadn't been any further sounds of outright violence, at least nothing he could be sure was a beating; but once when they'd been having sex, he had at first mistaken the sounds for beating; and another time, what he took at first for lovemaking turned out to have been an argument, a struggle of some kind, ending in a number of indeterminate sounds that he had interpreted as a physical altercation. Keiko often cried after Sherwin had gone home. Though it tried his mettle, Will made every effort not to eavesdrop when they had sex, however titillating—no, blood-firing—it was to picture Keiko in the act; he was ashamed of this; but he had begun to feel duty-bound to listen to it all, even to move his table and chair under the vent so as to be, whenever he was in the apartment, a sentry.

And then, the night before, there had been no ambiguity: a long, long fight that had ended with Keiko moaning, imploring Sherwin to stop what he was doing, heavy impacts, sounds of struggle; Will finally surmised that Sherwin was forcing her down, naked, while he took Polaroids of her against her will. This was happening not four feet from Will's trembling, ineffectual hands. All that interposed was a thin wall—and his own indecisiveness.

Keiko still smiled and winked when they made potty-mouthed jokes for each other whenever they met outside the building in the mornings. Will watched her closely, feeling mortally ashamed, and was certain that she must feel his scrutiny. That first time, her face had shown a faint bruise along the line of her jaw, like a shadow that daylight could not dispel, and all the while that he'd stared at it, Will hadn't found the words to ask where it had come from—certainly the most natural question in the world. Not having been able to ask her then, right at the start, it became more and more impossible to ask as time went on. But she was still the same, behaved as always, smiled like an imp and gave him the finger when she passed him on her way in, his way out. "Making any money?" she'd ask, or crack jokes about the millions of perverts that harassed her on the graveyard shift. "Maybe you should come over too. They remind

me about you.”

“Because I’m a pervert? Is what you’re trying to say?”

“You can say. I’ll just agree.”

“Agree, shmagree. Go blow-dry your boob-sweat.”

She beamed. “You can eat sweet beans from my shit.”

Will horse-laughed. “Sweet beans?”

“Japanese beans. I’m Jap, so?”

It was utter normalcy, under the strain of which Will felt himself fonder. The more successfully Keiko maintained her show of all being well, the more certain it seemed that no one would ever find out what Sherwin was doing to her. Whatever her intentions, she was protecting him. How could Will allow this to go on?

There was work waiting for Will when they returned to the Mission just before dusk. To run their errand, he’d put off the dishwashing duty he’d been assigned; but the form of compulsion at the Mission was different from that at a job; here, work got done because it needed to get done; when and where didn’t always matter; as long as Will pulled his weight to help keep the whole thing running properly, he was welcome to the program. For this reason, it never felt like *work*—it never had the sense of meaninglessness of paid employment. One of the guys at the program had graduated out, gotten a very solid job at last and convinced Child Protective Services to allow him to begin to take care of his son again after a long hiatus; in the front room, men were laughing about it, breaking up a group counselling session to eat doughnuts and sip instant coffee; this occasioned a remark from Rodney. “Marlon did it. I never thought he would.”

“Never?”

“Hate to say it.”

“It’s good he’s taking care of Jerome again,” said Will, leaning over a sinkful of dishes and coagulating food gunk. “I guess a kid is a pretty real responsibility.”

“I suppose. Never had one myself. Don’t intend to.”

“I will.”

Rodney looked surprised. “You?”

“Absolutely.” Will kept a straight face. “I want to spread my seeds, have all kinds of descendents. You know, father nations. Like Abraham.”

“Shoot. Why not.” Rodney had tumbled to the gag now. “You’re going to give birth to the nation of Willsreal.” This drew a laugh, so Rodney continued: “But who knows *what* race it’ll be, after you mix it up with

that Chinkanese babe.” He knew about Will’s crush on Keiko—though he imagined it to be less one-sided an attraction than it actually was, a misapprehension he had Will’s habit of withholding information to thank for.

“Yeah.” *Now*, Will thought. *Tell him now*. “A Japanese and a black Mexican. That makes a Jap-blaxican.”

“For gawl sakes!” hooted Rodney.

“A Japexican-blackanese!” Will’s humor was as desperate as a leap from a burning skyscraper. *Now!* he thought. *Now!* What was he doing, joking around? Having *fun*? “She’s getting beat on.”

Rodney’s face screwed into a question mark, still grinning but less so: what sort of clowning was this?

“She’s getting abused. It’s her boyfriend, I mean.”

Still Rodney awaited the punch line. Since when did Will’s girlfriend have another boyfriend, his expression seemed to ask. His mouth still smiled but his eyes locked onto Will’s face.

So Will told him everything, all that he’d seen and heard, battling to keep his voice level, embarrassed to speak so directly from his roiling emotions—but it all had to come out. At the end, he included the part about the Polaroids from the night before; though he hadn’t wanted to expose a detail so humiliating to Keiko, the more he talked the more he had no choice but to say. Will was not only describing the abuse; he was insisting upon it, like he were straining to convince a skeptic. *Battered women*—this was a thing; there were shelters for them, programs, public service announcements; TV dramas played it for a trump card sometimes, for sentimentality and easy sympathy; Will didn’t want to talk about *battered women* or employ any of the words that would arise most naturally in that connection; he wanted to talk about *this* battered girl, Keiko, his neighbor.

“Well, shoot. Shee-yoot.” Rodney sighed and frowned when Will had finished his tale. “That ain’t never good.” There didn’t seem to be much to add. “You sure he’s hitting her? Only from the sounds?”

Will nodded. “I mean, it’s not just, ‘bang, boom’. She begs him. I hear it, every fucking night.” This was, of course, an exaggeration. “She—cries.”

Rodney nodded, staring at the floor while he rolled a cigarette one-handed. Will was asking him for something, he could tell: a response or reaction to match Will’s own. Rodney didn’t want to feel anything. He checked both his pockets for matches. No luck.

Rodney’s disinclination was as plain to Will as if Rodney had been

wearing a sign around his neck, in the way he shuffled in place and wouldn't lift his eyes to Will's when he spoke, and in the way his normally unstoppable flow of chatter was stymied. However, the violent idea that Will had envisioned countless times was heavy on his lips. It had to come out—he had to be delivered of it. He wasn't going to let Rodney off before then.

Rodney leaned on his forearms on the stainless steel food prep counter and exhaled loudly, like a non-step bus lowering to the curb. “Sometimes, man,” he began, “sometimes that sort of stuff is kind of, like, part of two people's relationship.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Man, cool out. I don't mean nothing by it. Just that, sometimes, when a woman gets hit, she leaves the guy and good riddance, but other times she don't.”

“Women like getting beaten, you mean.”

“Of course not. Jesus sakes, Will. Don't put *me* on trial.” Rodney shrugged and fluttered his hands in a gesture that could have been comical, and gave up trying to express himself. “Well, anyway, I guess you're going to get involved now.”

Low in his throat, like someone in a film, Will said, “I'll, fucking—I'm going to kill him.”

The doorway out of the kitchen to the front room was open, and the men lounging out there had settled into low, jovial conversation. Rodney glanced in there—no one was looking their way. He stepped around the sink and opened the heavy back door that led to the alley behind the Mission. “We better go outside, brother.”

Around the stenciled green dumpsters there was standing rainwater, motley with floating engine oil. The sky above was a blank grey, night stealing up from the east. A cat picked daintily through the remains of a pizza box lying on the ground near where a pair of battered utility trucks was parked. After wedging a handy block of wood into the door so it wouldn't close all the way and lock behind them, Rodney leaned against the side of the building and fished a book of matches from his shirt pocket, where he'd forgotten he'd had them; he pulled hard at his cigarette and said, “Yep,” and let the smoke slide out through his nose and mouth. Will stood sullen by the Mission's dumpster, looking down the length of the alley at a shabby homeless woman quarrelling halfheartedly with no one. The cat eyed them with mysterious cat-like bored suspicion. They were otherwise alone.

“You can’t just go around talking about killing somebody.”

“I’m not just *talking* about it, you know. I’m telling you what I’m actually going to do.”

Rodney laughed once without humor. “Whuh. Well, okay. Firstly, all the more reason not to go off talking about it. And secondly, you don’t really want to kill anybody.”

“I do.”

“You think you do. Maybe you do. Hell, brother.” Rodney shifted around. “This is a pretty crazy thing to be talking about.”

Will glared.

“Because if you *don’t* go do something stupid like that, talking about it is just, has no—there’s no reason to. And if you *do* go do it, you make me an instrument to the fact.”

Will frowned. *Instrument to the fact?*

“Know what I mean?”

“Fucking aye, man.” Will sounded irritated.

“You ain’t never killed a dude.”

“I could.”

Rodney shook his head, not in disbelief but in a refusal to accept. “Shit, man. Anybody *could*, in theory. Also, you don’t got a gun.” Will shrugged; Rodney read from this that he’d guessed correctly; Will did not have a gun. He continued: “It matters, man. It matters. You’re thinking with your—anger. That’s how suckers go to prison, man. Think.”

Will’s rage boiled higher, but he said nothing.

“Think, brother. And, you know, sure. You want to help this gal out, course, nobody’s going to say that’s the *wrong* thing to do. That’s obvious. Point taken. And nobody will tell you it’s not honorable, what you’re feeling.”

“I guess.” Though Rodney had a guileless way of rolling his words around, Will felt like he was being mocked. Or was it his own mind mocking him, echoing Rodney’s words with added derision?

“Well, sure. Love—is a powerful thing. But you got to keep in mind, though.”

“What?”

“What’s good for you. Watch out for William, you read me? You’re a young dude.”

Will had heard enough. “Don’t try to tell me that shit. Is that what *you* would do?” Will turned away in disgust for an instant, then wheeled around again to face Rodney, eyeball to eyeball.

“Meaning—hello? You with me, dude? Meaning, your girl don’t need you to be in prison. She don’t need you to be out of action for some serious long years in a cell with a butt-buddy boyfriend.”

Rodney had no real idea of the situation, of the tenuousness of Will’s relationship to Keiko; this made everything he said sound more like a mock than he, perhaps, intended. Will clenched and unclenched his jaw. Rodney did his best to say what he meant—choosing, as it happened, all the wrong words to say to Will. “What’s good for you *is* good for her, man.”

“Really? *That’s* what you’d do?” Will was extremely pissed off now. “Look out for numero uno? Be honest.”

Rodney finished his rollie and dropped it into the puddle at his feet, where it hissed and died. “Listen. We need to back up a little bit here. Back off this thing a minute and take a longer look at it. So first of all, I ain’t contradicting anything you said.” Rodney paused to see whether Will would contest this; he did not. “You’re mad, or outraged, or—shoot, I’m not going to tell you what you are. That’s not my place.” Rodney paused to regroup his thoughts. “Talk about wanting to kill somebody, I’m right there with you, man, in spirit, that is. In spirit. But I seen some things in my day. Like in Panama. When it came to killing a person, I knew dudes who did not give a shit, but not everybody could be that way. And that was, like, over *there*, where you were *supposed* to be a killer.”

Will seemed about to speak. He visibly stopped himself.

Rodney guessed at what he might have been about to say. “Right now in this situation, maybe we’re supposed to be that way. Mad enough to kill a guy, or whatever.”

Will narrowed his eyes. Whether he was following Rodney’s train of thought or not was anyone’s guess.

“You’re not a—” He did not say *killer*. “—felon.” Rodney pronounced this as neutrally as possible. “You can still get them office jobs. And you’re a young guy, getting it together, got a lot going for you in the future, probably. You see where I’m headed with this? You’re too smart to get sent up for a murder.” Rodney paused to orient himself again. “Some guys choke up. Then it’s game over. You may be solid, I’m not standing here calling you a pussy—but until that exact moment you just never know. And then what does it cost. Fuckin’ aye.” He was suddenly embarrassed. “Class dismissed.” He fluttered his hands again.

“No, man. It’s okay.” Will’s voice was still bristly, but he was clearly listening.



“All right, then.” Rodney squared his shoulders again, as if to carry on with the lecture. “It’s just, this is serious.”

“I know.”

“And even if it’s, um—for the cause of love—”

Will cut in. “I’m not trying to get with this girl. That’s not what this shit is about, so you know.”

“Yeah, I was thinking *just* that, as a matter of fact. You do something like *that*, and that’s it. Got to be realistic about that.”

“I know that. I just said that.”

“You did.”

They had reached an impasse. They were silent a long moment.

Will didn’t know what to say. So seldom did he speak as passion moved him that now his body trembled from it. He was certain that he looked like a buffoon.

“Look, here’s what I figure.” Rodney spoke rapidly, to make his case. “You and me together, we’ll go see about this dude. There isn’t no reason to *off* this sucker, Will, but sure, I agree, we ought to do something. So what we’ll do is, let’s you and me go kick his ass.”

This was not Will’s original idea; Rodney saw that he didn’t like it. But he did not refuse, so Rodney pressed forward. “To beat on this gal, man, I can’t deny, that’s low. You say she’s real small too. So what we do is, look, we beat this lowlife down and let him know.”

“He’ll take it out on her.” In some part of Will’s mind, he was trying to process *You say she’s real small too*. What did that have to do with anything?

“I don’t think so, brother. Hell, I bet he’ll probably beat it straight out of the neighborhood for good.”

“You can’t know that.”

“That’s how them guys *are*, most of them. You come around with a lot of hot air, restraining orders and whatnot, they turn into real big men. But you just whale on them a bit, straight up they show the white feather.” Rodney began to swagger in place, to rock from heel to toe; he looked to Will to be talking himself into a zealous, militant mood; but not to the same purpose as Will’s.

“He’ll still be walking around.”

Rodney began pacing. “An eye for an eye. You heard of that?” Will nodded sullenly. “It means taking revenge for the same thing they did. Somebody gouges out your eye, you get theirs. You don’t go blowing away their family or something.” Will was still sullen. “He beats her up,

he gets beat up. Fair's fair."

"Him beating a girl is not the same as *him* getting beaten." Will pronounced this low and evenly.

Rodney wasn't in the mood to parse the logic of this, so he voiced agreement in order to move past it. "You're right, Will, you're right. But the gal? She'll be okay again." Rodney made a strident advocate. "Which is your main priority, right? And as far as getting back at—" Rodney made a wheeling gesture with his hand.

"Sherwin."

"—getting back at Sherwin, shoot, a decent ass-whopping is not something to sneeze at. He'll rue the day, man." Rodney nodded confidently. Will shook his head, but his air was no longer as decisive as it had been. "Just one thing: murder is out. We got to keep ourselves in the real world here."

"If he keeps hitting her?" said Will warningly.

"He won't. He'll get lost."

Will was in a terrible quandary. In order to do what was *right*, there was only one apt course: to kill Sherwin for battering Keiko. Will imagined that the *terror* she must feel was immeasurably worse than the physical pain. He'd only heard, not seen, the act; but he imagined the pure depth of her eyes made liquid by fear; the mental image racked him with physical revulsion. If punishments were to fit crimes, then the crime had to be measured by the pitiable and delicate loveliness of the victim; the purer and more good she was, the more horrible the crime; and in the tidal wave of grief and tenderness that Will felt for Keiko now, she seemed *infinitely* good—thus, to abuse her were infinitely bad, and the only fitting punishment were infinitely grave.

But to kill was awful. It meant prison, probably—and it meant moral burthen. Will had been raised Catholic, had been to catechism as a child; he yet believed in what the myth of hell symbolized: the tortures of inescapably knowing one has done bad. To go to jail for defending Keiko would be hard but necessary: he knew that, however just his cause, to spill blood was wrong and his debt would have to be paid. And though in spirit he was willing to shoulder this, in flesh he was weak. Rodney's path, if followed, would still satisfy at least some of the demands of justice; and this path was less risky. Will suspected, but hated to admit to himself, that the reason he could not say no to Rodney's alternate to killing was that his own instinct of self-preservation was kicking in.

He couldn't simply change his mind. He'd come there intending

somehow to obtain Rodney's sanction on this ill-formed, obsessive idea of killing Sherwin—and to ask for Rodney's gun—but now began, in the naked discomfort of seeing one's cherished idea in the cold light of another's skepticism, to wonder whether Rodney were right. The less absolute expedient of jumping Sherwin and roughing him up lacked the stern and absolute Old Testament justice of shooting him down; but if Keiko would be rid of him, as Rodney averred, and to some extent avenged for her pain, then perhaps that *would* be enough. At least this way Rodney would be involved and Will would not have to do it on his own—and at this thought he caught himself. Will's heart sank. He began to suspect himself of very inglorious motives: *Why* had he brought this story to Rodney in the first place, when he could have just done the deed himself?

As Rodney saw things, their course was settled. "Tonight," he pronounced.

"Tonight?" Will had assumed it would happen later. "Shouldn't we get ready?" At once he thought, *Get ready for what?* and felt foolish. *What a dork I am.* Tonight was indeed as good a night as any, since Sherwin would work late at the bank before going over to Keiko's—Will had gleaned this intelligence sitting by the vent that morning—and it seemed indispensable that they waylay him someplace else than at the apartment building on Fuller, where there was a fair chance that Keiko would see it. He said so to Rodney.

"No shit, Will. Duh." Rodney looked ready to grin. "We *are* talking about assault and battery here. Don't need the draw the cops a *map*, for gawl sake."

That wasn't what Will meant, but it was a cogent point. "So, we could get the Pontiac again from Jacob. If we get across town really quick, we can catch him coming off work."

At this Rodney balked. "I ain't too thrilled to jump a dude at a bank. They got armed security around there, not to mention how fast it would bring heat from the cops." Will hadn't considered this. After further debate, as the alley grew dimmer, they resolved to drive to the bank and wait for Sherwin, then tail him from there, watching for some opportunity. Perhaps he would stop for gas, or to eat—their plan was no plan at all, but, though Will felt less inclined each minute to carry it through on that particular evening, Rodney would not be denied.

Jacob didn't want to relinquish his car keys at first, and then, when Rodney let drop a hint of their mission, he wanted to come along. Will knew Jacob should not—he was only interested in the violence.

Will and Rodney drove into downtown, Rodney at the wheel because Will had never learned to drive—“Honestly, I’m not even sure which pedal is the gas,” he explained, not without a tinge of vanity—and soon found the nearest Valentina Mutual branch. It had already closed, and the only activity within was a janitor burnishing the tile floor with a machine that looked to Will like a lawn mower with a muff at the bottom. Will admitted that he wasn’t certain that this was the place Sherwin worked; there were branches of this bank all over Valentina; this was merely the nearest, and by Will’s logic a person would naturally live as close as possible to his workplace. From the beginning, Rodney had thought that Will meant that Sherwin was a teller, but once he grasped that Sherwin was a collections agent he said, “Shoot, Will, he don’t work *in* the bank. There’s got to be a separate office.”

They debated this for a while. “I know the place,” Rodney finally insisted. He thought he’d seen the Valentina Mutual logo painted on the glass door of a building in an office park farther south, in Midtown. They drove up and down the lower thirties, from Moore to T Street and back on each block, as the night wore on and a light rain began to fall, turning the street iridescent with reflected light. Rodney glanced from the road to the buildings on his left, then back to the road, scanning and driving; Will watched out the right-hand window. The Valentina Mutual logo did not appear on any office building doors. “Got any idea of the time?” asked Will at last. There was no clock in the Pontiac’s dash.

“Past eight.”

Will had to concede that Sherwin must have been at Keiko’s by then. They returned to the Mission and parted ways, neither finding much to say.

Rodney felt cheated. He agreed with Will, though, about not making a spectacle in front of the girl. Will seemed to want to protect her from the sight of violence, which seemed illogical to Rodney, since the revenge was for her benefit, after all. Rodney was more concerned that a young woman who stayed with, and protected through silence, a violent boyfriend would actually be more likely to turn *them* in for assaulting *him*. Anyway, they’d have to wait. As he prepared to bunk down in the front room, Jacob ambled in from a penny poker game in the old dough room to check out the damages and collect his car keys.

“No dice, dude?” Jacob guessed the event of their mission without being told.

“Nothing.” Rodney didn’t feel like talking about it.

“After all that.” Jacob’s tone said he wasn’t surprised. “Little Will pussied out.” The mission not having gone well seemed to tickle Jacob pink.

“No, it’s just.” Rodney shrugged, pulling off his boots and lining them up at the foot of his bunk. “Maybe later. We got to track the guy down.”

“I’m down to jump in on that shit, bro.” This, Rodney knew, was no idle boast. Jacob was a tempestuous sort. He may have given up the rowdy street roaming that had ruled his earlier life, but he still harbored no love for tranquility. He’d been ‘affiliated’ with the Hells Angels, which didn’t signify much to Rodney beyond an awareness that, when Jacob had renounced his white supremacist ties with that crowd, going so far as to join the program at the Mission alongside blacks and Latinos—even Joe Cholula wasn’t white—he’d done so at great personal risk; and he professed a kind of buccaneer’s Christianity, loose with the details but at any rate pious. But his bootlaces were still white, and he kept his hair shaved close; Rodney didn’t really believe he’d changed his spots.

“We can take care of it, brother. Thanks, though. Much appreciated.”

“Okay. Goodnight kiss?” Jacob grabbed Rodney’s face, his reechy breath rolling in a palpable yellow-smelling wave before him. Rodney shoved him back. Jacob guffawed and galumphed back to the dough room, slapping his hands.

“God damn junkie,” grumbled Rodney. Before lights-out he bedded down for the night, knowing he’d be up for meal duty again the next morning.

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As she laid her hand on the doorknob, Keiko noticed dirt under her fingernails and stood, under the poor light of the bulb above in the hall before her apartment door, to examine it. This sort of red, grainy soil seemed a final, lingering trace of autumn. Soon cold weather, though not exactly winter in the Japanese sense, would come to Valentina and harden the earth, denude the trees, afflict but not kill the grass, and she wouldn’t be able to spend as much time in the park before losing feeling in her extremities. This dirt, though, was moist and rough, and she imagined something still alive in it, perhaps at the microscopic level. The world, she thought, was still alive; winter hadn’t killed it—yet this was too conventional a notion. The world didn’t die at all during winter, it only slowed down; so spring, she thought, was not really a rebirth. There were, on one hand, stock ideas

of how the world was—winter equals death, spring equals rebirth—and then there was the way things *really* were, less simplistic, more nuanced: Keiko liked to imagine that she was careful with the precision of her thoughts, when she could be. The scent of this red soil put her in mind of forest exhalations and pine sawdust, of earthworms bisected by the blade of a shovel. With Sherwin gone, there was no one to notice her nails, and she could leave the dirt there as long as she liked. When she got into the apartment, she washed her hands anyway.

The night before, she hadn't worked. It almost never happened that days off from both jobs fell on the same day of the week, part-time work schedules being subject to endless shifting, but to skip one job or the other on a given night was better than nothing; instead of dozing at the gas station, she had dozed on her own floor. Sometimes working thirty hours a week at two jobs felt more draining than fifty hours at one would. Keiko had also taken a holiday from dish duty last night, and her kitchen sink was piled with dirty pans and flatware.

There were three messages left on the answering machine, though Keiko had only been in the park an hour. She hit the button and listened while rinsing her plate from breakfast.

—Keek, Amy. Hit me up.

—*Moshi moshi, Kei-chan? Genki? Masami yakedo.* Her sister. *Aitsu to donaiya no?*

—Hi, sweets. It's—me. I, ah—I'm at the hotel. It's nice here. You'd like it, maybe. Look—you have the number here, right?

She dialed Amy back first, but got voice mail. Keiko didn't care to leave a message. Talking to Amy's robotic voice mail was too similar to calling customer service at the utility company. As for her sister—Keiko wished she'd been there to pick up Masami's call. Keiko couldn't afford to call back. She would have anyway, despite that getting caught up on the phone would probably have made her late for her night shift, had they not spoken just the night before, Masami paying the charges, after Sherwin had left for the airport. *How are things, though?* Masami had wanted to know. *You don't still need money?*

*No, of course not.*

*Because you're a string these days, huh?* Dependent for support, she'd meant, like a string hanging from Sherwin. It was an old phrase from high school.

*People say that still?*

*If I say it, people say it.*

Keiko had giggled. *What's wrong with getting a little compensation? He farts, I put up with it.*

*How's 'he,' anyway?* Instead of using a polite 'he', Masami called him *aitsu*, 'that asshole'. It may have been a running joke of Masami's to forget Sherwin's name, or she may actually not have remembered it; either seemed equally likely to Keiko. Masami had never met Sherwin. *He's not there?*

At this, Keiko had hesitated. Should she tell Masami all, part or none? *We've had some fights*, she ventured.

*Breaking up?*

Masami said it too easily. Were there anyone Keiko ought to have been able to tell, it was Masami. Her older sister was the only Japanese person in Keiko's inner life who was not dominated by *teisai*, what in English might be called 'appearances' or 'disgrace'. But such openness itself was ironically a barrier. Keiko felt stupid for feeling as she did, but somehow she seemed to want her secret to be as hard for others to hear as it was for her to tell. It wasn't only the physical battery. It was the fear.

She imagined Masami's reaction: dismay, marvel, but not deep distress; instantly dispensed good advice; and the blithe assumption that Keiko would follow her advice and that the problem would resolve shortly. Perhaps Keiko's distrust of her older sister was horribly unfair, but there it was. Regardless of all else, Keiko had never been happy asking for help, even for the comfort of a sympathetic ear.

She thought of the strength of Americans, how they broadcast their troubles; everything deep-down private flew from the flagpole here. But on the telephone, when Keiko spoke Japanese to another Japanese person, she *was* Japanese. Each of these two countries was equally free, and each was freer on paper than in practice: each was burdened with hypocrisy and a restrictive conservatism that, with every generation, relaxed two parts and then constricted one; each country was, in specific cases, slightly more or less free than the other: religious dogma had basically no influence in Japanese social politics, and people were also free to enjoy liquor right on the sidewalk; while in the U.S. you could start to eat a banana you were *going* to pay for while you waited in line at the supermarket, and America was also kinder to women. Masami, after giving birth to Satoshi, had been politely instructed by her supervisor at Matsushita to resign her position: he was sure they could all agree that she would much rather be at home with her new family than remain as a burden to the company. Laws against that sort of thing were beside the point—to

march in the street and burn a bra would be the epitome of uncouth eccentricity in Japan; and Masami and her husband had taken this in mind before they'd even begun trying for a baby, though Masami loved her job and would have loved to stay. It wasn't *bad*, not exactly—Japan was not a place to *escape* from; there were no Japanese refugees huddling in the hold of cargo ships, which probably accounted for the laxity of U.S. Immigration, who by rights were supposed to have deported Keiko the year before when she'd given up trying to finagle a legitimate work visa, thwarted by the minimum income requirement and sponsorship process. But in Japan, it was necessary for Keiko to be Japanese, in the way that, during church, it was necessary for a child to keep quiet. Perhaps she was merely a kid who had run away from home to join the circus, but in the vast, crass, crabby culture of the United States were an infinitude of cracks to fall into, some wide enough for whole nations to disappear into. There was no hint of the Japanese malady of everyone pretending to agree on everything; and rather than *assuming*, the American rule was supposed to be to *assume not to assume*. She took deep pleasure in knowing that here, by Californian etiquette and perhaps the nation's as well, to say to someone of Asian extraction, “Do—you—speak—English?” would be the height of rudeness—and how it maddened Japanese tourists and exchange students, that no one would speak slowly to them! Keiko felt there was room for her here. To become a conventional American would have been distasteful, but happily there was no need—and because there was *no need*, she stayed.

She stayed, for now, with Sherwin. Through Amy and Amy's network of friends, Keiko had begun sending out feelers for a more lucrative job with a boss who wouldn't have qualms about paying an undocumented immigrant under the table. If anything came of it—nothing ever had before, though not for lack of effort—then she'd be free of her economic dependence on him. As a last resort, she might even get a different room, in East Highlands where the rent was reasonable, but she had long been in love with the ambience of Midtown, the stately age of the trees and buildings, the intimate atmosphere, the sense that the town had been built by people who cared how it turned out rather than just wanting to shovel shopping centers and parking lots together, the way the florist lady with the air of a librarian and the spruce fifty-something proprietor of the gay bar across the way from her building would bring out chairs on nice days and make conversation when business was slow, Keiko walking past them and smiling, renewing her resolution to one day really buy a flower. But



the rent she paid was a tremendous sum to part with only for the sake of atmosphere. Now she was even paying with sprains and abrasions.

Keiko was small. She wasn't strong, though after their first fight she'd begun hitting him back, which contrary to her apprehensions seemed somehow to satisfy him—but although she wasn't strong, she felt and lived strongly, and she knew she *could live* regardless of Sherwin's childish flights of temper. Though her commitment to him had evaporated, she had not, at heart, really resolved to leave him yet.

It was time to change clothes for work. Keiko had a long walk ahead of her to Stingray's, the bar and grill on Howell where she bussed tables. An early start was imperative, given that she needed to save on bus fare and Sherwin wasn't around to give her a lift. At first she had relied on him for rides to work only at his insistence, but lately the comfort and ease had gotten hold of her, and she'd begun to lose the relish she'd had for long, solitary walks. It was good to break out of that. Keiko folded her gas station uniform into her bag so she could walk directly from Stingray's to the graveyard shift and set out from her room.

Downstairs she ran into Will. He had a pair of library books and a plastic bag of groceries in his hand. "Will. Hey, you got a thing there." She pointed to his face.

Will wiped his nose. "What? Here?"

"No, there. It's very ugly."

Will caught on. "You mean here?" He grabbed his entire face in his hand and made a show of trying to pull it off. Keiko laughed, tickled that he'd gotten her drift. Will asked if she was off to work.

"Maybe later. First I gotta hunt. Manhunt."

"On the trail of a killer?"

Keiko blinked. "Killer?"

"You said, 'manhunt.'"

"You don't say it? For the girl who wants new boyfriend?"

"Oh." Will inclined his head. "Sure, I guess you could say that. Sounds original."

*He doesn't want to correct me*, she thought. She mentally filed the correction away: *Look up 'manhunt' in the dictionary*. This was how her English improved, not by being told, but by *not* being told.

"What about Sherwin?" asked Will.

*What was that?* thought Keiko. *The way he asked that just now?* A shadow of suspicion—or maybe nothing. "I need the backup boyfriend. In Japan, girls say, 'He's my keep.' You guys don't say it, I think."

“Keep.”

“It’s a Japanese-English.” Keiko studied Will’s face as she explained, “Sherwin went to Las Vegas. There’s a convention.” Will stared at the pavement, where somebody had drawn a stick figure with a penis into the cement when it had been wet, however many years before. A real human with a penis that size would topple over without scaffolding. But Keiko saw something in his expression—a change. “For few days.”

“Lost Wages, huh. A Star Trek convention?”

“Work convention. For the bank. What’s ‘start rack convention’?”

Will had long interested Keiko, like an intellectual puzzle she couldn’t find time to solve. The one time she’d seen through the open door of his room, it had been nearly empty, like the room of someone just moving in or just moving out. He’d also been in the crowd once or twice when she’d gone to punk shows with Amy, so she knew he was a music fan; and he was usually ready to cross wits with her when they met out here. Why hadn’t they ever hung out, she wondered. She hadn’t made many black friends in Valentina. She recalled her father: *Watch out for guns*. This was all he’d said to her when she was leaving for the U.S., never to see him again for all she knew. *They have blacks in America, and the blacks have guns*. He’d been drunk, starting on a new bottle of *shochu* that morning, as he did every morning he didn’t have work. Will intrigued her, but sometimes this sort of uncomfortable moment passed between them; he *fawned* on her, like a little kid mooning over a cool bigger kid on the playground. It was awkward, but it passed away instantly and Keiko forgot it. *But what if we were to fuck?* Keiko surprised herself with the thought; it was a bizarre one. “Hey, look at this.” Keiko lifted her work shirt up to let Will see the homemade T-shirt she had on underneath. “Can you read it?”

Will squinted, stared, shook his head. “Minna...” he tried.

“*Minna kichigatte, minna ii*. Can you understand?” Keiko realized this was a silly question. Outside Japan, the Japanese language was about as current and as useful as ancient Egyptian. And Will wouldn’t have read Kaneko Misuzu’s too-precious poetry, not even in translation, so the pun was lost on him—it was hopeless. But she’d been proud of this shirt when she’d made it and felt sure, barring the language barrier, that Will would have appreciated it too.

“Nope.”

“It means, everybody’s pervert, everybody’s okay. You gotta learn the Japanese. There’s a poem. I teach you sometime.” Jokes were hopeless in translation. English was an adventure, but in her native tongue she knew

she was cleverer, and could glide without effort through much more subtle communication.

“Foreign tongues are *too hard*.” Will rubbed his temples theatrically.

“Only for stupid.”

“If you want,” offered Will, “you could kiss my ass.”

“Eh? Kick the ass?” Keiko had honestly misheard. “I can. Piece of a cake.” She assumed a pugilistic position.

“With karate?”

Keiko wrinkled her nose. “Don’t say that.”

“What?”

“*Kur-rah-dee*.” Keiko pulled a sour face. “It’s *karate*.”

Will flexed and grunted, squinting his eyes and grimacing. “Hhhaahh... kah-lah-*tay!*” He pressed his hands together and bowed.

Keiko locked eyes with him. “Here, I give you chop.” She raised a hand to swing at his head, attacking clumsily, and the way he scrambled backward was clumsy too. “Ahh—*chop!*”

When Keiko came home after six hours at Stingray’s and eight at the gas station, a round trip of seventeen hours including time between and travel, she was weary but not sleepy. The walk home had been indispensable; the stress and ill feeling of the day had dispersed through the physical exertion. She realized afresh that she absolutely had to get back to walking. Normally when she got home, the tendons in her shoulders and legs would be hard as iron; when Sherwin was there or came by, she’d conscript him into massage duty, and he always grumbled but acceded, segueing from massage to sex whenever he could. Keiko sighed as she climbed the stairs. The sun was nearly up. It would be a while before she’d be able to soften her exhaustion into pliant drowsiness. She had a routine, which was to kill time for a spell, then fairly leap into bed when sleep was upon her; then, and only then, could she slip off into it.

What to do with herself? Her apartment, a little larger than a luxury sedan, had nothing like elbow room, but it did have a poor woman’s balcony: outside the window, with its peeling casement, yellowing panes and broken hasp, was a flat space of roof, hemmed by foot-high decorative trim and just large enough to sit cross-legged with a can of beer, if she happened to have one. She’d bought one today on her way out of the convenience store; the clock had just struck six as her shift ended, so it was okay to ring one up, though of course her employee discount didn’t extend to alcohol. She had to brush leaves from the roof to clear a space to sit, broad cup-shaped leaves that turned in the air as they showered down,

most falling into the bed of a sleek new-looking pickup truck parked illegally in the alley. She fingered a leaf and tried to estimate how soon the sun would rise, judging by the hue of the sky. The can of beer hissed when she opened it.

Keiko had just learned the phrase *urban forest*, and the leaf evoked an association in her mind: these must be urban leaves. How surprising to the tree, to find itself urban. To a human, there would be no mystery: someone had planted a tree just there, deliberately, by the mailbox. But imagine the tree looking around itself, wondering what the hell sort of forest this was, with buildings and strips of asphalt on all sides. A million millions of seeds, some sprouting, and some dying away; a million millions of leaves falling, some in wilderness, some on old roads or into rushing water, and this one onto her faux balcony on Fuller, and from there down to the bed of a pickup truck, presumably. And she was a woman from Osaka, wandering the wrong continent with the wispiest of impenetrable, invisible barriers between herself and even her closest American friends, shunning other Japanese expatriates—never frequenting, for example, Fumi’s café or Sakaya, a bar situated south of Moore in what had been called Japtown five decades before—living instead as a contrarian. Like whoever had planted that tree, deliberately, by the mailbox, she had imagined a deliberate purpose for herself when she’d arrived here. But she could not recall it now, or so it seemed to her. Like a leaf blown to a different landing—it was not fate but fated randomness. Fate that became fate after the fact. Her relationship was one more of proximity than of closeness. She here, Sherwin there.

She yawned. A pair of squirrels, barking angrily, brawled in the upper reaches of the tree across from where she sat; she smiled at their miniature bravado. At last one won out—the other fled down the trunk. “*A-a-and* we have a champion.” A phrase Amy used. The one that fled—it was the abused squirrel. The one that won was the abuser. It seemed so cute, from a distance. She finished her beer, set the can on the roof.

The leaf in Keiko’s hand was supple green in the center, shading out to curled brown at the perimeter like brittle paper. *Japanese people love nature*, she thought. *It’s written in the Constitution. Article nine-point-one.* Right next to the article that said they had to pave over all the riverbanks and build trash islands in Tokyo Bay. Nature-lover by nature of her race, then—how well did she know leaves? She couldn’t name more than half a dozen species of tree in any language. *Maa, ii ya.* Naming wasn’t knowing. This leaf—look at it—at the edge of where one tint of green

shades into another—how many shades of green exist on a single dying leaf? Each gradation itself a new shade, and between each of these yet another intermediate shade: one might infinitely parse colors and never find any final demarcation, only the endless variation of the spectrum. Keiko quite forgot herself and pressed her face to the roof, one eye squinting into the leaf, which trembled on the wind of her breath. Her imagination rode a photon into the leaf to bounce off of a single six-walled cell, where valiant but bootless photosynthetic labor yet maintained greenness. The central committee had not yet informed this branch office that the leaf was no longer attached to the tree. Even there, on the wall of the cell, would color be uniform? Might not one part of a plant cell have a darker or lighter tint than the rest? She rode in farther, traversing the top of the cell, which passed below her as a great plain, then zoomed in and dived between molecules, where color did not exist at all, for scientists said that between each atom lay an expanse of vacuum—she wondered whether this were true, and how anyone could know it—and whatever could the color of vacua be? Somewhere color had been lost. Keiko withdrew, elevating herself again to regard the cells. But perhaps color was not born at the cellular level either, but at a higher level still. She zoomed out again, then withdrew entirely, elevating her imaginary self to regard the leaf as a unit. At no time could she *see* it, if by seeing she meant to grasp through vision what it was. A view of the entire object was an approximation of what was real; zooming in obscured the whole. Even a plain dying leaf was too infinite to encompass—there were more things to learn about this leaf, had she cared to devote herself to learning them, than one could ever hope to know in a lifetime. The same was true of all things. One had to choose—one could not eat all the cupcakes. There was only so much room in one stomach for cupcakes. Keiko, on a sudden whim, mashed the leaf in her fingers and swept it from the rooftop. Fragments of it wheeled in the air like miniature scattered postcards. Infinity was cheap. She was sleepy—time for bed.

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David bought Angela a hands-free cell phone headset for use in her car, but she refused to use it while driving. She didn't want other drivers to see her speaking as if to nobody and conclude that she was talking to herself. Instead she commuted with one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding her phone to her ear, in order that she might appear

*perfectly normal*—and no, the irony of this was not lost on her, thank you very much. The morning was wearing on with no sign of traffic moving; Angela glared through her windshield at the vista of stationary cars on the rain-washed interstate and, grim and deliberate, sounded her Saab's horn. "Jesus fucking Christ," she told Crystal over the phone. "It's a parking lot out here."

Crystal had been a friend of Angela's since they'd worked together at Angela's previous job with a Midtown realtor; Crystal had since got married and quit working in order to tend her children. "Oh, god, I *know*, it's so—Shanté! Get your *fricking* hands out of that cupboard!" Domestic squeals came through the phone; Angela switched hands.

Crystal came back. "I know, it's, too many *people* in the world." Her sarcasm was very light, softened by the weary humorous lilt in her voice. Angela harrumphed. Traffic inched forward, but the car ahead was slow to respond and Angela's frustration boiled over: she blasted her horn again. "It's the pedal on the *right*, shitwit!" She noticed, and ignored, the fact that she was the only driver on this section of the highway using her horn; such was the ardor of her impatience. She absolutely *hated* to be late for work; "Sorry, *traffic!*" seemed to her possibly the lamest words ever uttered in the way of an excuse, in all the history of excuses.

"Did you ever think about traffic?" asked Angela. She felt irritated at herself for wording it this way; obviously she was *in traffic*, so she'd be talking about traffic, but the question was still basically apropos of nothing. Crystal would think she was being weird.

Crystal spoke over a background squawk, probably her younger son. "Um. No? Well, yes. Maybe." Angela could sense that Crystal was trying not to show that she thought it a dumb question.

"I mean, as a social phenomenon. In terms of how it relates in general to human life."

Crystal said, "Mmm-hmm."

"We're talking about a system of individuals under a—what. A common compulsion. I mean, to get somewhere."

Crystal did her best to keep up, in the curious way one tries to 'keep up' with a person whom one suspects one is already ahead of. "To get where they're driving to, you mean."

"Single-occupant vehicles with room to seat four. That's the first thing, how people plan to have up to four of themselves together at a time, hence the size of the car. But then you mostly drive around alone."

Crystal saw what Angela meant, though not yet where she was going

with it. “It’s certainly ironic.”

“Because you form a family, you have four to a family, let’s say. But you have to go to work alone. Nobody takes their family to work. So you drive alone.”

“Yeah.”

“Right off the bat, that’s one person taking up four people’s amount of road. Road-space. There’s a word for that, I’m sure.”

“Road bandwidth?” hazarded Crystal.

“Exactly. Cars. There’s no other possible way to get to work. People are spread out, the businesses and homes are spread out, public transportation is a pipe dream.”

“You know? That reminds me. It was on TV again, they’re talking about extending BART up to Valentina?”

Angela had run only midway down her own train of thought and was not interested in going off on a spar of Crystal’s. “It’ll never work! Give me a break. This is Northern California, people, not downtown Manhattan.”

Crystal did not reply. Angela felt embarrassed again; she was cutting Crystal off with no conversational grace whatsoever, which she hated in herself. She continued her earlier thought: “So, highways stretch from homes to businesses. This is an artery. Economic and political and—and social. Right? Which, I get that, you have to have a system for moving a million people into a place and out of a place every single day.”

“Yeah, they say that the population of downtown is really that much, like, a million people during the day, practically zero at night. I heard—Shanté! I *told* you to get down from there!”

Crystal was off the phone again for a moment. She came back. “So.”

“So, yeah. God, Crystal, I just don’t know what to *do* about him.”

Crystal guessed at last. “David?”

“He just—*wastes* himself.”

Crystal spoke with confidence now. “Mmm-hmm. Hence the road, hence you being on the wrong road, hence stuck on the wrong road which you need to get *off* at the next exit.” Angela could practically see Crystal bobbing her head on the other end of the line, as she always did when her conversation fell into a rhythm. “Girl, you don’t need to always be speaking in metaphors. Just come out with it straight. Married women have no time for mystery.”

“Yeah.” Angela hit the horn and the brakes simultaneously; she’d seen the car ahead lurch forward and had accelerated after it too quickly. “You

get to where I am, you can't just, like, switch highways. I'm on I-80 for the duration now. Camping out in, like, the traffic jam from hell."

"Dump him, then."

"It's not that *easy*. You can't love someone who you can't admire. I know this."

"Hmm." Crystal didn't sound convinced of this, but she let it go.

"But he's got so much potential. He's really—*it* for me. *The one*, in so many ways." Transit workers in orange vests jogged up between stalled lanes of traffic, past Angela's stationary Saab, and she came close to envying their free forward mobility. Ahead, red brake lights winked in waves.

"That's not what you say about him, like, *every time* we talk?"

"I *know*. I mean, I *could* work on his flaws, at least the main obvious ones, but is it worth it? Cost to benefit?"

"If you have to ask, then it isn't." Crystal sounded amused. "And you *know* you're high-maintenance."

"You're such a bitch." Angela heard Crystal laugh at this. "I'm being serious!"

"Mmm-hmm. So he's the *one*, and he's *it*, and he's got all these *flaws*, which I need to *work on*—"

"Okay. Got it. Thank you." Angela loved talking to Crystal; she was always so no-nonsense. "All he *does* is sit on his skinny white ass all day being clever. You know what? He tried to tell me yesterday about Africa. *Africa*. He had this whole theory that he must have found on the Web about how *corporations* are responsible for the AIDS epidemic in Africa. It's got nothing to do with *Africans* not keeping it in their pants, right?"

"Oh—well," said Crystal.

"In his calculus, they should just *give* the medicine away. It's 'corporate greed' instead of 'human need.'"

"That could be a rap." Crystal spoke with an exaggerated white-guy accent.

"Shit." Angela laughed. "Such a friend to the Negro. I straight told him, 'Look, what country do you live in? Where did you buy those shoes? Africa?' This fool had new Vans. I said, 'What about your job, smart-ass? Go to Africa and get a job that easy, paying whatever an hour, so you can buy new Vans and go club-hopping in Midtown and drink 'dark beer, brewed locally'!"

"You told *him*. Imagine how badly that would backfire if they actually had clubs and dark beer and, like, jobs in Africa."

"I *know* they have, like, jobs in Africa." Angela was both amused and



annoyed with Crystal. “People who live here, they *benefit* from living in this country—it just gets on my nerves, okay? It’s a cliché to say ‘love it or leave it’, but, you know?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Crystal was as unperturbed and noncommittal as if they’d been discussing weather patterns.

Angela didn’t need Crystal to agree with her—if she wanted blind agreement, Crystal was the last person to call. It just felt good to get some things off of her chest. “It’s the system this, the system that. Which he’s going to fix by drinking porter and listening to Weezer. Because, you know what? The rich *get* richer and the poor *get* poorer.”

“And what in the world could be wrong with that,” observed Crystal drily.

“My point being, he *himself* could maybe, just *maybe* get a *little bit richer* so that we could maybe, just *maybe* see ourselves actually putting a *ring* on it at some point.”

Crystal could be heard clattering dishes in the sink on the other end of the line. “Mmm-hmm.”

Traffic at last began to edge forward. Angela exhaled with satisfaction and nosed aggressively in front of a minivan into the next lane over, where the flow of cars seemed to move more promisingly. True to the laws of the universe, this lane immediately became the slowest-moving on the highway. Angela clicked her tongue. “So the question is, why am I trifling with this loser.” Her tone was ironic and playful now; she felt much better after unburdening herself to Crystal.

“Because he’s the *one* and he’s so *it*—”

“Yes, *thank* you. Your input is no longer required.”

Crystal laughed on the other end of the line. Angela’s car passed at last through the bottleneck where the business loop of 216 merged with 80, and she began to accelerate. Work was waiting; there were bullet-pointed to-do lists to power through, each bullet point like a balloon to pop. Life was a series of balloons to pop. Angela relished her work.

She managed to get to the brokerage on time and greeted Kimberly brightly in the office. Angela would never have dated a guy she worked with; it was potentially too messy a situation; nor would she have considered dating David once she learned he was brother to her co-worker, Kimberly Dunlop, who was the site director and worked in the office adjacent to her own, were it not that she had never seen David visit his sister at work for the two years Angela had been there. This indicated distance enough between brother and sister not to create conflict of interest at the

brokerage between Angela's job and her sex life. All this notwithstanding, she admired Kimberly and was glad for a pretext to eat lunch together with her some afternoons at the Subway sandwich shop across from the brokerage on Casebolt Avenue. These lunches were commonly forums for gossip concerning David, which Angela knew would have surprised him had he been privy to them. Angela expressed much more affection toward David when he wasn't around; Kimberly had probably guessed that Angela had matrimonial ambitions toward her brother, but he himself was almost positively in the dark. Angela was happy to see Kimberly take a similar bearing toward her brother, loving but nonindulgent.

But Angela had made up her mind; at lunch that day, she broached to Kimberly her intention to break up with David. Kimberly seemed to take it less than sanguinely, but only said that of course it was Angela's decision to make. Kimberly bore a slight resemblance to her younger brother, most notably in her full head of adorable blonde curls, which shone softly and piqued Angela's envy in a way she was not shy of admitting. She also never shortened her own name to Kim, just as David never went by Dave; but where David stood tall and rangy, Kimberly was a slight woman with careful, economical gestures, whose natural humor, instead of taking David's ironic bent, was turned inward in rather endearing self-deprecation that never sounded weak or self-pitying. The fey thought had once occurred to Angela that it was a pity she'd not been born a man, as Kimberly would totally have been her type. When displeased, Kimberly maintained a polite, unfathomable demeanor, which Angela noted there at lunch. They finished their meal exchanging terse banalities.

Back at the office that afternoon, Angela was running through a routine set of report forms, filling in fields on the computer screen with data and then sending each document to the print queue twice—each time she did this, it was with a small twinge, as Kimberly had expressly requested that everyone print documents only once and then use the photocopy machine if duplicates were required—when Kimberly knocked on her office door, which was halfway ajar, and told her, "Some clients waiting outside for you."

"Can't Julie handle them?" Angela planning on leaving early, just as soon as she finished what she was doing.

"They asked for you. Dominguez, something-something Dominguez, said you sold them a policy yesterday."

Angela recognized the name. She was not fain to see these people. "Could you tell them I already sent their file for processing and it's out of

my hands? If they want to make changes, they'll need—”

Kimberly craned her head farther through the door. “Isn’t that the contract there?” She pointed to a white and blue insurance policy contract folder on Angela’s desktop with *Dominguez, M.I.* written across the face in Angela’s emphatic cursive.

“Kimberly.” Angela sighed, more than a touch exasperated. “I have a personal engagement that I need to get to right after I finish this, so I would really appreciate it if you could tell them”—she spoke with exaggerated slowness—“that I just”—she picked up the folder in question and let it fall into the wire tray on her desk labelled *Out*—“filed it? So—it’s *out of my hands?*”

Kimberly’s smile had ice in it. “I’ll send them in.” She left the door open.

*Bitch*, thought Angela. She exhaled forcefully, then took the file from her out-box and shoved it out of sight in a compartment of her desk. Her office was small but she kept it straightened. Her desk faced the door, with a pair of plain chairs before it, upholstered in teal. The wall behind her was dominated by a window facing out on the parking lot, through which the afternoon sun would have shone had Angela not kept the blinds permanently closed to afford herself privacy. Nothing of a personal nature was in view on her desk, but on the walls hung framed prints she’d chosen herself at the art store in Town Faire Mall; the tasteful frames especially pleased her. The best that could be said of the carpet was that it was clean—it was the sort of industrial-grade characterless carpet that was designed mainly to stay clean—and a bank of fluorescent lights buzzed subaudibly on the ceiling. Angela was mainly pleased with the impression her office afforded: professional enough to be slightly intimidating to the likes of customers as the Dominguezes, but softened in its colors and textures with a feminine touch. When the two Dominguezes came in, she affected a cordial greeting but didn’t rise from her chair. Before they’d had a chance to seat themselves completely, she asked, “And what can I do for your folks today?”

The man, swarthy of course, and wearing a stiff, unruly moustache, was a stranger to Angela. He was presumably the husband, although Angela would not have been surprised to learn that their relationship was merely common-law; he said nothing, regarding her with dumb inscrutability while his wife did all the talking. Angela doubted whether he even spoke English. His wife—her name, Angela recalled, was Marisela—had been in alone to see Angela the morning before.

“Jou dinna tell us we was double covered.” Marisela came directly to it. “We wanna get our money back for the policy, please.”

Angela tensed like a bowstring within but labored to show nothing. As per her usual tack in such situations, she spoke quickly and with a show of professional decisiveness. “I see. Well, unfortunately, as it happens, we were unable to reach you by phone”—a bit of a distortion—“so we had to go ahead and send your file for processing. And once it goes for processing, going forward from there it’s out of our hands.” Angela spread her hands as if to show, *Look, nothing here*. “If you’d like, we can certainly go ahead and schedule an appointment for you to come in later and we can see about adjusting the terms—”

“But,” said Marisela.

“—of your policy to mutual satisfaction, though in fact once it’s processed—”

“But.”

“—there isn’t much wiggle room, which we’re sure you can understand—”

“But I come here before, every time I get the same insurance. I tell you I want that one—”

“When the file goes for processing, it leaves our hands, and in the event that mistakes were made—”

“—I tell you I wanna same one from before, jou coulda said if it’s gonna cost more—”

“—having signed the contract, it becomes your responsibility, and when the file is sent and actually processed, it becomes non-emendable and contractually binding—”

“—but my ossband say this is too much money, and you made so much charge for the fee—”

“—duly earned for services rendered according to the contract, and how is it this firm’s responsibility to know which policy you want?”

“—and you never say you make us double coverage, but you gotta computer right there to check and see...” Marisela pointed to the boxy gray workstation on Angela’s desk.

Angela’s initial plan, to sweep these annoying people right out of her office on a wave of jargon, was not succeeding. Marisela Dominguez had been a client of Sherry Charters’s, and when Sherry had retired in May, her client base had been redistributed at random among the other brokers at the firm. Though the normal broker’s fee for a contract as basic as the Dominguez’s was nearer to fifty or sixty dollars, Angela had seen fit to

add a hundred more dollars to that, which Marisela hadn't blinked at, so fair was fair; this money essentially went directly into Angela's pocket. She had also switched the Dominguezes to a policy more profitable to the firm, again with Marisela's informed consent. Everything was in black and white on the contract, nothing deceptive or unfair. Sherry Charters hadn't had much business sense at all, and the evidence was in the way she'd given the store away to anybody who crossed the threshold. Angela recalled Marisela's face during that first meeting, the sullen silence between words, the almost childlike look of confusion and panic—the panicky sense of inferiority that timid people sometimes feel when obliged to spend a good amount their own money on something unfamiliar. Each change to the financial arrangement that Angela proposed, Marisela approved; Angela, emboldened by this, had pressed for more. In the end, the Dominguez woman had freely put her name to the forms; whether she thoroughly understood what she was signing was her own affair; this was business, not croquet in the garden.

Angela and Marisela bandied words for another quarter of an hour, each growing obstinate—with her husband present, however much of a wooden Indian he was, Marisela seemed much less timid. The upshot was that the couple wanted to cancel the policy, receive a full refund and take their business elsewhere. By law Angela had to comply, so she tapped figures onto her desk calculator and, turning it to show them the screen, explained, “Less our cancellation fee, the broker's duly-earned fee, and the insurance agency's own cancellation fees and non-refundable processing surcharges, this is the sort of refund we're looking at.” She felt a tight pinch of satisfaction.

Marisela's eyes widened. “Thirty-eight dollars? I wrote you a check for two fifty!”

Up to this point, the husband had remained silent. Now he spoke, and Angela was nonplussed to hear him produce fluent English with barely any remnant of a foreign accent. “You're a very dishonest person.” As soon as he spoke, Marisela folded her hands in her lap.

Angela's throat constricted. *They're attacking me*, she thought instinctively. “Well,” she sputtered, a queasy sort of spleen flustering her, “I do need to be paid for my work.”

“Of course you do.” Bitter irony flashed like steel in his voice.

With that, Angela grasped the situation. The husband knew that with his wife's signature on that contract, they were at the mercy of the company. They could either continue in the policy, paying more for less, or

cancel it and lose money anyway. Such were the rules of engagement. He'd known all this from the start, and had come here to take the loss and walk away, just on general principles. Or was it—?

*He really came here looking for help*, thought Angela, perplexed and incredulous. *He just hoped I would be nice or something*. Her fingers trembled on the desktop.

The husband's frustration and disappointed anger trembled explosively in his eyes. "We're wasting our time." He stood, as did his wife, and they exchanged words trippingly in low Spanish, below Angela's range of hearing. She knew not a word of the language anyway. The man turned again to her. "Give us the refund. Cancel our policy. We won't come here again." He moved for the door, holding it for his wife. "You'll send us a check."

"Yes," Angela managed to say. She knew such things could be delayed for months. Only after they'd left her alone in her office did Angela permit herself to realize, with relief, just how narrowly she had escaped physical danger. If the man had become violent—*God knows what they'll do*, she thought. At any rate, though it felt galling to know she'd lost the firm a client, Angela herself had come out ahead: she had not had to forfeit one cent of her rather tasty commission. She had won.

There was no way she could leave the remainder of her work in the state it was in, but five minutes of concentrated efficiency at the computer and a quick bustle through some paperwork was all she needed to at least put things in a condition to be left till the next day. The paperwork on the Dominguez cancellation she would get to in her own good time. Angela powered down her PC and drove home early to beat traffic, this time with her mobile phone switched off in her handbag.

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Daybreak found Will shivering under a layer of heavy cardboard on the roof of a Dashier's supermarket some months before he was first to encounter Rodney at the Mission; his bedding smelled pleasantly of iceberg lettuce, a wet, crisp aroma that had filled his fitful dreams with images of a pair of strong hands rending a head of lettuce in two, twinkling sprays of water bursting outward. Will was cold as a corpse, cold not only on the surface but right down to his marrow. He'd laid cardboard beneath himself, on the tacky tar roofing, and huddled under more cardboard to sleep, and the cardboard would have retained his body heat admirably were it

not compromised—as cardboard boxes tended to be—by edges and corners and slits up the middle. His sleep, as was too often true, had been less a doze than a staccato series of dozes interrupted by perpetual discomfort. To get up on the roof, since the ladder hadn't been down, Will had defied death to manhandle the cardboard upward via a series of drainpipe handholds; coming down was easier: from the roof, he tossed the boxes back into the green recycling dumpster from which he'd salvaged them, then came careering down himself, executing a sort of semi-controlled slide down the side of the building that landed him in the dumpster. He had not yet perfected this maneuver, but he had at least learned to land without sprains or fractures. On the ground again, with a quick glance around to see whether any store employees had witnessed him, Will began slapping life back into his frigid limbs, walking tight circles and almost sobbing from exertion. There was no sleeping late on the roof—either cold, heat or raw discomfort woke him at dawn.

It was October. People in Valentina still wore shorts and sandals while the sun was up, but at midnight not even the illusion of summer remained. On his way around to the front of the store to shoplift breakfast, a bagel or something, Will told himself that it was probably time to start living in winter mode, walking all night to keep from freezing in his sleep, catching forty winks in the park during the day, if the cops allowed it. Last winter had been rough. Will had met a hobo in January—and before living out of doors he had imagined hobos to be vanished figures of a bygone era, playing Jew's harp in boxcars and boiling old shoes for dinner—who had offered to show him the right trains to ride down to San Diego, where indigents from all over the state flocked in winter to escape death by exposure; but the guy had seemed so shifty and lecherous, eyeing Will's young limbs like a treat to gobble up, that he hadn't gone. This year, though, might be the year he migrated south, he thought, if only he could break the intangible and ludicrous hold that his city had on him; he joked to Junior that it was a curse, like the one with the mummy—he could never leave Valentina. “Like that part in *Zelda* where you keep going left and it keeps being the same screen again,” Junior had agreed, losing Will with the reference.

They'd had this conversation at a keg party a week before, which a couple of Junior's friends had invited them to crash together. Though they'd turned up uninvited, Will had installed himself in the kitchen as tapster of the keg and commissar-general of the beer, which got a laugh from Junior and his friends. From his post, Will heard the conversation

turn to the punk ethos, and to his consternation somebody there had fingered him and said, “*That* guy there is the real fuckin’ deal. He’s straight *punk*.” This was because Will was homeless and not that hygienic, presumably. A drunken kid in a NoFX hoodie fragrant with his mother’s fabric softener had cornered Will in with questions about dropping out of society and the rest of it: “I so respect what you’re doing,” the kid had kept repeating. *What I’m doing*, Will thought of saying, *is being cold every damn night. And you could do it too!* But he refrained from making what might be construed as an offer, concerned that the kid might take him up on it.

But why the hesitation? Will could recall the first summer he’d been living outdoors, when he’d proselyted the lifestyle to practically anybody who would listen. That had been when the other homeless folks he’d begun to meet had been telling him to get his ass back indoors. So many of them had been hard up on booze or dope, or sick with hardcore maladies like stomach cancer, or cracked in the head and unemployable, though friendly—too many friendly folk to count. A guy in a fishing vest had once taken him aside and shown him a ‘street journal’, a kind of community newspaper, copies of which were given to homeless folks to resell on street corners as a kind of hand-up-not-handout form of charity; the page the guy had shown him was the obituaries: “Timothy Coombs. He fell and died. Wayne Alexander. Of cancer. Eddie Cook. Liver disease. Dawn Carboni. Cause pending. Eliot Nutile. Head trauma from beating. ‘Savannah’. Of pneumonia age nine years. Lori Nystrom. Cause pending.” Will had confided in all the homeless people he met, brimming with what he didn’t for a long time realize was arrogance, that it was only poverty if you didn’t like it, that if he freely chose it then it was freedom. Perhaps some memory of those times had been playing around the edges of Will’s awareness the night before when he’d stared up at the roof of the Dasher’s, cardboard in hand, and realized he deeply, deeply hated the idea of climbing up there. *Not ‘never again’, he’d told himself. Just not tonight.*

In the store to score his daily bread, Will coincidentally witnessed another shopper in the selfsame act—and it was someone he knew. “Security!”

Güero jolted, then stiffened, realizing too late that he’d given the game away. In the same gruff voice Will barked, “Drop that Power Bar!”

“Ah, fuck, *ese*, I didn’t know it was you, dog.” Güero relaxed. A supermarket employee passed, looking their way. They nonchalantly strolled in the other direction, Will thrusting his hands into his pockets and whistling



in a pantomime of *Who, me?* that Güero smiled at. Toward the dog food aisle, Will asked, “So where’s the cameras in here?”

“Noplace, fool, ’cept the booze aisle and the reg, and also the manager’s office where the safe’s at. My boy worked here. *Pinche pendejos* too lazy to put in real camera coverage.”

“Okay. We better not crack the safe, then.” They got to talking. Güero was also on the move, looking for a new pad. Güero was the picture of a well-muscled boy from the barrio, with his tattoos, his wifebeater T-shirt and his too-perfect duck’s-ass haircut. Despite the fact that he looked like a wetback rube, he was actually great people to know. He had an over-amped story, too unlikely to be anything but the truth, involving a definite brawl with his sometime sweetheart that had culminated in a near-fatal pass she’d taken at him with a kitchen knife; this had convinced him that the getting, as the saying went, was good. He had to re-situate himself immediately. “Section Eight,” Güero kept saying. “I’m all about Section Eight today.”

“Yeah,” Will said, or, “I guess,” or, “Huh.” He was joked out, and it was still early in the morning. Though he was up and moving now, that morning when he woke he’d felt ready to die, as old men must have felt in bed when health and vigor were lost memories. Even in his miserable sleep he’d felt his systemic want of dope creeping through his joints, into his teeth and behind his eye sockets. *I do not have the creeps*, he told himself, accidentally admitting to himself that he had the creeps. Sociability, of all things, was an excruciating chore. But he had to keep moving. Just keep moving.

“Where you going today?” asked Güero.

Will’s habitual answer—*Wherever the fuck I want*—was so plainly untrue that all he managed to produce was a brusque shrug.

They made it to the bagels. “These ones,” said Will, pointing out the best variety. Grazing for free gave them the freedom to sample all brands; shoplifters of their caliber became discerning consumers indeed.

On their way out of the supermarket, pockets bulging with grub, Güero asked Will, “So, how come you’re not on G.A.?” Will shook his head. “’Cause truth be told, *cabrón*, you look like shit. Been too long on the streets, know’m sayin’? All you got to do is fill in some papers,” Güero urged. “Why not?”

Will had no intention of answering honestly. It wouldn’t do to divulge the inner sneer he had for people on the dole—Güero himself was planning to go on the dole. Will’s prejudice was stupid but unshakable. Those

of his inner convictions he found hardest to justify to himself, he kept to himself.

But Güero asked again. “Come on with me. We’ll go to HUD and just check it out.” So they went. Will had no other engagements that day anyway.

The walls of the sparse downtown lobby where Will and Güero settled in to wait were decorated with, of all things, jumbo travel posters. Splendid images of Thailand and Berlin beckoned to the crowd of tired adults slouched in their chairs, waiting for Section Eight housing assistance. Unopened magazines and plastic racks of informational pamphlets were arranged on the low, narrow tables at their feet. Across from Will and Güero sat an enormous woman, her bulk spread across an entire couch, dressed in stained pink sweatpants and a bedsheet of a T-shirt with a printed logo of a shepherd in silhouette holding a crook, a four-pointed star at the ten o’clock position above him, and the motto, “As For Me And My House, We Will Serve The LORD.” On a retractable leash that coiled into a plastic handle, the sort used to walk dogs, the woman had tethered a daughter, naked from the waist up, perhaps two or three years old. The daughter ranged among the tables, the leash affixed to her wrist stretching like a tripwire to harry the other people in the room, not speaking, even when a kindly-eyed fellow ventured a word of greeting; she only fixed her characterless eyes upon him, not registering his repeated, “Hey there, pumpkin,” then returned to her prior occupation, which was to carefully lay her open mouth against the floor and, as far as Will could tell, to smooch or perhaps taste the stubbled, paisley-patterned carpet. The fat mother intermittently jerked the cord, sending the child staggering, and in a croaking whine said, “For Pete’s sake, Ashlyn Sierra, quit *bothering* everybody.” She repeated the same phrases again and again in overt tones of cranky pride. “You little *brat*.” Her voice was loud enough twice over to carry to where Ashlyn Sierra was, loud enough in fact that everyone else in the room had to make a pretense of not hearing her. Even the most vehement yanks on the leash failed to evoke any sound of protest from the feral little girl.

Will would rather have looked anywhere than in the woman’s direction, but her size and proximity dominated his field of vision. To ignore her he would have had to move to the other end of the room, to the opposite-facing benches there, and none were available. There she was, a walrus. Strings of hair the color of wheat bread sprouted from her thinning pate to hang in limp disarray on her rotund shoulders, which bulged in

floppy portions from under the thin fabric of her shirt like soft, wet sausage sectioned with tied string. Her round spectacles, though in inexpensive imitation of what Will took to be smart fashion, hung diagonally from her face like she'd been knocked in the head. Her face was a skewbald of irregular roe-colored patches—was it rosacea? Or an exhausted flush from the immense effort required of such a giantess even to shift her bulk?

And then the baby—its existence implied to Will a fact too gruesome to entertain; yet the inference was plain: someone, some male, had gone so far as to mount and rut on this pile of woman. In spite of the ambient warmth of the lobby, Will's flesh grew clammy. Who could have stomachached doing such a deed? The answer was plain: on the next bench over from the fat woman sat an equally revolting fellow, portly and younger than his paramour, if his age could be judged by his school-boyish haircut and fuzzy brown moustache, which had the look of virgin whiskers never shaven. The guy was staring at his wife as though there were a TV there instead, mouth open like a trout, with the look of having huffed more paint fumes than was good for him. One eyelid drooped; Will suspected cranial trauma. Will had not marked the connection between the two of them at first, but noticed now that from time to time the fat woman directed some comment to her husband, pitched like a complaint or demand, to which he would reply in a nearly inaudible wheedle. *They had bred*. The picture of the action, as far from prurient as scenes from a slaughterhouse, invaded Will's imagination. The sweaty fondling that must have preceded the action, the confused instinctive thrust, some reptilian urge satisfied, blank-brained, as the woman, the mortifying receptacle to his briny seed, lay inert, unfeeling, on a groaning box-spring mattress, stupidly wondering what her lover was up to. A minute, no more, perhaps a good deal less, and he lets go a hiss of breath and collapses onto her, mashing her indeterminate blobby form farther into the mattress, the structural integrity of which is now perilously near to being compromised. "Did you do it?" she keens, a little ticked off. No reply, only hoarse falsetto expiration—the TV is still on, *Cops* on the scene of a domestic dispute—both of them are of the moment distracted, and the episode of germination is soon but dimly remembered...

Will found that he was staring at the woman, at the bulging abundance between her outflung legs. Her labia must have weighed twenty-five pounds. It protruded from her sweatpants like a second pair of buttocks. When she walked, it must have swung around, like twin uncooked slabs of veiny, hairy mutton, slapping together—

Will stood suddenly to pace the room.

Around each low-set table in the room there were modular armchairs and benches, not shabby but rather industrial-grade decent, with stainless steel appointments and denim-colored upholstery designed to withstand any reasonable abuse until leeway in the budget could be found to periodically replace them. The potted plant near the door was plastic but not cheap-looking; the room had no windows to the outdoors, just one Plexiglas bank teller-style window at the counter where a receptionist might hypothetically have been installed. Two or three times since Will and Güero had come in, a mustachioed man with the air of being exhausted by the effort of it all had emerged from the door by the empty receptionist's window—the door leading back into the Housing and Urban Development offices—to pronounce, or indifferently mispronounce, the next name written on a clipboard chained to the counter. There was also a cord fixed to the counter for a pen, but no pen, compelling all who came here to bum the use of a pen from one another. As Will paced, the man appeared again and read from the sign-up sheet: “Rodney Toth?”

The gawky fellow who'd been trying to speak to the child on the leash said, “Yo,” and followed the clerk back inside. This accomplished, again no one stirred. Will checked the number of names before his on the list: ten.

The only free seat in the place was back near the big woman. Will hunched against the wall. The rest of the people there weren't much classier than she was. One white-haired, whip-thin old matron picked absently at a yellowish scab directly on the tip of her nose as, across from her, a slovenly guy whose baby-blue tank top had slipped down enough to expose a hairless nipple kicked at the table, breathing through his mouth. All around were shabbiness and insignificance, people in every state of dissolution with ugly skin and lousy hair, lumpy bodies and rude, stupid faces. Failures. All were sad cases who couldn't hack it, who bent down, gave up and asked the county to pay the rent. To become like this was an admission of worthlessness. The worthlessness that lurked around people like this—well, it lurked around Will too. He hated this train of thought. In the view of the rest of the world, he didn't matter much—and they may even have been right about him. He tried to prove himself to himself through certain futile, proud gestures: he didn't grow a beard, though he'd been out of doors from March to October, and he didn't stink, though his meals on occasion came from a dumpster—never from the bottom of the dumpster, of course; from the trash near the top. He would shoplift soap;

he would buy stolen gym membership cards in order to use the showers, or sneak around at night and rinse himself from the hose of abandoned houses in the suburbs where the water hadn't been turned off yet. The pivotal difference, he insisted to himself, lay in the choice: it was better to live free, and for free, pulling the wool, outfoxing a dopey, lumbering society, than to live locked into an eight-to-six job on a laughable wage, spawning children at reliable intervals like a convict adding years to his own sentence; it was better to be *who he was* than, bowing to the fate his color, background, school, neighborhood and economic class had imposed upon him, to become like—these people.

Will sat back next to Güero, who still could not get over the spectacle of the large woman. He nudged Will, snickering, “Hella white trash, eh?”

*Sure*, thought Will, *and black trash. Brown trash.* The sickness worse than death returned. Trash everywhere, human trash, which was the most petrifying sort of trash because it was so like oneself; human trash toiling like beetles to burrow in the muck. Even Güero was not qualitatively different: his homies called him a *güero* as a joke on his openly advertised contempt for all ‘fucking honkies’—*pinche güeros*—and yet he appeared as mean and cheap, as loutish and sloppy, as tacky and public with himself as any of the white trash he scorned. Will *hated* that his friend seemed this way to him now. When Güero had said that—*Hella white trash, eh?*—he'd plainly not cared that his comment was audible to everyone in the room; he might have even intended it thus; but how many *güeros* in the room saw in Güero a filthy spic, a piece of trash—and if he were right, weren't they also?

*How many brown-skinned losers are in here today, then?* thought Will. He felt watched, weighed, judged—held in contempt. Despised. But Will was complex and unfathomable—people who judged him as they did greasers like Güero didn't really *see* him. *Right?*

“Going to the pisser, *ese?*” asked Güero. Will didn't answer.

The noontime air was warm, though the sky was more cloudy than blue. County workers on lunch break walked past in groups, badges dangling. Will joined the tail end of a procession through a crosswalk, the only person not in a necktie. He did not get across before the light changed, and a car honked at him—he jumped as if stung. He did not have far to walk, from the grouping of government buildings north of downtown, through the rail yard, to come to the river, the bank of which he might follow, sticking to bike trails or the levee, all the way around to the county fairgrounds a few hours distant, where, detouring along the light rail tracks, he might

come to a city park he enjoyed hanging out in, Garfield Park. This was not the most direct route to get there, but Will was not walking solely in order to arrive somewhere. The view of the river was more remarkable from the gravelled path that ran along the bank, where the effulgence of the sun-dappled brown water reflected upward to the underside of the fecund effulgence of leaves that marked autumn's last burst of braggadocio before winter muted all colors in drab durance, but the walking was easier upon the asphalt-topped levee, and Will, veteran walker, gravitated there uncalculatingly. Every jogger who passed him nodded hello.

Will's howling loneliness racked him. He was sick to death of being in his own skin. The joggers nodded; the cyclists called, "Left side," and buzzed past. Will was pinned under his own microscope, with nobody there to flee from himself to. Here was the world in brief: at the top, connected men, string-pullers—Martians, basically; beneath them, the suits who worked downtown and made ludicrous sums; beneath them, suburban lawn-mowing minivan-owners; and beneath them, all of the squalid insignificant folks with no plots of their own—the extra people. Will lived in that stratum, alongside other human lumps who spent the balance of their lives working twice the hours for half the pay, who were weary from treading economic water indefinitely, slaves to their kids and the landlord, who perhaps in their finer moments, or their most naïve depths of self-deception, believed that they would show the world yet, make a splash, et cetera, even as they saw themselves breaking less than even, more month at the end of their money, no dreams to lament the loss of.

Will saw with nauseating clarity that he was likely to spend untold future hours in offices like the one today, looking at posters of Berlin, or in crappy mop-and-bucket jobs, or killing time in miserable unswept laundromats and dollar stores. "It's too much," he said aloud. He felt ready to cry.

His mind was a churn of bitterness and malaise, for he was pinned in the interstices of a double revelation. First: that his patronizing contempt for those who were at bottom only people, as human as he, was merely a bunch of vainglorious, childish baloney—an egoistic, masturbatory exercise in self-admiration. The fat mother—her husband loved her. Her child loved her. They were doing what they could with what they had. He knew precisely nil of their story; he was as unqualified to judge them as he was to appraise gemstones. All those people, if they were at least any less uncharitable than he, were likely *better* than him. His was a nasty way of looking at people, and a typical way, as typical as if he'd been a

bovine consumer curling his lip as he pretended not to see the bell-ringing Santa on his way into Wal-Mart. And second: that his membership in their class was indubitable. Whatever scorn he felt privileged to heap on the fat mother and her family accrued again to him. He was as poor, as dirty, as insignificant. His ethos and his values were nothing more than petty expedients to avoid seeing himself for what he was. Will meandered along the river for an hour, deeply ashamed. He was in error and knew it.

The Talbott Street Bridge arced over the river ahead of him, a gray-girdered obtrusion from a riot of green and yellow leaves. Will supposed people committed suicide by jumping from this bridge. The fall was certainly far. He knew, though, that it was the more picturesque bridge at 10th Street, always lit at night like a postcard image, that had the reputation of being a suicide spot. Will wondered if people, even when they chose to die, felt disinclined to land somewhere ugly. It made sense. Will watched the progressive decline of his thoughts into morbidity with detached, hollow wonderment. *I'm about to go off the handle*, he marvelled. Dying seemed—reasonable. Will shut back tears. At the bridge, on the asphalt intake of the raised pedestrian walkway, someone had painted a wide graffiti motto: GOD HATES US ALL. Will read it aloud. “Ha!”

He ached, as always, for dope. He'd quit using it all of a sudden—at the party, in fact, the same one in South Val where he'd been forcing kids to “answer questions three ere the beer keg you shall see.” A tentative game of strip poker had got going in the living room, most of the participants having no intention of playing all the way to nudity themselves but curious how far the others would go. In spite of himself, Will, from his perch by the keg, had been keeping an eye on one particular girl, far gone in drink, who was down to her T-shirt, shorts and one sock. It was during this furtive surveillance that one of the guys he'd hitched a ride with, a friend of Junior's called Cory who dressed in the urchinish mode of Midtown's indie rock scene, interrupted him to beckon toward the back of the house. When Will got there, he found Cory and another guy cutting lines on a table top with the edge of a credit card. “Want to get down on this shit?”

Will had an access of paranoia—or was it vanity? *Is there some kind of hipster cred in hooking up the 'totally punk' guy? Am I, like, a figure on this scene?* All at once, he felt creepier than he knew how to handle. “Uhh, bathroom, take a shit, be right back,” he'd mumbled. He'd heard a *sniff* behind him as he left. And that had been it.

The decision to try, for the umpteenth time, to effect a clean stretch

had been percolating up into his conscious intentions for a while. He was not optimistic, though. It seemed possible that heaven and earth might shift to deposit him into a life less lousy, but he wouldn't be holding his breath. Under different circumstances, his bout of depression after the HUD office thing would have sent him flying back to dope; but this time he couldn't stand the thought. Instead, his thoughts bent again to HUD; he knew he would have to go back.

It took another week of queasy soldiering through the sludge of a dope-free existence before Will felt qualified to label himself *clean*, but he stuck to it, dumpster-diving, in the interim, a brand new set of clothes and using a coin scam he knew to launder them, then paid a second visit to the housing authority. Working his way door-to-door around Garfield Park—he'd fixed on the area for no other reason than that it had occurred to him to walk there during his depressed episode—with paperwork in hand, feeling like a salesman in an old movie, he was rejected by one property manager after another until he came to an apartment building that would accept Section Eight housing, a place on Fuller. The first room he found, he took. The agent put his name in block letters on the dingy marquee by the front door, next to the column of buzzer buttons that he was warned did not function, between TSUHARA, KEIKO and HORN-ER, MARGO. *Hello, neighbors*, Will thought, running a finger along the glass absently. He had a backpack full of stuff, all of his possessions, more than half of it acquired by hook or crook only that morning, and this constituted moving in. *Maybe I should try to meet them*, he thought. Actually, it seemed like a stupid idea. The idea here was to keep a low profile, he reminded himself. There he was, standing in the sun with a key in his hand, no key-ring; another apartment, another clean streak; no job yet, but he figured it wouldn't take long for employment, like the press gangs of old, to catch up with him. He'd made this circuit before.

One diversion the privacy of an apartment afforded, one which Will had not much permitted himself all summer on exposed rooftops, was masturbation. It had been a long, rocky summer. Girls had been out in low-riding shorts and gossamer-thin summer dresses through September, suntanned legs flashing smoothly past him, sometimes brushed with the thinnest touch of perspiration, sleek waists either bared or suggested, the suggestion sometimes even more overpowering than the unclothed reality. Will, it took no explaining, was the antithesis of an eligible guy in the eyes of the average female; he *could* have dallied with one of the hardcore Palm Circle semi-prostitutes blessed with only some of the teeth they'd



once had, who reeked, if you were lucky, of nothing worse than ancient cigarette ash; but he'd never condescended to this; despite all his close dealings with the Palm Circle enclave, Will saw now that he'd been walking around like royalty in exile; women like those were an embarrassment to his self-image. So—it had been a lonely summer. In his own room, Will at last let roll his internal highlight reel, compiled from six months' lonesome observation of bouncing skirts and bare inner thighs, and expiated a season's worth of unrequited crushes. From Dashier's he shoplifted a packet of tissues. Before long, he shoplifted another.

Anne Havery was back in jail, Junior had followed a promising rockabilly gig north to Eugene, Oregon, and Will made no particular effort to fraternize with any of the other tweakers he knew. Sure, if somebody had come over, he would have 'been at home' to them—it wasn't *that* kind of clean streak. He just didn't see much point in watching other people get wired.

He spent whole days in the library. Of course, he never checked any books out, since the library would not grant him borrowing privileges unless he could produce a valid credit card. When he wanted to bring a book home, his technique was to peel off the barcode on the book's dust jacket—the barcode sticker contained a magnetized strip—and put it in his shoe: the security sensors at the exit doors didn't extend to the floor. Once he smuggled the book outside, he'd reattach the barcode so that, when he returned the book, the librarians would not catch wise to his strategy. He always returned the books. There was no point in keeping them, even the good ones, since he could always find them again at the library; and although to steal from the mall or Wal-Mart was a moral imperative as well as a viable source of fun and profit, to steal from as upstanding an institution as a public library smacked of incivility.

And also, Will was proud. The library's business about credit cards he took as a judgement of suspicion on his character. *Fuck if I'll be what you think I am.*

He whiled away hours lounging on the thin mattress that had been in his room when he moved in, or pacing in the park, reading novels he'd had an eye on for some time, not always completing them. He breezed through Henry Miller; had a rougher ride with Dostoyevsky but fell far enough into the plot of *Crime and Punishment* to brush past the boring shit; had less luck with Henry James and had to call things off on the tenth page of *Daisy Miller*; had a blast with Ursula K. Le Guin; got not even two pages into a copy of *Finnegans Wake* before he was convinced that there had

been a mechanical error at the printer, only to find the same clamor of alphabetical nonsense in the library's other copy; found himself arguing with almost everything B.F. Skinner had to say in *Walden Two*; got what Jack Kerouac was going for pretty early on and didn't feel compelled to finish *Dharma Bums*; burned through *Catch-22* with wild glee; and abandoned Annie Proulx not in spite of the fact that, but precisely *because*, he couldn't put into words what he thought was wrong with every sentence of *The Shipping News*. He occasionally took to reading the best parts aloud when he was in the park, a liberty he allowed himself only now that he wasn't homeless. There wasn't any chance of his catching up on all the books he hoped to read this side of mortality, but *finishing* books wasn't the point anyway.

As his days were filled with reading, his nights were filled with music. He'd been scamming his way into rock clubs for so long that most of the bouncers and guys working the door had begun to think he was *supposed* to get in for free. He'd put an arm around a band member, crack a joke, and saunter in together—easy as one-two-three. Since his evasion of the cover charge was more money out of the band's pocket than the bar's, he generally slid through. It was thus that one Thursday night, on a corny grill and beer bar on Howell Street called Stingray's, Will joked with the singer of the headlining band, a trio of local punk old-timers making their living on the names of the bands they used to be in, helped to carry in some gear, and in return not only got in for free but inherited a handful of the band's drink tickets. It was a bit of good fortune that the singer had already been well-lit on Jack Daniel's. This band's show was doomed to be uninspired. The music scene in Midtown Valentina was rightly the envy of the suburbs, and even of nearby cities like Sacramento or Reno, but it also supported a handful of insular pockets of mediocrity, musicians who'd been around long enough and knew enough of the business to command well-attended shows despite a want of talent, or worse, of *spark*. Still it was music. Will appreciated the crush of people, the volume, the laughing females—and there were those drink tickets.

Will drank his tickets up and had to dip into his slender wad of spending money to keep going. It was a fine thing, drinking beer this good. Will had no choice but to nod and agree with himself on this point: it was fine indeed to drink fine beer. Yessir, it was. He ordered another.

As befitted a rock show more hip than musical, the greater part of the crowd at Stingray's was either pressed against the bar or chatting out on the venue's enclosed patio, perfectly ignoring the bands. The house

lights were dim, and the decor—oh, this decor *wasn't even joking*. Will saw sporting detritus that tested the limits of one's faith in humanity, stuffed marlins on plaques, you name it. He laughed to nobody. It made an uncanny backdrop for the ear-splitting routine of the Bruebellies, three sweaty blond guys, one quite ironically wearing a mullet, cranking out four-on-the-floor garage rock with changes and stops that were—*reliable* was Will's snide euphemism. Oh, the snide hilarity—Will figured the world ought to count itself lucky he wasn't sharing his jokes with anyone tonight. Someone lit a cigarette, but the bartender made her put it out. The singer was a barker and, like a dog, could vocalise at only one volume, in only one register: "You say it's my abuse / but I will still refuse / head first into the machine / you don't know what I mean"—that sort of nonsense, dispensed in shouted, bitten-off syllables that the singer occasionally twisted into a weary sneer, as though the very conventions of singing and playing guitar were but tiresome chores the motions of which he was only going through to satisfy the demands of 'the machine,' I-hope-you-people-are-satisfied. Of course, this was music in the style Will had grown up on, thrashing punk mayhem, and he felt warmly toward it for all its silly flaws. One of this band's trademarks was to launch, every few songs, into old-school covers, the gimmick being that audience members were encouraged to rush the stage, snatch the mic and sing along. Will had seen their shtick before; it was planned spontaneity, but it did keep things interesting.

Will himself had never been on a stage, in front of a crowd. It would probably have been easy, but he could only imagine himself 'being on-stage' as an action inside quotation marks. Here they went—another cover. A firm-jawed beefcake disciple of Henry Rollins, stocky and tattooed, barrelled up to grab the mic as the band lurched into a well-known Stooges song. Will steeled himself for another onslaught of sweat, spittle and testosterone. But then something happened—a group of girls, laughing and raucous, pushed one of their number up onto the stage, a slight Asian girl, visibly drunk and wheeling merrily around. She bodily tackled Henry Rollins and somehow commandeered the mic from him, nearly bowling over the bass player as well, which was great. As she began to blare out the lyrics in an atonal foreign accent—"I'm the world's forgotten boy / the one who's searchin' to destroy"—the audience cheered and whooped, utterly taken in by her accidental charm, her clumsy, natural presence and the hilarity of the moment.

*God, how cool*, thought Will. She was slim and active inside her slop-

py, thoughtless clothes; her twill pants rode immodestly low around her hips; but what Will couldn't take his eyes off of was her palpable sincerity. *How can she just go up there and do that?* he thought, the beer in his blood amplifying the answer his emotions made to the moment. She would have been the same anywhere, as comfortable onstage as off; and there was no posturing, the way too many musicians *acted like musicians* to make up for their discomfort in the spotlight. *Why don't I know anyone like that?* he thought wistfully. As he would learn a couple of days later, she was actually his neighbor.

The song ended. Keiko tossed the microphone at the band's singer, who wasn't paying attention. It hit the floor and a mammoth pop blasted from the public-address speakers. Keiko jumped, looked apologetic; her contingent of drunken girlfriends laughed like imps. Will considered offering her one of his drink tickets in a play to—talk to her? Or something? *Oh*, he realized, *I'm out of drink tickets*. Foiled! He ordered another beer. That was what guys did, though, when they cruised the bar for tail. Happening guys at happening bars. Get the girls drunk. Slip roofies into their drinks when opportunity knocked. Make backhanded, disparaging remarks to get the girls' confidence down. Then crack a joke, one you've practiced at home. Will would have to sweep a hand through his hair first before bar's long mirror, check his teeth, turn up his collar. Slide in between her and whomever she was talking to—Hey, baby, why talk to a zero when you can be with a hero? Et cetera. Will wallowed in his joke, absolutely hilarious to himself. He could have sat on his stool mocking his own horny urges for the whole rest of the night—but then the band he'd come to see came on, Bubonic Prague—yeah, the name was shit, but the *songs*, man, the *songs!*—and he bounced off his stool to pogo into the crowd.

The members of this band included two guys he'd gotten to know, snide jokers named Stan Gruber and Pete Phillips—and their stage names were, get this: Grubby Stan and Philthy Pete—and a guy on drums he'd never talked to whom everybody called Greasebeard, for reasons readily imaginable. Their singer was a total weirdo—like, a *weirdo*, maybe with Asperger's or something—who called himself Aaron Bubonic. The first song they played tonight was one Will had fallen in love with right at the start of his love affair with punk; it was about—no shit—punk rock itself. Now he liked it because he'd *once* liked it, not because he *still* liked it; but the pit at a punk show was no place for ironic evaluation of one's motives and interests. Will sang along with Aaron's melodic lines:

*Crusty girls / holding hands / riding two-seaters  
Fashion-punx / at the mall / wearing wifebeaters  
Indie boys / gazes down / playing two-chorders  
Old-schoolers / on the porch / swapping disorders  
On the day that I say / that our lifestyle is wrong  
Smack my mouth and play / me this song!*

Aaron would twitch and jerk fantastically, spitting out each word of *smack! my! mouth!* It was Will's favorite moment in the song. It *made* the show for him. He staggered home in the small hours drunk and giddy.

The rent-free life began to agree with Will, his aversion to the dole going up in so much smoke the instant he got a taste of it, but the county made payments directly to his landlady, so Will could see no way to game the system for a little spending money. Without crank in his system, his appetite was unleashed, but he still mostly subsisted on table scraps foraged surreptitiously from the outdoor tables of a couple of restaurants in the neighborhood or food lifted from supermarket shelves, rarely resorting to dumpsters and even more rarely calling on friends to hook him up wherever they worked. The obvious solution was to shoplift to make cash, but he couldn't warm to the idea; the second most obvious solution was to score food stamps. Will knew from hearsay, however, that the county compelled all food stamp applicants to attend dull and demeaning seminars on how to apply for shit-work jobs—which side of the job application to write on, he supposed. When his hunger outstripped his impatience with such flappedoodle, he supposed he would submit to it, but his impatience as yet held firm. Dropping in at a Round Table Pizza his sometime-coworker Harriet worked for, hoping to take home one of the pizzas that a customer had called in to order but never arrived to claim—there were a couple every night, but it was no good waiting until they were thrown out because Round Table padlocked its dumpsters—he ran into Tim Thompson. “You been tweaking too hard, bro,” Tim offered. “You look hella skinny.”

“Dieting, man. Hoping to fit into my wedding dress.” Then, jokes aside, Will explained that he was clean now, but that food was scarce.

“Be nice to have an income, then.”

“Would be, I guess.” Will hoped Tim wasn't going to offer him another job cooking dope.

“You don't still eat out of the trash can.” When Will didn't answer, Tim chuckled and shook his head. “Might as well eat rat poison, dog. You're going to straight get salmonella someday, or fucking hep.”

“Nobody gets hepatitis from eating anything.” At least, to Will this

seemed unlikely.

“Why not get your grub from that one place on 23rd?” Will didn’t know about it, so Tim passed on what he knew: that it was a strict program with a Biblical dimension, but that under certain conditions one could be fed. “But check the name of it, dog. ‘The Christian Refugee Mission’ or some shit like that.”

“Man, fuck a soup kitchen.” Will clucked his tongue; but he was nevertheless interested despite himself. He pictured the place: a non-denominational church in a strip mall, with a youth pastor, a house band, a ‘Screaming Jesus’ mural like the one at the Army of God soup kitchen. But Food Not Bombs had been hounded out of Valentina on some kind of bullshit about permits, and Dignity Village was being busted by cops almost every week, so the charities had stopped bringing food out to the campgrounds as well. There weren’t many places to eat anymore that didn’t come with a sermon for an aperitif. Will thanked Tim for the info; he knew Tim was trying to be helpful. And after a couple of weeks more, as some form of employment began to look less and less bad, as the endless uncertainty of his food situation began to wear him down, and as the daily scrabble to get fed and scare up a few bucks to put toward the utility bill, which Section Eight for some reason did not cover, Will got *tired*. So he trekked to Tim’s place and asked about the Mission again, writing the address Tim gave him on his hand with a blue ballpoint pen, and set his salvaged alarm clock to wake him in time for breakfast.

## Chapter Four

Will imagined the feel of running the tip of his finger over the edge of her brow, over her temples where dark, fine strands of hair draped down. He thought of how it would be to push this hair back over the round ridges of her ears, the way girls put their hair back over their ears; then, when she shifted her body and one strand escaped and swung back over her face, to push it back again, carefully, intimately, holding her face in his two hands, dancing his lips across the dome of her forehead, cupping his palms over the lines of her waist at the subtle flange of her narrow hips. Will thought of Keiko for much of the night, then woke up late for work. When he awoke, without turning his head he found himself looking directly at the rotary telephone atop his table. *Call in sick?* he thought. *Or quit?* The answer was plain.

The bus Will boarded, like every city bus in Valentina, ran on some sort of ear-splitting engine which generated a racket like a metal shed full of jackhammers run rampant, or a cappuccino machine large enough to grind human bones. To overcome this perfect storm of noise, everyone on board shouted. A gaggle of teenaged boys on the back benches tried to win status over one another by means of caustic humor; to signal that they were to be understood to be getting progressively funnier, they grew louder. A couple of garrulous old men, one of them outfitted with a clipboard and papers for registering people to vote and gathering ballot initiative signatures, had fallen into a friendly but thunderously loud debate on the utter depravity of the Sacramento Kings, who showed no inclination to get off the dime and win a playoff. It was no small job tuning them all out. The driver announced each stop in a hoarse groan, sounding harried through the speaker; Will wondered why, if the guy was so stressed out, he persisted with the announcements. A heavy-boned girl, sullen and attractive, with her hair in a weave, sobbed into a cell phone on the seat across the aisle from Will; she was trying to explain herself in words he couldn't catch. All he heard was her pleading tone of quiet distress, alternated with stretches of worried silence as she listened to however the other person was responding. He tried not to eavesdrop—but it was impossible. He expressly ordered his mind to lean away from her words, and as a result it obstinately bent toward them. But the kid behind him was mouthing the lyrics of the hip-hop song that Will could hear crashing of his earphones, mumbling, on the intake of his breath, only the patches he could remember, and this too blended in with the cacophony around Will. Anyway, he

couldn't hear her.

At the stop at Carlson and California Streets, two handicapped riders wanted to get on, which meant the driver had to lower the bus's prehistoric lift twice, once for each of them, and to Will he did not look fain to do it. Will had no watch, but the bus was presumably running late. The driver, dour and ill-mannered, with his blue uniform shirt unbuttoned at the top, didn't want to talk at all, though the first person woman to board, in a wheelchair, kept asking the time. "Do you think we'll get to the East Val terminal on schedule?" *You're the one making us late*, Will thought. *Don't you know better than to ask the time?* This was a lovely way to think—it pointed up just what a compassionate and progressive mind Will had. His sudden self-disgust impelled him to change sides, inly taking the woman's part against the driver, and against in fact the entire busload of passengers she was delaying simply by existing. The disabled made Will feel *accused*. The driver was struggling mightily with the straps of the bus's wheelchair restraint, lips pressed thin.

"You're doing it wrong," another rider pointed out. "I think."

The driver ignored her. The whole bus seemed interested now. The driver's face, already red with effort, deepened in color, and he persisted in yanking at the straps, determined to stick to his way of doing it, however futile, as though his initial tack with the straps had been an investment and he was now constrained to throw good money after bad. *He's doing it wrong on purpose*, thought Will. *It helps him get angrier. It's how he builds up his case.* The longer the straps confounded him, the later his bus ran, and the more justified he would be in despising the two invalids. All this was to prove that none of it was his fault—prove it to whom? to the *universe*—so it was of moral value to the driver to be made later, ridiculously later, by the woman; whose face, incidentally, was waxen. Judging from her studied detachment, the whole thing could have been happening on the other side of the moon.

The second disabled woman came up on the lift, riding not a wheelchair but a sort of gurney with a strap to fix down her entirely legless torso. Will involuntarily recalled a whole series of no-arms-and-no-legs jokes from elementary school:

*What do you call a guy with no arms and no legs on the floor?*

—Matt.

*What do you call a guy with no arms and no legs on the wall?*

—Art.

*What do you call a guy with no arms and no legs in the pool?*



—Bob.

*What do you call a guy with no arms and no legs waterskiing?*

—Skip.

This was awful. Will tried to kill his own train of thought. The moment the woman gained the bus, she locked eyes with him. He found something else to look at. He'd been able to distinguish, at a distance half the length of the bus, the colorless hairs of her moustache, the droll, unsteady brilliance of her eyes. Was this the woman's habit, to start right into the eyes of strangers? Was it friendly? Had being disabled driven her batty? Once she too was secured in a wheelchair restraint, the other passengers waiting outside were at last able to board the bus. Those who came on were conscious of having been observed being made to wait, and the potential hung in the air for a shared understanding; at this Will felt revolted. He wanted to be glad that the handicapped women had come onto the bus, if only not to be in accord with the other riders. A guy came back looking for a seat; he looked to Will like an out-of-work laborer younger in mind than in years, though on what basis other than general impressions Will drew this conclusion he could not have said; he had a dip of chew pushing his lower lip outward; he sat next to Will, making a clumsy overture: "Kind of a long wait there, huh?"

The guy was a rube. Will's being, from head to toe, sneered. "Fuck you."

The fellow's eyes fluttered like a slot machine hitting a combination. Will could read his thoughts: *Did he say...?* "Whatever." The guy moved to another seat, looking stung. The girl who'd been on the phone leaned over. "You're right. People really need to be more *tolerant*." She was nodding at Will but talking to be heard by the guy with the chew. "Disabled people have rights too."

Will monitored this scene from a vantage just above his own head, transported a step from the words in his own mouth and the tense tilt of his own skull. If he looked as hard as he felt, anyone on the bus would have had to have been suicidal, or just as hard, to as much as exchange words with him. He must have looked dangerous, like an armed thug, a guy likely to pack heat.

He had one. A gun.

Rodney hadn't wanted to give it to him. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but fuck this kind of backsliding. It's like these dudes who, they turn up at the Mission all, 'I'm turning a new leaf,' and all that. Next thing, it's, 'Got a line?'"

“I do not see the connection.” Will enunciated sarcastically.

“Well, look harder. It’s *switching*.” Rodney took a drag on a rollie, impatient to smoke it and keep talking. They were out in the alley, in their usual conference area. “Now you’re switching, man. First it’s, kill him, which is like, yeah, right. Then it’s, kick his ass, but of course no action. Now you’re back to the old red rum.” Rodney was cruelly facetious.

“I’m not joking around.”

“Shit. You disgust me.” Rodney began rolling another cigarette, the yellow pouch of Top in his dextrous fingers, and stared at Will. “You better *not* joke about no felony, *kid*. Who do you think you are?”

“Angry black super-predator.”

“Hardy har.”

“The wrong nigger to fuck with.”

Rodney frowned. “You ain’t. There’s your problem.”

“Like you even know.” Will felt like a charlatan. He rallied his convictions—feeling desirous of convictions. Rodney winced and spat.

The bus was a sauna. Will opened the oblong window above his bench, tilting it nearly horizontally to ventilate his seat as best he could. The air outside, not much better than within, stank of exhaust, oil, dust, tar, burnt paper, decomposing leaves and hot asphalt, but the flush of air into the bus cleared his head nonetheless. Out his window, Will saw stores and offices, parked cars, plenty of parking lots; this area seemed designed with parking lots in foremost consideration. On the sidewalk, a young man with wind-whipped jet-black hair wrangled with a dozen dogs on comically tangled leashes. A heavy man in a sweat suit on the opposite bench, sitting where the girl on the phone had been, leaned his head toward Will and said, “How’d you like to have that job there?” His accent was Midwestern.

“Beats working in the coal mines.” Will’s own speech involuntarily turned down-homey as well.

The man said, “I tell ya,” and settled back into himself—not, Will was glad to see, intending to pursue the conversation. Will wanted not to be disturbed. *Hate to have to cap his ass*, he thought.

He rolled the conversation with Rodney back to the start and let it play again in his head, trying to call it back as nearly verbatim as possible. “So he did it again last night,” guessed Rodney. “That’s what’s got you going today.”

Will was obliged to deny this. All had been quiet the night before, and for several nights running.

Rodney snorted through his nose, not in contempt but just to clear the airway. “So then, what?”

“It’s not, *what*. It’s the same issue as always.” To avoid saying the only thing he could think of—Will felt that to admit that he *loved* her, a near-stranger, would be like admitting to an emasculating fetish or a belief in aliens—he tried saying what he thought Rodney would want to hear: “You said it, all talk, no action. And you’re totally right.”

“You ain’t listening to me.” Rodney spoke coolly. “You made your mind up. Now you’re standing there ‘listening’ just so I can say my piece.” He eyed Will’s reaction to his words. “That’s it, right? Rejected in advance, no matter what I say.”

Will was surly. He said nothing.

“I got no quarrel with your general basic impulses here,” pursued Rodney. “You want to be *doing* something.”

“That’s it,” replied Will with full-throttle sarcasm. “I want employment.”

Rodney had a talent for ignoring such outbursts. “If we was going to do something, we *should* of done it pronto. But, look—get serious. Gawl. You got this bug up your ass just *today*, man.”

“I have never stopped thinking about it since before I told you.” The subject was indeed old between them, batted around in half a dozen debates before. Will would bring up revenge-killing; Rodney would tiredly pooh-pooh him. They’d talk practicalities instead: how to find out where Sherwin worked, when to jump him and how far to carry the beating, whether Sherwin ought to know who they were and why they were jumping him, and whether Keiko need know about it at all. Sherwin’s fortuitous excursion out of town had left them spinning their wheels; then, when he came back, they had run into difficulties prying the car keys from Jacob without divulging their purpose. The only time they ever really knew Sherwin’s whereabouts was when he was at Keiko’s place; it was surpassingly difficult to track down and ambush someone neither of them knew, Rodney not even by sight.

“We’re talking about a *guy* here.” Rodney evidently thought of this as the central reality of the thing: that the person to be killed, Sherwin, was a *person*, now living. “You think this is a video game.” Rodney wasn’t being fair to Will or to his intelligence, but his attitude seemed to be that this was no time for fairness. “He does bad stuff, but he’s still got his good side. He’s got the virtues God gave him, somewhere.”

*Amen*, thought Will darkly. He had indeed resolved to hear and then

reject everything Rodney said to him, so he heard Rodney out with considerably less argumentation than he might otherwise have. Will knew that to leave Sherwin out—the dead guy, or soon-to-be-dead guy—to leave him right out of the script was indefensible. But what about justice?

Will leaned on his elbow against the chain-link barrier that partitioned off the seldom-used private parking area of the warehouse next door to the Mission, and as he spoke he wove his other hand through the air, as though unwinding an imaginary bandage. “Some asshole just lets it rip on a girl and nothing bad ever happens to him for it.”

Rodney’s gaze was penetrating. “Which ain’t good.” His tone said, *We’ve been over this.*

“And first, okay, some facts.” Will paused. Rodney nodded. Will continued: “One, it’s got nothing to do with me.”

Rodney cocked his head sideways. “She is your bud, though.” He sounded almost goaded into this observation.

“Nothing at all to do with me,” insisted Will. “None of my business. That’s what you think, so I’ll grant you that. And two, it’s most likely she wouldn’t even want me to.”

“True. Though he’s hitting her. Obviously it don’t break somebody’s heart to see a guy like that get back what he’s been dishing out.”

Will would not admit of this. “It’s not her style. You know, they’re all Buddhists in Japan.” This would have meant nothing to Rodney beyond vague notions of idolatry. “Three, jail.”

“*Prison*, brother.”

“I know that. Nobody wants to go to jail.” He admitted this flippantly.

“Some serious shit. No, you *don’t* know. It ain’t something *to* know. They even execute people.”

Will could not have explained it and would have been mortified to try, but for him, it almost had to be prison. Risk was in the equation. He had started out thinking, in a mix of nobleness and self-interest, that the balance of justice would tilt askew yet again if he were caught and punished for doing what was only right—as in an Edgar Allan Poe revenge story he’d come across: *I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser*—but he couldn’t stand to be an excuse-maker, a wriggler; he would not plead to be let off the hook; he had a will to culpability, perhaps perverse, which he imagined to totally separate himself from Sherwin: if caught, he would elect to take *total responsibility*. This would have been foolish to try to explain to Rodney.

Rodney wasn't buying any of it. "So then what about all that Buddha crap, then? I'm sure they got forgive-and-forget over there too."

To this Will returned repeatedly in his rumination aboard the bus as it carried him duskward, past the interstate and toward the Valentine suburb of Sunrise, where Sherwin worked at an address Will had located in a White Pages lifted from a stack in the supermarket near the sliding doors—purloined clandestinely, since, like a dummy, he hadn't realized till afterward that the books were free to take. Will had looked at a thin volume of Buddhist verse at the library; in it, a point had been stressed repeatedly: he who, when harmed, does not retaliate, wins a battle hard to win. It was simple enough in theory: let it slide. Had Sherwin given *Will* a bruise on his jaw, the doctrine would have been unassailable: a bigger man would let it go. But when the victim was someone else, especially someone weaker—*Twarnt nothin, little lady, said John Wayne*, thought Will—then Buddhism failed to give him an answer. Such forgiveness was really cowardice. The unavenged wrong must burn endlessly, long after Keiko herself might have forgiven the guy, because Will in good conscience could not sell her out.

Or was this just self-centered guilt? For whom was Will really doing this?

Was it action-reaction? Until Sherwin *paid*, would there be an imbalance?

Only pussies cried for peace to avoid their responsibility to warfare—was this true?

Into the molded blue plastic seat-back in front of Will, someone had carved FUCK JA. 'JA' may have been initials, or the beginning of a word. *Dude, plan ahead*, thought Will. *Probably got to his stop before he could finish writing*, he speculated.

In the end, Rodney had furnished the weapon. Each had satisfied himself: Rodney, that he'd made every effort to get sense to penetrate Will's granite skull; Will, that he'd heard Rodney out without softening, being both reasonable and unreasonable at the same time. Rodney had to disappear from the Mission alone for a few hours to retrieve his gun from what he called 'storage', which made it sound to Will like he kept it in a safe deposit box at the credit union. Will had no idea of how to get a gun other than to beg use of Rodney's. No one else he knew who might be able to lay hands on one could be trusted to keep a tight lip; also, they'd want money. What did a gun cost? Will had never had any reason to learn this figure. A few guys had flashed guns around him in his time living out of

doors, but he did what he could to avoid that sort of idiot. He knew he would have to end up throwing Rodney's gun away—into the river, presumably, after wiping off the fingerprints or the DNA or whatever it was one wiped off of the—handle, was it? Stock? Barrel? Will had no idea. Doubtless it would be proper etiquette to reimburse Rodney for the gun later.

While Rodney was gone, Will dashed downtown to Venture Horizons to see about taking home any of his last pay, but he learned, to no great surprise, that they'd mail him a check in their own good time. At this news he retained the presence of mind to tell his ex-boss his real mailing address, calling it his 'new' address in order not to admit falsifying information on the original job application. After this and a lunch of bagels and vegetable juice from a street merchant, he returned to the Mission to wait for Rodney. When Rodney came back, it was with a .357 Magnum in his jacket pocket. He handed it right over to Will there in the alley. Anyone could have seen. "Hide this, man."

"Fuck. Okay." Will wondered where it ought to go. His waistband? He tucked it away. Rodney jingled a handful of bullets in his fist. Will stared at them, then ventured what he knew was a dumb question: "Do those come with it?"

Rodney snorted in contempt. "You ain't never *fired* a gun."

"Should we, like, go sign up at the shooting range?" Will was irritated—nervous. The gun felt heavy against his belly.

"Gawl. This here is a comedy of errors." Rodney handed Will the bullets. "Here's twelve. You can shoot your foot off twelve times, if you reload."

"Well, that isn't so convenient."

"I ain't even going to get more into it." Rodney's voice bespoke his nihilistic disgust with and resignation to the absurd. "So some guy somewhere is going to die today. Hope it all goes according to plan."

"Would that really be so bad?"

Rodney exhaled loudly. "Shit. Sure. Like in them countries, when they have a revolution and they put the old dictator up to the wall. Sure. Everybody cheers. It's a party. That sucker don't deserve mercy, I get it, it don't make sense to feel bad for him after he's murdered however many people."

Will looked cautiously at Rodney. "That's basically my whole theory here."

Rodney hid his face behind his hand to smoke his cigarette. "Well, be

sure you really waste this dickhead. Don't miss."

Will swallowed.

"He deserves it," muttered Rodney.

Was *this* true? On the bus, Will considered the act from the farther shore of its completion. Item: every person was obligated to set to right some small portion of the wrongness of the world. Item: this was not a realistic idea. Item: every person had to decide for themselves what the right thing to do is. Item: *I'm doing this mostly for myself*, Will tried to admit. Item: trying to be candid with oneself and then going ahead and doing something wrong anyway was a sneaky cheat. Item: Rodney's tit-for-tat solution of giving Sherwin a beating was actually more fair. Item: but to hit a girl in a position of vulnerability and trust was exponentially worse than—a deafening blast of the bus horn jolted Will back to the present.

The bus barreled toward the intersection of Manlove and Olympia, where the light was already red. The bus had no prayer of clearing the intersection before it was full of cross-traffic. But the driver held down the horn and shouted. His voice clanged, distorted beyond comprehensibility, from the speaker above Will's head. The driver aimed the bus dead-center at the intersection.

No one on the bus knew what to do. The air was filled with noise. Tires squealed. Time slowed. As a unit everyone seemed to gasp. A van came inches from the side of the bus, fishtailing. A woman seated on that side threw her hands up to her face. Impact seemed certain.

The bus passed through. A chorus of horns chased its wake.

A grandmotherly-looking Mexican woman in a red raincoat near the front stood and shouted, "Christ, driver, you lose it or what?" Someone pulled the bell cord. The bus stopped and more than half the riders piled off through the rear door. The teenaged boys exited jeering. "Straight went *postal!*" Will saw that the driver would not turn his head.

The next stop was Sunrise Avenue; Will pulled the bell cord, eyeing the driver still. *Maybe I should do something*, he thought. *I have this thing on me. Maybe I should step in and do something.* The time for it, whatever he might have done, was past. Will stepped down to the sidewalk from the rear door and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. There was the revolver. The metal was warm. *Should I have done something about that guy?* The driver was a menace. It may even have been a matter of saving someone's life, to get the man out from behind the wheel of a bus. Or it could have just been a mental hiccup, steam blowing off, followed by a return to normal. *Anyway, what could I do? Shoot him?* That was the prob-

lem with a gun, Will perceived: it was practically useless. All he could do with it was shoot people. The neighborhood in this section of Sunrise was archetypally suburban, with boxy, anonymous shopping centers stretched along the thoroughfare, flanked by wide, empty parking lots of poured concrete, where some sudden blight must have taken off all the young saplings, leaving only stakes jutting up at geometrical intervals. Cars passed, but Will saw no other pedestrians. He had only a dozen blocks to walk to the bank's collections office. He crossed at the crosswalk, where an electronic bird chirped to signal a green light.

It had been a strange parting with Rodney. Both seemed to respect the gravity of what was to come. Will recollected a snatch of dialogue from *Goodfellas*: "You know who gets caught? Nigger stick-up men. And you know why they get caught? Because they fall asleep in the getaway car." It went something like that—Ray Liotta carrying on about how he and the mob were *organized*. The whole sense of the scene rose up in Will's head. So he said something to Rodney like he was going to go directly to 'the place' to do 'the thing'. He spoke in vague code now that the course was set. He would proceed with swift, sure care. Organized. It seemed the sooner he got it off his hands—the less time he allowed to elapse between the commencement and conclusion of the act—then the less potential for error would accrue to him. He ran some movie dialogue of his own: "How do they nail you? With facts. How do you get away with it? Minimize the facts. Facts take time to develop. In less time, less can go wrong." Item: this entire view could be full of shit. Item: suspicions like that are not useful when you need to act swiftly. Item: he was sure to screw up something critical if he did not think carefully. Item: his self-delusion was absolute; can you decide carefully that you are thinking carefully if you cannot be sure that you're thinking properly at all. "Shit, shit, shit," muttered Will. "Screw your courage to the sticking-place." He'd read this somewhere; he'd thought it was a horrible cheat of a metaphor, as though whoever had thought of it had got as far as 'screw' and thought, *Screw it to—what? What do people screw things to? Ahh—I give up!* Will trudged up the sidewalk, moral questions and slapstick mental associations rolling around inside his head like marbles in a bowl. He recalled Rodney in the moment he had capitulated, nodded, and told Will, "Be sure you really waste this dickhead." That had been the worst moment. That was when Will had come closest to giving up.

Will drew nearer to where he thought Sherwin's workplace would be. The knots in his stomach creaked and tightened like hawsers in a gale.



His thoughts turned hurdy-gurdy. The steady decrementing of the address numbers as he moved up the block oppressed him. He slowed his gait, but then pushed on faster. The street was an unbroken string of featureless commercial structures, dental clinics, office space, sculpted lawn areas in the California style; many of the buildings were already vacant at the close of the business day, though Will was counting on Sherwin's working late. In the windows of the empty offices, indoor plants and dormant computer monitors composed a corporate still-life under half-lighting left on through the night for security purposes. Will eyed them as he passed by. In one window, a woman in a pant suit disturbed the static scene of bestilled leather swivel chairs as, with the flat of her hand, she swept sheets of paper from a shelf above a photocopy machine into a wastebasket held in the crook of her other arm. Though Will could see her, he imagined that, with dusk deepening, she could not see him.

On a wire high above the sidewalk, a row of small mud-colored birds perched, all facing the same direction. Sherwin's building came into view. Will recognized the bank's blue and yellow insignia. The building was in an office park, its mostly empty parking lot enclosed like a courtyard by the three wings of the plain, sleek structure. Sherwin's car was there. Will knew it from seeing it on Fuller around the building.

Two other cars were also there. Will, ten paces from the corner of the lot, cast about for a place to wait, his mind revolving on the word *inconspicuous*. How ludicrous it was to play at lurking incognito when he felt as though a spotlight from above were trained on him, with ARMED MINORITY superimposed across his back. The wide, bare sidewalk, with only a utility pole jutting from the concrete, offered nothing to sit on and no place a person might loiter on legitimate pretenses. A bus stop would have been ideal. He squatted at the curb and stuck his feet into the gutter. The gun butt jabbed into his gut. The other two cars in the lot posed a problem that Will had already given some inconclusive thought to: witnesses. A thug would waste them. Anybody dumb or unlucky enough—waste them. Will knew this would be out of the question. But on the other hand, to show his face, to do what he intended, and then—to walk off? In truth, he ought to have been willing to shoot Sherwin in front of a hundred witnesses, since he was enforcing the right, but that was theory and this was practice. To risk punishment, even recklessly, was noble; but it were absurdity altogether to gift-wrap himself for the penitentiary.

Should Sherwin walk out of the office alone, the point would be moot. Will would intercept him halfway, say, "For Keiko," and shoot. No

speeches or long drama—all to the purpose of being *organized*. Sherwin would probably not have much idea of what was happening, or why, before it ended; this was far from ideal in view of repaying him for Keiko's suffering; but Will accepted the compromise. Maximum swiftness was safest. Mistakes took *time* to happen.

A chilly wind picked up. Will was grateful for his new pea coat, a serendipitous recent find behind a swank Midtown used clothing shop and costumier, not in but *on* the dumpster; to Will, anything fished from within a dumpster was pillage duly earned, but a coat found folded up on top was a gift from the cosmos. He pulled the coat tight and slipped his hand inside to finger the revolver. His index finger stole to the trigger and recoiled again.

Sherwin came out of his building unaccompanied. Will had seen no sign of anyone stirring within but for a shift in the lighting of the lobby a moment before Sherwin appeared, probably as an office door opened and shut. Sherwin was in a collared shirt, mauve, pressed, and a tie but no jacket. He made the picture of what he was: a salaried, but not well-off, young professional knocking off for the day; his shock of blond hair seemed incongruously childish. He stepped briskly toward his car and then stopped, wheeled abruptly, and jogged back to the door of the building. When after a moment he reemerged, it was with an expanding file folder under one arm and a sports blazer clutched in hand. He spent a ticklish moment at the door of his Mazda, trying to fish out his car keys without having to set down what he carried; but in the end he managed to load himself into the automobile. Just as his car's brake lights flashed red and its engine caught, the parking lot lamps sputtered to life, probably on a timer; the two unrelated events seemed synchronized.

Sherwin's Mazda had to wait at the light of the intersection, though there was no cross-traffic; this also was governed by a timer. Most friends of Will's would have rolled through after a neck-crane in each direction, but Sherwin waited. Will stared at the Mazda, at the license plate, the middle three letters of which happened to form the word 'PLY'. He loathed himself. He saw that he might yet overtake the car at the light—but he couldn't be sure that he would. No other cars were in sight in any direction. He could shoot Sherwin through the window. It would look to the police like a failed carjacking—not such a bad way to do it. After that, a dead run into the street, and he'd be away. The traffic signal in the other direction began to change. The yellow light seemed impossibly to hold for ten, twelve seconds. Then it too changed. The Mazda's tires turned. It was

too late. Will stood up hurriedly, took a step off the curb. No—it was too late.

Will did not have a curse in his vocabulary potent enough to level at himself now. He stood dumbly, then sat back on the curb. He turned the moment over in his mind. Two of Sherwin’s coworkers, young men also, emerged from the building and drove away. Still he sat as night drew on. He knew at what moment he ought to have done it: Sherwin was goofing around with his key ring, and his hands were full, at the door of the car just before the automatic timer switched over on the parking lot lamps. That had been the moment. The choreography of it had not been visible to Will until after the fact. He turned it over in his mind.

Apropos of nothing, he recollected that the day before, at the door to the apartment building, he had found a woman’s handbag. He hadn’t opened it, but had instead carried it up to Keiko’s door, being fairly sure she was at home. “I found this.”

“Hah?”

“At the door, downstairs.”

“Found it?”

“I mean, somebody dropped it. Probably who lives here.”

“Lucky.”

“No, I mean. We better find out who and give it back.”

“So open.”

“You open it.” He’d thrust it at her.

“*Nande?*” She’d blinked inquiringly. Still he’d held it out. So Keiko had taken it and opened it, fished out a wallet, and together they’d gone downstairs to look for the name on the marquee by the door—*Feisal, 2B*. The woman had thanked them abashedly; Keiko went back up to her room, Will went downstairs.

When she’d taken the bag from his hand, Keiko had not brushed him. They hadn’t touched. But still he’d felt it for hours afterward—in the instant he’d passed it to her, they’d been in material communication.

The chill wind of the evening made a final stinging lunge at Will and then died away to stillness. He sat as still as stone, an arrant failure. All of the streetlights had switched on before he was able to say aloud to himself, “Okay. Better get up before the birds start to shit on you.” He turned up the street for the trudge to the bus stop.

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Rodney stole into Ruth's garage like a burglar, sliding aside the loose pane of glass in the side door and working his hand down to the inside handle, a trick she'd shown him once. It was a shady move to creep in, but it beat the alternative: Smalls's plan, had Ruth been home, had been for Rodney to lure her out somewhere on a pretext so that Smalls could get into the garage—a place that, in Rodney's estimation, Smalls had no business being. It was a narrow stall, not a proper garage; had there been a car within, he wouldn't have been able to walk all the way around it without sidling hipwise past the rear-view mirrors. Ruth had only one half of the garage organized: boxes stood stacked in columns beside a hoary metal rack, piled with bric-à-brac, that resonated like an absurd gamelan when Rodney stumbled against it, his eyes yet adjusting to the gloom. The other half of the garage was a chaotic jumble of baled newspaper, torn boxes of every variety of junk, old clothes, a broken pogo stick and two bicycles with deteriorating tires. Most of this was probably the landlord's. On this dishevelled side, behind a legless pressboard tabletop leaning upturned against the wall, Rodney found his green rucksack, just where he'd hidden it.

"Got it," he reported to Smalls, climbing back into the Dart.

"Hot damn." Smalls ground the gears and the car jolted forward, laying a bit of rubber on the asphalt.

When they reached Larry Lawrence's house, it was Rodney's turn to sit tight in the car. He looked for the pot plant in the yard that he'd heard so much about but surmised that Larry must have harvested it. The house, a little low building on a plot of land not much larger than itself, was inconspicuous in a neighborhood where most of the sort of folk who took meticulous care of their property had long moved away. The trees here were tall and old; the tree in the yard of one of Larry's neighbors had a rope hanging from a broad branch; a truck tire, once suspended from it, lay beneath on the unmown lawn. Smalls emerged from the house alone after around twenty minutes. *Look at that grin*, thought Rodney. *Two feet wide*. Smalls caught Rodney's gaze and did a hop-step down from the porch. "Right on," said Rodney through the open car window. "Good news?"

"God damn *right*." Smalls beamed. "God *damn right*."

As he drove, Smalls explained that Larry had promised money for the dope as early as the next day. Until then, he had given Smalls a gift to tide them over.

"What is it?"

Smalls patted the bulging breast pocket of his flannel shirt with his

bony hand, the fingernails soiled at the rims. "Give you three guesses." He made a reckless right turn at an uncontrolled intersection.

"Grass?"

"Brrt." Smalls made a noise like a buzzer.

"Prope?"

"The survey says ding."

Rodney giggled. "Larry's some dude." He would have been mortified if he could have seen, from without, how effeminate his admiration for Smalls appeared. "I guessed grass first since I saw that plant wasn't there." Smalls nodded. "But it was prope after all," continued Rodney giddily. His chatter began to fuel itself, perhaps in anticipation of the coming dope rush, and his exuberance transmitted itself to Smalls, where it had a converse effect: the further Smalls let his satisfaction run off with him, the more subdued a show he made, his assurance deepening that he was the picture of *savoir faire* in Rodney's eyes. They had earned several grand, if *earned* was the word; neither had any premonition of what it would presently cost them.

They got wired at the house where Smalls stayed, sharing the wealth by necessity with Brenda, who guessed what they were up to without being told and invited herself to the party. Brenda worked as a chemist in the Heinz cannery in Porterville, where she tested outgoing product for quality using a specially designed set of instruments that, with a week of training, made it possible for someone with no other knowledge of nutrition or toxicity to inspect the vinegar, tomato paste and ketchup the plant produced; indeed, Brenda grasped even less of the chemistry of methamphetamine than did her sometime lodger, sometime lover. But she claimed proudly never to have been late for work or to have made a mistake on the job. Her income kept them both in the black.

Smalls and Brenda shared a bed despite—or perhaps owing to—also sharing a contempt for one another that verged on loathing. Rodney had never seen them exchange a civil word. When the mood cooled they tolerated each other; at other times they needled one another tirelessly. Smalls, feeling top-drawer indeed with dope searing his lungs and the promise of easy lucre on the morrow, began slapping the broad plane of Brenda's *derrière* every time she passed him and demanding, in a box-guitar exaggeration of his Okie drawl, sandwiches, cookies, fellatio and "what all else you owe me."

"Eat a turd, Smalls." Brenda was up and about in the living room where Rodney and Smalls lounged, straightening her coffee table and

sliding LPs into their sleeves. Even she called him by his surname. The full name, Dickie Smalls, was such a fat, obvious target for ridicule that Rodney had never yet summoned the gumption to make a pun on it.

Brenda made a show of enduring Smalls's digs at her with nonchalance. What needled her more was that Rodney, usually square enough in his treatment of her, was grinning along. This stung. Brenda knew she was getting old and that she looked it, and Rodney was a young guy, handsome enough and generally polite in his naive and uncouth way; Smalls appeared not to notice when she sat close to Rodney or brushed his arms when she was laughing, things that she did only half-intentionally anyway, and which she left off doing when Rodney showed semiconscious discomfort. She wasn't a proud woman, but she minded what he thought of her.

"Those kinds of exhaust manifolds, when they crack, they crack at the flange," Smalls was explaining garrulously. "I seen it enough times just to guess from the sound. Somebody's Toyota comes by with that loud ass noise, like, *grrr*."

"Yeah." Rodney nodded.

"Right at the flange every time. The suckers overheat when you drive them hard."

"It's a bitch to fix."

"No it ain't." Smalls was lightly derisive. "I guess you never fixed one. All you do is replace the part. That right, whore?"

"Shut *up*, Smalls." Brenda wouldn't look at him. "There aren't no whores here."

"What I mean is, isn't that right?" Smalls pursued her like prey. "When the manifold goes."

"I guess I don't know."

"You don't."

"You know I never studied fixing no cars."

"You *drive* a car."

"I said, I don't know about manifolds." She sounded weary.

"She don't know." Smalls shrugged his head at Rodney. "Kind of a shocker, when the cunt who knew everything suddenly doesn't know."

"Maybe she forgot." Rodney grinned lazily. He did not notice the look Brenda shot him.

"Tell you what she does know. Music." Smalls did not succeed in repressing a smirk. "Brenda's a maestro on the flute."

Rodney thought he got the joke. "You mean, the, uh."

“Don’t say it, Smalls.”

“She plays it like this.” Smalls squeezed his eyes shut, formed an O with his lips, and pantomimed sticking something oblong into his mouth.

“That’s really funny.” Brenda could not quite express such scorn as Smalls deserved, not with Rodney giggling so. “You ought to be in the circus, you’re so funny.” Smalls wouldn’t quit; if lewdness was funny, twice as lewd would be twice as funny. He lolled his tongue out and made choking sounds, gripping his imaginary cylinder with both hands and sawing into and out of his mouth in long strokes.

“Looks like she’s rowing a boat,” cried Rodney. “All hands on deck!”

“*Jesus*. And I’m all like, *shpoo!*” Smalls went stiff as a board, thrusting his pelvis out. “Like a geyser.”

“Painting the ceiling?”

“Shit, no. Brenda don’t spill a drop.”

“Down the hatch?” leered Rodney.

“She must have a hollow leg.”

Rodney cackled like a jackdaw. “Cut it out or I’ll die!”

“That wouldn’t bother me one bit.” Brenda was icy, struggling to inject any comment she might think of that would insult them in turn, and failing to make the smallest impression. “Both of you.”

“I tell you,” Smalls confided, his eyes twinkling with sadistic pleasure, “it’s lucky she’s so talented upstairs, because in the lower regions it’s a real mess.”

“Meaning?”

“It’s like an open hallway down there.” Smalls held his palms out to describe a twelve-inch circumference. “Like a wind tunnel.”

“Well, then, there’s room for everybody.” Rodney’s remark got a mighty laugh out of Smalls. They carried on in this manner until even Rodney was tired of it. Brenda, however mortified, stayed with them and bore it.

Rodney made it home the next morning, just past ten, ready to crash. Aaron saw Smalls pull up, his front tire nearly jumping the curb. *Two clowns*, Aaron thought, *in their clown mobile*. No one else was home, his parents both and work and himself truant from school. Rodney would have timed his return to avoid run-ins with anybody. Rodney tumbled from the Dodge, his ankle twisted in the seat belt, and his hysterical laughter carried into the house, though the windows were shut. Aaron smoldered like tinder on the couch. The TV and stereo were off.

Rodney made it up to the house, opened the door, and turned to wave

at Smalls, who appeared to be spacing out behind the wheel of his idling car. “So long!” Rodney raised a hand.

Smalls waved and called, “Yep. Take her sleazy.” He began to drive away.

Rodney stumbled into the house chuckling at what Smalls had said. He looked giddy with fatigue. He saw Aaron and said, “Dude.” He was grinning, didn’t break stride; Aaron could sense that Rodney was reading the airwaves here, however spaced out he was, and that he realized on a deep level that, if Aaron succeeded in cornering him, the party would be over.

“Rodney. *Rodney.*”

Rodney brushed past, still grinning, making a fast walk for the hallway and his bedroom door. Aaron shifted forward to intercept him, but Rodney detoured. “Yeah, Aaron, Bad-News Bearon, good to see you, right? Not in school? Uh huh, yeah, I guess I’m ready to crash—”

Aaron managed to catch his older brother by the back of the shirt at the corner of the hallway. Rodney whooped and fell backward, right at Aaron’s feet.

“Well, shit!” Rodney kept laughing. “Uncle! Okay? I got no interest in roughhousing right now. It’s time to hit the hay.”

“Shut up and *listen.*”

Rodney paused.

Aaron glared down. His brother was still flat on the carpet, looking silly. Around his lips were white traces of what could have been lip balm, and his sun-bronzed cheeks were sucked in, making him look older and more tired than was normal.

“You screwed up.”

Rodney shut his eyes, opened them and exhaled. “What? What is it?”

Aaron’s gaze bored downward. “It’s Ruth. Get off the *floor*, you sack of shit.”

“Ruth, what? In what way?” Rodney stood. He looked defensive.

Aaron was disgusted. Had Rodney popped Ruth’s cherry? Was that what he thought Aaron was there to tell him, that Ruth was knocked up? “Wake up. I’m not talking about whatever goddamn escapades you been having in her panties. I’m talking about the *drugs*. Which you put in her *house.*”

“I never told you about that,” bristled Rodney. He wiped his mouth. The white filmy stuff came off onto his hand.

“You did too, cunt-lip. I was here, remember?”



“Ah.” Something was getting through. “Uh. I never told you Ruth was going to hold it for me.”

*Hold it for me*—prime target for a lewd joke in other circumstances. Aaron glared. “You never told *her* that neither. It wasn’t hard to put two and two together, Rodney. Whoever it was busted into her house yesterday.”

Rodney visibly started. “The garage door? I—”

“The fucking *front* door, and what fucking difference does it make?”

Aaron was shouting now. “Tune in, Rodney! Hello!”

“What?”

“Awake yet? I am trying to tell you *they trashed Ruth’s house*. They practically pulverized it.”

“Who?”

“*Somebody*. You tell me who.” Aaron struggled not to slug his brother. “Who’d Smalls steal it from?”

“He didn’t *steal* it.” Rodney looked too dumb and confused for Aaron to believe that he was dissembling. He plainly didn’t know the facts. Rodney asked again, “Somebody trashed her house?”

“They broke down the door.” Aaron spoke slowly, his anger intensifying with every word like a volatile gas under steadily mounting pressure. His words and demeanor became colder and colder. He was primed to explode. “They broke everything. They smashed every last thing in her house. Knives through the mattresses. Turned over the dresser drawers. Et cetera. *Comprende?* Want me to say it again?” Finally it was too much. Aaron swung hard, connecting with Rodney’s left cheek. Rodney jumped back too late to avoid the blow, turned a clumsy half-step around, tripped over his own feet and tumbled headlong against the hallway wall.

“Ow! Ouch!” Rodney struggled to right himself. “Jesus, shit.”

“Turn around!” Aaron was ready to throw another one.

“Would you calm down? Hey, damn it. Ow!” Rodney held his hands around his head, slapping Aaron’s blows away. Aaron couldn’t get another good one in. “Where’s Ruth?”

“At home.”

“Stop it! What—what happened to her? You seen her?”

“I saw her. She’s okay. I mean, scared shitless. But thank God she wasn’t home. You prick!”

“Ow! Fu-u-uck! Stop it!”

Aaron let it out a bit more. He couldn’t stop. He fought Rodney back to the bathroom, stepped back to gain room, then aimed a high, straight

kick at his torso. He didn't pull it back. Rodney crumpled and couldn't breathe for a moment, then began to wheeze like a dying man. Aaron had to wait for him to get up again. They agreed to get water from the kitchen. They did not make peace, but some of Aaron's fire went out.

Rodney looked wretched. "Goddamn karate. Who taught you that? I mean, whose idea was it to let you learn that?" He gulped cup after cup of water, beginning to sweat.

"What are you going to do, Rodney." Aaron voiced the question flatly, like a statement. "Ruth's there now. Still."

"She's not hurt."

"You know she didn't call here for *me*. She called the house. You know she wasn't calling for me." Aaron let the accusation hang, then pursued, "So why the fuck was *I* the one going over there? What if she'd been at home when they came?" Aaron began pacing the kitchen floor. "Is there any chance you're going to take some goddamn responsibility?" To his own ears, his voice sounded like his father's.

"If she'd of been *home*—"

An impact echoed in the kitchen. Aaron had slapped the table. It seemed to silence all other sounds. "Like that. She'd be dead, you fuckwit. You got into some shit you don't understand."

Rodney squirmed. "I don't get why you're acting so harsh to me, but okay—okay!" He stepped back as Aaron raised a fist again. "I'm saying, okay! It's my fault. I'll go to Ruth's. I'll go right now."

"This minute?"

"In a quick second, man. I'm a little bit drop-dead exhausted, not to put too fine a point on it."

"Yeah, well, don't over-exert yourself, Tinker Bell." Aaron's knuckles throbbed with pain; he wanted to put ice on them; but he'd be damned if he would let Rodney see him doing so. "She knows it's something you did. We worked it out. Smalls ripped off a lot of something, like heroin. You stashed it someplace in Ruth's house. That way, when whoever it is caught up with you, only Ruth gets fucked."

"Just a minute—"

"And then—and *then!*" Aaron cut Rodney off. "And then, they *did* catch up. Probably because you and Smalls blabbermouthed it to everybody."

"I didn't—"

"And so the question is, did you take it out of Ruth's in time, or did the guy find it there?" Aaron let this question hang in the air. He was cer-

tain Rodney would not dare answer, and he was right. His contempt for his brother was boundless. “Cabacho came by.”

“Where?”

“Ruth’s house. He had a good laugh.”

“Fuck him.”

“Gave us some news. Some very interesting information. One, he claims he knew who you stole it from, but he was lying about that, because he wouldn’t say. But he did know the rest of the story, all about you and Smalls. So if *Cabacho* knows it, who all ever knows it too.” Aaron nodded, his eyes hard. “So *if* you got the shit from Ruth’s in time, they’re still looking for it, and they come here next. Hence is why I’m asking.”

They both glanced around them, at their mother’s orderly kitchen, her knife block, her spice rack. They saw their father’s stacks of magazines and rare bottle collection. Rodney’s cheek began to swell. It would bruise later.

“Maybe I’ll snitch on you.” Aaron was in earnest. “Go find whoever it was and tell the tale.”

Rodney whitened. “It would keep them out of here.” His face began to show genuine fear.

“Could be. I feel bad for Smalls’s chick too. The both of you ought to get nailed without no further trouble to anybody else.”

Rodney wouldn’t make eye contact. “What did Ruthie say?”

“She’s mad as fuck. You better go over there, fucker. She’s going to hate your drug addict ass for the rest of your life. Just make the fuck sure you go over there.”

Rodney’s brow creased even deeper.

“What she *said*,” continued Aaron, “was you should bail out of town with Smalls. *She* knows what’s coming. She told me to tell you, don’t come over, just get the hell out of here, go wherever Smalls is going. By now I’m sure *his* bags are packed.”

Rodney nodded involuntarily. About Smalls no assumption could be more certain. “She said that.”

“She don’t want you to know how scared she is, for one thing. You realize what I’m doing? I promised I wasn’t going to tell you this. So I’m breaking a promise for you, you worthless piece of garbage.” Aaron was sick to death of this. “I’m going over there. I don’t want to waste any more time on you.”

“Me too.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

“I’ll catch up with you.” Aaron darted him a knowing, scornful look. “I need to...” Rodney did not complete his excuse. *Need to make a phone call*, guessed Aaron. Rodney needed to check in with headquarters, find out Smalls’s plan.

“How could you be my brother?” Aaron turned his back to Rodney. “You’re an *addict*.” He left the house and mounted his bicycle. He was going to help Ruth, though he knew not how. His determination was genuine.

Rodney soaped his hands in the sink, then washed his face. His cheek was tender, his chest sore. *It’s not true*, he thought. Aaron’s word *addict* nettled. *I could easily never touch dope again*. He meant it, of course, especially in light of what had happened. In a bit of all-too-human intellectual double-dealing, he both realized and did not realize that resolutions to go clean were easiest to make when his system had just absorbed a full charge of the drug and was sated. He both felt and did not feel his own culpability; and he both knew and did not know what he would do next. He intended to go and check on Ruth. He dried his face and tried to recollect Brenda’s phone number; but before he could, the telephone rang.

“Rod, it’s me. Look, we’re up the creek.” Smalls poured out the story in a torrent Rodney could not interrupt. “They got the coke, man, the whole stash. Nailed Larry. Nailed Ruth. Larry got his hand broke and they chucked him in jail, the motherfuckers. The whole stash is gone. He called me from jail. I’m supposed to be getting some bail money together, but I don’t got jack shit.” In Smalls’s voice, Rodney heard cavernous despair. Aaron was right: Smalls would flee. A more savvy Rodney would have considered himself lucky that Smalls had done him the courtesy of calling to warn him at all; but, even when not dulled by admiration, Rodney’s nature harbored comparatively little cynical suspicion of the motives of others.

He broke in. “Smalls, I know already. I heard some of this.”

“From where?” Smalls sounded instantly hostile and suspicious, enough so to hurt Rodney’s feelings.

“Aaron. He was at Ruth’s. So I know that part. But not about Larry.”

“Well, they got him. Came to his place with guns.”

“Who?”

Smalls didn’t heed the question. “He made it clear, they got the coke. All of it. Now they’ll come for me. You, too.”

“Wait a minute.” Rodney finally began to think. “Larry’s in jail? Why jail?”

“Uh.”

“Smalls.” Rodney’s heart sank into his stomach. “Who. Who’d you steal it from?”

“Don’t get on *my* back.” Smalls was combative. “Maybe you want to blame me, well, forget it. Shit happens. We had a plan, it was right on, *we* were right on, and somebody must of sold us out—”

“*Smalls!* For Jesus sake.” Rodney stopped and waited. No reply came. “Is it a secret? I mean, at *this* point?”

Smalls sighed hoarsely. “The cops. Alright?”

Rodney’s fear was confirmed. “The cops.”

“I took it off this cop I know, name of Paulson. He deals out of Palm Circle sometimes.”

“Heard of him. Just that there was such a guy. Never knew his name.”

“Yeah.”

“*Smalls.*”

Smalls began to shout. “You want me to hang up right now? Then shut up. He never knew it was me. If you’d of been there I’d like to see you be half as smart.”

“Smart is the word, all right. Now Larry’s in jail—”

“They’ll let him out. No warrant. Nothing but this asshole’s grudge. You can’t just lock people up.”

“Ruth. Her house, Smalls.”

“Nobody got hurt.”

Rodney snapped. His anger was cold and balanced. He recalled Aaron’s words—*Any chance you’re going to take some goddamn responsibility?*—but didn’t repeat them. His breath flared; he hardened his mouth.

“Cabacho snitched,” said Smalls. “It had to be him. If we had time I’d love to nail that piece of crap junkie. But we got to move.”

*Nail him?* wondered Rodney. *What the hell are you talking about?* He and Smalls, as the world could see, were not the type of tough guys who went around nailing anybody.

“I’ll come get you and we can roll before they track us down. Larry says Paulson has heavy backup. Probably all of whoever else in the police department that was making money with him.”

“I’ve got to stay.”

Smalls was incredulous. “Did you say something?” His tone was hard and mocking.

Rodney gulped down his hesitation. “I got to stay in Porterville.”

“For how long?”

“No, I mean, *staying*. Not running away,” said Rodney. “Ruth needs me.”

“I don’t think you’ve been paying attention. Ruth’s house got broken into a little bit but she ain’t hurt. I feel bad about it too. Not to mention Larry. I mean, that guy’s like my brother.” Unmitigated hogwash, this. “He’s in it deep thanks to us. So the most logical thing is, get as far away from Paulson as humanly possible. The worst is over for Ruth. But think about it this way, she sure don’t want to see you killed.”

*Killed*. Rodney mouthed the word silently.

“Or, what, put in a wheelchair. Or God knows what. Paulson’s a complete psychotic. Which, by the way, I never knew that before. But just look at him now.”

“Well,” said Rodney, and paused, in the way a boy pauses before confiding in his pals that he just happens to *like* playing with dolls. His voice went up in pitch, and took on a whinging, supplicatory tone. “I feel like I got to do the right thing. I have to stay here and help Ruth.”

“Rod.”

“No matter what. That’s what’s—”

“Paulson’s going to—”

“Okay, let him come. Once you made your bed, you got to sleep in it.”

“*Well*. I’m certainly impressed.” Smalls, however frantic to save his own skin, still found time for persiflage. “Rodney, you’re a hero. Like Captain Midnight.”

“Cool it.”

“You’re inspiring.” Smalls spoke with venom, as one does who has chosen not to practice righteousness and thus feels accused by the very acts of righteousness of others. “I guess you’ll just stay out here in Porterville and help Ruth.”

“That’s right.”

“Come what may.”

“Laugh it up.”

Smalls’s patience ran out. “What the hell will it accomplish, huh? Earth to Rodney. Come in, Rodney. Ruth needs a broom and a dustpan. Her house got tossed. *That’s it*. Your ass is grass if Paulson finds you, and he *will*.”

*She even said I ought to run for it*, recollected Rodney. “I want to do the right thing,” he reiterated, ornery and lame.

“Such a thing does not exist in this particular situation. I’m coming over. We can be in Arizona by tomorrow. I know where we can stay in

Yuma, and none of them down there knows anybody up here.”

Rodney shook his head, but couldn't find words.

“If you're not ready when I get there, I can't wait for you.” Smalls hung up.

Rodney laid the receiver back in the cradle. “He's trying to help me,” he said aloud to himself. “Now that I think about it, I wasn't being fair. He got me in this, so he's trying to get me out. If he was only looking out for himself, he'd just run to Arizona. He wouldn't waste his time trying to change my mind. Not when I was being so stubborn.” Smalls was, in his fashion, acting responsibly after all.

Ruth was beautiful. She had her pick of guys. Rodney was certain he would be unwelcome at her home henceforth. What more could he hope for after screwing up her life, betraying her trust and putting even her safety in jeopardy? He lacked the temerity to face her—especially after he had failed to run directly to her, along with Aaron. With every delay, the dread and shame had only mounted. A decision now would be impossible to make, but to fail to make it were to fail to be moral.

As Smalls drove the route from Brenda's to Rodney's, he turned over in his mind what he'd told Rodney, the true bits and the fabrications. Brenda had gone to work, a piece of good luck in light of what he'd learned when he'd stopped at Larry's on the way home from Rodney's place. It was here that the story he'd improvised for Rodney diverged from fact: Larry, handing Smalls the money wrapped in a newspaper page, had vouchsafed a warning of Paulson's raid on Ruth's—everybody seemed to know about it—and advised that, for himself, Larry thought it judicious to leave town for a spell and that Smalls and Rodney ought to do likewise. The part about Larry being in jail had undoubtedly suggested itself to Smalls by dint of Paulson being a cop; the broken hand had been based on the bandage Larry had been wearing where he'd touched a stove burner and gotten a blister. At all events, Larry's news had frozen Smalls to the bone, and he'd dashed home bent on putting at least as much fear into Rodney. They had to fly, and Smalls would feel less small-hearted in flight with a partner to support him. He'd left Brenda a note, written on his way out, to the effect that he might not be home for a while; she was not to get rid of any of his stuff. The money he had on his person, some in the breast pocket of his shirt, some in his jeans pocket; only a few bills were in his wallet.

There he was. Smalls saw Rodney standing out before his folks' house, inert, waiting. His green rucksack bulged, with clothing perhaps.

He looked awkward in such stillness, standing like a sentry, his eyes on Smalls's approach but expressionless—or, rather, distant but astringent.

*We're both tuckered*, thought Smalls—sleep-deprived and racked; not the wisest of conditions for the twelve-hour drive south. Well out of town, they'd stop somewhere and take five, he decided. Rodney turned and fished a folded bit of paper from his pocket, laid it in the loaf-shaped mailbox, and swung up the metal door.

"Note to the folks?" asked Smalls, his note of suspicion clear to hear.

"Yeah."

"Mention Yuma, by any chance?"

Rodney stared ahead. "No."

In Yuma, they stuck together for a while, until Rodney found his way into a new circle of friends, new couches to sleep on; and then for some reason or another, Smalls took off again, this time alone. Rodney found Yuma to his liking, the hard heat driving in on everything, the acquaintances he made; he got a job, let it go, took another. His stay there stretched a year, two years; and then he dumbfounded his friends and privately startled himself by joining the army. He went to fight in Panama; he got around, got in some trouble; by the time he found himself back in northern California, getting into even more trouble in Valentina and sinking—such a period of sinking it was—years had unimaginably passed since he'd seen or even thought seriously of Ruth. In fact, he never met her again or wanted to. All that remained of her memory was the impression lightly stamped on Rodney's consciousness that, in circumstances just a shade more favorable to himself, he surely would have done some good for her when she was in need.

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In the dark before day broke, Mike Miller held a brownish scrap of paper nearly to his nose and stared at it in a struggle to believe what he was seeing. Farther up the asphalt trail, a weak lamp cast an indeterminate oval of illumination, nothing more than traces of which reached to where the three of them stood, bait boxes and rod cases in hand. To carry the slip of paper closer to the light occurred to none of them. It had permanent grimy fold-lines and was curled at the corners; as the three of them bent over it, their faces fell into shadow and could not be discerned one by the other. Mike Miller was from the Mission; he had a heart of gold, as is said of all people who are extraordinarily dumb but not disposed to maltreating



others.

“No,” Rodney found himself repeating, “you didn’t *just* get it, Mike, because it *expired* in 1997.”

“That’s not how I recollect it, though.”

“Shit fire and save matches,” remarked Rob, the third man of their party, though what he meant by this was anyone’s guess. With this late development it had emerged that not one of them had a license to fish, but after a quick conference they kept on to the river, walking raggedly abreast and not finding much to say at that hour. The chore rotation schedule having changed with Marlon’s departure, Rodney had cycled off of breakfast duty and took advantage of this free morning to organize some fishing. It was a long trapeze from the Mission out to the river, and then a good hike, more than a mile, up from the Talbott Street bridge to where the river narrowed and deepened. Any number of people came up that way, joggers and early risers with their dogs, but boats were scarce there and that suited Rodney. Having come so far, they weren’t apt to turn back only for want of a license. He nodded to whomever passed by, feeling pleased to be out in the dim dawn with a bracing wind up from the water pushing through the stiff hair on his head and making the skin tighten on his unclad legs. He wore cutoff shorts and his fatigue shirt. The fineness of his mood augmented the bonhomie of the fishing party, or at least firmed up his end of it; he said jauntily to Rob, “Ready for some fishing, brother?” It was the sort of question one asks, the answer to which is already known, and for this reason is eminently worth asking.

“Shit. Trade fishing for fish taco.”

Rodney caught the jest and returned one. “Tacos in the morning, dude, not for me.”

Mike Miller put in, “Rob’s talking about pussy, right, Rob?”

“That’s right, Mike,” said Rob. They knew it wouldn’t do to scowl at Mike, who by general consensus wasn’t fair game for mockery. They came at last to the stretch of river Rodney wanted to try, and he broke from the other two men and set himself down to piece together his rod and tackle. It was old gear, not fancy, but it did for him; even if he’d had any hope of laying hands on something more splendid, it wasn’t his style to fish like your modern sportsman, pitting the unevolved fish against mankind’s up-to-the-minute technological supremacy. He was out to catch just one real good one, if he could; and if he couldn’t, well, the morning was superb.

The river was shallow and pebbly at the bank, then plunged deeper

ten or twelve paces in, becoming a trench of thick brown murk. Rodney waded into the water, to the lip of the plunge, and cast. He let the line drift—just let it go where it will, he thought. The icy water, runoff from the Sierras where there was still snow melting, quickly numbed his toes inside his boots and reached up his legs as high as his calves so that his white cotton socks, pulled up high, just peeked over the waterline. He stood still, leaning a fraction of a degree into the current. Will hadn't come back the night before. At the shore, screening the bike path, stood bamboo in close ranks, bowing barely and then straightening in the thin breeze, and above were trees of many varieties, a number of them yet green, though others were turning; but a few hours of rainfall during the night had been enough to strip one large oak of most of its leaves, which littered the ground. Atop the levee that stood beyond the farther shore, a bicyclist's headlamp winked past. Beyond that, intermittent traffic noise brushed softly across from the road. A bend in the river hid the distant outline of the bridge so that, though it were a sentimental exaggeration to call the spot isolated, Rodney felt a step removed from the Valentina that he knew lurked just out of view. What he liked most here was that, at its best, the river was honestly what it was; the current was current; the ground was ground; the birds, awake and about their business, were nothing but birds. His time here was his, and he was under no obligation to be or do anything. He thought again of Will, then decided not to. He was here to fish.

The river was a place of varied memories for Rodney. He had lost his mind there for a while. He'd had a stint down south as a union carpenter, building sets for TV commercials in Los Angeles—good money, because the unions were strong and the TV companies were perpetually behind schedule and in a hurry to get their sets constructed, so there was always well-compensated overtime—and had tried juggling it with a growing overreliance on dope to keep at bay whatever it was that had been eating at him; he'd burned out; and thus had lost his job; so for the first time in years he had come back up to the northern half of the state. Rather than discomfit any of his long-incommunicado friends, who despite their own troubles probably would have housed him out of sheer decency, he'd started camping; where he lived or what he did hadn't made a twig of difference to him anyway. To become homeless had felt like a final low point in his descent—little had he known he would yet sink lower. And thus years passed. After so long living along the river, he'd come to hate the place, or rather the worst people who lived there with him: he'd hated his evi-

dent fitness among such people; and he'd hated the image he developed of himself as a reflex machine built to gobble methamphetamine and then sweat it out again, without end. But now, fishing in the morning, the river was just a river; the morning was in its first youth, and the water was icy cold; the contrast of those days with this one gave him great satisfaction. He even began to think that, if he caught a fish, he'd throw it back, just because he could.

If he followed his memories back far enough, even before L.A., he'd come to his time at Fort Benning. *There* had been a life the polar opposite of living on the river. Vagrancy was more freedom than a person wanted; the army was all order. Rodney had been somebody else's meat machine, only as valuable as his function and functionality. From the time of his youth, Rodney had for some reason imagined soldiery to be a footloose adventure; the actual experience was embittering. At Fort Benning, another guy had once asked him, "You know, if we went to war, would you go or would you *go*?" On the face, it was a stupid question: he'd *go*. The army didn't *invite* soldiers to combat. But the veiled question had been whether he would go because he believed in it or because orders were orders. Rodney knew a few guys in the service who believed in it one hundred percent, and a few others who did not, also one hundred percent. Most, like him, fell in between. For them, the easiest solution was to cop out, call it all happy horseshit, and capitulate. Rodney had once blown smoke up Will's ass about training for the Green Berets; in reality there had been no chance in hell of Rodney ever even applying; it had just seemed obvious that the only guys who got in were those who *believed* in the happy horseshit. Rodney only *almost* believed in it.

As he wound in his line for another cast, by chance Rodney glanced to his rear, toward the river's edge, and there saw a stately doe bending to drink, its body dappled white, slender stick legs leaning together. At his motion she started, stared up at him through an eye like black glass. The glance was all he needed; Rodney turned back to the water at once, not wanting to interrupt her drink, but it was too late and he knew it; behind him, he heard her bound away into the trees, her hoofbeats sounding clumsy on the gravel. *Imagine that animal getting this close into the city*, he thought and marvelled. A moment later truck tires could be heard mashing the gravel on the levee and a park ranger's vehicle emerged, headlamps unlit. Though Rodney figured the ranger was principally interested in the deer, he wasn't keen to pay any fines and decided to cut out of there.

He met up with Rob and Mike Miller on the bike trail and let them know about the ranger. All agreed to call it a morning. Rob had a fat trout scaled and neatly cleaned in his cooler, the only catch of the day. On a shortcut up the steep embankment, pushing past nearly impenetrable juniper, manzanita and a hard, dry vine Rodney couldn't name, slipping over muddy footing, they came across a fallen tree trunk the height of a man in diameter with its bark stripped off, swarms of initials and fuckwords scored into it by kids; across it someone had laid the corpses of half a dozen good-sized freshwater trout, as big as Rob's, for the bugs and birds to take to pieces. Far advanced in decomposition, they lay bloated and unnaturally colorless in the sun. Rodney sniffed. Putrescent meat didn't actually offend him, but it was a disgusting thing for someone to do. The world was bursting with idiots. They went up over the levee and down the other side to hop a quick fence and wait for the Beltline bus, which was due to start running, to ride it back to 23rd Street.

At the Mission, the guys had just rolled up their bunks and cleared space in the room for the breakfast table, but in a corner sat a knot of men in either a bull session or an argument—as usual, it was difficult to distinguish which. Rodney's feet felt like rubber doorstops from the cold; he pulled off his boots and peeled down his soaking wet socks as Rob showed the fish around. The socks Rodney could hang up till whoever had laundry duty came to collect them; but the boots, his only footwear, were too wet to put back on; he needed a way to dry them quickly. "Shoot, I'll just give them a blast in the oven," he said aloud to nobody, and carried them into the kitchen, where he set the oven heat on high to get the job done fast. "No more than a minute should do her." Rodney had to step fast to keep out of the way of the kid everybody called Raunch, who was hellbent on wrapping up his cooking before deadline. During his time at the Mission, Rodney had actually seen two guys given walking papers for failing to have a meal on the table by chow time; certain aspects of life there were freewheeling, but chore duties were prosecuted with inhuman strictness. On his way out of the kitchen, Rodney ran again into the argument. Wars of words at the Mission, when they weren't mere bitch sessions about being done wrong or scandalized by other tweakers, always began or ended on one of two themes: dope or Christianity. Today's was a mix of the two.

"You cannot say that," complained a tall, thin, strident white guy with a nebbish voice and knobby, awkward limbs. His name was Higgins; he had once owned a dollar store. "That's against the Bible and against common goddamn sense."

“You’re tripping,” replied Jacob, the jackanapes and former white supremacist, as flippant and as combative as ever. “*You’re* against the Bible. You’re straight blasphemizing. I’m surprised the lightning ain’t already struck.” He stepped back like he didn’t want to be close to Higgins when the bolt fell from above.

A guy called Julian, raising an eyebrow at Jacob, put in, “Better back that shit up with some quotes, nigga. Chapter and verse.” Rodney guessed that Julian hadn’t taken a side in the debate; he was having fun, playing a one-man peanut gallery.

“I don’t need any chapter and verse, you pisshole.” Jacob poured on the brash machismo, but it was plain to Rodney that he didn’t really *know* any germane scripture. “It’s common knowledge through the *whole Bible*, God only made good things. And therefore, fucking, *quid pro quo*, all bad things had to be created by the devil.”

“Including dope,” assented Jim Kelly. Jim had been not only a wreck of a drug user—heroin, in fact—but also a pound-foolish gambler. Rodney hadn’t associated much with him since learning, the hard way, how sore a loser at checkers Jim could be. “The devil can’t make nothing, but he inspires you to do it, and then you got drugs.”

“Chapter and verse?”

“Man, it never actually mentions *dope* by name in the Bible. What you want, then?”

“Maybe Jacob wouldn’t mind making something up.”

“No, that would be, fuckin’, ‘*blasphemizing*’. You know that ain’t even a word, white boy?”

“Look,” snapped Higgins. “I got chapter and verse right here, if you’ve got ears to hear it. And if you’re interested you can go and *read* it sometime, Adolf, and there’s a far outside chance you might learn something.” Jacob said *pshhh* and rolled his eyes but was prevented from offering a smartassed rejoinder as Higgins rolled on. “Try this on for size. ‘Revelation, four-eleven. Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.’ God created all things. Why? For His pleasure. And that’ll include dope.” *Case closed*, his expression seemed to say.

“Hoo!” breathed Julian, pleased with the power of this sally.

“Proves nothing.”

Julian clapped his hands. “You not listening? Nigga just showed you, everything comes from the *Earth*, fool. God’s creation. Creeping thing which creepeth, plant, bud, whatever.”

“Weed, okay, I could see that,” conceded Jacob. “It’s natural. Somebody could say that God never told you to go smoke it, but even if you eat it, you get buzzed. Right? Like, right out of the ground.”

“God’s creation,” said Higgins. Jacob’s audience saw that he was making concessions now only to offer a coming objection.

“You could even say beer, since it comes from hops and, um. Pilsners.”

A couple of guys laughed. “Made by the Lord,” agreed Higgins.

Jacob shook his head. “But not crank, not ecstasy, not acid. Because it’s not from God’s nature.”

Higgins scoffed. “Acid is *mold*, dummy. Comes from mold.”

“Bullshit.”

“The hell you think dope comes from? Like, the ingredients?”

“That shit over there.” Jacob gestured away toward the shelves under the sink before which Raunch toiled. The shelves were crammed with bottles, labeled and unlabeled, of various cleaning chemicals, degreasers and metal polishers. “They cook that shit out of unnatural shit. Chemicals.”

“You dumbass, where do you think *chemicals* come from?”

“The *factory*.” The guys all laughed at this. It was impossible to tell just how much of Jacob’s foolery was an act.

Just then Raunch interrupted the conversation, sticking his head into the main room to holler, “Rodney! What in the hell are you burning, Rod?” At this same instant, all were sensible of an acrid stink. Rodney was on his feet at once. “Crud!” He dashed into the kitchen and pulled his smoking boots from the oven. Behind him, howls of outrage and uproarious laughter. “Shoot. Am I dumb.” To keep from filling the entire Mission with funky smoke, Rodney carried his boots in fingertip ends to the back door, edged it open, and came reeling out into the alley. There he saw Will.

*After all, he came back*, thought Rodney; like a boat shipping water, he filled with grave disappointment. Will sat hunched with his back to the wall, his face turned down, chewing a bagel. He had an unwashed, down-at-heels look to him, which was a new sight to Rodney. He had the air of having been waiting a while; this turned Rodney off. He felt he’d walked into a scene staged for his benefit, Will sitting where he was, as he was. Anyway, there he was. The thing hadn’t happened. “Will,” said Rodney. “Greetings.” He remembered his boots, dropped them near the wall, and patted his pockets for rolling papers.

Will glanced over and said, with his mouth around the bagel, “Your boots are snowing.”

“What again?”

“I meant to say, smoking.” Will swallowed. “Hey. Morning. Fancy meeting you here.” His voice was hollow. “I was hoping to.” He faltered, shut up and devoured the last remnant of his breakfast.

Rodney exhaled. “You came to give the gun back.”

“No.”

Rodney narrowed his eyes. Will sat up straighter and pulled his jacket sleeves to keep them from slipping past his elbows. The day was shaping up to be the sort of clear, insistently warm day that appeared on occasion during Valentina’s nominal winter, temperate enough that office workers left their jackets in their cars after lunch and kids on bicycles tied their sweatshirts by the sleeves around their waists. Will fiddled with his jacket; irritated impatience reared up within Rodney. It was a magnified form of the ire he felt when people broke things but stuck them back in the drawer without a word, or when they picked fights with someone they’d wronged in order to be the first one angry. Rodney had never disliked Will before this.

“I’m working on a better plan.” Will shifted. “You could help me, if possible.”

“Huh, meaning, maybe I’ll be the one to go do it. Bust a cap.”

Will’s eyes darted up. Rodney was sorry he’d said it. He hadn’t meant to let out as much as he had of his opinion; he’d made a plain condemnation. “I meant, you could hypothetically help me work on a plan,” said Will.

“Don’t see why not.” But Rodney hardened his heart again. “But I also don’t see why I would.”

Will kept his head low.

“So far, no action, man.”

Will looked ready to take a beating.

“Plenty of talk, but.”

“You’re right.”

“Look, dude. I *am* right. I mean, it’s time to take a serious look at ourselves and all this stuff. I mean, taking stock.” Rodney began, in a stationary pacing action, to shift unthinkingly from one foot to the other, with his yellow pouch of tobacco hanging forgotten between his fingers. He was looking not at Will but at the heavily repainted stucco of the rear wall of the Mission building. Will, however, watched Rodney, or rather studied him. “You were the one who got this whole ball rolling, Will, with this girl and all, considering, well, I guess you could say, her guy and his violent

ways got it started, but you put *us* right into it, and I been watching you, sort of waiting on you to set it right like you said you would. Because, in a way, and take this however you take it, but this chickenshit backdoor sneaking and, secret combinations and so forth, is not my style, you know. I mean, there you go. In so many words. I don't like it. I don't like the way you been handling it. This isn't no TV show." Rodney waved his hand in the air, as though shooing a crowd. "You been at a shit-or-get-off-the-pot crossroads here, Will. What would I do? Let me tell you. I hear this girl up the hall getting banged around, I go up to the door. I go right up there, Will. And when Sheldon answers, I knock out his goddamn teeth. Properly. And I don't do it thanks to my secret lover's lament for the girl. I do it because it's got to be done."

"Sherwin."

"What'd I say?"

"Sheldon."

Rodney nodded, still looking at the wall. "If there's a problem, brother, I like to solve it, at the moment. At least, that's how I like to see myself. We all got a way we like to see ourselves. You read me? Well, my way that I want to see myself is, a guy who does stuff *at the moment*. Otherwise it grows and grows, and the hell of it is, is I *know* you could of taken this dude out. All it took was balls, William. I mean, let me just say, between guys, this is old-fashioned, but it's my belief, which is between guys, you throw a punch or you take a punch, and, shit, I mean, so it goes. Men are like dogs, sort of. We're all sinners, all imperfect. But if it's a *woman*—"

Rodney pounded his fist into his palm. He didn't notice that he'd dropped his tobacco. Will saw it, though.

"—it's goddamn wrong!"

Will pressed his lips together but didn't speak.

"It's a scummy thing to do, and that's that. What's right is right. I don't need a goddamn court of law or some fucking judge, pardon my language, to tell me what to do in such a situation, Will. This dude is a low, *low* son of a bitch, Will. He is."

"Yes."

"He deserves to *get* it. There isn't nothing too bad for him. You want to pity him?"

"Of course not."

"And, well? Where is he? He's out walking around. Right this minute. He's out at the bar, cracking jokes." Will said nothing, but he thought it unlikely that anyone were at a bar at that hour of the morning. "And if he



cracks some great damn joke, the people around him, you know what they think? They think, what a great guy. What a capital fellow.” Rodney’s bitterness overwhelmed him; he choked for a moment on his words. “Ah.” He swallowed. “Look. I—I killed somebody before.”

The sun, which had gone momentarily behind a cloud, emerged; the alleyway brightened. “In Panama. That’s what we did. You thought about what the bad guys were doing to people, who maybe you could label innocent people, though each of us has our own sins or wrongdoings in our past. But you’d think, ‘These people have been severely messed with.’ In them countries it’s business as usual, death squads and brutality. Shit we can’t imagine. And it’s like, look, that poor dick who you’re about to kill, maybe he don’t *deserve* to die. Christ, maybe not. You don’t know his story, he don’t know yours. But no matter what he *deserved*, you had something you had to *do*.”

“There was no other way.” Will sounded like a child.

Rodney swallowed down, feeling irritable with Will’s tone of voice. “That’s how it seemed.”

“I almost did it last night.”

“Horseshoes and hand grenades.”

“I meant to.”

“Huh. Because, look. Look.” Rodney noticed his tobacco on the asphalt and picked it up. Luckily it hadn’t landed in a puddle. “I think you won’t. We could run this drill ten times over.” Rodney put out his hand. “You better give me that gun.”

“Why?” Will’s voice began to rise. “So he can just keep on like he’s been?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“After that whole speech, it’s just—”

“Would you hand it over, Will, I’m—”

“—just turn around and call it off—”

“—damn it, Will, I’m going to do it!”

Rodney had shouted him down.

Will was startled. Like a fool, he was even scared. He was the one with the gun, but he could never stand up against what he saw now in Rodney’s countenance and heard in his voice. It was plain rage. Will gave up the gun without comment. Rodney stood staring at it for a moment in his hand, then stowed it. “I’m standing out here barefoot.”

Will required a long span to take in and comprehend this last. “Yeah,” he nodded at last. “Your, uh, boots.”

“Yup.” Rodney bent down for them.

Will had heard Rodney say what he was going to do, but he wanted to hear it again. He wanted a precise explanation, with no abbreviation or mincing of words. *I'm going to do it.* What other meaning could that have? *Going to—do it.*

The thing to do now was to insist on doing it himself. Will would ask for the gun again. He would refuse help. This was his thing to take care of. It was ridiculous, of course, to imagine himself blazing up like Rodney, putting his foot down and assuming that authority. *Give it back to me. I'm going to do it myself.* Even Sherwin was safe from Will. A person could descend to the vilest depravity and Will would not bend a finger.

Rodney was staring at the wall still, boots in hand. *Does he expect me to say something?* thought Will. Women would come sometimes to Will's mother's house when he was small, bringing presents, and his mother would just about howl her refusals, until it seemed as though the gift were a radioactive rock or something; what a calamity it were to allow such a gift to pass her threshold; she could never accept it and then forgive herself, not for the balance of her natural days. And then in the end she'd accept. Was Rodney waiting for Will to put up that kind of a fight? How had those lady friends of his mother's known that she was really going to accept in the end? Did Rodney want to be restrained, like a belligerent drunk who'd never have the temerity to offer to fight if he didn't know, in a corner of his mind, that his friends would hold him back. Rodney was taut as a wire. He would never be checked. *Maybe he's just waiting for me to draw a few conclusions and then give in.* Or perhaps Rodney was just too proud, or too nice, to tell Will to fuck off and leave him alone.

Will had not sought Sherwin out this morning alone. He had not shot him alone. His motive for coming to see Rodney was, in hindsight, utterly ignoble. Had he been hoping for this?

Rodney's expression appeared considerably more sober. Will tried to imagine how *he* would feel. *I'd be surprised by what had come out of my mouth. And I'd wish I could work around it. Take it back.* Yet Rodney seemed resolute. “You're sure.”

Rodney looked Will full in the face for the first time that morning. “I guess I am.”

For everything Will thought of to say, some way Rodney might rebuke him sprang to mind. Having decided against half a dozen statements, he ventured, “I guess you'd better be careful.”

“Of course.” Rodney took this like sound advice. “It'll be tonight.”

“Tonight?” Will, as before, had assumed it would be later.

“Has to be tonight. Tell me how to find him.”

On such short notice, the only place they could be sure they’d find Sherwin was at the building on Fuller. Rodney would catch Sherwin coming over after work, out in front of the building. Will was certain Sherwin would work between half and hour and an hour late, then drop in on Keiko after dark. He’d become a student of Sherwin’s comings and goings, haunting the heater vent like a surveillant. Will gave Rodney as detailed a description of Sherwin as he could summon. *Is he for real?* wondered Will. *He’s not just trying to save face after what he said?*

“Nobody better see us together in your neighborhood,” said Rodney. “It’s a good thing I never went over there. I’ll chill out around here while you go home. Go home early, like, now. Talk to people who see you go in. Get a buddy to come hang out.”

All this concern for Will and his alibi was also naturally concern for himself. Will reasoned it out: Rodney’s only connection to Sherwin was Will; were Will above suspicion, Rodney’s name could never come into it when the police investigated. That was the smart way to do it, then. “What will you do—after?”

“Get out of Dodge, most likely. Move back up to the river. Nobody notices you there, not as a person.” Rodney thought he would go back to Yuma, where he hadn’t been in a decade, but that information was need-to-know.

It occurred to Will to thank Rodney, but he wasn’t sure whether that would be appropriate. “Goodbye, man.”

Rodney nodded.

*See you around*, Will nearly said. Instead he got to his feet and walked toward home. Despite his fatigue—for he hadn’t slept that night—Will felt as light as paper on the breeze. He felt as porous as foam, as intangible as a spectre. There was nothing of consequence for him to do. He turned up toward M Street, where they sold cinnamon buns on the sidewalk of a morning.

Rodney’s mind was taut as a drum, his awareness crisp, his senses fine-tipped. He seemed to see each detail that came to his eye as through a lens, a delicately focused instrument. *What a hell of a thing*, he thought. His boots looked salvageable; he’d only crisped them a bit and could doubtless wear them again. They weren’t the same boots he’d worn in the service, just as this wasn’t the same fatigue shirt, but they were in the same style. He’d picked them up in the army-navy store in East High-

lands, the place with an M-60 up on the wall, presumably with no firing pin, ostensibly for sale though it hadn't moved in years.

As Rodney had said, he had indeed killed a person in Panama, in December of 1989, ten years before. It had been eleven days before the United States had been treaty-bound to cede control of the canal to the Panamanian government. The night before, a regiment of Rangers and two battalions of 82nd Airborne paratroopers had taken Torrijos; Rodney, with the 7th Infantry, had landed early the next morning to meet forward-deployed and in-country units in Panama City. Air assaults fell like thunder on the positions of the Panamanian Defense Force, where scores of patriotic boys died for their country without ever seeing the face of the enemy, as Rodney's brigade advanced to the city, meeting more resistance from Noriega's irregular paramilitary units than from the regular army, who were as untested as Rodney and his cohort in battle on urban terrain. The city was a mad spectacle, with fires burning, all order collapsing or seeming to. A building would be rubble, and next to it another building would be pristine. To move and to fight were terrifying. To the brass hats, Operation Just Cause—what a code-name!—must have looked like an orderly advance of colored flags across a map; but to Rodney it was a mad bowl across the city, running from position to position, doing his best to depend on his training; he didn't want to fuck up—he didn't want to die. He didn't want to make any mistakes that would get anyone he knew killed. Early on, a guy from his unit was killed by friendly fire: he was caught in a back blast when someone used an anti-tank missile to blow down a fence; that sort of thing was codified, during the aftermath, as a casualty due to unfamiliar secondary effects of ordnance, but in plain language was just a plain fuck-up. The whole while, the morning sky above was a pale blue, the color of heavenly disinterest; below, scorched grass. Homes were not homes, they were obstructions: blow them down. Another day, Rodney would have been ashamed even to walk through any of these front doors without knocking, but that morning the order of the day was to blow them down. When they crashed into certain homes they found the occupants trembling on the floors; in others they found no one. One man sprang at them from the kitchen with a knife and got a bullet in the forehead for it—Rodney saw this through the open front door; he hadn't been first in. Then it was a fast run up to the next position, ferreting out 'dingbats', the word they used for paramilitaries. Some dingbats had no uniforms, so anyone not in U.S. battle dress was a potential target. Orders came through on the radio: they were to be sent farther into the shit on an

anti-sniper maneuver in a tall hotel building. Rodney wanted to go where they sent him, not to fall out of position, not to take one step out of line; the army could have marched him off of a cliff, but that would have been okay; on his own, he'd be *on his own*. He stuck with the unit and somehow never found himself at the fore. There was no front line. They were just racing forward.

Having cleared all fifteen floors of the hotel, Rodney's unit began to descend. Then they drew fire. Someone had eluded their sweep and surprised them from the rear. A bullet passed under Rodney's ear with a frightful hiss and he saw it sock a hole in the door of the hotel's conference room. He froze. He lost control of himself and couldn't move. He couldn't think. Rifle fire erupted around him, louder than anything his ears could bear. All that got through to him was hellish noise, pandemonium. Who was firing? Where? Rodney managed to flop down onto the floor and pressed himself into it like a lover. Someone cried, "Man down!" He heard the words through the noise and thought, *They mean me*. For some reason that was enough to get him going again, and he raised his rifle to his shoulder and, prone, took aim at the muzzle flash he saw at the far end of the corridor. He fired short bursts, and got a few off before the attack broke off. The dingbats had apparently fled.

*Jesus Christ, I could die.* Rodney made it back out to the street with his unit, walking on rubber legs. *Jesus Christ.*

Up a block, over a block, from corner to corner they dashed. Orders came through the radio: their next objective was to secure a legislative building farther on; and, as there were no mechanized units in the vicinity, Rodney's unit, a light force, was going to have to hoof it. They drew fire from the windows of houses in a seedy-looking area, seedy even in that underwhelming town, and found their advance checked. Rodney and another soldier ducked beside a pickup truck parked at the curb, but unluckily crouched on the side of it exposed to a sniper across the road. A burst of automatic fire took off the arm of Rodney's fellow above the elbow, and a second burst punched through the boy's chest. Rodney yelled, swept his rifle around and sprayed bullets in a wide arc. *Jesus Christ*, he thought. *Random firing don't work. Quit wasting ammo. Shit. Think.* He scrambled around, heard bullets strike the body of the truck. He saw his assailant in a second story window and fired at him, angry. Angry! Rodney was shaking with anger. The brown face disappeared from the window, but Rodney emptied the clip of his weapon into the face of the building, shattering glass and chewing away wood. "Man down," he called to

his unit, and somebody ran across. Clayton Evans. That was the guy who he'd seen killed just now. They hadn't been very friendly with each other. Something across the road caught fire. A lady was shrieking. Rodney pressed himself to the truck, reloaded, then dashed forward. The dingbats had either all been neutralized or were lying low, and the only gunfire to be heard swept up from a distance. A man ran into the road, an older guy with fat brown legs and no shoes, wearing white shorts, maybe fifty years old, running like mad for shelter, then trying to pick his way past downed power lines with his hands around his head. In a second Rodney shot him down.

Someone yelled to move and they moved. They made it to the building in question and found it half-demolished, half-untouched. The unit interpreter had taken shrapnel in the foot, so Rodney and his unit had to wait for someone else to be moved up to their position; they had a handful of Panamanian suits in custody, refugees from the building, but whether they were prisoners or friendlies could not be established without an interpreter. Rodney and his unit were to hold things down; that was all—just hold things down. By the time things were settled there, the hairiest of the fighting had ended, and the United States was in tentative possession of that quarter of the city. No one else from Rodney's unit was killed that day, or indeed in the remainder of the action.

Sent out the next morning to quell rioting reported near a shopping arcade in Chorrillo, Rodney made an observation that he remembered long after. Sullen refugees whose homes lay smoking were collecting at the makeshift processing center that the Americans had erected in a high school stadium, their tread heavy but their eyes alive: some with a weird mix of anger, fear and elation; others only with anger; and it was one of these, a wiry man colored like coffee beans in a white, logo-less baseball cap, his clothes clean, with nothing about him to suggest that his home and possessions had all been swept away, or that his family or friends had met their deaths the day before, who caught Rodney's eye as his unit fell in. Under stark steel girders where a commercial building had lately stood, half-buried in hand-sized octagonal chunks of concrete rubble and twisted, blackened rebar, there was what looked like the wreck of a Chevy Impala, badly burnt with no tired or window glass evident. Beyond was a road, where other cars, unharmed, passed, some of them quite new-looking; beyond that, a line of humble homes which stood untouched by violence, and a shop, perhaps a grocer, that some giant hand from the sky had slapped palm-down; and in the hazy distance, in an otherwise featureless

skyline, two nondescript twenty-story apartment buildings. Leaning into the husk of the Chevy, maybe his own car, maybe someone else's, was this man, looking perhaps for something he'd left inside it, or else scrounging for valuables, either of which was absurd considering the total destruction of the car; and while Rodney took in the sight of him, it occurred to him as clearly as daylight, *Yesterday I could have killed that guy*. It would have been permitted. Now, in the orderly light of a U.S.-controlled morning, it was no longer permitted. Many American soldiers and many more Panamanians had lost their lives in the space of a few hours the day before; all of these deaths were mourned; most went unquestioned. Rodney saw that it would have nothing to do with that particular man. It could be anybody. Simple sights, coming upon one at the end of just the right sequence of experiences, could impress on the mind plain truths with a blunt power that the sophisticated intellect could not command. Before the end of that second day, the show was over. All military objectives had been realized. Noriega was down a hole somewhere and would soon be discovered; the country was in good hands once more—the U.S. was already assembling a native interim government. A week later, they debriefed Rodney and sent him back to Fort Benning to endure post-combat counselling, which was dull but had to be done: orders were orders and it was all happy horseshit anyway.

There was no rule against smoking inside the Mission, but Rodney still waited to finish his rollie before going back in. A cigarette was a poor man's therapy. The back door had swung shut, so he had to circle around and go in through the front. As he'd anticipated, breakfast was over. "Rodney!" called Jim Kelly. "Thanks."

"What for?"

"I ate your seconds!" Somebody laughed. Jim ambled away.

"Gawl." Rodney wasn't really angry; he wasn't hungry. He decided to light out from the Mission, to gather up some of his things and go; he didn't care to stick around any longer, seeing as how he wouldn't be coming back.

At his bunk, he caught sight of Higgins. "Hey. That scripture."

Higgins nodded his head upward. "Revelations."

Rodney paused in packing his rucksack. "You memorized that one for them kind of debates, didn't you?"

"Yup."

"Good one, man. Good one." Rodney nodded. "Something just came to my mind just now." He held up his hands. "My old dad used to keep

a lot of hunting knives in his den, big wicked guys about yea big. He'd have the blades just *polished*. And when we was little me and my brother could go look at them if we wanted, up on his wall. But of course he never wanted us touching them."

Higgins nodded; he was nobody's fool. "I see where you're going."

"They were for his pleasure. Not ours."

"Not yours," repeated Higgins. He smiled. "Don't tell that to Jacob." Higgins was going to have to hunt up a new supporting Bible verse; he couldn't be satisfied any longer with this one.

"I won't, brother." Rodney smiled. He would have been glad to have been capable of helping Higgins find more verses, although, in the first place, he found the proposition Higgins was out to prove to be a little dubious; but he'd really read far less of the Bible than he would have liked. One day he really meant to get down to it. Higgins, at least, had made a proper study of the Good Book. It was too bad that, on the other side of the debate, they only had a blockhead like Jacob to make arguments. *I guess a lot of important decisions end up falling a certain way*, speculated Rodney, *because the guy who would of known a better Bible verse just wasn't there that day. It's sort of a shame.*

"Who cut the cheese?" somebody roared, and a couple of guys guffawed.

"Shoot," said Rodney. "Another day at the Mission." He began packing up the handful of things he'd take with him. He'd need a blanket too, but the one on his bunk was the property of Joe Cholula. *It's a hell of a program here*, he thought, rolling each article of clothing into a cigar-shaped bundle and stowing it into his bag. *I guess I been blessed.*

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A co-worker stopped at Sherwin's desk to shoot the bull and noticed that all of the default loan files on the desk were stacked away in their folders, each with a summary sheet typed and stapled to the front, a sign that these collection accounts had in some way been settled. "You close out all your numbers?"

His eyes still on the computer monitor, Sherwin mumbled, "Yeah." He was deleting his read mail. He liked an empty in-box.

"Really? All of them? Paid up?"

"Well. Two paid. Small defaults, but I stuck on them. This one, had to arrange a sale of collateral, pissed that lady off royally. Total cluster fuck,



but I wrapped it up today.”

“You’re such a mean guy.”

Sherwin held up the file that was laid at the top of the stack. “Remember last month I was out on a skip trace? And then the dude just, like, came home? This old guy.”

“Old guy, yeah.” Sherwin’s co-worker nodded that he remembered.

“Died.” Sherwin dropped the folder. “After all that hassle.”

“Collect from the estate.” This was not always legally enforceable, but was generally worth a go.

“He filed bankruptcy the day before he dropped dead. The *day before*, bro.” Sherwin allowed himself a wry smile.

“Does that mean we’re dicked?”

Sherwin shrugged. “It’s over my head. Rochelle says to send it to the attorneys and they’ll figure it out. Something like, is it worth untangling.” *Who lends to these people?* thought Sherwin. It seemed to him that the loan officers handed out money like free samples of cheese and crackers at the supermarket. They must have been allowing borrowers to fill out their own background checks; they must have been taking pinky promises as collateral. Every loan officer, Sherwin believed, out to have to work a year in collections before being allowed to approve a single loan, just to witness the level of damage they were doing.

“That sucks,” remarked his co-worker.

“At least it isn’t my problem anymore.”

“Yes. The silver lining. Going home early?”

“I believe I will.”

In his car, Sherwin shed his necktie, undid his top button and, squirming in his seat, managed to get his shirttail untucked. There was a rumor at work that Valentina Mutual was going to downsize the department in which Sherwin worked and contract instead with third-party collectors; to give it credence was to worry unnecessarily, but he often, when knocking off work, wondered idly what he’d do next if he got laid off. The roads were uncrowded at that time in the afternoon, since not even the government workers at the defense laboratory, usually the first to clear out of work on a Friday afternoon, had made it out of the office yet. It was a pleasure to drive when the road was open and one could really *drive*. Sherwin almost took the exit at 32nd for King Street, the route to Keiko’s—in all likelihood she was at home—but changed his mind. Near the Town Faire Mall there was a Starbucks—a bit of a journey, but gas was cheap.

As he walked through the parking lot, Sherwin saw two small girls, perhaps seven or eight years old, fighting over a cellular phone. Their parents were nowhere around.

The walls inside of Starbucks were painted a uniform tan. With his order in hand, Sherwin hunted for a place to sit and concluded that it wouldn't be poor form to take an entire table for himself, since the café was far from crowded. *Aren't all the walls of Starbucks cafés painted this color?* reflected Sherwin; choosing the color of a single wall in a single establishment might be a slapdash decision, but the selection of one color to paint a thousand or ten thousand walls was nothing to take lightly. The Starbucks company might shell out a few millions to a color consultant and consider it money well spent if it brought the assurance of such masterful attention to detail, such intuitive and thoroughgoing perceptiveness of the effect on customers of just such and such a shade of coffee beige or nut brown or whatever it was. Or perhaps, through long endeavor, numberless trials and carefully corrected errors, the color of all Starbucks walls had evolved to this. *Anywhere you look, there's a story*, thought Sherwin. *What if I started my own business? Say the bank lays us off.* Anyway, the place was done right; it was such small, assured competence in the subtle details that made Starbucks a better coffee house than the puny no-name places to which, as Keiko yet was, he'd once been partial.

There was a woman at the next table. Her laptop computer was open and running, but she was engrossed instead in a book on her lap. She was attractive and looked about his own age—Sherwin guessed that she was a graduate student. He couldn't see the title of the book, but it was assuredly no romance novel.

*Ah, well.* Sherwin stared into his coffee cup. He did not sympathize with himself.

Though they never much discussed it, there were a number of things on which he and Keiko had once been of the same opinion—not just coffee shops—but on which they now disagreed. Inconsequential things. Sherwin's coffee was still too hot to really drink a mouthful. He sipped tenderly. *I ought to pour this stuff right on my face and burn myself.* Strange thoughts like this would come to him all of a sudden. He thought, in an abstract fashion, that tonight he might not strike Keiko. The night before, he nearly had. Two nights ago, he had, once—hard. What had it been? She'd laughed at him. He'd told her about his traffic ticket, getting caught busting a red light in a school zone, ironically because he'd slowed down so as not to speed near the school. She'd laughed. He probably should

have been able to laugh about it too. But.

Before that happened, when he'd been driving over to her building after work, he had hoped to himself that he would not go off. Hopes of that kind evidently counted for little. That she could laugh at him again about things like traffic tickets showed that Keiko feared him less and less. Did that make it easier to hit her? Or was what made it easy the fact that he'd done it once? After the first time, then the second, a pattern had taken form.

The woman at the next table had graceful posture. Her long auburn hair was tied back. Her subject of study must have been something high-minded, not finance or management or anything, but also not arty. She looked level-headed. It could have been architecture, for example, or dentistry. Sherwin considered an opening line, but nothing immediately occurred to him. *Am I considering what a potential opening line might be*, he queried himself, flabbergasted, *or am I considering an actual opening line?*

The probability was high that Keiko would split up with him. Things had changed. Whether or not he loved her still, it sank his spirits to know that he'd lost her. It was inevitable—it was the only way to break the pattern. Sherwin did not sympathize with himself—he saw all that he'd done, good things and bad. He knew he was essentially a reckless agent. He had no cause to be so angry, and no right to be so greedy about a girl he probably didn't really want. He had helped her out more than a little when they'd first met, when she'd been distressed for want of money and he'd begun buying everything when they were out together with friends: meals, drinks, cab fare, gifts of cash. This had begun even before sex, before being linked. He'd been chivalrous; he saw this fact as well, without emotion. All of their history together, and all of his transgressions upon her, could have been a column of numbers in a spreadsheet that he was reading over, for all it excited in his sentiments. He made no effort at defending himself from himself; nor did he indulge in lazy self-flagellation, the camouflaged self-serving sentimentality of histrionic penitence. Sherwin had taught himself that even he was the sort to hit a woman.

The woman at the next table put her book on the tabletop, closing a bookmark within the pages, and Sherwin thought he might say something. If she went straight to another book or to writing something, he wouldn't intrude; but she leaned back and stirred her coffee cup around, even looking in his direction. "I was guessing architecture," he said.

The woman looked again. After a moment, she replied. "Nice try."

“But?”

She turned the book up so he could see its title: *Emotional Disorders in Children*.

Sherwin chose his words carefully, wanting to regain some of the way of talking he'd had in school. “Child psychology. Sort of a far cry from Frank Lloyd Wright.” *Did I get that name right?* he wondered.

“Well, it's a pleasure read, if you can believe it. My major is actually criminology. I came across this book on a sort of a tangent, researching for a paper.”

“Criminology.” Sherwin smiled at her. “I should call you Sarge.”

The woman didn't look amused. “That's criminal justice. Future bailiffs of America. Criminology is a different field.”

“Oh.” What next? “FBI and things like that? Or is that also criminal justice?”

“FBI would be a dream come true. In fact, if all goes well I'm applying next fall.” She was tall, well-dressed but not overdone; she obviously worked out, kept trim. Women like this seemed masters of their own destinies, hard to get close to and harder to win. They maintained even-tempered platonic friendships with men for years and never got emotional. “You're a student at Valentina State?” she asked him.

“Graduated a while back. Got myself a J. O. B.” He smiled again. That she seemed pleased to continue conversing was a great encouragement to him.

“Lucky you.”

He introduced himself. Her name was Heidi. He felt suddenly disinclined to talk about his job, some mention of which was on the tip of his tongue. *Get her to talk*, he thought. He asked her if she was satisfied with her laptop, saying that he was thinking of getting one but didn't know how to make an educated selection. “Get a Mac,” she asseverated. “Worth every penny.” Her eyes were on him; it didn't matter what they talked about. Keiko's departure impended and Sherwin would lose, with her, the safety net of a reliable female presence in his life. The pleasure of flirting with Heidi—“Actually, my ex was the one into computers,” she told him, indicating that she was single—acquired the keen edge, the thrill, of potential loss. He made her smile, just by saying something bland like, “Must be nice to have an artist in the family,” and she touched her hair. The moment to ask her for something—her evening, or her phone number—seemed nigh. Fate, like a violinist, poised its bow above the strings.

Sherwin looked at his wrist, though he knew well enough that he'd

left his watch in the car. “You wouldn’t have the time?”

Heidi checked her computer’s clock. “You’ve got errands?” Was she going to ask for his... no.

“Well, I need to get home. My girlfriend’s waiting for me.”

The pellucid blue irises of her eyes seemed to deepen a shade; this was the only sign of her anger. Sherwin commended her inly. To be jerked around this far, and show it so little! She was stronger than ten of him. They nodded to each other and he left.

Outside, the bare beginnings of rain had begun to fall, but he wasn’t wet when he got to his car, only dewed around the edges. The afternoon was still early, so the roads were yet clear, but the sky darkened, threatening a storm. Sherwin drove toward Keiko’s, feeling numb to the core.

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David leaned heavily against a signpost and tried to steady his breathing. He examined his hands. They weren’t too badly cut, but a large scrape across the knuckles of his right hand looked gorier than it felt. He feared a bruise would develop later. Alcohol surged in his blood and he waited for the heartache to flare again. After a moment, it did.

“Just like that,” he muttered, his voice thick with dolor and drunkenness. He shook his head violently to throw the tears from his eyes. “Dropped, just like that.” Sadness squeezed him and he let it overcome him again. He looked at the clouded night sky without seeing it and allowed melancholy and self-pity free rein within him. His frame shook and his throat was so tight that it ached; he wondered if he was going to vomit, but that would have been taking it too far. He was glad that Angela wasn’t there to snicker at the melodramatic figure he made. There was no moon. It would probably rain again before morning.

David wandered back to Angela’s Saab, but slipped and landed on one knee in a gravelly puddle of rainwater. There were fist-sized stars in all four windows of the car and a significant dent in the hood where he’d swung down, with all of his strength, a length of two-by-four he’d picked up from a scrap lumber pile behind the groundskeeper’s toolshed. He noted with grim satisfaction that her car alarm had not ever gone off. “There’s your precious security, bitch,” he slurred, but his own words sounded false to him. *Bad acting*, he thought. He couldn’t curse her and believe it.

*Maybe I’m better off without her*, he thought. The idea was frighten-

ing because it might prove true. He wanted to need her. *What am I going to do alone?* He floated from this problem to another: *What am I going to do about this car?* He decided he'd better remove.

As he walked up King Street and across 19th toward Garfield Park, he considered what it was he was facing. *No more sex*, he thought. The sex had been outrageous. Her nude body had excited him to feats no other girl had ever roused him to: two, three long rounds a night, steadfast stamina, joyous determination, inspired carnality the likes of which Angela herself seemed unaccustomed to. David had always kept the lights on. Whatever bashfulness may have nagged him about his own body, particularly about the shapeless plane of his midsection where six tile-shaped abdominal muscles ought ideally to have quivered, gave way to the imperative: look at this woman. Swallow her image. He'd watched her body like pornography. From that, he had come to this; she had snatched that pleasure away—*snatched away the snatch*, David thought, it being beyond his power even in these straits to restrain himself—and handed down to him this unjust sentence, that never again in his life would he plunge himself into a woman's body with just that shape and just those lines. *Love and sex are basically the same thing*, he insisted to himself, driving back the suspicion that he might not be able to sustain the lachrymose woundedness of lost love for what could be revealed, in the sober light of a few mornings from then, merely as lost screwing. He would leave dispassionate reflection until then. Tonight he was hurt. He'd been left.

He'd bolted from his apartment half an hour before with his shoes untied, leaving his jacket and wallet on the bed. The cold of the night air, to which a mix of liquor, bathos and adrenaline had initially inured him, bit into him now. He pulled his arms tight against his body and walked faster. "What's really fucked is, she did it over the phone," he announced to the night. "She didn't even have the decency to face me about it." He hadn't had the decency to face her about it either when he went to her place—instead, he'd vandalized her car—but he dismissed this distinction on the grounds that Angela, as the guilty party, deserved whatever she got. "She couldn't even face the pain she caused." How in character it was for her! If Angela had any qualms about hurting people, David had never perceived them. "Like at work, for example. She always has, like, this complete justification worked out," he said. Kimberly had confided to him concerns about the ethicality of some of Angela's practices. "Just to prove that people deserve to get stabbed in the back. And another thing!" His voice rose in volume enough that two women crossed the street to-

gether at McKinley Avenue to avoid passing him. “She’s such a control freak. It’s a cliché but it actually applies. She’s all about control. And that *also* explains why she did it over the phone. She’d *have* to. She can’t do anything where she doesn’t know the outcome. That’s our whole relationship.”

He stopped on the sidewalk, taking small steps to maintain his balance against the whirl of intoxication, struck by this last thought. “That’s it. That’s so *it*.” He had always been vexed by the cool arrogance she affected, the attitude that passionate abandon just would not do, when he’d been sure that her heart raced just like his—if not in passion for him, then unmistakably when she managed some kind of interpersonal conquest. His opinion of her fell and fell. He had witnessed how she shunned unfamiliar foods rather than risk a bad meal, yet claimed to be such a gourmand, possessed of broad expertise and not stingy with her opinion. What had seemed adorable to him at the start was now clearly a character failing. The minute that anything fell outside the demesne of her savvy, she dismissed it. He had always resented the way she played on his guilt to exact sacrifices from him while disdaining his sense of moral thoughtfulness, as well as her prideful habit of boastfulness—never overtly or tackily, but nevertheless habitually letting drop, in a manner casual enough that one didn’t notice until the second or third time, some smug mention of her numerical superiority, her high ACT scores, her bust measurement, her income, her years *on her own* in the world: “Yeah, she *moved out* when she was fifteen,” he scoffed, “but her parents paid everything, rent, bills, until she graduated college, toured fucking *Europe*, and got a job. Her *first* job, when she was *twenty-four*.” She was always too proud—proud of her atheism, for example: “A model atheist,” David complained to the night with intense scorn, “who checks her horoscope every night and reads those—” he searched for the word; searched quite a long time “—*ludicrous* chakra books all the—”

He caught himself up. A bald man was frowning down at him from a second floor window across the way. “Hey,” David waved sheepishly. The man glared, then pantomimed tapping his wristwatch: *You have any idea of the time, bozo?* David tucked his head down and hurried on.

*I guess I’m letting it all hang out*, he thought. He couldn’t stay blazing drunk all night long, not after it became an act. He was calming rapidly now; on a sudden thought, he came to the conclusion that he would offer payment for the damages to the car.

He came to the corner of Garfield Park and cut across the grass and

over a wooden footbridge that spanned a finger of the lake no wider than a man. He passed through the shortcut he always used, past the little clearing with the bench, emerged onto Fuller and made for his apartment building.

As the light of a street lamp fell onto David, Rodney straightened where he stood waiting in the darkened doorway of a closed shop building, gripping the handle of the revolver in the pocket of his fatigue jacket, and scrutinized his approach, ticking off a mental checklist: *Blond guy, kind of a white boy afro, six footish, skinny, good looking. Uh huh. Walks a little funny.* Even that was just as Will had described. Rodney stepped from the doorway, walked toward David too purposely to be doing anything but intercept him, and called, “Hey, man. Hold up a sec.”

David realized that Rodney was addressing him; there was no one else on the street at that hour. Instantly he took caution, sobering from what remained of his drunkenness. *Watch out*, he warned himself. *Don't get jacked.* “Hey, what’s up,” he called to Rodney, speaking evenly and nodding his head upward at him. Maybe he was bumming for change, or wanted a favor, in the way a certain class of person in that town would ask strangers for favors. David resolved to act nonchalantly and tough enough to convince the guy not to try anything. One problem, though: should he go into the building directly? This would show the guy where he lived. David wavered.

They were close enough for David to decide he certainly did not know Rodney, and for Rodney to see, when David waved, the scuffs on his knuckles. *That's it*, Rodney thought. *The smoking gun.* His fury tightened. “I got a question for you,” Rodney began, his voice hard. He saw David stiffen. “I heard you got a temper. I heard you like to fuck with your woman in a violent way. That the truth?”

David thought, *Shit. Somebody who knows Angela. She saw the car and called on her thugs.* ‘Call on her thugs’ was such corny ghetto slang—*always with the jokes, you*, he thought to himself, wondering if this was how it felt to be outside yourself with fear. “Who the fuck are you?” he countered, thinking, *Be cool. Act like he's the one out of line. Don't let him know you're nervous.* He wanted nothing more than to avoid a beating tonight.

*It's got to be him*, thought Rodney. He was tense, solid. He resolved to doubly reconfirm. “Just answer the question, lowlife. You been fucking with your lady, yes or no?”

David couldn't figure out if Rodney was for real or not. He looked



ticked off about the car—but how was he to be taken seriously, with that Gomer Pyle accent and that half-cocked expression? There was something *off* about the guy that made him either comical or dangerous. *To hell with it*, David thought, and said, “So? The bitch had it coming.” This was the drink talking after all. “And anyway, whoever *you* are, you don’t even know half of it. There’s two sides to it.”

*It’s him*. Rodney hardened himself for the act. The gun in his hand seemed to tremble on its own, as if it were trying to go off. He knew that he had to wrangle it from his pocket before the moment fled. *Just get it out. He’ll see it. Once he sees it, I got to do it*. “You don’t know me, pal, but I sure know you.” All Rodney’s hatred broke out with these words; from here he didn’t think and then act; he only acted. “I know all about you, and I got to tell you one thing. There isn’t nothing in the world as sickening as the sight of a woman been beaten by a man.”

*Say what?* thought David. *What did Angela tell him I did?* Then he saw the gun. The guy had a gun. David froze, petrified where he stood as in a nightmare. He could have cut out his tongue for the way it betrayed him. No words would come. Fear mastered him. He could not save his own life.

“Suckers like you deserve to die, Sherwin,” said Rodney. He pointed the gun. A thin high *crack*—

The impact of the bullet pushed *hard* on David’s chest. In that instant he felt no pain. There was only the *push*, the force that rammed his body all at one locus. He could not stand. A crazy thought came to him: *Sherwin—isn’t that a brand of paint?* After that, he realized it: *He shot me. He shot me.*

Pain bloomed. It was terrible. It jammed through him. He staggered and yelped a short, piercing “Oh!” He thought, *He shot me once. People can survive being shot once.*

There was another crack. He felt the bullet *push* into him. Some of his body came away as the bullet exited the back of his shoulder. He felt his own flesh tear away. The pain came with no delay. It would destroy him. *Shoulder. Not fatal. If he stops now*— David knew he must speak. This was a mistake. He had to tell the man that he was not a brand of paint. He could not speak. He fell on the ground. A third crack. It *pushed* him in the neck. He was not ready for this.

*Stop*, he thought. *Please not my neck*. Simple begging now. He was hot and cold. He found that he was on the ground. Another bullet pushed him. Pain in his abdomen. *Dying?* he wondered vaguely.

He could not see. The man might have gone away. There was another push from a bullet. He barely felt it. *Dying?* It was so stupid. More distant pain. *Stop.*

He felt another push. Chest again. That was too many. He thought, *Dying. Killed me.*

Was stupid. Wrong guy. Wanted to stand up. He was. Not the. Guy who.

Rodney pulled the trigger again and realized simultaneously that he'd spent all his rounds. It had gone fast. He'd held it steady and not missed. He threw the revolver onto the sidewalk and turned to leave. He turned back, picked up the gun again, and used the tail of his shirt to wipe the handle and trigger. He dropped it again and walked a step. He stopped and went back and picked it up to take with him, decided to throw it in the river. He put it in his pocket, changed his mind and threw it on the ground. Remembering again about fingerprints, he picked it up to wipe it. He threw it down.

*This is getting out of hand*, he thought. *Go. Go!* He knew that the longer he lingered, the heavier he would become as confusion and panic begat more confusion and more paralyzing panic. He ran for the park, and then ran the other way across the street in the direction of the train stop. To run cleared his head; he was moving; he was taking action. He would follow the light rail tracks till they came to the river.

Will was in his room, chewing down his fingernails. He'd been to the toilet half a dozen times. He'd been to the heater vent twice as many times; there was no sound from Keiko's room. When he heard the shots, six dry pops in rapid succession like fire crackers, something fragile in him shivered like thin glass. "God!" he cried. "It's him!" He picked up the telephone and held it he know not how long, until it began emitting high attention tones. He set it back in the cradle to sever the connection once, then picked it up again and dialed. His voice was weak. He gave his name when the operator only wanted to know the nature of the emergency. "A shooting. Gunshots." Will finally made himself understood. After a string of questions, the operator told him he could hang up. He went to his window and peered down into the street. He couldn't see anything.

"I should go down," he said aloud, but he stayed at the window. He expected to hear sirens at once, but nothing came. Nothing moved below. A full minute passed before Will again said, "I should go down." At once then he collapsed into motion, pushing his feet into his sneakers and pulling a sweatshirt over his head.

He left the door to his apartment open and rattled down the stairs faster than was safe. Doors were opening in the hall, but no one else came out until after Will had. He shot out of the front door of the building and saw Sherwin's body. The street was wet and Will wondered, *Did it rain tonight?* The dead man in the road faced up to the starless sky.

A few people came out of the building, and out of the neighboring buildings. A couple of older men in leather jackets and motorcycle chaps whistled and said, "Can you believe that," over and over. One strolled directly to the body and stopped two paces away to examine it, though he must have known better than to touch or move anything at a crime scene. The other kept his distance. Will found that he was shivering. At last he heard a siren shriek many blocks distant.

"Will! Hey!" Keiko called to him from the doorway. She did not come out of the building, only called to him. "Hey!"

"Keiko! Don't come out," he said, striding toward her. "Stay there."

"What happened?"

"Stay there."

"What happened?" she repeated. He went to her. She stood in the entryway at the foot of the stairs before the mailboxes in her pajamas, a black T-shirt and sweatpants. Sherwin stood behind her, shirtless, with one arm draped around her shoulders. "Hey, bro, was that a drive-by?" he asked Will.

Will was stunned. He backed away without answering into the street and swung around toward the body. *The wrong one*, he realized, and was cognizant at last of David's face and of how utterly different he looked from Sherwin, once Will looked at him properly. David's check was splashed with blood from the wound in his neck, so that it seemed coated in thick dark paint. Will had never seen the guy before. His first flash of emotion was disappointment. *We missed*, he thought. His second flash of emotion, which obliterated the first, could never be described in words.

Keiko came out to the sidewalk. She blanched when she saw the body but did not recoil. Will, bereft of volition and motility, surveyed her from the street. He waited for her to turn and accuse him. The entire street and everyone on it were surely about to guess his part in this nonsensical violence; and she would be first; for a moment, this fear seemed rational.

Someone was murdered. *I made this happen*, he thought. Sherwin, now alive, standing and moving before Will's eyes, could have been the one lying ruined in the road—the thought was repugnant. The entire scheme, and the contraption of ideas by which Will had justified it, collapsed like

blown ashes.

Sherwin followed Keiko, and she pulled him to her and clutched his shoulders but never took her eyes from the corpse. "It's David," she said, her voice childlike and wispy. "He's the neighbor. I know him. Somebody killed him?" She seemed about to cry.

As hot despair welled in his throat, Will shut his eyes and finally knew that there had never been born a creature more foolish than he.

## Chapter 5

Would it rain? The late afternoon air breathed with impending rainfall, and evening seemed liable to descend early. In the past, Keiko had arrived enough times for work at Stingray's sopping wet from walking through the rain for it to have ceased to alarm her friends there. Once, a regular patron, in a gesture either of gallantry or of furtive courtship, had made a gift to Keiko of his umbrella at closing time during a downpour; it didn't take her three days to lose it. She walked to work now heedless of what rain might come; she had her hands in her pockets; every breath was like inhaling pure humidity. She walked through the intersection at Howell against the light, forcing a driver to slow, and then went straight on instead of turning left as she ought. It was twenty past the hour when she finally made it into work.

Everybody worked on Friday. Even the owner was prone to stopping by. The place had begun to fill with customers, early as the evening was. Stingray's was a popular spot and owed its success to the rigorousness with which it fulfilled the ideal of a sports bar: on the walls were posters and pennants for seemingly every professional team in every popular U.S. sport; in each corner, large-screen televisions mounted high on the wall, tuned to ESPN, allowed patrons to watch the game while facing each other; pool tables and video golf were stationed at one end; the bartenders kept darts in a can behind the bar; the CD jukebox had all of Elvis Presley's hits and most of the Aerosmith catalogue; the fare from the kitchen grill was as greasy as, but no greasier than, tradition demanded; and no employee would ever have dreamed of handing ketchup to a customer in a *plastic* bottle. Keiko was greeted at the door by many voices, known as she was to the patrons. She found an apron at the sink; Linda, the manager, passed her there without greeting her. This was normal. Linda's job including the enforcing of each petty workplace rule and the granting or withholding of days off, which made her a natural enemy of the entire staff.

The board showed Keiko's name with 'b/d' chalked in—today she would bus tables and wash dishes. Linda nearly always assigned her to bus-dish, though in a pinch Keiko was handy at the grill and could pour a handsome glass of beer. Jerome and Harvey, the other two busboys that night, came over to the sink with tremendous grins. "What up, Keiko?" said Jerome.

"Hey," she replied.

“Keiko. Baby girl. How about it?” Harvey sidled close and put a chummy arm round her. She blinked. “I been thinking. We could spend a little quality time—”

“Man,” objected Jerome, “don’t even try and corrupt—”

“What?” Harvey shot Jerome a false-angry glare.

“—*corrupt* little Keiko, fool. She’s just this much better than you.”

“She’s a *queen*, dog, but I was just thinking—”

“Uh-uh. She’s higher *class*. Forget this guy, K. He plays pocket pool.” Jerome giggled at his own joke.

“Whatever.” Harvey fixed two soulful eyes on Keiko, as though proposing marriage. “Huh, Keiko? Don’t even try to listen to mister, fuckin’—mister wet blanket.” Both guys snorted. “For real. My love is *necessary*.”

Jerome let out a hoot of ironic laughter, not an actual laugh but a vocalized ha-ha. They were deep into some shapeless gag, in the way that employees had at Stingray’s of killing time as they endured their jobs. Keiko didn’t know what to say to them. Harvey left her alone and shoved a wheeled cart of dishes at Jerome, who dodged with a matador’s flourish. It rattled against a wall.

“You know my shit is fabulous, yo.”

“Ha. I am laughing.”

“My shit it super *duper*.” They were both giggling hard. On any other day, she would have snuck to the back door with them to share another joint. Keiko went out toward the dining room with glass cleaner and a rag; from behind, she could hear them in a new stage of japery: joking aside, it was now time for appreciation of jokes bygone.

“What *is* that shit? ‘Mister wet blanket’!”

“Mister fuckin’ stick-in-the-mud!”

The shift passed on. As Keiko washed a stack of salad bowls in the kitchen, she overheard one of the line cooks say, “Saw on the news a guy got shot last night, up around the park.” Nobody else seemed much interested, and the subject soon changed. Keiko had watched that news program as well. *For this city of five hundred thousand, the annual murder rate of approximately thirty-five is higher than the state average, but lower than both Sacramento and San Francisco.* Thirty-five, she calculated, was about three per month. So it wasn’t a war zone, but when strangers shot strangers it didn’t affect the price of eggs. The dinner rush began in earnest. Stingray’s was soon packed. Indifferent to sports, Keiko only realized that some significant game or event was on that night when she

saw how enormous was the pile of dishes that Harvey and Jerome kept hurriedly contributing to; they'd burst through the swinging door behind her with fresh bus trays, then scurry out with steaming clean dishes to replenish the front. With robotic regularity, Keiko scraped leftover food into the garbage, gave each dish a shot with the spray hose, and then piled it onto a dish pallet; when the dishwasher finished cycling, she lifted the double doors, slid out the pallet inside, and had another flat of dishes ready to slide in. Long practice had made this an unthinking routine.

One shortcoming in the layout of the cramped kitchen was that the sink area was partly visible in the dining room, and when the door swung open clouds of steam escaped. Just as a customer was wandering past, a chubby lady above sixty years who was in search of the restroom, Jerome came knocking through the door with a bus cart at the same instant that Keiko angled a full blast of water into a metal Hobart mixing bowl. The water caromed around the inner surface of the bowl and out the swinging door, spraying the woman across the face and the front of her blouse. She threw up her arms in surprise. Jerome widened his eyes and then slipped away into the kitchen; Keiko was made aware of the blunder by viewing his reaction, and she turned and saw the customer there. Keiko stared, nonplussed, and the woman stared back.

"You sprayed me!" The woman's blouse was rather well soaked. She pointed to her large, low, shapeless breasts. Keiko regarded them.

"So?" Out the words came. "They gonna shrink or what?"

Linda appeared.

But the woman, who perhaps had had a few drinks already, slapped her thigh and burst out laughing. "Shrink!" she echoed. When customers were merry, Linda was merry, but only from the mouth down; her eyes drilled holes in Keiko. Keiko still stared affectlessly. "My God, dear, if you can make *this* shrink, I'll buy you dinner!" Guffawing, the lady turned and jutted out her ample rump. Keiko did the only logical thing, which was to spray the lady's ass.

This went over significantly less hilariously. Keiko observed, as Linda apologized prodigally in language that only a speaker of Japanese could have surpassed for abject penitence and offered the lady a discounted meal, which she declined, that the lady did not seem exactly angry, but confused about whether she need be offended. *She took it personally*, Keiko perceived. *There's no need even for that.*

In the manager's office, with the door shut so that there was nearly nowhere to stand, Linda laid into Keiko like a typhoon. "I don't care how

many pricks you tease around here, you may believe the sun rises and sets around your yellow little ass, but if you think you can pull shit like that in my restaurant, you've got another thing—"

"You're mad for nothing." Though Linda had been bellowing, Keiko spoke lowly and levelly. Of the two of them, it was Keiko now whose tone was the more effective rebuke—however logical or illogical her words. "You're—a crazy. You get mad and lost your—control. You just want to be mad. You look for the opportunity for angry." Keiko respoke: "Anger."

Linda glowered. "That's insubordination." Keiko's words seemed too irrelevant to the situation to take into consideration; no amount of ching-chong cutesie-talk was going to get Keiko out of hot water on this one. But Linda found it untenable to continue shouting.

Though it had nothing to do with being dressed down in the office, Keiko was an inch from collapse. She thought she might burst open, or implode into a pea-sized vacuum. Linda, back to business, warned, "We all have our off days, but you pull another one of those and I'll shit-can you." She brushed past Keiko out of the office.

Back at the sink, Harvey asked her what had happened. "She's going to shit my can," Keiko explained. "Shit *in* a can? I don't know."

"Uh, shit-can you. It means fired."

Keiko had suspected as much. She returned to the sink and caught up on the dishes that had piled up during her tongue-lashing, in order not to leave Jerome and Harvey with too much extra work. Without a word to anyone, since no one happened to ask where she was going, Keiko folded her apron into the hamper and walked through the dining room and out the front door.

Just as she was departing, a shower was petering out, so she got wet but not soaked. Right before she reached her building, another shower hit, this time really drenching her, but in the interval, walking warmed her up. Warm or cold, her mind was elsewhere. Every gnarled root of every tree, snaking just beneath the earth or pushing up to buckle the concrete of the sidewalk, was transformed in Keiko's eyes to a sinister finger grasping blindly for dominance. Big trees strangled little ones. In each tree were merciless birds, pecking out one another's eyes over paltry scraps of food, and on the ground were miserly, wicked animals, warring among themselves for petty territorial dominance. There was nothing cute any longer about suffering, no matter how small the creature who inflicted it. The grumbling sky above was an empty expanse of turbid, pugnacious gasses and perpetually skirmishing electrical discharge. Cars roared past



each other with only inches to spare them from fatal collision as their careless drivers rooted among their CD collections, applied lipstick in the mirror or simply woolgathered, untroubled by the peril into which they put all those around them. All things in the world set selfish courses and careened along them like angry comets. Children shrieked and spat.

There was no joy like fury. Though the constraints of decency, im-bued since infancy by fear and repetition, forbade wanton rage, those constraints eased or were shuffled off when a target appeared who was outside the purview of decency's protection; then with what abandon did people unleash themselves, burning like phosphate with brute hatred; then how cheering it was to hear of bombs falling on the heads of outlandish, filthy, alien peoples. Keiko, too, when she hadn't eaten well or hadn't slept enough, flared up, said scathing things to Sherwin. It felt good to be cruel. Were she stronger, not different in kind but only stronger than she was, what a murderess she might make. Animals everywhere did the same. It was horrible; it was the prime emotion. Newborn babies did not smile. They screamed; they were furious, with all their tiny energies, when their appetites went unsatiated; and they floated at all other times in solipsistic ignorance. For regard for others to be beaten into them, selfish rage had to be beaten back. Such clogged off rage found any egress; it sprayed from any puncture in the membrane decency wound around it; and it felt glorious to let it out.

Her apartment seemed to mock her with its unromantic shabbiness. Everything in it was so much rubbish. Even the odor of the place—faint traces of the sweet acrid smell of West Asian cooking from the Turkmenish bachelor who had lived there before her, like a film over the air—which had piqued her so pleasingly before, now merely stunk. Sherwin had left his pajama bottoms wadded on the floor. She picked them up and pressed them to her face. Behind closed eyelids, she searched for some image of his face; but, bizarrely, she found that she had forgotten for the moment what he looked like. She carefully folded the pajamas and laid them on her unmade bed. Her phone showed two new messages. She erased both unheard.

"*Hai, moshi-moshi.*" Masami, her sister, answered on the third ring. Keiko calculated that in Japan it was already Saturday, about four in the afternoon. In the background on the other end, she heard dramatic theme music from a television: a plinking piano backed by the army of soupy strings requisite in all Asian pop. Keiko heard a baby's gurgle. She heard faint static crackling on the line.

“*Kokuken katte kurehen?*” she said without preamble. “Can you buy me a plane ticket?”

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Not long after she had laid a pair of lilies on her brother’s descending coffin, Kimberly Dunlop received two telephone calls: one from the detective’s office informing her that David’s apartment, until then sealed with yellow police decals, could again be entered; and one from David’s landlady inquiring whether she’d rather clear out the apartment or remit another month’s rent before the first of the month, which was now less than a week off. Prior to the funeral, lilies had held no especial significance to her or, as far as she knew, to David; she’d picked some from the floral arrangement because they were at hand and had barely known what she held until she dropped them onto the shut lid of the casket. Later, though, it became her custom to keep a white stargazer lily in water on her mantel shelf, a custom she maintained until after she married and bore children.

The detective’s call carried with it an unsettling implication: though no one had been arrested, was the investigation over so soon? Could the police have finished picking over all of the evidence in David’s apartment already? True, the crime itself had happened outside, but an instrumental clue could have lain anywhere. The kind of painstaking analysis that Kimberly imagined should have taken a careful investigator three weeks, or four—or perhaps not. She was no expert.

With the rest of the family still in New Hampshire, it fell to Kimberly, on her return to California, to sort out David’s remaining affairs. She managed to make short work of it; this seemed unfair. Outstanding traces of her brother were too easy to erase; the gap he left in the world was handily papered over: his MasterCard debts and the remnant of a student loan, the last vestige of his inconclusive peregrination through university; these she covered with some of the money their parents had transferred her; although Kimberly’s research had convinced her that his creditors would be forced to write off his unpaid liabilities—his ‘estate’ consisted of nothing more valuable than a hi-fidelity phonograph and some kitchen appliances—her father, solemn and wearied by grief but still himself in all ways, had insisted that the Dunlops would settle any debt. It was no trouble for Kimberly to take leave from work, and after an enervating few hours on the phone with the bank and a few credit report agencies, utility and telephone companies, his employer and his landlady, official notifica-

tion of his death was settled. It was like moving to a new apartment, she realized, with only the chores of moving out, none of moving in.

Kimberly brought Angela with her when she went to collect David's things. There were bound to be things of Angela's in the apartment—not David's apartment now but *the* apartment—so Kimberly phoned her at work and arranged to pick her up at noon. It would be easier, maybe, to have another person along. In the car, Kimberly did not find much to say to her, in part naturally because it was the first time since his death that they'd been alone together, and also in light of what had come out during the detective's investigation about the breakup—which Angela had described as a sloppy, draining conclusion to a relationship that, she almost seemed to imply, hadn't been worth enough in the having to justify such turmoil in the ending—and about the incident of vandalism with Angela's car an hour before the murder, an act of overblown violence captured on closed circuit camera which, together with the blood alcohol content the toxicologist measured post-mortem, led the detective to the early theory that David, far gone on his bender, had unwisely picked a fight with the wrong sort of character—a theory to which Kimberly could not subscribe. For the damaged car, at least, if not the discomfiture of the failed relationship, Kimberly nearly felt obliged to make Angela an apology, though she did not.

Angela, feeling solicitous toward Kimberly but having sense enough to know that there was nothing she could *really* do, talked shop in the car. She did her best not to seem either too cheery or too solemn, sticking to light gossip about coworkers and longtime clients; she also prudently steered clear of mentioning her own work, as she'd lately sensed that Kimberly did not approve of some of her tactics. Angela had agreed to come along mainly from a tender wish to help Kimberly, spurred also by a tinge of guilt that she adjudged irrational but perfectly natural: Angela was not a 'survivor' of the deceased and did not see herself as a victim, but she had in a sense lost someone, and reactions of mourning were not abnormal. Angela had let pass Kimberly's earlier suggestion that some of Angela's things might be at the apartment: Angela knew the location of each of her possessions as precisely as a person knows the position of each tooth in her mouth, and she'd left nothing of consequence at David's; but to say so would have been to refuse to come along: without the pretense, Kimberly would have refused to entertain the proposition of discomfitting Angela just for a bit of help packing up.

The police had not troubled to remove all of the yellow tape from

the door and jamb, so Kimberly and Angela peeled it off, careful of the finish of the wood. Inside, the room looked turned inside-out, either by the detective's investigation or as a vestige of David's loose regard for tidiness. Angela wrinkled her nose—this was going to be a lot of work. Kimberly, after pacing the apartment for a moment with no evident aim, fell to boxing up David's clothing without a word. Angela, suddenly nervous, tactlessly turned on the stereo. It was tuned between stations. Angela was unused to working David's stereo system, though she fancied herself technologically inclined; she turned knobs and flipped switches in semi-conscious imitation of the nimble way David had used to do, but, instead of finding a radio station, managed to engage the phonograph. The needle dropped onto the turntable with a bassy pop. The sound brought to mind a memory.

He'd been a record collector. She had hated it. "You only buy vinyl because it's trendy."

"It's trendy because I buy it." David had brought home a parcel of used records. He blew so much of his pay on trivial garbage and kitsch that Angela wondered how he made rent and bills. "The hipsters in this town are like reeds in the wind," he said. A smile played on the corner of his lips, as it often did when he believed he was keeping a straight face. "And you know what I am?"

"You don't need to say it."

"The *wind*, baby." He was in a chipper mood. "Check this shit out." He put on a record, Bill Withers or somebody—somebody *old*—Angela wasn't interested enough to learn their names. She rarely spent time at his place, but he'd proposed hanging out. David left off his nervous adjusting of the hi-fi as the beat began and started to dance while Angela watched from the couch. He looked good when he danced, at least when he took it seriously; Angela admired that about him; she herself was indifferent on a dance floor. But today he was goofing: his dance was a kind of hip-shaking running-in-place, clapping his hands with his head jutting forward like a fifties beatnik sticking his nose into the bell of a jazzman's trumpet—*Blow, daddy, blow!* Angela didn't know where David got the idea that stuff this corny could be funny, or that it was funny just because it *wasn't*, but in spite of herself she giggled a bit.

The record turned out to be a James Brown album. *Hey*, shouted James from the speaker. Angela thought she recognized the opening. Perhaps it had been in a film.

"Hey!" answered David, still dancing in place.

*Got ta pay back!* cried James Brown.

“Say what?”

*Revenge!*

David spun on his heel, showman-style. Angela grinned: “Oh, *god.*” But he was deadpan: “I said, say what?”

*I need some getback!*

“Er, what exactly is ‘getback’, James?” David’s voice went adenoidal.

*Payback!*

“Come again?”

*PAYBACK!*

David jumped, startled. “Oh! I see!” Angela laughed unreservedly. “You’ve memorized this, haven’t you?” she cried, quite entertained. David began rhythmically jerking his shoulders around. “Why you so mad, J.B.?”

*Get down with my girlfriend!*

“I suppose there’s something—er, objectionable about that?”

*That ain’t right!*

“I see your point,” conceded David.

*Holler and cuss! Wanna fight!*

“I don’t blame you!”

Angela was beside herself. “You look like a reject from Soul Train,” she laughed. “Stop before it’s too late—oh my god, it *is* too late. You did *not* just do the electric slide.”

“I do what I have to do, woman.” David snapped his fingers, boogie-woogied, bobbed like a pigeon. “I *got* to.” He gyrated. “Check my razzle-dazzle.”

“Enough! Stop it!”

“Try to tell *me*? Just, you better watch out, be-cause...” David chanted along with James Brown’s next line from the record: “I don’t know karate, but I know kuh-razy!” He punctuated this with a guttural “hwah!” and a high kick in the air that had him sprawled on the floor the next moment with an overextended ligament. Angela, by strength of will, tried to force herself to quit laughing or else risk asphyxiation. “Like ballet!” she kept wheezing.

“Go ahead, laugh,” David had moaned, his anguish both real and theatrical, hand scissored in his crotch as he writhed on the carpet. “Laugh as I lay dying.”

While Kimberly, somber and meticulous, filled boxes with David’s effects, Angela flipped through his record collected, looking for the James

Brown record. It wasn't there, for some reason. She decided she wasn't making herself at all useful and began to unplug and disentangle the red and white cables that connected the components of the stereo system at the back. Kimberly had mentioned that someone would be hired to come in and dispose of the kitchen appliances and anything else too large for them to carry out; they could leave garbage behind and only needed to collect things of personal significance. The records would go into the car, she presumed. If David had always been that way—spontaneous in his fun, with irony more good-natured than cranky and defensive, with cheesy humor more wry than showy, and minus the delight in being crass for crassness's sake—then she could have loved him more. Even now, she was pleased by the memory, and particularly by the fact that he had never tried that same joke again.

*Anyway, now he's gone*, Angela thought. Angela was inclined to hold with the initial theory of the city detective, who had speculated that David had gotten in over his head in an argument with some hood. Angela had phoned Crystal the morning after the police had come to her place to ask questions. She'd taken the day off work; Crystal, as usual, was home with the baby. "It's his own fault," Angela had pronounced—words she would later regret, when she recollected them.

"Huh." Crystal sounded faintly displeased. "That's cold, Angela."

"Cold, but—look. He always thinks he can talk like a G. I know he's trying to be funny, but not everybody's going to laugh."

"I know." America was full of white people who weren't *racist*, of course, but who treated black English as default laughable.

"So that's probably what he did. Somebody got pissed." Angela's head felt funny: both clouded and keen at the same time. She was more clearly aware of the feeling of keenness, less of the cloudiness.

Crystal sounded empathetic, but not sympathetic. "Try to speak kindly of the dead. My personal opinion."

Angela ignored her friend. "There's such a thing as too liberal for your own good. He starts to think he can just try to be buddies with everybody. Like, I totally respect all races and cultures, so here's an Ebonics joke."

"People getting killed for a joke, it's sad," said Crystal.

"People getting out of jail for free, is the issue. I'd bet you anything. Whoever did it was out on parole, he was on welfare, he was blaming society. God, it's so fucking ironic, which I hate to use that word, but I can just *hear* David going off on how, you know, the system, it's so corrupt,

open up the prisons and let everybody out.” Angela was forgetting that Crystal’s own brother was serving time at the moment; it was lapses like this that most strained her friend’s regard for her. “He just never *gets* it.”

“You realize you’re using the present tense.”

Angela started.

“He ‘does’ this, he ‘says’ that.” Crystal’s voice was as level as always, but Angela could hear the depth of concern in it. “David’s gone, Angela.”

“I know.” Angela felt irrationally angry. “I know that.”

While Angela disconnected and packed the stereo, Kimberly, busy with packing tape, was in a quiet vacuum of torment—a vacuum because, rather than be buffeted by the hurricane violence of bereavement that had descended on her like an entangling shroud shortly before the funeral and wrung from her incalculable emotional energies, only to be followed by a wallop of survivor’s guilt that she had found it impossible entirely to conceal but that, hard as it was on her, was at least a feeling, her emotions now were instead mortified and muffled as though some petrification of the sympathies had overtaken her. It would have been much the same to her to strike a match to this empty apartment and burn to the ground every meaningless stick of it, and all it contained too. But that was an awful thought to have.

At her family’s house back east, visitors had dropped by to pay condolences, and many had tried to express—some sincerely, others for the sake of decorum—what everyone already knew about the senseless and tragic end David had come to. But one, an old colleague of her mother’s from the Nashua mayor’s office, had said to her, “I’m not here for David. I’m here for you. I want you to know that.” His name was Poundstone, so-and-so Poundstone, and he was a big man in his well-cut suit, football lineman-big, his hair mostly gone and his archaic Kaiser Bill moustache waxed to upturned points at the ends. “God’s ways are not man’s ways,” he’d told her. In numb silence Kimberly had allowed herself to be subjected to the sort of religious talk she nevertheless knew she had no intention of crediting. “All things occur for a purpose, no matter how obscure that purpose may be from us. No one has all the answers; I don’t claim to. Honestly, no one really knows if any of it is true at all, except for what can be known in your spirit, not your mind. But you will surely know peace once you accept in your heart that David has been called to a better place. It’s been said that, during a dark night, a bird flew in through the window into a great, well-lit hall and passed through and quickly flew out the window at the other side, into the night again. What I’m talking about

is, a human life. Our time here is brief, and we can't any of us see what comes before or after. But in God's plan, all things are for the best." At this Kimberly had nearly asked, *How can you say that? Isn't it obscene to take such a pat view? Who could ever be so cold?* But by then her whole strength had left her. "David is not gone," Poundstone had said, leaning in with his palms laid on the knees of his black trousers, "any more than I'm gone when you can't see me, or you're gone when I can't see you, or your father is gone right now." She had just seen her father out on the back patio, chewing ice from the drink he'd finished, talking not about David but about environmentalism, which he scorned—not because he, who'd been an avid camper in his youth, hated nature or despised rainforests, but rather because he despised environmentalists, the sort of people in his calculus likely to smoke grass, have abortions and wear facial piercings. "Like your father, David is only out of your sight for the time being. But he's not gone. You will see him again. I'm promising you this, though only because I have faith that it will be done. I came to tell you, Kim, that in God's plan all things have a purpose and a season. Not even a sparrow falls but he sees it. He gives power to the faint, and to them that have no strength." Poundstone had searched her face slowly with his gaze, and Kimberly had nodded assent, thinking it rude not to show a little gratitude while hiding her small annoyance at having her name foreshortened; only her father was permitted to call her *Kim*. But Poundstone's words were not as easy now to dismiss as she would have expected. She packed efficiently and with care, taking time to sort David's effects into categorizes and labelled cardboard boxes despite the likelihood that the lot of it would be put into indefinite storage at the space she'd rented. As she worked, she turned over the well-meaning words of Poundstone in her mind.

Movers were due to arrive later in the afternoon. On the phone, the lady from the moving company had instructed her not to disassemble anything large like shelves, so all Kimberly had to take care of were the small things, clothes, records and CDs, dishes, photographs, books, a collection of action figures found in a box in the closet that made her snort a laugh in spite of herself. Though she expected to, she did not turn up among David's things any evidence of involvement with drugs, or with any sort of illegal activity. Such proof would have been dreadful to come across, but inly she hoped for it. She did not accept the police account of David's death. It was too senseless to be true. Somehow, preternaturally, she *knew* that David had been in over his head with some kind of clandestine thing, probably unwittingly, definitely unwillingly, and someone had killed him



for it. Perhaps he'd been silenced, perhaps robbed of his share for something; the perpetrators had known what they were doing and would not be caught. However murky, this was the only explanation for the death of her brother that Kimberly could accept.

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“Will.” Tim Thompson was in the yard at the house on T, drinking from a paper bag. “I haven’t seen you in hella days.” It was a fine night, chilly but clear. A trio of girls—skanks—sat with Tim, sharing a cigarette and saying nothing like a line of heavy, watchful birds. “You know Teresa?” Tim indicated one of them. “She’s from Peru.”

Will ignored her. “Let’s go inside.”

Upstairs in Tim’s room, they got wired and started talking. Though Will had bought the dope from Tim, obviously he felt obliged to share it; Tim ended up snorting an even half of it. When the crank hit Will’s system, a stream of nonsensical chatter cascaded from his lips. “I had this wack fucking dream, dude. Because, like, you know how in dreams all kinds of completely bizarre shit happens? Well, it’s like, the absolutely weirdest dreams are the *normal* dreams. For example, there’ll be, like, your teacher from the second grade chasing you around your house, only it’s not your house, but it is, that sort of thing, and then you start flying, but you’re naked, et cetera, et cetera—that’s basically a normal dream and it’s actually, um, it wouldn’t even be really considered weird at, at all, because when you wake up you know it was a dream. So it’s run-of-the-mill dream shit, which is, by the way, I never saw a mill before or ran one, or, like, ran around inside one, so like, run-of-the-mill, what the fuck? But so anyway, the weirdest dreams are the ones where only normalistic *realistic* shit happens. Then you’re straight like, was that a dream? Like the other day, I had this dream where I was out in Midtown looking for a haircut and I found this place with a sign out, like, Special Rates, one day only, \$2.99 for a haircut. So it’s like, score. But obviously you’d be all, what kind of haircut are they going to give me for two fucking ninety-nine? And so, dude, realize that this is some hella vivid shit, it’s like movie-realistic, not weird or dreamy at all. So I go in to check it out, and in my dream I can even hear the little bells they’ve got on the door of the shop. And inside they’ve got all the usual barber shop paraphernalia, those like swivel chairs, basins, bottles of gel and whatever, scissors and combs in these little racks, a fucking what do you call it, a broom, to clean up the

hair. But after a minute I realize, no mirrors. Not a single damn mirror in the place. How they usually put up mirrors in front of each barber chair. And there's tons of customers, with these barbers just chopping away hella fast, trying to turn out all these cheap haircuts as fast as possible, considering just to make a profit you'd have to do like ten haircuts an hour. But you're not going to know until you get home what kind of shit they did to your hair because they took down all the mirrors. And when I look close I can see that there used to be mirrors because on the walls there's these square outlines of like, where the mirror was, the paint's a different color, which is probably like the original color of the paint from back when they painted it and then put up the mirror and then the other paint got old and the paint behind the mirror was, like, you know what I mean, so—anyway. So I got out of there, since, fucking, I'm broke as a joke but I don't need a bargain *that* bad, you know? But anyway, I was tripping on this crazy shit the next day and like, I swear to God, I was burning up all morning thinking of who I could call to get them to go check this wack-ass place out with me again, just for the fucking spectacle of it, but I was all frustrated because I couldn't remember exactly what street it was on and I was like, "What the fuck is *wrong* with me?" when I couldn't even bring back where I saw it, I mean, this head trip lasted about four hours—no, maybe closer to two, you know, one and a half hours, or maybe like, well, hella long, but—so then I only finally snapped out of it when I realized that I never use barbers at all, there's no way I would, since I always just cut my own hair..."

"Oh, nuh-uh," said Tim. All through Will's soliloquy, Tim made this rejoinder like it was the congregation's response at a mass. After every few skittery words from Will's mouth, Tim came back with, "Oh, nuh-uh," and wiped an imaginary drip from his nose. They ran like this most of the time, each taking it in turn to declaim upon nothing; thus the hours melted away.

On the shelf in Tim's room was a finely bound book of glossy softcore pornography, featuring women lounging in luxuriously appointed rooms of heavy velvet drapery and handsome bookcases, brick hearths and lush animal pelts; in every picture, Tim or someone else had blacked the women's exposed vaginas with a felt-tip marker. As Tim wandered around the room, holding a cell phone to his ear and drumming his fingers on things, Will paged through it, feeling unsettled. He knew the feeling: his limbs began to feel constricted, like he was imprisoned in a narrow box, and sundry hard aches sprang up in his teeth, in his sinuses, in his wrists. He

and his friends called it ‘the creeps’.

“Dude,” announced Will, “I have the creeps.”

“Oh, nuh-uh.”

Downstairs the skanks had long gone, but Patton, the old electrician, had the TV on and a Stonehenge of empty bottles arranged on the coffee table before him. A guy named Alejo, also on the couch, said, “Dude, Will. We just did the math. Motherfucking Patton drinks his own weight in MGD every week.”

“But that counts the weight of the bottles, so,” Alejo’s friend put in, apparently feeling the need to militate for calculative precision.

“So it’s a little over, uh.”

“Overestimation,” said Patton. He looked content.

“Oh, nuh-uh.” Will shrugged, casting about the room. He pointed to the back porch. “Whose bike is that?”

Patton snorted. “That? That’s a loaner.” This got a terrific laugh from everybody. Will said nothing else but rode off on the bike. It was a fifteen-speed with street tires; after a bit of fiddling with the shifter, he got it into an easy gear and left it that way.

He rode directionlessly in the city, all the way from Midtown up to the warehouse district north of Loman Street, then out to the desolate strip malls and car lots of East Highlands, the long winding route along the frontage road to the Asian neighborhoods, back again to Midtown, past the supermarket-sized adult bookstore and through downtown, where a policeman scolded him for not walking his bike on the pedestrian mall on Fresno Street. This peripatetic amble in fact had an aim, a negative aim that Will only dimly admitted to himself: he was taking great pains not to go home. His route was random and circuitous, favoring obscure alleys to thoroughfares, doubling back, veering impetuously into byways unknown even to him, whose long solitary walks had exposed to him so much of the city. He rode lazily, sometimes so slowly that he tottered; his legs grew tired but his appetite had vanished; and so he rode without stopping until the afternoon. But, as the marble in a crooked roulette wheel rolls again to the same slot, so did Will bend back toward King Street and Garfield Park; four times that day he startled himself by being within a block of, or right around the corner from, his building on Fuller, and each time he reversed and shoved off again on some new tack. Though he stopped infrequently, he hadn’t slept at home since the night it happened.

Wherever he slept, nightly he dreamt of inavertible disasters, common themes being powerlessness and absurdity. Interpretation wasn’t neces-

sary.

Cold as a clinician, Will remarked the turning of his mind. At periods, notions arose automatically, balm to salve the chafing of his conscience; each approached as though from a great distance and raised a trail of dust as it drew nigh, so that, by the time, it arrived, Will knew it for what it was: a lie. Will had not killed anyone. His hand had not pulled the trigger. He had proven conscientiously incapable of doing so, an inability that in hindsight exonerated him. He couldn't have known that things might go as wrong as they had. Rodney's and his intentions had been pure, their cause just. If people were held to task even for honest mistakes, wouldn't everyone in the world be accountable? These and other lies, or rather evasions that were true enough to a point to be effective as evasions, suggested themselves to him most solicitously; but now that Will could not sympathize with himself, he only had to turn the light on them to dispel them. As long as his self sought to love itself—as long, in other words, as he lived—it would struggle to turn the entire world cockeyed so that his fallen figure would again appear upright; as his guilt faded, his self-love would win, and the evasions that now rang counterfeit he would eventually take for sound truths. He saw it all. He foresaw the entire disappointing process. Above everything else was the monstrosity he had committed.

But *he* hadn't done it—it had been someone else. *A lie*, thought Will. It was strange, the way they stuck at him. At last he rode home. His legs ached, and he remembered a bit of orange juice remaining in his otherwise barren refrigerator. That he'd sprung for orange juice in the first place, when tap water was more economical, had boded ill. But he was past caring—hence the trip to Tim's. Out in front of the building on Fuller was a moving van. It could have been anybody moving out, especially near the end of the month, but Will felt an eerie surety that the van had come for the effects of the dead man. Movers in navy jumpsuits, three or four of them, trooped out with boxes; the heavier articles had already been humped into the van. Leaning on her arms on the rail of the stoop, a black woman of uncommon loveliness idly checked her cell phone's messages. As Will watched, a white woman came out and the two traded words. Will parked the bicycle under a tree, whence he hoped someone would soon have the gumption to purloin it. The second woman was petite, blonde and could have been a relation of Sherwin's, save that she had nothing of the sinister bent Will thought he'd seen in Sherwin's countenance the few times he'd laid eyes on him. Will guessed that she must be from David's family. The other one was probably a friend.

Will passed them on the way into the building. Just as he approached, though, the white woman turned to address one of the movers and the other got a call on her phone and turned aside to answer, so he had no occasion to speak to either of them. He paused in the hall, then went up.

In his room Will polished off the orange juice and, since it was now empty, unplugged the refrigerator. It hadn't been a particularly quiet machine, so the ambience in the apartment shifted a bit without the noise. He wondered why he didn't go down and talk to those two women. It would be natural for a neighbor to offer condolences. Strangers so often seemed not to care; a kind word from him might conceivably brighten things for them, at least a little.

*Or why not tell them the truth?*

This was an unbelievable thought. If he were perfect, that's what he would have done: go down, spill out his whole story and take what he had coming. To do this would bring repercussions to Rodney as well. *Am I so sure I'd be right to do that?* he wondered.

Once already, he had let his convictions carry him to lengths from which he couldn't return. No matter how sure he'd been that he was right, the unintended consequences had been devastating. It were wiser now to be humble—not to presume to know more than he knew; to wait and be passive; at least then he couldn't do any further harm. Such should have been his guiding principle from the beginning, no matter if a hundred Sherwins beat up a hundred Keikos. *If you never lift a finger, maybe that's a sin of omission or whatever*, he thought, *but in the end it won't be you who shoots the wrong guy. It won't be you who makes it worse trying to make it better.*

He decided to tidy the place. *Typical tweaker*, he thought drily, but this didn't prevent him from indulging the urge to collect and stack into neat piles every loose thing in the apartment. He got his few dishes washed and set to dry, folded his clothes and arranged them in the box he used for a dresser, swept the floor with the flat of his hand and was considering whether to schlep the vacuum cleaner up from the ground floor utility room—he had the landlady's reluctant permission to use it, provided he bought his own bags—when he became conscious that he'd slipped under the sway of still another evasion: he was avoiding those women. Passivity wasn't the least immoral of the selection of lousy choices before him; it simply kept him out of a terrifying situation. He'd suckered his conscience with another slick bit of sophistry. There were not just two extreme choices. It wasn't either *do nothing* or *destroy everything*.

“Jesus Christ, I’m fucking going down there,” said Will. He would give his condolences, and if a confession developed, then so it would go.

On the way down the stairs, he tried to work up some idea of how he’d begin. In his life he’d had no practice choosing words to make a formal impression, the way British characters in old books were always doing. In the pages of a drama of manners, his part would be the rube. *Just speak from the—heart, or something*, he told himself. When he came to the front door, the moving van had gone and there was no sign of either of the women. He stood there a moment with his hands in his hip pockets. *Impeccable timing*, he thought, accusing himself wryly, feeling as wrung out as a limp towel. It was getting dark. The bicycle was gone. Will noticed that the landlady had lost no time removing David Dunlop’s name from the marquee board by the door: between HAYES, M&F and TAFURI, BEN was written ROOM AVAIL.

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The next morning, Will’s telephone rang. He was already up, but groggy. The ringing nonplussed him; he’d thought that service had been shut off, since a final notice from Pac Bell was wadded in his wastepaper basket, but he hadn’t tried using it either. The last of his bare savings from the data entry job had gone into Tim Thompson’s pocket instead of going to satisfy his bills, most of which had slipped past due even before the thing had happened. A renewal form for Section Eight had come in the mail and he’d let it sit; having heard nothing from him, it was likely the county would stop paying his rent. The night had been long, but near dawn he’d fallen asleep despite a fatiguing headache; in his sleep he must have ground his teeth, for when he woke the headache was worse than when he’d gone to bed. He answered the phone. A voice he almost thought he knew mumbled, “Wrong number,” and the line went dead.

“The fuck, then?” Will rubbed his temples and made it halfway to the refrigerator before the lack of motor noise intruded on his awareness; it was off; it was empty; he had no breakfast. He settled for tap water. The phone rang again.

“Will.” It was Rodney.

Will stood mute, phone receiver in hand.

“Will. Can you talk?”

Will had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Yeah. I’m not doing anything. Nobody’s here.”

“Okay, but I mean, can you *talk*?” Rodney’s voice sounded badly distorted, with street noise behind; Will deduced that he was on a public payphone. “On this phone, I mean.”

*All clandestine and shit*, thought Will. As if the police would bother monitoring his phone—he felt caustic toward Rodney for an instant. “I think so, man. We just better hope Ma Bell doesn’t disconnect my service before we’re through.”

“All right then.”

*Where are you?* he nearly asked Rodney. “You’re okay?”

“Fine, yeah. Feeling good. I just got into Spokane.” Rodney deemed this lie appropriate on a number of levels. He was on a phone in Yuma near the Greyhound terminal; in under an hour, he’d be on a coach to Dallas, and once there he figured it would be safe to settle down. In the first place, though, that was a fact he didn’t want anyone listening in to be within miles of guessing; second, he didn’t want Will to know it either—he didn’t fear snitching, but the less Will knew, the less implicated he’d be. This at least was how Rodney calculated it. It was a clear day in Yuma, the sky as deep-blue as he remembered it and the entire city flat as a board. He’d found this payphone near an auto dealer, across the street from a plain building with a fiberglass cross and a sign: Centro Familiar Cristiano. It was a weird name for a church, he thought, with the word ‘familiar’.

“Spokane? Washington.”

“Yep. Rainy as heck.”

“I heard of that.” Will didn’t mention that he’d been there once.

“So, listen, man. You got any news for me?”

When Will heard the eagerness in Rodney’s voice, his own hollow core threatened to implode. “Sort of.” How could he say it? “You got the wrong guy.”

Rodney’s chief worry had been capture. He’d spent these long weeks, the longest in his life, hidden in a trailer in a huddle of barely established residences in the desert not far from the border; no one there had enough hubris, or ironic humor, to call the place a town; instead of being someplace, it was merely near someplace, an hour’s drive from Yuma; to be able to crash there, Rodney had incurred a favor to an old acquaintance from Fort Benning, who spent most of his monthly check from the V.A. on Milwaukee’s Best, which he drank warm. There Rodney had hidden, sweating beer with his friend as fast as they could drink it, wondering whether any detective, even an absolute Sherlock Holmes, could possibly

have connected a dead misogynist on a street in Valentina with an non-air conditioned mobile home in the inhospitable red desert. His paranoia had argued that a phone call to Will could prove a capital blunder, when what he ought to do was to cut all ties with Valentina until years after his manhunt, if there was one, ended. But his curiosity—*dumb damn curiosity*, he thought—won out, so he'd called, regardless of what it might bring down on him. Thus even perfect crimes would fail. This new information of Will's fit nowhere in his schemes; he wasn't eager to comprehend it. "Wrong guy meaning, what?"

"It wasn't Sherwin." Will hadn't talked to anyone about it, of course, and now the story of Rodney's mistake coursed out of him. "I guess there was a guy in the building named David Dunlop, who I never even saw before, and he came home piss drunk and I guess he looked like Sherwin and that's who you—got."

"No."

"And even I, when I saw him, I could have taken him for Sherwin, but. Well, he was basically just some guy, the wrong guy, and he got killed. It's awful, Rodney, it's fucking awful."

"For God's sake, Will, I didn't know!"

Will had become well acquainted with selfishness and defensive rationalization; he could hear it now in Rodney's voice. "I'm not saying that." He felt sure of the track Rodney's thoughts were running at precisely that moment. "Forget the blame thing, Rodney. Stop it. I'm not a god damn judge, I'm not your enemy. Just—look. Just admit that it's awful."

"Will, we been friends for a while, so do me a favor and don't fuck with me. It was you who asked me to do it, and it was you who never told me who to look out for. You said, a blond guy, a tall white guy, this and that—"

"I know—"

"And you were the one who—"

"I know, I know, fuck! Rodney! *Listen.*"

Sullen silence.

"Listen." Will waited for a response but got none. "Are you listening?"

"Loud and clear, brother."

Sorrow and guilt imparted a wan calmness to Will's emotions. "Some shit happened. It's not, you did it; it's not, I did it. We did it. Right?"

"That's what you wanted to say?"

"Yeah, plus some more."



“Open fire.”

“Okay.” Will paused. “We did it. We thought we had a good reason. But the outcome is all fucked up ten different ways. It’s awful.” Will stopped to wait. Rodney was present on the line but didn’t speak, and Will thought, *I’m going to sit here and wait until you say something.*

At last Rodney replied. “You’re saying that a different guy got shot.”

“Right.”

“So the original target is still out and about.” No word on this was forthcoming from Will. Rodney continued: “So, the original target wasn’t who was eventually gotten. We’re established on that. And, so.”

“Yeah.”

“This other fellow.”

“David Dunlop.”

“Is, what, hospitalized?” It was an idiotic question.

“Rodney.”

“Jesus. I mean, Christ on a crutch.”

When it had come to this pass, the conversation stalled. For a moment neither of them noticed that the other wasn’t talking. Rodney pushed his fingers through his hair, staring at but not seeing the instructions in English and Spanish for making long-distance calls from the pay phone. Everything had changed. Up until now it had been Sherwin he’d got and Keiko he’d helped. He’d met each desert sunrise knowing this and feeling evenly grounded in himself. He could make nothing of the situation now.

For his part, Will was intent on one aim: to wring from Rodney, not a confession, but an admission. Even in a sewer, one had to call sewage what it was. “This is awful—”

“Awful, right. You got that across already.”

“Fucking, it’s eating me up.”

“Well, okay, Will, but would you just give me a second? What you’re telling me is sort of a heavy—what. A shocker, brother.” Will heard Rodney exhale into the mouthpiece. “All I want is a second to get a handle on this.”

“It’s eating me up,” repeated Will. He wasn’t the sort to snivel on the phone, or at least didn’t want to be, but could scarcely give vent to a tenth of the battling emotions that racked him without the entire mess forcing its way out. “All I’m saying is, call it what it is. We’ve got to face it.”

“Don’t you think I feel bad, brother?” Rodney sounded sincere. “Shoot, I’m the one who should. It was my mistake, I guess. You didn’t even do anything.”

“I did, man. I set you up to it.”

“Well. And if you really want to mention it, you could of been out there the point out the right guy for me.”

*It's not a question of pointing out the right guy,* Will wanted to shout. *It's that we mostly likely shouldn't have been out, fucking, blowing people away. Blowing the so-called 'right guy' away.* Rodney seemed to continue to insinuate that what they'd done, though botched, had been a legitimate thing to attempt. This distressed Will far more than Rodney's bald wriggling. But what disapproval he'd incur, were he to voice this to Rodney, kept him silent. Even in its catastrophic aftermath, Will's cowardice persisted. *When did I turn into such a chickenshit?* he wondered, knowing he couldn't risk offending Rodney any further.

For his part, Rodney made every effort to reconcile what he'd just learned and its unsettling implications with his natural conviction that he was in the right. He shifted the telephone handset from one ear to the other and set his cigarette atop the box of the phone to dig in his pockets for change as the automated operator's voice came on the line. After he'd fingered another handful of coins into the slot, he asked, “So, how's it been, though? You holding out okay?”

“Um. Actually, no.” Will voice levelled, got louder. “I guess I ran out of money.”

Rodney narrowed his eyes. “Dope.”

“I fell off the wagon, yeah. Actually, in a short bit I'm going to have to move out.”

“They give you notice?”

Will said they had. In reality his landlady couldn't yet have known that the rent would dry up, but he wasn't going to hang around long enough to get evicted. It were better yet to walk out than to get the bum's rush. This was more than he felt like explaining to Rodney.

“You can fight it.” Rodney spoke from experience. “You got rights, brother. You ever gotten evicted before?”

“Look, I'm not even interested in staying.”

“Once they start on you, you should still have some time before you really have to go. Higgins at the Mission knows all them laws, if you ask him.” But Rodney recalled Will's admission of getting wired; word of this would get back to Joe Cholula; he'd no longer be welcome at the Mission. “But you're leaving.”

“Might as well.”

“Huh.”

“Rodney, there’s one thing. You know, we did what we did in the idea of, like, for this girl who was being used badly, to fucking tip the scales on this guy who we thought, you know, he deserved the worst. But that’s not what happened—you’re, right now, you’re thinking that I’m just repeated myself again”—Rodney was thinking something very near to that, and the irritation with which he greeted it was no credit to himself— “but fuck it, I’ll repeat myself. I saw this guy’s family today. I mean, yesterday. I think it was his sister, and maybe his friend, or girlfriend. They were at his place. And it’s like, this wasn’t the family of a fucking lousy-ass dude who got what was coming to him, so like, if they’re sad, big fucking deal; it was this dude who got capped for no reason. Because I fucked up. It was *me*. And in fact, so did you. We thought we knew, but we were basically dumb. You look around you, man, and you realize that this whole society is in a haze, all these people have been tricked, or tricked themselves, whether it’s religion, money, some wack theory, or whatever gets to them, they’re in a fog, dude. I used to laugh at them. But I saw that *I am too*, and the consequence is, there’s a guy who was killed and that means his family... shit. I saw them, Rodney.”

“Okay.” Rodney awaited Will’s punch line.

“You’re not even listening.”

“Well, I was, and there’s one thing you said right, which is, we screwed the pooch. I’ve got to take the blame too. But once a wrong is done, brother, you can’t undo it.” As these words left Rodney’s mouth, he recognized their potent fitness. He couldn’t undo anything. He’d said this unthinkingly, but in his mind the idea fell into place like the teeth of a gear catching hold.

“You can try to make things better afterward, man,” said Will.

“As in, how?”

“As in, we could go talk to these people I saw.”

“For God’s sake.”

“David Dunlop’s family.”

“And what? Ask them to kill us? An eye for an eye?”

“You believe in that, right?”

“Don’t twist the Bible on me.”

“I wasn’t saying, ask them to shoot us.” Will had indeed been saying this, however ill he understood himself. “So don’t twist what I say either. But fucking aye, man. So we jump down a hole? What was it, then?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Will, would you grow a fucking pair?” Rodney felt raw, bilious contempt. “Grow a pair of gawl-damn balls.” He felt like

hurting Will, like smashing the windows of his ivory tower. Further than that, he felt like schooling Will. He would wake him up a little; for better or for worse, he was qualified to do so. “What’s the possible benefit of looking back on something you can’t change? When you do something, you become *the guy who did it*. We did it, we had our reasons, and it went south on us. Case closed. You need to own up to it, swallow the pill and toughen up. Nobody wants to listen to some crybaby second-guess every damn thing he ever did. Big surprise, the world’s not always nice and tidy. There isn’t nobody who’d blame you for feeling like shit about it. Pardon my language. But it’s a done deal.”

“You won’t come back. From wherever you are.”

“I told you, I’m in Spokane.”

“Yeah, you told me that. And I can forget about you coming with me to see these people.”

“What’ll it prove, William?”

“Nothing.” Even through the phone, Rodney palpably felt Will’s bitterness. *This’ll bring the heat on for me—if he really does it*. Rodney’s instinct for self-preservation calculated this consequence as inevitable. He decided he’d just have to take that as it came. But in an uncharacteristic access of shrewdness, Rodney perceived that Will wouldn’t and *couldn’t* take a step like that alone. He hadn’t been able to pull the trigger before, and things hadn’t changed—thence the bitterness. Rodney’s yes or no on the thing would determine Will’s course. Rodney felt nearly paternal.

“Will,” he began again, “we blew it. It sounds scummy to say this, but all you can do is chalk it up to experience and move on. That’s what I’m going to do.” He announced this firmly, but in almost kindly tones. “And I suggest you do the same. We’ll have to, you know, morally wrestle with it, and maybe God will forgive us, maybe not. Shoot, probably not, if you think about it. And, I’m not trying to preach at you, but for me that’s where the heartache is, a lot more than anything on this earth. It’s been a long time since I prayed, Will. But I should, and I think you should, if you can. We all get trials, including this family who you think you saw, and it’s a big damn mess. That’s about all I can understand of it. You got to stay humble. If there is hope for me, actually for us, it’s that we just didn’t know. We had good intentions.”

“They kind they pave roads with.” This was bootless sarcasm, not even clever; it was the sound of Will giving up.

“Good intentions,” repeated Rodney, “and bad actions; it ain’t up to us to know how we’ll be judged for that.” Rodney thought he might finish off

before the payphone made him drop in any more money. “All I can say to you, brother, is, the work ain’t finished. It never will be now. This gal and Sherwin, it’s all unchanged. We can’t fix it now. Put it behind you, Will.”

“I can’t.”

“Well.” Rodney shut his eyes. In an instant, he very nearly broke. He nearly resolved to return to Valentina. The next moment, it was gone.

Will’s voice came through the phone again. “I don’t want to say this. But I’m disappointed in you.”

Rodney shook his head; he had nothing else to say. The prim, over-precise voice of the payphone operator cut in. Rodney hung up. It seemed to take an age to hang the receiver in the cradle, but once he’d done it, it was done. As he turned again to the street, a black and white police cruiser pulled past, a newer type that looked like a Ford Taurus, and Rodney’s paranoia about tapped phone lines recurred to him, but the car kept on to the light and turned, and he relaxed. He felt free, at least. All he had in the world was either on his person or rolled into the rucksack he’d leant against the base of the payphone; this he lifted to his shoulder, then felt with a reflexive movement for the roll of bills in his trouser pocket. A teenaged girl drifted past balancing a stack of schoolbooks on the handlebars of her ten-speed bicycle. Her cheeks were peeling with sunburn. As he watched, her control of the bike wavered and she nearly toppled over; her books spilled onto the sidewalk. Rodney looked the other way from her, out of politeness. He didn’t want her to be embarrassed.

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At the door of Keiko’s apartment, with a roll of wall posters under his left arm and a vinyl CD carrying case under his right, Sherwin paused and, in a guilty, halfhearted way, leaned at her for a kiss. Their too-long familiarity kept her from resisting. His mouth touched hers, but her lips could have been moulded plastic. He quickly straightened again, checking the reflex to moisten his lips. Both of them felt disappointed that he’d done that. Still he didn’t pass over the threshold. “I guess I’m.” The sentence died.

Keiko waited to give him a chance to justify balking. Now that she had cut him out of her heart, her patience had lengthened. “I don’t think you forgot something,” she finally prompted. “Forgot anything, I mean.”

Sherwin was duly goaded. “Okay. So, I’ll get out of your way now. I was going to say, ‘See you later,’ but it’s most likely I won’t. Looking at it honestly.” To his own ears he was weepy. And he was running at the

mouth. It was a bad showing to make. At the moment, though, he couldn't find restraint. "I'm sorry you feel like you have to leave." He left off the *me of leave me*.

"You were gonna leave too." This was true enough. Sherwin had stopped in to her place a week before, bearing a gift of groceries and, feeling as giddy as an acrophobe who in spite of himself had leant over a precipice, had told her in a rush of words that he would break up with her. Not just then, he had emphasized, but in seven days. To this strange period of remaining un-broken up-ness Keiko had been unsure how to respond; but it remained that, by the time she'd gotten a word in to let him know of her decision to relocate back to Osaka—without him, naturally—he'd already tendered his intention to quit her.

"That's true," replied Sherwin. "Technically."

In the seven remaining days of their nominal relationship, he'd called her but once, to make a date, and then they'd seen each other just that once, in the coffee house above which Keiko's friend Amy had an apartment. In that public place, they'd spent a distressing half of an hour chatting about the unlikeliest of subjects: British history, the Viking raids and Sir Walter Raleigh; neither of them knew a substantial amount about this, cared for the subject, or could have said later how it had come up. Sherwin had come with a speech prepared, then had avoided meeting her gaze, unsure of how to introduce it; she'd been the first to leave. As with most undelivered speeches, it had afterward seemed a silly, inadequate, unfocused thing.

On this seventh day, Sherwin had come by at last in the afternoon to pick up whatever he'd left at her place, which turned out to be quite a bit, necessitating four trips down the stairs. The posters, though, were hers. Sherwin liked her gigantic *Taxi Driver* blowup, with De Niro pushing two enormous gun barrels centimeters from the camera lens and smirking dangerously; as she was handing it over to him, glad to be rid of it, he had impulsively asked for her collage of Unwound and Three Mile Pilot fliers. He didn't care for the bands, but still he took it. Keiko had decided he was welcome to anything he fancied; she had to sell or otherwise dispose of every possession she couldn't fit into her suitcase.

Looking around her room, Sherwin had suddenly coveted nearly everything there; he knew, too, that she would be unlikely to care were he to carry off half of what she owned; all that restrained him at last was his sense of how tacky it would be to ask for freebies at the termination of the relationship; anything more he got from her would only remind him of

this tackiness whenever he looked at it afterward.

His car was below, in someone else's spot, and it was time for him to head down to it. It were impossible to say what he felt. He would have promised anything to keep her. "It's good at least that you're doing what you want," he said, completely contrary to his real feeling. "If it's going to make you happy, that's what's really, you know, the whole point."

"Goodbye," said Keiko.

"Yeah. Sayonara, I guess." He knew at least that much of her language.

Sherwin and Keiko were both simultaneously sensible of being watched. When Keiko turned, so did Sherwin. Up the hall, Will leaned against the jamb of his open apartment door and fixed his stare on them. Sherwin remembered seeing him around the building more than once but would have been hard-pressed to recollect his name. To Keiko, Will's appearance was unsettling, as though life had recently used him hard: his skin, normally dusky, was sallow, his cheeks sunken, the bones prominent. Worst were his eyes. They were the eyes of a clock-watching insomniac, locked in iron-hard weary wakefulness. Disposed as she now was to see potential violence in every person, she felt disposed to shy from the sight of him. If Will wanted to stand around in his doorway and look around the hallway, a public space to residents, that was his business, but Keiko felt a mite constrained now that this scene in her lately turbulent emotional life had an audience.

What to Keiko was thus vaguely annoying was to Sherwin distinctly so. "Hey, bro," he nodded brusquely, then turned again to Keiko with the air of having something more to say. But he heard a footfall on the hallway floor behind him. When he turned again, he found himself nose to nose with a visibly enraged Will.

"I know what you did."

Will's appearance made a more immediate impact than his words. Sherwin started back, at first simply caught off-guard at being so close. Whether Will was black or Mexican, or Cuban perhaps—Sherwin couldn't distinguish—he was dangerous; that much was clear to Sherwin from Will's wide-open nostrils and eyes, the mean thin line of his lips, and the visible trembling in his limbs. It did not occur to Sherwin to see in Will a guy afraid of what he might do, for too cumbrous was Sherwin's perceptual jaundice; he saw instead a snorting bull, a gorilla. In stature the two of them were roughly equal, neither one particularly brawny.

Following this instinctive fear, recognition dawned of the import of

what Will had said. “Look,” said Sherwin, then faltered, not wanting to call him by the wrong name.

Keiko, knowing her ex-boyfriend well, saw this. “Will,” she said.

“Will, bro,” repeated Sherwin. “I don’t want to be *disrespecting* you”—he chose this word deliberately, thinking, *Respect, that’s what matters to them*—“but we’re just doing our thing here and it’s got nothing to do with you.” Sherwin would have continued, but Will cut him off.

“I know what you *did*.”

Keiko stood petrified. Anyone with eyes could see the violence flashing from Will’s livid features; to her too now, he was a gorilla. From head to toe he was a threat. Keiko was unable to wipe from her mind the picture of a blond-haired supine corpse in a puddle of slick blood in the street where every day she walked. It flashed upon her now. In her uncontrollable waking dreams, the dead boy sometimes wore Sherwin’s face; at other times, she saw Sherwin firing the gun. *You’re all lunatics*, she thought. *Psychotics*. As Sherwin and Will swelled up against one another, everything began to move too slowly, and like a rooted tree awaiting the axe she was frozen in her spot.

Will spoke through shudders of agitation. “You’re a bastard. I know about you.” Raw hatred coursed in him. “You hit her. You beat Keiko.” He turned to Keiko for confirmation, but oddly she made no acknowledgment. This he hadn’t foreseen. She was still afraid of Sherwin, perhaps.

“No, I don’t.” Sherwin realized there was no dumber thing to say. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“I fucking know what you did!” Spittle formed on Will’s lips. He wiped it away, self-conscious after all.

“Where did you get this idea? You barely know me.”

Will stepped hard toward Sherwin, so that their faces would have collided had Sherwin not started backward. An instant of thoughtful hesitation passed over Will’s features, but his anger won through. “You hit her. You’re a pervert. I know about the camera. I know about how you violated her. I swear to God, you’re lucky to be alive. And you know what? Maybe the rest of the world will never know, so you think you’re safe, but *I know*. Do you understand me?”

“Okay.” Sherwin didn’t know what to do.

“You fucker.”

“Okay. You’re right.”

“It should have been you on the street out there.” Will hadn’t thrown a punch in earnest at anyone since his childhood, but now he’d said the



most important parts. He breathed in.

Sherwin glanced back at Keiko, at her form but not her face. He was being upbraided for offences of which he'd already repented; it seemed unfair. "If me and Keiko have problems it's—it's between us. So—it's private."

"You're a fucking—" Will lost his power to speak. All that emerged from his throat was a strangled grunt as, like a horse pulling itself from a mire, he reached back and swung a fist wildly at Sherwin. He missed. Sherwin jerked aside, knocking Keiko bodily down. He spun away toward the stairwell, losing hold of the posters. Will had missed—he'd barked his knuckles on the edge of Keiko's open door. He nearly lost his footing. Sherwin also almost lost his keel, teetering at the edge of the top step.

"What are you doing?" cried Sherwin.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" snapped Will. He took a rushing step toward Sherwin, steeling himself to shove him, but it was too late. Sherwin was gone, bounding down the stairs. He was lost from view at once but could be heard clattering down to the ground floor. The building door slammed.

*That was stupid, Will thought, but at least I did it.*

Keiko regarded him from where she'd fallen. He looked at her apologetically: he'd tried to slug Sherwin, Sherwin had knocked her down, and so he, Will, was to blame for her being on the floor. He didn't try to help her rise, and she made no move to do so. She'd lost her fear of him when she'd stumbled to the floor, stinging her elbow on impact. He could turn on her and beat her too; she'd been through that sort of thing already—really, she'd taken more blows than Will probably ever had. He'd known about her and Sherwin. He must have heard things. A clearer understanding of the situation rolled in on Keiko. It made perfect sense that he'd know some things; she herself had overheard him on the telephone just the week before, arguing about something in English too quick to catch. The ventilation of the place conducted a lot of sound.

*So you came over here to help me,* she thought. What idiocy. How was harming ever helping? Would punching Sherwin lighten her bruises? Will was plainly upset about what had happened to her. *He might expect me to be touched by his concern,* she thought, but in that case he was in for a letdown; she was past feigning stuff like that. By the time he'd swept in to help, it was already over anyway, which cheapened it further. *Ato no matsuri,* thought Keiko. *You're just another human after all.* This filled her with malaise. She and Will were both human, identical to the world's

fighters, shouters, murderers, connivers and pious backbiters. As her opinion of people, and of Will, sank lower, so did her opinion of herself. That one was ‘better than all that’ was a favorite dodge in the presence of evidence of spite, cruelty, irrational conviction and all the other least appealing human traits. Notwithstanding her unbroken affection for poor, silly clowns like Will, she couldn’t respect them any longer. She, who had used to dote on the venial, could not now overlook mortal flaws.

Will watched motes of dust dance in the light. Gone was the state he’d worked himself into to confront Sherwin, in which he’d snapped all his inhibitions; in its place was a wipeout of relief. He saw two faces of himself, as through a prism: he felt what he felt—righteous, chivalrous, triumphant—and also observed himself feeling it—a goof relishing his own illusions. *If all goes according to plan*, he thought deprecatingly, *now is the moment she clings to my shirt and weeps tears of joy*. To his credit, he rightly distinguished how he hoped Keiko would respond from how he could reasonably expect her to.

“I heard you through the wall. All this time. And, for God’s sake, I’m sorry.” Will breathed deeply. “Sorry for spying. I mean, eavesdropping. Sorry for not doing anything. It’s one of the worst things I ever did, by not helping you.

*Tachigiki*, translated Keiko, recalling the word ‘eavesdrop’ from a vocabulary flashcard years before. She nodded.

“So, this, I mean. I came over to do this, by now it’s nothing, basically. It’s just a worthless gesture.” Will felt awkward to be standing while she lay, but lacked the impertinence either to sit beside her or to offer to help her stand. “It’s the same as doing nothing. Just hopefully one notch above. For the record. I knew *everything* he did to you. I’m sorry if that humiliates you, but I had to tell him.”

“*Aho*.”

Will wondered what that meant. “Okay. I just. I had to do something. You’re so *good*, Keiko. I hated him enough to kill him. I wanted him dead.”

*Stop*, she thought. “*Aho*,” she said louder. It meant *idiot* in Japanese.

The word didn’t sound nice to Will. He couldn’t stop. “Listen. The guy. David.”

*Stop*, she thought. *Shut up*.

“It was awful what happened to him, you know. It almost killed me when I saw it. But if it had been Sherwin, you know, it’s like. My friend and I, we—we knew what you were—”

“*Aho!*” Her eyes shimmered like the skin of water atop a glass filled just past the brim. “*Baka yaro! Damare!*” She clambered to her feet, pounded the wall with her fist, and shouted at him. “*Dokka ike!* I hate you!”

Will was not shocked, but he was hurt. “Sorry...”

“I don’t want you. Go!” Keiko reached for the handle of her door. “I’m gonna go Japan. I’m moving. So, the end.”

Will trembled. “I... okay. I knew that too. I’m sorry. I’m leaving too. I can’t pay the rent.”

“That’s too bad.” She shut the door on him and threw the bolt. *He could break it down*, she thought. She pressed herself to it, then stepped back from it. After a moment, she heard him slink away. His door closed, then his footsteps crossed the hall again and descended the stairs.

Her apartment was half-bare. Amy would take the stereo and help her sell the little furniture that remained. Amy was also going to throw her a farewell party somewhere; they would all get drunk as lords, of course, but beyond that Amy was keeping details secret from Keiko. *It’s going to be fun*, she thought, incapable now of enthusiasm but aware that, when the time came, she’d go nuts with the rest of them. She could be assured that Amy would invite half the phone book, some to laugh with, some to laugh at. Keiko sat at her table, staring at nothing, decompressing. When she’d had enough of this—which is to say, at the instant she noticed she was doing it—she locked the apartment and strolled toward Talbott and the way to the Fresno Street pedestrian mall. Between K and L streets, the block was under endless sporadic construction, looking badly patchworked. This was not only decay. In the city, as in deep wild forests, as often as one saw decay, one saw concomitant rejuvenation. Old shops closed, new ones opened. This window was boarded, that one bright. People made their places, as often as not standing on the toes of their neighbors, reaching like the blind branches of a million trees. All compounded things rose and fell in a breathtaking mess. Keiko could see her breath in the cold.

At the end of the block, a new tower of apartments had risen, not high at all by the standards of her own country, but still impressive in Midtown Valentina’s low skyline. Across the intersection, the main branch post office stood imposing with stately cornerstones. *All the money that goes into these buildings*, she thought with wonder. She’d never given this proper consideration before. *It’s lucky not everyone in the world is like me, because then none of this would exist. Nobody would bother to get that much money together.* More money must exist in the world than

she had ever estimated. Even if she and all her friends had pooled their money, it seemed impossible that they'd be able to afford even one tremendous girder of a building that size. Yet she knew that men somewhere contemplated erecting these buildings as a normal order of business.

Now that she was leaving, the ticket bought and the die cast, she realized that her decision to go had been made in a panic. Still, she wouldn't change her mind. She was glad to leave.

Keiko passed a taqueria, which judging from the sign had no name apart from 'Taqueria'. She'd seen it any number of times before but for some reason had never till now entirely noticed it—much less gone in, despite her enthusiasm for Mexican food, a cuisine she'd never tasted in Japan, subscribing as she had to the conventional view there that it was smelly. She'd flied in Midtown to advertise her moving sale and had managed to get rid of her old chest of drawers, one of the more substantial articles of furniture she'd owned; with the proceeds, she now resolved to splurge—on *food*.

The walls inside the restaurant were painted in the dimensionless style of Mexican murals, prominently featuring a portrait of Cesar Chavez above the emblematic black-on-red eagle of his movement. The place was sleepy and not at all slick, the type of well-established but unambitious family business that persisted for years without ever spawning a chain of franchise locations. A handful of patrons populated the tables. The radio was tuned not to Radio Romantica but to The Hawk for the Five O'Clock Rock Block. Keiko smelled frying meat and the fresh, moist, clean piquancy of the open salsa bar. Lacking the fortitude today for chorizo, which she only ate on more gung-ho occasions, Keiko ordered an enchilada combo and two tacos. The servings here looked big. She was going to pig out.

At the next table, a young father had his hands full with a little girl of about four. *Honma genki*, thought Keiko; the Japanese meant something like healthy and spirited. The girl was a whirlwind of precocious inquisitiveness, imperious demands on her father's attentions, and voracious appetite for anything on her dad's plate not also on her own. Keiko amused herself by watching the pair as she ate. The girl seemed almost giddy, as though she'd misbehaved herself into a tizzy of glee, confident in the indulgent affections of her papa.

"Daddy, let me have some. That stuff. Daddy, who's that?"

"That's a lady. Watch out. Come on, sit still."

"Daddy, don't be immature. What's *he* having?"

“Be quiet. He’s eating *his* food, now you eat *your* food, or else.”

“What’s ‘or else’?”

“It means you’re going to get it.”

“What’s ‘get it’?”

“It means some serious time out. You know, be careful with that—that’s spicy! You put on too much.”

“You’re on my *side*. Move over. You better mind me, buddy.”

“Don’t reverse roles on me. It won’t work.”

“What’s ‘reverse roles’? It sounds like River Stroll.”

“‘Reverse roles’ means—”

“Our house is on River Stroll Drive.”

“I know that. Here.”

“Buddy! I can do it myself!”

“Quiet *down*, Muriel. I’m absolutely serious.”

On the radio, the singer of Boston was hitting heroic high notes in stirring harmony, lamenting his lost Maryanne. There was a clock above the counter where Keiko had placed her order, its hands stopped at half past one. *If only it were that easy*, Keiko thought, contemplating the unmoving clock. This Mexican food might be the last of its kind she’d have a chance to eat, since owing to her visa situation the United States were going to be much easier to leave than ever to re-enter. Osaka had its share of ethnic restaurants, but it couldn’t be expected to be the same. This place was good.

What had Will meant? *It should have been you on the street out there*. There had been something in that, Keiko was sure; obviously it had to do with David, the murdered boy, but whatever was underneath the words she couldn’t guess. *I suppose I regret not studying more English, more grammar and things*, she thought. Sometimes, even when she knew the meaning of every word, the entire meaning of certain sentences yet eluded her. Nevertheless, this past year she’d begun deeply to know the language. Mental translating now got in the way where before it had been an indispensable crutch; sometimes she even dreamed in English. In that light, it was a shame she was going back. *I’ll probably lose it all again*, she predicted.

She’d told Sherwin that once, in a dream, she’d heard her sister speaking exclusively in English, a language that in reality Masami did not know. Sherwin had shown uncharacteristic interest. “Did she have an accent?” he’d kept wanting to know. Keiko had had to admit that she couldn’t remember.

The little girl was at Keiko's table. "Hello." Keiko blinked.

"Hello, lady. What's that?" The girl pointed at but couldn't quite reach Keiko's plate, or she probably would have sampled from it.

"It's a Mexican food."

"You talk silly. Are you mental? Is that a taco?"

"I think so." Keiko deemed this a complete answer to both questions.

"Can I have some?" The girl's father, busy till then settling the check, noticed what she was up to and scolded her from the vicinity of the cash register, but she ignored him. "Can I?" The father strode over and reached for her—"Muriel! Don't make me count to three..."—but the girl slipped from his grasp, gripping the edge of Keiko's table. "Can I, please?"

Keiko winked. "Maybe."