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No Comma, Period, Rage

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Aaron Hauser

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Committee Co-Chairperson

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University of California, Riverside

This manuscript is dedicated to my mother. Without her love and constant support none of this would have been possible.

Table of Contents

1978.....	1
Inflation.....	24
No Comma, Period, Rage	42
The Reasons We Keep Them That Way.....	61
No Soap, Radio	84
Mountain Lion (1976).....	108

1978

We came to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Elementary School confused as to why we had journeyed so far. Our parents and the faces on the television argued that these schools were necessary, even important, and there was great determination, though uneasiness, in their voices as they talked about it. The schools must be desegregated, they said. Separate but equal was a lie. There was nothing *we* could really do about it. The Great Purpose was put forth, the Machinery set in motion. We abided their wisdom. We rode the fleet of yellow busses and became the jostled, dazed and traumatized subjects of their experiment.

We didn't know about other schools, but our school was filled with confusion, fear and anger, but mostly anger, which took the form of fights, fights in the lunchroom, fights on the blacktop, fights in the classrooms. Most students had their anger well prepared before they came through the door the first day. Blacks angry at whites. Whites angry at blacks. Then there were those for which race didn't matter, those who churned anger over nothing at all, or maybe it was girls. Girls caused all kinds of confusion. Many allowed their anger to explode in the faces of the principal or the vice principals, even teachers, which frightened many, including me, who had never seen students show disrespect for adults.

There were those who seemed angry at the nature of education, mouthing off against science, math, the English language, or they were angry at the school, kicking the lockers, doors, throwing desks, even using teachers' pointing sticks to whack at the

fluorescent lights that screamed in a high pitch whine above us, or this may have been their unhappiness at the absence of sunlight, which rarely made an appearance in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Elementary because the teachers kept the shades closed to keep our attention on what they were saying. At times it seemed like we were there to witness the school building being ripped apart with each passing school day.

My journey began at a bus stop, which really wasn't a bus stop. It was a corner. But when it came down to it, it wasn't really much of a corner either, since an alleyway and a pile of sand left from a street construction project acted as a barrier between us and the busy intersection of Walnut Hill Lane and Boedeker Street. Whatever it was or wasn't, the city, the school district, or someone had chosen this as the point of departure for students from the Meadow Oaks district of Dallas. When the bus picked us up or dropped us off, the intersection was loud with cars, and we couldn't help but feel we were skirting the edge of a dangerous arena.

It didn't help that I didn't belong there, not that bus stop, not that neighborhood. My dad died a year before and we couldn't afford to continue living in what I considered my house, our true house, the one with wide-open spaces inside, outside and upward, a house of gray wood, light and glass. Our new house, a considerable step down, was on the other side of Walnut Hill Lane, close enough that if I walked a few steps closer to the intersection I could see the runt of a house, or really the rear of it, with its white stone walls, its tiny windows, its thick outcroppings of bamboo that walled it off from the neighbors.

But I didn't want to see it unless I had to, and definitely not on that day, when my nerves were jumping. My friend Cassius and I had plans to skip class, and as I waited for the bus and kicked rocks against a wall, the rocks leaving white scars against the bricks, I wondered whether we'd actually go through with it. It was his idea. Cassius didn't say much more than "let's skip class" and that was all I needed. I used to like school, but Longfellow wasn't school, or it wasn't like any school I had been in before, and I didn't feel like I was learning much, other than survival.

The bus arrived late. I moved to a seat in the middle, away from the other boys in the back and the girls at the front. I looked through the window at the changing landscape. The homes of my neighborhood gave way to skyscrapers and apartment complexes. We crossed a highway and followed the perimeter of an enormous shopping mall with fields of empty parking spaces until we turned into another neighborhood not too unlike my own, but the houses were less well kept, the lawns less well cared for. Hot air blew in a constant stream through the open windows. I sweat through my clothes and my thin hair stuck to my temples. The neighborhood opened up to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Elementary, a two-story building of white brick that had become stained yellow and brown with age. Before first period English, I met Cassius in the hall.

"We still doing it," Cassius said.

"Yeah," I said.

"I'm all fluttering," Cassius said.

This was the extent of our planning. I'd be missing math, and he'd be missing social studies, and possibly the rest of the day if we chose to stick it out. We would have

skipped first period but we both liked Mrs. Kates, our English teacher. Cassius and I were just in the one class together. His full name was Cassius Clay Johnson. His parents were great admirers of Muhammad Ali, but the Johnsons were devout Christians, and so chose to name their first child by the great boxer's Christian name. Cassius liked to be called by his first two names or all three names together, if necessary, but not by just his first name, which is what I called him. I liked jiving Cassius because he made me laugh and when I called him Cassius, just Cassius, he went off into a flurry of words and I laughed. Cassius didn't just like being called Cassius Clay, he liked *being* Cassius Clay, or a very short, scrawny, eleven-year-old version of him.

Mrs. Kates was teaching sentence diagramming. She drew lines on the board with slashes cutting them in half and branches arching off the ends and more slashes braking off from the bottom and she spoke about the parts of speech. Cassius sat across the aisle from me. I watched him nervously. Cassius lay his head sidewise against his arm, which dangled off the end of the desk and his hand slowly twirled in the middle of the aisle. His Afro was thick with small valleys and soft lumps, and the black handle of a pick comb jutted out, the tops of its needle-like teeth barely visible.

Mrs. Kates held the chalk tightly as she wrote the sentence on the board. The sentence was on the paper in front of me and I noticed a grammatical error. Cassius' noticed it as well. He raised his head and sat upright. He pointed to the sentence and mouthed the words "me not I." He said it again, but his attempt to mime them failed. The words escaped his lips, loud enough for Mrs. Kates to hear them.

“Mr. Cohen. Mr. Johnson, sorry, Mr. Cassius Clay,” she said. “This is high school material. Pay attention and someday you’ll impress your high school English teacher with how much you already know. Don’t make me get it.” Mrs. Kates pointed to a small paddle that sat on the bottom edge of the blackboard. Holes had been drilled through it so that it could move faster through the air. Cassius rose from the desk. His almost sheer undershirt pulled tightly against his arms, and his skin peeked through several tears along the side. His blue jeans were too tight and there was too much sock at the bottom of his pant legs.

“This is a most unfortunate misunderstanding, Mrs. Kates,” he said. “You see, we, my friend and I, yours truly, quickness Clay, Cassius quickness Clay J., as in Johnson, thank you for calling me Cassius Clay for short, and as for this matter, Mrs. Kates, we didn’t say nothin’. If we did we would be remiss if we did not point out that the sentence you was diagramming is grammatically incorrect. My namesake and hero this is where I rolled my eyes] would show no fear in bringing this to your attention. I, his Christian brother and namesake, felt—” Cassius stopped and ran his tongue along the edge of his upper lip and darted his eyes my way. “My white friend here, Mr. Louis P. Cohen, I can tell, felt it was unnecessary that we bring this mistake to your attention. We know that you would see the error. Yes ma’am. So, you needn’t be upset by our gestures, since we juss’d been looking at each other as pals do, ma’am. He and I are brothers, despite our obvious racial disparities. You see, the ideal set forth by this establishment, this school, yes...”

Cassius is rocking from one foot to the next and gesturing wildly with his hands. It occurred to me that he might be trying to get Mrs. Kates to kick him out of class and get an early start on our plan, but that would leave me behind. It's not like I would stand up and join him in a dueling chorus. Cassius described us to Mrs. Kate as friends, but we'd only known each other six weeks. Still, we'd found things to like about each other that made it easy to talk. We learned fairly quickly that we shared a similar taste in R&B. Mostly, Cassius liked that I was Jewish. "A Jew is a special friend of the black man," he'd say. "They marched with brother King and sister Parks and they sacrificed in Mississippi," Cassius said. He called me his white friend to Mrs. Kates but when it was just us, I was his Jew friend. It was "My Jew friend here is right," or "My Jew friend is wrong but we must not make him feel poorly for it." After a while I realized I wasn't much different. I liked Cassius because he was black. My parents, my mother, were political. They fought for desegregation, or that's what they said. I had no idea what that meant, to fight for desegregation or any other cause, but in a vague way, it made sense to desegregate my friends.

Mrs. Kates tried to interrupt Cassius, but he talked louder and more wildly about things that had nothing to do with the subject of English. He pontificated about the poor state of boxing, that Ali's loss to Leon Spinks had obviously been a sham, a fact proven only a few weeks ago when the Greatest reacquired his belt in a win by decision over Spinks. Cassius didn't realize that if he had stopped Mrs. Kates might have gone ahead and sent us both to the principal's office. I could see it in her stare, but Cassius kept talking until the bell rang. Mrs. Kates grabbed Cassius' arm before he could leave the

class and spoke harshly but low enough that I couldn't make out what she was saying. I waited for him just outside the classroom.

“What'd she say?” I asked.

“She suggested I might be better off in a more advanced class,” he said.

“Really?”

Cassius smiled and rolled his eyes. The hallway filled with students. We walked slowly and made our way to the end of the hall. The stairway to the second floor was off the main hallway in a small nook with doors to a maintenance closet. There was small gap between the first flight of stairs and the wall and we moved quickly into that gap as the crowd thinned. The students emptied the hallway. The teachers closed their doors. The bell rang for classes to start. After a few moments, we emerged and peeked around the corner down the hallway. There were stragglers at the other end of the hallway. They turned the corner or moved into a classroom. We were alone. It was at that moment that I realized a major flaw in our plan, a flaw so deep and unsettling that it elevated the already paralyzing fear beating a drum inside my chest.

We had nowhere to go.

“Cassius, um, what now?”

He gazed downward and his thick lips pulled backward. His small aquiline nose hooked slightly over his bright uneven teeth. He was very quiet and I waited. His small muscular shoulders went square and he licked his lips. Cassius spun around, lurched backward kicking his feet forward and jabbed his fists in the air.

“This is good,” he said. “We’re in it now, my Jew friend. The gym, the gym, there ain’t no place else to find ‘im. Floatin’ like a butterfly. Stingin’ like a bee.” He put his hand forward and beckoned me to follow him.

“Cass, what if someone sees us?” I asked.

“Shake’em up. I’ll show you. Dance, see.”

Cassius danced back and forth, side to side on the balls of his feet. His hands were up in front of his face. I mimicked him, moved with him. He whipped his head from side to side. I smiled and huffed at him, Cassius’ eyes, wide and lively, seemed locked on my chin. His lips flattened against his teeth. The muscles in his neck tightened and stretched the collar of his shirt. We circled around each other and my breathing grew heavy and seemed to expel any doubts I had about what we were doing. The intensity in Cassius’ eyes made me laugh and I peered down at my feet. A fist darted very close to my chest and brushed against my shirt. I looked up at Cassius. He sent the other hand forward and his fingers swung close to my nose. The punches scared me and I stopped moving. I dropped my arms and Cassius pumped another fist at me, this time to the side of my head, close to my ear. He danced from side to side, but I remained still. It seemed like he wasn’t going to stop. Cassius slowly calmed down but his hands swung as if the energy had settled there and wouldn’t let go.

“I was just funnin’,” Cassius said, his expression dull, peering right through me. He turned and started down the hallway saying, “I got this figured out, come on.”

I followed Cassius through the halls. The school was shaped in a large rectangle and the gymnasium was at the complete opposite corner of the building. We stopped in

recessed doorways just in case a teacher emerged from a classroom or someone came around the corner to find us. I was surprised how empty the hallways were. Our footsteps popped air pockets beneath the uneven linoleum floor and the fluorescent lights buzzed loudly above us and an unexpected peace filled my chest. My stride fell into a rhythm of one and two and three and four. Having Cassius next to me gave me strength, as if Muhammad Ali himself walked with me. I'd seen Ali on television, his eyes wide, his jaw clenched, his head darting forward as he dared the world to contain his voice. I admired him, maybe not as much as Cassius did, but there was a great and natural force emanating from him, screaming, overpowering, frightening. He stood with no shame, no fear, staring the world in the face claiming "I am the Greatest!" and he could make that claim because he'd proved it over and over, but there was something else. It was in his eyes. He knew something we all didn't. I wasn't sure even he could put it into words. It showed in his eyes as they danced and flared with his words. Maybe it was about heart or sheer force of will, or maybe it was about self-determination. There was so much that his voice seemed to overpower, including any sign of his own pain and loss. I wanted to know what that was. I wanted someone to show me.

Walking through the hall, thinking of Ali, the nervous energy of freedom filled me and lifted me. I felt as if my feet were barely touching the floor, and suddenly all that was wrong seemed distant, the home that was all wrong, the bus stop that was all wrong, the school that was all wrong, Mrs. Kate's sentence that was all wrong, everything that was all wrong seemed like a distant memory. What was right was being free of all those things and walking down that empty hallway with Cassius Clay Johnson.

We passed the teachers' lounge without breaking stride. As we approached the door to the gym two teachers emerged from around the corner. We had no time to hide or run. One of them was my social studies teacher, a tall man who also happened to be the orchestra teacher. I thought he might recognize his only string bass player walking toward him. The teachers were talking about forms or something. I couldn't be sure. They're words were jumbled behind the sound of my heart beating loudly in my ears. We passed beneath their gaze, and we watched them as they moved away from us down the hall and entered the teachers' lounge.

The large wooden doors of the gymnasium were in front of us. Cassius pressed his hand to the gym door.

"There's no going back," he said.

The coach usually started gym class with a few minutes teaching athletic skills or running calisthenics, but then he went to his office and left the students unsupervised for free play time. Cassius's eye became unfocused and he angled his chin toward me.

"That Miss Kates, she couldn't take my flurry, could she?" Cassius asked. "Me not I. Me not I. I talked her into a knockdown."

I smiled and said, "More like a decision. The bell rang."

He frowned. His hand pressed the door slightly but didn't open it. He seemed to be contemplating his next move.

"But I did make us invisible to those teachers, moving too quick for them to see," he said. His eyes searching my face for some sort of recognition.

"You did, Cassius," I said. "You did."

“Cassius Clay,” he said. “I’m Cassius Clay.” Cassius pushed the door open and I followed him into the gym.

Play time had already begun. The air carried the odor of sweat and sour apple bubble gum. A group of girls were performing cartwheels near the door and they stopped to look at us. We circled the gym. The gym consisted of three basketball courts. Each half court was devoted to a different activity. The gymnasium was one of the few places where desegregation had failed (the other was the lunch room). The blacks played basketball on one side of the court. The whites played on the other side. The blacks played half court ball, moving the ball around the court quickly. Their sneakers squeaked loudly. One of them stopped and hunched his back, his head faced the defender, his eyes wide and focused but also deceiving, moving left before he shifted right and right before he shifted left. His arms swung upward like the legs of a gigantic spider dribbling the ball hard against the floor from one hand to the other.

The whites played H-O-R-S-E. Lane Trader, a popular kid and a bully, held the ball at a spot on the court and threw it up while the others stood to the side watching. Lane flipped his long black hair back. He was wiry and feminine, and what he lacked in physical presence he more than made up for in confidence. Lane was in my social studies class. On the first day our teacher asked us to name someone we considered a hero. Most people named famous people, musicians or actors or the president of the United States, but I said mine was my father, Lane laughed and made fun of me, and in trying to defend my choice I made the mistake of saying he was dead and Lane laughed even more. He said I couldn’t choose someone who was dead. A hero had to be alive, he said. The

teacher told Lane he shouldn't be so cruel, but the damage was done. The other students saw me as a sad kid to be pitied. I told Cassius about what happened, and though he had never met Lane, he decided he hated Lane even more than I did.

Lane exaggerated his pump of the ball at the basket. The ball rolled off the side of his hand instead of the fingers and it caught the edge of the backboard and bounced across all three courts into a corner near the doorway where we had entered. Lane moved quickly away from his friends and walked across the gym to get the ball. Cassius watched Lane, and the thought entered my head that Cassius may have planned this all along. He wanted to skip class so we could come to the gym. Maybe he knew that Lane would be in gym class this period. Maybe he wanted to use this opportunity to exact revenge. Cassius turned to me.

"Come on, I got an idea," he said and took off across the gym. I ran after him and when I caught up, he had Lane cornered in the small recess with lockers against the wall. Lane had picked up the ball and held it to his chest with both arms. Cassius pushed him back on his heels and Lane stumbled somewhat before regaining his balance.

"What the hell you want," Lane said. "Cohen, this a friend of yours?"

It was more an accusation than a question. I stood next to Cassius. I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. I just stared at Lane, my hands down at my side. My fingers tingled, a feeling I often got when I knew I had done something wrong. Cassius kept his eyes focused on Lane, like he didn't expect me to answer the question.

"My friend here requires an apology," Cassius said.

"*You* pushed me. I didn't do nothing."

“You should apologize for being so ugly. We’ll take it for laughing at his father.”

“Aw, that,” Lane said. “It was stupid. Besides, I ain’t letting no nigger tell me what to do.”

The word ran cold through me. *Nigger*. It was a word I would never use and my parents, my mother, thought it so horrible that to even think it was unforgivable. I’d heard it before. Last summer, a kid named Ralph Sussman said it at camp. He talked about all the niggers he’d beat up, but I think he just liked seeing the shock on our faces. It was a Jewish day camp and there was not better word to outrage the children of liberal Jews. When I told my mother about it, she became angry and called the managers of the camp to complain. I begged her not to. I didn’t want the other kids thinking I was a tattletale, but she called anyway. Ralph picked on me the rest of the camp session, but he never said the word *nigger* again, which I guess was the point. I had heard the word after that, of course. I even heard the word whispered in the halls at school. But I hadn’t heard it said like this, like a weapon, like something meant to hurt, and I felt sick in my stomach. I looked at Cassius, and then at Lane, and my heart filled with hatred.

He moved quickly. Cassius grabbed Lane by his shirt and pushed him against the wall. Lane’s head hit the locker and bounced forward. Cassius met it with his fist, catching Lane’s chin on the corner. Lane’s eyes closed, and when they opened they were slick as if soaked in oil. The muscles in Cassius’ face were taut. He rocked stiffly back and forth. His hands danced at this side. Cassius whipped his arm and slapped Lane across his head.

Lane threw the basketball across the court toward the other kids, who stood at the edge of the court. Lane moved forward and put his fists up in front of his face. His fists were so tight I thought blood might spill from them.

“Nigger,” Lane said with a smile. The kids had stopped playing H-O-R-S-E and surrounded us. The black kids must have heard what Lane said because they stopped their game, but they stayed on the court and watched from there.

Lane hunched his shoulders. Cassius’ head darted left and right, and his shoulders lowered. He looked uncertain, like he had gotten himself into a fight more real than he expected. Cassius took a step back. Lane’s eyes danced as if drawing strength from the surrounding onlookers. Or was it from Cassius, who seemed to be withdrawing, yielding to the mob. Cassius looked back at me and shrugged his shoulders, his eyes downward, like there was nothing more he could do, like he had reached the end of his ideas. Lane turned to me, his fists still up, his eyes wide with intensity.

“Hah, typical nigger,” Lane said. “You got anything, Cohen.”

“Stop calling him that,” I said.

“You gonna make me?”

I felt dizzy and the room brightened as if filled with yellow light. The faces of those around us were expectant. Their eyes flickered like bulbs popping on and off.

“Kick his butt,” a boy said.

“Yeah, Lane, beat him up,” another boy said.

Cassius faded into the crowd and Lane stepped closer. I shook my hands, trying to lose the tingling. I had gotten myself into the wrong place again. Wrong bus stop. Wrong

house. Wrong school, now, wrong fight. I looked around. Cassius was gone. He left me to face Lane by myself and I was had a decision to make. Fight Lane Trade or back away and face the taunts and laughter of those around me. I thought of Mohammed Ali again. I imagined him in a cage with chains around his ankles and his wrists and he wore dark sunglasses. An army of men surrounded the cage. Then one of the chains magically dropped from his wrist, a door opened, and he had to make a choice, use his one hand to work himself free of the other chains and face the full onslaught of attackers as they piled on him, or strike out with his one free hand at the first man that came at him and keep striking, hoping that his one fist could knock them all down. Lane moved quickly and punched me in the jaw. The pain was intense and the gymnasium went bright. I focused on my hands and waved them around to regain my balance. My mother always said I had my father's hands. She'd stare down at them and run her thumb along my fingers. I wanted to believe her. It felt like a dirty trick that I couldn't remember one word my father said when he was alive, but I remembered his hands, the way his long fingers gripped my shoulder when he wanted my attention, his comforting eyes peering beneath the glare of his thick horn-rimmed glasses. There was the way he handled playing cards, his thumb barely touching the cards as he slid them off the deck. And there was Friday night, every Friday night, when I watched him stand above us, the fingers of one hand splayed across the rough black cover of the prayer book his synagogue gave him for his bar mitzvah. The other hand carefully held up a dull silver cup as he chanted the Kiddush.

I heard laughter from behind me. I stretched my arms forward stiffly. My elbows locked and I must have looked like the Frankenstein monster or Superman trying to fly

and I heard laughter behind me, which only made me more desperate to do something to make them shut up, or at least to stop them from laughing at me. I closed my eyes and leapt at him. My legs had more strength than I thought. I heard a gurgled “Hey.” His fists struck my chest and pain shot across my shoulders. I grabbed his shirt and pressed him against the lockers. My forehead pushed up into his throat. My eyes were still closed. I pushed against him and felt his arms flailing around my shoulders. His chin dug into the top of my head, and then Lane went limp. A flood of air and pulsing blood filled my ears, and the voices around me sounded as if drowned by water. Everything went very bright and my legs gave out and I fell.

I never heard the bell ring. I never heard the students walk away, maybe laughing at us lying there. I never heard the girl running across the gymnasium screaming for the coach to come and help the two unconscious kids lying on the floor. I never heard the next gym class file into the gymnasium and the bell ring again for class to begin. I never heard the school nurse asking me, “Can you hear me, honey? Can you hear me?” I never even felt them lift Lane off of me and prop me up against the wall like a limp doll.

It wasn't until I was sitting in the nurse's office that I became fully aware of what was going on, but even then things were still a bit hazy. My head felt as if it were swelling to twice its size. The nurse asked me over and over if I was okay. I didn't answer her. I wasn't sure whether I was okay or not. She kept smiling at me as if her smile would cure whatever was causing my pain, and the whole time I couldn't stop looking at her large bosom and the nametag that said, “Mrs. Johnson,” and I thought how

she could never be Cassius' mother. She was much too white. I laughed when I thought this, and Mrs. Johnson stopped smiling.

“You're in trouble, I hope you know that.”

“Yes, I know,” I said.

I asked about Cassius and the nurse said they were looking for him. She led me to the hallway where I sat in an orange chair next to the door. I sat there for several minutes and watched the hallway. Four men, one taller than the others, walked down the hall toward me. It was strange to see the teachers talking to each other, laughing like regular people. The four men stopped about halfway down the hall and three of them entered a room. The fourth, the taller one, approached me.

“Mr. Cohen, I'm Mr. Vandergriff. Follow me.”

We entered an outer administrative office between the principal and the vice principal's offices. Lane Trader sat in a chair against the wall.

“Sit down,” Mr. Vandergriff said. “I have to call your mother.”

Mr. Vandergriff went into his office and closed the door. I stared at the door. I hadn't even thought of my mom until the moment Mr. Vandergriff said he was going to call her and the list of wrongness got longer. Wrong house, wrong bus stop, wrong school, wrong sentence, wrong fight, wrong me. After a few moments I desperately wanted to know what was being said behind the door. Mr. Vandergriff would tell her that her son had been fighting. My mom wouldn't believe him or she might tell him he was mistaken, or she'd ask whether another kid pressured me to do it. Then I had a terrible thought. She might start crying. Over the last year I'd seen my mother crying at the

oddest times. She cried in the breakfast room while I sat in the living room watching television. She cried in her bedroom when I was just walking by in the hallway. It seemed like she was crying all the time. And now I'd given her another reason to cry. I looked at Lane. He gave me a smug look, like he knew the trouble I was in and the bad things that would happen to me, and I had a strong desire to hit him again. I fought hard not to keep my composure. I didn't want him to know I was weak.

"This ain't settled, Jew boy," Lane said.

The secretary near us heard him and told him to be quiet until Mr. Vandergriff came out and dealt with us. The secretary collected small posters and ceramic paperweights with biblical sayings painted on them. It seemed like everything on her desk had a cross on it and was colored in pastels as if Jesus was represented by pastels and evil was anything darker than baby blue.

"No goddamned Jew knocks me out and lives to tell it," Lane whispered, but the secretary still heard him and moved him to a chair on the opposite side of the office.

Mr. Vandergriff emerged from his office and asked me to come in. He closed the door behind us.

"Mr. Cohen, I can't permit fighting to go on in my school. Do you understand that?"

He looked over the desk at me. The desk seemed too small for him. He towered over it.

"Yes."

"Yes *sir*." Mr. Vandergriff said.

“Yes sir,” I said. “You talked to my mother...sir.”

“I called her at her work number. I had to ask for her permission for corporal punishment. There’s no law says I have to do that, but the district’s got rules. She gave me her authorization, so come here now.”

I hesitated. Mr. Vandergriff reached into his desk and took out a paddle. It was made of dark wood and it was about a foot long with holes in it. He stood and opened a second door in the office that led to the hallway, then sat back down.

“Come on, come over here.”

I stood and walked around the desk. He gripped my shoulder and pivoted me so I faced the desk and pushed me up against it. I felt his hand at my back, pressing. I thought, Mr. Vandergriff has turned me into a marionette.

“Bend over the desk, son. This will be over before you know it.”

I bent awkwardly over the desk and for what seems an endless moment all I could hear was Mr. Vandergriff’s breathing, a dead rasping of air moving in and out.

“For fighting, it’s ten licks,” he said.

He hit me ten times with the paddle, each separated by a long moment. He must have brought the paddle back as far as he could because with each hit I pushed the desk forward. The slaps from the paddle were loud and reverberated off the walls of the office and down the hallway outside the door. The pain shot up my sides and my shoulders tingled. As he hit me I thought about my mother and why she had agreed to let him hit me. She had never hit me. Neither had my father, before he died. It seemed like she had made the wrong decision in giving him permission to do this, or maybe Mr. Vandergriff

had lied and said he talked to her when he actually didn't. I thought about Cassius and whether I should blame him for this, whether he should be here taking his licks, but he didn't fight Lane, I did. I stood up to him. I saw it through, so I'm the one who should be taking the punishment, though it did seem that Cassius deserved part of it, maybe one or two licks. It seemed at that moment that he wasn't Cassius Clay, but I was. I was Muhammad Ali taking my licks and I'd live to tell about it. After it was over, Mr. Vandergriff said not to worry, that Lane would get his punishment too. He let me leave through the door to the hallway. A few minutes later I heard them as I was about to go into my science class that was already in session. I heard the whacks echo through the hallway. There were more than ten. I couldn't be sure of the number, but it seemed like more. I was sore and it hurt to sit down in my desk.

At the end of the school day I walked to my bus. I looked for Cassius in the crowd of students loading onto busses, but I couldn't find him. I spotted Lane deep in the crowd. He stopped short of his bus and I watched him cut across the lawn, pushing his way through the throng of students. He stood behind me.

"Like I said, this ain't over," Lane said. He boarded the bus with me and hid beneath a seat in the back.

We arrived at my stop and as I walked to the front of the bus Lane emerged from his hiding place and exited the bus. The others walked toward their homes. I thought about running away, but I knew if I didn't face Lane I'd have to face him the next day or the day after that, so I lingered. Lane put his books down on the sidewalk. I walked toward the intersection. Lane moved close to me. I turned and Lane moved closer with

his fists up. This was going to be the place where we settled it, and I suddenly realized how tired I was. My muscles ached. My rear end was sore and it hurt to walk.

“You gonna run home to mommy?”

It was just us, and strange. This time, there was no crowd, no onlookers.

“I don’t want to fight you.”

Lane Trader just stared at me, his fists still in front of him.

“We ain’t in school no more, Cohen,” he said. “Come on, see if you can do it again this time.”

“My dad was my hero,” I said. “That’s all I was saying.”

“Nobody gives a damn, Cohen,” Lane said. “You’re a freak, ya know.” Lane lowered his fists and looked at his watch. “Oh hell, it’s late. I’ve gotta get home or my dad will beat *my* ass.” Lane moved backwards a few steps. “You, me, it’s gonna happen. Expect it. Plan on it, and by the way, you shouldn’t be hanging around with niggers. It’s only gonna get you in more trouble.”

He picked up his books. I watched him as he moved down the sidewalk and turned the corner.

I was in no hurry to go home and face my mother. I sat on the brick wall and closed my eyes and when I opened them the sky was lit up like yellow fire. I searched for a rock to kick against the wall, a small game to spread out time, but it seemed sad and pathetic. I desired something more, and a hunger grew inside me. It frightened me and my skin crawled with desperate anticipation.

Officer Ranier and his partner took the call and interviewed the witness, a lonely old woman, who dragged out the story the way old people do, wanting the company more than anything. She said she looked out her front window and saw a boy. She thought it might be girl because he had such long black hair. The boy was walking down the street, and as he reached the street light another boy came up quickly, almost at a run, and tackled him. The victim's books scattered across her yard. The officer promised the woman they would clean up the mess. The boy didn't have a chance as the other boy flailed at him, beating him with his fists wildly. The woman said it was as if he was full of hate, out of control with no sense in him. The officer rolled his eyes. Old women liked to weave very dramatic scenes. She said he kept beating on the boy until he grew tired and stopped for a few seconds before he started up again. When the officer had arrived earlier, the victim was conscious but unresponsive. The attacker sat by the streetlight. The officer looked at him and at first he thought he might be dead. The boy's eyes were wide and unblinking, but on second look he realized the kid was just staring at the victim. The police officer had seen it before, when a man did something out of character, in the heat of the moment, killed his wife's lover or lost control and beat his kid. It's as if they discovered in their heart a new facility to do harm to his fellow man. There was something not right, though. Those people's eyes were usually wide in shock, but this kid looked almost proud, as if he had done something the world wanted him to do. The paramedics took the victim to the hospital. He'd be okay. A few broken ribs, a fractured jaw, contusions all over his body. The attacker was a boy from the neighborhood. There were lots like him in that neighborhood but they or their children never did anything like

this before. They were usually good quiet people. The officer tried to talk to the kid but he just sat there. He didn't say anything until they got him in the back of the patrol car. He mumbled a few words and they weren't sure what he said, but thought it was about having what he needed for school, like maybe he had just come back from the five and dime with a protractor or something.

Inflation

My girl Melissa wants tonight to be a special night, which means paying for a queen and screwing her like a whore in a nice hotel, not the usual Olympus Motel with the sandpaper bedspread and the uneven mattress, but a first rate place with soft sheets, a mini-bar and room service. Unfortunately, a fake ID got you only so far. I can tell that Melissa's worried that things between us might change once we graduate from high school, even though we'll both be freshmen at North Texas in three months. She thinks we'll grow apart. We talked earlier on the phone. I tried to tamp down her expectations.

"Maybe we should come back to my room tonight," I said.

"We deserve more privacy than that," she said. She was silent for a moment, and waited. I could tell she was thinking it over. "I deserve better than that."

"We can be real quiet," I said. "They'll never know."

"I think we should live close to each other," she said. "When we're at school."

"What does it matter?"

"It matters," she said, and for a second, I thought I heard a different voice in the background, pleading with me over and over *it does, it does, of course it does*.

"Guess what I'm wearing right now," she said.

"Nothing," I said, and she laughed.

"I'm dressed, baby," she said. "I'm wearing the gold bracelet you bought me. I'll wear it tonight at Agatha's. It'll jangle all night, even more later." She laughed again. "I may never take it off."

“Are you sure you want to go back there?” I asked. “Agatha’s, I mean.”

“You made the reservation for eight, didn’t you?”

The voice behind hers is there again. *Didn’t you, didn’t you, didn’t you.*

“Yeah, eight,” I said. “I’ll pick you up a little before that.”

All the thoughts that had been haunting me since we made these plans came back. I can’t afford the restaurant. I can’t afford the hotel. I can’t afford Melissa. I can’t afford shit. I made a last ditch effort to raise funds, my sister, friends, who were no help.

But I’ve got other concerns. It’s mid-afternoon and a fence named RJ and his friend Bo are staking out my house. They’ve been rolling by the house in a gray Corvair the last few days, sometimes in the front, sometimes moving slowly down the alley, but they don’t stop and they don’t just tell me what they want. I spotted them the first time by accident. I was helping my sister load her kid into her car and the silver Corvair slowed down enough for my sister to get scared. I told her it must have been someone interested in buying our folks’ house.

It’s five o’clock and I’m on the balcony in my bathrobe with acne medication caked on my face peering through a telephoto lens. My room is over my parents’ garage and I have a balcony that overlooks the driveway and the alley that leads to it. From my vantage point the large surrounding houses look like a patchwork of brick and asphalt. RJ and Bo have rolled by twice today. I don’t like RJ and Bo, but I do business with them because they always have cash. RJ and Bo aren’t from our neighborhood. They are from the other side. The peppery side. They dabble in my neighborhood. I don’t dabble in theirs. They’re a couple of thugs who don’t think. RJ is one of those guys that’s tougher

than he looks. He's girlish and a skinny like he hasn't eaten in years, but his black eyes glare at you and his voice is sharp. It feels like he's putting you on the spot with every word, like he might follow anything you say to him, even if it's to compliment him on his choice of shirt, with a hard punch to your gut. Bo is just big and mean, his shoulders almost disappear into his giant doughy form. RJ and Bo like to push their way around. Bo once hit me just for refusing RJ's offer on a stolen radar detector, a pricey one that picks up laser as well as sonar speed traps. It even squelched false readings from automatic doors grocery stores or banks. After Bo hit me, it took me twenty minutes to stop puking.

I've had no dealings with them for weeks, so I'm guessing this has to do with Stevie. Stevie dumped a bag on me two days ago. The bag was full of radar detectors, car stereos, and the camera. Stevie didn't think I'd be home. He left the bag in front of my door and walked away, but I caught up to him and he came back and paced around my room, his T-shirt and blue jeans soaked with sweat. He looked out the window. He cranked up my stereo, Prince comes over the radio screeching *DMSR* on a Rotel 1500 pushing 200 watts with an amber LED display. Stevie asked me to hold the bag for him until the air cleared. He pointed at the bag, touched it several times as he spoke, like he was tethered to it. He wouldn't say who was after him. I assumed it was the cops. I took the bag, but I probably wouldn't have if I had known RJ and Bo were involved, which is probably why Stevie didn't mention them.

I can't remember which of us started stealing first, but Stevie takes more risks. He prefers car stereos. I prefer radar detectors. Car stereos are too much trouble. Guys like Stevie know how to yank them out of the dash without damaging them. I tried it once. I

broke the window of a BMW 325i. The Blaupunkt had an industrial strength rubber band wrapped around it. The rubber band was somehow connected to the deep innards of the car. I pulled and pulled and the thing wouldn't come out. I'd invested too much risk as it was, so I kept yanking on it. I got four inches of it but the car wouldn't let go. I didn't think to open the goddamned door. I reached in and after pulling for a few minutes, the stereo was pulling me into the car more than I was pulling it out, and my ass was hanging outside the broken window. I felt a tap and a yank on my belt loop. I rose and banged my head on the map light and dropped to the seat. The pain radiated down my neck and across my shoulders. It took a few seconds for me to see clearly. I heard laughter. I pulled myself out. There was no moon and the car was parked in an unlighted part of the street (I'm not a total idiot). I couldn't make out the guy. I pushed him and ran. It must've been too dark for him to identify me, 'cause the cops never came looking for me.

For days, Stevie shot rubber bands at me in the hallways, laughing. It was humiliating. Radar detectors are never mounted. People don't even hide them. They leave it suction cupped to their windshield or clipped to the visor, or they put it under the driver seat or in the glove compartment. They came out clean. Break the window or slip the lock, grab it, and I'm gone. Adam Janis taught me how to do it. Adam is a short, thick guy who wears glasses that darken with the sunlight, but the glasses don't work quite right and he always looks as if he's hiding his eyes. Adam and I grew up together. He smokes more pot than anyone I know and spends most of his money on rock concerts and watches. Most of the watches are fakes. Fake Rolexes, fake Piagets, fake Rados, but he

has some real ones too, mostly stolen. He introduced me to RJ and Bo, but I wish he hadn't.

I don't think my house is the only one RJ and Bo are rolling by or they would just sit there all day. Stevie never deals well in pressure situations. He panics and runs around to his friends and his not-so friends until he runs out of options. He's been a mess since David Platt went away. David was his best friend, which was odd because he was always a bit too contained, too stiff. The guy just snapped one Sunday morning. He told his parents he wanted to stay home from church. While they were singing to Jesus he took his father's shotgun from the gun cabinet. He loaded it, grabbed a chair from the breakfast room and sat in the middle of the living room waiting for them to return home. He shot them as soon as they came through the door, his twelve-year-old sister first. The father was some big executive at an energy company, and it made the headlines for weeks. The reporters even interviewed Stevie, who shouldn't have said anything. He came off like a psycho too, like he might kill his own parents if he had the chance. David went off to a mental institution, and Stevie fell apart and got himself kicked out of St. Vincent's for setting the bathroom on fire, which is how he ended up in public school with me. Stevie was always a bit of a pyro.

Stevie's going to be pissed when he comes back for his stuff. I sold everything, except the camera, of course. I needed the money. Tonight has to top a few weeks ago, when Melissa and I ate dinner at Agatha's. We'd never been there before and didn't know the dress code. The host said they had a jacket and tie I could wear. I looped the green tie under the collar of my yellow golf shirt and the guy helped me put on the sport

jacket, a blue one with a satin stripe along the edges. The jacket was several sizes too small and so tight in my shoulders that I had difficulty bringing my arms up to the table to eat my food. The dinner was all right. I didn't like all the attention from the waiter. It was like having a nervous Stevie circle around us while we ate. Melissa started scratching just below her tits and I found it hard to concentrate. After dinner, we screwed all night at the Olympus Motel. Even with the cheap motel I blew through all my cash, my allowance plus months of breaking into cars.

I can't help spending money on her. Melissa is a stealth beauty. She slides next to me without a sound, her fingers sneaking their way into my hand, her foot brushing against the side of mine, almost imperceptibly. She looks up at me with her drowsy black eyes. Her chaotic black hair falls over my arm, and I'm lost to her. This is usually when she asks me for a small gift, never asking me outright. That's not her style. She says something like, "Baby, do you think I can afford that bracelet?" or "I would look so good wearing that don't you think?" Other guys want her, even if they fear her. It's understandable. They know about the stalker that followed her to a friend's house and shot her and her friend. The friend, a pretty blonde, was dead instantly. Melissa spent a month in the hospital with two bullets, one stuck near her spine, the other inside her lung. With the one near the spine they had to wait for the swelling to go down and for the bullet to shift before removing it. She was fifteen. The stalker was twice her age. He was a friend of her father's. They've never caught him. I've seen his face on the post office wall, a picture from when he was picked up for drunk driving a few years before, or I

thought it was him, by the way she described him, a guy with thick black hair in tight curls, a very slim, almost nonexistent moustache and eyes oddly similar to Melissa's.

Her scar is a thick purple ridge that skews her tits, making one smaller than the other, one erect, the other flabby like an old woman's. The scar is hard and presses into my ribs when I lay on top of her. I have to rise above her or take her from behind. Melissa calls it "the mark from hell." Her folks are still too deep under her hospital bills to pay for plastic surgery.

Melissa can't tell whether people are looking at her in fear, disgust, or pity. I didn't want her thinking I was any of those, so on our first night together I jokingly talked to the scar. I continued to talk it every night we were together and she eventually started asking me to do it.

"Talk to it," she said. "Tell it to go away. Tell it I deserve more."

And I do, but I also tell it how beautiful it is and how its shade of purple reminds me of royalty. I tell it things to make Melissa not so sad about it. After a few weeks of this, it was as if Melissa split in two. First was the woman I wanted, the sexy and beautiful girl, the one every guy wanted but I've got, and then second, the wounded girl, the one I try not to see, the one marred by a gunshot—vulnerable and needy and desperate for my attention. I was aware of the second Melissa, but I submerged it deep in the back of my mind. When I'm not flush, it's that version of her that makes me deeply sad.

It really comes down to money. It's all currency. I love her but she costs me money. The scar, the mark of the second Melissa, is essentially inflation. It raises her

price. I drain my parents of all they'll give me. They think two hundred a month will keep me going, but it's really nothing, and the pay I might earn at a teenager's job is laughable.

Pacing around my room, a vision of Melissa slips into my head. It's her later tonight. She is standing in front of Agatha's. Eight o'clock. Her short, thick-hipped figure stands in a black satin dress. Her wild hair blows in the wind, and the valet, who stands near her waiting for the next car to park, may think she is a young model waiting on her uncommonly handsome boyfriend. Another valet drives up in a Porsche. He walks up to Melissa and instead of handing her a key he hangs a string around her neck and on that string is a big fucking price tag.

The clove cigarette is giving me a headache. Outside on the balcony, I watch the alleyway. This is Stevie's fault. Fuck'em for trusting Stevie or whatever dealings they have with him. I don't know for sure they're watching for Stevie, but Stevie's not answering his cell.

I go back inside to my bedroom. Eventually RJ and Bo will give up or they'll hear that the stuff been sold and come after me. The shit sold for a hundred. A hundred is not enough for tonight. That's what a fence gets for telling the buyer the stuff came from Stevie, but I'm an honest businessman. I kept the camera because I liked it.

I return to the balcony and balance the cigarette on the edge of the banister, then go back inside, and then outside again. The camera gives me a full sweep of the alley and the tall fences to the other side. No RJ and Bo. What are they waiting for? There is no pattern, but what would they see. Just me, a schmuck standing on his balcony in a white

bathrobe, his face caked with acne medication, which isn't working. The paste is Melissa's fault. She loves my smooth skin, smooth and hairless as a baby. The acne shit has forty minutes to make up for past failures or I'm tossing Dr. Feldstein's tube, his name taped to it like a tiny little business card, like someone might wonder who's the genius that prescribed this worthless paste that might as well be, well, paste.

I look through the phone book at hotels and call some of them to find out their rates. I need more cash. I try Stevie's cell again, no answer. I call his home and his Mom answers and she bitches me out for calling too much. She says if I see him to tell him they're also looking for him. She says this in a way that makes me uncomfortable, like I'm suddenly a snitch. Stevie's mom hates me. Stevie told me she doesn't like me because I never look her in the eye. Melissa says it's because I'm always nervous, like there's somewhere else I should be.

I look through the telephoto lens. I close my eyes. I open them. Another vision of Melissa. This time she hovers above the alleyway like an angel. Her narcoleptic eyes weigh me down. She is washed out in the dying sunlight, the dark asphalt of the rooftops pour through her eyes. She needs this night, but I'm not sure I can give it to her, at least not by eight o'clock. Nine o'clock, sure. Maybe I can get enough cash by nine o'clock. Nine o'clock will work. I pick up the phone to call her, or I should call Agatha's first. I dial the number for Agatha's. Before I can explain, the woman from Agatha's says they're booked for the night. I realize I'm fooling myself. An hour wouldn't have made any difference.

I get dressed and walk downstairs. My mother is lying on the couch watching the local news. Sitting next to her is our overweight Chinese pug, who is so old she doesn't move, but her body shakes in a pathetic effort to lift herself. There is a towel beneath her for when she pisses herself. My mother's purse is next to the dog. I lean over the back of the couch and hover over it. She looks away from the television long enough to squint at me. Her mouth opens slightly, and she looks back at the television. I lean closer to the bag.

"Your dad has my credit cards," she says. "After last time." She's referring to the second time my father filed for bankruptcy.

"I wasn't looking for nothing," I say. I lean further and stroke the dog. The dog looks up, her black and gray face brightens and her body rumbles with excitement.

"You're daddy won't be home until late," my mother says. "Why don't you take that crap off your face."

I walk to the kitchen and look out the window. A car with a black hood sits far down the street. I can't see the rest of the car. I feel trapped even though I'm not. They're looking for Stevie, not me. I return to my room and wash my face.

Melissa calls. Her mother wants us to break up, she says. Her mother doesn't like me, even more than Stevie's mom, most likely because I'm screwing her daughter. Melissa's mom thinks graduation is a good time to start anew, to consider other options, but Melissa told her she loves me, and my heart grows heavy.

"There's nothing you could do that would make me not love you," she says.
"Where are we staying tonight?"

“I’ve got a hotel all picked out,” I say.

“We’ve got forever,” she says. “The rest of our lives.”

Her breathing is heavy. I feel as if I’m being pulled down to my knees. Tires squeal behind the house.

“I might have to meet you at Agatha’s,” I tell her. “Eight o’clock?”

“See you then, baby.”

She asks about the hotel again, and I give the name of a hotel that I haven’t even called but I know is nice and costs more than what I’ve got. I hang up.

The car is Stevie’s. He’s looking up at me from the driveway, wearing a thin, almost transparent white undershirt stretched almost to his knees. His baggy jeans look as if they could easily slide off and fall to his ankles. His skin is sallow and his long hair is matted as if he hasn’t showered in days. I tell him about RJ and Bo and he can’t come up. He’s lost his privileges. He runs to the alley and looks left and right. Stevie begs me to let him in, just on the balcony and I agree, but only if he tells me what its all about.

He tells me RJ needed the camera to take some pictures of some girl. Stevie told him he could find one if he agreed to buy it with the rest of the shit in the bag. He needed money for his own girl, some freak with greasy black hair he met at a party. He didn’t really know where to get a camera so he stole his father’s. He was on the way to see RJ and Bo when his sister called. His father reported him to the cops. He’s been wandering every since, sleeping on couches. He slept on Adam’s Janis’ lawn last night. Adam came out in the morning and found him lying there and said, “You owe me twenty. Squatter’s fee.” Adam can be cold-blooded that way. He made him pay it right then.

Stevie said his sister called twenty minutes ago and told him that she'd negotiated a truce. Their father would drop the charges if he returns the camera and agrees to some stipulations. His father is an asshole lawyer. I told Stevie that I sold everything except the camera and he seemed oddly relieved.

"At least the camera's still mine," Stevie says.

I see my opportunity. I see Melissa at Agatha's. I see me in a dinner jacket and tie, this time my own.

"I'll sell it to you for one fifty," I say. "Nine-tenths and all."

"One fifty?"

"Okay, make it a hundred."

Stevie's lower lip shakes like the pug when she gets excited.

"What kind of son-of-a-bitch are you? You said you'd hold it. You fucking sell everything, except the goddamned camera and now you expect me to pay you for it." He stops talking. He looks over the edge of the balcony.

"I don't have that kind of money," he says. "Twenty-five maybe."

"I'm meeting her at eight," I say. My headache has passed. I light another clove.

"What if I pop you one," he says.

I turn to look over my shoulder. I see RJ and Bo sitting at the end of the alley in a different Corvair, this one red and black. RJ restores Corvairs with his dad. After dropping out of high school, that's pretty much all he seemed to do, fix up Corvairs, when he's not dealing drugs and stolen shit.

"I can sell it to RJ and Bo myself," I say.

Stevie rocks on his feet, his toes point up at me. I balance the clove on the banister and stroke my face. I squeeze at a pimple but it's too hard. The fucking medication doesn't do shit. As soon as I'm done with Stevie I'm tossing it. Maybe I'll burn it and see what the vapors do for me.

"Give it to me, it's mine. It's my dad's," Stevie says.

I pick up the clove and take a drag and shake my head.

"I think I'll take care of my girl instead," I say.

Stevie smiles briefly, probably because I look wrong when I smoke. Holding the cigarette puts me off balance. He moves closer and hunches. RJ and Bo move up the alley and stop at the end of the driveway.

I say, "I want those fucking assholes off my ass." I turn and move toward the stairway, but slowly.

"You're a son-of-a-bitch, ya know that?" Stevie says.

RJ and Bo get out of the car and approach the balcony. I hold up my hand and they stop.

"What's it going be?" I ask.

Stevie is crying. He wipes the tears from his cheeks and begs me not to do this, not to force him to steal again. He's had enough, he says. He doesn't have the money, not even the twenty-five. His knees buckle and he's on the floor of the balcony, his feet tucked back beneath him. RJ and Bo look confused.

Stevie's chest heaves from deep within his body. He is shaking. The last time I saw Stevie cry like that was after his dad slapped him in the face for burning large gaping

holes in the Slip-n-Slide until nothing would slip or slide on it. David and I tried to cheer him up, talking about ways we would kill Stevie's father. David said we should wrap him in the ruined slip-n-slide and throw him down the chimney and he'd suffocate to death. I turned on the stereo and played One Trick Pony by Paul Simon. I danced around and they laughed until I made them dance. "Dance," I said. They looked at me like I was crazy. Stevie, his face lined with dried tears, started moving his body. I danced around like an idiot, but David just stood and stared. I yelled at him several times until he moved his body stiffly, and Stevie and I both laughed at him.

The sunset is a soft weave of red and burnt orange. I wonder what color the sky was when David Platt sat in the living room waiting for his family to come home. Did he see the sunlight at all, how beautiful the day was that day, or did he see only the gun, the thing he believed would take care of his family? Was that solution running through his head when we were talking about ways to kill Stevie's father?

The automatic lights flicker on and light up the driveway. RJ and Bo climb the stairway and stand behind me. RJ's long hair is tied into a ponytail. He's got crystals hanging from his jean pockets.

"Where's my shit," RJ says.

"We only have the camera," I say.

Bo moves forward and RJ brushes the back of his hand against Bo's fat humped stomach, but he doesn't stop. He grabs my shoulder. His grip is tight and pain shoots deep into my chest and my heart feels like it's going to stop. He looks down at me and he is smiling.

“Jesus,” Stevie says. He’s wiping away tears and snot from his nose. He looks like a blubbing little kid who is just regaining his composure.

“Bo, brother,” RJ says. “All I wanted was the camera in the first place.”

Bo lets go of my shoulder and remains close to me. His breath smells like cigarette smoke and Juicy Fruit gum. I do an equation in my head. RJ and Bo are the more immediate threat. Stevie’s father will eventually come around, and even if he doesn’t he won’t hurt Stevie, but even if he does hurt him he won’t leave him physically disabled. I go inside and grab the camera. I offer it to RJ for a hundred. He says they agreed on sixty. We settle on seventy-five. I take thirty as a holding fee and give the rest to Stevie. Stevie protests, but we ignore him.

Bo looks away and then quickly turns. His fist moves fast. It’s the same punch. There’s a blast of sunlight and I’m on my knees. The pain moves through my bowels, but this time I don’t vomit, probably because I don’t have much food in my stomach, but it feels like someone opened a faucet in my gut and I’m overflowing. Saliva and bile forces its way up my throat and explodes from my mouth and nose. I fall to my side and lay there. I can’t close my eyes even though I try.

“That’s for the other shit we was promised,” Bo says.

“Jesus, Bo, I said we didn’t need that shit,” RJ says. He crouches down and stares at me. He cocks his head so I can see his wide centered eyes, and he says, “Sorry, brother. Cum see cum sah, right?”

RJ and Bo leave. After a few minutes I am able to sit up. Stevie and I sit on the balcony. I can’t stop holding my stomach. We burn the tube of acne paste and the flame

calms him. We get a little dizzy, but nothing very good. We drink some cheap vodka and laugh about how steamed his father is going to be. We open my father's bottle of twelve-year-old scotch that I nabbed days ago and there are soon no fathers, no debts to be paid, no money, and halfway through the bottle, I think of Melissa. I think about that night at the Olympic Motel after Agatha's. Melissa talked about her stalker. He shot her friend first, but she doesn't remember it. The shock of it took most of her memory, but she does remember a sense of dread and the man stepping closer and standing over her. It occurred to me that she might have been on her knees looking up at him, begging for her life.

We lay there naked in the dark. Moonlight filled the room with blue light. My face was close to her stomach.

"I'll order us some champagne from room service," I said.

"You're funny," she said. She propped herself up against the pillows, her tits pointed away from each other in their usual disagreement and she looked down at me. She said, "Talk to it again. Will you talk to it for me? Tell it to go back to hell."

In the darkness of the room the scar resembled a black river moving through her flesh. My stomach tightened. I didn't feel like talking to it. I didn't feel like talking much at all. I wanted Melissa to be only one of her, the sexy one, not the vulnerable one with the scar.

"I don't think so," I said. "It's sleeping."

"How do you know?" She asks, playing along.

“I see it disappearing,” I said and looked up toward her face. It was odd, but the wounded girl was there. I was overcome by fear, sadness and that sense of pity I thought I’d lost, and I said, “I don’t think it’s even here anymore. It’s gone back to hell.”

“No,” she said.

“It has,” I said. “I don’t see it anymore.”

“Yes, you do,” she said. Her voice was hard. “Don’t ever say that. It’s here. I’ll never be rid of it.”

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“For fuck’s sake,” she said under her breath.

“Of course, you’re right. It is here,” I said. “I don’t feel like talking to it now, okay? Maybe we can just screw? Is that okay?”

She was silent for a while and I was desperate for her to say something. In the darkness, her face seemed to float off into a dark vision upon the wall, not unlike the wanted poster of her stalker at the post office, the object of a great and all-consuming hunt. Her breathing was heavy.

“Yeah, baby, sure, I want that too,” she said, her voice unable to conceal resignation, and she rolled over on her stomach.

It’s past eight and she is waiting for me at Agatha’s. Better to piss her off than give her less than she deserves, I think, but that might be the acne paste, the vodka, the scotch talking nonsense to me. I imagine other men in suits walking past her. They see her, those eyes that hide from you. They want her with a blindness that I envy, and they can afford her. They can afford both Melissas. It’s past eight, and I sit with Stevie. We

work out a plan to deal with his father, though it's hopeless. The lawyer must pursue his logic to the end even it involves his own son. It's past eight, and Stevie and I talk into the night. We make plans for the future, some real, some cruel, some beyond our means, but they're ours.

No Comma, Period, Rage

Gina wanted me to meet her girlfriend, who was unhappy and thinking about moving back to her home state of Arizona. *Maybe you can be the reason she stays here.* I didn't exactly trust Gina to fix me up with a winner. Gina was a co-worker, the kind who finds a way to do as little work as possible, and a bit of a flake. The girlfriend's name was Cole. A strange name for a girl. It didn't sound promising.

On a Friday, Gina sent me an online invite. *Come by my place next Thursday at 7:00. We'll chat, drink wine, and play games. It'll be fun.* She invited fifteen people. The moment I responded *yes* I regretted it. I started checking the RSVP count every day, hoping the universe might help get me out of it.

Friday: Not responded, 13, Thinking about it, 0, No way, 0, Attending, 2 (that's me and Gina, of course).

I can't blame Gina for trying. It had been six months since the break up and I'd become a worse version of my ex-girlfriend, a recluse, stuck in my own head, never leaving my apartment, never seeing other people, wanting nothing but my own thoughts, and I thought a lot, especially about my ex.

She was an expert on televisions and made her name as a pioneer in the design and use of remote controls. We met at a happy hour during a conference on flat panel displays. Her consulting company had just gone belly-up. The day before, she gave a presentation on the crossover between remote controls and mobile devices. Watching her up on stage, I knew I had to meet her. I asked around about her. Years ago, she wrote a

white paper about the proportional relationship between modal and non-modal buttons on a remote control. Her work led to a complete redesign of every remote control on the market. She gave a few presentations at international conferences, enjoyed a bit of fame among TV experts and industrial designers, and even had a page on Wikipedia devoted to her before it mysteriously disappeared from the Net.

When we met she was on the tail end of her fame, and as we grew closer I found myself running up against an unyielding dead end whenever I probed her about her plans for the future. One morning, we were having coffee in her breakfast room.

“Do you think you might work on a new study?” I asked.

“No.”

“Are you planning on working on a new paper?”

“Not really.”

“Are you planning on working on anything?”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“But you could contribute so much more. You’re so talented,” I said, and I truly believed that. I had read her white paper and it was beautifully written, especially for such a dry subject. I actually laughed out loud when she compared the user’s failure to master the most simple remote control to a man’s inability to give a woman an orgasm. *We don’t know why it’s so difficult, but we need to keep helping him out or he’ll never get there.*

“I just don’t have any more to offer,” she said and looked down at her coffee cup.

“I’ve done all I can. I make enough money from the remotes to get by.”

Instead of pursuing the frontiers of technology, my ex asked companies to ship boxes of sample remote controls to her home so that she could critique them for an online TV tech site that had a small following. She took short walks around her neighborhood and sat around reading obscure history books (*The Forgotten Contribution of Asian Immigrants to the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad*). There wasn't much else to her life, except the time she spent with me, which consisted mostly of meals, talking about her remote controls and books, and having sex. She reserved much of her passion for the bedroom, but increasingly I found myself wishing she'd shift at least some of that passion to other parts of her life. For a while we went to happy hours thrown by one of the various tech networking groups in the area, but she complained that I was not very good at social situations. I was too blunt. I wasn't good at small talk, and we stopped going.

Saturday: Not responded, 9, Thinking about it, 1, No way, 3, Attending, 2 (Glenda was evidently having trouble convincing Cole that it was a good idea to meet me)

I had hoped my girlfriend's apathy was just talk, that her small pursuits would eventually coalesce around a new grand achievement. Maybe she might discover an easier method of controlling the TV, cable box and DVR at the same time, or she might perceive some great understanding of history, but after a while I came to realize that her explorations were just existential busywork.

One day she announced to me with a small laugh that she was starting her own school, what she called a "school of life." The school employed one teacher and enrolled one student, both herself. Every day she would devote herself to a new topic, the dam

building techniques of the Eurasian beaver, the history of the semicolon or apostrophe or some other nonsense. This was the breaking point. I told her I didn't love her anymore, which wasn't exactly true. I loved her. I just didn't love this unambitious version of her, but I couldn't find a way to tell her that. I thought it'd be too cruel.

Sunday: Not responded, 7, Thinking about it, 2, No way, 4, Attending, 3 (Cole acquiesced, foolish girl)

I found Cole's picture on Google, a fuzzy one of her with two schnauzers. It was hard to make out whether she was attractive. The dogs partially obscured her face. Her Facebook photo was a close up of her own eye, or I assumed it was her eye. It could have been any woman's eye, or even a man's eye, for that matter. It could be a sign of whimsy, *you want to see me... my eye*, or a pun replacing the eye for I as in *this is me*, but then it could be a sign that she is profoundly disturbed, maybe a person who believes her sclera and pupil enable us to know her more deeply (to her soul), the literal version of Shakespeare's maxim, or one-half of it.

Monday: Not responded, 7, Thinking about it, 1, No way, 5, Attending 3

After the break up I went into isolation and I was very good at it. I turned down all invitations from my friends to venture out. There were trips to the grocery store, but I felt very exposed. I played tennis with a friend once a week. We simply hit the ball as hard and accurately as possible. No score. No game, set, match. Just two guys whacking the ball back and forth like the game Pong.

My isolation was helped by the fact that I worked at home. I was an aspiring novelist working as an editor for a television market research company. The research was

about the technologies and production of televisions, not the crap that came through their screens. Their reports were mostly about shipments, shipments of raw materials for components, shipments of components for modules, shipments of modules for assembly, shipments of products to retailers. Capacities were underutilized, over-utilized, or needing reallocation. Problems led to plenty of hyperbole about inventory surpluses, shortages, and supply/demand balances, and add to all that the unending string of acronyms, CRT, LCD, TFT LCD, AMOLED, LED, PDP, BLU, UXGA, WXGA, WSXGA, HD, WUXGA.

My job (and Gina's too) was to excise grammatical errors in reports written by Asian researchers who lived in Taiwan, Korea or Japan. I chopped out lengths and lengths of unnecessary language, lots of *meanwhiles* and *at the same times* and *on the other hands*. Strings of empty clauses trained across the page and despite the straight lines they formed across the screen their sentences became twisted and tangled in my mind and I drank whiskey, which didn't help, but at least I felt softer toward the misery of those sentences until I had to sleep it off.

Of course, it wasn't just their sentences. I had to contend with the sentences of my co-workers too. Lines of texts moved down my computer screen at all hours. Gina contacted me about the fix up in a one-on-one chat session, but as part of my job I was required to be a member of our group chat room. I rarely participated in this free-for-all, a streaming mixture of business and personal thoughts, and they often wrote things about me as if I weren't there. On Tuesday, I spotted my name amidst the noise.

Sally: The fix up for Adam is on? I'll take the PR (press release), can someone take the hi-res report.

Gina: Yes, Cole's in. Can't take the report. I've got other work.
Sally: Adam, are you there? Just thought I'd check.
Gina: He won't respond. He's deep into the shipment report.
Laura: I'll take hi-res. Btw, Houston guy came to town last night.
Gina: Oh, T-shirt and tennis shoes guy.
Laura: Yeah. He didn't even wear the T-shirt this time.
Sally: What?
Laura: Kidding.
Sally: Adam and Cole. Not sure I see it. Dash between LCD and TV, as in LCD-TV?
Gina: No dash. Space, as in LCD TV.
Laura: Japan has a New Clear energy problem, so electricity cost are sky rockets.
Gina: LOL, I see prices rocketing over Tokyo.
Sally: I hope Adam isn't so much Adam Thursday night.
Laura: Exactly. Yoshi says he can't fix the charts in the glass substrate report.
Gina: He lies. Adam will be fine... maybe.
Laura: Depends on his mood.
Sally: And how much he thinks of Christina. Shit, I hope he's not reading this. So, Houston guy no T-shirt?
Gina: Collared, good. Ratty shorts, bad.
Laura: Dump him.

I was indeed working on the shipment report, a monster-sized document that usually took two or three people to complete, but I had insisted on taking it on by myself. I wanted a challenge or maybe I just liked torturing myself. I tried to forget their conversation, but I saw her name on every page.

Christina, Christina, Christina.

I put the report aside and worked on my novel. Her name was still on every page, but at least there were no televisions involved. My novel was about a cult. I had been obsessed with Jim Jones and The Peoples Temple since I was a kid and after a long exploration I settled into a novel about a true believer, a lonely and dissatisfied woman, who finds love and companionship in Jones and his followers. She remains loyal right up until the mass suicide, when she has an epiphany. She doesn't see the suicide as wrong or

crazy. Instead she envisions a oneness with herself, a desire to eliminate the voices around her, to be alone with her own ideas, to hear her own thoughts. She confides in Jones about her epiphany and he tells her to forget it and drink, but she is undeterred. As her friends approach the pavilion to take their cup of poison she walks into the forest, into the wilderness to begin her next journey. I hadn't worked out the ending yet and wasn't sure whether the epiphany was in fact the end of the novel or the beginning of another one.

My mother called. She lived in Dallas. She had grown increasingly concerned for my well-being. She asked me what I was doing to improve my life, which was her way of asking what I was doing to find a woman. I lied and told her that I wasn't doing anything and that I didn't need to do anything, because I was happy as things were. She said in a resigned voice, "Yes, I understand, it's easier that way."

That night, I dreamt that the words "it's easier that way" were floating in white light and then they were a halo around Christina's naked, arched form, revolving around her like the news ticker that spins around the building in Times Square in New York. Just before I woke up, the halo moved up her body and tightened around her neck. The word "easier" burned brightly just below her chin.

There were still only three people coming to Gina's. I texted Gina:

Me: Do you really want to be the third wheel on a blind date?

Gina: I'm working on it.

Me: I saw her eye on Facebook.

Gina: Right, she doesn't think she photographs well.

Me: It's very odd.

Gina: That's Cole. Still interested?

Me: I'll be there.

At four in the afternoon, Gina texted me: *I got Simon and Alyssa to join us.*

I knew both of them, but not very well. I met Simon at a networking meeting years ago, when we were both freelance writers. We met a few times after that, over several years, just to compare notes and see if we could help each other out. My impression was that Simon was a rather dull man. His wife Alyssa joined Simon and me for lunch once. She was a sweet, attractive, yet overly cheerful woman. She sold specialty coffees to grocery stores and restaurants around the area.

I arrived at Gina's with a bottle of wine. It was a small place with an open area that included the kitchen, living room and Gina's home office. Her living room and bedroom opened onto a balcony that went the length of the condo. Gina lost her husband to pancreatic cancer two years ago. Her living space showed signs of neglect, stacks of unused electronics that she said she didn't know how to use, pictures leaning at the base of slightly stained walls. Gina and I talked about work and made fun of analysts and the quirks of their writings. Simon and Alyssa arrived thirty minutes late. Cole arrived soon after them with a large brown bag in her hand.

"I brought some food for myself," Cole said, "I had to work late and didn't get a chance to have dinner."

I knew very quickly that it wasn't going to work between her and me. Her tall body, the large bulbous rear end, the broad meaty shoulders, a nose that flared at the nostrils. She moved clumsily around like an overzealous child who didn't know her own size. She was nothing like my ex-girlfriend.

Cole opened the brown bag and hovered over a vegan dinner she had picked up at a natural foods grocery store. The room felt crowded. Simon explained a problem he was having at work. The solution seemed simple to me, and I told him what I thought he should do.

“That’s too simple,” he said. “It would be giving them what they want.”

“But it would work,” I said.

“Yes, if I were willing to do that,” he said.

There was an uncomfortable silence between us. Simon smirked and looked at Alyssa.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Maybe I don’t really want to solve it,” Simon said.

It was oddly intransigent, as if Simon wanted to appear as if he were asking for a solution but did not actually want one. I felt the acid burning in my throat and wanted to argue the issue, but Alyssa inserted herself into the conversation. She wanted to apologize in advance for being in a bad mood. She had been to the dentist that afternoon.

“I go to Michigan,” Simon said.

“Michigan,” I said. “For what?”

“My dentist.”

“He does,” Alyssa said, her eyes wide. “He has a dentist there, a doctor too, for physicals. It’s a bit crazy.” Alyssa’s hair had prematurely frosted gray since I had last seen her, but she was still a beautiful woman with an infectiously bright personality.

Gina opened a few bottles of wine, including the one I brought. Simon tasted one of the wines and spit it out into the kitchen sink in disgust. He tasted mine and did the same. We opened another bottle and again he spit it out, as if he were at a wine tasting at which all the wines had gone bad. Everyone else was happy with the wines and Gina refused to open a fourth bottle. Simon settled on a glass of water.

“I don’t go to Michigan just for the dentist, I have family there,” Simon said. “It’s important to have a good dentist, and mine is the best. Do you have a good dentist?”

“I have a great dentist,” I said. “He’s just down the street from my apartment. I can walk there.”

“Does your dentist give you free cleanings?” Simon asked, his voice suddenly very insistent. “Your dentist doesn’t do that does he? I bet he doesn’t. Mine does.”

“He does that,” Alyssa said. “He’s a very nice man.” She put her hand on Simon’s shoulder.

“No, my dentist doesn’t do that,” I said, “but he’s a great dentist. I guess if you were to say one thing about my dentist, it’s that he has no sense of humor. He’s humorless but competent.”

“Competent, that doesn’t sound very good,” Simon said.

Cole had finished eating her dinner and moved between Simon and myself so that she could pour herself a glass of wine, and I remembered I was at the party to meet her, not contend with Simon.

“So what do you do for a living?” I asked Cole.

“I work at a shelter for battered women,” she said.

“Dear, you’re being too modest,” Gina said. “She’s the assistant director, and it’s a pretty big operation.”

Cole looked down into her glass of wine. Gina announced that it was time for the main attraction. She went into her bedroom and brought out a game called *Cards Against Humanity*. I had played this game with my ex-girlfriend at one of the tech happy hours. Someone had brought it as an icebreaker. It was an odd party game of questions and answers. The questions were simple, even boring, like *What is the secret ingredient in my special muffins?* Some questions were not even questions. They were statements with blanks, like Adlibs. What made the game funny were the answer cards, which could be absurd, even obscene at times. You might choose the card that answers the muffin question with *Midgets ground up into a bloody pulp*.

We sat in the living room. Early in the game, Cole became very competitive, overly exuberant about every point. It was a bit absurd, since the game was more about shock and humor than winning, but her energy was infectious and all of us became increasingly invested in winning. That is, all of except Simon, who after a few questions turned to me and asked:

“Can I make your name into a pun?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. I concentrated on my cards, trying to pick the most reasonable answer.

“A pun, you know. I like to make puns out of people’s names,” he said.

“I don’t get it,” Cole said while still concentrating on her cards. “Can you give us an example?”

“He’s joking,” I said.

Cole took a card from her hand and put it in front of Gina. “I’m going to win this one,” she said. “I know Gina better than anyone.”

“Can I?” Simon asked me.

“Simon, I’m trying to play the game.”

We finished two rounds and we took a break. Gina went to the bathroom and Alyssa refreshed everyone’s wine glasses. Simon had yet to find a wine he liked. Gina opened a fourth bottle. Simon tasted it. He hesitated, then took another sip. Gina slouched and her jaw tightened as she waited.

“This’ll be okay, I guess,” he said, holding his glass up for her to pour more into it.

Cole told me about the women in her shelter. It was a large non-profit center that offered the women psychological treatment and advice on divorce and custody issues. They helped them establish a new home, develop job search skills, and find a new school for their children. As she talked about her work her face thinned and her eyes brightened. The passion poured through her lips. A small beauty flowered about her cheekbones as she told me about a man who erected a ladder and dragged his wife up to the roof of their house and threw her off. Then, he did it again, picked her up, carried her up the ladder and threw her off the roof. After the third time the police showed up. As exhausted as the man was, it still took four policemen to subdue him.

“It’s hard to believe a person can be that cruel,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” I said, “But maybe it’s not that surprising.”

“But it should be, shouldn’t it? We should be terribly surprised.”

“This is why I avoid people,” I said. Cole laughed. I didn’t laugh with her and she grew quiet.

“You must like some people?” she asked.

“I’m not even sure I like the people in this room,” I said.

Her gaze settled on my chin, and I realized I might have offended her. I forced a smile to reassure her that she wasn’t among those I was unsure about. Soon it was my turn to ask a question in the game. Simon looked at his cards, then turned to me.

“So, can I do it, can I make your name into a pun?”

“Again with this,” I said. “This is a joke, right?”

“I’m perfectly serious,” he said.

“Really, you still haven’t told me what that means,” I said.

Cole looked up from her cards and stared at Simon. Alyssa took a card from her hand and put it in front of me.

“It’s not that confusing. I make a pun out of your name,” he said. “So can I do it?”

“Why ask me? Why not just do it?”

“I like to get people’s permission before doing this kind of thing,” he said. “I find that it prevents misunderstandings.”

Simon stared at me. I couldn’t tell whether his need for approval was a joke or not. He was goading me. He was pushing me and pushing me, first with the dentist, even the wines seemed to be a jab at me, and now with the pun. Why would anyone need permission to create a pun? Was there pun malpractice? Creating a pun seemed to be a

rather innocuous pursuit, and yet Simon treated it as if it were a weighty creation. It seemed too trivial, so meaningless, and I wanted him to stop, to pay attention to the game or move on to more substantive conversation. I decided to put him on the path back to sanity.

“A pun is a play on words, not on names,” I said. “Your request seems rife with misunderstanding from start.”

Cole put a card in front of me and looked back at Simon.

“You need to pick an answer from your hand, Simon,” she said.

“So can I do it?” he asked.

He was not going to stop. I felt my stomach tighten.

“Give me an example,” I said.

Simon took a card from his hand without even looking at it, and put it on top of the others in front of me.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Simon had dangled the keys to my prison in front of me and quickly yanked them away. I slowly picked the cards up and read the question and answers, but it was an unconscious reading. I couldn't concentrate on what they actually said because Simon had wormed his way into my head. I chose a question and answer that evidently that made no sense, or maybe it was offensive to women, because Glenda, Alyssa, and Cole stared at me in confusion.

For the next few rounds of the game I avoided looking at Simon. I felt that if I looked at him I might lose control, and there was Cole. I had to remind myself that I was there to meet Cole.

Cole started to talk about herself, probably to dispel the tension in the room, and her voice lulled me into a softer mindset. I discovered that we enjoyed many of the same interests, John Coltrane, politics, the literature of Philip K. Dick. She revealed that she dabbled in drawing and wanted to study painting. She drew a quick sketch of me on a napkin, and it was surprisingly elegant. I may have been the wine, but as I got to know her she became more beautiful as the evening wore on.

We had finished three bottles of wine. Gina's face slouched toward the table. Alyssa started flirting with me, her cackle ringing out at everything I said. Her small round face grew feeble as her husband became increasingly erratic. Marriage often transforms a person into a mindless collaborator.

Simon insisted that we start reading every aspect of the question, even the punctuation. When he read the question he challenged the answer if it wasn't long enough to fill the entire length of the line or too long to fit in the space provided. I asked him to stop it. Cole joked with him about the period at the end of the sentences, that they should actually be written out, since the blanks warranted a drawn out line.

Simon's antics stretched out the game into a tedious exercise and I was losing my patience. My responses grew more curt. I was unable to focus on one thing for very long. Simon became a growing obstacle, the adversary, the errant phrase on the page that I couldn't backspace over, the misplaced modifier that wouldn't disappear, the man

standing in the middle of my apartment singing at the top of his lungs. He was the immovable object, a pebble laying in the path of Sisyphus' rock, just large enough to force him to turn his back into it and try all the harder to make it up the mountain. My anger at Simon grew more insistent and the wine only made it easier for me to express it.

“Play the fucking game, Simon,” I said under my breath. I said it again, but Simon ignored me.

Cole was not helping. As much as I had come to like her, and even entertained asking her out on a date, she was encouraging Simon to continue by needling him and indulging his ideas. The others seemed dulled into indifference.

Simon held a question card in his hand and turned to Cole. The question required two parts to the answer, *Superman thought he was _____, but he was actually _____*. We each looked through our cards and chose two (one for each blank). Each of us put our choices in front of Simon. The cards sat in front of him.

“Superman thought he was, underline, comma, but he was actually, underline, period.”

“We've got it, Simon,” I said. “Read the answers.”

“Hold on,” Simon said. “I think I missed something.”

“You missed a comma,” Cole said.

“Oh lord, read the question and then the answers,” I said.

Gina looked at me dumbly. Alyssa sat with her hands in front of her, saying nothing.

“No, no,” Simon said. “I didn't miss a comma.”

“Then maybe the absence of one?” Cole asked.

Gina woke from her stupor and reached across the table to touch the stack of cards in front of Simon.

“I don’t think we’re going to hear the answers,” Gina said.

“I’ll get to it, hold on,” Simon said. “So how should I say it?”

“Say no comma when there is no comma but we might expect there to be one.”

“And how will I know when you will expect there to be a comma.”

“I’ll let you know,” Cole said.

“Yes, that’s it, but I never said we had to read the absence of punctuation, only the presence of it.”

“Still, it seems only appropriate that you mention the absence, since we’re being accurate here.”

“Cole,” I said.

“What?” She winks at me as if I’m in on some sort of joke.

“Simon, just move to the fucking answers will you?” I said.

“Cole, I’ll indulge you on that one,” Simon said. He looked at the card.

“Superman thought he was, underline, comma, but he was actually, no comma, underline, period. Is that better?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “But get it right next time. Don’t forget to tell us that there is no comma where we might expect one.”

They sat there taunting me, now the two of them. The master and his assistant. I realized that Simon’s intent was not to goad or push at me, but to get inside my head, into

the machinery and generate as many kinks as possible until everything came to a halt.

But, what was the purpose?

“Yes, of course,” Simon said. “No comma, no comma, no comma.”

“Superman thought he was, underline, comma, but he was actually, no comma, underline, period. Is that better?”

“Much better, honey,” Alyssa said.

“Superman—”

I reached out and grabbed the cards and held them up to Simon’s face. His eyes went wide. I shoved the cards closer to him.

“Read the fucking cards or I’ll shove them down your fucking throat, you goddamn asshole. Read them, goddamnit. Read them.” I stood and pointed to the window. “There’s a balcony right there. I’ll throw you off the damn thing if I have to.”

He started to speak but nothing came out of his mouth. I stared down at him. My entire body vibrated. Simon stared up at me, his eyes wide, his mouth slightly open. I wanted him to call me the period at the end of the sentence, the fucking space he couldn’t ignore. I imagined shoving the cards into his mouth, them poking up through his lips like a glossy white tulip. A hand grasped my shoulder and Gina’s soft drunken voice came from behind me.

“Adam, it’s okay,” she said. “You’re going to be okay.”

I felt everyone’s eyes on me. They were all standing except for Simon. Cole’s eyes were fearful, but more than that, there was sudden comprehension. That man with the ladder carried his wife up to the roof and tossed her to the ground three times—the

despair that must have led to such unspeakable violence. Alyssa stood near her and stared at the floor. I sat down. There were low mumbled words. I flipped over the answer cards one at a time. They stood around me as I flipped over two of them. *Superman thought he was a crowded house on fire, but he was actually a silver toaster.* I smiled, and Simon must have thought I had relaxed a bit. He said:

“When a dam breaks nobody gives Adam. Get it, a dam.” He opened his mouth as if to repeat it.

“I heard you,” I said.

He shrugged and turned to Alyssa. She flashed a small, tired smile. The games were over. Simon quietly helped his wife get ready to leave. Cole started cleaning up the kitchen and Glenda sat with me rubbing my hand until I withdrew it and stood by the door.

All of us left Gina’s apartment together. There was no way to avoid sharing the elevator down together to the first floor. When we reached the street, Cole walked off with Simon and Alyssa. I watched them disappear down the street into the shadows, and I stood alone, remote and still, looking into the street light above me until my eyes burned from exposure.

The Reasons We Keep Them That Way

Marjorie stood in the middle of the appliances store. A salesman stood beside her. She stared at the Electro Crystal II Dishwasher. It was almost exactly like her Crane Shine Super, except the row of buttons was one button too long. The designers could have made the buttons smaller and fit them into the same space. Then at least they would have looked proportionally the same. The buttons showed the wear and grime from customers pushing at them. Marjorie had been to four other stores, made salesmen look through inventory and call their warehouses to see if an old model happened to be lying around. She'd had searched Craigslist, eBay, several barter sites, but found nothing. She even spent several Sundays visiting estate and garage sales across the Dallas and Ft. Worth area. Crane stopped making dishwashers ten years ago. The company restructured, changed its name and now manufactured parts for NASA's space vehicles. There was a Whirlpool model that came close. It had the same white front and faux wood panel at the top, but the start button was separate from the settings buttons. She needed all the buttons to be together. The Electro Crystal II, part of Electro's new retro series, would have to suffice.

A man lingered not far from them, playing with the controls of a clothes-dryer. He was extremely muscular.

The salesman knew nothing about her struggle to find a duplicate dishwasher, but she felt like he should suffer at least a little bit for selling her such an inadequate one.

"The incongruity bothers me less than the lack of symmetry," she said.

“Yes ma’am,” the salesman said.

“Why would you need to select it to be more silent? Shouldn’t it just be silent all the time? There’s no way to lose that button.”

“No ma’am,” the salesman said.

It was as if she were talking with one of her clients. She was a turnaround expert, a consultant who convinced corporate executives to deconstruct their company before building it back up into what it should be or it should have been if they hadn’t been so careless. The dishwasher was becoming an object of negotiation like employees that needed to be downsized or equipment that needed to be repurposed.

“That must be some kind of bullshit function,” Marjorie said.

“I’ve never had a customer want a noisier dishwasher,” the salesman said.

“Can you deliver it on a Sunday?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am,” he said. He left to get the paperwork.

While she waited for him to return, Marjorie imagined the dishwasher swallowing the button whole, its blue aluminum face growing over the wound until one could never tell that the button was there in the first place. The man with the impressive chest moved closer. She recognized him, but she wasn’t sure where from.

“Excuse me,” he said. “If you don’t mind my asking, why are you buying a dishwasher you don’t want?”

“It resembles my other dishwasher,” she said.

“Two dishwashers,” the man said. He was significantly taller than her and his closeness made her uncomfortable, but she did not move. The man took a step back. She felt a small sense of victory.

“I have two kitchens,” she said, and then she rethought her statement. “No, one kitchen, but everything is duplicated, or should I say *was* duplicated. The damned repairman said it would cost more to fix the dishwasher than it would to just replace the thing and said he couldn’t in good conscience do it.”

“I’d like to see that, a house with two kitchens,” he said. “Did you do that for a reason?”

He was a shegetz and knew nothing about kashrut. She decided to have fun with it.

“The story goes, the house was once owned by an older couple. The husband was an excellent cook. He showed his love for his wife by cooking dinner for her every night after he came home from work, but his wife was obsessive compulsive and wouldn’t let him make dinner in a kitchen that retained even the slightest remnant of the previous night’s meal. She had this notion that it took twenty-four hours for bacteria to die. She equated food with bacteria. So, they created two identical kitchens.”

“I’ve heard of super bacteria,” he said.

The man was weakly handsome, or maybe it was the confusion on his face. His dull eyes were set deep beneath his thick eyebrows. His jaw and high cheekbones allowed him the potential for simple strength. She liked simple men rather than complicated, intellectual men, who only made things more difficult down the road, once

they were together more than occasionally, spending weekends together, sitting together, talking at length about politics, being so honest with each other that it strained believability. She never thought it was necessary to be so revelatory with a man. Eventually, they would end up staring at each other trying to figure out why two people are necessary when one could do very well without the other. These were the men she usually attracted, Jewish men, or the men that tradition, and more pointedly her sister would have her be with.

“There’s something nice about that sense of ambiguity every time I walk into the kitchen,” she said. “We’ve met somewhere before, haven’t we?”

“Speed dating at Harold’s Bar and Grill.” He smiled. “I was number five.”

“Oh, right,” she said, but she still only vaguely remembered him. Marjorie had done speed dating only once. It was her sister Rochelle’s idea. She said, “Any more than three minutes and you’ll find a way to make the man feel very small, so it’s perfect.” Rochelle was married but said she’d join her “just for the fun of it.” Marjorie played along but chose an open one where anyone could participate, including non-Jews. She didn’t tell Rochelle until just before they arrived at the bar. She was not happy, but it wasn’t like Marjorie took the whole exercise very seriously. She spent most of the evening drinking and just humoring her dates.

“You’d think it would be easier to meet men in a city the size of Dallas,” Marjorie said. “All the mirrored buildings have made us such terrible narcissists.”

“We talked about Reverend Moreland and the end of the world,” he said. “You didn’t think much of those who believed in him.”

“I’m a mean drunk,” she said. “I rejected you, you know.”

His small forehead became flush.

“It’s not like you were special,” she explained. “I rejected everyone that night.”

“I didn’t reject you,” he said. “I’d say you won the argument. November ninth went by and nothing. The earth didn’t fall into the sun or anything.”

They both looked back at the dishwasher.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing two kitchens,” he said.

He was being very forward, but they were standing alone in the appliances aisle and the sound of a running clothes-washer gave them cover as if they were meeting in a loud nightclub. The idea of having a man back to her house after they just met, or second just met, was unusual but not objectionable. She enjoyed the game of defying a man’s expectations, and his body was beautiful.

“I’ll be cooking tomorrow afternoon,” she said. “I’m making a soup. I might actually use both dishwashers, one with gusto, and evidently, one fucking less so.”

“I’m Peter,” he said.

When he said his name she remembered something from their speed date.

“A physical trainer, right?”

*

She told him to come by around two o’clock. Her house was located in an older, wealthy neighborhood. Most of the houses were one-story ranch style with large bay windows looking out on generous front yards. He drove past her street, thinking she couldn’t possibly live in that neighborhood. She was too plain and too young to live

there. He realized his mistake and backtracked. He was fifteen minutes late. As he approached her door he doubted his own reasons for being there. She was not his usual target. Her figure, though not fat, was thick and shapeless. Her face was expressive but not particularly attractive, but her eyes were another matter. They were green and wet. He couldn't keep himself from looking into them, and though it made no sense, he really wanted to know more about the two kitchens.

She opened the door wearing a blue cocktail dress. He was wearing black jeans and a dark gray corduroy shirt.

"You came," she said. Marjorie quickly turned and walked deeper into the house. He followed her into the living room. The room was contemporary with a sleek glass coffee table, leather sectional, and a wall of shelves from floor to ceiling. The shelves were filled end-to-end with books. Marjorie said even though there was a television in the room she used this room mostly to read. She referred to it as "her room." He walked along the shelves. He was not much of a reader. The books were very thick and frayed. He saw strange words on the spines, some he recognized as Hebrew or Arabic.

"You Arab?" he asked.

"No," she said, "Jewish."

He was somewhat embarrassed. He didn't know what it meant to be a Jew. There were Jews in his high school, but he never talked with them. Some of his clients may have been Jews but they never spoke about it. Jews seemed to keep pretty much to themselves. He remembered his father using the word "Jew" as a verb when Peter was a kid, and his mother frequently talked about Jews controlling the television broadcast,

though he was pretty sure her experience with Jews was no more than his. At the moment, Peter thought being Jewish had something to do with reading volumes and volumes of dull-looking books.

“I haven’t read all of them, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Marjorie said.

Peter was fairly sure she had in fact read them all. He felt her staring at him, and it was as if she peered at him from a great distance.

Marjorie considered Peter’s ignorance refreshing and the blank stare on his face made her almost adore him. Other men she brought home usually took books off the shelves and opened them as if they were already familiar with them. They became sentimental and recalled memories of reading Roth for the first time, or it was Oz or Malamud or Bellow. They talked about Bellow like he was a prophet delivered to the world by an angel, maybe the very angel that stopped Abraham’s hand from offing his son. Its like they thought being erudite would make her tear off her clothing and fuck them right there in the living room. Hell, maybe if he recited poetry by Judah ha-Levi she might jump him, but it was hard to find a Jewish man that even knew who ha-Levi was. Most of the time she could tell the guy was just regurgitating something he heard a professor say in a literature course he took in college.

Marjorie watched him and wondered what he thought of the books, how different his perception was from hers. For her, they were not just books, they were late nights studying with her father, Reb Manuel, Manny. She and her father explored the richness of a dying culture, though her father would cringe at that thought. He considered it a living tradition, as competitive today as any corporation or idea that just came into the market.

The books about maintaining a Jewish life or raising a Jewish family, and most of the Jewish fiction belonged to her mother. She was a kindergarten teacher at a Jewish day school. She cooked all their dinners in the kitchen, remaining faithful to the imaginary line that divided the milkhik and fleyshik sides. Both their parents had been gone for several years, her father from cancer, then her mother from a broken heart. Rochelle wanted to sell the house, but Marjorie insisted on keeping it.

Peter's eyes had become unfocused. He was bored.

"You came all this way," she said. "You might as well get your money's worth."

She led Peter to the kitchen. The kitchen was as she described it, the left and right were identical. The cabinets, both higher and lower were made of a richly stained rosewood and there was an island in the center with an ebony surface and even the island had identical halves, with the same shelves and cabinetry on each side of its base. Peter noticed subtle differences. One side of the kitchen was almost devoid of decoration except for one small item hanging on the wall between the counter and the refrigerator. It was a silver cow. The body of the cow consisted of small, delicate curls. The curls joined a plain, unremarkable head. The other kitchen was obviously the side that Marjorie used more often. There were a few photos stuck to the refrigerator with magnets, and on the wall at the back of the counter hung square copper plates with cutout designs of a rooster and a bull and a lighthouse. There were a few small baskets hanging on the wall that contained onions and garlic. A large cast iron pot sat on the stove. He glanced up at the ceiling. There were three ceiling lights on one side and only two on other side. He

remembered Marjorie's story about the origin of the two kitchens and wondered whether she had told him the truth.

He heard a door close in the other room and a woman entered the kitchen. She walked to a cabinet and took out a glass, removed a pitcher from one of the refrigerators, and poured herself a glass of iced tea. She was taller and thinner than Marjorie, but there was a subtle resemblance. Her hair was in a ponytail and her facial features were sharper, but the eyes were the same luminous green. She took a sip from the glass and stood there for a few moments staring at the kitchen island. She looked briefly at Marjorie.

"Peter, this is my sister, Rochelle," Marjorie said. "She came by to see what you look like."

"I came to taste your soup. That's a much better story." Rochelle turned to Peter. "You weren't one of my speed dates that night. I'd remember you. What do you do, and don't tell me just your career. I'm talking about all your time."

"I'm a physical trainer," he said. He took a moment to think through the rest of his answer. The two women stared at him, waiting.

"I work out a lot," he said, "Even when I'm not working. I like sports. A few months ago I went rock climbing with some buddies of mine. That was excellent. You know, ropes and pitons. It was tough... I like to read." He regretted it almost as soon as he said it. If asked, he would have to admit he read mostly fitness magazines and nutritional supplement recipes and guidelines.

He took consolation from Marjorie's blank expression. He was doing well with her, or at least that he had not hurt his chances. The more he looked at Marjorie the more

he knew she was not his usual type of girl. She was less body and more mind. Everything about her seemed at battle with her surroundings, including him. His usual girls were all body and somewhat clueless to their surroundings. They looked to him for instructions. Marjorie ran on her own instructions.

“He’s a real prince, a climber *and* a reader,” Rochelle said, and then, without another word, she walked out of the kitchen.

“Ignore her,” Marjorie said. “My sister is indelibly critical. It’s like she hasn’t lived a human life.” Marjorie said this last comment loudly so that her sister could hear her. From the other room Rochelle yelled something about their parents and a grave with a revolving door.

“She won’t be staying,” Marjorie said.

Marjorie’s toughness toward her sister gave him the confidence to confront her about the kitchens.

“So the story you told me yesterday about the kitchens, that wasn’t true was it?”

“No,” she said. She stared at the floor. The sound of the TV came from the other room. Rochelle was switching channels from show to show. Marjorie closed her eyes briefly. “It really was a chef,” she said. “He was a bit of a workaholic and brought his work home. He wanted to test his concoctions. His wife just wanted to cook their meals. They fought so intensely that this house was listed as a domestic disturbance hot spot for years. They threw knives and pans and food. They devised this solution so that they could avoid conflict. It saved their marriage. That is, until he started stealing ingredients from

her side. She filed for divorce. I'm sure there were other, more serious considerations.”

Marjorie smiled.

He was certain she was lying to him again. It seemed like a bad idea to accuse a woman of lying twice in a matter of minutes. It felt like she was making fun of him, but it could just be her sense of humor. Marjorie walked to the refrigerator. She pulled out some carrots, celery, parsley, a turnip, and a package of short ribs and put them on the counter. She removed bags of dried barley and lima beans from the pantry. She set them on the counter next to the other ingredients and turned to face him. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. She seemed to be going over the recipe in her mind. She assembled the utensils and pots and bowls she would need to make the soup. He watched her silently as she moved around the kitchen in her cocktail dress, looking very out of place, but she handled the ingredients and kitchen utensils like she very much belonged there. She stopped for a moment and looked down at herself. She said she needed to change her clothing and left the kitchen.

Peter walked into the living room and found Rochelle on the couch watching a documentary about the Mormons. Joey Smith had just been murdered and Brigham Young was leading his followers out of Missouri, the original homeland, and setting off for Utah, their new homeland.

Marjorie emerged from the hallway. She had changed into blue jeans and a thin ruffled top. Her figure seemed rounder and more feminine. They returned to the kitchen and Peter sat on the kitchen counter. Marjorie opened a bottle of wine and poured three

glasses. Peter did not usually drink, but she shoved the glass toward him and he accepted it.

“Glasses without wine are lowly,” she said. “Like a body without a soul.”

She took the third glass to Rochelle in the other room. When she returned, she started cutting up the vegetables. Peter sipped his wine and watched her. There was an unhalting motion to their date, or whatever it was. Either he was being pulled inevitably to her bed or he was on the cusp of being shown the door. Despite her strange need to hide the reason for the two kitchens, he was curious about her and more oddly, he was curious how he would be with her, or who he would be with her.

Marjorie talked about herself. She had two graduate degrees, one from a Jewish Seminary, the other a law degree, but she was neither a practicing rabbi nor a practicing lawyer. Her chosen career was as a consultant to troubled companies. She called herself a turnaround expert, which sounded to him like someone who spins on her toes for a living.

Peter listened to Marjorie the same way he listened to his clients, especially the first timers when the exercises were new to them. He watched their movements, their bodies, making sure he liked what he saw, that they used what he considered good form, but he was only vaguely aware of what they said. There was no passion with his clients. He enjoyed working on his own body more than theirs. Occasionally, he worked with an attractive woman and he thought he should listen to what she said, get to know her, and maybe start a relationship if she were single, but the attractive ones already had a workout routine. They just needed him to get them back into it after taking a break or

having a kid or some other excuse. They didn't stay with him long enough to get to know them, which was why he turned to speed dating.

There was a mechanical strength to Marjorie's movements. Her voice hummed in his ear like the low beat of workout music, but he was more attuned to the movement of her mouth, her lips pushing forward, the train-like chug of her jaw. Her hands were expressive. He watched Marjorie prepare the barley soup and became caught up in her motion, her speed and grace as she cut up the ingredients and moved them around the cutting board.

Marjorie asked him questions. He did not like to talk about himself, so he talked about his clients and his mother who worked at his health club as a receptionist and spent her evenings at the bingo hall or sitting in front of the TV watching reality television and father who left them when he was a kid. He knew where his father was but hadn't spoken to him since he was eight years old. Marjorie poured more wine into his glass.

Marjorie went to the restroom and when she returned, she found Rochelle in the kitchen cutting the carrots. Marjorie picked up her glass of wine and downed it, then filled everyone's glasses again.

*

Peter was talking about a 300-pound woman, a client he trained on a regular basis. They were laughing about squat thrusts. Peter was acting them out, one knee bent forward, the other stretched back behind him, all his muscles tightly flexed such that even fully clothed she could see the beautiful form of this muscular body.

“But really,” Peter said, “She’s a sweet girl. It breaks my heart. You’d think she’d stop eating the sugar once she couldn’t see her own feet.”

Marjorie was embarrassed that Peter would talk about his client in such a demeaning manner. She walked over and stood next to him, the new dishwasher behind her. They were both facing Rochelle as she cut up a turnip.

“You must see a lot of that. Fat people who can’t manage it,” Rochelle said. “These fat people, they eat, eat, eat, and never see the damage they’re doing. And you have to work with them and see them do all the right stuff while under your tutelage, but then they go out into their lives and eat cakes and breads and such. There’s nothing you can do about it. It must be terribly frustrating.”

Marjorie brought her hands behind her back and gripped the edge of the counter.

“It’s not like you don’t tell them about changing their diet, right?” Rochelle asked. “You do tell them about eating the wrong things and what the right things are, don’t you?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be a good trainer if I didn’t. It’s just that they have no self-control.”

Rochelle glanced at Marjorie, who looked uncomfortable, and then looked at Peter. She pointed the knife at him. “No, no. I disagree with you. They have self-control. They do.” Rochelle looked down at the carrots. “It has nothing to do with self-control. It’s a matter of faith. A person must have faith in who they are supposed to be, their true self, and where they should be.”

“Where they should be?” Peter said.

“Yes, of course. It’s not just a matter of self-image. We all know or have an idea where we should be in life, especially if we expect to be true to ourselves and to others. Otherwise, we’re living a lie. Fat people or people who have become fat don’t want to be around other fat people. That’s just their default paradigm. They have no choice because thin people definitely don’t want to be around fat people, and who can blame them. Fat people want to be around thin people, healthy people, sexy people.” Rochelle smiled and winked at Peter.

“There must be people who are happy with their bodies, fat or thin, who are happy with whoever they happen to be with,” Marjorie said.

Rochelle did not respond. Peter seemed comfortable with Rochelle’s logic and this bothered Marjorie.

“Didn’t you say you needed to go home?” Marjorie asked Rochelle. “Alan must be wondering where you are.”

“Oh, honey. I’m having way too much fun.”

“How about watching the rest of that documentary?”

“I’m sure they’ve formed that tabernacle of theirs by now,” Rochelle said.

“So you think that if fat people were around thin people they would learn self discipline?” Peter said. He was still catching up to the conversation.

“There you go again with that self-discipline,” Rochelle said. “Always with you its self-discipline.” She said it as if she had known Peter for years. “It’s about faith. If a fat person *believes* she should be with thin people. If she has faith, then she will see the path to a new paradigm. She won’t just remain stuck in the same place, the same life, the

same mistakes. She would eat the right foods, do the right exercises, find herself a nice, handsome trainer to help her follow that path to thinness. Otherwise, she's lost, cursed to make love to fat men."

As she talked she had stopped cutting and waved the knife around like a murderous conductor, pointing the knife at Peter for emphasis, and Marjorie became concerned that she might hurt herself.

"Maybe she finds fat men attractive," Marjorie said, "or maybe she just likes sex."

"Oh, honey, we all lie to ourselves and to others when we're desperate."

Marjorie walked around the island and took the knife away from Rochelle.

Rochelle stared back at her, then looked at Peter.

"Wait, Alan, who's Alan?" Peter asked.

"Her husband," Marjorie said.

"But I thought—"

"Confusing, isn't it?" Marjorie said, her gaze remaining on Rochelle.

"Evidently I'm not wanted here," Rochelle said. She removed the apron around her waist and smoothed her blouse over her jeans. She went to the sink and rinsed and dried her hands. "It was nice to meet you, Peter, number five." She walked out of the kitchen and left the house.

Marjorie set the soup to simmer on the stove and they moved to the living room. They sat on the couch.

"There is nothing I wouldn't do for her, don't get me wrong," Marjorie said. "She is actually a lovely person. You thought so, I could tell. Actually, you two are more

suites for each other. She is a much more physical person. Her husband is in good shape, like you. I, on the other hand, spend too much time..." An alarmed look came across Marjorie's face. "I need to stir the soup every fifteen minutes, don't let me forget. God! You know, she actually picked my friends for me when I was a kid. She has this way of twisting me into knots. Like I can't figure things out for myself. I bought that dishwasher, didn't I? You saw that. You were there. I've got a witness. Yes, it took me a long time to come to that decision. Never mind how long. Don't even ask, but I bought it, and I managed to get past that stupid button, but it's here, isn't it."

The room darkened as evening set in. As she talked, the smell of the soup came from the kitchen, mostly the odor of simmering raw carrots, and then the celery and onion. Peter became very hungry.

Marjorie stopped talking and sat quietly shaking her head. Peter stared at her. She was more attractive in profile. Maybe it was the elegant simplicity of her nose, or the angry passion revealed so plainly on her lips. Her breasts and hips became more full.

She rose from the couch and went into the kitchen. When she returned, she approached him, leaned over and kissed him. Her lips were rough and cold. Marjorie removed her clothing and Peter closed his eyes. He was afraid he might judge her too harshly if he saw her in full, but he wanted her close. She straddled him and removed his shirt.

"Why are there two kitchens?" Peter asked.

She pulled away and looked him in the eyes. She was moving her hips against his groin. She embraced him and spoke into his ear.

“It’s a southern gothic tradition,” she said. “When people think the house is haunted.” She licked his ear. “Southerners consider the kitchen the most important room. They didn’t want the spirits spoiling their food.” She pulled back and looked him in the eyes again. “They thought if they built two kitchens the ghosts wouldn’t know which side is true. In their confusion they would move to other parts of the house.”

Peter grabbed her shoulders and looked at her face. Her eyes were closed. He held her away from him until she slowly opened her eyes. She was lying again, he was sure of it. Girls had lied to him before but it was because they didn’t know any better. They thought he was as stupid as they were. There was something about those kitchens that make her lie about them. Or, was it about him? She didn’t trust him. She was playing with him, maybe even mocking him, but she was also revealing something deep inside her that was wrong, a defect that kept her from being straight with him. She pushed against him and kissed him hard on the mouth. It felt wrong but he gave into her.

When they weren’t screwing she went into the kitchen to stir the soup, which was still simmering. They lost track of time. She put the soup in the refrigerator and they moved to the bedroom.

Peter woke in the middle of the night. He found the bathroom and when he returned, the covers had fallen off of Marjorie. The darkness softened the ugliness of her thick body. Sex with her had been challenging. He could feel her mind move inward and outward, more often inward, with him returning her gaze as if through a fogged window.

Peter became dizzy. He steadied himself against the doorframe. He had still not eaten. He walked through the house. The beefy odor of barley soup lingered. He walked

into the kitchen. He found a can of tomato juice, a block of cheese, a bunch of raw vegetables, and a carton of eggs in the refrigerator. The soup sat on a shelf still in the cooking pot. He didn't feel like cooking eggs and he had a feeling Marjorie wouldn't appreciate him eating the soup she had just made, so he stood naked in the warm kitchen drinking a glass of tomato juice.

He looked over the kitchen island to the opposite side of the room, at the other kitchen, which except for the small discrepancies was identical in every way. He felt weak and braced himself against the counter. When Peter looked up he saw a vision of himself looking back at him as if he were looking in a mirror. The other Peter had the same cut physique with the definition he had worked so hard for all these years, but there was something different. The eyes weren't right. They were warm but dishonest, like eyes you might find on a used car salesman. They were his father's eyes, at least as he remembered them from pictures. This was the Peter that pursued Marjorie, he thought, and the Peter that fucked her because he didn't enjoy being toyed with. Peter was suddenly uncertain where he was standing in the kitchen. Was he looking toward Marjorie or away from her? He tried to remember on which side the ceramic cow hung. He found it but now was unsure whether the cow was in actuality a cow or a sheep. The man on the other side of the kitchen faded and Peter felt even more naked and exposed. He went to the refrigerator and took out the soup.

Marjorie awakened alone in bed and assumed that Peter had left. She stared at the empty side of the bed and considered whether he belonged there. Maybe for at least another night, maybe two, or maybe it was better this way, a night together and move on.

She followed the evening backward in her mind. The sex, the soup, Rochelle, fat people and thin people, the Mormons, Peter at her door looking like a plain clothes Mr. Universe, all flexed and Mr. Clean-like, and the origin of it all, the button, that fucking errant button. It was bad enough that she couldn't get a fourth light installed in the ceiling (the electrician said it would be a fire hazard) and her sister insisted on her putting up that stupid silver cow, and now she had to accept the dishwasher with an extra button that was supposed to make it quieter. Quiet mode. She wanted to know what kind of person would actually choose not to have that button depressed, all the time. Was there a practical use for dishwasher noise? Was it soothing to some people? Maybe some parents sat their wailing child on top of the damn thing and ran it until the little monster shut the fuck up. She'd thought of ways to rectify the situation. Maybe take it to a local appliance repair shop and ask them if they could remove it and extend the faceplate. Maybe write a letter to the president of the company and ask him to personally remove the one that matched the other from their dishwasher museum and send it to her.

Marjorie showered and dressed for work. The living room was still dark. It took a while for her eyes to adjust before she realized she was not alone. She did not wake him. She admired Peter's long muscular body stretched out across the couch. One leg had dropped to the floor. The other was extended. His mouth was slightly open and one arm lay across his forehead. The flexed bicep of that arm was a beautiful arched bridge hovering over his face. His other arm was at his side. His penis was lay across the thick bed of pubic hair. Behind him were the shelves of books. They had never been as oppressive as they were at that moment. Marjorie suddenly felt like she was a docent in a

museum. She should say something. She should explain this work of art to the patrons. What we see before us is the Other through the ages, she would say to them. We are us and he is the Other. He is attractive, though, isn't he? Sexy even.

*

Peter woke up to find a note on the coffee table.

Peter Number Five,

I had to go to work early. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen. I enjoyed our night together. You do have a lovely form. Keep working at it. To answer your question, the kitchen, the house, all of it was owned previously by an Orthodox Jewish family. My family, in what seems another lifetime. If you don't know the rules, it's okay. It's nothing you should be concerned about. My sister might drop by this morning to take some of the soup for her family. Please forgive her for anything she says.

Marjorie

He stared at the note. The paper felt heavy and rough. He wished Marjorie was there with him because this time he'd call her a liar to her face. The reason she gave, her family, their religion, was the reason there were two kitchens, but it wasn't the reason she had two kitchens. There's a reason things are the way they are, and there's the reason we keep them that way. He realized he'd been wrong about his clients. Rochelle was right. It wasn't an issue of self-discipline, especially with his obese clients. They'd talk about the food, the lack of exercise, their friends who ate tons and never gained any weight, but they never talked about why they let themselves continue to get bigger and bigger until they couldn't see their own feet. They never explained what was at the root of it, why they saw that train headed toward them from miles away yet didn't step off the tracks.

Peter dressed and walked toward the front door but stopped before opening it. He still hadn't really eaten a meal. He went to the kitchen and made himself a cheese omelet

for breakfast. Rochelle arrived. She removed the soup from the refrigerator and started ladling some into a container. She stopped.

“What did she do to the dishwasher?” Rochelle asked.

Peter looked where Rochelle was staring. A button had been removed and in its place was a hole with a sharp metal rod sticking out.

“I guess it bothered her enough to yank it out,” he said.

Rochelle’s face became grim. “She destroyed a perfectly good dishwasher.

“I still don’t understand the two kitchens,” he said.

“She doesn’t even keep kosher,” Rochelle said. “I’ve been begging her to get rid of one of them. It only serves as a reminder.”

“A reminder of what?” Peter asked.

“She’s hopeless,” Rochelle said.

Peter left Rochelle in the kitchen to search the living room for any clothing he might have left behind. He found his car keys and wallet. He searched the bedroom, and when he emerged he found Rochelle standing in the middle of the den with the large container of soup in her hands. She set it down on the coffee table and approached him.

“What are you still doing here?” she said.

“I don’t really read books,” Peter said.

“I know,” she said.

He put his hand behind her head and drew her face to his and kissed her. He looked into her eyes. They were the same eyes. Marjorie’s eyes, but she was more beautiful, more shapely. He knew that if he lingered there, they would end up on the

couch, or on the floor, or in Marjorie's bedroom. He considered whether it mattered that she was married. Which was worse, screwing a liar or screwing an honest but immoral babe?

Rochelle opened her mouth as if to say something, but her cell phone buzzed.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," she said.

"What?"

"She found one. She found one exactly fucking like it." She looked up from her phone.

Peter remembered the appliance salesman's suggestion that Marjorie should just replace both dishwashers with new ones. He thought about what Marjorie had written in the note, and he reached for Rochelle's hand. He led her into the kitchen and positioned her in front of the older dishwasher. *Help your self to anything in the kitchen.* She tried to speak and he tapped his lips with his finger. He wasn't sure why silence was necessary, but he felt that words would ruin the moment.

No Soap, Radio

The production meeting over, Ira Shepovnik, president of the Shepovnik Novelty Company, sat at the end of the long glass conference table alone. At the other end of the table stood samples of the company's latest models, each of them uniquely and intractably defective. The Fart-A-Way hissed like a leaking tire rather than imitating unrestrained flatulence. The Chunk-o-Vomit canister coated the floor with milky foam rather than a puddle of artificial ingested food. The Sneez'em, which was supposed to soak its victim with a generous sneeze, sprayed a soft mist, more soothing than disgusting. The Shepovnik Novelty Company was not in the business of soothing. Irritating, yes. Angering, if lucky. Ira Shepovnik might even settle for delighted, but soothing? No. This was his mess, he thought to himself, and only he was to blame for the company's tailspin.

As he sat there, a joke repeated over and over in his head. *Two elephants are taking a bath. One elephant turns to the other and says, "Please pass the soap." The other elephant says, "No soap, radio."*

It was his father's favorite joke. His father would laugh hard, stop, then laugh even harder. Ira never understood it, but nevertheless it stuck in his head like a defective gear vibrating back and forth, back and forth.

His sister Edith strode into the conference room. She was the second largest shareholder in the company after Ira, and she often stopped by the office to harass him. Edith was tall with no hips, like a party blower that had lost its curl. She wore a tight

black skirt and a frilly gray blouse. She dropped into the chair at the opposite end of the conference table.

“Happy’s cheating on me with some whore,” she said. “I’ll kill the bastard for doing this to me.”

One thing Ira liked about his sister was that she didn’t waste time.

“Hell, Edith, I’ll hand you the gun. Pull the trigger, a nice little flag with the word ‘bang’ on it pops out.”

“Very funny. All hail the novelty king,” she said. Her mouth formed a quick and hard smile before returning to a cold stare. “Seriously, I’m worried, darling. Even if it isn’t a woman, which I know it is, he’s gone missing, and I can’t tolerate an absent husband.”

“I see. How long has your husband and my old friend been absent?”

“Five days,” she said. Her lower lip quivered. “Not a peep from him. Not his cell phone, the office, nothing. I know I should have called someone before this, but…”

“You thought keeping things quiet might be best. Why worry everyone with a little thing like a missing husband, when you can run to your brother.”

“He’s in Los Angeles, I’m sure of it. He’s spent the last six months flying back and forth from there working on some kind of real estate deal.”

“He’s always working on a real estate deal,” Ira said. “How about a private detective?”

“I’d rather you handle it dear. You’re so good at handling such messes, like with father.”

Ira looked again at the defective products at the end of the table.

“No matter how much a cad, he deserves our protection,” Edith said. She took a handkerchief out of her small black handbag. “When he’s home, he spends most his time watching television.”

It was a strange statement, Ira thought. He rose from his chair went to the bar in the enclosure behind him. He fixed himself a scotch, neat.

“Please. Find him and bring him back here,” she said. “Alive. I can always kill him later myself.” She allowed a small laugh before returning to cold and weepy. “You don’t have a wife so you don’t know what it’s like.”

Ira stared at Edith and considered her proposition. Chasing Happy around Los Angeles was rife with unpleasant possibilities, especially if it involved a mistress, but he realized the errand presented him with an opportunity. It might just be the diversion he needed. The engineering team wanted a commitment for funds to fix the defects, but he told them to wait until he consulted with the money boys. The problem is, there were no money boys. Ira was the only money boy, and he already knew the answer. There was no money, or not enough of it. They could borrow, but any more debt and the company would tip over into the Gulf of Mexico. He looked at the defective products again, haunting reminders of his incompetence.

“I’ll tell you what,” Ira said. “I’ll play retriever if you stop pestering me about the value of your stock.”

Edith rolled her eyes. “How about a three month moratorium?” she said.

“Make it six,” Ira said.

“Deal.” She rose from the chair. Her tall figure moved toward him with the certitude of a woman who had secured an uncommon victory. She pressed into his hand a small sheet of paper with the name of Happy’s hotel was written on it.

“Bring him back to me,” she said and left the conference room.

Ira cancelled all his meetings for the next few days and took a flight to Los Angeles. The receptionist at the hotel said Happy was no longer staying there but he still came by evenings to pick up his messages. Ira grabbed a quick dinner, then settled into a comfortable chair in the lobby. He occupied his time reading the brochures on a large coffee table in front of him and watching the hotel guests come and go. Doubts crept into his mind about his mission, chasing after a man who went from being his nemesis in high school to his pal in college. The reason for both relationships, nemesis and pal, was the same, Happy attracted women. In high school, he stole them from Ira and Ira often swore vengeance. At the University of Texas, Happy’s throwaways became Ira’s conquests, and Ira often swore allegiance, that is, until Edith turned Happy into a changed man and the roles reversed. Suddenly, Ira became very important to Happy as his brother-in-law and as a path to success. Ira was Happy’s most financially and socially successful friend, who could introduce him to other financially and socially successful people, or as Happy saw them, investors for his real estate schemes.

Darkness settled outside the hotel, and around nine o’clock, Happy entered the hotel. His hair was mussed. His silver sport jacket and black slacks hung loose and ragged on his short, stocky frame. Happy had not aged well after college. His once rich and darkly tan skin had turned sallow. The handsome face and thin neck that reminded

women of a softened Burt Lancaster had gained hard bulges and an unattractive width. Ira called out to him. Happy pivoted his entire body like a minuteman rotating on his nightly watch. His face brightened for a moment, then he moved with intensity to the chair across from Ira.

“She sent you, didn’t she?” he said.

“I tried to weasel out of it, but she’s got this hold on me, her and her twenty-five thousand shares.”

“I can’t go back,” Happy said.

“I’ve got a special set of Shepuvnik Houdini chains in my car to drag you back,” Ira said. “I’ll let you know how to escape them, but not before Edith gets several good whacks at you.”

Happy slouched and sunk deeper into the chair. He let his chin drop very close to his chest. Ira suddenly realized that Happy’s eyes had yet to meet his.

“You look good,” Happy said. “I’ve always admired the way you keep up with it all, the business, the girls, your sister, even me. The world is your oyster, you know. And that company of yours, never been run better.”

Ira had heard this before. Happy used flattery as a bridge to bad news. Seven years ago, Happy spouted off ten minutes of flattery before telling Ira the news that his father had committed suicide. Late at night, the founder and CEO of the Shepuvnik Novelty Company walked down to the production floor and inserted himself into an automatic shrink-wrapping machine. Nobody was quite sure how he did it, how he managed to contort his body in such a way that he could be inside the machine and turn it

on at the same time, something the manufacturer said was impossible, even for a child. It took the production managers several hours to dislodge his somewhat amorphous gleaming form that resembled a transparent mummy and unwrap the tightly packaged and thoroughly suffocated president of the Shepovnik Novelty Company.

Ira vaguely remembered telling Happy how pleased he was that the new shrink-wrapping machine worked well beyond the manufacturer's specifications. It was a cold reflex, and he regretted saying it later. The truth was, he didn't really know the man very well. His father, an overweight and slovenly Russian immigrant, spent most of his time at the office inventing his little toys and building a novelty empire. Ira had a few memories of his father. He remembered running to see the old man at the front door when he returned home from work. He usually gave Ira a small gift, a novelty of some sort, but then his father quickly went to his usual chair and read the Wall Street Journal, the paper hiding his face from Ira. Ira would hang on his knee hoping he might lower the paper and tell him a joke or play a game with him. It happened, but only rarely. Only when the old man told his jokes did Ira sense any warmth, the laughter opening and closing the creases in his face like a lively accordion. After his father's death, Ira asked his mother why he had done it, and she just said that even with all that wealth the man felt like he had no challenges left. All he had was a novelty company, which evidently was not enough. It was a poor explanation but Ira accepted it. Despite such few memories of his father Ira missed him and knew the company would be in better shape if he were still around. Also, the old man most likely would have told Ira not to get involved in Edith's problems with Happy, whatever the cause may be.

“I’m being blackmailed,” Happy said. His sleep deprived eyes stared back at Ira like a pair of tiny blue marbles sunk in cotton candy. Ira reached into his pocket and took out a two-headed coin with his father’s profile on it. Above his profile were the words “In Shepovnik We Trust.” Below it, “But Only So Much.”

“Let’s have it,” Ira said.

“Listen, you and me, we come from different neighborhoods,” Happy said. “You sat at the front of the synagogue, I barely saw the rabbi above the yarmulkes. Your sister, she expects a lot. Smarts, and you gotta be good, a real super mensch.”

Ira knew this line of thinking. It was the same reason he thought Happy was wrong for his sister from the beginning. He and Edith had a good time together when it required little mental effort. Edith fell for the good times, the handsome boy, and then she fooled herself into believing he would make great strides under her control. Once they were married she made him accompany her to book clubs, political forums, the Wagner Society, and Mensa luncheons (Edith’s IQ was 165). She even convinced Happy to host a Chomsky symposium at their house. She twisted him into an intellectual knot.

“About six months ago,” Happy said. “I was in an airport bar watching the television. This amazing show came on. These people live together and compete in contests. Each week they vote one person off the show until only one is left. The winner gets half a million dollars. There’s sex, betrayal, double-dealing, I’m talking real drama. While I sat in the bar watching, a girl hit on some guy right in front of everybody. Later, she says she’s gonna betray him. Another girl casts a deciding vote and kicks her boyfriend right out of the house. Her own boyfriend. I couldn’t believe it.”

“Sounds like my kind of girl,” Ira said. “Keep talking.”

“So, this guy sits next to me at the bar. His name’s Curly Resin.”

Ira flipped the two-headed coin, profile to profile. As Happy told his story his voice grew hoarse like the whirring hydraulics of a protrusion machine.

Curly Resin told Happy he could get him a spot on a reality television show. He could open doors for him, immerse him in “a whole new world.” Resin said that once a guy has lived the reality life he will never want to be off camera again. Happy initially laughed him off and Resin left him alone. Happy returned home and thought nothing more the show or Resin. Then, one day, Edith mentioned hosting an event at their country club. A Joey A. Dauphan, Ph.D., a noted authority on modern linguistics, was to give a speech titled “Unrehearsed Theatrical Representations and Subversive Linguistic Improvisations within an Artificial Construct that Undermines Social Cohesion, Reduces Intellectual Curiosity and Degrades Political Discourse.” He agreed, but when the event came around, he faked an illness and sent Edith on her way. Happy turned on the television and found himself watching the very same reality show from the airport bar. It did not stop there. He stuck to the same show for the next few weeks. He watched hours upon hours of current and past seasons. He scanned the television stations and discovered a multitude of similar shows. He immersed himself in them and watched them regularly end upon end. He found himself unable to live without them. His portfolio of reality shows grew quickly from one to ten to over thirty. Reality television consumed more and more of his time. He neglected his work, his social obligations, and Edith. The habit had profound effects on his judgment. A few months ago, he skipped an investor meeting to

watch the final episode of a show about a group of ardent knitters who compete to create increasingly elaborate sweaters.

Edith tried to peel him away from the television. She bought him a new sports car, built him a tennis court behind their house, even stood naked in front of the television holding two small authoritative books about something-or-other in strategic positions, of course. Happy avoided Edith, haunting bars, recreational centers, airport lounges, anywhere he could find a television and far away from those who might tell Edith of his illicit activities.

Then, fate gave Happy another stopover in Los Angeles. Same bar, same time, Resin wandered in. Happy and Resin became fast friends and Happy's first tryout was for a show where contestants sang in front of judges who made sport of brutally criticizing their performances. The winner won a million dollars and a record contract. Happy failed to make the cut, but Resin arranged twenty more tryouts over several months for various reality shows (for a healthy fee, of course). Supposedly, Resin worked him past the initial interviews and judging sessions. The best Resin could manage was to get him short-listed for a few shows, which was close enough to keep Happy's hopes alive, his addiction strong, and the money flowing. Happy took an apartment in Los Angeles, and Resin introduced him around to the reality "community." He invited him to crew parties, reject parties, winner parties, even dinner parties at the houses of various producers. Happy hosted get-togethers at his apartment, and although he had achieved no fame from reality television, having never been a contestant, he became well known in the reality television world as an amiable bon vivant, or, as he put it "a guy who likes to party it up right."

Resin also connected Happy to the collectables market. He became one of the largest collectors of reality paraphernalia, including discarded props, clothing, vote cards, dead microphones, set furniture, and over three hundred DVDs covering almost fifteen years of episodes and bootleg recordings of uncensored interviews and salacious acts between judges and contestants caught by hidden cameras.

“He wants ten million dollars,” Happy said.

“That’s a ridiculous number. I don’t get it, this is hardly worth blackmail,” Ira said. “Edith may be difficult, but she’s not without a sense of humor.”

“Edith handles our money,” Happy said. “I had to be a little...creative.”

Happy moved to the edge of his seat and leaned over the coffee table and spoke in a low voice.

“Resin’s got papers, confirmations, recordings and if that’s not bad enough, he’s got photos.”

“Photos? Of what?”

“It was a cast party. We were just hanging out. The evening got long and someone said ‘I wonder what the show would be like naked.’ One thing led to another...”

“You cheated on my sister, didn’t you?”

“No, believe me,” Happy said. “I left before things got completely out of hand. I would never cheat on Edie.”

A silence settled between them, and they sat staring at each other.

“Pay him,” Ira said.

“I’m tapped out.”

“You certainly aren’t asking *me* to pay him.”

Happy looked down at his stomach. His wrinkled shirt had opened to reveal the hair on his stomach.

“You want me to get you out of this mess, this goddamned ugly mess. Even if you didn’t cheat on Edith, and I’m not convinced you didn’t, you’re a real son of a bitch,” Ira said.

“I don’t think I could live without her,” Happy said. “Of course, I was the one who had to tell you about your dad.”

“That’s your play? My father’s suicide. Besides, I manage a novelty company. What exactly do you think I can do, drown him in fake vomit until he cries uncle?”

Ira rose from his chair and walked around the coffee table. He grabbed Happy by the lapels of his wrinkled jacket and pulled him to his feet. Ira brought his fist up against Happy’s jaw. His top and bottom teeth banged together and his entire face squinted.

“I feel better. Now, let’s go see this bastard.”

They drove to an area where hookers loitered along the sidewalks in front of dilapidated buildings. As they got closer to Resin’s office his father’s joke came back into Ira’s head. *Two elephants are taking a bath. One elephant turns to the other and says, “Please pass the soap.” The other elephant says, “No soap, radio.”*

They parked and walked to a rusted metal door between a palm reader and a 24-hour Chinese restaurant. They climbed three flights to another door. The frosted panel on the door read “Resin Talent Agency: Who Needs Dreams When There’s Reality.” The door opened into a large waiting room. Metal chairs lined the water-stained walls of the

waiting room. Tacked on the walls were tattered posters promoting what Ira assumed were reality television shows. The smell in the room wavered between cherry hard candy and heavy musk. The waiting room was empty except for a woman sitting behind a desk in front of another door.

Ira and Happy approached the desk. The woman had short with straight brown hair in a bowl cut. She wore a crisp white blouse, a short black skirt and very little makeup. Even without makeup, nature seemed to have crafted her eyes, her cheeks, her lips to a refined perfection.

“Make me happy, Happy,” she said, giving a small hardy laugh at her own joke. “I never get tired of that one. You got the money?”

“We need to speak to Resin?” Happy asked.

“He’s in no mood for talk,” she said. Her voice had the smooth texture of polypropylene plastic. Ira liked her instantly.

“I’ve come a long way to see him,” Ira said.

“This one here. Who is he?” she asked.

“A friend,” Happy said.

“Just ‘cause a friend of yours comes a long way he thinks he’s got special privileges.” She settled back in her chair, giving them a view of her attractive figure, full and rounded. She reminded him of the Shepovnik Etta Doll, voluptuous with the looks of a WWII pin up girl, but when you pull her chord she farts.

“You know as well as I do, my friend is drowning. I guess I’m the guy with the life preserver. How about you help us out?”

She smiled and her sharp lines melted away making her the only flower in a room full of stems. She pointed a pencil at Ira.

“I like this one here,” she said. “He dresses sharp and talks right. He your lawyer?”

“My name is Ira. I’m president of Shepovnik Novelty Company. Mrs...” He offered his hand and she took it with a strong, confident grip.

“Ms. Jane Selwin. Novelty, huh? Does that biz treat you well?”

“Not bad,” Ira said. “Ms. Selwin, please do us this favor and I’ll buy you a nice dinner sometime.”

“You move quick,” she said. She darted the pencil over her shoulder. “What if you don’t make it out of there?”

“Then promise me you’ll wear a very revealing black dress to my funeral,” Ira said.

Ms. Selwin smiled again, and Ira felt great warmth toward her. She picked up the phone and mumbled something into the handset, then hung up.

“You can go in,” she said. She darted the pencil over her shoulder again. “Marion here will have to check you out first.”

Ira had failed to notice the short, scrawny man standing behind her. He wore a ragged grey pinstripe suit. Around his neck was a gold choker thick enough to put him into a permanent slouch. He shifted his stance and his jacket opened to expose a large knife sitting loosely in an open gun holster. The man wore a chauffeur cap over his

graying hair. Marion came forward and patted Ira and Happy down. His hands worked through Ira's pockets and he withdrew the two-headed coin.

"Some kind of joke," Marion said, his voice like a grinding hinge.

"My kind, yes," Ira said.

Marion held the coin up to the ceiling light. He flipped the coin with his fingers. He brought the coin down and pushed it with his thumb hard against Ira's chest, then slid it into his shirt pocket. He moved aside to allow them to enter the office.

The musty air of the office reeked from stale cigar smoke and moldy gypsum. The only light was an ornate desk lamp with a stained glass shade.

Behind a metal desk sat a fat man with a head the shape of a large eggplant. His black hair was thick and sculpted like the head of a large rubber mallet. He wore a blue tuxedo jacket over a pink T-shirt. Thick tufts of graying chest hair peaked out over the shirt collar. Around his neck hung a large gold pendant in the shape of Texas with diamond studs along the border.

"Where's my money?" Resin asked. He darted his eyes at Ira. "Ach, two of 'em. What's your part in this?"

"I'm a friend. Actually, he's my brother-in-law. I'd like to work out a deal if I can," Ira said.

"Always more complicated with high-brow types," Resin said. Resin whipped his shoulder and head in a quick movement as if he were trying to separate his neck from his shirt. The motion was like a small convulsion. "It's simple, ten million or I contact the feds, his wife, and whoever else might be interested."

Resin reached into a drawer and took out three compact disks and several photographs. He spread them across the desk. Ira looked down. The disks were labeled “Stock Trades,” “Cash Transfers,” and “Phone Conversations.”

“Just how deep into financial malfeasance are you?” Ira asked Happy.

Happy looked away.

“He’s a tricky one,” Resin said. “A regular Ponzirelli. All to feed his addiction, or to feed me and my family, depending on how you look at it. I like to look at it from my side of things.”

The photographs on the desk were of Happy in various compromising situations. In one of the photographs Happy, naked, played leapfrog with a rather obese woman, his hands pushing into the folds of her flesh. The woman’s large sagging breasts hung between her thick legs. None of the pictures showed a sexual act but taken together Edith’s head might explode.

“Go ahead, take ‘em,” Resin said. “I’ve got the originals safe and sound. It’s a regular white crime smorgasbord.”

“Mr. Resin—”

“Call me Curly.”

“Happy can’t raise that much money without his wife finding out,” Ira said.

“So *you* pay it. Who pays matters not,” Curly said. Resin whipped his shoulder and head again.

“I’m not that invested,” Ira said.

“That’s too bad,” Resin said. He turned to Happy. “I’ll give you another week, since bringing your friend shows you making an effort.”

“I don’t like the way this is going,” Happy said. He backed himself against the door.

The phone on the desk rang. Resin picked up the phone and spoke in a low voice. Ira moved closer to Resin’s desk. Scattered across the desk were an assortment of proposals. One had the title “Public Official” with the word “Bought!” stamped in red across it. Below the title a short paragraph read “A reality show with a public service flavor. Contestants compete to achieve the most successful bribe of a public official. Officials get fifteen to twenty, contestants win big cash.” Another script was titled “Take My Husband, Please.” The small paragraph below read “With an increase in domestic abuse in this country, there’s no better idea for a reality show than one where abused women turn the tables on their husbands. The most elaborate and satisfying revenge wins an all-expense paid divorce and a new house, fully stocked, very far away from her soon-to-be-ex-husband.” Resin hung up the phone.

“You’re looking for a reality show.” Ira said. “To produce?”

“Law suits, every one of ‘em. Bunch of idiots think they can make it in this business. I’ve got enough idiots like your friend Happy on my hands. I don’t need partners like him too. What’s it to you?”

“Just curious,” Ira said. “There must be some way you can do without my friend.”

“You kidding me? It’s guys like him that paid off my mortgage, paid for my home theatre system, my kid’s college tuition, all six years, and a vacation to Bolivia. I’m

hoping to retire early, maybe after Happy-ness pays me my due.” Resin shoved some of the proposals aside to clear a space on his desk. He put his forearms in the cleared space and intertwined his fingers and looked up at Ira. “What business you in?”

“Novelties.”

“What could you offer me, a golden whoopee cushion?” Resin laughed.

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” Ira said. “We hadn’t really thought this through.”

“Then, honestly, get the hell out. You’re wasting my time. Mary!”

Marion barged into the office. The door pushed Happy to the floor. Marion brought his knife out of its holster. He pointed the blade at Ira and grabbed Happy by the arm and lifted him to his feet. Then, he yanked him hard toward the door. Happy’s knees buckled and he fell down again. Happy twisted his head around to look up at Ira.

“Do something,” Happy said.

“Take this one, too,” Resin said, pointing his thumb at Ira.

Marion slid the knife into its holster and moved toward Ira with one arm dragging Happy and the other outstretched to take hold of Ira. Ira backed up.

“He touches me I’ll make him intimate with that knife,” Ira said. Happy looked up at Ira, his eyes wide. Ira’s words surprised even himself.

“That’d be a neat trick,” Marion said. He moved closer to Ira, and Ira took another step backward into the corner. Ira needed time to think, to figure out how to get Happy out of this mess, so he blurted out the only thing he could think of, the one thing that had been popping into his head for the last few days.

“A joke,” Ira said. Marion stopped.

Resin leaned forward. “More bullshit. Get them outta here.”

“Okay, okay. Hold on a minute. This is not bullshit,” Ira said. “I just want to ask you something. It has nothing to do with Happy or the money, I promise. Just help me with this and we’ll leave. My father used to tell me this joke. It’s been on my mind, lately. I can’t really get it out of my head. Just help me understand the joke and we’ll leave. I’m in the novelty business, right? Well I can’t have an unresolved joke running through my head all the time. It’s grounds for the funny farm, you know. So, if you can help me with it I will be eternally grateful. It’ll just take a moment.”

“A joke that needs understanding can’t be funny,” Resin said. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It makes no sense,” Ira said.

“Then why tell it?”

“Exactly,” Ira said. He moved closer to Marion, who did not back off, and Ira could smell his sweat and the bubble gum he was chewing.

“It’s nothing to me. Go ahead,” Resin said.

Ira had the attention of all three men in the room and his skin tingled. He stood with his legs apart and his hands in front of him and he adjusted his shoulders to make himself comfortable.

“Two elephants sit in a bathtub,” Ira said.

“Elephants in a bathtub,” Marion murmured.

“Right, two elephants sit in a bathtub. One elephant turns to the other—”

“Elephants bathing, got it,” Happy said like he was marking off a checklist.

“Can I please finish the joke?” Ira asked.

“Who’s stoppin’ ya,” Marion said.

Ira took a deep breath.

“Two elephants sit in a bathtub. One elephant turns to the other. He says ‘pass the soap.’ The other elephant responds ‘no soap, radio.’” The joke was answered with silence, the same silence he imagined his father faced when he told the joke. Ira could feel his heart pounding into his throat. He felt like he should laugh like his father, play the role his father did even if he still did not understand the joke.

“That’s the fucking joke,” Marion said.

Resin stared at Ira. Ira stared back at Resin. He watched Resin’s eyes for some trace of understanding, some sign that he might find the humor. Resin’s lips moved like he was repeating the joke to himself, and Ira thought he might have just given Resin the same problem he was having, a bad joke that will not leave his head. Suddenly, Resin’s face cracked a smile, a wide quirky grin that did nothing to ease Ira’s tension. A squeal escaped the grin and rose to the halting smoker’s cough, then Resin broke in a full laugh.

“You wanna know why the joke’s funny?” Resin said. “It’s funny ‘cause it’s not funny. Your father must have been a real bastard. I bet he laughed every time, didn’t he? His own son, that kills me. What gets me is a smart guy like you couldn’t figure out a cruel fucking joke like that. I can see it on your face. You’re still lost.” Resin seemed to be enjoying himself. “I’ll talk slow so you’ll understand. Your daddy laughs, you don’t. You feel the idiot, he laughs again, this time for real. The joke’s not the joke. You’re the joke. Get it.” Resin stopped talking and a knowing expression came across his face. “You

never thought your father would be so cruel, did ya. I get that. No kid expects his father to treat him as a dupe.”

A dupe, Ira thought. That’s what he was. His father was not telling a joke, he was playing a joke. Only a dupe would fail to see the joke for what it was, a novelty, the cheapest kind, a practical joke using words. Ira suddenly felt an unexpected affection for Resin, but something else came over him, something rather unexpected.

“That son-of-a-bitch.” Ira said. “That goddamned, Shepovnik, suicide CEO son-of-a-bitch.”

“Hey, Ira, calm down,” Happy said.

“No,” Ira said. “He was a bastard. He founded the company, spent his whole life in that office playing with his toys, then all of the sudden he shrink wraps himself into an early death and leaves me with a sick fucking company. It’s not my fault, is it? It’s not my fault, but what the hell am I going to do, Happy? What the hell am I going to do now?”

Happy, who had been struggling to break Marion’s grip on his arm, blurted out, “A reality show.”

Ira and Resin turned to look at Happy.

“Let go of him, Marion,” Resin said. “We’ve had enough fun with these boys. Just get me my money, Happy-ness and we’ll be done.”

Ira suddenly remembered why he told the joke in the first place. He was supposed to figure out a way to help Happy, but instead Ira let his own situation, the company, his

father, the joke, take over. Now, Happy seemed to be scratching his way out with some crazy idea.

“You’re looking for a reality show,” Happy said. “Ira, you’ve got a novelty company. How about combine the two? People compete to create a novelty, say a better whoopee cushion. They work with Ira’s development team, the testing lab, and so forth. The winning designer wins cash plus royalties. Shepovnik mass produces the winning product, sells it, reaps the larger chunk of the cash.” Happy looked at Resin. “Of course, you’re due a piece as well. You’ll make what I owe you in one season.”

Resin whipped his head and shoulder again and leaned forward. He brought his hands beneath his chin and closed his eyes. Resin and Ira were locked in the same mode, contemplating Happy’s idea. Ira’s flipped it over and over in his head, novelties and reality television, reality television and novelties. Ira still loved the novelty business and wanted badly to dig himself out of his own troubles. Was this his way out, he asked himself. He considered television an irritating one-sided entertainment, no interaction, no give and take. Still, Happy’s idea had Ira’s blood pumping faster. Working with the unsavory Resin risked more than financial resources. The man blackmailed Happy, and was probably capable of worse. Then again, if the deal worked, Ira would have managed a nice double. He would have succeeded at digging Happy out of his predicament and found new life for the Shepovnik Novelty Company. Ira thought of another aspect of the deal and a very nice one at that. The project brought with it the promise of more intimate contact with the recently discovered and very intriguing Ms. Jane Selwin.

“I’m probably going to regret this, but I’m in if you are,” Ira said. Happy’s face brightened.

“I like it,” Resin said. “But I still want my money.”

“That’s not the deal,” Happy said, his voice squeaky.

“If the show don’t sell then what’ve I got. Bupkis. I need a guarantee.”

“It’ll sell,” Happy said. “I know it.”

“This from the guy running around naked with a bunch of reality rejects,” Resin said.

“Okay,” Ira said. “Happy can’t pay you now. He’s on empty. I’ve got a little money, but not enough. So, here’s what I propose. You give Happy more time to raise the cash. I’m thinking six months. Meantime, you and I develop and sell the novelty reality show. The show fails, Happy pays you the money plus interest. Hell, I’ll even sell the company’s assets to help settle the deal. If the show succeeds, we all become millionaires and Happy’s off the hook.”

Ira felt himself growing stronger as he made the proposal as if he had worked himself into a comfortable groove. Resin sat silently for a moment, his blue eyes searching the floor.

“Take a seat, men,” Resin said. “We’ve got business to discuss.”

Ira and Happy spent the next two days in Los Angeles. Edith called several times, and Ira delayed, telling her he had not found Happy. Ira insisted that Happy remain isolated in his apartment with no phone calls, no Internet, no visitors, and most importantly, no television. While Happy suffered in isolation, Ira met with Resin several

times to work out the details of their deal. They worked together surprisingly well. They both had a no-nonsense proclivity for the absurd. Ira and Ms. Selwin shared a few blissful evenings together. Ira noticed that Jane's edges softened the more time he spent with her, especially in the dark.

Ira and Happy flew home on the red-eye. They took a limo from the airport. He called Edith from the limo and asked her to meet them in front of the Shepovnik headquarters. She begged him for more information, but he reminded her that the deal was for retrieval not marriage counseling. Then, he called his assistant and gave her a set of instructions. The first was to tell the production manager to scrap all the defective products. The second was to set up a meeting with the creative team about developing new products. The third was to set up a photography session. It was time the two-headed coin featured his profile instead of his father's. Lastly, Ira told her about the deal with Resin, and Ira hung up before she had a chance to protest.

Edith was waiting for them when they arrived. She leaned through Ira's window. "Thank you, dear," Edith said. "I'm sorry for putting you in the middle of our problems."

"Six months, Edith," Ira said. "Not even a mention of the stock price. You promised."

Ira switched from the limo to his own car and drove down to the industrial side of town and parked in front of the Shepovnik production plant. He walked through the production floor. He always enjoyed the sound of the machines as they whirred and crunched and banged loudly. He was the only person on the production floor not wearing ear guards and goggles. He worked his way through the maze of the floor and found the

shrink-wrapping machine that took his father's life. He signaled for the machine operator to back away and then he kicked the base of the machine as hard as he could. The machine operator watched quietly and Ira thought he saw a knowing smile on his face. Ira kicked the machine over and over until the machine stopped making any sound. Other operators stopped their machines and silence spread across the production floor.

Ira turned and walked past the machines and their operators and made his way to the executive offices at the back of the facility. Ira walked into the break room. He poured himself a cup of coffee. His hands were shaking and he spilled coffee on the floor. A worker stood against the counter drinking from a foam cup. The man was tall and thin with a scant beard growing on his chin and along the edge of his jaw.

“Are you okay, Mr. Shepovnik,” the man asked.

“I'm okay, kid. I'm okay, but I'll be much better soon.” Ira sized him up, took a sip of coffee, and walked toward the door. Then, Ira turned around.

“What's your name, kid?”

“Ralph, sir, Ralph Johnson.”

“So tell me Ralph, you ever hear this joke...”

Mountain Lion (1976)

In early summer our family took a road trip in my mother's station wagon to Santa Fe. My brother Seth and I sat in the rear cargo area with our backs to the side windows and our feet extended out beside each other like cords of wood. My oldest brother Joey sat in the middle seat. The second oldest of us, David, was a year younger than Joey. He was in Israel traveling with a youth group. I imagined him being one of those strange people that kiss the big stone wall in Jerusalem.

Our father drove the car. Next to him was Mom. She struggled to keep her face forward because she was prone to carsickness, but she was thoroughly devoted to driving her children crazy with questions. *What are you doing? Play a game with your little brother, Seth? There is food up here if you're hungry? Have you eaten anything? What are you reading, Joey? Is it interesting? What's interesting about it?* She talked to us in the back as if she could see out the back of her head. It was a long drive.

It was not unusual for our family to take road trips. We drove to Denver a few times to visit my aunt and cousins, and we frequently drove to Galveston to visit our grandparents. The family usually became preoccupied with keeping me entertained. This was a form of torture. I didn't like the attention. I was a too young or didn't have the patience for the games my brothers wanted to play, but one game we enjoyed together was the French card game Mille Bornes. Joey leaned over the back of the seat to join us. The object of the game was to complete a 1000-mile race. The cards controlled your progress, the distance traveled, the hazards and repairs that slowed you down (a skipped

turn), and the fuel necessary for you to complete your journey. The cards with their European style cartoon pictures and French terms made me feel like we were traveling in a foreign land, that is, if I could ignore the desolate landscape that surrounded our car. It felt more like we had been transported to a dead planet. The only break from the dead, flat stretches of desert were the fields of robotic oil derricks popping up and down.

Seth was the most competitive. For him, the game didn't matter as much as winning, even if it involved mostly luck. He took great pleasure in yelling "coup fourré," when he could protect himself from whatever hazard card we threw at him. Joey was mostly in his own head. He'd rather be reading science fiction. He played games with us mostly to exert his authority as the oldest brother. He frequently told me I was "cute" and pinched my cheek as if he were an old man and I was his nine-year-old grandson.

Playing games with my brothers brought out the worst in me. I looked up to my older brothers, measured myself against them, even tried to be like them, but at the same time I resented everything about them. There was oppressive goodness all around me. All three were too much the teenage sons of a pair of goody-two-shoes. My brothers were great students, successful socially, well-behaved obedient sons. There was no room to be anything other than as good as they were. I had to be extraordinary or I wasn't a member of this family.

As we played Mille Bornes in the back of the car I grew frustrated that I wasn't winning.

"Ease up, Seth, let Barry have a chance," Joey said.

"He's doing fine," Seth said as he shuffled the cards. "He almost won that time."

They only made it worse. Seth started dealing the cards, laughing to himself about all his wins.

“What was that, three in a row?” he said. “I like this game, don’t you, Joey?”

I opened the back window. The wind gusted in and blew the cards into a swirl before they were sucked out the window and scattered across the highway behind us. Seth screamed for Dad to stop the car. It took him a while before he realized what we were saying. He veered the car to the shoulder of the highway and hugged the steering wheel. He looked at Mom, then into the rearview mirror. His tired eyes peered back at us through his horn-rimmed glasses.

“What happened?” Mom asked.

Both Dad and Mom turned in their seats and looked back at me. Dad usually had a kind smile even in the most difficult situations. This time, they both gave me a hard stare, but Mom’s was the hardest to take. It fell over me like a cold wave and my entire body went numb in its wake.

Dad put the car in reverse and backed up along the shoulder. The car started to drift out into the lane and he slowed momentarily to straighten out. He quickly glanced at me. Seth spotted one of the cards on the side of the highway. Mom, my brothers and I climbed out and began searching for the missing cards. Dad stayed in the car. We walked up and down the highway like prisoners on a work detail searching for the bright colorful rectangles against the asphalt or the dry, cracked ground. Joey found one in the middle of the highway and made the dangerous dash to retrieve it. I found another one a few yards beyond the shoulder, stuck in a weed. After searching for a while we couldn’t find any

more cards and Mom said we must've found them all. When we returned to the car I had made them sort the cards and figure out if any were missing. There was one card missing. It was the "out of gas" hazard card. We could still play the game with only one missing card but it didn't feel the same, at least not to me.

We began moving west again. Seth stuck his tongue out at me and bugged his eyes out, and when I smiled he reached out and tickled me. I begged him to stop. He kept tickling me until my face turned red. I was gasping for breath. I hit him and he lay across my chest until I said I was sorry. For the remainder of the trip I stayed away from Seth and Joey. I slept or stared out the window at the empty country.

We reached Santa Fe late at night. My father carried me to the motel room. I woke when we reached the room. Seth and I were to sleep in the same bed. Joey had a bed to himself. I felt anxious and couldn't sleep. I walked around the room. I couldn't stop thinking about the missing card. We had been moving fast and the wind was strong. It could have landed on the grill of another car or some wild animal could've taken it. Mom said there were mountain lions in New Mexico, so maybe one of them took it.

Seth sat up in bed.

"We'll find it when we drive back to Dallas," he said.

"Don't tell him that," Joey said. "Barry, we'll buy a new set of cards when we get home."

"We won't have it for the ride home," I said.

"Jeez, you're nuts, you know that," Seth said. "You can still play the game without that card."

“It’s not the same,” I said.

“We’ll find it here, then,” Joey said. “They have toy stores in Santa Fe.”

I wondered where we’d find a toy store that sold Milles Borne in Santa Fe. I lay prone on my back on the floor and stared at the ceiling. There were large dimples in the molding and I counted them. As I counted, I realized there was another thing bothering me. Our father didn’t get out of the car to help us search for the cards. It felt like he was avoiding the search, avoiding us. If he’d joined us we might have found it. I went next door to their room and knocked on the door. Mom answered. She was in her nightgown. The look of disappointment on her face hit me hard and I backed away. She ushered me back to bed and told me I’d be punished if I got up again.

Santa Fe was small compared to Dallas, less skyscrapers, more buildings of stone than glass. The buildings were colorful, painted with murals and strange combinations of soft, rich colors that I had never seen before. We walked through an art festival in the early morning. I followed Mom closely. Seth and Joey went off to see a man with his pet python. Dad sat on a bench and told us to go on without him. We visited a few booths and I looked back to where we left him. The crowd was thick and I couldn’t see him at first but it broke apart for a moment and I caught sight of him. He was just sitting on the bench watching everyone move past him.

I asked Mom to buy me a print of a desert landscape with adobe homes in the foreground but she said it was too expensive. All the prints were too expensive and after an hour of wandering I was bored. Mom tried on Native American jewelry and she offered to buy me a ring or pin. I looked through one of the displays and saw a ring with

a silver band and a turquoise rock in the mount. It reminded me of the rings in my father's dresser drawer. I'd often sneak into my parents' bedroom and look through the top drawer of his dresser where he kept his rings and cuff links, watches and other small objects. My favorite was a ring with a blue stone. The blue stone had a white four-pointed star in the middle, like a star glowing in the blue sky. The ring was too big for my fingers but I put it on anyway. I'd always thought I would have a ring just like it when I got older. She bought me the turquoise ring, and it fit perfectly, which felt too small.

We left the art festival and drove to some ruins and caves outside the city. People supposedly once lived there, but they looked to me to be just holes in the side of a mountain. Seth and Joey teased me about my ring, saying it was a girl's ring. Mom told them to stop, but they ignored her. Dad just stood off away from us looking at the ruins. On the way back we stopped for lunch at Rafael's Restaurante on the side of the highway. It was more a large shack than a restaurant.

I ordered an enchilada entrée on the menu.

"Barry, why don't you order something else," Mom said.

"I don't want anything else."

"Barry, it's too spicy, see what it says, very hot," Seth said. "You're too young for that one."

I would not change my mind. I knew when I ordered it that it was too hot. The menu said that it was "Rafael's family recipe, made specially for those who like things hot."

"I'll order it and you can taste it," Joey said.

“No, you order what you want,” Mom said, “He’ll order something else.”

“I don’t want anything else on the menu,” I said.

Mom stared at me. She was hoping I would give in, but I stared back with determination. Mom turned to the waiter and asked that the kitchen prepare the enchiladas without the usual spicy ingredients. This started another argument. I wanted it to be prepared normally. I stood up from the table and walked to the front of the restaurant. The waiter assured Mom in broken English that the dish was really not that spicy and the note in the menu was just a precaution for people who cannot handle any spice at all. Mom relented and ordered it as its normally prepared, and I returned to the table. While we waited for the food, Dad mentioned taking a nature hike the next day and some locations. He showed us a brochure from the motel front desk that showed various trails around the area, including ski slopes that during the off-season serve as good mountain climbs. It was an unusual idea. We were not an outdoors family. We would more likely spend an evening sitting around the breakfast table playing poker with our father than go outside and peer up at the stars or spend the night in a tent in our backyard, let alone, a national park.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Mom said.

“Why not?” Dad said.

“I just don’t, and I don’t want to discuss it,” she said.

Dad looked disappointed and Mom avoided looking at him.

The waiter brought our food and put the dish in front of me. He warned me that the plate was hot and I touched it anyway and burned my finger. Mom watched me. I could feel her eyes on me, expecting the worst. She waited for me to take my first bite.

The sensation was almost instantaneous. There was a sharp stab at my tongue. The spice swelled in my mouth and my throat burned. My nose started running and my lips went numb. My head tingled as if the air around me pricked my skull with needles. Seth and Joey laughed. Mom called the waiter over and asked him to take the enchiladas away and bring another entrée. Dad just stared at his own plate as if nothing had happened. He took a few bites of his own food and nibbled a few times.

When the waiter brought the bill we discovered that they charged us for the original enchiladas entrée, in addition to the entrée that replaced it. I thought I'd be blamed for this, but instead Mom became angry with the waiter. The waiter refused to change the bill and her voice grew louder and louder until she was screaming at him. He didn't speak English very well, so its doubtful he even understood what she was saying. The manager came over and she screamed at him too. His English was no better.

When Mom became angry she developed what we called the dragon face. Her eyes sunk in and went wide. Her chin extended forward, further than I thought humanly possible, and her lower teeth jutted out. It was as if she were reverting to a prehistoric creature. When this face emerged we knew we were in serious trouble, especially since it appeared so rarely. Mom unleashed this prehistoric dragon creature on the waiter and manager.

"Listen here," she said, "The waiter said the enchiladas were not spicy."

The manager opened the menu to show her the description.

“I don’t care what the menu says. The waiter said it would be okay and it was not okay. He turned beat red, the poor thing, and you have the gall to charge us for a dish he hardly touched. Uhn uh. Nope. You have some nerve. We’re not paying for this meal.”

I had once lost control of my bicycle and crashed into a parked car in front of other kids. It was frightening and embarrassing at the same time. Mom’s fit of anger felt ten times worse. The entire time, Dad remained strangely silent. Those who knew my father always said he was a calm man who never let things bother him too much and he balanced out my mother’s more emotional nature, but he just sat in the booth and said nothing as our mother became a madwoman.

Seth and Joey tried to calm her down. She became more wild, insisting that we should not have to pay for anyone’s lunch because of the way we were being treated. Mom had taken issue with such injustices before—segregated schools, anti-Semitism, the existence of the Republican Party—but her reaction this time had risen to a level well beyond anything we had seen before. The waiter and the manager refused to relent. They said they were under instructions from the owner not to change any bill once it was written. It was as if our mother asked the desert to grow lakes.

I sat in the booth struggling to feel my own tongue and drinking water from a pitcher. Mom seemed on the verge of calling the police, the National Guard, or the governor of New Mexico. She became increasingly unhinged and I felt more and more like I had done something terribly, terribly wrong.

Mom demanded that the manager call the owner and he panicked. He offered to pay for the entrée himself. She was about to object, but Joey intervened.

“Mom it’s okay,” Joey said. “He’s the manager. He can afford it.”

“No, he can’t,” Mom said. “He doesn’t make that much. The cost of that dish is probably more than he makes for the entire week.”

She turned and looked at the manager, who was already looking through his pockets for loose cash. Joey put his hand on Mom’s arm.

“It’s getting dark outside,” he said. “We need to get going if we want to avoid getting lost on the way home.”

Mom sat down at the table and looked at Dad. The manager, the waiter and a busboy all contributed to pay for the spicy entrée. Dad drove us back to Santa Fe and Mom continued to talk about “the injustice of it all.” Her voice became hoarse and she stopped. I felt the sting of the silence. There would be a reckoning between my mother and me, I was sure of it, but for now, she was too distracted by her sense of injustice to turn her anger on me.

The next day, we drove to a nearby ski resort. Our father was determined to surround us with the mountains and fresh air and for the first time during the trip Dad seemed excited.

“There will be other people up there right?” Mom asked. “What about food? The boys will get hungry before we know it. Also, I’ve heard that during the off-season the wild animals take over the mountains.”

“We’ll stop and get some food, and I’m sure others will be up there,” Dad said. “The guidebook says the ski slopes make for an easy hike. We’ll be up and down without a hitch.”

We stopped at a small grocery store on the way and bought supplies, bread, cold cuts, and bottled drinks, and arrived at the mountain at mid-morning. We parked at the base of the mountain and walked past the shack that housed the ski lift machinery. Other than the teenage girl running the lift, we were the only people around.

“There’s nobody here,” Mom said, but Dad ignored her and walked toward a nearby stream. I put my hand in the water and removed it quickly. The cold water bit my skin. We put our food and drinks in plastic bags and sunk them into the stream and weighted them down with rocks so they wouldn’t float away.

“A natural refrigerator,” father said, but it seemed more like a freezer. He assured Mom that nobody would take the food and said we’d pick it up when we get down from our hike.

Father took the lead, his energy higher, and we set out together to hike up the mountain. The ski slope ran above us like a gray streak slashing across the side of the mountain. I found myself squinting most of the time until the muscles around my eyes grew tired. An occasional whiff of sulfur blew past us, but the pine scent from the trees was stronger. The water that had run off the mountain from the winter season had scarred the surface of the slope. I took several wobbly steps into the long thin crevices. Seth stayed close to me and helped me overtake the deeper breaks in the land.

Mom moved carefully over the rocks and patches of grass, her hands going up often in a little sky dance.

“What about the mountain lions?” Mom said.

“Mountain lions,” Dad said. “Honey, I hardly think that’s possible.”

“The book said they’re common here. We should keep an eye out.”

“They mostly roam at night.” Dad increased his pace.

Joey repeated that mountain lions only roam at night as if he were the expert, and he probably did read about it in a book somewhere. Joey worked hard to match Dad’s pace.

“There have been news reports,” Mom said. She was breathing hard and she stopped at moments to regain balance.

“What kind of reports?” Seth asked. He had his hand on my back pressing me forward. I was having trouble keeping up with everyone.

Mom looked at me.

“There have been attacks on climbers,” she said. “Nothing serious, but still.”

“Dad, maybe we should stop here and head back down the mountain,” I said.

He yelled something back at us but he and Joey had moved far ahead of us. His words were lost in the wind. Mom called out to them several times, pleading them to slow down, but they kept moving.

“I can’t believe him,” she said. That was the beginning of a conversation with herself that at times it broke down into sounds rather than words, hmphs and grunts and nonsensical half words. She mumbled something about a promise he had made to her.

She stopped talking. She sighed heavily several times. It felt like the same silence from the night before in the car ride home. We had not talked about what happened at the restaurant and I had been on the watch for the dragon face all morning. I became convinced that Mom's frustrations had to do with me and not Dad, that her anger was really about the restaurant, me ordering that spicy dish and causing her to have such an embarrassing fight with the manager, about me knocking on their door in the middle of the night and bothering them, and about the cards flying out the window and the missing hazard card that was going to require her to buy a whole new Mille Borne set. I realized that if someone would attract the mountain lion to us it would be me. I had brought on all the other troubles. I would be the one who tripped over the mountain lion's den and awakened it when it was most hungry. I imagined the last thing I saw would be the prehistoric beastly stare of my mother as the giant cat devoured me. As we ascended the mountain, I realized we were close to the time of reckoning.

"You're not really mad at Dad, are you?" I asked.

"No, it was nothing, darling. I'm just worried about your father, the same way I worry about you boys."

I looked up the mountain. They were heading toward an opening in the forest that lined the edge of the slope. They stopped at the clearing and looked out beyond the edge of the mountain.

"Dad is doing fine," I said. "We'll catch up to them, won't we?"

Mom stopped for a moment and looked back at me. "Yes, Barry, Dad is doing fine." She smiled weakly.

I smiled back at her, and we continued moving forward. After a few more yards, Mom stopped and sat on a rock and she seemed older as if the worry had drained years from her body. Her face was pale and sagging. The sun had lowered in the sky and the terrain darkened under the shadow of a larger mountain. My body felt heavy.

“I don’t see them,” Mom said.

Seth and I both looked toward the top of the mountain. I saw what I thought were two small figures high on the mountain, but I could not be sure. They could have been two small tumbleweeds rolling across the mountain.

“I think that’s them,” I said.

“It’s them,” Seth said. “It’s gotta to be.”

“Are you sure?” Mom asked

“Yeah, it’s gotta be,” I said.

“I could kill him. I could just kill him. What does he think he’s doing?”

We had settled into a well-paced hike up the mountain, though still not making up ground between us and Dad, when Mom screamed.

“Something moved across the mountain,” she said. “Oh, oh, oh, what, what was that.”

Seth said he saw it too, something moving across the mountain. I looked up the mountain and saw only the very small objects, not quite human-like, in the distance. Whatever they saw was gone.

“They were there, I saw them. Something moved where they were,” she said.

“I thought you couldn’t see them,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter. I saw it, whatever it was. My god. It’s a mountain lion. I know it. They’ve been attacked. They’re not moving. Why aren’t they moving?” She darted forward quickly, her body shaking.

“I can’t see them,” she said. She stopped every few moments to look up the mountain. Seth and I tried to keep up with her but we fell back a bit. I was having trouble breathing.

“This is bad,” Seth said to me.

“It moved across the mountain, stopped where they were, then moved on,” she said. “One of you should go down the mountain and talk to someone, get help.”

Seth and I looked at each other. I wasn’t sure whether she was making a request or just speaking her thoughts out loud.

“Shouldn’t we find out if there is something actually wrong first?” Seth asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, her eyes were wide. “They could be hurt, or even...”

“Let’s just go toward them,” Seth said.

We moved quickly up the mountain. We started to run and Mom fell behind. My legs and chest burned and I felt my heart pounding. This was my fault. I had been too focused on my aching feet and sore ankles to look up and see what happened. If I had looked up the mountain and seen whatever it was I could reassure my mother that nothing bad had happened. Mom had slowed down. She tripped and caught herself. She looked small. The dark shadow of the mountain moved quickly over us.

Seth yelled out alternative theories to what we saw and I joined in, both of us pushing our words out between gasps for air.

“It could have been a low flying bird, Mom.”

“It could have been a raccoon.”

“Maybe it was the girl who runs the chair lift.”

“How about Joey? He might have wandered off and come back to Dad.”

We moved closer to the top of the mountain, and two figures came into focus. My father was standing with his hands on his hips. He was a distance from Joey who sat on a large rock. We reached their position, a clearing with few trees and a full view of the mountain range. They were fine, but Mom was still distraught. She could not be calmed down. Dad held her and patted her back.

“We’re fine, honey,” he said. “We’re just fine.”

“No, you’re not,” she said. “You should have stayed with us.”

“I know that now,” he said. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again, okay?”

She calmed down and we told them about our mountain lion theory and they laughed. The moving object was a man, a jogger, who ran across the slope. The jogger stopped for a moment and talked with them. He jogged across the mountain every day. We laughed at Mom’s overactive imagination. Joey dubbed her “The Great Mountain Lion Worrier.” Mom laughed too. Dad started down the mountain. Mom didn’t move.

“The boys look hungry exhausted,” he said.

“We’re so close,” Mom said. “How do you feel?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think we’ve got enough strength to push through.”

Mom took a few steps up the mountain, and Dad turned and followed her lead. We made the final ascent together. Mom was quiet for the rest of the climb. She touched Dad's arm frequently and they held hands for a while. The wind had grown wild around us. We reached the peak only to find another family there, a man, his wife and two children. They were very short and round people. They had taken the chair lift to the top. During our frantic run up the mountain we failed to see them floating above us. They were from Salt Lake City.

Dad asked the wife to take a picture of us with his camera. We drew close to each other and formed a wall against the cold wind. I was in front and in the middle. Mom put her hand on my shoulder. I reached back and touched someone's leg, mostly to keep from falling down, but also to feel part of the family wall.

That summer trip to Santa Fe was our last trip together as a family. My brother left for college a few months later, about the same time my father became sick, or really when I became aware that he was sick, when things got bad. Nobody told me much of anything about what was happening to my father.

There was a visit. My mother led me into their bedroom. Dad lay in bed, his face pale. He looked thinner and more tired than I had ever could imagine anyone being. His eyes were the same, though, and they fooled me into thinking he would eventually get healthier, like we all do when we get sick. I doubt my brothers understood much either, but it felt like I was the child again, the youngest, too young to be told anything that mattered, too young to participate in the bigger games.

I discovered years later that he had been sick with cancer even before we went to New Mexico and they'd known about it. They cut out a section of his esophagus and put him through chemo but it was too much for his thin, asthmatic body.

He died that December, a month after my birthday. My mother came into my bedroom in the middle of the night and sat at the end of my bed. It was dark. I could see other people in the doorway, but my mother was like a black ghost against the light. I sat up. Her voice was hoarse. The light shifted. Her eyes were swollen. There was worry and fear on her face, worse than I'd ever seen. She stared at me, waiting for a reaction, and I stared back. I'm sure she thought I was too young to really understand, but I did. The funeral was the next day and our house filled with people. Over the next week they brought food and joined the minyan every evening. My mother sat crying in the middle as the visitors said Kaddish. My brothers tried to entertain me, keep me distracted, but it wasn't necessary. It just annoyed me and made me want even less to do with them.

A few days after things settled down and the people stopped coming to the house, I started to remember things about my father. How he came home from work and before he put down his briefcase he'd whistle and I'd run across the house to him. How he would sit in his chair reading the Wall Street Journal. He was a stockbroker and I'd watch him study the newspaper page after page. How he sat up on the bema at synagogue each Shabbat, talking with the other men and managing the prayer service. I thought about dad mostly just before I fell asleep at night, and one night, one of those memories led me seamlessly into a dream. I was on the mountain again. I was alone. The wind swirled around and drained my strength. I grew too weak to continue and sat on the ground. I

looked toward the peak and high up above me there was a mountain lion standing on a rock. His body was long and monstrous, his ears pricked. He bared his teeth. The mountain lion seemed to be laughing at me. Then he dipped his head to the ground. I thought he was going to leap and attack, but instead he slowly lifted his head and displayed for me the lost hazard card gripped between his sharp teeth.