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Lacuna

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by

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Eating mud

When four cops pile on you, you're basically a shit sandwich. You go down and stay down, even if it's a blow to your delicate pride.

Not that these guys don't like me. Tomorrow, I'm moving on to the Corps. This fracas is just their friendly way of bumping me up to the big time. Every senior gets the same treatment when they get sized for their Accelerator.

So who am I to complain? I just cover my head and eat training field mud, figuring I'll stay put until their arms get tired of whacking me. But then Jeff Birch yanks me up by the back of my collar until my toes are just touching the muck, and gives me a glower down his pointy nose. I spit out a mouthful of blood, careful not to get it on his black leather jacket, and try to look frail. I'm going to get one of those jackets too, and in a year's time, I'll be the one pummeling the junior class into cadet hamburger.

What a fine world we live in.

Rain is inching down, like it always does, that stupid misty drizzle that gets in your eyes and mouth and makes you feel like a snail even after you dry off. My left ear is starting to swell up, and I figure it's getting to look pretty ugly, which is good news, because they probably won't hit me any more if they think I already took a decent enough beating.

"Waddaya think?" Jeff Birch is saying. "Slow-boy had enough?"

"Couple a more gut shots, maybe," Jerry Fitzpatrick says. "He's still breathing easy."

I catch sight of Jerry Fitzpatrick blurry at the corner of my vision, moving light on his feet, shadow-boxing, blood-eager to put me down on the ground again. My left eye is swelling up worse than my ear, like they're in competition. It's starting to occur to me that I'm in bad shape. I wonder if maybe I ought to make like I've been K.O.'ed, but tucking my tail always made me feel lousy. So instead I let out with some choice curses about the boys' moms, junkyard dogs, and the family connection between the two, and give Jeff a head-butt that sends his nose bending off at a wrong angle.

Jeff staggers back, mewling like a kitten, and the other guys bust out laughing. I figure the fun's over, but Jerry, the perfectionist, has to quick-step, duck low, and get in a flurry of his famous gut shots. Sure enough, I stop breathing easy and dive back down to my mud-bed.

Everyone stands around for a second, sniffling and shifting like they're graveside trying to think of something nice to say about the deceased. Then the whole crew lurches off laughing, leaving a blood-trail from Jeff's nose most of the way back to the classrooms.

I lie there on my side, flapping like a baby bird nose-dived out of the nest, spicy vomit trickling out the side of my mouth.

All in all, a pretty good day.

At least I got a lot to look forward to, unlike most people, for whom looking forward's a relic of the past. I passed my exams, I'm going to get my Accelerator, I'm

going to wear one of those crazy leather jackets. The way people are going to look at me in the streets is beyond stupendous.

I'm going to be respected.

As for my father.

The man's going to be over the moon when I come staggering in like a giant bruise on legs. He'll know that means I'm following him into the Police Corps. Just how he wants it, like he wouldn't stop talking about ever since the day he joined up. I was sixteen then, which was, what, maybe four years ago?

I'm sixteen now.

That's what the Slivers did.

Slivers

I remember where I was when the Slivers came, do you? Me, it was a subway car so dark you couldn't see anyone's faces, all the light bulbs painted black so the Heinies couldn't aim their two-ton bombs, crammed in with a load of mopey, smelly joes, everyone all depressed about the war, smoking crappy war-issue Pall Malls that drooped at the end. They kicked us out of Calhoun at noon that day. A busted sewer pipe flooded the basement, and no one could do math or conjugate verbs with the smell of crap in their nose. I was riding home trying to figure how to skirt my calculus homework so I could sneak out to work with my pal Joe Glass on what he claimed was going to be a mustard gas bomb, though I was skeptical and had expressed that to him on more than one occasion.

And I was chewing over the multiple meannesses I inflicted on my little sis Abby just about every day, from putting mashed potatoes in her milk to surgically removing the mane from her favorite stuffed lion just to see her pitch a fit.

The subway car swayed to a halt, pushing me into the joe on my right. I could feel the burlap of his suit scratch my arm through my windbreaker. I shuffled onto the platform with a couple dozen other citizens, them with their briefcases, me with the same knapsack my dad used when he was a kid my age back in Krakow. The leather was dry and flaky, but it was soft against my shoulder-blade, and gave off a whiff of tobacco that reminded me of my dad. That smell got into my school books too, made the other kids think I was a smoker, which earned me a few points. I tried smoking once, but with my

sparrow lungs, all it did was drop me to the ground wheezing and flopping like an accordion getting kicked.

Up the steps we all went like a crowd of motorized freckles, nobody looking at anything but their own feet. Towards the top the steps got rain-slicked and you had to step hard on your toes so you wouldn't slip. The air had that electric-fresh rain and diesel smell. I was feeling like maybe this would be the day my brain wrapped itself around functions and limits.

At the top step, I ran nose-first into the back of a citizen who had stopped suddenly. "What's the damned hold-up?" I muttered and slipped past on the right. Out on the street, it was more of the same, citizens frozen in place with their chins tilted up to the sky. Cars and taxis idled in the street, drivers and passengers leaning halfway out with their faces squinting up to the heavens. A few of the cars had collided; one Buick's radiator was sending steam thick as cotton candy curling into the sky.

The light was different, too. Blue, like it was getting shot through a sapphire before it hit the earth. It made those mountains of donated scrap metal sitting on every street corner sparkle like they were underwater. The air, the metal, the rain – everything was dancing, kind of. Shaking, almost. I reached out to touch that crazy air, but it moved away from me, like I was poison.

It took me a while, but finally I noticed a sound blending in with the hissing radiator, the honking horns, the patter of rain on the asphalt. It sounded like a crowd of old men whispering, their voices all ragged and rumbly. And it sounded like a never-

ending cat's meow, and that part made me want to scratch my skin off. And it sounded like a bunch of girls singing in a choir, only none of the notes made sense like a song ought to.

Me, in my eloquence, said: "What the hell?"

Everybody else was too busy to give such a dumb question the time of day.

So I did what everybody else was doing.

I looked up.

Black leather jacket

After napping in my own puke a while, I pull my face out of the mud, limp home from school, heave myself up the beige linoleum-lined stairs, stopping three times to catch my breath, unlock the door of my apartment, and listen for my dad. Sometimes he's slumped at the dining room table, nursing a cup of weak tea the color of bloody piss, the only kind you can get. He doesn't eat much anymore, and who can blame him? We used to complain about wartime rationing, but counting the peas on your plate is nowhere near as bad as trying to choke down a bowl of the Slivers' slimy grub. Oatmeal mixed up with gasoline would be a better bet. But fruits and vegetables and grains and all the rest stopped growing after the Lacuna, and people slaughtered and ate most of the cows and chickens in the world that first year. So it's not like we have a choice.

Today, though, I find my dad on his bed, snoring like a sleeping lion, still dressed in his uniform. The moist, warm air smells like bourbon.

Dad doesn't go in the bedroom much since Mom and Abby skedaddled. Mostly he conks out on the couch around two in the morning, with the radio droning the production reports of the day. According to him, using the Accelerator gives him insomnia, but I've caught him more than once standing at the mantel staring at the photos of Mom and Abby. He doesn't cry or nothing, that's not how he's built, but I've seen him chewing on his tongue, his jaw working, the whole side of his face turning red.

We're lucky we get to keep our apartment. It helps that Dad's a member of the Police Corps. We even get perks. One time Dad brought home a whole box of lemon

lollipops from the office. There must have been a thousand goddamned sour pops. I got so sick of eating them that I crammed the box in the hall closet under a sleeping bag, and there it remains. Let the mice have them. Another time, Dad brought home a duffel bag full of men's clothes. A whole wardrobe of snazzy suits and tailored white shirts. But somehow they creeped me out. I mean, someone's initials were stenciled on the shirt collars.

J.L.

What the hell happened to poor old J.L.? It couldn't have been good if all his worldly possessions ended up parked in our hallway. Besides, if he met up with my dad, it could only be because he screwed up worse than anything, that he was a junkie, or a revolutionist, or even a murderer.

Wearing his clothes would have been like wearing a ghost. It didn't bother Dad, though.

He put on J.L.'s hat, strolled in front of the mirror, and nodded sagely at himself. Dad was a guy who had never had nice things. Once he showed me a photo of his digs back in Poland. Dirt, basically. Dirt, and a few huts, and a dozen dumb chickens walking around like the Royal Family. And in the middle of the street, ankle-deep in sewage and feathers, young Dad in unhemmed knee-pants, sucking his thumb.

Thank God he got out. As he is so fond of reminding me.

I start to take off my dad's boots, quiet-like, so he won't get more dirt on the bedspread. "Sammy, boy, what the hell you doing?" he says.

Dad's accent always gets worse when he's half-asleep. He sounds like a bumpkin, and it makes me feel a little queasy in the pit of my stomach, like I'm suddenly realizing I'm living with someone I never met.

"Taking your boots off, Dad. Go back to sleep."

He pushes himself up on his elbows and squints at me. The blue afternoon light is barging through the blinds and knifing across my face, highlighting my swollen eye. Dad leans over to turn on the bedside light and angle it on me. I feel like I'm in a line-up. He looks me over, that jaw of his working. I don't say a word.

"Busy day," he says.

"I might look like steak, but they look like hamburger."

"Good job, Sam. That's how you got to do."

He swells up bigger when he says that, bobbing his head like the Tin Man float back when they used to do the Macy's Day Parade. I can feel the tough, mean part of him stirring, and I like that.

"Don't worry, Dad. I can take care of business."

He cracks a pill bottle on the nightstand and shakes a pair of green capsules into his hand. "You're a regular Joe Louis," he says.

"Beau Jack, please. I'm going to be headlining the Garden when things get back to normal."

That catches him broadside. If there's one thing the man can't stand, it's hope. I know he wants to lecture me about how we're done with normal, and stuck with weird

forever, but instead he tips the pills into his mouth and washes them down with a swig of weak tea. “Come along. I have something for you.”

He slides himself off the bed, takes a couple of shuffling steps as if the whole idea of legs has just occurred to him. They say being accelerated all the time wears a cop out, but my dad’s an ox of a guy, and by the time he gets to the living-room, he’s moving fast and his shoulders sink down from his ears.

He opens the closet, and makes a gesture like he’s introducing me to a new friend. I look inside, and next to his weathered, cracked leather jacket, I see a new one, soft and oiled, so black it seems to be sucking up the light. Both jackets have the insignia of the Police Corps on one shoulder, though my badge has a red cross through the middle to show I’m still a student. Usually, you don’t get your jacket until your first day on the Accelerator, but I’m sure Dad pulled rank on this one, being a Captain and all.

“Go ahead, try it on, don’t be such a mope,” he says, and gives me a nudge in the middle of the back. I guess I’ve been standing there frozen, with my jaw hitting my toes. I peel my jacket off the hanger and shrug it over my shoulders, feeling its weight sink into me. It creaks as I move, the thick leather breathing as I breathe. I finger the reinforced loops that will anchor my Accelerator, and I feel like I rule the world for once, not the Slivers, not Jeff Birch or Jerry Fitzpatrick’s pounding fists, not the silence that lives in the apartment with my dad and me like a roommate.

I can see my dad sizing me up, all proud, and I probably should have just looked him in the eye and said thanks, but just then my mom pops into my head like the flags on

a cash register. I see her standing next to me, Abby tucked into her hip. Mom messes up my hair, gives my ear a tug, and sighs.

"Stupid boy," she says, like she always does when she's mad but not too mad, and acting like she wants to hit me and hug me all at the same time.

In my mind, Abby is giggling at me, too.

"You look like a retard," she says, then ducks behind Mom to avoid my inevitable kick in her deserving derriere.

I get their meaning. The jacket is too long in the sleeves, and I'm already sweating just standing in it for half a minute, and who the hell am I anyhow to think I could be a cop? I'm not a big ox like Dad. I can take a beating, but I can't deal one out. I got bad lungs, the kind that would have killed me if the Slivers hadn't arrived. I'm no Beau Jack coming back to the Garden three times in a month, taking on all comers. And I don't take orders with much good cheer, especially from Slivers.

I manage to mumble a few words that sound like "Thanks" and "I love you, Dad," and then he throws those muscular arms around me and plants a kiss on my cheek. I feel stubble and I smell tobacco, and for some damn reason I feel small and weak, like a stalk of asparagus that's been boiled too long. Then he holds me at arm's length, and gets all paternal in his Polak accent.

"Sam, you're going to have to learn to be tough if you want to be police. You think you can do that?"

I nod with as much moxie as I can muster. "Already did," I say.

But my arms hurt where he's squeezing them, and my hands are starting to go numb, and sweat's stinging my eyes. I'm thinking about a raven flapping itself in circles on the sidewalk, one foot bent backwards, half a wing gone.

This was a while ago. I was standing over the bird with Joe Glass, who was cradling the pellet gun he used to knock it off a telephone wire. The damn thing was cawing, tracing a circle of blood around itself as it flapped. Abby was squatting off to one side clutching at her skirt and rocking on her heels. I was maybe ten, Abby six, but Joe had just hit puberty, and even had a moustache which you could see in bright light if you squinted.

Every so often he leaned in and casually kicked the raven, which just kept on making gory circles, like it was painting on the pavement. I followed his lead, stuck a toe under the bird, and flipped it into the street. It landed on its back, broken wing quivering.

I glanced at Joe, wishing I had a moustache too, then without a thought crossing my mind I grabbed the bird by one oily wing, and started waving it in Abby's face. She let out a mighty peep, tried to back away, tripped over the cobblestones, and landed on her butt. I moved in with the raven, who was trying to peck me, her, the air, anything to get out of this predicament. Abby put her hands up to her face and starting shrieking louder than the bird. I felt like I was ten feet high and made of steel as I dangled the bird over Abby and watched it peck at her.

Joe laughed. His guffaws broke the same way his voice did.

Then here came my mom barreling up behind me. She grabbed the bird in one hand and the back of my hair with the other.

Joe went quiet.

“This what you want, you little animal?”, she hissed. Before I could answer she lashed Abby across the face with the bird. Blood spattered Abby’s hair. She stopped crying and looked at us like we were both Nazis.

My mom shoved the bird at me. “Go on,” she shouted. “You show her, big man.” She gave me a shove that sent my chin into my chest. Suddenly I was wishing I was somewhere down in the sewer with the other rats. I shook my head and made my eyes go all blurry so I wouldn’t have to see how ugly I had made the world.

My mom marched to the curb. She grabbed a brick knocked loose where a car parked bad last week, and she wound up and swung, four times in all, mashing that raven’s head until you could only see the beak and a bunch of meat. The bird’s feathers shuddered, one claw made a fist, and that was that.

She came back, corpse in hand, and got right down in my face. “You’re goddamned mean, Sam. You’re just evil.” She sprayed spit on me, she was so mad. I was too scared to wipe my face. Then she thrust the dead bird into my hands, grabbed Abby, and dragged her into the apartment.

I don’t know what she expected me to do with a dead raven. It seemed heavier now that it was a corpse. I walked around with it for a while, watching it drip blood on the ground, while Joe followed at a distance with his hands tucked behind him like a

math professor working out a problem. Then I dumped the bloody bird in a trashcan and sat on the steps until night without moving.

Finally, the front door creaked open, and Mom looked at me being a statue, and just said, “Dinnertime.”

As I walked past her into the building, she slipped her arms around me and hugged me, kind of too tight, and I broke out sobbing.

“Yeah, I can be tough,” I say to my dad, and I zip up my jacket.

The Prez

After I took a good long look up at the sky, my legs started to run and the rest of me followed a few seconds later.

The store was shuttered when I got there, so I took the steps fast as I could without my lungs closing up or my vision getting fuzzy. I found my mom and dad sitting on the couch next to the radio, holding hands white-knuckled, like they were riding a roller coaster. Mom had a moist handkerchief balled up in one fist, and she was dabbing at those blue eyes so hard I thought she was going to pop them. Dad's face had gone soft. He looked like a boy. He looked like me. I knew right off they had seen what I saw, but when I opened my mouth to talk, Dad put up one hand so hard the words got strangled in my chest. Then he pointed to the radio.

The announcer was trying to sound all professional, but there was a quiver in his voice like he was trying not to cry. He was talking about the sky, of course, but he was also talking about President Roosevelt, who after all, saw the same thing we did.

Only the Prez kind of, almost, died.

Later we found out that at the same moment the Slivers showed up he had been sitting in his favorite chair at Warm Springs while the lady painter worked on his portrait. Maybe she was painting his hair, which had gone practically white. Maybe she was trying to get the color of his cheeks right. They were probably talking small talk, like how good the pancakes were at breakfast that morning, or maybe he was telling her a funny story about how at the Yalta Conference Stalin got toilet paper stuck on the bottom of his shoe.

Then, I imagine, the Prez winced. Just a little.

"I have a terrific pain in the back of my head," he said. His secretary, who'd been drinking a cup of tea and eating a biscuit and maybe thinking about wouldn't it be nice to take a spa after lunch, probably stood up and spilled tea on her dress. The painter maybe missed a stroke and gave the Prez a big fuzzy eyebrow.

Then, before anyone could move to help the old man, the sapphire-blue light came streaming through the window. The sound of caterwauling and choirs shrieking and old men grumbling. Teacups and paintbrushes rattled like they were singing along.

I imagine everyone wanted to go help the Prez, but like us citizens in the street, they found themselves drawn to the window, where their chins cocked up.

They saw what I saw what the rest of the world saw what no one has ever stopped seeing since.

Thousands of slivers of shimmering metal filled the sky out to the horizon. They were a mile up, maybe, lined up over Manhattan, over Brooklyn, over Warm Springs, hell, over the whole goddamned planet, hanging in the sky, equidistant. The slivers were so bright you could hardly squint at them without tears popping out of your eyes. It looked like a giant bobcat had just raked claw-holes in the sky.

But when your eyes adjusted, you could see, first off, they were made of metal. Some kind of metal that flows, like the mercury in thermometers. Second off, you could tell from the shadows they cast on the buildings that they were gigantic, each one

stretching for a city block. Ripples of electricity arced from one sliver to the sliver next to it, and to all the slivers around it.

I couldn't help thinking it's a giant net and we're the lucky minnows.

I heard a voice shrieking out, "What the hell are those goddamn things?," and I thought, "Who is that asshole?" Then I realized the asshole was me, and I was so freaked out my whole body had gone rigid and the hair on top of my head was standing up like a milkweed.

In Warm Springs, I figure the Prez put his hand to the back of his head, and groaned. The pain must have been unbearable by now, like a freight train was running a hundred cars in one ear and out the other. The room looked tiny to him, like a dollhouse he was peering into through a missing wall. The dolls were squeaking out words, but the Prez couldn't make out the conversation, and besides, like everyone else, he was more interested in what was going on outside. He managed to wrap his shaking hands around the wheels of his wheelchair and roll himself to the window.

"What the hell are those goddamn things?," the Prez said.

Right around then, time stopped.

Jell-O

Well, almost stopped.

Right after I huddled around the radio with my parents, the crazy cat-old-man-choir sound stopped dead. The radio sputtered and crackled for a few seconds more. A dry hiss replaced the cry-baby newsman. The building began to shake, gently at first, then stronger, like a B-52 was flying low overhead. All the buildings in New York City were trembling. You could hear them groaning and shrieking. Goddamn it, it was a terrible racket.

My dad pulled my mom and me in close. I could feel his heart beating a hundred times too fast through his shirt.

My mom managed to choke out one word:

"Abby," she said.

I never knew a person could load so much awful feeling in one word. I hoped I would never have to hear my mom sound like that again.

My dad stood up. I think he had an idea he was going to rescue Abby from her school ten blocks away, but he had a Nazi bullet in his right knee from the first big war, back when he was a teenager and part of the underground in Poland. He loved to roll up his pant leg and make us press a finger against the pink scar and the hard flattened slice of lead underneath. We would make faces and pretend to barf, but you could see he was proud of his war wound. He tried not to walk with a limp, but he always ended up listing to the side. "I'll go," I said.

"Stupid boy," my mom sobbed. "You're staying right here."

She grabbed me by the collar and started crying into my shirt. What the hell did she want? I thought, not for the first time, *I will never understand women*. My dad would announce that on a pretty regular basis, after my mom would do things like pop her cork because he left a smelly sock on the kitchen table. Now I was saying it too, at least in my mind, about my own mom. That's what the world's come to.

Meanwhile, outside, the sky was filled with some seriously scary crap.

None of us knew what the hell was going on. You didn't. I didn't. We all thought: this time the Nazis have finally done it. Developed some kind of super-rocket to blow us all to smithereens. Or maybe it was an army of zeppelins packed with stormtroopers.

Something we had a chance against.

I heard electricity crackling across the sky. I peeled my mom's fingers off my collar, and went to the window. I pressed my face against the glass just in time to see –

Honestly, I don't know what the hell I saw. It came oozing out of the slivers and fell through the air, and when it touched a building, it clung on and spread out like warm Jell-o.

People were running for cover, buffaloing over the bodies of citizens who stumbled. Brawny men were elbowing women and kicking strollers out of the way like they were going for the winning touchdown in the Sugar Bowl. People were breaking windows with trash cans and crawling over broken glass to get inside shops. A guy tried to climb the fence around a brownstone, and while I watched, the top-spike lanced

through his leg, and he dangled upside down flapping his arms while blood ran up his suit and dripped off his head onto the sidewalk. How embarrassing that must be, I thought, then gave my cheek a pinch to remind me it's all real.

Out on 5th Ave., a young couple scrambled under a car for cover, and the car started up and peeled out right over them. I think the driver saw them and just didn't give a crap. The couple lay there on their faces, still holding hands, while a puddle of blood haloed around their heads.

It struck me people were dying. A lot of them.

The Jell-o stopped oozing a few feet above the ground, and hung there. That sapphire-blue light came shooting out of it, so bright my eyes filled with tears.

I wanted to go, "Mommy." I wanted to scream, "Daddy." I felt like I was two years old again. I thought I might pee my pants, which I am embarrassed to admit.

Before I could do any such babyish thing, the light flooded into the living-room, pierced my eyes, and set my brain on fire. I felt like I weighed a thousand pounds. I did the only reasonable thing.

I fell down.

The Persian carpet pressed up against my cheek. I smelled ancient dust.

Farther along the floor, I saw my mom and dad. She had fallen on her back with her dress hiked up, and I could see she was wearing one of her few remaining pair of hoses. They looked like a spider web held together with dabs of nail polish. My dad, on

his stomach, was reaching out trying to touch her. She was looking at him, mouthing something I couldn't make out.

Then I went unconscious.

K.O'ed in the first round.

Abby

We all woke up later. How much later, who the hell knows. The slivers were still hovering in the sky, oozing their Jell-o, but the only people on the streets were as dead, crazy, or confused as humans get. They were wandering around like drops of rain on a windowpane. As soon as I could move again, I staggered out the door, and took off running in Abby's general direction. I don't think my parents wanted me out there soaking up the blue light, but they were still crawling around the floor trying to get their bearings, and someone had to go, right?

My lungs burned like each one had a hot coal lodged in it, but all I could think about was grabbing Abby and dragging her home. I got knocked down three times on the way to her school by big-eyed citizens trying to run away from the Slivers. One woman was waving around a fistful of her own hair, and scratching a bleeding bald spot where she yanked it out. "Jesus Christ," she kept saying. "Our *savior*." As if I didn't know who J.C. was. Then she started clawing at *my* hair and I scuttled between her legs and took off down the street.

I made a beeline for Abby's room. Her teacher had sent her and her classmates under their desks as soon as the Slivers made their appearance, and no one had come out since. I saw a pair of trousered legs, checked socks, and loafers pretzeled up under the teacher's desk and I figured it must be the guy himself, setting a terrific example for his students. I checked every quivering ball of kid under the other desks and when I found

Abby I grabbed her sweaty hand and gave a wordless tug. For once she did what I asked, and we scrambled off home.

On our way back, I noticed something my mind had pulled the curtain on before. Everywhere, we had to pass the unlucky dead scattered in piles on the street. Mostly, they looked squashed, bent, or broken, like Abby's toys after a couple weeks. Mostly, they were kids, old people, women. Men are faster and stronger, I guess. They claw their way free. They use their fists if they have to. They panic more and that keeps them vital.

I kept trying to cover Abby's eyes with my hand, but she kept pulling it off. "Too sweaty," she said, like that was the real problem. After a while adding up all the dead people, she started breathing hard through her nose and tears pushed down both sides of her face.

By the time we passed the subway station, its stairwell packed with bloody bodies, I had had about enough. I took off my school uniform tie and blindfolded Abby. Her tears kept leaking out from under the tie, but I figured I was sparing her the worst.

She didn't open her mouth but once, to ask, "Are we going to die, Sam?" All I could say was, "I don't have a goddamn clue."

Some big brother.

The living were wandering around the streets, acting like they forgot where they lived, or why they were even alive. A citizen tipped his hat to me as he walked along the street whistling a dizzy tune, briefcase in hand, all his seersucker creases in place. I guess he thought he was going to work. Good luck to him.

Citizens clustered around on doorsteps, shooting the breeze, wondering what the hell the fracas was about, but all the fear had drained out of them. And out of Abby and me too. People nodded to us as we passed, and I nodded back, smiling like it was a regular day. A nice-looking gal about my age giggled at the sight of Abby, blindfolded and stumbling.

At first I thought the general demeanor was kind of weird.

Then I discovered actually I didn't care much anymore that the world had caved in.

I felt sleepy and hungry and I wondered if there was any bologna in the refrigerator and whether my mom would let me have a ginger beer. Even Abby wore out her waterworks and eventually peeled the tie off her eyes.

"I forgot my homework back at school," she said, and for a couple seconds I considered going back to get it. Then I managed to focus my mind.

"I don't think you're going to be doing homework for a while," I said, and tugged her down the street.

"Yeah?," she said. "That's good news."

"It sure as hell is."

I knew I was supposed to be frightened. I remembered how a half-hour ago I was ready to curl up in a ball and suck my thumb until the end of time. But now, I couldn't stop thinking about bologna, and Carolyn Hester, the sweet Jewish girl who used to live in our building, who I kissed one time on the roof last summer while we were smoking

cigarettes we stole from her father. Her family skedaddled out of Manhattan last winter. Her dad was a big cheese in radio, and I guess they finally could afford their manse in Connecticut. I hadn't thought about Carolyn all year, but now I could hear her voice in my head saying "Touch my hair."

On the roof, that night, touching Carolyn's soft brown locks had felt like a revolutionary act. I thought maybe I was the first guy ever to touch a girl's hair. I said to myself, "Tonight, I, Sam Konwicki, am a man." Which, looking back now, was complete bullcrap, but you got to understand: up to that point I had never touched a girl's hair or felt lipstick-sweet lips mashing mine.

I made myself stop thinking about Carolyn Hester and her hair. I was starting to wonder if something in that Jell-o the slivers had dropped was making us as docile as though we were soldiers packed full of morphine. Too bad it didn't kick in before everyone stampeded themselves to death.

Abby stepped over the body of a woman lying face up on the sidewalk. "Jeez, I almost tripped," she said. The woman's dead hands sat crooked on her arms, like she was trying to lift a piano or a safe off her. They were pale as custard cream and I could see the whorls on her fingertips and the lines on her palms. Her face had turned blue, and her swollen orange tongue poked out the side of her mouth. I knew I was supposed to cry, or puke, but looking at real live death in front of me felt no different than looking at the photos of dead G.I.'s in Life magazine every week.

"Ouch," I heard myself saying. "That's got to hurt."

“Can I have an ice cream cone?” Abby said.

“Mom and Dad closed the store, squirt. ”We turned onto our street.

“Hey, Sam, look there.” Abby said. “It’s Mrs. Terry from next door.”

In front of our apartment building, a taxi had collided with the Terrys’ Buick, spinning the car into an old oak tree, which obligingly sheared off the Roadmaster’s front end. Mrs. Terry had ended up dangling out the windshield with the top of her skull tilting off like the lid of a serving platter and her brain about to slide out onto the car hood. Mr. Terry was in attendance too, looking like he was taking a nap on the steering wheel, but most of his teeth were studded like marshmallows in the congealed blood on his face, and there was a hole in his neck the right size for an engine piston.

“I liked them,” Abby said.

“Yeah, they were nice,” I said. “Let’s go inside.”

I noticed Billy Morrell from 1-C sitting on the landing, playing “Scrapple from the Apple” on his cheap plastic saxophone. Definitely more scrapple than apple, but what the hell, it made him happy. Sometimes he played along with Charlie Parker on the radio, sometimes he did his own thing, but, man, his tone left something to be desired, and he knew it, which is probably why he was such a mope most of the time. I used to love to stomp the floor with a broomstick just to make him miss a couple notes.

“Hey, Billy, want to come over?,” I said. “Maybe there’s something about this goddamned mess on the radio.”

“I don’t know, Sam, I should practice,” Billy said, and kept on tooting his horn.

Why the hell were we all so happy? I knew I ought to be shaking in my sneakers, but I couldn't shake off the crazy calm. Maybe a good strong cup of coffee would do the trick.

"I'm telling Mom you said goddamn," Abby said.

"Go ahead, tell her, I'll just deny it," I said. "What do you say, Bill? You want to goddamn come over to our goddamned apartment?"

"Goddamn it, I think I will," Billy said. He unfolded himself, shaking out his long legs.

"Goddamn good choice," I said as I took the stairs two at a time. Abby took that as a challenge to race, and came charging up behind me. Billy, saxophone tucked under his arm, ambled along like a giraffe prowling for eucalyptus leaves.

Every time Abby tried to pass I blocked her good, and pretty soon we were giggling and screaming like we used to when we were half-pints. I kept trying to hang on to the idea that we ought to be frightened out of our skulls, but all my ideas kept drifting away like untied helium balloons.

I thought, all in all, this is turning out to be a pretty good day.

The Prez speaks

The look on my mom's face when Abby came wandering through the door made me feel about ten inches taller and twenty years older. The alien morphine had snuck its way into the apartment, so she had given up crying, and even made a token attempt to clean up around the place. She threw her arms around Abby and me, nearly broke my damned neck with all her hugging, and only stopped when Abby, her face crushed into Mom's chest, made a sound like a death-rattle.

Dad, as always, had a plan. He collected us around the radio, spent a few minutes twiddling the knobs, and finally found the only working station. Since the war began, we had counted on the radio to tell us what to do and sometimes even what to think. I had started to think of it as a member of the family, a weird uncle who couldn't stop telling you crazy stories.

I was perching on my knees with my nose an inch from the grille when the broadcast kicked in. That's the way I used to like to listen to Nero Wolfe and Red Skelton. No distractions. Only this time I wasn't solving a mystery, or laughing my guts out, I was listening to FDR addressing those of us humans who were still around to listen. His voice came out of the speaker covered in scratches and wobbles. I imagined the Prez in a Brazilian jungle, bobbing on the river in a paint-peeled dinghy, Harry Truman holding a bulbous microphone up to FDR's pale, drawn lips.

"Today, April twelfth, 1944," said the Prez, his voice trembling in a way I had never heard before, even when the Japs bombed us, "an event occurred that is beyond the comprehension of our frail and humble minds."

"He's got that right," said Billy.

While the Prez talked, Billy was leaning against the wall tapping out a melody line on the keys of his horn. Billy used to say you had to practice every waking second if you wanted to be any good, but the ratcheting keys sounded like a legion of cockroaches, so I threw him one of my patented withering glances and he quieted down.

"Shush," I said.

"For centuries, scientists have pondered the possibility of life existing on other planets, in other galaxies. In our immense, perhaps boundless universe, we thought that surely there must be other creatures made in God's image. Today, we learned, with utter certainty, that life has thrived elsewhere."

"He sounds weird," said Abby. "Like he's going to cry."

"Shut up," I said.

"Sam," said my mother, and pressed a finger to her mouth.

"Despite our striving," the Prez continued, "despite the innate grace and brilliance of the human race, despite our monuments and innovations, we are primitive and backwards compared to our illustrious visitors."

He paused for what seemed like a minute. Then, so low the crackles and wobbles almost drowned him out, he said, “We are practically nothing.” I never heard him sound so low.

“Well, that’s a happy message,” said Billy.

“Can it,” I said, with more force. I realized we were all starting to come down from that alien morphine.

“I’m hungry,” said Abby.

“Later,” said my dad, and gave her one those looks that shut her up real quick.

“It is our great good fortune,” said the Prez, “that our visitors come not to destroy us, but to elevate us.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said Billy.

“Just listen,” said my dad, and I could see all the back-talk was making him angry. My dad loved the Prez, especially the way he would arrive everywhere in a long black town car, sitting up straight in the back seat like he was part of the automobile.

“Take a look out the window,” muttered Billy, and blew some spit into his sax.

“Our visitors have already communicated with us. They have indicated that they are here solely to assist in our technological development, to spur industry, and to put an end to the awful war that has diminished our humanity, and almost destroyed our ability to exist at all. We accept these gifts gratefully.”

“I’m sure all the dead people are really grateful,” said Billy, and gave a blat on his horn.

"I'm going to wrap that trumpet around your neck," said my dad.

"It's a saxophone, Mr. K." Billy leaned his instrument against his leg, and folded his arms, trying not to look annoyed. I think the alien morphine was wearing off for him too.

"I don't get it," said Abby.

"The Slivers aren't going to kill us," I said. "They're going to help us grow stuff, and they're going to smash Hitler like an ant."

"I still don't get it," said Abby, and she started chewing on what was left of her thumbnail. She liked to worry her digits. It was a bad habit.

"We will provide more information to the populace in the next few hours, once we take stock of a situation unparalleled in human history," said the Prez. "Until then, I ask you to remain calm, tend to your families and to the injured, and join me in a prayer of thanks to our God, whose compassion and boundless power has brought the people of the world more powerful allies and friends than we could have hoped for or imagined. Thank you, and God bless."

"No, thank <u>you</u>," said Billy.

"Why is he thanking us?" said Abby. "We didn't do nothing."

"<u>Anything</u>," said my father, "We didn't do <u>anything</u>." He was a stickler for proper English, even though he couldn't handle it himself. He loved English almost as much as the Prez. He says you have to come from somewhere else if you want to understand how great it is to be an American.

Then all at once my mom began to wail. I had heard that sound before, when other moms in the building got the letter announcing how their son had been shot dead by the Nazis or the Japs. I thought I might cry myself, like you start hiccupping when someone else does, but I'm way too old to be sobbing into Mommy's skirts. So instead I imagined the tear-producing machine in my throat revving up its pump, and I flipped an imaginary switch, saw the gears grinding to a halt, and blinked myself back to normal. I can do stuff like that.

Just part of growing up.

My mom slumped over with her face in her hands and her bird shoulders shuddering, and keened like an air-raid siren. My dad tried to put his arm around her, but she wriggled away. She liked to suffer solo. You had to wait her out.

"It's okay, Mom," I said, "everything's going to be good now. The war's over."

I went and stared out the window.

The city had got quiet. It mostly belonged to the dead. The living had gone inside and pulled the covers up to their noses. But it wasn't all peaceful. Thousands of orange eggs -- at least they looked like eggs to me -- were pouring out of holes in the bottom of the Sliver ships. They came floating down in elaborate spiral formations, maybe so they wouldn't knock into each other, then separated, one egg for each city block. I thought maybe I should let out a shout, get everyone over to the window to take a gander at the latest circus act. But everyone's mood was so sour and frazzled, I decided I'd enjoy the view myself for a while.

Closer up, the eggs looked like they were spun out of glowing orange yarn. Sparks flew off their shells in spectacular firework clusters that glanced off building facades, leaving them smoking and charred. Each egg was the size of a tugboat, and through milky windows I could see shadows moving inside them, multi-jointed figures waving their extremities, bulbous heads nodding to each other. Whatever was in those eggs, they looked to me like they were excited about all the fun they were having.

One of the eggs stopped and hovered at the subway entrance, where the bodies choked the stairs in a giant knot of flesh.

The egg shuddered.

For a second I thought maybe it would hatch, a giant chick would come out, and this whole scenario would be revealed to be Orson Welles' most elaborate prank yet. His fake-o War of the Worlds radio stunt had left me the most scaredy-cat angry seven-year old in Manhattan. How dare he betray a child's trust? I wrote the great man a letter of complaint, and with my mom's help posted it to the Mercury Theater of the Air.

I never received a reply.

While I was busy nursing my grudge against Orson Welles, the egg tipped up and crapped flame. A white-hot river of the stuff. The street rolled like a sheet being shook out, cobblestones rising a few inches and coming down in the wrong places. The city made a groaning sound. Maybe it was disappointed with its poor defense of its citizens.

The bodies ignited and flared red. They twitched and danced and knotted themselves around each other, and in a few seconds they went from bodies to bones.

The flame stopped.

The bones trembled and whispered into dust. I thought, so that's what toasting flesh smells like. I imagined the Jap soldiers in their bunkers who had been getting creamed the same way, and for the first time I felt sorry for them.

By this time everyone in my family, and Billy too, were right behind me, leaning on my shoulders, crushing me into the windowpane. Nobody felt much like talking.

The egg tipped up again, suctioned the human dust off the subway steps, and darted off to incinerate the next cluster of corpses.

"At least they're neat," Billy says.

I could hear the crackle of sparks and the boom of the eggs' fire echoing down every city street. I tried to imagine people's spirits or ghosts or souls or whatnot, freed from their bodies, floating up to the sky to shake hands with the angels, but every time I looked up, I saw nothing but Sliver ships blocking the view.

My dad brought out a bottle of Old Taylor bourbon he had stashed in the pantry in a paper bag. I never even knew he had it, and judging from my mom's pout, I don't think she did either. He was a Blatz guy. Loved to tip back a frosty mug with his elbow cocked, his salute to the god of beer. But he gave us all a chug of the hard stuff, except for Abby, who he decided was too young, the end of the world notwithstanding. We sat around the radio with sweet alcohol perfume hanging in the air around us, tickling our mouths. My dad lit a Pall Mall and smoked it down, then crushed the burning nub between his yellowed fingertips.

I realized we had stopped talking.

We just listened to the Slivers clean up.

Every time a new boom rattled our windows, I imagined a person catching fire. Women, children, babies, all lit up in the Slivers' flame. I wondered what Orson Welles was thinking about now. I wondered if Orson Welles was dead. I thought about the woman we stepped over with her outstretched hands and swollen orange mouth. We wouldn't have to pick her up by her cold armpits and ankles and load her on a truck, squinting so we wouldn't have to see her blue tongue and blood-shot eyes and the fingerprint whorls that only she in all the universe had owned. Those whorls had been incinerated, along with the pain of dying, and the humiliation of her crushed, battered, clown-faced corpse splayed on the sidewalk for everyone to feel sick about. We wouldn't have to bury her. Her family wouldn't have to cry over her body, shred their clothes like families in Greece do when their partisan husbands return from the front stiff and cold in their cheap pine boxes. The dying was done. The burying was almost over. We could get on with things, whatever things turned out to be. Like the Prez said, maybe the Slivers were giving us a gift. Was it their fault if some of us were too frail to receive it?

In an hour, the streets were spotless.

Brenda

I'm sweating in my black leather jacket, watching Mr. Parrazid draw graphs and arcs on the blackboard to explain why I'm sixteen practically forever, and why Tom Braszkowski, slouched at a corner desk in the back, will have scabby pimples to pick at for the rest of his fourteen year-old almost-eternity, and why Dave Schwarz, his knees knocking against the bottom of his too-tiny desk as he frantically takes notes on Mr. Parrazid's droning lecture, will be eighteen and gawky into perpetuity.

I'm the only one encased in leather. It makes me feel safe, like a horned beetle among garden-variety ants. Everyone knows my dad's a police officer. He can throw his weight around, call in favors, so while everyone else is wearing their drab beige canvas training jackets, I look like I'm ready to work the streets. I was thinking maybe I'd leave the jacket home, blend in, but Pop was ready with it when I walked out the door, holding it up by the shoulders so I could slip my arms inside.

"Show them what you can do," he said, and kissed me on the cheek. Too much stubble and saliva. I hate that. Then he pushed me out the door, and closed it after me

And besides, what the hell *can* I do? I'm nodding at the blackboard like I get it, but I don't even understand the first thing about the science behind the Slivers. It has to do with my worst subject: calculus. At least I think it does, though personally I would be reluctant to comment authoritatively on the mechanics of alien technology.

Mr. Parrazid finishes scrawling parabolas and equations all over the board and turns to us. I think he has actual tears in his eyes. He's Persian or something, very emotional.

"And as a consequence, we will not die for thousands and thousands of years," he says. "What a gift the Mauritei have given us."

Thanks, Slivers. Thanks a hell of a lot. If I have to sit for the next thousand years listening to Mr. Parrazid drone, I'd rather die. Maybe throw myself off the Empire State Building. Only nobody can get in the place anymore since the Slivers made it into the Eastern Seaboard Central Security Complex.

I start to drift off to sleep with my eyes open and my head wedged between my hands. It's a skill. Makes me look extra-interested. In a few seconds, I find myself deposited in a weird dream where I'm inside one of those giant Sliver suits, thundering through Times Square, hundreds of wild horses running between my legs. Appaloosas, piebalds, Arabians, you name it. It's like every horse left in the U.S.A. has decided to swarm Times Square. Their hooves sound like a million typewriters clacking away at once. And me being a Sliver, at least in the dream, I'm trying to step on the gorgeous creatures. But every time I bring my lunky mechanical foot down, the river of horses splits down the middle, and instead of making equine pancakes, I fracture the asphalt with a booming stomp.

The rustling and squeaking of my fellow students getting up from their desks sucks me back into my body. I get up, too fast, bang my knees on the bottom of the desk,

get a little stuck, then manage to stand up and join the back of the single-file line out the door. Terence Porter, who's at least twenty, the oldest, blondest kid in class, gives me a look of such magnificent condescension that I make a mental note to murder him one of these days. His dad's a mucky-muck in the Agricultural Department. That's how Terence got into Training.

"Have a nice beauty nap, Sam?," he says. He likes to put on a British accent because his mom's a society lady and the whole family lived in London for a few years.

I mumble some kind of verbal porridge, still half-asleep.

Terence flips his hair back with the tips of his fingers. Gives my jacket a look like it's made of mud. It's a lot of work to make one guy feel small, and it's wasted on me.

We march out into the drizzle, feet crunching in the wet gravel. For the first time, I notice that the short-haired, slight-shouldered kid in front of me, is an actual girl.

"You're a girl," I say.

She glances over her shoulder at me. I get a blast of blue eyes and freckles under a red mane, and she frowns at me like I just gave her the bird.

What's a girl doing in Training anyhow? I've heard for years from my pop how hard Acceleration works your body, how you have to be in top physical condition at all times. I thought I wouldn't even get into Training with my bad lungs, but magically that information got left off my application.

I decide to give the girl a pleasant nudge in the middle of the back. Her spine's warm through her canvas training jacket.

She whips around, and her face is red under all those freckles.

"What," she says.

"I'm Sam," I say.

"Good for you," she says, and gives me the back of her head again.

I poke her again, same place, throw in a tickle. I don't know what's got into me. She's just annoying, is all. She turns all the way around now, so she has to walk backwards to keep the line moving.

"What exactly do you want?"

"Just wondering. I mean, you don't see girls around here much."

"You don't see many kids, either," she says. I try not to react to that. I don't want to her to think I care.

"You got a name, right?" I try an insouciant grin. Too big, I'm the Cheshire Cat. I scale it down to a close-lipped smirk.

"Brenda Garland." She rolls her eyes when she says it.

"Some moniker," I say, so she knows I'm in on the cosmic joke.

She makes a strangled sound and turns back around.

Apparently I can't catch a break today.

I find I can't help myself. Got to tickle that spine one more time.

Brenda whips around, plants her feet, and I bounce off her. The guy behind me smacks into me, and I bounce back into Brenda, and she shoves me back into the guy behind me, and I go back and forth a few times, like an eight-ball off the cushions. The

front part of the line drifts off to the training field, and the back part clusters up around Brenda and me.

She's got her fists up, protecting her face. Pretty good boxing form.

It occurs to me that I'm about to get into a fight.

With a girl.

The other trainees are whooping for blood. I can see Terence Porter standing to one side with his arms folded, looking at the fracas through heavy eyelids like the rest of us are mildly amusing zoo chimps. "Oh, mother," I imagine him saying, with his snoot cocked up, "you won't *believe* what that frightful boy got up to today. You know, the one who looks like he's twelve years old."

Why do I always end up in the middle of a fracas? I'm just walking along minding my own business –

Okay, so I wasn't minding my own business.

But she's a girl.

Girls like it when you make them a little mad. At least that's what I heard.

My mom used to say to my pop, "You drive me crazy, you hairy ape," and slurpy kisses usually followed.

So what gives?

I can hardly move in this jacket. I got the whole weight of a cow on my back. All I want is to be back in line, scraping along with my head down, but instead I got a dozen kids walling me in, screaming, "Kill him."

Kill me? What about, kill her? Brenda's the one with her dukes up. I decide I better play nice. I put my hands up and make my eyes all tender like Jesus.

"Look, Brenda, obviously – "

She swings at me. It's a good right, and she puts her shoulder into it, the way a boxer ought to. But I see it coming, and roll so I take it on my shoulder. At the same time, I slip in a right undercut, and give her one in the ribs. It's a move I've practiced a thousand times with a punching bag, but I never tried it on a person, and never ever thought I'd be throwing my knuckles into a girl. I don't even want to hit Brenda, it just sort of happens because she's trying to hit me.

Be that as it may, there's a crack loud enough for all the kids to hear, and Brenda slips to the ground like a coat slipping off a hanger.

All the Trainees go quiet. I'm standing there, Daddy's boy in black leather, breathing hard, looking like the ultimate asshole of the universe.

The guy who hits girls.

Great first day of school.

She looks at the hand I hit her with like she's ready to bite off my fingers. I tuck it into my jacket.

"You were trying to hit me," I say, mostly for the benefit of the Trainees. Somehow that ends up sounding like I just impugned Brenda's delicate reputation.

She's gone shock-pale under her freckles. I must have cracked her rib good.

"So we got our first fight already." I hear an adult voice, and I'm flooded with relief. A Detective First-Class with short-clipped gray hair, wire-rimmed specs, and pockmarks that could be old shrapnel wounds. MacDougal by his name tag. Now, this guy looks good in his leather jacket. Maybe you just got to grow into them.

"Nothing happened," says Brenda. "I slipped."

Terence offers her a hand up. She brushes herself off, even flashes the Detective an apologetic smile.

You ever had a cracked rib? You know what that's like?

Scream on the inhale, and whimper on the exhale. Repeat until you start to pass out. And as you're spiraling down into the maw of oblivion, hug the darkness and thank it for swallowing you up.

Okay, I'm exaggerating, but goddammit, it hurts. That time in the boxing gym when I took on Mal Fenwick? Well, I only did it once, let's leave it there.

And Brenda, she's just getting back into line, stretching, shaking the mud off her pants.

With a glance at me, Terence whispers some dumb comment in her ear. She actually manages to giggle.

I'm ready to pass out just watching her fake it.

"All right, Trainees, catch up with your classmates, let's go, goddammit, double-time." Detective First-Class claps out a rhythm, and we all start marching, stomping our feet in the gravel.

Brenda keeps her head down. Drizzle's condensing on the edge of her nose and dripping off, and her eyes are wet too, I don't know with what.

But she doesn't slow down.

I can see the Training Ground ahead. It looks like a collection of Eastside tear-downs, three blocks of soot-and-water stained brick tenements, holding each other up, bordered by a spiked wrought-iron fence.

At the entrance gate, there's a sign. If I squint, I can just read it.

Brooklyn Municipal Police Training Ground.

The name's drab, like everything else in this swampland. There's nothing to fix your eye on around here, except the school barracks, the river, and the algae-crawling marshes that stink like old eggs and sour coffee grounds. The marsh water's turned black. Maybe the diseased buildings are leaching their toxins into the ground. Even the fog that hangs over the marshes has streaks of black crawling through it. Some invisible insect is hissing louder than our marching feet splashing through the rotten ooze.

They're waiting for us at the entrance. Three Detectives, with their assistants, all at parade rest. I can see the assistants are wearing the blue arm-badges that identify them as fresh Rookies.

And then I see two of the guys are Jeff Burch and Jerry Fitzpatrick.

They see me and they stand up a little straighter.

But what really makes my balls want to climb into my belly is the sight of two Slivers flanking the humans. Those mighty suits, caked with the white residue that's

always oozing out the exhaust holes. The rusty tubes and gears. The arms that drag the ground, like a gorilla's.

The suits make no kind of human sense. I imagine they came out of the heads of designers in padded cells, strapped into dove-white straitjackets, sketching out mechanical nightmares with a pencil clenched in their teeth and a drawing pad balanced on their knees.

Nope.

This is state-of-the-art alien life support.

Behind those grey-smeared viewing windows, there's always something moving, something flitting around. Sometimes you can hear a high-pitched chirp from behind the glass, like some kind of giant parakeet.

But I don't think they look like birds.

You ask me, they probably look like snails. Which is why they need these King Kong suits with the counterweighted hands that can grab a time junkie by the hips, and in a second squeeze him so hard his body falls into two parts.

I've seen it.

More than once.

They do it because they know it impresses.

I look down at the ground and keep marching to the Training Ground.

Kippers and Eggs

For the rest of that first day, we sat on our hands waiting for the next opportunity to panic.

The radio played static, but I left it on anyhow, hoping for an update from the Prez, or at least a music show. At six, for an hour, a garbled word-stew spilled out of the speakers. Some language I had never heard before. The voices clacked and echoed in the static. They reminded me of machine-guns. The more I thought about it, the more annoyed I got. The Slivers had their own lines of communication: Why the hell were they elbowing in on ours? Then it hit me: They're making a point. They wanted us to know they had their fingers, or whatever they had instead of fingers, stuck deep in all our pies.

At least our pantry was full. It was my dad's way to stock a year's supply of food. That's Polack ingenuity for you. Back in his dump of a town, you never knew when some tangle-bearded Cossack was going to ride in with his buddies, burn the town down, decapitate your chickens, defenestrate your babes-in-arms, and shoot your cows. You always had to be ready to lose everything.

Around dinnertime, Dad grabbed a can of kippers from the shelf where he kept them stacked like miniature skyscrapers. He bought those damned fish by the case, and he loved them in a way no one ought to love kippers.

He peeled the top back in three quick turns of the key, easy as winding a watch, then divided the stinking fish into four equal pieces, and arranged them on plates with a rueful look, like he wished he had parsley to make them look nice.

My mom set the table with the good cloth napkins, and the nice silver she inherited from Aunt Linda and Uncle Mike after the car accident. For ten minutes we pretended we were living the good life on Park Place. But once the taste of those kippers got in the back of my throat, I remembered Mrs. Terry's head and the pink porridge sliding around inside, and with everyone else remembering whatever recent terrible moments they could conjure, the table stayed pretty quiet.

That's the power of kippers.

After dinner, my mom and dad played cribbage. They didn't want to worry me and Abby by acting terrified, but they ended up reminding me of the straight men in a Marx Brothers movie, arranging their cards and moving pegs down that mahogany board while Sliver eggs streamed past the window on their way to clean up some mess uptown, and the whole apartment shuddered and groaned, and dislodged plaster floated down into their hair.

After a while of playing cards, we started to get antsy without even knowing why.

"Go check the time, Sam," said Dad. He had just lost another cribbage hand, and looked like he was considering knocking over the pegs.

"You got your watch on," I said.

"Just go check, will you?" Mom was looking out the window while she shuffled the cards. I felt like for some reason she was talking to me like I was an adult, and an adult she didn't even much like.

"Go check the time, Abby," I said. She was watching the cribbage game, holding up her head with her hands, index fingers pressed against her eyebrows to keep her eyelids open.

Abby groaned and stumbled into the kitchen, where my mom had hung the cuckoo clock. It had spit out its last cuckoo around five years ago, but my mom insisted the clock part was working just fine, so she kept it around.

"Eight seventeen," said Abby.

My dad checked his watch, then looked at my mom.

"Eight seventeen," he said, and glanced out the window.

"It's a Swiss movement," my mom said.

My dad tapped his watch. He took it off and wound it.

We all looked at the gray light streaming through the window.

It looked like noon out there.

I was going to say something, but Mom and Dad started another card game and Abby went to make herself a bologna sandwich.

"*One* piece of meat," said my dad.

"Don't you think I know that?" Abby said.

She took her sandwich and a cold Pa-Poose and went to her room.

I napped on the couch. A dream crept up on me. When I heard my dad calling me, all I could drag back into the real world was a moment when me and FDR were doing some rewiring on the apartment building, and when the Prez leaned over to unroll a

blueprint I could see he had a hole in his back like where you would put your hand in a marionette.

"Nobody's used that since I was a little boy," said the Prez. "You want to try?"

I politely declined.

"Sam, go check the time," said my dad.

I sat up. Wiped drool off my cheek. It seemed like only a few minutes must have passed, because the same gray daylight was still hanging outside the window.

"What difference does it make?," I said.

My dad gave me a look like asking me to check the time was on the same scale as disarming a V-2 bomb.

I slouched into the kitchen, and spent a good long time looking at the face of the cuckoo clock.

"Well, let's have it," said my dad.

"Ten fifteen," I said. My mouth got dry as I spoke. I wanted a big glass of seltzer, but I didn't want my Dad yelling at me for wasting precious rations.

He lay down his cards. He tapped the corners to line up the stack. He didn't even look at my mom.

I counted eighteen ticks of the clock.

"Strange," said my dad, and squeezed my mom's hand. She stayed quiet.

After a few more rounds of cribbage, my mom dragged out the Parcheesi set and rousted Abby from her bed. She made us play ten whole games of Parcheesi, and when

the last printed score sheet ran out, my dad cocked his wrist, took a long look at his watch, and covered the face with his hand.

I listened to the cuckoo clock ticking. It felt like a tiny Swiss mountaineer was slamming a pick into the side of my head once every second. I walked over to the window, where the same gray light still hung over the city.

"What the hell's going on?" murmured my mom.

No one said anything.

I leaned my head against the glass. Down on the street, a man in overalls was walking around with a Brownie camera taking pictures of burned-out cars and shattered windows. A German shepherd came trotting down the street with a brown paper bag in his mouth. His tail was wagging, his fur damp with drizzle. He must have found a burger. Lucky dog.

I looked at the family. Abby was peeking under our dad's hand at the watch.

"It's midnight plus three minutes," said Abby.

My dad got up from the card table and went to the window. We stared at the daylight. He drummed his fingers on my shoulder.

"There's a stray dog out there," I said.

We watched the dog lope around the corner.

"Poor thing," my mom said.

"Poor everything," said my dad.

He drew the blackout curtains.

###

I woke up thinking a Sliver egg was sitting on my chest. It was only Abby leaning on me. Her breath smelled like Mars bars.

"You been sneaking candy?," I said.

"I heard something," she said.

"You're losing your little mind."

"No, I mean I heard a guy screaming like he was being murdered."

"You had a bad dream."

"I wasn't asleep. I can't."

I sat up on my elbows to get her off my chest so I could breathe.

"So is he murdered and can I go back to sleep now?"

"He's crying."

"He's crying <u>where</u>?"

"Come look."

She dragged me by the hand back to her room. She had her blackout curtains half-closed, but the shadow of the fire escape still hung like prison bars across the walls. Under the floorboards, I could hear Billy's saxophone squeaking through "Scrapple from the Apple" worse than he ever played before the Slivers arrived.

"Mystery solved," I said. "It's the sax that's getting murdered. Maybe someone'll come haul Billy off to the pokey."

"That's not it. I know what Billy sounds like, you dumb-bug."

She put her shoulder to the window and pushed, but the window didn't budge.

"How about unlocking it first," I said, and unhooked the window lock. Abby slid the window up, and the sound of the saxophone came piercing into the room, tinny, echoing off the walls. It sounded almost like Sliver language.

"Satisfied?" I said.

Then I heard the guy sobbing.

It sounded like he was in the alley between our building and the apartments next door. The sax made it hard to hear, but I thought maybe he was saying "Please" and "Mother." I had read enough Life magazine and Ernie Pyle to know that grown men don't ask for their mommies unless they're about to die.

I stomped on the floor to shut Billy up. After a few seconds, the sax went silent.

Now I could hear the guy in the street moaning a whole monologue about how he never thought it would come to this, and please, please, Mother, and he wanted to be forgiven, and a few Latin words to impress God.

I climbed out onto the fire escape. When Abby tried to follow me, I pushed her back inside with a foot in her gut.

"Hey," I shouted. "Mister. Should I call the cops?"

He went silent. For a second, I thought maybe he was glad to hear another human voice, but then I figured he was doing the same math I was, about the slim chance of cops showing up, what with all the ruckus today.

Abby squirmed past me and leaned over the railing.

"We're coming down there," she shouted.

"You're not going anywhere," I said.

"Okay, you go."

"Let's give it a minute," I said, "see what develops."

"You're scared."

"I'm thinking."

"That's a first."

The guy started up crying again.

"Hang on. My brother's coming to get you," shouted Abby.

"You're too much," I said.

"You're not enough," she said.

I weighed punching her, but instead I took a hold of the rusty ladder, and scuttled down to the fourth floor. As my slippers touched the grate, I saw Billy sitting in the window, tonguing his saxophone.

"Some drunk, is all," he said.

"That's what I'm guessing," I said. I listened for the guy, but it was quiet. I thought maybe I wouldn't go any farther, just shoot the breeze with Billy until the guy wandered off to some other block.

"You down yet?" Abby's voice rattled off the walls.

"So glad I don't have a little sis," said Billy.

"Amen, brother," I said.

Billy patted his saxophone.

"How do I sound?", he said.

"I thought Charlie Parker moved in downstairs," I said.

"No, really."

"No, really. I mean, the tone. The syncopation. You got the whole package, Billy, honest."

"You think he's still alive?"

"Charlie Parker?"

"Who else?"

"Well, if he's gone, God forbid, it opens up possibilities for you."

"You think there's still gonna be music? I mean, now that's the world's lost its nut?"

"Well, you're still playing, right?"

"I'm not some moldy fig, am I?," he said.

"What, like some Dixieland cat? Not in my book."

"Thanks, Sam."

Above me, Abby's voice killed the moment.

"Sam? Are you down? Can you see him?"

"On my way," I said, and headed for the ladder.

"I wouldn't go down there," said Billy.

"Why not?"

"Because you never know."

I leaned over the railing. Craned my neck. Down below, right at the corner, I finally saw the guy sitting with his back against our building. Blood was trickling from his gut and pooling on the cobblestones in the shape of Lake Michigan. I wanted to be back on my couch.

An engine gunned. Someone throttling down too hard. A Ford stripped to primer came coughing around the corner. At the alley, the driver hit the brakes hard. A stocky guy and a girl in a tight dress and heels bailed out of the car, scrambled over to the guy, and lifted him up under his arms. The girl kept shrieking "Teddy," over and over, the stocky guy kept telling her to shut up, and Teddy started in bawling when he saw them. When they lifted him up he tried to wipe the blood off his pants, like he was embarrassed.

They tossed him in the back of the car. The girl got in the passenger side. The stocky guy got in the driver's seat. The girl slammed the back door, got in the front, pulled her own door shut, and just when the guy hit the gas, a Sliver egg came flying down the alley and stopped right above the car.

The stocky guy hit the brakes. The car rocked on its axles. The girl grabbed the stocky guy's shoulder, clutching the material of his suit so tight she hiked his sleeve up over his wrist. In the back seat, the guy Teddy was sitting up on one elbow. I could see spots of blood on his face.

And that was pretty much it, the last second of their life.

A flame blasted out of the Sliver egg. The Buick's windshield vaporized, and then so did the stocky guy and the girl, and a moment later so did Teddy. They all held their shape for a few seconds, and then the stocky guy and the girl crumpled into each other, kind of became one heap of slag, and in the back seat Teddy became his own heap. The red-hot frame of the car closed around them like the petals of a rose.

"I don't think there's going to be any more music," said Billy. He stood up, shook out his legs, and climbed through his window back into his apartment.

I looked up, saw Abby's white face hanging like the moon. I felt warm rain hit my face.

Then I realized she was crying.

Disequilibrium

Detective first-class MacDougal cinches the Accelerator belt tight around my chest. I have enough trouble breathing already, so this is not good news. I can feel the alien metal shifting and molding around my shoulders, my arms, my ribs, my thighs. I can feel the console sliding into place under my right palm, four oval buttons to control acceleration, deceleration, communication, and the weapon, which is of course de-activated for us trainees. I look down the line: Everyone's standing stiffly as their Accelerators grab them and settle in. Even Terence Porter, who claims to have accelerated once at one of his Dad's society parties, looks like he's getting goosed by the shimmering thing.

I've ended up standing next to Brenda, of course, because it's that kind of day. I try a smile on her, but she's ignoring me. Her jaw's moving like the alien getup on her back is giving her the jitters.

"They say you get used to it," I say. Before she can answer, Jerry Fitzpatrick comes strolling down the line and stops in front of me.

"Cadet Konwicki, do you have permission to speak?" The Slivers, who have been standing so stationary I thought maybe they fell asleep, stir when Jerry opens his mouth.

"I don't know -- do I?"

He leans in on me. I can smell alien porridge on his breath. "Address me as sir."

I smile. "Sure thing, sir," I say. Jerry looks like he's considering kicking me in the balls, but he moves on.

"Me and him go way back," I whisper to Brenda. She just stares ahead.

Detective first-class MacDougal starts in telling us how to use the Accelerators. He sounds bored. I bet he's made this speech a thousand times before. This is Training Mission #1, in which we're supposed to accelerate, locate any abusers lurking about the imaginary neighborhood of the Brooklyn Municipal Police Training Grounds, and detain them for questioning. For the purposes of this simulation, they're not real junkies, just cops pretending to be bad guys. Nonetheless, points out MacDougal, they will respond unpredictably and with sufficient force to disable you on occasion.

You have to think quick on your feet so the fake junkies don't get away, or mock-kill you, which would be worse than embarrassing on the first day. If you don't make the grade, you can get cut from the training, and it doesn't matter who your dad is, or how much your family paid the Ministry. The Slivers take their law enforcement seriously.

They pair us off. I get Brenda because apparently God hates me. I see some of the others shaking hands as they introduce themselves to their partners, so I offer Brenda my mitt.

"Sorry about the rib-shot," I say.

She slaps my hand away. "Just focus on your job," she says.

"That's what I'm here for." She makes me feel like I'm mumbling through a mouthful of marshmallows.

For the last week, I've been memorizing the position of the buttons. None of them is easy to reach. The Slivers didn't plan for human fingers when they designed the

Accelerators. At the same time I try to listen to MacDougal, who's strolling down the line in his pressed black uniform.

"If you feel as if you're going to lose consciousness, immediately decelerate, and remain in place until a rookie can assist you. I don't want any first-day fatalities on my watch. Can't stand the paperwork. I will hound you in hell if you make me fill out forms on you."

I don't want to be one of those guys who flips the switch and blasts into a wall like a marionette in a tornado. We've all heard the story of Tom Finn, whose Accelerator got miscalibrated to such a frantic degree that it took a week to find him, six miles away, embedded in the wall of a post office. The manager got wise when he saw the Rorschach blood blot growing on his wall. They had to open the plaster with picks and take Tom out with tweezers.

Then there's Bill Franken, who choked to death on his own accelerated puke.

The stories are endless.

"Cadets, prepare to accelerate," says MacDougal. I can feel Brenda tense next to me. I glance at the Slivers, impassive in their suits, milky fluid dripping from their joints. I don't want to let them down. I don't want to let anyone down. I press the prep button, and a needle slides out of the console, pierces my wrist. The yellow fluid burns going in, but I'm too excited to think much about it.

"And -- accelerate," says MacDougal. I press the button, which I hope is the right button, which I've rehearsed doing a thousand times, and goddammit, I need to get one thing right today.

My dad told me the first time he accelerated he forgot about all the terrible things that happened in his life. He said it was like all the time he had been sitting in a cold, moldy theater with uncomfortable wooden seats, waiting for a show to start. And finally the red curtains pulled aside and showed him such wonders he forgot all his aches, his chills, the nightmares that traveled with him from Poland, all the disappointments.

Even my Mom and Abby.

It made him forget them. At least for a few minutes.

But I don't want to forget them.

I don't want my mind scrubbed clean.

I just want to survive.

I need to remember the golden rules of accelerating: Don't touch any stationary objects. Acceleration is a surveillance technology. You are moving fast through time, everything around you is moving slow. Imagine a car hitting a wall at seventy miles an hour. That's *you* gently caressing a wall while accelerated. Good way to lose a finger.

So stay in open spaces.

Enjoy your ride.

I press the button.

The engine starts right up. I hear those sounds I heard on the first day the Slivers came. Caterwauling and choirs. Buzz-saws and church organs. The Brooklyn Municipal Police Training Yard lights up around me. It's still gray, but I can see every particle of light churning like sea-foam. I can see drizzle hanging in the air like rock candy. The buildings that a moment ago had looked like old men sagging on a park bench tremble with details I hadn't noticed before. It's like looking at a painting nose-close, seeing the grooves of the paintbrush. And those old buildings sizzled with sounds: the creak as they settle into the ground, the drum of raindrops along their eaves and roofs, the way the mud laps at their foundations. It all fits together so beautifully. I could have punched myself for not seeing it before. Even the Slivers, who had accelerated along with the rest of us, move like music, the way they hiss and drip, the way the joints of their suits grind together and squeak. The milky clouds that churned behind their faceplates are telling me a story. Something about power and infinite space, the long distances they had traveled to get here to bring us almost-eternal life and an end to war and poverty. For a moment, I love these guys with my whole heart. I feel shame for ever doubting them. I know I'll be safe as long as their ships circle our fragile little planet.

Then I thought:

You don't ever want to love anyone <u>that</u> much. You leave yourself open for a gutshot.

Brenda looks magnificent. She's exploding with light and color. She's a human version of a tickertape parade down Fifth Avenue. All of us are. I had forgotten there was

so much ripeness in the world. I had gotten so used to gray and wet. But Brenda's skin is a juicy peach and her eyes are Thrifty's mint ice cream. She catches me looking at her and frowns, and then MacDougal shimmers into view, his Accelerator singing like a choir.

"Cadet, hold it together." He's looking at Tom Braszkowski, who has broken out in a cold sweat. His mouth is undulating like a goldfish, and his Adam's apple looks like it's thinking about busting out of his throat. Terence Porter snickers, and then I notice the stain drifting down Tom's pants leg. He's pissed himself, poor bastard. He stands slumped in his accelerator like it's the only thing holding him up.

They call it <u>disequilibrium</u>.

The way some people are allergic to cats or milkweed, some are allergic to accelerating. Their bodies get all used to slow-time, and when you wind them up, some kind of mental spring breaks. It happens eventually to everyone who accelerates– your mind and body just cry uncle – but only one in a hundred snaps on the first trip.

Poor Tom, I thought. Why did it have to be you? Why does it <u>always</u> have to be the kid who gets the shit knocked out of him on a daily basis already? Why not someone like me, who can get up and walk away and hang on to a splinter of pride?

That's the world for you.

Jerry Fitzpatrick comes up behind Tom, and slides a hand onto Tom's console.

"I'm okay," says Tom, "I'll be fine, sir." Then he vomits all over himself. The puke goes whirling around his head in a blurry spiral, then Jerry de-commissions Tom,

turns off his Accelerator, and the quivering mass of disequilibriated kid freezes into a statue. You can't even tell he's breathing. All the colors rise off him and dissolve into the air. He's gray, rain, and puke now.

He's been knocked back into slow-time.

He doesn't see us anymore. We're flickers. We're annoying mosquitos and half-heard whispers.

We're invisible.

By the time we finish our mission, not even a second will have passed for Tom. We can just leave him where he's standing, in the slow world, while we barrel through time like Grumman Hellcats.

While I'm feeling bad for the motionless lump of piss and puke that's Tom Braszkowski, MacDougal's barking orders. "Konwicki and Traut, north sector. Porter and Bannister, south. Schwarz and Feld, east, Abbott, you and Birch take North."

We all bark out nervous variations on "Yes, sir," and I follow Brenda down a muddy side-street into the north sector.

I get fixated right off on the beads of water drifting down the walls, and the smell of rotten wood, as if there's a forest hiding in the middle of this fake city. Don't get hypnotized, they told us. Keep breaking your focus, or you'll end up staring at a cockroach crawling across a horse turd and you'll never get the job done. That's how powerful it us for us getting shot out of slow-time, back into the world we used to inhabit, remembering what our senses used to be good for.

I feel awake for the first time since the Slivers came. That sleepy feeling like my head's full of feathers is gone. I'm hungry and I keep thinking how I could use a steaming bowl of mac 'n' cheese. Or maybe a slice of prime rib like we had that one time for my dad's birthday. I remember sliding under the red banquettes and looking up at the constellation of masticated chewing gum stuck to the bottom of the table. And Abby following me under, grabbing one of those glazed old pieces and popping it into her mouth. I didn't stop her, on purpose. And got screamed at by my mom, as usual.

I wonder how Abby is. I wonder if she's alive.

"Konwicki, your feet." Brenda's turned around and she's throwing me a frown.

I look down. I'm standing in place, up to the ankles in mud, my feet still trying to march along. I'm about to topple over and take my Accelerator with me.

"You disequilibrated?," says Brenda. "I could go get MacDougal." She sounds like she'd like that.

"I'm fine," I say. "I'm surveilling the scene. You ought to be too. You're the point man."

"I'll go right, you go left, Officer," she says with a smirk. I get an impulse to kick some of this goddamned mud all over her.

She turns off the main road into an alley. I wonder for a second if maybe we shouldn't stay together, but I'm so relieved to not have her standing over me making me itch that I sprint down the alley in the opposite direction.

It's darker down here. They've cluttered the alley with fire escapes, awnings, stained laundry hanging half off clotheslines. All the decoration's supposed to make the place look real, I guess. In this shimmering fast-time, with the sluice-gates of my senses open, I feel like I do when I'm watching a movie, everything made mysterious and new with lights and music, so that a regular street looks like a fairy-tale kingdom.

Maybe I ought to take up smoking. A cigarette leaning off my lip might make me look tougher. With my lungs, I can't inhale. But I like the way the smoke settles into your clothes. It says, adult. It says, you got the determination to take on the world.

Why the hell am I'm thinking about smoking when I'm supposed to be sweeping the street for junkies?

Then I see a wisp of smoke hanging in the air, curled at the edges like a jellyfish.

There's someone behind the dumpster.

I stand there trying to be quiet so the smoker won't see me.

But he's doing the same thing, right?

He's the junkie. I'm the cop.

I'm the guy in charge. I figure I better try to act like it.

"Hey," I say. It comes out friendly.

Nothing happens except that the smoke climbs into the sky.

"Hey, you," I say. "Come on out of there." Good thing my voice changed before the Lacuna. I know guys a couple years younger than me who are stuck into perpetuity cracking like yodelers every time they open their mouths.

The guy sticks his head out. I see a long, horsey face and small eyes under a fedora. Then he dances back behind the dumpster again.

"Police," I say. "Come out with your hands where I can see them."

Now I just feel ridiculous. Like I'm Wyatt Earp all of a sudden.

But it works, kind of. The smoker comes out, hands up, cigarette dangling between his puke-colored nicotine-stained fingers. He's tall and his suit hangs off him and the arms are a little short, and there are rips at some of the seams. I get the thought he took the suit off someone else who maybe didn't want to give it, and he's wearing it as a warning to others about what he's capable of.

"Okay, John Wayne, don't shoot," he says. His voice is high, almost like a girl's.

"What are you doing back here?," I say. I'm pretty sure that's the first thing I'm supposed to ask.

"I'm having a cigarette," he says. "Want one?"

"Just answer the goddamned question." I'm already cursing. Makes me sound nervous.

He nods to the fire escape. "Little lady doesn't like cigs around the cashmere. You know what <u>that's</u> like, right?"

"What's your name?" I say.

"Bill. What's yours?"

"Bill <u>what</u>?"

"You one of those guys off 'What's My Line'?" He takes a drag off his cigarette. Smoke curls out his nose. "Ask me another question."

"What's your apartment number?," I say.

"2-B. Hey, you want to come up? I could introduce you to Marlene. She's German, but she loves this country better than you and me. She'll sing "The Star-Spangled Banner in her skivvies for a dollar."

My focus is hard on him, on the pimples on his chin and at the left corner of his mouth, the fringes on his cheeks where he missed shaving, the sweat on his tripe-white skin. I shoot a look at his shoes, shuffling nervously on the cobblestones.

"You're accelerated," I say.

"No kidding."

"What are you doing in fast-time?"

"I work overtime at the scum factory, I get a bonus, just like everyone else."

I don't say anything.

"You know how it is," he says. "I make food for them aliens. It's a good job. Doesn't pay much, but we get time bonuses. You probably do too, right? It's just a cheap kick, but these days a guy doesn't have a lot of choice when it comes to fun."

"Open your coat," I say. "Slowly, and keep your hands away from your waist." I pull the arming lever on the weapon. It's all pretend, but it makes me feel safer.

"You got one of them alien guns," says Bill. "I hear they blow a hole big as a fist through a guy. You ever done that?"

"Open your goddamned coat," I say. I'm starting to not care if this mope thinks I'm nervous.

"They let cops talk like that? What's the world coming to?"

He flicks his cigarette butt to the ground and unbuttons his coat. "I'm from South Carolina," he says. "I came to the great city of Manhattan for work. You a native yourself or a transplant?"

I can see a lump on his right side under his shirt. It's shifting around, quivering, almost like it's got a mind of its own.

"Unbutton yourself," I say.

"But it's cold," he says.

"Do it."

"And also, Mr. Bossy-Pants, I'm a little shy because I happen to have a war-wound sustained in my service on Guadalcanal. You have heard of Guadalcanal, haven't you? That was one fierce battle."

"Sir, I'm going to ask you one last time. Open your shirt."

"What about if I don't?"

That's a good question.

I don't have a real weapon.

My backup's off on her own adventure in the next alley down.

This guy's maybe a welterweight, and me, I'm a flyweight.

So that doesn't leave much except that I don't want my career to end on the first day in this alley.

Bill takes a couple steps towards me.

"You wouldn't shoot a man for smoking a cigarette."

I try to remember this is all play-acting. This guy could be a cop, or a press-ganged con, and either way he's going to report to MacDougal after the exercise. If I pull the trigger, I'm going to look like a psychopath and they're going to send me to Bellevue. But my mouth keeps on working faster than my brain.

"Take one more step at me, sir, I'm going to blow you back."

"Thank you for calling me sir," he says. "I appreciate the respect. People don't always acknowledge the sacrifice us veterans made during the war. Would you mind if I shook your hand?"

He does a little skip towards me.

I ratchet the weapon up into firing position under my right arm. The metal scope flips up, catches him in the cross-hairs, and the weapon adjusts automatically to hold him in its sights. I don't even have to aim.

He considers, then takes a couple steps back, daintily, like he's doing a minuet.

"Sorry, mister cop," he says. "Ever since I got back from Guadalcanal, I've had a difficult time with social interaction."

He unbuttons his shirt, then pulls it up and out like he's opening a theater curtain. He's not kidding about the war wound. It's a thick pink scar running around the bottom

of his ribs and up the middle of his chest. Smaller pucker scars dot his chest. He must have caught a hell of a load of shrapnel. He's a beanpole, like most time-junkies, so little meat on him that I can see right through his skin to where his ribs didn't set right.

He sees my face all screwed up, and he grins. He's got teeth missing on both sides. I remember our Criminal Identification course. The teeth are the first organs to age out on a time junkie.

I'm starting to think this guy is no play-acting cop.

"Jap grenade," he says. "But I kept going another twenty minutes before I realized my shirt was full of my guts."

I'd commiserate, but I'm looking at his right side, where a fat metal beetle's clinging to him like a toddler on his daddy's hip. In class, I've seen classified photos of these jury-rigged black market Accelerators, pocked with rust and oil, studded with bolts, but seeing one in person makes me a little sick. The way the legs dig into Bill's skin, squeezing out a teardrop of blood at the end of each pincer. The nest of wires streaming out of the carapace into the watch fastened to the beetle's back. The viscous yellow fluid pumping out of a glass bottle into a tube that disappears into Bill's armpit.

"Now I know how this looks," says Bill. "But you got to understand. I'm in a lot of pain. I didn't get to totally heal from my ordeal."

I know what I'm supposed to do now. De-activate the beetle, leave Bill standing there frozen in slow-time for pick-up, and continue my surveillance sweep. One quick tug

of the plastic tube, and all that precious juice will come spilling out on the ground. My dad says it smells like cinnamon if it's good quality, wet dog if it's crap.

I'm about to take a step forward when I notice a flash of movement by the fire escapes at the far end of the alley. I see a girl moving in the lattices of light between the shadows. Her black hair's tied back. She's wearing an aviator's suit a couple sizes too big, so she has the sleeves rolled up. She's painted her fingernails dark blue, and she's wearing goggles with sea-blue lenses. I've never seen an Accelerator like the one that's clinging to her. It covers her whole body, from her head down to her ankles, but it moves with her like a dancing partner.

Are they throwing a second time-junkie at me? Do they want to see how I handle juicers coming at me from every direction? How the hell am I supposed to juggle all this shit?

I guess that's why you stick with your goddamned partner.

The girl spots me. We both freeze. Slow-time makes a second seem like it's full of infinite possibility. I wish I could see behind those sea-blue lenses.

Her mouth moves, but she's not talking to me. She taps the side of her head, makes a little leap straight into the air, and disappears. For a second a ghost-image of her lingers, as if she were so bright she burned herself onto my eyes.

What the hell kind of junkie was that?

I turn back to Bill.

He's in the middle of raising a Colt pistol to my face.

He pulls back the hammer.

My body goes cold and trembly.

"Wait," I say.

"That's what the Japs used to say right before I shoved in the bayonet. Of course they spoke in Japanese, but begging for your life is the universal language."

"It's my first day."

"Mine too. They said they'd shave a year off my jail term if I came and showed my stuff to you kids. And I got to get juiced, for free. And now I get to shoot a cop before he even gets his badge."

I can't stand that gun barrel pointing at my face. I imagine a bullet hitting my upper lip, shattering my front teeth, burrowing through my throat, severing my spinal cord, exploding out the back of my neck. I think about my dad leaning over my corpse, his hands gripping the stainless-steel morgue table tight enough to squeeze the blood out of his knuckles. And how he'd sigh the way he does when terrible things happen, as if they are minor impositions on a sweet, benign natural order.

I can't do anything right.

"What happens now?" I say.

"Bang," he says, and pulls the trigger. The hammer falls on an empty chamber.

Bill lowers the gun.

"This is the part where you're dead," he says.

"I know," I say.

"No hard feelings. They're going to bump a year off my jail."

"You said that already."

"I guess I did."

We get quiet. We've already run out of things to talk about. We shuffle around a few seconds, then Bill glances up at the sky, and shouts:

"Are we done here?"

He looks down at me again. "Don't judge me. You don't know what it's like for a vet like me. A guy with injuries."

A Sliver egg maneuvers between the buildings and hovers above the ground. The engine whines. It's a small egg, not one of the massive incinerators that prowled the streets after the Lacuna. I can see the silhouettes of Sliver pilots at the helm.

The bottom blossoms open, and a wave of heat rolls out over us. Bill picks up his shirt and his jacket and folds them over his arm. He snaps to attention and salutes me.

"Tom Natterly, 25th Infantry. That Bill business was just what they told me to say."

He walks towards the egg, his clothes whipping in its wind.

"Goddamn blenders," he mutters. He rises up into the egg, some invisible force twisting his slight body in circles like a leaf in a dust devil.

The egg folds up its doors and rises. The cold settles in again. Drizzle fills in the space where the egg was hovering. I turn around to leave and see MacDougal and a Sliver watching me.

"Don't feel bad," says MacDougal. "There isn't a rookie alive gets it right the first time."

###

When you leave the Training Ground, it's a half- mile down the highway before you hit the city fringe. From there I usually pick up a cart for the ride back to the subway. Now that cars don't work anymore, the draft horse business is booming. I don't have much patience for the bumpy, endless ride. Unlike the subway, where everyone minds his own business, something about a cart makes people loquacious. Like we're all neighbors now.

We're not.

First off, you got to be careful what you say these days. So all there really is to talk about is the weather, and the weather is always the same. Or maybe you could talk about your job, which is likely stirring the fake cheese pot at the scum factory, or slaving in one of the warehouses where they make the Sliver food. Jerry Fitzpatrick's dad got a job working there, and Jerry says he pulls twelve-hour shifts and comes home with cuts all over his hands and arms. I ran across Jerry's dad on the street one time, and asked him how's his hammer's hanging, and he grinned and said, "Just dandy, my boy," with that Irish accent of his. Only, his hands were shaking and he could hardly walk, and when some little kid playing down the street gave out with a shriek, Mr. Fitzpatrick tensed up

and covered one ear and blinked a few times, then said he had to go inside and ran up the steps.

So I try not to talk on my commute. My police jacket's turning out to be helpful in that department. No one wants to hold forth to a cop.

I'm a good way down the road when I catch up with Brenda walking slow in front of me, holding her side. I come up alongside her and I can tell from the look on her face that she's even more unhappy than when the day started, if that's possible. I start to feel loathsome all over again.

"You okay?" I say.

"For a dead person," she says.

"You got killed too?"

"Knife," she says. "I look away for a second, and bang."

"All around shitty day."

We listen to our feet tramping through the mud.

"Look," she says. "About me giving you a hard time. I'm just – I got to be good. I can't get cut."

I know that feeling.

"How's the ribs?" I say.

"Had worse."

I probably should shut up, but I say:

"Tom Natterly. 25th Infantry."

Brenda gives me one of her impatient looks.

"That was my guy," I say. "My juicer. That was his name."

"Mine said she had a kid out there somewhere and his name was Abraham Mazurska. Or something like that. And could I find him. Like I have time to go looking for juicers' kids."

"We should forget the juicers," I say. "Just a bunch of stinking cons."

"She would have cut my throat," says Brenda, tracing a path from ear to ear with her finger. "If any of this was real."

We've come to a row of brownstones, most of them with boarded-up windows. A Greek restaurant's open, serving coffee and hard bread to a table of seniors in pinstripes playing chess. A half-foot of stagnant water covers the cobblestones.

A few carts wait by the intersection. The horses snort and whinny when they see us. Their handlers sit on the curb rolling cigarettes. They don't get up. Not enough profit hauling cadets around Brooklyn. Anyhow, they don't want to run their horses too hard, so they wait for a full load. These sway-backed nags are the last of their kind. Once they're gone, these guys are out of work and we're all going to be walking everywhere—or staying home.

"Now that we're dead," I say. "Can we start all over?" I stick out my hand.

Brenda sticks out her warm moist paw. We shake, all serious and frowning.

"So how old are you?," I say. "I mean, in real time."

"Twenty-five," she says. "How's about you?"

“Me, I’m twenty-six.”

“Old guy.”

“You wouldn’t know it by looking.”

“No, you look good.”

“I look like a kid.”

“We do this job long enough, we’ll grow up some,” she says.

“Perk of the job,” I say.

“First we got to graduate.”

“We’ll do okay,” I say.

“If we stop getting killed,” says Brenda, and sets off down the street.

“Where you going?” I say.

“I live around here,” she says.

“How about I walk you home?”

“I’m okay to go by myself.”

“I don’t know. With that rib –”

“Stop following me,” she says.

I ignore her. I’m pretty sure I’m about to come out with some brilliant utterance.

She stops and turns around.

“You don’t have the right,” she says.

“Okay,” I say. “No offense. Catch you tomorrow.”

I walk off down the street. When I glance back over my shoulder, surprise: Brenda's looking back at me. That clinches it. I wait until she's turned the corner, then I follow her.

At the corner I linger behind a burned-out streetcar, watching her walk down Hudson Avenue at a fast clip. I fall in behind her. She stops at an iron gate, unlocks it with a key, and goes into a rust-colored apartment building. I duck behind a dead sycamore that stinks like canned anchovies and think what to do next.

It should be enough knowing where she lives, but I want to see her face when I knock on her door. I need to impress her and I'm not going to manage with my soft little body. I need to walk into her place, put my hands on her, kiss those dry lips, shut her up before she can say a word, prove there's a grown man living inside me. Just thinking of it makes me want to go home, lock myself in the bathroom, and jack off until I pass out. It's easy enough to lose track of time when there isn't any—I've had some flogging sessions that went on for what felt like hours. I fell asleep on the toilet one afternoon in the midst of savaging my dick and woke up the next morning with a cold, sticky hand and my dad pounding on the door, yelling at me to go to school. In an ordinary world, I would have had plenty of dames by now—chalked them up like mission markers painted on the side of a B-52. I would have slow-danced with women, slouched at bars drinking gin and tonics with women, ushered women up to the roof of my building on a summer evening to smoke cigarettes, listened to them giggle when I ran my fingers up their skirts, across the sandpaper itch of their hose, and onto their stiff cotton underpants.

I had older friends on the block who told me tales. Terry Carter, when he was home from Harvard, insisted that women get wet when you tickle their privates. I was eight and saw in my head a panicked girl pissing torrents on Terry's hand. Four years later Chaz Starling brought to school a couple abused black-and-white photographs of meaty foreign women arrayed on sheetless beds like split chickens. That cleared things up. Even in the crime-scene lighting of Chaz's photos, I could see a glittering anointment where the women held themselves open. "How else you going to get a baby out if you don't grease the chute?" Chaz said. It was a reasonable point, and it started me out on a jacking-off career that shared qualities, I thought, with the austere Buddhist monks we were learning about in Social Studies. We were both practicing for Nirvana, only I was doing it with my hand on my dick.

I expected I'd have girlfriends, like Billy Morrell did. I used to see them sometimes leaving his apartment early in the morning. Usually blondes. They left behind an odor— sugary perfume and a swampier stink that made me want to lick the walls outside Billy's door. Sometimes that sea-salt woman scent lingered all day. My dad got a noseful too—once I saw him stop in the hall, sniff the air, and shake his fist at Billy's apartment.

I could have been Billy, who, before he vanished from our attenuated stream of life, played the saxophone and fucked and smoked and grew a beard. By now I could even have been married, had a drooling dumpling or two to bounce on my knee.

Instead, I'm standing outside Brenda's apartment, hiding behind a tree, with, if I'm being honest, the blind, bullish hard-on of a teenager, a hard-on that will not listen to reason or obey decorum, an arrogant, ambitious hard-on that seeks to extend itself beyond its modest root and insinuate itself like accelerated ivy under every female skirt.

It's fucking exhausting being a twenty-six year old teenager.

As soon as I can walk without harming myself, I head over to give Brenda's gate a shake. The solid lead key plate wouldn't be out of place on a chastity belt.

I wedge a foot between the gate slats and shimmy to the top. It's not difficult to maneuver over the rusty railheads, though I manage to cut my thumb. After I jump down I lick the slow syrupy blood off my hand. These days you could nick an artery and it would take you a week to bleed to death.

In the foyer, I scan the dented mailboxes lined up like vacant jail cells, find *Garland* scrawled on a shred of paper and stuck with curling yellow tape to box 3A. I take the elevator up, straighten my hair in the cracked mirror, and when the doors squeal open on the third floor I push aside the accordion gate and stride manfully down the hall.

I don't have a clue what I'm doing.

The carpet's wet underfoot and the bare bulbs give off a trembling light as if they're frightened by my arrival. Black marks run along the ceiling where the wires shorted and wallpaper's curling off the sweaty walls.

I ring the doorbell outside 3A and a spark shoots out and stings my finger.

I knock instead.

Voices inside, then footsteps, more voices. The door moans open a few inches. Under a shock of white hair, a blue eye regards me.

"I work with Brenda," I say. "I just stopped by to say hello."

The door closes. I hear a muffled argument and what sounds like heavy furniture moving around.

The door cracks open again and I see Brenda's eye this time.

"You're kidding," she says.

"I was just walking around the neighborhood," I say.

"You followed me."

"It occurred to me we should make a plan. So we go in prepared and don't get killed anymore."

"Stop harassing me."

She slams the door.

I press the doorbell again and this time the bell sends an electric jolt up to my elbow. The wall crackles. This apartment building is trying to expel me like I'm a germ.

I knock and keep knocking. Finally, she opens up. She's changed into a white dress which looks pretty good even with her short hair. "We're eating dinner," she says. "Would you please stop? I'm asking nicely."

The owner of the white hair and the blue eye is hovering behind her, leaning on a stick that must have belonged to a Viking, an unvarnished log thick as a howitzer barrel. She's shaking with the effort of holding up her weight. Her blue silk dress looks like it's

been let out a dozen times. Desperate safety pins circle the equator of her waistline. Her bruised and swollen ankles spread out over her stained suede slippers like beached jellyfish.

"Hi," I say to her over Brenda's shoulder. "I'm Sam."

"I've heard a few things about you," she says.

"Grandma, please," Brenda says. "He's going."

Grandma surges over to us, a tent in a wind-storm. "When did you get to be so rude, Brenda?" She grabs my arm, pushes the door shut with her cane, and drags me through an entryway lined with stacks of mildewed books and old newspapers the color of nail clippings. It's a jungle of rotting paper. Stinks of dust and vinegar. The air must have stopped moving inside this place even before the Slivers came. Grandma has to turn herself sideways to maneuver like King Kong through her skyscrapers of dead words.

After much arduous travel, we arrive in a living-room .

"Call me Audrey," she says, "I'm not *Grandma* old, just middle-aged. Weight puts ten years on you easy."

I'm busy staring like an idiot at the walls.

They're crawling with clocks.

Angels with paint-chipped cheeks cling to a Roman clock-face, right next to a modern office clock with sharp black ticks where the numbers ought to be. Grandfather clocks press shoulder to shoulder along the wall. Desk clocks crowd a small table, stacked in a pyramid. Dozens of wristwatches hang from a clothesline. Nothing ticks, of

course, the hands are frozen semaphores, the cuckoos are hibernating in their hidden mechanical nests. This is what a morgue must be like—packed with the shape of life but none of its heat.

"What is this?" I say. I realize I'm using a policeman's voice, all low-pitched and disapproving.

"It's my collection."

"They don't work anymore," I say.

"Of course I know that," she says. "But it's nice to remember." She's smiling at me like I'm five years old and I never saw a clock before.

"It's illegal to keep them," I say. "Junkies use clocks to regulate their doses."

"We know, Sam," Brenda says. "Grandma keeps them safe." She turns to Audrey, who's shuffling into the dining room. "He should go now."

"Nonsense," Audrey says. "He should join us for dinner."

"I'm kind of in a hurry," I say.

"I'll see you to the door," Brenda says.

"Sit with us for a few minutes before you go," Audrey says, and she pulls out a chair at the table and nudges me in the back with her mighty stick. I sit down, trying to make it look like it was my choice.

At the end of the table, Audrey lowers herself into a rocking chair lined with pillows; she's as uncertain as a piano being lowered from a fifth-floor window. Brenda collapses into a chair at the end of the table, puts her hands in her lap, and glares at me.

"I used to repair watches and clocks," Audrey says. "I worked out of this apartment. Now I'm obsolete." She laughs, like she just told the funniest joke ever. "I could open a museum, but they'd just take my clocks away, wouldn't they?"

"Probably," I say.

"But you won't tell, will you?"

"Why would I tell?" I say. "I don't care what you do in private."

"Good."

Audrey starts ladling out bowls of alien porridge. She's sprinkled some paprika on top to make it look nice, but the stuff's still glorified glue. She pushes a bowl in front of me and hands one to Brenda.

"Brenda says we'll get better rations once she graduates. Maybe even salt."

"I guess so." I take a piece of spinach-colored bread from the plate she's offering me. I bite into the slice and get a sour, leafy taste.

"We say grace first," Brenda says.

Everyone grabs everyone else's hands. I have Audrey's on one side of me, slack and lumpy, and I'm holding Brenda's on the other, warm, sweaty, muscled, and I tighten my grip just enough to let her know I'm there. I feel her hand tense, like she thinks she just slipped it in a bear trap, but she doesn't move.

"Dear Lord," Audrey says, "thank you for this food, and for this day which is not a day, this night which is not a night, this precious time we have together, even if it is not time at all. Thank you for tomorrow, which I continue to believe will come, and for all

our bounded yesterdays, which we will cherish. And thank you for our guest, Sam, and thank you, Sam, for watching over our little girl. Amen."

"Amen," I say.

"He's not watching over me," Brenda says. "We're in it together."

"Actually," I say, "you wouldn't even be there if it wasn't because they needed undercover girls to work the streets."

"Plenty of women worked in the war. It's not like we can't do it."

"They were making things," I say. "They weren't fighting crime."

"You've been reading too many comic books," she says. "We don't need Superman anymore, we need detectives, and there's no reason a girl can't be a detective."

"We always need Superman," I say. "He's a great American hero."

"What's he going to do? Fly up in the sky and beat up the Mauritei ships?"

"You got something against the Slivers?" I say.

"Slivers?" she says. "What's that mean?"

I never told anyone my pet name for the Mauritei, and slipping like that makes me feel like I'm sitting at the table in my underpants.

"I'm just asking if you got something against living forever."

"Some people might like to die," she says.

"Oh, come on," I say. "I heard about all the people depressed about the changes in things, but it's not so bad you would throw yourself off a building. We got jobs, we got food, we're going to be around a long time."

Audre y's looking at me like I'm a particularly amusing ventriloquist's dummy. "What about sick people?" she says. "People in pain who are never going to heal. Sick children who are never going to get better or grow up. There's not much future for them."

"Maybe the Mauritei will come up with some cure for them."

"You really think they mean to be kind to us?"

"I think they want to make the world better. They stopped the war, didn't they?"

"We don't really know, do we?" she says, "because we can't get word from overseas."

"I guess that's a point," I say. "But my philosophy is wait and see."

"It's been ten years, Sam," Brenda says.

"Sure," I say, "but what's ten years when you got eternity?"

Brenda's about to say something, but Audrey gives her a look and she curses her porridge instead, stabs it with her spoon. I pick the sharp green crystals out of my hard bread. But every second that goes by we have to listen to Audrey breathing through her nose like heavy people do, so I finally break the silence and say, "So where's your parents?"

"Them?" Brenda shrugs. "I don't know."

"My daughter and my son-in-law are engineers," Audrey says. "They're working for the Mauritei in a special facility."

"Grandma, enough."

"What are they engineering?" I say.

"Top secret," Audrey says. "But I'm sure it's something wonderful. Maybe they're working on that cure for sick people." Audrey's starting to scare me a little. She's smiling, but her eyes are flat.

"We get phone calls sometimes," Brenda says.

"So that's good," I say. "They have good jobs."

"Sure, they're doing great." Brenda gets quiet, like I just insulted her. Then she puts down her spoon.

"What about your folks?" she says. "I heard you talk about your dad, but what about your mom?"

I push my food around. I watch blood from my cut thumb smear my spoon.

"She died a long time ago," I say.

"Oh," Brenda says. "Sorry." She gives me a sorrowful look. One thing I'm learning is that girls like it when something's gored you. They want to stanch the blood. They want to stitch you up. But my mom's a hole I don't want Brenda sticking her finger in.

And then I hear it. Or I think I hear it. Or I want to hear it.

A tick.

And then another. A regular pulse. A beating heart, a bomb about to go off, a dog's claws pacing the floor.

Ticking.

Maybe it's just the drizzle spilling over a rain gutter and dripping down a window. I'd rather believe that, and I'm going to, until Audrey says, "A special occasion calls for a special treat," and she rocks herself back and forth in her chair until momentum carries her to her feet.

She's being too loud.

She's trying to obliterate the silence so I can't hear that tick.

I try to be poker-faced so Brenda can't tell I know.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Brenda says.

"I'm an only child," I say. "What about you?"

She shrugs.

Audrey shuffles over to a depleted cupboard, fishes three sugar cubes out of a yellow ceramic jar, and puts them on a plate. She makes a big show of bringing the plate to the table, tells us an epic story how she's stashing the sugar for her nephew Frank who left to fight in the war the day before the Mauritei came and who knows *where* he is now, maybe he's stuck on an aircraft carrier in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and can't get home, but anyhow this is his sugar—

All that noise, it's a tell, for sure.

It's so I can't hear the working clock she's got stashed in the apartment.

Is she supplying to junkies? She doesn't seem like she has the skill. We looked at plenty of jury-rigged clocks in school, milky fluid pumping through the gears, containment boxes so the wires don't get wet, copper-wrapped engines. Illegal clocks are

the bad guys' jury-rigged accelerators, the key to having a nice, smooth time-high. This fat old lady sucking on her sugar cube—she's not the type to be out on the street slipping clocks to the Tom Natterleys of the world. Neither is Brenda in her white dress, licking her sugar cube like a lazy horse.

But Brenda's parents? They're engineers. They could have done the work before the Slivers shipped them off to god-knows-what scum factory or workshop.

To hell with it. All I came for was a kiss, now I'm stuck with a big fat secret.

The old lady's probably harmless. A washed-up clock repair lady. And Brenda, who I thought would be worth kissing, basically hates me. All I want to do is sleep.

"I have to go," I say. "But thanks for all the food." I stand up. The room smells like alien porridge, a smell somewhere between wet dog fur and asparagus piss.

"Brenda, why don't you see Sam out?" Audrey says.

"I'm okay by myself," I say. "See you tomorrow, Brenda"

I head for the jungle of dead books.

####

I'm halfway to the elevator when Brenda catches up with me. She's thrown a man's pea-coat over her dress. Her hands are hiding up in the tunnel of her sleeves and the hem comes to her knees.

"She likes you, for some reason," she says.

"I can't imagine why."

"Me neither."

She follows me into the elevator. I smell cigarettes on the pea-coat.

"Your dad's?" I say.

"He left a lot of clothes when he went."

"Big on you."

"I sleep in it. It's warm."

The elevator shakes us like we're dice in a Yahtzee cup.

"This is an old building," I say.

"There used to be a doorman."

"That must have been fancy."

I look at us side-by-side in the mirror. I'm taller than her, but she looks older than me. I can tell she's looking too.

The elevator shudders to a stop and the door opens.

"Thanks," I say. "I can take it from here."

She follows me out the front door anyway. "You going to climb back out?" she says.

"I could."

"You already lost enough blood for one day."

She takes out the key. I wait for her to unlock the gate, but she doesn't.

"Slivers," she says, like it just hit her now.

"What about it?"

"You call them that because of their spaceships. The way they're so skinny up in the sky."

"You going to unlock the gate?" I say.

"Slivers," she says. "I like it. MacDougal would probably ship you off to the scum factory if he heard you use it."

"People get shipped off for a lot of different things."

"We're all doing the best we can," she says. "It's not always easy."

She slips her hands out of the sleeves of the pea coat and laces them together under her breastbone, like she's praying. Her body's trembling.

"Are you cold?" I say.

"I'm always a little cold."

"You need to stay warm."

I reach out to tuck the coat around her shoulders and instead we're kissing. I taste the sugar on her lips and then her tongue comes into my mouth and she's pressing her face and her breasts against me and my hands are inside the pea coat at the small of her back. Her mouth is sticky and cool and the tip of her tongue keeps tickling the bottom of mine. I want to suck every last molecule of sugar out of her mouth.

My hard-on leaps back into life and now it feels as gnarled and massive as Audrey's walking stick. Like my johnson has an accelerator strapped to it and it's going to take off like a mortar and leave the rest of me in a smoking ruin back here in slow-time.

She's rubbing her privates against my dick, and I'm embarrassed, I can't stand for her to see me helplessly hard—to see my sixteen-year old body seized with so much desire it's making me sick to my stomach. This is not who I am, I tell myself, but I press back against her. I can feel her dress against me, her underwear, and the soft lips underneath riding the length of my hard-on. She goes on tiptoe, grinding into me. She makes a sound I've never heard a girl make, a wolfish, hungry groan, right into my mouth, and without warning my legs shake, the world goes bright, and come runs out my underwear and down my leg.

Her body goes tense, she stops moving against me. There's drizzle, and the rank acid smell of my come in the air, and Brenda's sweeter perfume, and her body shaking in my arms.

We stay locked together in that smear of time for a while, and then she sighs and pushes me away and puts her arms back in the sleeves of her father's pea coat.

"Better?" Brenda says.

I nod. What else can I do?

"I need to go back in," she says. She fumbles in her pocket for the key and unlocks the gate and says, "See you tomorrow."

I don't want to leave. Mostly I want to kiss her again. But she shoves me out in a not unfriendly way and locks the gate behind me.

"Thanks for dinner," I say.

This may be the single stupidest sentence I've ever uttered, but the good news is that before I get it out she's gone inside and the front door's swung shut.

The Lacuna

In the endless day after the Slivers arrived, we didn't know what to do with ourselves. People started walking the streets in a funk, stopping to whisper to each other and glance up at the Sliver-filled sky. Now and then a Sliver egg would come humming down the street at high speed and people would climb back up on their stoops, or duck into alleys to watch it pass.

My mom kept me and Abby inside. She would have bolted us to the floor if she could have. We sat around on the bed in our pajamas and played Go Fish.

"You got hearts?" Abby said.

"Go fish," I said.

"You know the earth's stopped turning on its axis," she said.

"That's impossible," I said. "We'd all fly off into space, you dolt."

"And why exactly would we do that?"

"It's a little thing called gravity. You got spades?"

She groaned and threw me a card.

"So how come the sun's not going down?"

"Look up in the sky. You notice anything out of the ordinary?"

She shuddered a little. I hated to remind her of the scene in the alley. After it happened we both went right to my dad and dragged him out to the fire escape to see the smoldering wreck. He stood there for a long time, with his hands shoved into his pockets.

When my mom tried to come out to look, he rustled her back into the living-room like a sheepdog working his flock.

She didn't resist.

He sat down at the kitchen table. The rest of us lingered by the window, waiting for him to speak. Finally he took his hands out of his pockets and said, "He must have done something." I couldn't read his face like I usually could. It was like he had already walked out of the room and left his body behind to keep us company.

"That's right," said my mom. "He was probably a thief or a looter." I could tell she didn't believe herself, but I nodded to make her feel better.

A couple days later, in what passed for morning, my dad showed up at the breakfast table in an ordinary suit.

"I'm going to open the store," he said.

"You sure that's such a good idea?" said my mom.

"People need things," he said. He kissed her on the forehead and pinched her cheek like he always did. "Be a good baby," he said. "I'll be back for lunch." My mom put her hand on the red spot and cradled her face.

Abby and I got the standard behave or die scowl, and then my dad walked out the door and went to work.

My mom waited about an hour and couldn't take it anymore.

"Stay here, watch your sister," she told me. "I'll be right back."

I heard her heels knocking on the stairs as she hurried down to join him in the store. I knew she wasn't coming back up any time soon.

"Abby," I said. "You want to go downstairs?"

"Hell, yeah," she said, skidding into the room. "Do I have to put clothes on?"

"Unless you want Dad to start in with the yelling."

We spent the rest of the day cleaning up the store. The window in the door got broke in the alien brouhaha, and a few jars of pickles and mustard had fallen off the shelves. The whole place smelled like condiments. Otherwise, we were in good shape. The suppliers weren't dropping off produce, or meat, or even newspapers, so all we had was canned food, mostly beans and carrots, toilet paper, and a few left-over apples and grapes. They looked pretty good. Not a spot of rot. When my dad wasn't looking, I sneaked one and went outside to eat it. First bite, I knew something was off. The apple tasted like it was made of glue. I pitched it into the gutter and went back inside.

We didn't get much business. A couple people bought toothpaste. We ran out of aspirin early. One guy came in to ask if we had guns.

"It's a grocery store," said my father. "We sell groceries."

The guy was sweating and shaking. "They're going to kill us all, you know," he said.

My mom got up from the easy chair behind the counter. "Don't you talk that way in front of my kids," she said.

"They ought to know," he said. "This is all a thing Hitler dreamed up. This time next month, it's stormtroopers goose-stepping down Broadway. You think sticking your head in the sand's going to help?"

"This doesn't have nothing to do with the Nazis," said my dad. Don't you listen to the President?"

"You kidding me? He's been in cahoots with Hitler all along. It's their big plan. Run the world together under the Nazi flag. You mean you didn't see it coming?" The guy was sweating so hard the front of his pants under his belt were starting to get wet.

Abby inched behind my dad. My mom was going to jump in, but he waved his hand to silence her.

"This is how it started in Poland, my friend. The Nazis just marched themselves in, flags waving, and then came the mass graves."

"You don't know nothing about Poland," said my dad, and the way he said it quieted the guy down.

"Okay. Okay. But you ought to get out of the city," said the guy. "It's the only chance you got. I hear there's partisan groups forming in the Catskills."

"We'll take our chances right here," said my mom.

"We ought to be helping each other out," muttered the guy.

"Maybe you want to buy some gum," my dad said.

The guy wiped his face with his wet sleeve, shook his head, and headed for the door. He stopped to look us over one last time.

"God's telling us we did bad when we elected that crook Roosevelt. That's what all this is," he said. "God putting his finger into politics."

"God don't care about us," said my dad. "Go on, get out."

The guy staggered out into the drizzle.

"He must have been drinking," said my mom.

"Something wrong with him," said my dad.

####

My dad and I lugged the radio down to the store. We left it on all day, listening to the occasional bursts of Sliver talk, waiting for a human presence to re-assert itself. Mom and Abby spent most of the day with us, reading, cleaning, playing cards. We wanted to be together. It was the only safety we had left.

Still, things were getting back to a kind of bruised normal. Even the furniture store across from us was open, though I can't imagine buying a couch was much on anyone's mind. Around the corner on 13th, Valentine's Diner was doing a pretty good business, even if every time I walked by people were complaining how tasteless their cherry pie was. I didn't make much of it. Sugar was hard to come by. In any case, Valentine's ran out of supplies pretty quick, and stopped serving everything except their undrinkable coffee cut with chicory.

Billy started practicing again, but his saxophone sounded weak and distracted. He didn't come out of his apartment much. When I knocked on his door he just played louder to drown me out.

This was the week of funerals. Every day we'd see hearses go by, usually with plain pine boxes in the back, a few cars idling behind them, engines coughing and lurching. Nothing mechanical was working too well. I guessed that whatever the Slivers had done to mess up time had messed up timing belts too.

A couple of hours later we'd see the hearse coming back, minus the plain pine box and the cars full of weeping citizens. It was pickup and delivery all day long. If the Slivers overhead weren't enough to remind you to stay worried, the funerals sealed the deal.

On the sixth day, the radio hiccupped and the national anthem started playing, a full choir belting it out. Abby ran upstairs to get Mom, who was taking a nap, and Dad reached over from the easy chair to turn up the volume.

By the time Mom came barreling through the door tying the cord on her silk robe, the Prez was already talking.

"We have been advised," he was saying, "that hostilities have ceased across the globe as of noon today. The war is over."

There was a long, hissing silence. Then, the rattling of pages, like the Prez was reading off a prepared speech.

"We hope and pray for a new era of prosperity and benevolence. To that end, I have assigned a national planning committee to facilitate the transition to a new, cooperative economy augmented by our visitors' extraordinary technology."

The bell trembled and out of the corner of my eye I saw a man in a black uniform tiptoe sideways into the store, acting like he was embarrassed to interrupt the Prez. It took me a second to recognize Arnulf Strang, our local car mechanic who had jumped at the chance to become the neighborhood warden. All through the war, we had to deal with Arnulf. If our blackout curtains were askew, there would be a hearty knock at the door: Arnulf in his hard hat and warden's armband.

Did you happen to know that by your lack of attention to personal security, you're aiding and abetting the enemy?

Of course we didn't mean to. He *understands* this.

Everyone's under pressure. He *understands* this.

Nevertheless, *in remarkable times, we must behave like remarkable people*.

Screw you, Arnulf.

He carried a reporter's notebook, and no matter how much we told him what a remarkable job he was doing, and how remarkable we'd be in the future, we'd always peek out the window to find him bracing his notebook against his fat stomach, making notes on us as he searched for the next crack of illegal light.

I don't know who those goddamned notes were for. Maybe he was writing a book about us in his off-hours.

Anytime any of us would complain about Arnulf, my dad would groan and say, "Austrians." After that, we'd let it drop. At school, every time Jerry Fitzpatrick would sneak up in the hall and kidney-punch me from behind just for fun, knowing I'm a boxing

aficionado, I started saying to my friends, "Austrians," even though Jerry came from Tuscaloosa and spoke with a drawl that apparently interested the girls.

It became kind of a joke.

Austrians.

It almost sounds like *aliens*.

But here was Arnulf in a black uniform I hadn't seen before, and an actual sewed-on insignia that looked like a row of three Sliver ships with a neon-red circle around them.

The other cock-eyed thing was that Arnulf was carrying a revolver. A .38 Special, I thought, a real cop pistol, though I was no expert. I only knew what I knew from pawing through the *True Detective* rags we sell in the store. Oil gleamed on the barrel, and the holster was soft brown leather. The whole get-up looked expensive and unused.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you at such an exciting moment," said Arnulf. He patted the bundle of mimeographs he was carrying like it was a baby in need of burping.

The Prez was going on about converting neighborhood wards into industrial committees, revitalizing and centralizing food sources, and how cooperation would carry us through this difficult transition. He sounded like he was boring himself.

"It is so good to hear the President's voice again," said Arnulf. "Isn't it so?"

"Only we can't hear him if you're talking," said my mom.

"No, no, I will get out of your hair. I only came with exciting information about the new era."

He moistened his thumb and peeled a mimeo off the bundle. No one was in a hurry to take it, but I was curious, so I did the honors. The sheet was fresh off the press – the paper was still sodden and I could smell the sour ink.

WELCOME TO THE NEW ERA!, it said in angular blue letters, like a newspaper headline. Underneath that, in smaller type, it was inviting us to a PUBLIC MEETING TO DEVELOP NEW SOCIAL PROTOCOLS at the Y on 37th. Tonight, 6 p.m. There was a sketch of a mom and a dad and a little girl in a taffeta dress, and the mom was holding a baby. They were all looking up into a sky filled with Sliver ships, and they were all smiling, and the baby was reaching up for the Sliver ships like he wanted to shove them into his mouth. Skyscrapers rose all around the happy family, but the paved streets had been replaced with fields of wheat and corn and horses pulling plows and farmers on combines.

Then it struck me.

This was the Slivers' idea of what would make people happy. It was their New Deal.

It made as much sense as anything else that had been happening this week.

"Bye-bye, I'm off," said Arnulf. The Prez had finished speaking, and the national anthem was playing again.

"See you there tonight, then," Arnulf said, but he didn't move. I knew he was waiting for us to ask about his new uniform, but none of us wanted to give him the pleasure.

"Maybe we see you," said my father. "Maybe we don't like to travel so much right now."

"Oh, my apologies. I'm not being clear," said Arnulf. "Attendance is mandatory. You have to come."

"We have to come or what?" said Abby. My mother grabbed her by the neck and drew her close.

Arnulf laughed.

"You just have to come," he said. He rested his hand against the barrel of his pistol and knocked his heel against the floor like he was testing to see there was a hidden basement.

"But anyhow why would anyone want to miss the exciting meeting?" he said.

He raised his eyebrows and sucked on his upper lip. It made him look like a Kewpie doll. I wanted to tell him exactly that. Which I would have done in the past, because it was Arnulf, and that's what you did with Arnulf.

But I couldn't get the words out.

He waited. Not for an answer, I don't think. More like he was sizing us up. Like he didn't need us to tell him what we were thinking. Like he would decide what we thought.

"Well," he said. "I think you'll enjoy the meeting."

He tucked his mimeos under his arm and left.

I waited until the bell stopped vibrating, and I said "Austrians."

Only Abby laughed.

My mom clamped a hand over her mouth.

Abby whimpered and squirmed loose.

“You’re choking me,” she said, and I saw the red marks of my mother’s hand on her face.

Boxing Lessons

I have to stand up on the subway. It's the end of the day shift at the scum factory, and the car's already loaded up with tired-looking citizens wearing gray overalls stained with Sliver food. They're looking harder at me than I'm looking at them.

I'm wearing my leather jacket.

I'm a cop.

Supposedly.

From all the nervous, guilty looks I'm getting, I'm guessing everyone's done something they shouldn't have. They shouldn't worry. They don't know how bad I failed today.

They only see the jacket.

When I get home, MacDougal and my father are sitting at the kitchen table. My dad is in the middle of washing down a handful of pills with a mouthful of Old Taylor from one of the crystal wine glasses my mom left behind. The bourbon's synthetic these days, something the Slivers cooked up when the wheat crops ran out and the fields went fallow. It tastes like burning water, but it gets the job done. I've snuck a glass or two on occasion, even though my dad barks at me, forgetting that I'm twenty-six even though I look sixteen.

He clinks MacDougal's glass. They're both pretty snockered, and we're barely into an evening which looks just like the day that came before.

I stand there holding up the doorway, wondering if I've been cut from the Force already.

"Come in," MacDougal says, like he lives in our house and I'm the visitor. I decide I didn't hear him, and plant my feet.

"Listen to the man," says my dad, and pushes a chair out from the table.

Fine. I shuffle in, sit down and shove my hands into my jacket.

"So," says my dad. "First day."

He pours himself another shot of bourbon. He waves the bottle at MacDougal, but the detective shakes his head.

"How you do?" My dad pours himself another drink.

"I got killed," I say.

"Too damned bad." He looks past me, into the air. When he disapproves of me, he likes to pretend I'm not quite there.

"He had a tough juicer," MacDougal says.

"They're all tough," says my dad. "So what?" Disappointment is coming off him in waves, along with the bourbon fumes. I turn my chair to face MacDougal.

"He told me his name," I say.

MacDougal tightens up. I can hear his fingers squeaking along his glass.

"What'd he say?"

"Tom Natterly, 25th Infantry."

"Juicers lie," says MacDougal. He gives me a look that chokes me. "Sounds like he was trying to make himself look good," he says. "He probably wasn't even a vet."

"Yes, sir," I say.

I feel like we're playing a card game here, only I just played my only card, and too soon, and it wasn't that great a card anyhow, and the whole thing's about to turn into a game of Fifty-two Pickup.

My dad grabs my shoulder, leans on me too hard, puts his face next to mine.

"They shoot up unregulated time, Sam. It goes bad. It makes their mind go rotten." He sits back, plants his hands on his thighs, and snorts. The man gets dramatic when he drinks.

"You did fine, cadet," says MacDougal. "I came here to tell your dad the apple don't fall far from the tree."

"Thank you, sir," I say. "But technically I'm dead."

"Half the class failed today. Don't take it hard. Second day's always better."

I should let the whole matter drop, but I look at my father swaying in his chair and I can't keep my mouth shut. It's as if all of a sudden I'm the dad and he's the kid, and I have to show him how to live. It gets this way when he hits the bottle.

"What happens to him now?" I say.

"Who?," says MacDougal.

"Tom Natterly, 25th Infantry."

"He goes back to jail. Serves his term. Hopefully he cleans up, becomes a useful member of society again."

I can tell by Macdougal's dulcet tones that everything he's saying is a load of crap. I look over at my dad. He has that look like he always gets when he tells us the story of how his best friend Piotr in Poland got put up against a wall and shot in the chest. How the Russian officer finished him off with a gunshot that ruptured his head.

A *coup-de-grace*, they call it. I don't see much grace in it.

"He seemed like an okay guy," I say.

"You always hate to see a vet end up in the dumps," says MacDougal. "After all they did for the country."

MacDougal stands up. My dad pushes off from his chair and manages to stand up too. I follow their lead.

"Don't get a swelled head," says MacDougal, "just because I came to your house. Your father's a great man. And a good friend. And that's all there is to it."

"No, sir," I say. "I understand, sir."

"It ain't gonna happen again until the day you make detective first-class."

"Then we'll all have a drink together," says my dad. He picks up his wine glass and holds it out at the end of a stiff arm. I guess he thinks he needs a visual aid or nobody's going to get what he means.

"Mariusz, you did good with your boy," MacDougal says.

"We gonna be detectives together," my dad says. "Me and my son."

"You'll set the world on fire," MacDougal says. He smiles and I see yellow teeth peeking out.

"I show you out," my dad says. He walks MacDougal a whole five feet to the door. Along the way, he hooks his arm around the detective and gives him a bone-cracking squeeze. "Only a man comes to a man's house," he says. I'm afraid for a moment he's going to kiss MacDougal on the cheek, like he likes to do with people, but he squeezes his shoulders and releases him.

MacDougal retreats to the hall, then leans back in, cocks his head.

"Konwicki," he says to me in his instructor-voice, "you happen to see any other juicers while you were on patrol?"

I'm about to tell him about the girl in the blue aviator suit when I get a pain in my stomach. For some reason I'm imagining Brenda, of all people, standing next to me stabbing me in the arm with a penknife, whispering *shut up*.

Why the hell should I? Don't I get extra points for being Aware of my Environs? Isn't this my shot to justify my poor performance on the field?

On the other hand, the blue girl's the reason Tom Natterly got to shoot me in the head. I got distracted, and she's the shameful proof.

But mostly I don't like the way MacDougal's asking me. Like he knows I'm keeping a secret and he's testing me.

And I don't like the way my dad's grinning at him and grooming dust off MacDougal's jacket like a chimp. And I don't like the sweet bourbon smell permeating

the apartment, and the way people look at me on the subway, and I especially don't like the fact that I can feel on the inside of my guts that Tom Natterly's body is somewhere right now smoking and twisting inside a roaring Sliver fire.

"I didn't see anything, sir," I say. "Just the one juicer who killed me."

We all stand there for a moment, me slouching, my dad buffeted in the invisible breeze only alcoholics can feel, MacDougal keeping his face blank. It's awkward, but at least I'm feeling I got a decent card to play now.

"Stay vigilant, cadet," he says. "You never know what's going to come at you."

"I'm ready, sir." I shift into parade rest without meaning to.

He lingers in the doorway, tapping a black-gloved finger against the door frame.

"How's that asthma thing of yours doing?"

"Good," I say, and force a smile and stand up a little straighter.

MacDougal gives me one last look and throws my dad a lazy salute.

Then he's gone.

In certain ways, he's gone.

Because hours later I can still feel his eyes on me.

The new deal

We went to the meeting, my dad and me. He didn't want to go anywhere Arnulf wanted us to go, but I whined until he relented. I wanted to know what the new social protocols were going to be. I wanted to figure out what the Slivers were up to.

I invited Billy Morrell to come along. He was looking pale from hiding out in his apartment, and the dry sweat-stains under his arms told me he wasn't bothering changing his clothes. But he shrugged and grabbed a jacket and out we three went into the eternal daylight.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with sweaty, panicked citizens in the YMCA gym I felt like a POW on the Bataan death march. Everyone was shouting at once, so you couldn't hear the guy jabbering at the podium. I think he was saying something about food sources and printing new currency. The air stank of old basketball games. Fights broke out, guys yapping like dogs at each other, trying to make elbow room. One old guy even slapped a woman just because she stepped on his foot.

At the side of the stage, Arnulf was standing at parade rest, next to another joe I didn't recognize. Both of them immaculate in their black uniforms, both of them sizing up the crowd. He caught my eye and nodded at me. I pretended I didn't see him.

They brought out Mayor LaGuardia, and the crowd shut up. He didn't quite reach the podium, so Arnulf ran backstage and brought out a crate for him to stand on.

The mayor shuffled through the pages of his prepared speech, looking at the words as if they were written in Sliver language. Then he laid down the speech and wiped his face with the back of his sleeve.

"I spoke to the President this morning," he said. "And the word for the time being is that we want to rebuild civic unity. All you got to do is be good to your neighbor. We lost a lot of people, and that's unfortunate, and that's not how the Mauritei planned it. It's a crying shame, but we all lost someone in the last four years, and now we're done with losing."

I was watching everyone's chin cocking up as they listened to the mayor. They were like children who needed to know what's for dinner and when bedtime was, and finally here was their daddy laying down the law.

"Listen, I don't have all the explanations for you," said the mayor. "But you got to believe something good's happened here. We're not going to want for food. No more ration books. They say they're going to bring our boys home from overseas. There ain't gonna be no more war."

"No more war," said my dad. I couldn't tell if he thought that was a good thing or a bad thing, or maybe just an outright lie.

A few women started crying. A few men too. Everyone started peppering the air with stupid questions. Was this whole thing Jesus coming back? Were all the Nazis and Japs dead? Were *we* the dead ones and was this Hell? The Mayor rolled his speech up into a tube and banged it on the microphone to get us quiet.

"Look, the important thing is that we don't all fall apart here. And especially we don't all start thinking that because of everything that's happened we got the right to do whatever we want. There's got to be a order to things. We got to stay straight with each other."

A beefy guy at the front put his hands around his mouth, and bellowed, "When's the sun going down?" I could hear a real edge of fear in his voice.

The Mayor blinked the sweat out of his eyes and squeezed his paper tube so hard the thing bent in half.

"The sun's not going down," he said. "This is how it's going to be from now on."

Everyone started yelling at him so hard the whole gym began to vibrate. A portly woman near us slithered to the floor unconscious. The heat and the stench must have got to her. Two guys hoisted her up under her armpits and patted her face until she opened her eyes. One of her high heels had come off and she kept lurching into everyone as she tried to straighten her pillbox hat.

"I got a lot of boroughs to visit tonight," said the Mayor. "Be patient. Any questions you have will be answered. All in good time."

He went to step off his box, and Arnulf was there to give him a helping hand. La Guardia waved at us with his crumpled tube and said he would never abandon us, and then he abandoned us.

After the mayor left, no one wanted to listen to anyone. They just wanted to roar their heads off. Arnulf took to the podium to urge calm. "I understand you're upset," he

said, which only made everyone upset. Fights started breaking out, grown men flailing at each other like little boys. My dad grabbed my shirt collar and strong-armed his way through the crowd. Billy followed after us, and we waded through all that slick flesh, shouldered our way through the door out into the alley.

The cool air slapped me in the face. I felt for some reason like I wanted to laugh, like this was all the funniest joke anyone ever came up with. My dad still had my collar in his fist.

"Lemme go," I said, and tried to pry his fingers off me, but they were like steel cable.

"Goddamn," said Billy. "What's the fracas now?"

He pointed at the street. Two Sliver eggs were hovering outside the entrance to the Y, about twenty feet in the air.

"We stay here," said my dad, and pulled us behind a dumpster.

People started to spill out the side door and make for the street. I don't think anyone knew where they were going. They just wanted to get out of the pressure cooker and back under their bedclothes.

They were pouring out the front of the building too. As soon as they saw the Slivers hovering above them, they lost their last bit of respectability and started cursing and screaming. The guy who wanted to know when nightfall was coming back worked a brick out of the gutter stones, like a dentist pulling a tooth. He wound up and pitched it at

the Sliver ships. It caromed off of one and landed on a woman's head. Blood started coming out her ear but she didn't notice: she was too busy screaming at the eggs.

Pretty soon people were throwing whatever they could get their hands on. Garbage cans, hubcaps, their own shoes. Next to the Sliver eggs, all the home-made ammo looked like a swarm of mosquitos. It didn't budge those eggs.

After a minute of this barrage, one of the eggs tilted up, the end spiraled open, and out spewed out more of that alien Jell-O that had wiped out everyone's worry on the first day. This time it landed in the crowd, coating people's clothes, splattered on the brims of men's hats, stuck to the ground and tripped people up as they scattered.

Ogling the chaos I was beginning to think a crowd is more like a fire than a collection of people. It moves where the fuel is, and the fuel is fear. I wasn't even in the middle of the mob, but I couldn't think straight. I just wanted to run. If my dad wasn't holding me down behind that dumpster, I think I would have bolted.

But that alien morphine made everyone breezy. They pretty quick stopped being a crowd and started being individuals again. Most of them looked like they couldn't figure how they had ended up shoeless in the street, covered in goo. They stopped throwing and walking and screaming, and just stood swaying for a few seconds, a forest of people growing along Thirty-fourth Street.

Then they just started to stroll away.

"Good night," they called out to each other. "See you in the morning. Sleep tight."

"I don't want to get drugged anymore," I said.

"Me neither," Billy said. "That stuff 's worse than horse."

My dad stood up. "Okay, we get out of here," he said. "Look happy."

"Happy?," Billy said. "I don't know if I can do that exactly."

"Just smile," I said. "And don't breathe too deep."

We forced smiles on our faces and wandered out into the street. There were still a few people here and there, chatting like they had just come out of a movie. The fat lady who lost her heel was sitting on the curb having a conversation with the eggs.

"I called my daughter first thing," she said. "I said I could see you from my window. And she said she could see you too. And she's all the way in Denver. Why, you must be everywhere." She waited for an answer. The eggs just hummed.

We walked down the street, careful to avoid the puddles of Jell-O. One of the eggs swiveled to give us a look. My dad's hot hand on the back of my neck kept me tense.

I took one glance back. I saw the fat woman take off her other heel and struggle to her feet.

"Do you speak English?," she said to the eggs, enunciating every word. The egg watching us turned back to the conversation. I guess a loquacious crazy lady's more interesting to aliens than a few humans stumbling home in the dark.

We turned the corner. My dad picked up the pace.

"We're in a truckload of shit," said Billy.

"Be quiet," said my dad.

"He's right," I said. "What the hell do they even want?"

My dad stopped. I could tell he wanted to be in charge. He wanted to be the guy with the answers. But he didn't have a clue.

"They could kill us all if they want," Billy said.

"But they don't," my dad said. "They keep us living."

"What about those people they burned in the car?" I asked.

"Shush up," said my dad. "Just be quiet now."

"I just wish the goddamned sun would go down," I said. I sunk a right jab into the nearest building. It felt like needles going through my knuckles, but the pain kept me from crying.

"No point wishing, Sam. Now you just got to do."

My dad started walking again, his head down and his lips moving, and for a crazy moment I thought he was counting the cobblestones.

Then I remembered what he told me, how he had got out of Poland. He had just walked out of Poland into Russia. From one country to the next. That's how he survived. Just put one foot in front of the other, and counted.

One-two, one-two.

He was close to my age back then, and in a day's time the world had turned from home into a slaughter-pit. So he put his head down, and he counted one-two to the border.

Late one night, years ago, I asked him, Who was with you while you walked?

No one.

I asked him, Were you scared?

No.

I asked him if he looked up from time to time.

I looked up once.

What did you see?

A horse, he said.

What kind of horse?

He put his hands over his face.

I got to sleep now, he said. You go to sleep too. He gripped my face in his hands so tight I couldn't move my jaw.

No harm will come to you, he said.

But what kind of horse was it?

It was just a horse. Now go to sleep.

Snowfall

At least we get snow every few months.

That's how the Slivers try to make life interesting for us. The stuff never sticks, but it cools the air, and the flakes sting my face before they melt and run down my cheeks.

We're hunkered down behind a rusty Oldsmobile—likely a juicer hang-out at one time. It's not like there's gas anymore, so what else are you going to do with cars but crawl up inside them and slide through time ? The windows are blacked out with shoe polish, so we sneak looks over the hood at the crumbling warehouse across the street.

Brenda offers me a chunk of factory bread and a couple slices of jaundiced cheese. I shake my head. My attention's sucked up by the crumbling warehouse across the street. She shrugs and chokes the bread down herself.

"Some juicer's going to nail you while you're stuffing your face," I say.

"I got nine lives."

"You a cat all of a sudden?"

"Meow," she says.

"Keep your fleas to yourself."

She just laughs.

That's what I'm coming to like about Brenda. You can punch her in the ribs, call her names, and she doesn't take any of it personally. What she does carry around like a war wound is the same memory I do: being practically killed by her first juicer.

It's been three weeks since Tom Natterly. I'm getting pretty good at dealing with the enemy, but I'm lousy dealing with the image of that long black gun barrel pointed at my face and Tom's bony finger squeezing the trigger onto an empty chamber. I started out feeling sorry for him, but every night he comes to me in my sleepless bed and pulls the trigger again. Sometimes the gun is loaded.

If I saw him in the streets tomorrow, I'd obliterate the sonofabitch in a blaze of Sliver fire.

They made our weapons live today.

So technically I could do that.

We've practiced attack modalities, defensive positions, techniques for disarming multiple bad guys. We've pulled the trigger on juicers going for their guns. No one's gotten a bead on us since that first day.

Only we've never pulled the trigger on a live weapon.

MacDougal says they use the worst of the worst juicers for this exercise, so that if anything goes wrong – if we end up having to drill a bad guy – we're killing someone who's got a date with the electric chair anyhow.

Of course no one's going to put up a fight, because even juicers want to live.

Doesn't make me feel better. I've seen what Sliver weapons do.

I look through the binoculars. The building still has a hand-painted sign hanging askew above the window: Yosef's Haberdashery. A jagged stalactite of glass hangs off the top of the shattered frame. It glitters and sparks in the accelerated light. Inside the

shop a dusty fedora sways on a hat rack. It would look good on my head. I fantasize about walking across the street, picking it up off the rack, and somersaulting it onto my head like I saw Fred Astaire do once in a movie. Then my skin gets hot and prickly.

"There's somebody in there," I say.

Brenda shrugs. Her mouth's still half-full of alien cheese. "You're hallucinating."

"You feel a wind?"

"I don't feel nothing."

"Okay, so why's that fedora moving?"

She takes the binoculars and ratchets the focus. "Maybe I do feel a wind after all," she says.

I reach for the radio button on my accelerator, but she stops my hand.

"We're supposed to think for ourselves, right?"

Sure, Brenda, but thinking too hard today could mean putting a burning hole through some juicer's head. So I give her a shrug.

"Cover me," she says, and before I can approve her brilliant plan, she breaks cover.

That's the part I don't like so much about Brenda. She needs to be in charge, but she knows I'm going to say black if she says white, up if she says down, so she moves fast, before I have a chance to lord it over her.

I scramble after her, but I'm panicked now, not watching what I'm doing. I slip on the slushy ground and my knee buckles.

Hitting a hard object accelerated is no picnic. Smack yourself at the right angle, you shatter bone. Land on your head, you might end up a giggling idiot eating blended bananas the rest of your life.

So they teach us how to slide.

It looks ridiculous, shooting off down the street like a bowling ball for a hundred yards, raising sparks, but it's a life-saver. I spin as I go, and the world's whirling around me in shards of brick and cloudy sky. Finally, I manage to dig a heel in, stop, and turn myself around.

The car looks small down at the far end of the street. Brenda's already scoped out the haberdashery, and with a thumbs-up to me, she slips inside. I stagger to my feet, the weight of the Accelerator pulling me in three directions at once, and start running back to her.

While I'm mud-skiing back to my partner, I see her come tumbling out onto the steps of the shop.

Then come the gunshots.

Bullets tear into the Olds, making shiny new holes through the rust. I guess the bad guys got live rounds too now. Nobody told us that part. All we get is the dry science. When somebody accelerates, so does their weapon. A piss-ant .22 has the killing force of a howitzer. In Forensics, they showed us a photo of a cop who got hit by an accelerated .22 cartridge. In the hot light of the flash bulb, you can see through his stomach to the sidewalk.

I go running around the side of the car and crouch in firing position. My legs are numb, like my bottom half's been submerged in ice. It feels like my heart's sprung up into the middle of my head and it's pounding away in my skull like a cannon. My fingers fumble along the console, and the weapon locks into position along my arm. The scope chirps and frames the shooter in the doorway of the shop. He's waving the gun at Brenda. She's tumbling backwards down the steps.

So this is it. Final exam. Fire a live round into the body of a human. Funny they call them live rounds, when *dead* is the result.

Closer now, I see. This guy, he's going bald, with a red fringe hanging on for dear life. His face is dusted with freckles. His chin ain't much.

He sees me and fires off a shot that kicks up the roof of the Olds and sends shrapnel scampering across my face. The firing button's wet under my finger. Blood, or sweat, or am I drooling? My mind's screaming to my finger to press the damn button, but my finger's gone on strike.

A woman comes running out. She throws herself on Red's gun-arm. He tries to buck her off. Her blonde hair's braided, wrapped in a bun on her head. She's wearing a dress the color of whipped cream.

She looks nothing like a juicer.

Then the kid toddles out. He grabs mom's dress and gets to screaming so hard his toes come off the ground.

He's got dad's red hair.

I fire now, I take out a family.

Brenda's scrambling to her hands and knees, but she'll never get her weapon in position in time.

She's pleading. For her life, I guess.

I'm going to have to shoot.

I imagine killing a man's going to be like walking from one room into another. In the room I'm in, toys lie scattered across the floor. The kaleidoscope I used to hold up to my cactus lamp. X-ray specs that turned people into gray ghosts. A blue velvet draw-string bag filled with marbles—cat's eye, bumblebee, clearie, and pearl.

In the next room, there's a wood table that gives you splinters every time you touch it. And sprouting out of it, my dad, sitting rigid with a glass of Sliver whiskey in his hand, working his jaw, staring at a photo of my mom and sis. When I walk through that door, he'll look up at me, and say, "Don't make one of your big damn deals, Sam. Sit down and have a drink."

I'm not sure I want to walk into that room. I sure as hell don't want to start drinking with my dad.

Red drops his gun.

It hops down a couple steps and splashes in the mud. Now he's pleading with Brenda, waving at the shop, his wife and kid, the sky. He's acting like he wants Brenda to let them go, even though there's nothing outside the Training Ground but Slivers who

like nothing better than a bonfire. And she's nodding, motioning them back inside. Everybody's friends now.

We're going to fail this exam for sure. I'm going to look stupid handing my leather jacket back to my dad.

"Put your hands up, you sonofabitch," I shout. "Get down on your knees."

A pair of Slivers fizz into view at the end of the street, sending off dark sparks. Their suits tense up and they lumber toward us. At the other end of the street, MacDougal and Fitzpatrick and Burch appear in a rush of accelerated air. MacDougal's yelling something, but the roar of acceleration drowns him out.

And Brenda? Who ought to be plowing holes through these juicers? She's swept the toddler up in her arms and she's barreling into the haberdashery shop with Red and his wife bringing up the rear.

"Brenda," I say. "What the hell?"

Something knocks me in the back of the head. I hear a pop inside my head and I carom off the side of the Olds. The ground heaves up and smacks my face. A river of mud empties into my mouth. Breathing is out of the question. My arms and legs are not in their usual locations. I feel like gravity's about to reject me and I'm going to go shooting off the surface of the earth.

A foot hooks under me and spins me over. I blink grit out of my eyes and get a blurry image of the lattice of Sliver ships filling the sky.

A shoe stomps on my firing arm. The blue girl is looming over me. Azure light radiates off her aviator's costume, silver threads snake across the suit like living creatures. One lank of custard-colored hair pokes out of her helmet.

"Sorry, cowboy," she says. "I need to hitch a ride." She pries one of those writhing strands loose from the fabric of her suit, kneels on my back, and threads it into the guts of my accelerator. I twist around to try to pull it out, but she's got a grip on me that would make a professional wrestler cry.

"Giddy-up," she says.

My accelerator goes white-hot, burns my back, her suit shines bright as a Sliver ship, blue fire crawls down my throat, I go blind.