

## **1. A Nobody in the Day and Night**

Whether distance, physical distance, from his family, was a worthy criterion of success for a son to embrace, Luther Garatdjian had, since childhood, seen removal from the apartment and the building where he had been raised as necessary to his survival. He longed for separation, not closeness, his life mission being to prove that he was not like the floundering older siblings ensnared on the very premises where they and he had lived since infancy. Oh, he loved his mother to a degree as great as any child could love his mother, seeing her as warmth and softness and love itself, and he loved his brother and his four sisters in varying degrees, but he did not love failure. He did not love weakness and dependency and the excuses that accompanied them, and such deficiencies seemed in strong evidence in his immediate environment.

Like his family, the building, which towered thirteen stories over Broadway, was showing signs of deterioration. Periodically bits and pieces of masonry would break off from the cornices and crash to the sidewalk below, scaring the pedestrians witless and prompting the police to temporarily section off a portion of the block. Over the years the façade had grown grimy from the exhaust of the cars and trucks and buses down on Broadway and cried out for sand-blasting, and the window sashes were rotting and in need of replacement. If the building's neglected features called attention to themselves, so too did the huge mural of John 3:16 from the Gospels painted in pastel colors on a side wall and visible to the pedestrians below:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Auntie Eve, Luther's aunt, managed the building, with the assistance of his mother. His aunt occupied the ground-floor apartment and the Garatdjian family lived on the second floor in the only other apartment. The remaining units were single and double rooms furnished with stoves and small refrigerators and sinks. There was a public bathroom for those tenants whose rooms did not include a private bath. Rents ranged from ten dollars to twenty-two dollars a week. Some of the tenants were elderly, men and women who had never married or whose spouses had died. Increasingly, they were foreign-born, young men and women from India, Pakistan, Korea, Kenya, Ethiopia, Kenya, and other third world countries who had come to New York to continue their education.

Here and there among these tenants could be found members of the Garatdjian clan in a kind of mini-diaspora. Next to Arvin Singh, in 9D3, lived Naomi Garatdjian, age thirty, married to Chuck Bolan, age 55, neighborhood drunk who went about with wine stains on his shirt. And in the penthouse, a rooftop set of rooms, lived his brother Luke, age twenty, though only, he said, until he had saved enough money to rent a pad down in Greenwich Village. And in room 2C2 lived his oldest sister Hannah, with her six-year-old son Moses.

Even his sixteen-year-old sister, Vera, had a room in the building, hers being 2BB.

And now, there in room 2E2, in September of 1965, lived Luther Garatdjian, the room having been given him rent-free by his mother, as all the Garatdjian children lived rent-free in their rooms.

It was not supposed to be that way.

Since his girlfriend Jane Thayer's departure, emotional pain had made his life a daily struggle. When she boarded an Aeronaves de Mexico jet in New York City in August for what was planned as a two-week stay in Mexico City, it wasn't for him to know that she would do for him what he could not by writing him that she would not be coming back.

His mother was a party to this matter only insofar as, following air mail receipt of the letter in which Jane said goodbye, Luther approached her with his pain and suddenly realized that she didn't care and that her work with him was done and never would resume. In that moment he saw that he was neither her sun nor a star of any magnitude in her consciousness.

And what mother should have to think excessively of a son afflicted with the dullness that he exhibited? Was it not obvious to one and all that he was poor material for love, let alone success? What would possess a girl to give her heart to an ectomorphic boy, all of one hundred thirty pounds distributed over a 6'4" frame? And what could be more grotesque than a young man who, as his eighth-grade classmates had gleefully pointed out in the yearbook, lacked the back of his head? His mother had never called him Squarehead or Flathead, but surely she had heard the words applied. If once he had

been her blond Svenska pojka, that conception of him had long since fallen away, given the reality of his poor appearance in the passing years.

Nor could he turn to the compensatory gift of intelligence, if his high school record, which was excellent before his grades plummeted, or his poor performance on college entrance exams, were any great indicators, and he knew they were. He had been defeated in all the categories that seemed important—physically, mentally, and in the realm of love.

All the more reason to stay separate, to avoid the family apartment just down the hall or stop by the rooms of his siblings scattered throughout the building. Avoidance lessened the pain of seeing he might one day become just like them.

Of course, there were practical reasons to remain at home and attend a public college. A boy with his SAT scores was not suitable material for Princeton or Yale or Brown, and even lesser private colleges had hefty tuition fees and weren't about to offer scholarships to the likes of him. Where was that money to come from? It wasn't as if his parents had set aside anything for his further education. There was one school in Maine that wanted him, and he might have managed with student loans, but going off to college would have taken him away from Jane, a circumstance that he could not easily bear to initiate and that her trip to Mexico City had solved, as it was far preferable to feel that she was leaving him than he was leaving her.

And yet family was family, blood was blood, and called to him through the walls he hid from them behind, as on the evening he stepped in the elevator and pressed the button that bore the initials “PH.”

“Man, you’re all bones. I mean, don’t you eat?” his brother Luke said that night, in the rooftop shack he called the penthouse.

“Geniuses don’t need to eat. They live on air. Einstein. All those cats with big brains. They’re different from the rest of us,” said Lenny Cerone, who could take his Bonneville apart and put it back together again blindfolded. Luther felt paralyzed by his excess.

It was for Jerry-Jones Nobleonian to say what he, Luther, was thinking. “Einstein didn’t go to no Queens College, Jim.” Luther and Jerry went way back to grade school. Close. Inseparable back then. But not anymore. Jerry was Lenny’s friend and Luke’s friend now. “And Einstein’s pussy didn’t walk out on him. That’s why he’s all fucked up,” Jerry cackled.

“That’s some bad shit when a girl does you wrong like that. It’s got to put a serious hurt on you,” Lenny declared.

“Here. Have some. It’s chianti.” Luke poured wine from the wicker-covered bottle into a mug but Luther shook his head no.

“Lenny, remember that time we saw him coming out of Davega, down on Forty-second Street, with some some guy from the store, and loading a box of weights into the trunk of a cab? Like he was going to stop being a 99-pound weakling,” Jerry went on.

“Come on, man. That shit ain’t right. He looks OK,” Lenny said.

Ever since his trip to Europe following high school, Luke had been settling back into the building. For a while he had a railroad flat downtown, near Klein's Department Store in Union Square, but it was hard to meet the monthly rent on the office temporary job he had. All day filing papers for a few bucks an hour and the girls paying him no respect but going out with the guys in suits, the ones who had their own offices. And then for a while he went to some college up in Vermont that Luther had never heard of, a college that took kids at the bottom of their class. Luther remembered going up to the used car lot above One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street and Broadway, where Luke bought the big old Buick with fins that he drove up to Vermont in, and a month later the Buick was parked outside the building and there Luke was, back home, living in some room on the seventh floor and he had never left since. Started working as a night watchman for Auntie Eve and doing maintenance work and now and then painted a room. Then the missionary who had been living in the penthouse went off to China and Luke badgered his mother to let him have it until she gave in. Living on the roof wasn't the same as living in the building, Luke said. It was like you weren't living in the building at all is what he said. And Luther listened, because that was all Luther ever did when his brother spoke. Because it wasn't for Luther to tell his brother the truth, even if he suspected that's what his brother wanted him to do. Because even if Luther told his brother the truth, what good would that do, given that his brother wouldn't be able to do anything with the truth Luther told him.

"I've got to be going," Luther said.

"Don't be doing anything we wouldn't do," Lenny said.

*“Who was Lenny Cerone, Luther?”*

*“He was the part of America that needed no education because everything he needed was stored in his genes, as he did not need the sun to maintain his true nature, being Italian with olive oil for blood.”*

*“Can you tell the reader where he came from?”*

*“He was Lenny from Long Beach, Long Island, and mythical in his proportions, having not only the bronzed body but the capacity to fill his jeans and T-shirt so well in the bandana days of his youth. He drove a white Bonneville, and I was with him when Terry Stafford sang ‘Suspicion,’ so full of intensity and yet buried alive in the air of the 1960s.”*

*“What else?”*

*“The girls could not resist his power or his knowledge. One he spoke of as Body by Fisher, Face by Accident, which cracked him up and got Jerry Jones-Nobleonian to go ‘Ho shit, ho shit,’ words that when he spoke them made me move away, at least in my mind.”*

*“What else?”*

*“They were the tie that binds after Jerry Jones-Nobleonian fell out of love with me and I fell out of love with him.”*

*“What else?”*

*“It was when I first heard the Beatles’ song ‘I Want to Hold Your Hand,’ and that caused electricity in the New York City air.”*

*“What else?”*

*“A graveyard is a graveyard. We don’t have to walk too long among the bones.”*

He stopped in the lobby to stare at himself in the full-length mirror on the door to Auntie Eve’s apartment. Full face he thought he looked OK. It was only when he turned profile and bent his leg and saw the meagerness of his thigh that he grimaced. Well, what could he do but feel hurt and wounded that they had spoken to him in such a way about his body. Not that he hadn’t heard it before. And then mocking him, paralyzing him with that Einstein stuff.

He headed down the hill and along the bridle path in Riverside Park in the direction of the George Washington Bridge. A southerly walk would have mired him deeper in the city, whereas the direction opposite was to follow the Hudson and gain the promise of freedom. So it had been since childhood.

By the time he reached Riverside Church and then Grant’s Tomb his mood had brightened. For the first time that day he felt release from the pain that had become a constant. He knew that walking changed his breathing, but he didn’t know that his breath was a factor in how he felt and how he thought. He didn’t know anything about his mind except that it had the capacity to torture him.

He followed the curve of the pathway down toward the nameless bridge that stretched ten blocks north from One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street and imagined himself in a world far from the grim and desolate warehouse-lined streets below. Soon he saw himself wearing the black and yellow road uniform of the Princeton Tigers and performing as he had seen all-American Bill Bradley perform against Columbia, the smell of wintergreen strong in the Lions’ small gym. The shots he made were from farther



and farther out until he was practically at mid-court. The number of points, rebounds, and blocked shots were unheard of. His mind filled with accolades and looks of awe on the amazed faces of teammates and opposing players as well. He was simply doing things that had never been done on a basketball court before fleeing into the night, where all alone in a hidden away apartment high above the street he could savor the memory of his performance. A desire to be recognized and idolized but not to be known.

And now there were the Jaynettes singing “Sally Go Round the Roses,” singing it silky before they sang it strong and insistent inside his head. But what was the secret the roses wouldn’t tell? What was the mystery his mind could never solve? Oh, it didn’t matter. Only the sound, so glorious, mattered. Saying, I have never listened to what a song means. I have only listened to what a song caused me to feel. Because that is all I can do.

The desolation at the other end of the bridge dissolved the fantasy. He should go no farther, unless he wished for the men with the long knives to appear and begin the stabbing thing. He turned back, grateful for the occasional car that came and went. He still lived in the Salvatore Negrón alias Cape Man world, and had since that day when the Cape Man did his stabbing thing in the Hell’s Kitchen playground, making two white boys fall down dead, some years before. The Cape Man cast a specter over New York City. You must remember this was 1965. In Luther’s mind it was the purpose of Puerto Rican boys to make the white boys all fall down.

That night he dreamt he was naked in Chock Full O' Nuts, up on One Hundred Sixteenth Street and Broadway. Not only was he naked but his head was shaved so one and all could see how flat and ugly his head was. Another boy, even thinner, sat across from him smoking a cigarette. All the sadness that would require one to seek death or not wish it away was in his eyes, and yet in spite of his condition, the boy had loaded his hair with gunk in some gesture of hopeless vanity. Suddenly, the boy called out to him in a loud voice, "Is your name Skinny? I hear your name is Skinny."

"Yes, my name is Skinny," Luther said.

"All right then. We can do some business," the even skinnier boy said.

What business that was the dream did not reveal.

"Your mother is a saint. A saint. What she needs is a few good men. I'm praying for her. I'm praying very hard," Mr. Fitzpatrick, Luther's neighbor, said the next morning, there in the hallway as Luther emerged from his room to use the public bathroom.

Mr. Fitzpatrick's white-haired head listed and his eyes closed and he began mumbling inaudibly. His left arm was in a permanent sling, having been mangled in a machine accident that ended his career with the transit workers' union. The exact nature of the accident Luther had never inquired about, suspecting, as he did, that a gruesome report would follow. Even at this early hour Mr. Fitzpatrick wore the oversize denim jacket that was a staple of his dress with his one good arm through the sleeve.

Luther was aware of an attitude of dislike in regard to Mr. Fitzpatrick. It was that prayer he incessantly prayed, or said he prayed. Who were those few good men Luther's

mother needed? Luther suspected some sly malignity attached to the man, that he was seeking to hide his cruelty behind a pose of piety.

The bathroom was heavy with Mr. Fitzpatrick's old man smell, causing Luther to crack open the window even with the fall chill in the air. He couldn't easily imagine Mr. Fitzpatrick stepping into the shower, not with his disability as he stood at the mirror and shaved away the fuzz that had begun to appear on his face the month before.

The trip to Queens College required three subway changes and a bus ride and took over an hour, and yet without much regard for the practicality of such a decision, he had registered for an 8 a.m. math class. He told himself that his mind was in need of strengthening, and what better way to accomplish this goal than to take on, right at the outset, a subject in which he was weak? Anyone could read or write, but how many could successfully manipulate numbers and come up with a correct answer? Reading and writing were for those who could not do the heavy lifting. They were akin to selling ice cream at the Central Park Zoo while real men blasted off into space powered by rockets with enormous thrust.

It was the wound of his SAT defeat, that abysmally low math score. Underweight in his body and underweight in his mind. So his dream had signified.

At Times Square he descended two levels to the Flushing Main Street Line. Soon the sweet, slightly chemical, and pungent smell from the nearby SilverCup bakery filled the car as the train screeched from the tunnel onto an el overlooking the sprawling rail yards. At each elevated outdoor station men boarded in their Dickey work pants and white socks and shirts with their names sewn on them in red or white thread. Some

carried metal lunch boxes and *The Daily News* under their arms. They appeared tired and worn down by the sameness of their dismal days. He imagined their meager earnings, the diners they ate in, the single rooms they slept in. Men without women, he imagined them to be. Men like the men of the building with whom he had grown up, men of the single rooms and the single, woman-less lives and of the diners. He, too, with the *Daily News*, while Jansson's *History of Art*, enormously heavy and impenetrable, sat unread in his canvas bag. A feeling of terror gripped him. He was seeing not only his past but his future. He too would be a lunchbox Louie without love in his life.

The sudden desire seized him to return to his room as proof of his goodness. He would show Jane Thayer that he was not moving away but waiting anxiously for her to return. In that moment it had no significance that Jane was in Mexico City finishing high school or that her letters were full of the names of new girlfriends and of boys and parties as she integrated herself into the life of the American community she had found down there. But then he remembered an earlier time, that before Jane Thayer there had been his mother. The voice he heard now he recognized as the same voice he had heard then telling him on school-day mornings to turn around and run back home, that his mother was weeping and needed him to dry her tears.

He boarded a bus from the Flushing Main Street station to Kissena Boulevard, a name lacking all warmth that would not be allowed in Manhattan.

An old and gentle man placed Xs and Ys on the blackboard. The boy seated next to Luther in the back row, with fluid motions of his pencil, moved these Xs and Ys to their logical conclusions, solving the mystery of one equation after another. Luther could

only watch in helpless admiration this wonder of the earth with his unassuming excellence.

Strange, but the writings on the blackboard were hard to read when only the week before they hadn't been. How could that be? The room was rather small; he was at no great distance from the board.

Later that morning a man named Milton Marcus-Britton (yes, there was a hyphen) stood on the stage of an auditorium. A pointer stick in his hand, he referred the students to slides of the architecture of old churches and cathedrals, but he was the work of art in the seasonally correct earth tone colors he wore while reserving the right to shock with his burning yellow tie. "You're all bright. After all, you're here at Queens College," Milton Marcus-Britton said. What was it when you said one thing but meant another by the tone you adopted? Was it irony? Was it simple sarcasm? One thing was clear. Milton Marcus-Britton wanted his students to know that he was elevated above them more than physically on that stage where he strutted and held sway.

It didn't seem right that Milton Marcus-Britton should drive him down any lower than he felt. But then it became all right. He could live with Milton Marcus-Britton's assessment and his chatter about flying buttresses. He could find a place within himself where the words could live without destroying him anymore than he had been destroyed. And he could sort of understand what his professor was up to. Milton Marcus-Britton was on a search-and-destroy mission, like the American soldiers in Vietnam Luther read about with great fear in the newspaper. Milton Marcus-Britton was just seeking to rid his environs of mediocrity so his excellence could live.

Two girls, both of them attractive, spoke outside the cafeteria that afternoon, in the tone of quiet intimacy that girls adopt and with their books cradled to their chests. Seeing them, Luther came alive in his longing, but they had the intricacies of their acquaintance and a force field operating that separated him from them and ruled out even the thought of connection. The chasm was too great. He had his low numbers to remind him of that.

There was no stove or running water in his little room, nor a fridge, as most of the other units in the building had, so he could neither cook nor store food. But it was important that he not go next door to his mother's apartment and eat the food she served. Such a regression could prove more than he could bear. It could break him beyond the point of being able to come back together.

That evening he ate at Tad's Steak House on One Hundred Eleventh Street and Broadway. For \$1.19 he got a steak and a baked potato and garlic bread and even a small salad with French dressing. The steaks were cooked right before your eyes on a charcoal grill. He sat alone at a small table with his tray of food and the hope of feeling nutritionally sound and expanded in all his dimensions so he could see his reflection in the plate-glass windows of the stores out on Broadway and be satisfied with the image of the body reflected back to him.

As he was finishing his meal, Skinny, the boy in his dream of the night before, walked in. Skinny was wearing a shirt two sizes too big and swimming in his oversize jeans. Jesus, he looked ugly, his skin so papery you could see his veins and that gray

complexion and those bad teeth. Skinny took the table two down from Luther and stubbed out his cigarette before starting in on his steak. Jesus, what a sight.

“I was just down to Whitehall Street,” Skinny said, as Luther was leaving. “They sent me my draft notice. But they told me I’m too skinny and gave me a 4-F. It don’t make me feel right, hearing shit like that. Makes me feel real bad.”

“I know what you mean,” Luther said.

“You been down to Whitehall Street?”

“No, I haven’t,” Luther said.

“How come? You in college, or something?”

“For now I am.”

“That’s good. What college you in?”

“Queens College?”

“Why do you go to Queens College when you live here in Manhattan?”

“It’s the college that accepted me.”

“Maybe I’ll go to college, too. They can’t keep you out because you’re skinny, right? I mean, look at you.”

“That’s right, Skinny. Look at me.”

“I wasn’t saying nothing. It’s just you ain’t exactly Johnny Weismuller either. You know?”

“Oh, I know,” Luther said. “I know.”

That night he took a break from his room and the park and headed down Broadway. Passing under the bulging marquees of the Riverside and Riviera movie theaters, one next to the other, he came to the Thalia, an art movie theater one block south, on Ninety-fifth Street. A foreign film, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, was playing. There on the screen was Catherine Deneuve singing and her young lover singing and her parents singing and everyone was singing. They were singing about love and the joy of love and the pain and danger of love and then the young man was singing of going off to war, in Algeria. He and Catherine Deneuve sang of eternal love, a love that could not be broken by time or distance, but then there were the strategies of her parents, who knew the young soldier was not right for her and had never been right for her, knew this from the perspective of their years and the wretched practical sense it had given them. Oh, you know how it ends. You know and you have always known how it ends, how reality always ends up doing its victory lap. But Luther didn't know. He didn't know even as he did know. Love is not supposed to end, he screamed, if only in his mind. It was simply not supposed to end with Catherine Deneuve pulling her expensive car into a filling station, not realizing it was owned by her young lover. It was not supposed to end with each of them having found new partners and moving on with their lives. You were not supposed to tell a young person that there is young love and then there is mature love. You were not supposed to say that.

Luther cried. He cried and cried in the darkness of the movie theater where he had gone to spend his evening.



Daylight gave way to darkness early now. The college had empty spaces. Wherever he was, they seemed to occur. He didn't speak, and when he did, no one heard. He was at the bottom of something and began to suspect it had no top.

By now he had the glasses that his failing eyes required. He could see the blackboard in math class, but solutions remained elusive.

A sweet sadness began to manifest. Love was an arc, and he was slowly climbing it. Things became holy. His room. The sidewalk. The subway cars he traveled in. The city at night, with store windows burning bright. It was OK being alone in the New York autumn, with the brisk, clarifying wind as your companion.

In the newspapers images of helmeted young men and body counts. Thirty-nine Viet Cong killed. Search and destroy. The perimeter secured. Incoming rounds of mortar. Soldiers dying in a tangle of jungle. An enemy that couldn't be known or contained. Things out of control. Frightening. And if the unknowns won, what would that mean for Australia, the Philippines? Would they not soon be in New York City? He was alone and he was afraid, for himself and the world.

The boys from Amsterdam Avenue, Fatso Scully and Jimmy Jone and Luis Alvarez and even little Kevin Donnelly, the boys with whom he had drunk the quart bottles of Schaefer and Rheingold and Knickerbocker, in his high school years, were all gone. The military had come calling and they had answered.

But not Skinny. And not him.

One night, as he lay on his sofa reading, there came a knock on the door. It was December by now. There had been no knocks to this time. And yet, when he called out, “Who is there?” no answer came. And when he called out a second time, still no answer came. It was not for him to open a door under such circumstances, but the sense of a presence in the hallway was strongly felt. With his free hand he turned the lock, the other hand now balled into a fist. But there was no need to deliver a blow and smash the startled face of the person standing silently outside, not when that person was Jane Thayer herself.

“Is that any way to greet a friend?”

“I guess I got a little nervous.”

“Your past coming back to haunt you?”

He cleared away his books so she could sit on the sofa. The barrier of pain and hurt was there in him, but he sensed, from her upbeat manner, no corresponding state of mind in her.

“I came back to see my mom and dad. And guess what? They’re allowing me to throw a party. You can come, if you want.”

*If you want.* Her words made the invitation sound like an afterthought.

Her parents lived in a walkup building some blocks away. He remembered, from his few visits, the thin bulge of the extension cord that ran under the worn rug in the crowded living room and the dusty surfaces and the dirty windows and the tired furniture. Jane’s mother spent her days on the bottle while her father worked two jobs as a printer.

“Why did you come?” he asked.

“Because we’re friends. That’s why.”

“Are we?” he asked.

“Of course we are.”

“You seem to like parties,” he said.

“People aren’t so bad, Luther. You should try meeting a few yourself.”

“Yes,” he said, as she grabbed her bag and headed for the door.

It had been more painful being together than apart. He was not unhappy that her visit was brief, wanting as he did to get back to the life he had established in his aloneness.

He sensed the influence of Jane’s beautiful and popular cousin Jeanne down in Mexico City with all this party stuff. Jane bragged about her a lot in her letters, how she was a model as well as a first-year student at the University of Texas and the endless socializing. He had tarnished Jane. They shouldn’t have started going all the way. There had only been Jane and him and him and Jane, and now Jane wanted something more, a life beyond that tenement apartment where she lived with her parents on One Hundred Twenty-Second Street and the little world she and Luther had created. Still, that didn’t mean he had to show up at her party and be one of many, a face in her crowd, someone from the past being flattened by her present and her future.

Some days later he saw her with a tall young man, the two of them walking with their arms around each other on the snow-covered streets of Broadway in what seemed, even from a distance, an ostentatious way. Surely the young man would have been at the

party. The fact that Luther had seen them and they hadn't seen him meant something. He felt safe and protected; he had stayed out of harm's way.

He did not always pass by the family apartment on his way to and from his room. His life was not an endless detour around his mother. Besides, he had big news to tell. He was going away, down to Miami for the beach and sunshine and fun.

"Is that so?" his mother said. "But how will you get there?"

"I'll take the train from Penn Station. It will be a real adventure."

"And where will you stay?"

"I've rented a small room in walking distance from the beach."

"My word. But will it be safe?"

"Oh, sure. Lots of college kids go down to Miami Beach on Christmas break,"

Luther said. How old his mother looked, with her gray hair and careworn face and those beige rubber support stockings she wore to ease the pain of her varicose veins. But she was forty-three when he was born, and so she had always been old to him. His mother deserved better than she had gotten. None of her children had turned out right. It was no wonder that she was always turning to Jesus.

Luke came in the apartment that night. He was not always respectful of their mother. Sometimes he even talked to her in hateful ways, as when she would come calling on him in the morning in his penthouse and bang on the red door, saying "Luke, I have need of you. We have an emergency. The bathroom in 7C is flooding. A pipe has burst," or some other crisis, and he would not answer, being still asleep from the excesses

of the night before, and so her pleas would grow louder and louder until he would shout, “Get the hell out of here and leave me alone.” In just such a way would Luke go against their mother with angry words, reducing her to saying, through her tears, “My children treat me like the dirt beneath their shoes. In just such a way do you treat me. I have no one to help me. No one.” And in those times of despair she was back in her childhood, that familiar place of sorrow and pain and hopelessness, with that father who had gone missing with his bottle into the snows of Sweden.

And it was the same on this night.

“Luke, could I ask you not to play loud music on the radio when you sit in the lobby tonight? Some of the tenants have complained. It does not look right.”

“I’ll play what I feel like,” Luke said.

“Must you speak in such a willful way? Can you not be reasonable?”

But Luke was not hearing anything more she said, or if he did, he was not responding, and the smile on his face was one of satisfaction at having reduced her once again to pleading. It was not right that Luke should go against his mother with his words and tone, and then to continue in his ways after seeing she was upset, and further, to see him go on *because* he saw that she was upset. It was clear in such moments that Luke wanted to bring their mother down—bring down her hegemony. Because she was there. She was always there, but their father wasn’t, at least with his mind.

“Hey, Luke,” Luther said.

“Fuck off, Bones.”

“No, Luke. This isn’t right,” Luther said.

“I said fuck off,” Luke said, with added vehemence.

But Luther did not fuck off. He stood up. He did not want to see Luke proceed with his malice toward their mother. A tussle ensued. Luke broke free of the headlock Luther had placed on him and shoved his younger brother to the floor.

“Do you want to put an end to me, my sons? Would you have me suffer a stroke before your eyes?” their mother asked. She was gasping for air and her chest was heaving.

Afterward there was shame. What was it that someone with all his bones showing should be fighting in the first place? Such was the thought that his mind gave him. And his mind’s eye—because everyone had one—gave him the picture of those bones.

Mr. Fitzpatrick was waiting for him outside his door the next morning. “Did I tell you a few good men? Did I?” he asked. His face reddish and sharp like that of a fox, his hair gray, the coldness of Catholicism emanating from him.

The motion of the train had its effect, turning Luther’s thoughts to things he could not consider in the same way in the confines of his room and during his daily routine. When darkness claimed the day, his thoughts turned to Luke. He imagined his brother sitting in the lobby in an old upholstered chair, guarding the building with his presence because the junkie world was now on view on the city streets, addicts going into a nod right out on Broadway in the daylight, rooted to the spot like human pretzels. You expected them at any moment to topple to the sidewalk. And stealing anything they could for their daily fix

when they weren't nodding out. Like the skinny little junkie running down the street with one of the upholstered chairs from the lobby upside down, like a weird giant helmet over his head, and Luke giving chase.

Another scene presented itself, his brother walking through Straus Park just north of One Hundred Sixth Street on Broadway, the one with a fountain originally meant for horses to drink from and where the elderly liked to come and sit on benches amid the pigeons, but for Luther it was not a park for resting in, not with traffic flowing to either side that left no refuge from their fumes or sight. But now Luke and Luther were walking through that park when two boys approached. The boys did not like Luke's face or the attitude it conveyed, their own faces conveying attitudes of blazing seriousness, a statement that they had no play in them. The bigger of the two did Luke four times in the belly before he could know what happened. He fell down with blood pouring from his wound and soaking his white shirt. When they ran he took his knife with him. It was a knives he would need again, a knife to make him proud.

Luther was right there to see his brother fall, as he had been when Winston and Butch, two black boys from the neighborhood, had made Luke fall with their blows and bleed from his nose and mouth into the snow some years before for having called them a name when he hadn't called them that name at all, when in fact he hadn't said anything to them, the fact of him saying that he hadn't said anything of that kind or anything at all only making their rage greater, so that they said to him, "Are you calling us liars, motherfucking white boy? Is that what you be doing?" And before he could answer they

brought him low with the blows they had to inflict. Because hatred was hatred and fury was fury.

His stupid brother. Falling was what happened when you walked too freely as yourself among the aggrieved people of the earth. A person needed caution in his face and a degree of fear. You could not walk heedless of what was out there. This was New York City, and something was spreading, block by block, that required you to contain yourself more and more. How could Luke not see that the Puerto Ricans were angry and the blacks who had made him fall before were angry?

Luther had not been his brother's keeper. But he could kneel and place his fingers in his brother's gaping wound and have his brother's blood on his hands.

The train made its way. It had a pace all its own. Newark, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Baltimore, Washington. Those were American names. Alexandria, Richmond, Rocky Mount, Florence, Kissimmee. Those were American names, too. Whatever else they had once been, they now belonged to America, and Luther could say he had been to them, if only to have passed through, even as a voice not his own said distance was no substitute for depth.

The beach, windy and deserted, was in easy walking distance of his rooming house on Collins Avenue. Though the temperature never rose above seventy degrees, the skies were clear and remained that way as he lay on his towel amid a scattering of palm trees. Every afternoon he could see, as he stood under the shower down the hall from his room, the progress that the sun was making on his skin. The rest of his body was leaving behind the sickly whiteness that the area covered by his bathing suit still showed. A tan



would make his body more than it was. The sun would bring his flesh to life and make it look all right.

Not that he felt so good about himself in the shower itself. Naked he saw what he lacked, tan or no tan, and was grateful for the comforting cover of clothes.

Every morning he had business to take care of before he set foot on the beach. At a diner owned by Cubans, he would order *huevos* and French fries and whole wheat toast with lots of butter. In this way was he getting filled up so he could have a more substantial look when he stepped out of his clothes and showed himself in his bathing suit. He could see his shadow looking temporarily fuller in the sand when the sun came around to cast it.

In the evening he found a restaurant with jumbo fried shrimp on the menu, served with tartar sauce that had the tartness its name promised and French fries that he bathed in ketchup and a slice of tomato on a bed of lettuce. He washed his meal down down with a Coca-Cola in a glass of crushed ice. Then he had some coffee and smoked a Marlboro cigarette. Sometimes he bought the flip-top box. Other times he went for the soft pack, not being wedded to either.

Except for brief exchanges with waiters and the hotel clerk and the like, he had nothing approaching a conversation and felt no crying need for one. He was OK with his solo status.

One thing he thought: I am 1,500 miles from home. I can go away from that building. And even if I return, I can go away once again. I am not my sister Hannah. I am

not my sister Naomi. I am not my brother Luke. I am not any of them in the sorrow patch where they have committed to spend their lives.

On the beach he read *The Iceman Cometh* and other plays by Eugene O'Neill in a Vintage paperback edition. Professor McGonigle had liked a paper he wrote on Yeats. His words had started a song of sweet love in Luther's heart. But Professor McGonigle then found his essay on *Long Day's Journey into Night* too emotional. Those words "too emotional" came to Luther now as he read about the drunks in Harry Hope's bar. He was practically naked on an open expanse of beach, with only the ocean in front of him. With no place to hide, how could Professor McGonigle's words not have found him again? Luther put down the book and whispered into the sand so no one could make out his words or even know that he was saying them. And there were only two words, "Help me. Help me." Over and over did he say them staring down at the sand until the words of Professor McGonigle went away. Because Professor McGonigle had seen the nakedness of his mind, if not his body, and no one must do that. No one.

*What else do you remember about that time, Luther?*

*I remember the barren beach and the chill; the blinking Christmas lights behind the front desk of the rooming house; the Spanish spoken by the Cubans and the aroma of coffee and the feeling of warmth in their diner; the spare, damp room and the peeling paint on the walls; the wrinkled brown skin of the worn-out waitress who served me the jumbo shrimp; the comfort of soft ocean air against my skin; the train trip home with Luke nowhere in sight, emotionally speaking—these things I remember.*

Jane Thayer was not patrolling the streets of Broadway when he returned. She had finished with her parties and walking up and down the avenue with her boyfriend of the week. She was gone from his sight.

But Luke was not gone. He was still upon the earth and hanging out with Lenny Cerone and Jerry Jones-Nobleonian in the lobby in the performance of his night watchman's duties. "Man, I have to tell you. I thought you were dead, over with," Luke said.

"Over with?" Luther asked.

"This kid who looked just like you is crossing Broadway last week right near here. It was around one o'clock at night and this car comes tearing along with its lights off and flattens the kid. It was a sickening thing to see. It wasn't you but it could have been you. And then we thought how maybe it was you. Like maybe you had come back from Florida early. You know what I mean?"

"Was he killed?"

"Oh, yeah. He was dead," Luke said.

"Gone. Finito," Jerry added.

"That ain't right, man. It ain't right. Some sick shit," Lenny said.

"And a Columbia student, too. It was in all the papers," Luke said.

"That's how we really knew it wasn't you. You don't go to no Columbia," Jerry Jones said.

Just up the block from Tad's Steak House a bar with a loud sound had opened, music pouring from its dark interior that made Luther come alive in a way that he didn't deserve to feel alive each time he passed on by owing to his college entrance exam failure. On this particular night "Mickey's Monkey" was blasting into the street, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles doing it up right. The amplified music just held him, intoxicated, to the spot. Lonely and depressed only a moment before, he was now bathed in a brief emotional delirium. Yes, yes, he was number one and going higher, he could feel, before the reality of his circumstance returned to him.

Back past the few patrons at the bar, on a runway, a young woman danced under colored lights. The sight of her in a white bikini and matching boots drew him in. And yet, once inside, he feigned indifference, forcing himself to stare straight ahead as he sat on a barstool sipping his beer.

He had drunk on and off during high school, starting with the six-pack of beer he bought the night after walking Jane Thayer home in the spring of his freshman year. He and his friend Jerry-Jones Nobleonian drank the beer in Riverside Park, opening one after another of the cans with a church key. As he shared his happiness, his joy, at having met and kissed this girl, Luther had a distinct sense that he was using the beer to try to preserve the feeling of elation from the night before and perhaps even go higher with it. He drank sporadically in those years, mainly with the neighborhood Irish kids. Schaefer, Knickerbocker, Rheingold. Beers from New York City breweries in dark brown quart bottles. But he had never been in a bar, not until now, and the thought occurred that he might want to spend the rest of his life there.

But he mustn't do as the other men perched on their stools, who openly gawked at the dancing girl. He would present himself as too sensitive and good for that. It did not occur to him that she might want to be looked at, considering the fact that she was up there undulating and gyrating to the sound of Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs singing "Wooly Bully" or shooting out her arms in a dramatic interpretation of the thunderous imperative "Stop! In the Name of Love" or getting downright slinky to the sound of "Love Potion #9."

Her youth and the freshness of her beauty—surely she was no older than him—made her seem two cuts above such a bar, a nightspot too dark and smelling of lonely sex for those of quality like the Columbias and the Barnards to enter. And yet there she was. How bold and maybe defiant to step into this world and display her thinness and those miracle curves and the swell of her breasts and those full, kissable lips and that lustrous black hair, cut so daringly short, and those eyes so big and dark and the power they possessed.

The bartender wore a black knit short-sleeve shirt buttoned at the top and had a long tattoo of a dagger on his right forearm. He was surely a man with takeout power in both his big fists. His anger beamed out at you through his small, hard eyes, and so Luther's requests for more beer were of the entreating kind, as he knew what anger was, its language and its smell, and how you must act in its presence. He had seen it written on the walls of the family's apartment growing up.

And he knew something else. He knew the girl. Not well, not intimately. Not so as she would necessarily know him. Her name was Imelda. She had lived across the street

from Jane Thayer. Maybe she still did. A lesbian, Jane Thayer had said, only repeating what she had heard. The rumor only added mystery to Imelda's natural appeal. And now a lesbian go-go dancer. A girl who could go where others couldn't go.

Luther approached during her break and introduced himself.

"I've seen you in the neighborhood through the years," Luther said. He felt no need to mention Jane Thayer.

"And?" Imelda said, not adding, as he might have hoped, that he looked familiar as well.

"Are you a student?" Her bright-eyed matter-of-factness had not eased his terror.

"I'm in my first year at City College," she said.

The information triggered a mental collapse. The girl was higher on the intelligence grid. He had been trying to connect with her, but the information had brought down a painful barrier. Even so, fortified by two beers, he tried to reach across the divide.

"Could I maybe walk you home?"

"You can if Joey doesn't show up, and I have no idea if he will."

She said Joey's name as if Luther would know who he was. As if everybody would know who **Joey Szyborska** was. And Luther, at least, did.

A train black in the night traveling at a very high speed and smashing him into kingdom come. That's who Joey Szyborska was.

Woozy from the beer, he returned to his room and lay his head on the pillow. In the dark Imelda's face appeared. What would it be to walk her home, and to kiss her, as

four years before he had walked Jane Thayer home on a spring night and kissed her? Imelda, and the beer, and the music, had opened the door of possibility. It had felt safer, if not better, to be mired in depression, to see a monochrome world rather than the world of color that had briefly opened up to him in that dark bar.

She had said that he, Luther, could, if he, Joey, didn't. She had said that. He ran his hand over his naked and bony frame, his meager chest and thin legs and all the rest. The electric alarm clock glowed in the dark. It said 1:50 a.m. He fumbled for his pants and shirt and sneakers. And then it occurred to him—he hadn't thought of Jane Thayer since laying eyes on Imelda. She had banished Jane Thayer from his consciousness. Once again that couplet from *Romeo and Juliet* came to him: "Take thou some new infection to the eye/ and the rank poison of the old shall die,"

The shops on Broadway were closed, except for the all-night grocery, and the streets empty, and yet, like a beacon, the lights burned in the bar, drawing him toward it. And there she was, stepping out in jeans and a black turtleneck and a suede jacket. Luther stopped as she came toward him, a smile spreading on his face. Oh, what a strange world. Oh, what a strange life. She waved with her right hand. He waved back. But then she waved again. Luther turned and saw bearing down on him a huge young man who, in passing, dealt a blow with the back of his hand, catching Luther square across his face, separating him from his glasses and sending both to the pavement.

"You want more? You want me to knock your head off, too?" Joey said.

"Come on, Joey. Come with me, baby." Imelda's voice was soft, but it traveled far. It had no competition on the desolate street. It was just her voice and big Joey, of

course, and how they walked off, and how he suddenly turned, with his lips thin and compressed, as if to finish the job that he had started, before she pulled him back.

“It’s OK, Joey. It’s OK. Don’t be getting in trouble for a nobody in the night. You just come with me, baby, and let me give you something good.”



## 2. Sister of Mine

Every day, coming and going from his own room, Luther would pass by the room of his youngest sister, Vera. Hers was bigger, with a private bath and a view out on the courtyard his mother would ask him to sweep as a child. He rarely saw his youngest sister, and on those occasions when he did, a feeling of fear, even danger, ultimately would seize him, preventing communication. Some wound had been suffered that made him freeze in her presence. He sensed they were at cross-purposes in their lives. She had taken something from him. She had taken their father. And she was planning to take more.

His youngest sister was an irritant he could live his life around, and the same with his older sisters as well. He had no capacity for sweet surrender to her, nor could he act like an older brother should, with affection easily shown. She had her anger. She held it in reserve, but it was there. And she had her talons.

Defensive. That was a word he heard used a lot, as in “He or she is so defensive.” Around Vera he was just that—defensive.

With Jane Thayer in his life, there had been no need for Vera. There had been no need for anyone but Jane Thayer. All chambers of his mind had been flooded with her. But she had gone away, and now he had the sense, every time he passed Vera’s door, that his sister was counting on his vulnerability to lean him toward her. (He could not call her his kid sister, not when less than two years separated them. Her close pursuit had followed from the womb.) When will Luther come to me? So he heard Vera thinking.

When will he break? When will his desperation in combination with his innate weakness compel him to exercise his only option. She was the gate he would have to pass through if he was to emerge from the limbo of his life into a new chapter.

And that's all it was, a matter of time. When he passed her door one afternoon, she was standing just outside, as if anticipating his presence. He didn't head on by because he couldn't. The loneliness was too much. He entered and she closed the door behind him.

"It's the best. Twinings lapsang souchong. Exotic, smoky, flavorful. See if you don't agree," she said, as she served him a cup of tea.

The tea was hot, but he managed a small sip. "It is good," he said, and it was, better than the Lipton he occasionally drank.

"So tell me about college? Are you liking it?"

"I feel a little lost. Just a face in the crowd. It's a change, going from a small private school to a huge public college, that's for sure."

"But what about your classes?"

"They're OK. I'm taking some required classes to get them out of the way—math and French and even a speech and music class."

"I can't wait to go to college," Vera said.

"Who is that on the wall?" he asked, motioning to a poster of a blond giant of a woman in a triumphant pose.

"That's Verushka. A Russian super model. She's over six feet tall and beautiful. Don't you think so?"

“Oh, yes. She is that,” Luther said. It was easy to see why his tall sister would admire such a woman.

The room was filled with plants: a diffenbachia with white-spotted leaves stood on the table and a philodendron hung in a basket in the window and on the floor was a tall rubber plant. Not that Luther knew their names, but Vera did.

On the wall was another poster, the foursome in it more easily identifiable. He had heard “Satisfaction” and “That’s How Strong My Love Is” and “Play with Fire” and “The Last Time.” He had heard what the Rolling Stones, Mick Jagger and Keith Richard and Charlie Watts and Brian Jones, dressed in black and staring down at him with jeer and scorn, could do.

“What do you see when you look at that poster?” Vera asked.

“I see four pretty famous guys,” Luther said.

“No. Really, really look at it and tell me what the poster is saying to you.”

He stared at fat-lipped Mick Jagger and sullen Keith Richard and slightly more affable Charlie Watts and pretty boy Brian Jones. “Something a little darker than the Beatles?”

“No, no, no. Keep looking.”

And so he did, but after a minute shrugged and said, “I give up.”

“You aren’t seeing it yet?”

“I don’t know what you want me to see.”

“You don’t? You really don’t?”

He shook his head.

“Their long hair.”

“So?”

“So that’s what you should do, Silly. Let your hair grow out.”

“Such beautiful, curly hair. Hair like that belongs on girl,” his mother would say, when he was still in grade school, before sending him to the Puerto Rican barber down the block who would shear off his long locks and give him the crew cut that his mother thought would make him an American boy. But here came his sister saying something different. *Grow your hair*. An imperative, she had uttered. And so he did, and his sister rewarded him.

“You look beautiful. You know that, don’t you?” He didn’t answer, but his sister’s words made his heart sing. Who had ever used such a word to describe him? Who?

And something more. Never again would he have to be exposed. Never. Now could he reclaim his secret and not be subject to ridicule, as who could tell the back of his head was flat as a board with so much hair to hide its sheer, monstrous shape?

Unlike his older sisters, Vera possessed some core of strength that didn’t allow for defeat. As with him, her goal was to escape into a life beyond the building.

He began to look forward to their get-togethers, if only warily. Still, he noted that Vera’s favorite book was *Charlotte’s Web*, which she had read and then reread many times. He couldn’t be sure that his sister too wasn’t spreading a web.

“Daddy, Daddy, Luther smacked me. He smacked me in my face. Tell him to stop,” she had called, back in the long ago when they were young enough to still share a room. His father appearing from the bedroom across the hall from theirs in his sleeveless

undershirt and scorching Luther's face with a hard slap, or *smack*, as Vera described such blows. A word Luther had come to detest, for all the falseness and exaggeration that attached to it, and for all the treachery as well. Vera had turned their father against him. She had betrayed him.

He lived in the wound she had inflicted. It didn't matter that he had behaved badly. It didn't matter at all. She shouldn't have done that. She just shouldn't have. And then to gloat while he cried out in pain. What did that say except that she wanted him to suffer and could even possibly live with and enjoy his extinction. He had not received justice. He had not been heard. It wasn't fair. It wasn't *fair*.

He held on to things. He couldn't let them go. Even when he thought he had let them go he hadn't.

He wanted the love of a man he himself had killed, or said he had killed, the way that some children kill their fathers by making the decision to be the child of one parents, their mothers, and not their fathers. And if other children didn't do that, he had. And yet his father was still alive, sort of. It was not for him to think about too much. He had his feelings. That was all he knew.

My relationship is with the air. This he sometimes said too, if only to himself.

He could tell you these things with the passion such memories aroused, and you could tell him, rightly, that he was in the land of the infantile or lost at best in sibling rivalry. And you would be right. He would be defenseless against your truth.

All his roads led back to Vera. All his wounds led back to Vera. Or maybe they didn't and he would just tell you that they did.

They went out together to the coffee shop of the Turk on the other side of Broadway, where they sat at a booth drinking Cokes and eating cheese Danishes. Jack Jones sang “Wives and Lovers” on the jukebox. It sounded in his ears like an old song and made Luther feel old as he listened to it.

On the street Vera would introduce Luther to male acquaintances and friends without identifying him as her brother. This omission Luther noted, but didn’t call it to her attention, as he feared a penalty might attach and return her to the rancorous state. He could put a hold on his words but not his thoughts. She is letting them believe I might be her boyfriend, he sensed, growing fearful that she might shine a light into his mind at that very moment.

One day he would move away from her. One day he would not be hers the way he was right then, hiding out with his sister in the neutral zone because he could not have a life of his own. This much he permitted himself to think. Hope was a right he would not give up.

### 3. The Life Around Him

His mother had a love that required her to stay and look, not to run. Auntie Eve, her older sister, was weak and often bedridden, and Luther's father hobbled about on an artificial leg, following the amputation of his gangrened left leg below the knee. She did not flinch from the signs of mortality but did what was needed so their lives could go on.

But Luther did not have that kind of love. He saw his father, with his ancient face longer than a horse's, shuffling out of the lobby with the aid of his walker and wanted only to run and run, as if his father were the embodiment of decrepitude and imminent death. From a distance he watched his father make his way to the traffic island in the middle of Broadway, where he would sit and sun himself now that the warm weather had arrived.

A word about his father for those who didn't know. Katchair Garatdjian had been born in Constantinople in 1901. He had two sisters and two brothers. Those sisters now lived in Marseilles, in an apartment with drawn curtains they peeked out from behind. His brothers had disappeared. The Turks had been castigating the Armenians as traitors and insurrectionists, a fifth column bent on the destruction of the Turkish nation. Then World War I came and they turned to hitting the Armenians very, very hard, hitting them with the intention that they exist no more, not as individuals or as a race. The Turks had a master plan for the elimination of the Armenians so the Turkish people could breathe more easily in their own country and see sameness, not differentness, when they looked at other faces. The Turkish servant answered the door and told the authorities the

Garatdjian family was not home and went so far as to say he couldn't be sure when they would be returning. While it was true that some of them were away, it was not so that all of them were. Thus, the Turkish servant had told a lie to the Turkish authorities, who were not to be played with, given their fierce and ruthless dispositions. Thus was Luther's father spared. Luther had no understanding why the Turkish authorities would not have pushed past the brave Turkish servant to see for themselves that the dwelling was free of Garatdjians, or why it was that those same authorities did not come back at another time or simply wait for the reappearance of the Garatdjians. The story had not been told to him by his father but by his mother. His father he did not go to for stories about the Armenians or for anything, for that matter, his father being a danger zone in his mind. (A father you cannot get enough of, even when he is gone. A father must be come back to, as he was there at your beginning and your calculation is that he will be there at the end.)

But enough of a past he would never really know or understand, a past that was handed down to him in bits and pieces, a past as blown to the winds as the way of life his father and his family and all Armenians lived in in the time of the Ottoman Turks.

The fall and winter had been rough. The power grid had failed and there had been a blackout in New York City and all of the Northeast in November. Then, in January, the entire transit system was been shut down because of a long strike. Michael Quill, the short and fiery union leader, called the new and tall and Ivy League mayor Linsley when he knew full well his name was Lindsay. Spring was a welcome arrival, and it was good to see his father taking advantage.

Overcoming his instinct for flight, Luther approached.



“My son,” his father said, from his seat on the bench. “How are you? Are you being a good boy?”

“I’m doing OK,” Luther said. His father’s face seemed to have grown longer through the years, and his nose as well. Something else was different. Luther was used to seeing him in the suit and tie he dressed in for his job as a cashier, not the old pants and white shirt with the frayed collar he now wore.

“You are different, my son. I almost do not recognize you.”

“I have to wear glasses now. And I’ve let my hair grow longer.”

A small flock of pigeons had gathered near the other end of the bench, where another old man sat feeding them crumbs of bread. Luther never paused at such rest stops. The idea of setting out benches for people to sit on in the middle of rampaging traffic was an abomination, a gross insult to civic life. Cars were key to the mayhem madness of contemporary life, and someday they would be roaring through dwelling places while you slept as well if the nefarious ones had their way. And who were the nefarious ones? Oh, everyone knew. Everyone. They were the ones who macadamized the trolley tracks, the trolley being the sole legitimate purpose of these traffic islands, a place where the citizenry could wait for their ride on public transit. And now they were gone so cars could run more fully riot through the streets of Manhattan.

“I am preparing to leave,” his father said.

“Leave? Where are you going?” Luther asked.

“Where would my son expect me to go?”

“I should know?” Luther said. It was a conversation they had had before.

“You must do a better job of understanding your father, my son. Your father is preparing to enter Heaven. And Mommy will be joining me shortly thereafter.” His father turned to a newsletter he had brought along. Luther instantly recognized it as a religious publication from the cheap paper and the blue ink.

“Well, I should be going,” Luther said.

“Be well, my son. And be good to your mother. Your mother is everything. Everything.”

Luther nodded. It was a sentiment he had heard before.

That evening the *Thalia*, and the memory of its cozy confines, drew him back. *Darling*, an English film, was playing.

a bright light

a shining star

a radiant queen

Luther could not begin to comprehend all the blond actress, Julie Christie, meant to him as he witnessed her on the screen. Nor could Dirk Bogarde, who played a TV reporter. He succumbed to her beauty and left his family. But he was quiet and bookish, and she was on the go, walking with a swinging, carefree gait and displaying attributes of fineness that made you want to be as she was or at least walk and shape your lips as she did and be loved as the star that she was.

Dirk Bogarde didn't anticipate that Julie Christie would leave him for Laurence Harvey and the rich, fast-paced, and glitzy world he moved in, as Dirk Bogarde had left

his own family. Dirk Bogarde didn't imagine that he would find himself alone at night, with no wife and no family and no Julie Christie, and only a book to read.

And so Luther tried to walk as he had seen Julie Christie walk on the screen, swinging his arms freely, and he tried to shape his lips as she had shaped hers. It did not matter to him that he was six feet four inches tall and only one hundred thirty-five pounds or that he was a male. To be a blonde, as Julie Christie was a blonde, was to bathe in the light of love.

In that same season a tenant named Bill Bucke took an active dislike to Luther, and all because Luther spoke words Bill Bucke could not agree with. Bill Bucke lived in room 2D8 with his wife, a woman very much in his image. Bill Bucke had teeth that were white and prominent in a feral face, and sunny blond hair and a disposition that was on fire with a truth he claimed to possess. There were 289 Communists in the House of Representatives and fully 83 in the United States Senate and the antichrist himself was sitting in the Oval Office, and don't let those elephant ears of the president fool you.

Bill Bucke held forth on the threat to the nation down in the lobby at night, when the brazenness and scale of the attack on American institutions of government would not allow him to sleep. Luke, who was on duty, was his skeptical audience, along with Lenny Cerone and Jerry Jones-Nobleonian and Luther, who had happened by.

"My real father was runned over by the Communists," Jerry said, sharing the same version of history he had offered Luther when they first met back in grade school.

Sensing an ally, Bob Bucke said, “That’s their signature action. They run you over.”

“They ran him over with a tank. A Communist tank. He was defending Estonia from the invasion of the Communists, and the tank just crushed him when he tried to stop it.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the one who did it is sitting right there in Congress now,” Bill Bucke said.

“A Soviet Communist is sitting in the United States Congress?” Luther asked, having been silent to this point.

“Communists are like chameleons. That’s why they both start with the letter C.”

“But Christ starts with the letter *c*,” Luther said. “And carpet and cow and candle.”

“Are you apologizing for aggression and iniquity in high places? Is that what you are doing?”

“I’m asking a question.”

“The Communists always try to put the side of righteousness on the defensive,” Bill Bucke said.

“Where did you learn all this stuff?” Luther asked.

“It’s in the public record.”

“What public record?”

“The congressional record.”

“And where can people get a copy of this record?”

“I have a copy right in my room.”

“It would be great to see.”

“Then see it you will,” Bill Bucke said, and tore off up the stairs.

Luke shook his head. “You shouldn’t get him upset like that,” he said, as if he had some better understanding of Bill Bucke than Luther possessed.

“I guess not,” Luther said, staring nervously at the stairs and wondering now what he had set in motion. Would Bill Bucke come bounding back down the stairs in a crazy wig and a granny dress wielding a huge carving knife, a la Norman Bates?

They didn’t have long to wait. No wig, no dress, no knife, apparently. Just Bill Bucke at a new level of intensity, his face gone deadly white, slamming a staple-bound document on the nearby table and tearing through one page after another until he found one with text that had been boldfaced, underlined, capped and set in a box, and the headline COMMUNISTS ON THE MOVE: WAKE UP, AMERICA, and the statistics Bill Bucke had previously cited.

“But this doesn’t look like a congressional document,” Luther said, noting the cheap paper and screaming capitals and other pyrotechnical formatting of the text.

“A document about the United States Congress is not a congressional document?”

“It’s a document about the United States Congress, which is not the same thing as a document issued by the Congress.”

“I’m warning you,” Bill Bucke said, pointing a threatening finger at Luther’s face.

“Hey, don’t be warning him. He’s my brother,” Luke said.

“You’ll be sorry. You’ll all be sorry. The day will come when even your mothers are Communists.” With those prophetic words, Bill Bucke tore back up the stairs, his document in hand.

All that night Luther thought about the harm’s way he had placed himself in by riling Bill Bucke, just as he had placed himself in the same path with Joey Szyborska at the bar that night, and could only wonder if the world had one agent of destruction after another waiting for the opportune moment to demolish him, and he were collaborating on some level with those forces for his demise. After all, what had he done but try to make himself better than Bill Bucke by ridiculing the man for his convictions? It wasn’t a good or a nice thing to come between what a man loved and the object of his affections, whether a woman or an idea.

And he saw other things as well that made him want to turn his face to the wall and say shame, shame, double shame.

Professor Corwin Blackner had a bulging brow, but you did not need to be a phrenologist to measure the deep capacities of his mind. He cavorted and pin-wheeled through history, from the Peloponnesian War to Charles De Gaulle and along the way drew easy parallels between the Edict of Nantes and the Bill of Rights and meditated on the word *sabot* and its implications for world history. What he could not do was maintain linearity and a base on the ground. The professor’s mind summoned gusts of wind that blew solid matter around so that all sense of order got lost. Luther felt dropped into a strange forest with a compass he couldn’t read. He felt a crying need for orientation. He

needed to be able to write *facts* down so he could have them to know and be fortified by the possession of them.

Luther went with his complaint to the administration, and at the next World Civilization class, heard from Professor Corwin Blackner noise such as he had not made before. Once again I have been a trespassing fool, Luther thought, seeing the effect of his action on the yowling professor. How could he not have seen what was so obvious? The professor was young and ambitious and passionately in need of expressing his mushrooming ideas. Wounded and angry, Professor Blackner challenged the student who had gone over his head to criticize him to declare his identity.

Luther felt only shame at what he had wrought. Though he could not come clean in front of the class, the weight of his guilt became intolerable as the week progressed and he sought out Professor Blackner in his small office before the next class and was not surprised that he had to identify himself, as the class was large and conducted in an auditorium.

“I was the one,” Luther said.

“I’m sorry. You were the one what?” Professor Blackner asked.

“I am the one who made your life unhappy with my unjustified complaint, and I will go to the administration and withdraw the complaint.”

“Well, it is very brave of you to come to me, and I appreciate your honesty. But can you tell me, if only for my own edification, what led to your unhappiness with my method of teaching?”

It was one of those earnest moments that Luther blamed himself for sullyng life with, that he should bring a high-flying young man with a Harvard pedigree down from his lofty airspace into the mundane realm of the personal and confessional. What a thing, that he should be burdening Professor Blackner with his presence. But Professor Blackner had asked a question, and Luther felt obliged to answer.

“It is only that the torrents of history you unleashed were pouring out of a powerful hose and flooding my mind and I felt in danger of drowning. I thought, if I could have just one fact to hold on to, like a man being swept downstream reaching out for an overhanging branch only to have the branch snap. My mind has been slow and lackluster, so much in need of the fixed space and the security of names and dates to get me from one place to another.”

Professor Blackner put a studying look on Luther’s face, as if to go beyond it and extract some missing information. But for a man of many words, his response was brief.

“I will see you in the next class,” he said.

One night that spring there came a knock on Luther’s door. But no, it was not Jane Thayer making a seasonal visit to announce some new party plan with a triumphant look on her cold-reddened face. It was just a man named Sean with a snub nose and a head, like Luther’s, that called attention to itself. Sean had the back of his head, where Luther’s was missing, and it was round enough to make him human, and yet too abundantly present. The neighborhood kids had called him Hammerhead, though never to his face, unless it was the time of month that a beating was what they wished to order. Sean was



squat and could take you down with either fist and make you stay down once he delivered. It was not nothing that he could make you fall in love with all his power.

Sean made a disapproving appraisal of Luther's new coiffure. "You forget where the barber is?" He himself was not one to let his hair rise too far off his scalp.

"It was suggested to me to let it grow out."

"It was suggested. The way you fucking talk. That fucking hair of yours has seven parts in it."

"Everything you say is true, and yet I have to go where I have to go."

"You are one ugly fuck face. Let's go for a drink. I'm buying."

Sean's battlefield prowess had won Luther's heart when he put it on display on the baseball field down in Riverside Park in the long ago, routing Frenchie the Algerian, who had been dropping shavings of dry ice on the neighborhood kids from atop the batting cage as they took their turn at the plate in a pickup ballgame. When Sean, swinging from the left side, felt the burn of the dry ice on his neck, he did not ignore the neighborhood bully, as the other kids had done, but had it out with Frenchie in the middle of the diamond, separating him from the bat he swung at Sean's head with a punch to the head that crumpled him before strutting off with his bare chest out and his head thrown back.

That had been the summer before seventh grade, but it wasn't until ninth grade, when Luther began to hang out with the boys from Amsterdam Avenue on Fatso Scully's stoop, that he really connected with Sean. Not that there wasn't ambivalence. Sean liked boys, not girls, and he was predatory and definitely dangerous. And probably he was a

crook, given the large roll of bills he often flashed and the expensive theater tickets and box seats to ballgames he bought for them. And yet all those things were part of his appeal as well. Life attracted life.

But now Sean was out of the context in which Luther had known him. That old life was over. The boys of Amsterdam Avenue were no more and Jane Thayer was no more and high school was no more and dreams were no more. Luther was on a plain of bleakness now.

He did not want Sean. The mystery and aura of excitement that once attached to him had faded. He now seemed to Luther seedy and corrupt as well as dangerous. Only you could not say such a thing to anyone, let alone someone with the tendencies and the disposition of Sean.

“Murray’s not showing me any class and class is everything,” Sean said. They had gone to Torlini’s, where a fleshy girl with none of Imelda’s dark beauty, was on the runway, doing her whiskey a go go thing. Luther had felt insane suggesting the place, but he seemed to lack the means to stay away.

“Class?” Luther asked, holding up the word, like a glass, for inspection.

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“But why, I mean, how, didn’t he show any class?” *Class*. The word really did clank with stupidity.

“The boy is a complete whore. I take him to a party in San Francisco and the next thing I know he’s in the bathroom with some jerk. Class, he should have more class.”

Though Luther didn't care for the word, he had to accept that class was a driving force in Sean's life. If it wasn't San Francisco, then it was Chicago or Los Angeles Sean mentioned. He was a man who wanted you to believe he was going somewhere and had been somewhere. A man with a hard-shell Samsonite suitcase strutting through airports in expensive Italian shoes.

Such a big head Sean had, but his face with the smallness of a monkey's. Murray had left him. That was why Sean had come knocking on his door, Luther was sure. Sean's life was unraveling. The money he had stolen—and he had stolen money, whatever air of mystery he tried to surround himself with—was probably running out. And even if it wasn't, the fine restaurants and swank hotels and trips he lavished on Murray weren't enough to hold someone with his beauty and physical endowments and inclinations. Murray was built to turn heads—not just those of homosexual men but everyone's—with his body and looks like that of a Greek god.

Sean had done a crummy thing, exploiting a lonely old widow, Mrs. Harlow, to whom he had delivered groceries from the Daitch Shopwell down on One Hundred Tenth Street. She did not know that Sean was more interested in her money, of which she had a bundle, and the uses he would put it to, than he was in her. The last Luther had heard, Sean had drained her bank account and was badgering her to liquidate her investment assets.

It was all quite tawdry and predatory, and Luther understood he had no business with such a person. Sean had done violence not only to other people's lives but to Luther's as well. Had he not beaten him senseless twice in the past four years, and on the

flimsiest of pretexts? He too had felt the power of Sean upon his face so that he lay unconscious on the street where Sean had struck him. It had been Luther's laughing way about some matter or the other that provoked the rage. And had he not ridiculed Luther as a bag of bones he was embarrassed to be with the one day they spent together out at Jones Beach?

"What college did you say you were going to?" Sean asked, after ordering another round of drinks.

"Queens College," Luther said.

"That's what, like a step up from Manhattan Community College?"

"I guess so. It's a four-year college and Manhattan Community is a two-year school."

"You know, I can respect these Columbia kids. They work hard and they're bright and they study all hours of the night. But you, I don't see it."

"I don't see it myself sometimes," Luther said. "Sometimes I think I should just get a card at the New York Public Library and borrow books and get some kind of job."

"Then why don't you?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid of falling, and that if I fall, then there will be no bottom. It will just be some endless plunge into darkness."

"The way you fucking talk."

"I guess," Luther said.

Sean's words should have stung, and maybe they would in the morning, but the three gin and tonics Luther had drunk provided an anesthetic. People had roles in each

other's lives, and if Sean's was no more than to tear him down, both physically and mentally, then so be it.

"I got something going on," Sean said, dispensing with the auxiliary verb to force language into a truer expression of who he was.

"What would that be?"

"You getting sarcastic?"

"I'm just asking."

"Don't be fucking with me."

"I'm not fucking with you. Really."

"Uncle Sam is going on."

"Uncle Sam?"

"Uncle Sam wants me, baby. Uncle Sam wants me bad. But you know what? Uncle Sam can suck my mick dick. That's what Uncle Sam can do."

"Wow. What are you going to do?"

"I'm working on it, baby. I'm working on it. I got me a plan, baby. A plan."

"Oh."

"What's that mean, 'Oh'?"

"Just oh, like OK."

The dancing girl who had flailed her arms and gyrated her hips now sat forlornly in a corner, a light jacket over her two-piece outfit. Or maybe she wasn't forlorn at all. Maybe she wouldn't go home and cry and cry. Imelda's face came to him. It shone there in the small dark space. She was no nobody in the night, that was for sure. He wondered

where she had gone and where she possibly could go with an ape like Joe Syzmborska hovering near.

“I’m blowing this big town soon. You want to hop the big bird with me, baby? You want to go and go and go?”

“Go where?”

“You name it. It’s on me.”

“Dawn (You’re Too Good for Me)” was playing on the sound system. Frankie Valli at his best, better even than “Rag Doll” and all those sad rags exchanged for glad rags. Oh, the drinks had lifted him into the stratosphere and the music was taking him even higher.

“There’s only one city I want to go to.”

“Yeah? Which one is that?”

“It’s south of the border, down Mexico way. Do you know that city? Do you?”

“You fucking guy, you. You fucking crazy guy.”

He had never been on a plane before, nor had he ever been out of the country, but now he would be accomplishing both. And the advantage of surprise would be with him by journeying to Jane Thayer in a foreign land. He would close the distance between them in a way that the occasional air mail letter couldn’t. Spring break had come and it was time to leave behind the darkness of winter.

Whatever the cruising altitude of the plane, Luther felt like he was flying even higher. The contents of those miniature bottles served by the stewardess in plastic cups

made for potent drinks. Oh, the happiness of this new world, beyond any he could have imagined only hours before.

And in the hotel bar that night their drinking continued. A mariachi band struck up “Bridge Over the River Kwai.” The grinning accordion player showed teeth as big as piano keys. Even drunk Luther had to wonder if some dangerous mockery was going on.

It was near noon before he could get out of bed the next day, while Sean remained fast asleep. Lightheaded, he wandered about in the motorized mayhem of downtown. A twelve-year-old crouched forward on his motorcycle around a curve wearing a jackal’s smile, his abundant black hair blown back by the wind. Farther on, a barefoot peon in a long white shirt and loose cotton pants sat against a building wall with his knees up and his head down. He had seen all this before. He was tired and in the shade, away from the ferocity of the noontime sun.

On the wall of a building a bullfight poster with the bright colors of life. Torrero. Corrida. What was it to bring a bull’s head low and drive your sword into its neck?

Luther pulled out the air mail envelope with the red and green border and checked the return address. Paseo de la Reforma was Paseo de la Reforma, whether on a street sign or an envelope. Soon he passed through the unlocked front door to the coolness of the lobby. It felt like a place he had been before. A great commotion had started within him. What would he say? He had entered the drama of his life. He was no longer distant from it.

She had come knocking on his door. Now he would be knocking on hers, though not quite.

She was not long in coming. About fifteen feet separated them when she entered the lobby from the street. He had pictured her arriving alone, but she wasn't. A girlfriend was with her. Jane waved and then turned to her friend. The two giggled and walked up the stairs.

He had gone where he didn't belong. Ashamed of the way he looked, she had given him the brushoff. He was not suitable for presenting to her new friends. She had found men with more meat on their bones and heads with some roundness and without all that hair.

He did not linger in the lobby but made a beeline for the hotel. He needed to touch base with who he was. He thought he could go there and regroup. It was either that or disintegrate on the street.

The bed in the hotel room was neatly made. A note was on it. Under the note Luther found an airline ticket and two one hundred dollar bills. "This place not for me. See you. Sean."

Luther began to cry. He had hurt Sean's feelings. He should never have suggested Mexico City, even if Sean had made the offer to go anywhere. He had just been using Sean for his own selfish purpose, namely, to see Jane. It wasn't right what people did to each other. It just wasn't right. He remembered something Sean had said in the long ago, before the Daitch Shopwell plopped down on the neighborhood and he was still working for the little grocery on One Hundred Thirteen Street and Amsterdam, right next to Fatso Scully's stoop, where Luther hung out with the neighborhood Irish. "I feel so dirty



coming to see you after you've been with Jane," Sean had said. And now Sean all lonely and hurt and out there in the world with no one.

So much money Sean had left. And the ticket home. It showed something about him. It showed he had a heart.

He lay curled up on his side on the bed and stared at the phone. Calling Jane was hard. He did have his pride, but he just couldn't see leaving Mexico City without a little more than a wave and a giggle from her. She picked up on the second ring.

"Oh, it's you," she said, seeing that she had all the power and he had none. He wondered if her girlfriend was still there with her and Jane was rolling her eyes that she should have to talk with him at all. But his days of displaying anger to Jane Thayer were over. He couldn't be angry at a girl who didn't want him and he didn't want either, if the truth were only known and embraced.

"Yes, it's me," he said.

"So what do you want?"

"I was just passing through. I had some business to attend to."

"What business might that be?" she said. He could hear the disbelief in her voice.

Luther looked around the hotel room. The curtains were drawn against the sun.

"Some important business," he said, as if he was on a secret mission a la James Bond.

"And how long will this business take to complete?"

"Could be a day. Could be two."

"What kind of business could you be doing with your hair like that?"

"Just business. That's all."

“Well, I’m having a party tonight. You can come if you want. If you can get away from your business, I mean.”

And so he did, only to sit in a chair for most of the evening, apart from the good-looking American kids with tans and white teeth and the look of money to support their easy ways. They saw his fear and insecurity and steered clear. It became the kind of party where he looked at them but they, having seen what they needed to see, stopped looking back at him.

After a while Jane, tired of the social whirl, came and sat with him.

“So what’s this secret mission you’re on down here that you couldn’t tell me about? Are you with the CIA or something?”

“The truth is I’m on my way to Costa Rica.”

“Costa Rica?”

“Oh, yes. Something very big is happening down there.”

“And what would that big thing be?”

“I’m flying down there to get married.”

“No one would marry you.”

“That’s what you say.”

“What’s your fiancée’s name?”

“Estelina del Nina.”

“And where did you happen to meet this Estelina del Nina?”

“In New York City, where she’s attending college. She has a room in my mother’s building.”

Jane Thayer laughed in a loud and unkind way, briefly attracting her friends' attention. "You look like you're on your way to a funeral, not a wedding, and your own." There was meanness in her voice.

Since arriving, he had been fighting the drowsiness brought on by the thin air of Mexico City, and now, quite powerfully, he felt the call of sleep. "I should be going," he said.

"Nice seeing you, mister," Jane Thayer replied.

Luther returned to his room and slept and slept. He had thought down Mexico way meant that he was going down, down into a hotter region of the earth. Only later did he learn that Mexico City was up, up, where the air was thin and drowsiness-making for those who hadn't yet acclimated to its great height above sea level.

That spring he moved out of his little room but not out of the building. He took an even smaller room in the penthouse, across the landing from the two rooms his brother occupied. There was a bathroom on the landing that he and Luke both could share. Luke was strong in his insistence on the rightness of the move for Luther.

"It's what I've been saying, man. Being up here is like not being in the building at all. You'll be that much farther away from where it all began." Luke said.

"Where what began?" Luther asked.

"Don't ask me questions you know the answer to," Luke said. "You know what it is. It is it."

“Sure I do.” In that moment Luther was remembering their childhood dream of escape, and because he was remembering, Luke saw it in his face and grew challenging.

“Are you saying something different? Are you saying I’m not far away?”

“I’m not saying anything,” Luther said.

“Then tell that to your face,” Luke said.

“OK. I will. I mean, there’s nothing to tell. It’s fine, and even kind of exciting.”

“Didn’t I tell you I would get a place and you could come live with me?”

“Sure. Sure you did,” Luther said, and this time tried to keep his face from saying something different. In any case, there was no need to tussle, as they had back in December. It wasn’t that kind of row. Luther had an understanding that Luke was feeling hurt and defensive, and so he was at pains to alleviate his brother’s distress, as he did not want for his brother to suffer at the merciless hands of the truth. Because what was telling his brother the truth but an act of sadism if his brother could only be crushed and made to cry and even die by speaking it. In that way Luther was his brother’s keeper, the protector of his vulnerability. But if it wasn’t for Luke to get away, it still was for Luther to do just that. The roof could be a steppingstone, but it could not be a final destination.

Luther gave the walls and ceiling a fresh coat of flat white paint and applied to the wood floor two enamel coats of forest green so he could make the room his own. He had taken with him the radio his mother had given him to listen to the broadcasts on Sunday morning from Calvary Baptist Church but on which he mostly listened to 1010 Wins, all news all the time, so he could be abreast of all developments local and worldwide that needed his fretful attention. A small wood dresser held his few clothes,

but he left his desk behind, as the space did not allow for such a thing. Nor did he have a bed, but he did have a mattress and rather liked lying close to the floor in the night listening to the snapping wind off the river trying and failing to get at him. Through such times he came to understand that the wind had a personality and to recognize its moods. Yes, it could be a zephyr caressing his face and yes, it could be no friendlier in its intention than the wolf at the door of the three little pigs.

Luke had gone to the roof. He hadn't gone to the moon. And so his mother needed only an elevator, not a spacecraft, to reach him. Some mornings she came calling, in her long black gabardine skirt, with the keys on her big ring jangling, and her words stayed the same. "Luke, I have need of you. It is urgent. I must speak with you this minute." Because the weight of the building was on her. The weight of Simon Weill and of her life were on her. But Luke had a way of responding to her cries for help in a way different from Luther. He did not feel that he would have to fall down and die if he did not match her sense of urgency with his own. He did not, in this instance, go against her with words, as he had at Christmas, and put his laughing thing on her. He met her instead with the silence of his snoozing. But her pounding on the door and cries for help continued, eventually rousing Luke from slumber and awakening his rage.

"Leave me the hell alone."

"But Luke, we cannot have this. I have need of you."

"Later."

"But I need you now. It is urgent."

"I said later."

Soon would come her tears. She would just stand there weeping while her two sons hid behind their locked doors. She had failed to come to him, as he was not a man in the way that Luke was a man who could replace a burst pipe or even a blown fuse. He was only good for his paperback books, if he was even good for those. He saw once again that his mother had stopped seeing him and was gone from him now.

Luther held his hands to his ears to try to block the sound of his mother's suffering. To never have a man she could count on. Not her father, whom her mother dispatched her to find so he didn't die drunk in the snows of Sweden. What a job for a child, to not only retrieve her father but to smash his bottles against the rocks, as she had told Luther years before. And then Daddy, a man she could not count on not because he drank but owing to his temperament. A man with a condition, she would say of him. A man who could not handle stress. A man who stood behind a cash register all day at Jack Dempsey's restaurant and sat in the Automat drinking coffee and spent money on burlesque shows and had time for his God but not for his family. A man for whom everything was too much. A man whom it was beyond imagining changing a light bulb or replacing a fuse.

But Luke had a story, too. He was a man of new beginnings. His song would always be "Don't Fence Me In," with all due respect for his thing for Elvis. It was said of him that, as an infant, he had kicked a crib apart in protest against its containment policy.

"Two good men. That's all your mother needs. Two good men," Mr. Fitzgerald called after him as Luther tried to slip by him in the lobby, where Mr. Fitzgerald had been doing his upright prayer with his head bowed.

He must have some kind of monitoring device that enables him to detect my presence. Such an essence these Irish Catholics project, as if only fists and coldness are to be found behind their faith, Luther thought.

Later that day, back from school, Luther visited with Luke in the quiet of the afternoon. He found his brother in the penthouse suite with his big nose pressed into his forearm for minutes at a time, as if trying to bore into his flesh and smell his blood to ascertain its degree of freshness. Blood could be stinky, Luke had told him when they were kids. It could stink to holy hell.

“Your blood is stinky. That’s why you’re all bones. Your flesh can’t stand to be around you,” Luke had informed him, back in the long ago.

Luther sat quietly, as when they were children. It would not do to call him from the spell; that would be a violation, and even dangerous, like shaking a sleepwalker into consciousness. Several minutes passed and his brother lowered his arm and went to the mirror, where he pulled his lips apart to inspect his teeth. Then he gave them a couple of chomps to test the soundness of his uppers and lowers.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, having determined that everything was good to go.

“I heard the ruckus this morning.”

“Get used to it.”

“Mr. Fitzgerald says she needs two good men.”

“I don’t listen to people who smell as bad as that guy,” Luke said. “Besides, she needs one good man, and that one good man is me.”

“I guess,” Luther said.

“What do you mean, you guess? You don’t hear her knocking on your door, do you?”

“That is true,” Luther said, not especially surprised that Luke should articulate what he himself had been thinking only that morning. Thoughts were readable. You saw them on people’s faces all the time.

“You see, she recognizes that I have the goods. She saw us both naked so she would have to recognize that. We’re talking endowment now. You understand what I’m saying?”

He was talking about his dick, but it wasn’t for Luther to say as much, cast as he was into the place of shame. “I guess so.”

“You see, you can’t be a man without that. Just ask any woman.”

“Stop it. Just stop it,” Luther found himself shouting. “You’re talking about our mother.”

“I’m just saying that how we are physically can suggest how we are mentally, too.”

“Right,” Luther said, repressing the impulse to ask his brother if he had never seen a bozo with a pea brain.

Having served up his aggression, Luke now offered his insecurity.

“I can’t have people looking at my face. You understand what I’m saying?” His brother needing a receipt for his words. asking for a receipt for his words.

“There’s nothing wrong with your face.”



“Don’t tell me there’s nothing wrong with my face. What do you know about my fucking face?”

He had blundered, gone where he hadn’t needed to go. Better to let his brother express whatever it was he was trying to express. When his brother went dark, to let him go dark and not try to shine some light into that darkness. Because, for all he knew, his brother needed that darkness as a place he could call his own.

Luke saying, “I’m going to get some plastic surgery so my face can be what it’s supposed to be.”

It was the acne. Luke’s face not as bad as it had been in his teen years, when it was one big red zone and Luke went through a bottle of special skin cleanser every month. The pustules had dried up, leaving his skin like some cratered planetary surface after the fire had come and gone.

That summer the Lovin’ Spoonful came and went, but then they came again, having their way with “Hot Town, Summer in the City,” an assault that revved you up but left you stranded when it ended. Rock took you into the sky and dropped you without a parachute. It left you twisted and destroyed with its sadness and its joy. He wondered that a violin sonata never did that to him, how instead it led you into the contemplation of your life in peaceful shadow and not in a state of internal commotion.

He took sick that summer, a condition that lingered, his throat continually sore and his glands swollen and walking a city block a fatiguing exercise. He lay about a lot

on the mattress he had placed on the floor of his room, listening to the cable winding and unwinding from the winch in the elevator housing while living on Tropicana orange juice and the antibiotics prescribed by Doctor Edelbaum, whose office was across the street in the building of normalcy and order. When he could, he lifted ten-pound barbells so he was not defenseless against his emaciation, the gray face of Skinny never far from his mind.

At night lonely men would ascend from their rooms to the roof and peer with their binoculars into the apartment windows in nearby buildings, scanning for signs of female flesh. Others, more ethereal, brought their telescopes seeking constellations beyond the smoggy sky over New York City. Some nights Mr. Fitzpatrick would show, somehow managing to climb up on the parapet and stand at its very edge, a foot from the deep drop to oblivion, and pray from this high vantage point for the mass of mankind.

Luther himself would climb the ladder to the roof of the penthouse itself, where he would lie until his fear of the darkness and of danger would drive him back inside behind his locked door. There on the roof one night he saw a flying saucer, and spoke to Luke and other disbelievers how it had hovered, a luminous disk-shaped presence, not ten feet above him, before departing. What he didn't say was how special the flying saucer made him feel that he should be chosen for exposure to it, or that, curiously, he experienced no dread that the aliens had come to abduct him.

Jane Thayer came calling, in her Jane Thayer way, in August of the summer. No written warning. No phone call. Just with her knock, knock.

“So, are you among the living?” she asked, having tracked him to his room.

“Oh, yes, I very much am,” Luther said.

“And where is your Costa Rican lovely? Gone out for a quart of milk, has she?”

“Oh, yes. A very special quart of milk,” Luther replied.

“How can you live like this?” she asked.

“Like what?”

“This tiny room. No furniture. Just a thin mattress. What’s wrong with you?”

“Actually, I am getting better. The worst is over, I think.”

Jane Thayer made no mention of parties. Not a single one did she say she was throwing or attending.

She was there and not there, having come back to Manhattan to visit with her parents before returning to Mexico City, where she would start college in the fall. He found himself wanting to be with her all over again, but she did not want to be with him, or be with him in the same way. In Central Park, when he had regained his strength, he heard Dionne Warwick sing “Walk On By” at a free concert and wished so that Jane Thayer was with him to hear the singer tell her lover to keep walking on by so her tears would not be visible to him. Luther thought it magical to be back among the living in the night in New York City and yet agonizing too that Jane Thayer should be so near and so far.

Her parents moved that summer to Prospect Park, in Brooklyn. Several times Jane Thayer called on Luther to journey down to be with her while her parents were away and protect her from her isolation and aloneness. The borough’s dark, lonely streets frightened and disoriented him, and the apartment felt drenched in history but no present,

as if only the spirits of the dead were in its rooms. And yet it may have been his relationship to which he was referring, he sleeping apart from Jane on the floor through the night because he was with her and not with her at the same time. In the morning he left without a goodbye.

And what was the smell of that perfume she wore that spoke to him of lonely teenage nights and the ache of desire? And what was that laugh of hers across the table at a coffee shop booth that said she was having it all her way with him once more?

And that song, that damn song, “Hot Town, Summer in the City.”

There was another with whom he spent time that summer, a young man named Daniel. He and his wife, Therese, had taken a room in the building, which they paid for with the salary she earned as a secretary in a midtown office. Daniel frequently flashed a mischievous smile on his narrow face and his walleye gave the impression of strangeness. Therese, a young woman with long brown hair and a soft smile, had an Ingrid Bergman-like beauty that spoke for itself. To look at her was to see that sincerity was part of her makeup.

While Therese was off at work Daniel sunbathed on the roof in black jockey briefs. The question arose in Luther’s mind whether the two were actually man and wife. Daniel’s indolence wasn’t the issue. There were many such men married to women who tolerated them for one reason or another. It was more his vanity and exhibitionism, the abundant sense of wantonness he conveyed with his look and manner. Seeing Daniel sun himself as smoke and embers blew from the incinerator, Luther would be aware of an

attraction he felt for the man, who did, with his short blond hair and lithe, athletic, and bronzed body give the appearance of an Adonis. And perhaps he would have succumbed to Daniel's power, were it not for the smirk Daniel also displayed, which strengthened Luther's resolve not to give him the victory he was seeking.

Sometimes the sadness in Therese's eyes seemed to suggest a story she wasn't at liberty to tell. The two were from a small town in Michigan. They had come to New York City for their freedom, the way that many people do. She was afflicted with pleurisy, a condition which sometimes laid her low and even required hospital treatment. Her illness, suggesting a fragile hold on life, only added to her beauty and her appeal. Surely she had to know how much Luther longed to touch and hold her and receive her caring warmth. One day Luther would tell her everything he wanted to say. One day he would have the opportunity to do just that.

Toward the end of summer Daniel startled Luther with his plan to divest the Cathedral of St. John of some of its precious relics, which it displayed under glass in a wing of the edifice—gold cups and jewel-studded artifacts, as Luther vaguely recalled. He might just walk out wearing a gold-layered chasuble, Daniel said, giving truth to Luther's suspicion that he did have mischief and more in that mind of his, a felonious nature.

“How do you plan to do such a thing? Are you an international jewel thief, like that character in *Topkapi*. Because you don't look like one to me.” In fact, Daniel was coming to look more and more like a blond Norman Bates, with the fixed and birdlike intensity of those eyes.

But Daniel was not deterred. “I have a plan,” he simply said, summoning a smile to support his confident tone.

“There are people in prisons who had plans,” Luther said.

“The problem with you is that you are in a negative groove. You really do need to begin to think positively.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Luther said.

Daniel surprised him with the presumptuousness of his observation but also with its accuracy. And yet the fog of corruption enveloped him, too. How else could he explain the presence of people like Sean and Daniel in his life?

In the same room with the relics was a long wooden bench. Daniel came before the closing hour and, when he was alone, lifted the seat on the bench and hid himself away in the hollow. When the cathedral closed its massive bronze doors for the night and the guard had made his obligatory round, it was Daniel’s intention to rise, and, supplied with a glass cutter, to liberate the artifacts from their enclosures. But he hadn’t counted on the sedentary nature of the guard, his large appetite, or his flatulence. For what seemed like hours the guard smacked his lips and loudly passed gas. Along with each emission the guard provided commentary. “Massive bombing campaign underway... Operation Rolling Thunder... Let her rip, big guy... Stinkaforium, you are me.” Nor had Daniel counted on the dictates of his own internal plumbing. He had to go, and go badly, and in a state of terror pissed his jeans in the box where he lay while Fatso bombed away. Hours later, through a side door of the edifice, he emerged, wet and stinky and relic-less.

Luther never had the chance that summer to pour out his heart to Therese. Her sickness kept her away, and those times he encountered her alone it was as they were passing in opposite directions, he going in and she going out of the building, for example, or vice versa, strongly suggesting to him that the flow of their lives was in opposite directions and he must let her go because he didn't have the necessities for securing her to his person. In fact, the closer they were physically to each other, the more improbable he saw the fulfillment of his longing ever being realized. He could find no segue into the realm of involved conversation and so could offer her only his niceness, his blandness. What is this goodness thing that I cannot move beyond? He would ask himself in the isolation of his room.

And then came the day that they were gone, without so much as a goodbye, as there had been no heralding of their arrival. But it was that way in the building without order, people coming and going while the Garatdjians, or most of them, remained.

There was another who, for a time, was on Luther's mind. Eddie Finkle was his name. With his disconcertingly small nose and fretful expression, he resembled a pug. Eddie had gone through life, into his forties, alone, gray now showing in his wiry black hair. Though he had the look of an escapee from an asylum, his single status was about to change. There was a woman he had taken to, and she to him. Her name was Eleanor Perron, as small and delicate and of good cheer as he was big and brutish and brooding.

Luther saw the collision coming. He had no hopes for the future of the odd couple. For one thing, Eddie had a smaller mind than Eleanor. It was the pairing of a

cretinous Cro-Magnon man with a songbird. More distressingly, he was avaricious. She had means and he didn't. He gave up his room, moved in with her, and went on an alarming buying binge—a big color TV, high-priced stereo equipment, a fancy dining table set. Eddie's consumer bent gave rise to her suspicion that his main interest was her money. Another man who used and abused women. This too Luther saw, in anticipating the quick dissolution of the marriage.

That summer he received a letter from CCNY accepting his application for transfer. He remembered it had been called "Harvard on the hill," back in its glory days in the 1930s and 1940s, when quotas were in place that kept Jews out of Ivy League institutions. Luther, with his low SAT scores, was indicative of its decline. Still, he was grateful. No more one and a half hour journeys to the outer reaches of Queens and back. Now the IRT local would get him to the campus in ten minutes.

Not one campus but two, north and south. Shephard Hall. Wingate. Decrepit Lewisohn Stadium. Not Columbia. Not Teachers College. Not Union Theological Seminary. Not Juilliard, up at 122<sup>nd</sup> Street and Broadway. None of those, but *north* of them all, as if in exquisite seclusion. A college like a second baseman who shows occasional flashes of power. Good for twenty homers a year. In this way did he also think of the City College of New York.

That wasn't it either. He was going north, with all the promise the north contained, and yet he would still be within the bounds of the city he loved on a campus with gothic features amid the new.



That now he would be among the anonymous mass in a respectable and affordable college even if his board scores did not entitle him to be there.

That by anonymous mass he meant the public school boys and girls he should have been with all along if only his mother had not been scared of the boys of violence who might have at him in such a setting.

He lacked a retentive mind. Quickly he would forget the pages of text he read, no matter how much highlighting of the material he did. The small academic abilities he possessed were in the humanities, but English and history and even the social sciences, were suspect in his mind. They were for those like him who were poor in math and science and lacked minds that could quantify and calculate and fathom the mystery of complex equations. What was that to read paperback novels and yet be at a loss in a physics class or chemistry lab?

Disregarding past failure, he enrolled in a calculus course. The words on the glossy white pages of the hardbound text he could read: the sine of the curve, the differential of this, the tangent of that. But the elegant mathematical notations represented a language he could only dream of comprehending. *(f) x + y something*. And yet he had set himself up for failure by going with his weakness, not his strength, as if, only by prevailing in the manly domain of math or science could he in fact be a man.

For a week his mind was a torment, giving him no respite from his dilemma: drop the course or stay on. He sought out a counselor. Perhaps he could help him with this acute feeling that he was meager in both body and brain. The counselor had Luther's

transcript in front of him on his desk for the meeting. He was a young man of few words, a quantifying sort with a hard exterior.

“I don’t feel worthy of being here. Can someone with my mental resources survive in this world?” Luther said.

Pained hesitancy showed in the man’s face as he looked up from the unimpressive data on Luther’s transcript. The room filled with coldness. It was a room in which no life, no spirit, was allowed to exist, only numbers.

“You may need help I cannot give you,” the young man would only say.

His romantic poetry class was only a little less punishing. *How Does a Poem Mean?* he was supposed to have read in high school, but if he had, its message was mostly forgotten. Be suspicious of meaning altogether or find one that is non-linear. Something like that. The girls in his class seemed not to read but to inhale Keats and Shelley and breathe out insights about this sonnet or that. High board score girls bored with their dull professors.

In this time Luther encountered someone from what seemed the long ago, prompting not joy but alarm bells to ring in his mind. The solution of flight was denied him by the fact that their eyes met, and so there was now the social cruelty of two students who had little in common and little to say to each other in high school having to acknowledge each other in their new environment. Though it was sad to regard another person with such fear and so little basis for understanding, certain information about the fellow student flooded Luther’s consciousness immediately and colored how he saw him. One, he had scored well on the SAT and was seen as gifted in mathematics. Two, the

most intense engagement Luther had with the young man occurred on a basketball court during a varsity scrimmage in which Luther decided the young man was showing too little discipline and desire. Luther took personally his seemingly cavalier attitude toward what was, at that stage of Luther's life, supremely serious business. Suddenly Luther flung the basketball hard, hitting the young man in the back. He then barked angrily at the young man. Luther had not shown this aggressiveness at the school previously, and though he later apologized, the hostility shown the tall, gentle young man only extended the gulf that exists between the intelligent and the less intelligent, the pacific and the violent. It grew large in Luther's consciousness that his overly serious approach to what was, in reality, simply a game revealed his inferiority to his acquaintance, whose general air of amusement supported the notion that he possessed a higher consciousness.

With surprising directness, Boris, simply said, "I can't tell you how uncomfortable it makes me to see you on this campus."

"Yes, I understand," Luther replied, as he surely did.

"Let's keep this brief, shall we? You go your way and I'll go mine."

"Yes, of course," Luther replied.

And there their connection ended, insofar as any further verbal communication. Harsh as the treatment was, Luther accepted the justness of it. People had a right to live their lives free of his oppressive presence. People had the right to assess who had things they wanted and who didn't.

“I don’t like the subway anymore,” Luke said. “Too many people down there looking into my mind. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Sure.”

“I’m going to buy a motorcycle. That way I can get around all on my own. Know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“You like motorcycles?”

“They’re OK.”

“What’s that mean? You like them or not?”

“I like to walk.”

“I like to walk too, but you can’t walk upstate, can you?”

“Maybe take the train upstate. I like trains.”

“Yeah, all right. Trains. But you have to think of the future.”

“Right. The future.”

“You all right, man?”

“I’m fine.”

“College is OK?”

“Sure. It’s OK.”

“That’s all you want to do is read books?”

“There are other things, I’m sure.”

“I was reading about this course in 16 mm and 35 mm film production. I’m thinking of getting one of those Bolex cameras. Maybe make some movies. You know what I’m saying?”

“I do,” Luther said.

“You see the new stereo I put together? And cheap, too. Turntable, amp, receiver—all for under seventy-five bucks. Listen to this sound.”

It was a loud sound. Eric Burden and the Animals coming through strong with that hideous song “House of the Rising Sun” and the even more lamentable “War (What Is It Good For)?” which featured a whole lot of grunting. Hairy beasts in some sort of cave. The man of many stinking shits. In such a way did Luther think of this Eric Burden and the same held true for his animals as well. Who in his right mind called the rest of his band “the animals” anyway? Or if he insisted on staying with the name, why not call the group “Eric Burden and the *Other* Animals”? At least be decent about it.

“It’s great,” Luther said, when his brother finally turned down the volume. “You really do know how to put things together.”

“And take them apart, too. You know that the Coast Guard contacted me?”

“What for?”

“They wanted me to enlist. I scored in the ninety-ninth percentile on their test. But then they found out about my arrest and withdrew their offer.”

“Oh, no. That’s so unfair.”

“It’s OK,” Luke said.

“OK? But you didn’t do anything.”

“I said it was OK, didn’t I?”

Luther went to his room and closed the door. He stood with his forehead pressed against the wall and his eyes closed. He stayed like that for a few minutes.

In the not so long ago, when he was first back from Europe, Luke befriended a boy named Andy Collingwood, who wanted to appear tougher than he was by wearing his hair in a duck’s ass and going about in a T-shirt and leather jacket in all kinds of weather. In spite of his rebellious pose, Andy was a high achiever at the Bronx High School of Science. The persona was one some of his type committed to, boys from prosperous homes and possessed of supreme gifts play-acting at rebelliousness and failure but never committing to the real thing. Andy encouraged Luke to take off on an escapade with him one spring evening. With little money and only a few supplies, they hitchhiked upstate and found themselves sleeping in a public park in Albany. In the morning, cold and hungry, they wandered into a residential section of the city. Seeing a car in the driveway of a private home, Andy said, “How about we take it for a spin?” There was the key in the ignition and the front door was unlocked. Luke had a conscience that would not allow for thievery, at least of money or material goods, but he was afraid he would disappoint his younger friend if he didn’t take up the challenge. And so Luke got in behind the wheel, and with Andy in the passenger seat released the emergency brake. As the car rolled down the slight incline and into the road, a warning voice sounded in Luke’s consciousness. No, no, the voice said, which was only an amplification of his initial trepidation.

“Hey, Andy, maybe we shouldn’t,” Luke said.

“Shouldn’t what, man? Let’s go, go, go.”

Luke couldn’t drive off, as Andy wanted, but he couldn’t leave the car in the roadway either. He turned the ignition and the car came loudly to life. What he didn’t know was that, it being Monday morning, the couple inside the house were preparing for work and that the husband had been drawn to the window by the sound of the car engine starting up in time to see Luke returning the vehicle to its rightful place in the driveway.

Minutes later, Luke and Andy heard the wail of sirens heralding the arrival of the Albany police with guns drawn in a swarm of squad cars. After handcuffing and frisking Luke, he was driven to the precinct and booked, placed in a holding cell minus his belt and sneaker laces, and later fingerprinted. Bail was set at five thousand dollars at his arraignment two days later, and when he could not meet it, he was remanded to the county jail to await trial. In this new location, he had the company of older men with lengthy rap sheets and younger men who were in the process of developing such records. Some of these older men had favors to ask of him, and when he denied the requests, unable to accept their sexual agenda, force was applied and he was compelled to fight.

The calls he made to home did not gain the response he had been seeking. “Is that so? But what is the meaning of this?” his mother asked, when finally he got to hear her voice, but her sound was one of bewilderment about the things beyond her immediate vicinity.

“Can you get me out?”

“My Lord, Luke, where am I to get such money?”

A few days later a delegation of the righteous and the scornful, as Luther later dubbed them, arrived at the county jail in a prayer van, owned and driven by Pastor Cohn, from the tabernacle where their mother worshiped. With him were Brother Johannssen and Brother Gluck, vested members of the congregation.

“We are come to set you on the path of righteousness, son. We are here to blind you with the Light, as Saul of Tarsus was blinded by the light. In the name of Jesus are we here,” the name *Jesus* pulled from Pastor Cohn’s mouth like taffy.

“I am not Saul of Tarsus and you are not the Lord,” Luke replied. “I need someone to get me out of this hellhole.”

“Jesus will get you out of this hell and every hell you could ever imagine,” Pastor Cohn continued. “This is your come-to-Jesus moment, son. You see where iniquity has brought you, and if not iniquity, then the path of foolishness.”

“Go away and do it now,” Luke said. He saw the entourage as his parents’ offering, and it filled him with self-pity and anger that what he perceived as smug rectitude should be offered in place of genuine assistance. Because he knew with them it would be words and more words and never any action, that they came from a place of judgment and self-righteousness, and that a God such as this that they embraced gave them license to show cold indifference to him as a human being, the same indifference the congregation at the tabernacle showed to the world as it sat there in those pews assured of their ticket to a heaven the rest of the world would never possess.

He was six weeks in jail before a plea bargain could be worked out by his legal aid lawyer.



As for Andy, he too was held for a night but released in the custody of his father the next day, his father having driven to Albany to reclaim his privileged son. And that summer he went off to an arts colony to which he had applied and in the fall enrolled at Harvard University, his father's alma mater.

This is only to explain why the Coast Guard didn't want Luke after wanting him so badly and why the world that came calling to him, whether the military or his mother, he could not readily go to. In truth, he showed no regret that the door that had opened and through which he could have walked onto a bigger stage was now closed. It was enough to bask, for a time, in the validation of the high test score and the Coast Guard's initial ardor. He did have worth. He was not the washout those at his high school, St. Andrew's, would have had him believe, from his desultory grades and SAT scores. The Coast Guard meant the loneliness of the water. It meant men without women. It meant regimentation, whereas the penthouse meant the freedom of the night. That which had called to Hannah and Naomi was now calling to him, silently and insistently, to stay where he was in the coffin that the building had become.

That fall Luke bought a 500 cc Yamaha motorcycle, a thin red and white and black death machine with chrome fenders. Luke kept the bike on the roof, in spite of the protests of their mother, who raised the prospect of monstrous fines should the fire department marshals see it during one of their inspections.

"Do my words mean nothing? Are they lost to the wind?" she exclaimed.

If her words had value, it was the smile her exasperated sound brought to Luke's face, and the impetus it gave him to kick over the bike's engine and do a wheelie, as if he

were rearing up on a mechanical stallion, right there on the roof. But while Luke's disregard was brutal, Luther did not come to blows with his brother, as he had that Christmas season the year before. Luther did not want the job of quelling his brother's defiance. He wanted now to bear silent witness.

For Luke now, mornings were a time of despair. His defenses down, he would awake to the reality of his life, that his high school classmates had moved on while he was pushing a mop and doing other small chores for Auntie Eve and his mother while still living at home, penthouse or no penthouse. He turned to wine and a joint to soothe his pain and get him right for the day ahead. The night became his refuge, with the cloak of anonymity it provided. He would wheel the Yamaha onto the elevator and, from the basement, tear up the ramp and onto the street, waking and enraging those in the vicinity who thought 11 pm was a reasonable time to be fast asleep. From high up on his rooftop room Luther would lie in bed in anticipation of the engine's roar.

“Do I need people looking into my face and my mind on the subway when I have this? Well, do I?” Luke asked, pointing at the bike. And the answer was no, he didn't. He had claimed his autonomy with the helmet on his head, the spare one strapped to the buddy seat, and the throbbing engine between his legs. Led on by the promise of connection, he would take the hill down to Riverside Drive and onto the West Side Highway at Ninety-sixth Street, where under the verdigris base of a lamp on the arching bridge he and Nancy Becker, his teenage flame, had placed two pennies as an avowal of eternal love only several years before. But Luke was beyond Nancy Becker now and those “Blue Moon” high school days when she loved him only to not love him and then

loved him again, those days when her rejection caused him to take aspirin by the bottleful and have his stomach pumped. He was a hunter in the wilds of lower Manhattan, flying over the cobblestone roadway down by the Fifty-seventh Street piers, a treacherous stretch particularly in the rain, which mixed with the motor oil dripped from the leaky pans of passing cars to make the surface slick as glass.

Greenwich Village was lonely streets calling to lonely, willing, footloose girls wandering in the New York City night around the perimeter of Washington Square Park. It was Rienzi and Café Figaro and other haunts along MacDougal and Sullivan Streets. Far from his own territory and free of the abashment that daylight brought, he could pursue his desire, like the girl walking south through the memorial arch of the park and past the fountain and turning down West Fourth Street in a pocket of aloneness—no one with her and no one near her on this late weekday night to paralyze him by reflecting back to him his predatory intention. A girl in jeans and a turtleneck and a suede jacket and boots. A girl just for him. Saying to her not “Are you lonesome in the night just like me?” but “Hey, would you like a lift? I’ve got an extra helmet,” the girl responding with a smile and the one word “Sure,” swayed by his size and strength and vulnerable eyes to climb onto the buddy seat and, as the bike gained speed, to place her arms tightly around his waist.

Soon Luther would be woken by the elevator door opening and voices on the landing and some minutes later jazz coming softly from Luke’s stereo as the smell of grass spread across the landing. There was no envy of his brother for the success of his nightly adventures. The repetition spoke of desperation and emptiness. It wasn’t much,

but Luther at least had some books and the possibility of a future, whereas Luke had mops with which to swab the landings while serving as his mother and aunt's not so little helper.

The girls were always gone by morning. All that needed to be said had been said in the night, and now it was necessary to flee from that which they had done or allowed to be done to them. Daylight brought guilt and shame and the feeling that their lives were out of control, and the control couldn't return until they were gone from this place.

On occasion the girls would oversleep, only to be woken by the pounding of Luke's mother at the door, and the emotional scene that ensued, with Luke and his mother going at it, did not fit with the image the girls had of Mr. Motorcycle Man in the Night.

And yet, late that fall, Luke did meet a girl he could stay with for more than one night, and not on one of his motorcycle forays but at the Cheetah Club, near Times Square, where he had gone dancing to the Dave Clark Five and yes, Eric Burden and the other Animals and all the rest. Addy was a rugged girl who needed something more than a flyweight boy. It did not matter that she was in her last year of high school and Luke was some years older. He had meat on his bones and was in her image of what a man should appear to be.

Addy was from Darien, Connecticut, which Luke understood to be one of the wealthiest communities in the country. She was the real goods, a top-shelf square-faced girl with a straight A average, and not some waif on the street. When Luther was introduced to her, he bounced right off. He found no way he could draw near. It was his lightweight status that kept him at a distance from her, he sensed. The judgment was felt

acutely. But he had an observation of his own. If he had too little flesh on his bones to constitute a real man, maybe she had *too much* flesh on her own to be a real woman. All he really knew was that he felt meager in her presence.

Addy had a girlfriend, Dahlia, who had accompanied Addy to the Cheetah. Luke had some idea that Dahlia might be right for Luther. “She may have a screw loose, but she is pretty,” Luke warned.

“A screw loose?” Luther asked, knowing his brother’s tendency to believe he had special insight into people.

“You’ll find out,” Luke said.

Luther didn’t try to dissolve the mystery with close questioning. He saw the smile that came to his brother’s face, a sign that some complicated judgment was being made and one it was not in Luther’s interest to subject himself to anymore than he already had. The smile was also a reminder that mischief was not foreign to Luke’s nature.

But if Luke had assured Luther that Dahlia had homicidal tendencies, such an assertion would not have been enough to keep Luther from her once he stood in her presence. Dahlia dazzled with her blond hair and perfect white teeth and big green eyes, and possessed an elegant thinness that put him at ease in a way that he couldn’t be with heavier Addy. A girl like that.

Luke had no time for “Hot Town, Summer in the City.” It was the wrong season for the Lovin’ Spoonful. But he did play Bob Dylan, whom Luther had heard before and suspected might be right for any season with his words and images and a sound that did painful things to his mind, somehow diminishing him and at the same time creating wild

longing. Music that roiled his still waters and left him dancing in his chair with the bobbing movement of his head.

When an hour and then another passed, it became clear that Addy was not going home. And if she wasn't bound for Darien, then neither was Dahlia. It did seem to Luther a miracle beyond description that a girl with Dahlia's looks and worth should be sitting next to him, and even if they could not really talk because of the loud sound of the stereo, he sensed a strong connection was developing from the smiles she offered and the way she casually brushed against him as they drank their scotch. And when he took her by the hand and led her to his little room, he had even more reason to believe he was not hallucinating but that Dahlia was really there with him.

He reached for her in the dark and she did not pull away. And when she removed her yellow top and bellbottom jeans, she seemed to be saying that there were things she wanted in the night, or if not, that she would give him those things that he himself wanted. But when he tried to enter her, she began to whimper and push against his chest with her hands. Whether he was hurting her physically she would not say. Instead she just pressed herself against him, as if all she was seeking in the world was to be held. Several times the same impasse was achieved, and he grew tender and protective of her in his thoughts. He understood to let the matter stand as a mystery that did not require explanation.

In the morning he awoke and found that overnight Jane Thayer had gone somewhere into the past. There was only the bright light of Dahlia burning in his consciousness now.

He made plans to meet her the next weekend at the information booth at Grand Central Station. He didn't want to go back to the penthouse. The thought of Luke's presence bothered him, like some unwanted shadow. Luke was leaning too much into his life, more than a brother should.

"Didn't I tell you you two would hit it off?"

"You did," Luther said.

"So how was she?"

"How was she?"

"Was she good?"

"It was nice being with her," Luther said.

"Is she OK?"

"Sure she is."

"Is she *really* OK?"

"She is," Luther said, not wanting to voice any doubt that would open the door for more of Luke's knowingness.

There was a hotel verging on seedy on lower Broadway, just north of Houston Street. Idle-looking men hung about in the lobby, next to the vending machines, eyeing Dahlia as Luther registered at the front desk. A rats in the walls sort of place with mildewed carpets where life of a lower kind got lived. Luther left Dahlia in their room with the bottle of gin and Seven-Up he had purchased and ran to the bar below for a bag of ice, not without fear that she might be attacked in his absence.

He poured the crude but potent concoctions into waxed cups. If Dahlia noticed the poverty of imagination and the seediness, she didn't say. Together they drank and drank, as if it was the pathway to change and adventure that would allow them to truly be together. And yet, though the location was different, the same impasse of the weekend before was reached. Again she pressed with her fists against his chest and gave little cries in the night. How different her demeanor in the dark than the serene, smiling manner she showed with the lights on. Though he did not understand, he knew not to push, her little cries conveying that she might not understand either.

The morning light brought separation and self-conscious unease, dispelling the closeness he had felt in the dark. It was a time for dwelling on differences—her fully tanned and perfect body next to his too white flesh and the burden of having learned she was a straight A student and thus her mind was a notch or two above his own. Feeling ill from the drinking, he could not defend against the abysmally low SAT score and the image of a thin mind housed in a square head atop a meager body.

They headed uptown for Grand Central Station, where he held a hot dog he had ordered at a concession stand. "Eat. You're a growing boy," Dahlia said, with her mysterious smile, minutes before bolting through the gate for her train. She herself was not much for food, nor was he on that morning, and so he tossed his purchase in the garbage.

"Now it's your turn to come to me," Dahlia said, when next they spoke. As a strategy he had waited until Wednesday to call her, fearing severe punishment if he appeared too eager. He fretted that the alternative she proposed to the city venues they



had been was a way of registering her disapproval. Still, he would get a chance to ride on the railroad, even if it was just the New Haven Line, with its engines of many colors. He had only been to Connecticut once before, a brief visit to Trinity College, in Hartford, Connecticut. The college had not wanted him. He lacked the academic stature for enrollment, the admissions officer had firmly told him. But now he would be journeying to see Dahlia, not a steely-eyed admissions officer delivering the quick brush-off.

As the overheated coach car pulled into the Stamford station, he stared through the window dulled by dirt and saw below Dahlia, her face upturned to the falling wet flakes, which settled softly on her golden hair and the brilliant red scarf wound around her neck and her blue parka.

“You have a car?” he asked, as she led him to the parking lot.

“Of course I have a car. Did you think we get around by subway up here?”

“Well, no, of course. But how can you have a car and still be in high school?”

“Everyone drives at age sixteen up here. You don’t have a license?”

“My brother has a license.” Mentioning his brother in what she would see as a better light than his own made him suddenly anxious.

As Dahlia pulled out of the parking lot, the car went into a skid. She gave a scream like he had never heard before, her hands flying from her face.

“It’s OK. It’s OK. Just a bit of black ice under the snow,” Luther said, he himself recovering from her blast of sound. He rested his hand on her shoulder, the shuddering of her body like that of some cars that stall out before coming to rest.

“It’s not all right. It’s not. These things are not supposed to happen,” Dahlia said, enunciating every syllable.

“They happen all the time. That’s the reason for cars to exist, so people will get hurt.” It was an angry and extreme thing to say, though he tried to make his assertion in a calm, matter-of-fact manner devoid of extremism. It was a way of establishing his power, his authority.

“That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard,” Dahlia said, and began to laugh, uncontrollably.

It was OK if she laughed. It was better than hearing her scream. And it was OK if she chose to be dismissive of his idea about the malevolence of vehicles. True was true, regardless.

He got out and walked around the car. “Your tires all bald. All four of them,” he said.

“I know that,” she said, her tone resentful.

“But should you be driving on tires without treads?”

“I’m saving just for new ones,” she said.

“Saving how?”

“I have a part-time job as a secretary.”

“Can’t you ask your father for the money?”

“I don’t ask my father for anything. Anything,” Dahlia said.

A real passion statement is what Luther heard. He could feel the heat in her words.

“Killing yourself is a pretty extreme way to achieve independence,” Luther said.

“Did I say I was going to kill myself, mister? Did I?”

“No.”

“Stay out of what you don’t understand.”

They drove to a Wetson’s, a hamburger joint ablaze with white fluorescent lighting in nearby Norwalk and a Saturday night mecca, judging from the kids packed into it. It looked like a place for pain and reckless Saturday night violence. It was a kind of life Luther didn’t know, driving in your car to get some food.

“You wait here,” Dahlia said.

“I shouldn’t come in?”

“Just stay put and keep Ellie company. She needs a lot of love.”

“Ellie?”

“My car, silly.”

“Could you leave the engine running so the car doesn’t get cold?”

“The heater is not working,” Dahlia said.

“Well, hurry, please. I’m freezing.” He had only a sweater and shirt under the light pea jacket he wore and his breath made small clouds when he exhaled.

“I’ll be back in a jiff,” Dahlia said.

He wondered that she wouldn’t have him accompany her. Were her friends among those inside? Was she ashamed to be seen with him, as Jane Thayer had been when he came calling in Mexico City? He got out of the car and walked around it, rubbing his arms to try to generate some warmth. She was a while before returning with a big white

bag. Minutes later they had left behind the commercial strips for a community of private houses with snow-covered lawns.

“Is someone home?”

Dahlia had pulled into a driveway and Luther stared at the lighted upstairs room of an otherwise darkened house.

“Of course someone is home,” Dahlia said.

“Who?” Luther asked.

“My father.”

“Just your father?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Where is your mother?”

“My mother? My mother is away.”

“Away where?”

“Just away.”

Such a presentable house it was. The clean, comfortable kind Luther would see on TV or in magazines. As he ate the burgers and drank the thick vanilla shake, he kept thinking of her father upstairs alone. It was more like he felt her father as an oppressive weight coming from above.

“It was so nice of you to come,” Dahlia said, as Luther finished with the burgers and the French fries. Dahlia herself had only sipped at her Coke.

“Really?”

“Yes. It was delightful to have you here.”

So nice. Delightful. Her words didn't sound right. They sounded formal and distancing, like words offered to a stranger.

She drove him back to the station but didn't wait with him for the train. She had things to do back at the house, she said. He watched the taillights of her car as she drove off, waiting until she was out of sight around a bend before going inside the station, where he stared at the posters for Broadway shows. Out-of-towners getting the best of New York and then leaving. Not seeing that Times Square was like raw sewage. *Come on. We'll take in a show.* Is that what they said?

Something had been done to him but he didn't know what. It was like when he and Dahlia were in bed and she let him in but didn't let him in. Only this was worse, much worse. She had let him in but not let him in to her life. Oh, it was all too much to contemplate and he mustn't go toward darkness in his mind. He mustn't.

Twenty minutes passed. More than enough time for her to arrive home. He would call her from the pay phone. Things would be different when he did. He experienced a surge of love to melt all the coldness he had experienced as he dialed and there she was on the line.

"Oh, I miss you, too. I'm in bed shivering under the covers. I wish you were here to warm me. I wish it so much."

"Me, too. But we'll see each other again soon," Luther said.

"Everything will be all right. Everything will be fine," Dahlia said.

Oh, how different he felt as the New Haven Line train arrived. He could even feel a measure of compassion for the foppery of the behemoth of an engine and its overhead

pantographs. Surely it was doing its best, decked out in those silly and jarring black and white and orange colors, even if they did lack the brilliance and subtlety of turning leaves for which the region was famous. Still, it was in the best interest of a train to know where it was if it wanted to be received well, and that went for him as well.

Once again, when it came to the phone, Luther was aware that a strategy was needed. While it was true that love depended on making himself scarce for a brief while so he did not doom his bond with Dahlia with a premature call, to delay too long could mean disaster as well, as then she might make other plans for the weekend. And then what would he do, when time went by so slowly as it was without her for a few days? Like an alcoholic trying to postpone the first drink till 5 pm, he struggled to hold off reaching for the phone until Wednesday.

Around the corner from the building was a luncheonette, and it was there Luther went to call Dahlia, as all throughout high school he had used that bank of phone booths to ensure that his family would not overhear when he spoke with Jane Thayer.. Enclosed in the booth, he spun the rotary dial, fearful that his voice would reveal anxious concern. His brief euphoria in the Stamford train station had passed. Once again he was interpreting his aborted time with Dahlia as evidence that she was moving away and that he was suddenly reaching out across a greater and greater divide. But she wouldn't even have to hear his voice to discern his fear. Vibrations in the air would have told her as much already.

“Are we meeting at Grand Central Saturday night?” he asked.

“Oh, Luther, I can't,” Dahlia said.

“Why is that?”

“There’s a party I’ve been invited to that I don’t want to miss.”

He had no reserves of strength on which to draw. The rejecting breeze was enough to defeat him. And yet, though crushed, he opened the door for more pain, ignoring the warning voice that told him to hang up. “What about the weekend after next?”

“I’m afraid I have plans for that weekend, too.”

“Oh,” he said.

“I’ve got to r.un. Someone is waiting for me,” she said.

“Sure. Run. Go ahead,” Luther said.

Skinny was sitting at the counter, as if waiting for him. That reedy neck. That pale, shiny face. Even his hair was skinny, skinny and greasy.

“I’m getting me some London broil to fill me up and make me strong again. Everything all right with you?”

“Sure it is, Skinny,” Luther said.

“Your roof’s OK? It ain’t sprung a leak?”

“My roof’s OK, Skinny.”

“You know my real name ain’t Skinny, don’t you?”

“Right,” Luther said.

“But if people want to call me that, I don’t mind.”

“You should be called whatever you want to be called.”

“Skinny people like us have to keep up our strength. You want to have some London broil with me?”

“I don’t think so, Skinny. I think I need to be going.”

“What’s the matter? You don’t want to be seen with me?”

“That’s not it at all,” Luther said.

“Just remember you’re skinny, just like me. You should be called Skinny, too. You mind if I call you Skinny?”

“Call me what you need to call me,” Luther said.

Though the luncheonette was patronized by Columbias and by locals, Luther was squeamish about the fare and so never ordered anything more than a Coke while sitting at the counter. A narrow metal cabinet with sliding drawers held the hot food. It wasn’t anything to tell Skinny, but Luther imagined rats and other vermin having first dibs on the London broil or that the meat had gone bad or was of poor quality to begin with.

Lev, the owner, intercepted Luther at the door.

“So, Luther, you don’t talk? You don’t say hello?”

And so Luther paused and turned to Lev, a balding Jew with a robust physique and numbers tattooed on his right wrist, an indelible reminder of the horror of Auschwitz. His full lips, his giant nose, the slope of his face—a face the Nazis might have used in an anti-Semitic propaganda posters. A face so ugly and yet so alive that it almost became beautiful in the power it conveyed.

“My boy, he is at Cornell University. Is a good school, yes? One of best in the country?”

“Yes. An Ivy league school. Very good,” Luther said, desperate to be gone.

“He is studying to become a doctor,” Lev said.



“Yes. He must be very smart.”

“Full scholarship he won to the school.”

“That’s great,” Luther said.

“What you do now?”

“I am a student at City College.”

“What you study at this college?”

“English.”

“What is that, English? Why you need to study something you already know?”

Luther had no answer for muscular Lev, whose progeny would wrest from life all that was good through intelligence and force of will. Once again did Luther feel a need to be alone, to just close the door on the world. He had run enough of a gauntlet with Dahlia and Skinny and now Lev.

But there was one more before he could be safe for the night. “A few good men, boys. A few good men,” Mr. Fitzpatrick called out, interrupting his prayer vigil in the lobby so Luther could be reminded of what his mother lacked.

For his father he did not cry. To his father he did not say, “I love you.” His father was only decay and death at this juncture of his life, with his walker and his prosthesis and his daily insulin injections. It would be years and years and then more years before he could say that he knew what he had missed by not having his father in his life in the way that a son could have a father in his life—someone who could coach him into his world in a way that would not leave him fated to exist solely in the power of women.

Because he had no words to convey the evisceration that Dahlia had performed and no one to say them to, he bought a fifth of gin and a bottle of Seven-Up that Saturday and sat alone in his room. He had no bag of ice but he did have a glass and so he broke the seal on the gin and began drinking. He did not find Dahlia, but he did find his anger. The girl had hurt him, she had really, really hurt him, and she had done so with a smile. And now he could do some hurting. He threw the bottle and the glass through the window, then punched the remnant of the broken pane with his fist and emerged onto the landing with his bloody hand and shouted at Luke's door, "I will kill you. I will kill everyone. Every last one of you."

He remembered his brother opening the door and a couple of tenants coming from the floor below. And he remembered the bright lights of the emergency room and continuing to carry on and the nurse, as she applied stitches to his hand, saying, ""You don't shut up I'm going to have you sent to Bellevue. You want that?"

The nurse, stocky and thin-lipped and red-haired, saw through him, saw that he was in performance, saw that in the moment before he threw the gin bottle through the window that he didn't truly have to do that, just as she saw that he didn't have to go all histrionic and shout that stuff about killing his brother and everybody else. Saw that the only genuineness in him was sadness and depression and saw further that even that was suspect. Saw and saw and saw and, in seeing, shamed him back into his small, withdrawn space.

It was some days later, the bandage still on Luther's left hand, that Sean came calling, just stood there outside Luther's door after knocking, his face blasted by the cold winter wind. Gone were the silk shirts and dress slacks and other expensive duds; he had squeezed himself into pale blue corduroys, a tight blue windbreaker and red high-top Converse sneakers. The ill-fitting outfit made his shorn head appear bigger, like a balloon that has been squeezed.

"I'm on the lam, man. AWOL. The military police are after my ass," Sean said, too engrossed with his own drama to see the utter dismay with which Luther had greeted his arrival.

The story was a long one, and Sean was eager to tell it.

After leaving Luther in Mexico City, Sean returned to New York City only to find that the MPs had shown up at his parents' apartment. And there were letters waiting for him from the military citing the penalties for refusal to ignore his draft status. His father, especially, put pressure on him to surrender. America had been good to them and Sean needed to fulfill his obligation, his father said. Sean had himself been feeling something similar. How many different cities could he run to? How many lonely hotel rooms could he stand? And so he turned himself into the draft board and began basic training at Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, and was doing well. He would, like the rest of his army buddies, get shipped overseas and shoot him some guerrillas, as he put it. But the daily regimen and the barking drill sergeants and the close quarters of barracks life began to wear on him. He remembered the freedom, not the pain, of his civilian existence, and began to miss his lover, classless Johnny. And so, after several months of army regimen,

he took off from Fort Bragg, and had been running ever since. His funds were pretty much gone and his father wouldn't let him back in the apartment.

All along Luther had sensed, with dread, where Sean was going with his tale, and so it came as no surprise. "How about it, Luther? Can you put me up for a few days?"

Even in his diminished state, Sean had great power and Luther felt his weight now pushing against him. How much he wanted to rid himself of this incongruity, this dangerous and depraved appendage, to his life. Was he really supposed to let this marauding man-child into his humble sanctuary and forfeit any comfort or peace of mind for the length of his indefinite stay? But it was not only cowardice, the fear of Sean's wrath, that led him to say yes when he wanted to say no. There was also the moral question. Sean had done things for him, like the trip to Mexico City and all the box seats at Mets games and theater tickets and dinners he had paid for. Didn't these constitute a debt of sorts?

"Sure. You can stay," Luther said.

"You know, I can see you taking a rifle and shooting people," Sean said that night, in the room they now shared. With the help of Luke Luther had found an extra mattress to serve as Sean's bed.

"Why would I shoot anyone?" Sean had asked him how he got the cut on his hand, and so Luther had told him.

"You're like that Charles Whitman guy picking people off from that tower in Texas."

“I don’t think so. I don’t do that sort of thing.” Sean was making him uneasy with all his talk of violence.

“All I know is that I wouldn’t like to be around you if you had a gun in your hand,” Sean said.

Sean left him with that thought and went to sleep.

“That man must go away,” Luther’s mother said, having seen Sean with him as they passed through the lobby the next day.

“He won’t be here long,” Luther said.

“He is not normal and you have become less than normal with that hair of yours and the height you have risen to without any flesh on your bones. You are a hanging string, my son. Why is it that you do not come to the dinner table and eat my normal food? Why do you go on this way so that soon you will disintegrate from the earth?”

“I am doing fine,” Luther said, though his mother’s words hurt.

“I have no one to help me. No one. Do you know this, my son? Do you know anything of the last days that are coming for all of us?”

They were in the lobby, within earshot of Mr. Fitzpatrick, who had his prayer session going before a framed verse of scripture hanging on the wall:

For the wages of sin is death  
But the gift of God is eternal life  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 6:23

“I have been working with these boys of yours. I just want you to know.”

“What is that you say?” Luther’s mother had crossness in her voice.

“Working with them night and day. They are in my prayers,” Mr. Fitzpatrick said.

“I see,” she said, as she took in Mr. Fitzpatrick, with his fallen face and humped back and mangled arm. A Catholic man tied to the apparatus of an oppressive church. For the Virgin Mary and the saints and the liturgy she had no use, and the Pope, with his cardinal cohort, had the markings of the antichrist. Coldness, the coldness of stone, she saw in the ravaged visage of Mr. Fitzpatrick and perhaps all Catholics.

If Columbia was a supreme institution in all their minds, the sign on the side of the building sought to address it with Gospel words about God and his only begotten son and eternal love. The sign sought to stand up to the perceived haughtiness of the Ivy league and direct it away from the vanity of great intelligence to the world of spirit, where all were one and distinctions that divided and separated could not be made. But such perspective was not available to Luther or many others in the neighborhood who struggled, with varying degrees of success, to accept that they lived outside the realm of excellence.

“Such fine minds those young Columbia students have,” even Mrs. Garatdjian was heard to say.

Word was out that a Columbia couple were throwing a New Year’s Eve party, and even though it was not Luther’s way to be around the Columbias if he could not be one of them, his loneliness led him, in the company of Luke and Sean to a building on the next

block. When he heard the Beatles singing “In My Time” and saw, through the open apartment door, the crowd already gathered, he had no power to resist.

The couple were well matched, the woman voluptuous in a short skirt that showed off her long, thin legs, while the young man commanded your attention with his dissipated handsomeness. His shirt hung from his gaunt frame and his Jesus-length hair needed a comb or a brush.

It was said that the two were heroin users, but while nodding addicts with corkscrewed bodies were a common sight on Upper West Side streets, Luther thought use of the drug was pretty much restricted to the poor and uneducated, like the scrawny junkie desperate for a fix who tried to make off with an upholstered armchair from the lobby balanced on his head. Luther didn't associate heroin use with a Columbia University graduate school math whiz, and the thought that the young man was in its progressive grip and slowly diminishing his own excellence saddened him.

It was an easy party to crash, and for all he knew, the couple had thrown open the door to the neighborhood. In fact, across the room stood Skinny. Somehow, in such a crowded space, he had managed, through force of negative energy, to create an unfilled zone around him. Seeking to ease his discomfort, Luther headed for the bar and poured himself a large glass of Scotch, to which he added a splash of soda, fearful that there might not be enough whiskey left when it came time for a refill. The warm glow of the whiskey spread quickly.

A short, thick-necked man arrived with a woman and powered his way through the room, a motorcycle helmet under his arm. Drawing on his newfound confidence, Luther smiled at the woman and she smiled back. But the man was less than friendly.

“Buzz off, Scarecrow,” he said, prompting Luther to punch him in the face with his left hand, the other having received the stitches. The man tried to bull his way forward, his face reddened with rage, but several men held him back, while the handsome host clamped his arms around Luther’s chest from behind and moved him out of the apartment.

A woman emerged and led him by the hand up the stairs to the next floor, where he lay with his head on her lap on the landing. Her enormous and frizzy hair made her face appear tiny, like that of a monkey. “You’re not violent. You’re not violent. You’re just a child of fear.” She whispered those words over and over while stroking his brow, as if they were words he needed to hear.

Down below could be heard a commotion as the man emerged from the party. Suppose the man sensed where Luther was? Suppose he climbed those stairs and beat him senseless, as he surely could? But slowly the racket faded, like that of a plane moving into the distance. “He may be waiting outside. He is very angry. Stay with me for a while. Stay here where it is safe.”

The woman came from a world that was not his that she could talk this way and be this way with him. As the minutes passed his discomfort grew at this intimacy with a stranger. Beyond simple gratitude, other feelings began to emerge. He sensed in her an intelligence he couldn’t match. The only thing that had attracted her to him was the thing



she was asking him to disown. Why else would she treat him like an unruly and misguided child in need of attention.

“You were very, very lucky,” Luke said the next morning. “That guy came back with even scarier-looking friends. He was meaning to hurt you real bad.”

And Sean had something to say, too. “You sick fuck.”

That fall he had been required to take a medical exam, along with others new to the college. Stations had been set up on the basketball court in Wingate Hall, on the north campus. Lab-coated physicians inspected him, applying a stethoscope to his chest, tapping his knees with rubber hammers, applying a tight wrap to his bicep to check his blood pressure, recording his height and weight, using a tongue depressor to check his mouth and teeth. Stripped down to his Jockey shorts, his emaciated frame exposed to one and all, he felt humiliated and tried to avoid the looks of disgust on the faces of the other students by keeping his eyes from theirs.

“You are badly underweight and in need of immediate dental care. You have significant tooth decay and your gums bleed easily,” the final doctor said, surveying his chart. He showed Luther a clinical gaze and clearly was one of those for whom warmth was not a necessary attribute in life.

“I see,” Luther said, borrowing his mother’s expression and clearly deflated by the empirical evidence, which only corroborated his worst feelings about himself.

*In this corner of the ring, standing six feet four inches tall and weighing 133 pounds, with holes in his teeth and bleeding gums, we have....*

“I’m not feeling too good. I’m feeling like a bum. You know what a bum is, Luther? You’re looking at him. I’m a bum. That’s all I am. That fucking roof of yours. I’m afraid to go out on it. I’m afraid I’ll jump off the fucking thing. I feel like a ghost in my own fucking life. I feel like I’m in a fucking desert or something with nothing around me and I don’t know where everything went. I feel so fucking lonely I don’t know what to do. Look at me in these ugly clothes and with this big fucking head. I look like a fucking ape, a white fucking ape. An Irish fucking ape. That’s me. I’m almost as fucking ugly as you, and that’s saying a lot.”

“That is saying a lot,” Luther agreed.

“I don’t mean to insult you.”

“No, of course.”

“But you are an ugly motherfucker. You know what I mean?”

“I really do,” Luther said.

“I just feel so fucking lost.”

“Yes,” Luther said.

“You’re lost too, you know. You ain’t going anywhere either. Pretending to be a student when you’re just as big a dope as me.”

“It’s true,” Luther said.

“Look, I know I sound mean, but I love you. I mean it. I don’t know why. You’re ugly and you’re dumb just like me, but you’re OK.”

“Right. I’m OK. And you’re OK, too.”

“I’ve got to go back. I’ve got to turn myself in. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Right. You can’t do this anymore.”

They sat in the bar where Luther had first seen Imelda. A new disco damsel was doing her thing. It seemed they changed every week. But none of them were Imelda. Luther and Sean finished their drinks. They left nothing in the glass. Then Sean went his way and Luther went his in the night.

Luther liked the burgundy turtleneck sweater he had worn the night of the party, but because of the incident, the sweater remained in his dresser, lest it identify him more easily to his victim and bring on retribution. To further obscure his identity, he removed his glasses when out in public. The street lights were a blur, as were faces, but it seemed a prudent measure to take. Day after day his fear grew, rather than lessened, of a savage beating. Some days he curled up in a fetal position and comforted himself with soft moans. If he was a coward, so be it.

But who was that other person at the party, the smiling, serenely confident mongoose flirting with another man’s girlfriend before socking her mate? And what about that drunken threat against Luke the night he cut his hand? The woman on the landing had gotten it right. He wasn’t violent. The threat against Luke and the punch he threw were little more than histrionics, instances of playacting and nothing more. He wouldn’t do serious harm to anyone. Not to sound like Norman Bates, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly.

“She was sick,” Luke said, speaking of Dahlia.

“You keep saying that, but you never say why.”

“Didn’t you notice? She never flushed.”

“What?”

“When she went potty, she left it there for everybody to see.”

“No way.”

“I’m telling you she left her mess floating in the bowl. I mean, come on, you must have noticed.”

“What? I’m a toilet inspector?”

“I’m just trying to help you, man.”

“Well, thank you, I’m sure.”

“You’re welcome,” Luke said.

That grin Luke displayed, suggesting some special knowledge about Dahlia, as if trying to goad Luther to inquire further. But that was a road Luther didn’t have to go down.

Addy had gone out of Luke’s life, as Dahlia had gone out of Luther’s, but without the pain and the tumult Luther had experienced. Luke just resumed his late night cruises on his motorcycle of the Greenwich Village area and found other women to share his bed with. That was before he met Maureen.

She was a local girl, brown-haired and pretty and Irish, from One Hundred Ninth Street. Her mother had died of ovarian cancer, leaving Maureen, who was seven at the time, and her two younger sisters, in the care of their father, a man who spent good parts of the day in Mulligan’s on the corner of Broadway having his beer and shots.

Maureen loved her father with an unyielding love; his excesses did not matter. She refused to have her life set in sorrow but lived instead in the high spirits she was born with. And when she saw Luke on the street one day, she took a shine to him and let him know, and that was that.

At the time she was a senior at Julia Richman, a public high school over on the East Side, where she had a standing near the top of her class in a commercial course. Like Addy before her, she had a partiality to virile men in the mold of Luke, and looked askance at those like Luther who lacked meat on their bones. From the start of her visits to the penthouse, it was Luther's sense that Maureen didn't care for him. He heard it in her tone of voice and saw it in her eyes and her dismissive smile.

Two months into his relationship with Maureen, Luke came to Luther, and told him she was pregnant.

"How old is she?" Luther asked, fearing that his brother could be liable for statutory rape.

Luke showed no similar concern, if the big smile on his face meant anything. "Nah. Forget that. She just turned eighteen. But isn't that something? I mean, I got a girl pregnant. Wow," he said, exulting over his potency.

"But what are you going to do? I mean, what is she going to do?"

"She wants me to marry her."

"Marry you? Marry you how? You have no money. Where would you live?"

"We'd live here."

"Luke, don't do it. Just don't it, unless you want a disaster."

“What disaster? You worry too much.”

“This is true. I do worry.”

“You see, I have a big dick, but you don’t. And when you have a big dick, you have to use it. I have power you don’t have.”

“The way you talk,” Luther said, his brother landing on him that way.

“There will never be a right time for you to have a kid, while for me, anytime is the right time. That’s because I can tear things apart and live with the chaos. You, you’re still back there arranging your baseball cards in alphabetical order. You think that’s life, but it’s really death. *Fucking* is life.”

“Or maybe this penthouse is death.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me. What?”

“I didn’t mean anything,” Luther said.

“You did. You meant something. You think there’s something wrong with this penthouse?”

“There’s nothing wrong with anything,” Luther said. His brother a big stupid with that big dick of his, saying anything that came into his head, while Luther said one thing and his brother went and fell apart.

He went to his room and lay face down on his pillow. Abortion was dangerous. Quacks, butchers. Luther had heard hideous tales that made him shudder. Procedures performed with coat hangers and knives. Girls dumped in alleyways and left to slowly

bleed to death. He didn't want any such thing for Maureen or for any girl or woman, but he also didn't want to see Luke burdened with a wife and child he would inevitably leave. Did the family have to embrace any more irresponsibility than some members, like Hannah and Naomi, with their progeny and abject dependence on their mother, had already shown? Did Luke, who had already shown signs he could not negotiate his way in the world, have to tie himself to the building even more?

Luke was right. He didn't want to break the mold. Not if it meant ending up with the life Luther saw all around him.

Someday he would enroll in law school. The idea had come to him as a child when in the grip of anxiety about the oppressiveness his mother endured in her daily life at the hands of the building owner, Simon Weill. Luther remembered his terror that she would perish before she could witness him rushing to her aid with a law degree and all the powers an attorney could bring to bear in a court of law so that justice was served and ancient and ongoing wrongs were righted. But now, somewhat older, there were other reasons to pursue a career in law. It provided a path open to someone with his small abilities.

Lawyers did rely on words, did they not, and didn't, at a minimum, everyone except mutes have the ability to speak? Lawyers could be perceived as manly while avoiding the manly pursuits, like spending their time in science labs or tackling insoluble math problems. The law was meaningfully applicable in the world, unlike the substance-less world of ideas a PhD would gain him access to; what, after all, was that to lead a class of

students in a discussion about some work of literature or another, to just gasbag it within the walls of academe? To his mind, teaching did not equate with doing.

And what better preparation for the law than political science as a course of undergraduate study. Fear gave him a modicum of interest in politics and even bound him to it, and the word *science* in the name did not have to scare him, because he suspected no science was to be found among all the words he read in the books he would be assigned.

From the back of the room Sandra Leventhal, the instructor, appeared young and pretty, but she aged significantly the closer Luther drew to her that first day. There was wrinkling around her eyes, the luster was gone from her strawberry blond hair, her bosom sagged, and her teeth were stained yellow by cigarette smoke. She was a woman living in the ruins of the beauty she had once possessed.

But her green eyes had not lost their fire. Or maybe the fire had come into them with age and hurt and pain. He would never know. But he did hear and feel, when she spoke, laceration and vileness of a taunting kind, though he had no words for what was happening at first.

She had spent time in Cuba helping, with her thin arms, to harvest the sugar cane crops and support the revolution; she let you know she was on a first name basis with Fidel and Raul and Che. Had any of the students in her class done such service? Had any of the middle class white boys in the room set foot in Mississippi or Alabama or elsewhere in the Deep South and sought to advance the cause of civil rights? Were they



going to remain collaborators with the white power structure or were they going to help to tear it down? In this way did she throw down the gauntlet.

Luther wondered about this woman with the flame of self-righteous anger burning so bright and threatening to consume her. Might she not be considered a poor messenger for her social causes with her tone of mockery and castigation? Was such jeering truly an effective way to engage them with the sugarcane fields of Cuba? And was Cuba really such a good cause in the first place, with its oppressive leader little more than a demented and verbose tyrant tormenting his captive household?

Across from him in the class sat an equally enervated black student. A giant cushion of hair had sprung from Willie Sumner's scalp, and a fragile pair of wire-rimmed glasses gave his narrow face a bookish look. Luther tried to close the divide he perceived between them by suggesting that the black struggle for racial and economic equality meant more to him than it did and suppressing the fact that he was conditioned to come from a place of fear of blacks, stemming from childhood experiences on the streets of Manhattan. But Willie Sumner, from Brownsville, Brooklyn, heard the falseness of Luther's social concern and soon moved away.

A letter came, addressed to "Lucer Garrajun."

I need yore help. I am in the rong place. I dont want to shoot  
no gorilas. I dont want to shoot no one. Come down and get  
me out of here.

Sean

And so Luther did go to the South, not the Deep South that Sandra Leventhal had ordered him to but to North Carolina, and stared in disbelief at the street scene outside the bus depot in Fayetteville, one bar after another with swinging doors like a stage set for a western. But drunken soldier boys in drab olive garb, not cowboys, were flying in and out, brawling in a mud-slop alleyway even as helmeted MPs wearing armbands rushed to separate them and save them for the larger war.

He had seen the softness of America on TV and in the movies and heard the nobility of America in the speeches of the American presidents, but now he was witnessing the heartlessness of America, the great roundup of the young and the regimentation of them into a precise military machine poised for carnage. He feared for the soldiers and for himself as well, a longhair among the buzz cuts in this bustling army town.

Ten minutes later he was in the barracks on the enormous base among freshly showered soldiers, those who were dressed snapping towels at the bare butts of their buddies. And there among the young lions was an apologetic Sean, sitting on his bottom bunk and saying right off, "I got you down here for nothing."

"How is that?" Luther asked.

In a whispered voice, Sean said, "My parents and my brother were down to visit. They left only an hour ago. No way I can take off now. No way. You understand what I'm saying?" He wore a fresh white T-shirt with his fatigues that showed him slimmed down, honed, but it was still that buzz-cut, enormous head where his power seemed to reside, as if it were a weapon itself, a many megaton bomb.

Luther had met Sean's parents in the long ago. His father was a small, gruff man, his catlike face fixed in a permanent scowl. He had been a maintenance worker in the subway yard up in Inwood, at the northern tip of Manhattan. When Luther thought of Sean's mother, he pictured the antimacassar over the sofa and the upholstered chair in the living room of the small, tidy apartment that looked out on the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. "The Swedes. They are good people," she had said to him, after inquiring about his last name. He had explained to her that he was Armenian on his father's side and that his mother was from Sweden. Clearly, she had been baffled by his mention of his father's ancestry. The invisible Armenians. The unheard of Armenians. The Armenians who gave people pause when they were mentioned.

"I do," Luther said, feeling, even as he spoke, that he was surrendering Sean to his fate, allowing him to be funneled into some bone-crushing madness.

"Y'all down here to join our little party?" A soldier in a top bunk was smiling down at him.

"Just here visiting," Luther said. Something about that smile, like the soldier was toying with him.

"We got an extra bed for you. Course we got barbers down here. Might have to see one of them first. You a college boy?"

"Yes, I'm in college," Luther said.

"What you studying in college?"

"Not a lot," Luther said. It wasn't the answer to give but it felt like an honest one.

“You know how to take a rifle apart and clean it? You know how to kill a man quick with a knife or with your bare hands? You know any of these things?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then maybe you’re in the wrong college.”

Luther’s fear grew with each exchange, fed by the soldier’s insinuating tone and the undercurrent of menace. He was grateful when Sean said, “Let’s take a walk.”

In the nearby canteen, Sean said, “You need to get out of here. Once these guys start ragging on you, it can lead to trouble. That kid’s a hillbilly. Comes from someplace in Arkansas where they’re lucky to have running water. You got all kinds of shit here, but it’s all right.”

“I did bring the bus fare for you, just so you know.”

“I knew you would, but my mother said it would put her in her grave if I ran away again and my father talking about how the army would make a man of me. It was just too much.”

“It’s your life, not theirs,” Luther heard himself say.

“It’s lonely out there. This is home to me now,” Sean said.

It was a conversation they had had before.

The strip was ablaze with light when he arrived back in downtown Fayetteville and even thicker with soldiers. From a rack inside the depot he took a paperback with a beige and maroon cover. *In Cold Blood*, the title said. He recognized the name of the author, Truman Capote. He had written a novella called *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Luther hadn’t read it, but the movie had grabbed hold of him. It was that song, “Moon River,”

the big sound sweeping you up in tide of emotion, and at the end, George Peppard and Audrey Hepburn embracing in the rain. A movie that would make anyone cry as well as laugh, with the way zany and beautiful Holly Go Lightly carried on and that neighbor of hers, Mr. Yunioshi, from Japan played by Mickey Rooney, and Sally Tomato, to whom she delivered the weather reports in prison.

But this was a different sort of book, Luther discovered, turning on the light above his seat. Normally his mind wandered when he read. Whole passages would be lost to consciousness before he became aware of his distraction and he would have to go back. But here the narrative pulled him along. It did not matter that the outcome was known. Imagine that, two drifters murdering a whole family. What could be more awful than to inflict ruin on beauty?

He read and read until he fell asleep, and woke some hours later to daylight and the New York skyline. He turned and across the aisle a curly-haired blond girl was smiling at him, a shy smile but one of genuine interest, as if she had been studying him for a while. And though nothing came of it—some friends were waiting for her at the terminal—that look spread warmth all throughout him. It seemed like a long time since a girl had received him in that way.

As the months passed, Maureen began to show, and when her father saw that his eldest daughter was pregnant, he demanded to know the father. Drunk and belligerent, he confronted Luke, and threatened bodily harm if Luke didn't form a matrimonial bond with Maureen. And so the two were hitched in a City Hall wedding. Maternal and

domestic by nature, Maureen began to set up house in what had been Luke's bachelor pad, pushing him to install a washer and drier and space for a crib.

"Don't you suppose it's time you found your own place?" she said to Luther, shortly after moving in. Smiling hatred illuminated her face, but it was hard for him to feel offended by a girl headed down the path of pain and sorrow, with her foolish notion of domesticating Luke or his rooftop lair. Besides, he could now realize his dream of leaving not only the penthouse but the building.

He had passed the post office exam and was now working a four hour shift five evenings a week. Twice a month he received a government-issued check, with instructions not to fold, spindle, or mutilate it. That income, plus the student loan money he had received, allowed him to take a dingy, mildewed room in the Morningside Arms and share the public bathroom, which had ring marks in the bathtub and a toilet that routinely overflowed. Though the room was only half a block from where his family lived, it was a start, was it not, the realization of his dream of leaving the building and tangible proof that his journey outward had truly begun.

"You won't last," Luke said. "You'll see. You'll be back in the building by next week."

"Thanks," Luther said.

"I'm just saying," Luke said.

"I understand what you're saying," Luther replied.

In fact, he had tried some months before. A lovely studio apartment with a wood-burning fireplace on a quiet, tree-lined block of old and pretty walkup buildings just off Riverside Drive, but he was soundly defeated by the ceaseless roar of anxiety.

*“Tell us about it, Luther. We will give you the time you need.”*

*“There was a building of blond brick, new at the time, that Luke and I would pass when we were kids and out walking the dogs at night. It stood on the corner of Riverside Drive some blocks south of where we lived. There Luke hoped to move some day, away from the tormenting squalor and strife of family. In the grip of modernity, we would have a big color TV and an apartment with shiny wood floors. And so the block called me back when I began college, if not to that particular building, to one farther up the side street. But an aloneness feeling sitting in that apartment came over me that I cannot describe and the monthly rent became a weight that threatened to crush me. And so I vacated the premises less than a week after moving in. As I made the retreat to the building I remembered the shame I would feel when taunted for being homesick at the camp for Jesus where I would be sent to spend parts of my childhood summers.*

*“But how did you expect to pay for the apartment in the first place?”*

*“There is something I haven't spoken of. For a time in my later years of high school I would enter Auntie Eve's apartment while she was elsewhere, unbeknownst to her or anyone else, with a duplicate key I had made. Ashamed to ask for college tuition from my family, given that it was money my mother did not have, for a time I took modest amounts on a weekly basis from the rent receipts my aunt kept in her apartment as preparation for my future. At some point my conscience would not allow me to continue*

*on this path. In any case, some of the small sum I had accumulated I used to pay the rent and security for this apartment I briefly took.*

*“Do you have anything you wish to add?”*

*“Coming clean is an apt saying. When we are honest, we feel cleansed inside.*

*“Is there anything else?”*

*“Thank you for allowing me to preserve some sense of order with this addition.”*

He was assigned to the General Post Office, on West Thirty-Third Street and Eighth Avenue. The gray mass of the granite, block-length building, the sweeping expanse of stairs, the columned entranceway, and that motto chiseled into the pediment, “Neither rain nor snow nor sleet...” suggested permanence and stability and had meaning for him. The entire stretch between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, beginning with the Horn and Hardart on the corner and the parking lot and the series of vine-covered single-room occupancies had meaning. There had been few Sundays since early childhood when he hadn’t walked along the north side of the street, just across from the post office, to the He Is Risen Tabernacle for Sunday school and then upstairs for the afternoon service, where he and Luke and Vera would be joined by their mother.

“You know we are living in the last days. You know that, do you not?” she would say.

“You have had your life. Please let me have mine. Please.”

His angry, pleading retort would bring a smile to her face and a week later she would say the same thing. It was his mother’s way to speak about Jesus.



“I came to the conviction at age thirty-two that the world had nothing that I wanted. Nothing,” she had told him. Told all of them. But he lacked the intelligence and its hallmark, curiosity, to inquire why this conversion should have happened at age thirty-two. Why not age thirty-one or thirty-three? Her faith was as authentic and her conversion as mysterious as Saul’s on the road to Damascus; she was one with her Jesus and her God and in this world but not really a part of it. As a car needed gasoline, so too her spirit needed replenishment. The Sunday afternoon service was her time to gain strength and hope for the week ahead, and when she was so moved, to speak in the tongues of angels.

But now here he was on the other side of the street, about to enter not the tabernacle but the world of the postal workers. He had puzzled over their harsh and gruesome fate as a child. Would they really be consigned to the eternal flames of hell because they were not part of the congregation just across the street in the old church with the big rosette window listening to the endless sermons delivered in a deep baritone by Pastor Cohn? Someday he would go back to visit and try to better understand those first thirteen years of his life. Why he couldn’t say, but something had happened there sufficient that the sight of the church now filled him with longing, as the whole area did—the long expanse of the arcade he passed through in Penn Station, the Horn and Hardart on the corner. He and Luke in their sailor suits. Vera in her white church dress. His mother in her brown dress with the white polka dots on days she didn’t wear the red one with the white polka dots. There was a story someone should hear and know about. It shouldn’t just be lost. All of it. It was his. Something had happened here. His life had

happened here. And no one knew, and would never know, if he didn't tell them. He would simply be consigned to oblivion in this government monstrosity across the street.

He punched a time clock and sat for four hours at a box scheme, sorting envelopes from the bin in front of him into small compartments for each of the fifty states. When one bin was empty, he would then go to a nearby conveyor belt for another and empty that one as well. Initially he had wanted to cry, that his life should be so low and pedestrian as to find him here as a government drudge in a line of mostly older men all sitting on stools performing their little task. But the activity itself dispelled the sense of drudgery; it brought a feeling of urgency. He grew competitive with the man to his left and his right as to who could empty the most bins. Clearly some sort of industrial psychology was in play to spur productivity, and yet this awareness was insufficient to detach him from the race. He swelled with pride that, unlike some others in his family, he could have a place in the world, small though it might be.

As for his fellow workers, he saw men considerably older, some with thinning hair or no hair, men negligent of their appearance with big bellies and bad teeth and faces reddened by alcohol. One hummed "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as he slouched on his stool and another sported a pirate's patch over his eye and then there was the one who went about on one leg with the aid of crutches, the pants leg for his missing limb pinned so it wouldn't flop. Luther saw them as men of indolence, men of the Automat, men whose lives were the *New York Post* or *Daily News* tucked under their arms as they reported each day for their shifts. He had seen them before even if he hadn't. They were the men of the long ago, the Tall Tommys and the Little Tommys and all the other

handymen of the single rooms whom his mother and Auntie Eve called upon for manual chores, like replacing blown fuses and painting rooms, that the building required. And while he feared the lassitude that had led them to succumb to life in such a way, he couldn't say that he didn't understand.

That evening a Bunyanesque man made his way down the aisle. He wore his long and frizzy brown hair in a ponytail and a beard of biblical proportions hung from his Old Testament prophet's face, on which a smile more a caricature of merriment than the real thing played. As the man's right hand opened, revealing a pink, heart-shaped pill in his palm, the smile seemed to intensify into a beam and he nodded his head several times, the go-ahead for Luther to take his offering.

Luther didn't question the man about the proffered gift. His silence was strange and yet benign, and with no other basis for trust than an impression, Luther took the pill and, a minute later, swallowed it, with the aid of tap water from the bathroom sink.

He soon reached a level of happiness he could not have imagined. He had accessed a source of love that seemed to encompass everyone on the floor and in his little world. Barriers of misunderstanding and hurt were gone and harmony reigned. And now as well there was newfound confidence in the power of his mind to handle the challenge of college, the pill having dispelled that nagging feeling of intellectual deficiency which plagued him daily. He had been made whole.

Energized, he finished his shift and walked northward through the city, staring into the faces of passersby and feeling that he was good enough for any girl in town. No streetlamp could have burned any brighter than the incandescent light in his being. And if

that light began to dim as the night progressed, and his hands and feet grew cold and sweaty, and dark thoughts replaced the joy as sleep refused to come before the dawn, it was no matter. Nothing could erase the memory of having found that space of warmth within himself.

Efram Ellsberg was the enigmatic giant's name. He was no post office lifer but, like Luther, a student at the City College of New York. The raiment of his self-worth was not the staple jeans and work shirt he wore, being a champion of denim duds, but the dressing he gave his mind with works of philosophy beyond the reach of Luther. He was a 1500 SAT score man who had had his pick of colleges but chose to stay at home and make the long trip from Midwood, Brooklyn, to the Harlem campus five days a week. A rabbi's son, he was also the youngest of four brothers, the other three either medical doctors or on their way into that field.

“Most of my friends are very bright. That's not why I like you,” Efram said, breaking his silence and establishing the basis of any friendship they were to have. These words he spoke in the PO bathroom, where he opened a window and blew smoke from the lit joint out into the night.

“How do you know I am not bright? Luther asked, when he was able to speak.

“Looking bright and being bright are two different things,” Efram would only say.

Though Efram's words hurt his feelings, Luther found himself over time surrendering to his newfound friend, assigning him the role of a wise older brother on whom he could lean when fear and insecurity overwhelmed him. From Efram emanated a

vibe of great peace, even if was often chemically induced, and sadness and kindness as well as the wisdom of the ages could be seen in his big, memorable face.

Efram it was who introduced Luther to his friend Zach Zeckler, the Scale Master, as he came to be known in Luther's mind, for the small scale he carried about to measure out grams of hash and ounces of grass, and later, the harder drugs that were to earn him notoriety in the media if not in Luther's mind. It was Zach who told Luther of Efram's mental prowess while also asserting that Efram was a sleeping giant. The two of them had been friends since childhood and had attended the same high school, Brooklyn Tech. Efram may have been the higher college board score man, but how far behind could Zach be, given that he enrolled in college at age sixteen. He had grown up a motherless child. She had died of cancer when he was only three.

A sleeping giant. That meant Efram was like China. Luther liked thinking of Efram not as Mao but a giant Buddha.

"Are you going to Elliot Zweiger's reading this Friday?" Zach asked Luther.

"Who is Elliot Zweiger and what is he reading?" Luther asked.

"You don't know who Elliot Zweiger is?"

Luther shook his head.

"He's a terrific poet and is teaching a course this semester on contemporary poetry. Do you read poetry?"

"Percy Bysshe Shelley. 'Bird, thou never wert.'"

Zach laughed. Efram laughed. So did Luther, there in Finley Cafeteria, the walls

covered with day-glo murals and the smell of grease thick from the kitchen, on the south campus of the City College of New York.

Luther took a dislike to the poet. Even from the farther reaches of the auditorium he saw that beard as pubic hair grown wild and his red red mouth as a vagina. The image was grotesque, but all the venom his jealousy could summon was visited on the poet as he read. The way he waved his arms with a flourish. The adulatory throng three deep against the walls and jamming the aisles, ready to ooh and ah at his every word. The man should be punished. Something should be done about him.

In such a way did Luther respond. Some malign conspiracy had been established by the poet and his audience that caused them to offer up such undeserved reverence, its sole purpose being to make Luther feel bad. The man could have read from a phone book and received the same acclaim.

And yet he stayed. Poetry was the mysterious domain of the chosen few. Poetry was meter. It was rhyme. It was dactyls and anapests and trochees and enjambment and all the rest, words laid out and calibrated with slide rule precision. Certainly it was attention to language that eluded the likes of him. He thought of those bright girls in his English class. In what he saw as skimpy lines of verse they saw universes. And some of those girls were at the reading, sitting cross-legged in the aisle of the overflow auditorium, chins pressed against their clasped hands.

A sad-eyed woman approached him afterward. "We're having a party. I only know you as the landlady's son, but will you come?"

“Landlady’s son?” He could only repeat her words.

“The building with the Bible verse on the side of the wall and the framed verses of scripture in the lobby. I live there.”

“Oh, I’m not there anymore. I now live in the Morningside Arms,” Luther said, recoiling in shame that this woman should know so much about him.

“That’s where I’m going now. My boyfriend is having a party in his room. You should join us.”

The woman’s small head and beaked nose and frail frame gave her a birdlike appearance. To think that she had seen him at the family building and he had never seen her and that now she was inviting him to a party.

As he trailed after Elinore and the small group headed down Convent Avenue, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the very small manila envelope containing the ten feel-good pills Zach had sold him, the same kind Efram had given him on that golden night. He had been planning to reserve the pills for studying, but the night was calling to him now, with Elinore’s invitation. To meet the social demands of the occasion, he swallowed one right there on the street.

By now they were at the bus stop at the corner of One Hundred Twenty-Ninth Street and Convent Avenue. At the bottom of the hill, a bus emerged from the depot, sluggishly making its way up the cobblestone street. When it finally arrived, the driver kept the doors closed, offering them no mercy from the cold. They were like that, some of them, in their exercise of power. If they weren’t keeping you out, they were applying a heavy brake so as to throw the straphangers around a bit. They had their tricks.

A girl in Elinore's small group smiled at him.

"Where's your coat?" she asked.

"I'm wearing it," he said. He had on his navy blue pea jacket and a sweater underneath.

"I'm cold just looking at you."

"You don't look so cold," he said. A scarf, a long wool coat, and a knit cap seemed to be giving her all the protection that she needed.

On the bus some guy sat next to her with a guitar case between his legs. Some kind of troubadour, Luther surmised, trying to claim her with his musical gift. Now and then, Luther, sitting off by himself, would look her way and find her looking right back at him, as if some understanding had been reached that their conversation wasn't over.

He was really flying by the time the group arrived at Elinore's boyfriend's room. The night was now full of promise. He was sufficiently fortified by the drug to indulge the boldness of his base intention. He wanted the girl. He would have wanted her under any circumstances; the drug only made him want her more.

Luther stayed to himself, flipping through a thick collection of record albums. Despite being high, a wall remained between him and the others, who chatted easily among themselves. The folksinger unpacked his guitar and started strumming, and soon he was croaking out lyrics. One of his own compositions, he said. Something about the wind and silver bells.

The girl abandoned her seat on the sofa next to her singing beau. "Can I look with you?" she whispered.



“Sure,” Luther said. Like him, she feigned preoccupation with the albums she flipped through.

A circle formed on the floor, the lights were turned down low, someone placed an album on the record player, and a hash pipe circulated. Two tokes and Luther was flying, the room a ring of concentric circles his body moved into as he rode the hook of Keith Richards’ electric guitar on “Satisfaction.” Someone quickly transitioned to *Rubber Soul*. Mick Jagger couldn’t sing, but John and Paul and George really could. No album had the right to seize such full control of his emotions.

He had positioned himself beside the girl, who sat cross-legged in the circle. A run in her black tights made a clear line under the hem of her short skirt. He inched the index finger of his right hand against her leg, following the trail of the run, the notion having seized him that the candle would serve as a talisman so long he remained focused on the dancing flame. The girl didn’t rebuff him, either by moving her legs or slapping his face or publicly denouncing him. Even when she did stand up and exit the room, why should that be a matter of concern, as she was only seeking the public bathroom down the hall? Oh, what a night it was, with the best yet to come, Luther could only conclude, his head having undergone a complete stoning from the potent hash on top of the feel-good pill.

But now, other, less welcome changes were occurring. The overhead fixture came on, the brutally exposing light vanquishing the soft candlelit ambience where dreams could flourish. And the needle had been lifted from the vinyl album, right in the middle of “I’m Looking Through You.” And now the troubadour had metamorphosed into an angry colossus, standing before Luther with his legs spread.

“You touch her again and I will break your ass. Are you listening, Fuckhead?”

“This needn’t be a call to arms. I mean no harm,” Luther surprised himself by saying, supporting his pacific words by maintaining his gaze on the overmatched candle, fearful that to turn his face to his inquisitor would be to trigger a physical assault. In his mind’s eye, the stillness of his head suggested no resistance, like the hands raised chest high with palms outward by those gentle Buddhas among the statuary in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And what choice did he have? His skeletal frame, the incapacity the hash had brought, his own guilt, and the troubadour’s fury would only result in a severe beating.

“Liar. Filthy fucking liar. You molest my girlfriend and say you mean me no harm? How about you get the hell out of here? How would that be for no harm? You belong in a freak show you’re so skinny. I could snap you in half like a twig.”

The young man’s words fell like a hard and hurtful rain, but Luther understood he was worthy of them. After all, the young man had a proper sense of justice and the courage to express his outrage.

“Fred, please, come sit with me,” Elinore said, as mobilized for peace as Fred was for war. Such gentleness in her delicate, somber face, in which could be seen the mournfulness of the ages. She took Fred’s hands in hers and led him to the sofa.

With irate Fred in Elinore’s precarious custody, Luther raised himself from the floor and headed out the door just as the girl was returning.

“I have been sent into exile for my deplorable behavior. You will find me in room 28. Please come. We must talk,” he said.

Whether her half-smile was a mask for incredulity or horror or sheer excitement he had no idea. When she said nothing, he went on his way.

Removed from smoke heaven, he sat on his single bed, the room lighted only by the glow of his electric clock and the Marlboro he smoked. He had some idea that the young woman would be led to his room by the momentum of the evening, but as the minutes passed he became less sure and more inclined to think a posse of the outraged, led by irate Fred, would storm his room and beat him half to death. He dropped the still-burning cigarette in the empty Coke bottle he used as an ashtray and as he lay down on the narrow bed there came a feathery knock at the door. A sound such as that, so feminine, he thought he had never heard.

“Please don’t be offended, but are you crazy?” The half-smile was still in place, suggesting that his sanity was not a matter that concerned her more than it needed to.

“Why would you say so?”

She began to laugh but caught herself. “Is that your normal approach at a party, to place your hand on the thigh of a girl who is there with someone else?”

“I don’t really go to parties.”

“Why is that?”

“No one asks me.”

“That girl Elinore said that she only invited you because you’re the son of the landlady of the building where she lives. She says your family has problems.”

“Problems. Yes.”

Beyond the hallway, out on the landing, the familiar sound of Fred's ire could be heard. As the noise came closer, the girl stepped inside.

"What room is the freak in?" the troubadour shouted, while standing in front of Luther's door.

"I don't know, Fred. Please, let's stop." Elinore was evidently with him. How blessed the peacemakers.

"I don't want to stop. I want him to pay."

"He'll pay, Fred. He'll pay. You know what goes around comes around. You know that."

And there it was, the ruckus slowly leaving town.

"Should we at least introduce ourselves? I'm Maura," the girl said.

"And I'm Luther. Pleased to meet you."

"Poor Fred. He's so upset."

"So I noticed. Have you been with him a long time?"

"No. Not at all. We met through a dating service. He came to pick me up earlier tonight, and I knew right away that it was a terrible mistake."

"A mistake?"

"You can tell about these things. He's so full of his own importance."

"Folksingers are important."

"Not if they can't sing."

"Bob Dylan can't sing. He can't sing like Caruso or Frank Sinatra, and he's important."

“That’s ridiculous. Bob Dylan can too sing. He can carry a tune, something poor Fred sure can’t do.”

She was not a girl he could give himself to easily. If he had far too few pounds, she had far too many, a fact she somewhat disguised by the black tights and black top and black skirt she wore that first night. The faint, dark line of a mustache was also troubling. And yet he took the gift she made available to him, tried to blind himself to the too-white flesh of her soft, heavy thighs as he sank into her, afterward feeling the happiness that came from a connection of this kind with a girl, and perhaps any girl would have done, after the rough time he had had getting over Jane Thayer and then the Dahlia debacle.

Her name was Maura Golden, and she was a second year student at New York University down at Washington Square, where she had transferred from a small college in Iowa. Her father, a fur importer, agreed to allow her to return to New York City to attend school on the condition that she live at home. Her mother had died when Maura was still in grade school and with her stepmother she was on cool and distant terms.

“He likes to keep an eye on me,” Maura said.

“But you’re nineteen,” Luther said.

“Not to him.”

“You’ll have to leave sooner or later,” Luther said. “Or maybe not,” he added, thinking of Hannah and Esther.

“Of course I’ll leave. Just not today.”

“Every day has to be Independence Day in America,” Luther said.

“That’s a silly thing to say.”

“People make a lot of money saying even sillier things,” Luther replied.

But Maura had her mind on other matters.

“Even on really cold days you wear only a light pea jacket. And your closet is so empty. I want to buy you clothes. I want to take care of you.”

“I’m doing fine,” he said. It hadn’t occurred to him that two shirts and a couple of pairs of corduroys hanging on hooks shouldn’t have been enough.

“And you’re much too thin,” she went on.

She sought to surprise him: a pair of wide-wail corduroy slacks; a wool sweater; a high-collared blue shirt he wore outside his pants as a tunic, all purchased at Paul Sargent, a trendy shop on Waverly Place, in Greenwich Village. But the gifts did not endear him to her. He saw the strings attached, the request that he love, or at least value, her more than he could.

Her parents lived near Lincoln Center, in a newly built white-brick high-rise, the kind whose apartments had low ceilings and modern fixtures. As Dahlia had rejected the dingy downtown hotel, Maura wanted to avoid his room at the Morningside Arms.

“It brings me down to be there. That public bathroom. Doesn’t anyone clean it?”

He thought of the older, broken, and solitary sorts who lived there, the kind who lacked the stability or the wherewithal for apartment living. It didn’t occur to him that he might be broken and solitary as well.

“It’s not the best, I guess,” he said.

“Come over to my apartment. Don’t worry. My parents won’t hassle us.”

He visited with her at night, after her parents had already retired to their room. Even so, he spoke in a hushed voice treading the white carpet to her room, fearful that the sound would travel through the thin walls. A sterile apartment, with no personal effects showing. An apartment for cold, impersonal people. Not that Maura was.

“Do you like this?” she asked, feeling her way below his abdomen with her soft lips.

“Sure. Sure I like it.” It was just that with her he progressively didn’t.

A nobody in the night, disco Imelda had called him, and yet maybe now he was a somebody in the day and night worthy of more than Maura could offer, a girl without that faint line of dark hair above her upper lip and skin less chalky white; what he longed for were the sleek, tanned contours of Dahlia, from Darien, Connecticut.

And yet she had been good for him. She had received him where others hadn’t and brought his losing streak to an end. In doing so, she had boosted his confidence sufficient that he began to make overtures to other girls, often in the sharp clothes she had gifted him with.

Troubadour Fred had staying power in his mind. A man with a social context was always better than a loner who had only himself; a man who sang and played an instrument, regardless of the level of his talent, was always better than someone who didn’t. Fred was game for the orderly processes of life; he did not need to appropriate another man’s date for impulsive sex. He had the patience to become friends with a woman before coming to “know” her. This too gave Fred clear superiority. Luther did not fight this reality; he accepted it as so that the karmic wheel would turn.

Luther and Maura took in a foreign film one night. Maybe it was the soulful banks of the Seine or the Champs-Elysee or the shimmering beaches of the Gold Coast or the high-speed chases through the French Alps, but the movie unleashed a yearning to leave behind his small life for an international stage filled with beautiful women and expensive cars and intense intrigue.

“If I had money, I’d get on a plane tonight and explore that city from one end to the other,” he said, as they sat in a Horn and Hardart automat on Fifty-seventh Street sipping hot chocolate.

“We could, you know,” Maura said, surprising him with her equal enthusiasm for escape.

“My post office check should take us far,” he said.

“There are other ways to get the money,” she said.

“Like the jewelry heist we just saw?”

“How about my father’s safe? No jewels, but bundles of cash.”

“No,” Luther said.

“And I know the combination.”

“You’re making this up.”

“My father is extremely wealthy. He is the biggest fur importer in Manhattan. And that is saying a lot.”

“You’re proud of your father,” Luther said.

“I was thinking of what you said. He shouldn’t have made me live at home. He shouldn’t try to control me.”



“Going out with someone like Fred doesn’t seem so out of control.”

“As you may remember, I am not with Fred. How can I say this? You would not be my father’s number one choice for me. Is that hurtful to hear?”

“Maybe.”

“All I mean is that he has some set ideas about the kind of boy I should be with. A nice Jewish boy basically.”

“It’s true. I’m not very smart.”

“Not all Jews are so smart.”

“All the ones I know are.”

“I only have an IQ of 140. That’s not very smart.”

Luther looked away, pained by the numerical quantification Maura had just expressed.

“But wouldn’t he know? First the money was missing. Then his daughter and her boyfriend were missing.”

“We wouldn’t necessarily have to clean out the safe. He might not miss what we took.”

Now and then, in the weeks that passed, Maura would bring up the safe and the trip to Europe they could take on the stolen assets but Luther heard it as the foolish talk of a not so foolish girl, an attempt to keep him close to her as Sean had used money to try to keep him close. But the proposal was also terrifying. Following though on it could get him arrested and thrown in jail, or worse.

For two weeks he did not call her, and when finally he did, she said, with weary acceptance in her voice, "Nobody controls you." A free-wheeling sort, an independent spirit, he heard her to be saying, and her words lit him up. He thought back to the bondage to Jane Thayer he had lived in through those high school years. Women didn't care so very much about men who cared for them. At least this one didn't. You could just go and ask the troubadour if you didn't believe him. So his thinking went.

Her girlfriend Jill was coming to town for the weekend. Maura had told her all about him.

"She really wants to meet you," Maura said.

He didn't have a good feeling about this friend of hers. He sensed a one-person jury whom Maura had charged with the task of delivering a verdict. The fact that she went to Smith College only added to his anxiety, as it meant she could claim a pedigree he so obviously lacked. The prospect of cold and unforgiving eyes upon him was not a happy one. Clearly it would be an occasion that called for another of those pills he had purchased from the Scale Master.

"How do you find time for your studies while working at the post office?" Jill asked, that Friday night, at a booth in the West End Bar, on Broadway and One Hundred Fourteenth Street, where Luther had joined them after his shift.

"I don't do a lot of studying. I mean, I do read the books, but a not a lot sticks."

"Not a lot sticks?" Jill was poised at the edge of incredulous laughter, of the kind that high-spirited, highly intelligent girls display.

“Like I’m reading this sociology book but the only thing that really stays in my mind is this one word, *anomie*.”

“Anomie?”

“It means being rootless, disconnected from society, and was coined by this French thinker named Emile Durkheim.”

“I know what the term means,” Jill said.

“No. Of course you do. But what I mean is that it is the only thing I remember after reading one hundred pages. How can that be? Where did everything else I read go?”

“Where did you say you go to college?”

“I didn’t, but I attend the City College of New York.”

“Maybe you only remember what pertains to you, and everything else is extraneous,” Maura said.

“That could be. The word didn’t frighten me, but it did excite me when I read it. It was exactly that. It had personal application to my life.”

“You suffer from anomie?” Jill asked. Luther heard dubiousness in Jill’s voice.

“I’m not sure. But it’s comforting to think there’s a name for it if I do.”

They ordered a second large pitcher of beer after Luther drank most of the first. His consumption did not go without notice.

“Do you always drink so much?”

Jill’s pointed question shook him. “It’s what people do on a Friday night.”

“And what do you do other nights?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Never mind.”

But he did understand. He heard the judgment in her voice and saw it gather in her narrow face. A frail, pale-skinned girl with scrutinizing eyes.

“The moon is full and watching warmly over us,” he said, looking up into the night sky over Manhattan as they left the bar. Minutes later, in his room, they were passing a joint as rock music poured from WNEW-FM on the radio his mother had given him. As he sat on the floor with the two girls, an intuition came to him, received from some lunatic portion of his mind, that Jill’s coldness was little more than a pose to hide her attraction to him. How transformed, how soft and alluring Jill’s face appeared in the light of the candle. All of life should be by candlelight. How else could the authentic self emerge, the self that said I want you, I must have you, you are the door I must enter on this night, as surely Jill was thinking now, their minds in accord on the need to move forward.

And Maura, was it not possible that she, her face suspended like a full moon in the dark, was complicit with this urge of his to explore new and forbidden territory, to bridge the gap between the thinkable and the unthinkable, and in so doing make the whole world ripe for exploration, so that he who had been denied everything now could be denied nothing? Why was there so little space between Jill’s folded legs and his if she didn’t want him? What more proof did he need, after her acquiescence in coming back to his room and her willingness to enter smoke heaven with him and Maura?

Well, there was just one more thing, something of a more tangible nature.

Suppose he were to graze her leg with his knee? And now that he had, and she hadn't moved away, why not inch his index finger onto her leg and see where that might lead?

And so he did, though not with the result that he had anticipated.

Jill sprang up like a jack-in-the-box. "Get out, Maura. Get out. He is completely insane." But while Jill fled out the door, Maura remained in place.

"I don't want you to go, but you can, you know," Luther said.

"I know," Maura said.

"Why such a sad face?" Luther asked.

"I should be happy? You do whatever you want to do."

"That doesn't sound right."

"You place your hand on my best friend's leg and say it doesn't sound right?"

He lit another joint. As the minutes passed, a feeling of dread came over him. Of what, he couldn't say. In the distance he heard the hallway door open and a commotion of voices draw closer, followed by a knock on his door, a loud, announcing, and insistent knock that promised fury should it not be heeded. And now there was a voice to go with the knock, saying, in an imperious tone, "Open the goddamn door." Luther was drawn to his feet with the coward's logic that appeasement rather than defiance was the safer path. Surely Jill had run for the police. How could he not have understood that would be her course of action if she imagined he presented a real and present danger?

And so he opened the door that he had relocked after Jill's flight but what kind of policeman was this who would punch him full in the face and kick him in the ribs and

stomach when he fell to the floor and who would shout, “I will kill you, you fucking longhaired faggot son of a bitch. I will break you in half and feed you to the sharks.”

Luther scrambled on the floor to get away and then rose and wrapped his assailant in his long arms. His attacker was breathing hard and Luther could feel the man’s chest heaving as he moved him toward the door and out into the hallway.

“Take your hands off me, you faggot fool,” the man demanded, and so Luther did. All the fight had gone out of the fireplug of a man; he had nothing left with which to further batter Luther.

Out on the landing stood Jill, her face flooded with righteous wrath, and behind her Elinore and a few others, all of them watching as the man pointed a finger at Luther.

“You come near her again and you’re dead. Dead. I have people who will dispose of you so you will never be found. Now give me my hat, scumbag filth. Give it to me.”

Luther reached down for what looked like a legionnaire’s cap and tossed it to the man who, after placing it back on his balding head, rushed at Luther once more, but not quickly enough to prevent Luther from slamming the hallway door.

From the other side came Maura’s imploring voice. “Oh, Daddy, Daddy, please let’s go.”

One morning, a week after the altercation, he received a letter:

You must stay away. My father keeps knives and guns as well as cash in his safe. While it is true that as he has grown older he has more and more left the termination of his enemies to his underlings,

he still takes a personal interest in this aspect of life from time to time.

You were very, very lucky the other week. You do have your own peculiar contribution to make to the world and I have developed a liking for you.

For this reason I hope you will heed this morning.

Fathers. They were a strange and lethal bunch. And daughters, were they any less dangerous?

Shaken and yet peculiarly exhilarated to have absorbed and survived a father's blows, he returned for imagined safety to the company of Vera, who coaxed him one weekend into attending a party thrown by one of her high school friends. The host, a stringy brown-haired girl, showed no interest in him and so he turned to a pretty girl with long curly blond hair who appeared to be there alone. But she met his chatter with stony, obdurate silence, returning him to the reality that a great gap still existed between him and the girls he truly desired, such as Dahlia and this serious-looking girl.

The following Saturday evening he heard footsteps in the hallway as he lay on his bed. He thought of Maura's father's goons and her father's proclivity for doing the job himself in some cases. Had her father or his emissaries come to perish him from the earth?

The footsteps stopped at his door and a knock of menacing softness followed.

"Yes?" Luther called out, trying to sound strong.

"It's your sister, Vera. Remember me?"

He opened the door and the room filled with her tall, strong presence.

“For this you’re paying money?”

“I don’t want to go back,” he said.

“That I can understand.”

She had come for a reason. Could he spare some of his feel-good pills, about which he had told her? She had schoolwork she needed to do.

From the packet at the bottom of his underwear drawer he gave her several pills and watched as she swallowed one right on the spot, with the benefit of two gulps of his Pepsi. He didn’t like the idea of his younger sister taking such things, but he was afraid to say no, as he was afraid to say no when she asked him to step over to the End Bar for coffee. The thaw in their relationship hadn’t allowed him to forget their previous difficulties. If anything, the current harmony only brought their prior discord into sharper relief. He found himself handling her, as he would a dangerous explosive, his sense being that her anger was not far away.

“I shouldn’t tell you, because it will only go to your head, and I probably wouldn’t if I weren’t feeling so great on this pill, but there is a girl from the party last week who is interested in meeting you.” They were seated at a booth by now, with patrons three-deep at the horseshoe-shaped bar. Even with the din generated by the Saturday night crowd, he heard every word she spoke.

“Who would that be? I didn’t meet anyone.”

“Didn’t you?”

“There was one girl, but she didn’t have two words for me.”



“A girl with long blond hair?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the one. Her name is Sarah. She’s Pam’s best friend. Pam says she’s really wild.”

Pam was Pam Becker, the younger sister of Luke’s high school girlfriend Nancy.

“This doesn’t seem possible.”

“Maybe you intimidated her. Anyway, she wants you to call her. That’s what she told Pam. You’ll have to look her up in the phone book.”

“What’s her last name?”

“Van Dine.”

“Van Dine?”

“Two words. Like Van Gogh.”

The speed pills had a way of turning his face into a somber mask. Odd, as it was so in contrast with the joy he felt when he was on them, at least before the crash began. And yet that mask was useful now. It wouldn’t do to have Vera see the excitement her news had generated and the door she had opened leading away from her. It wouldn’t do at all. If she could open the door, she might have the power to close it as well.

He did not question his assumption that his youngest sister had the dark intent to keep him within the confines of family and from the richer, fuller life he sought. It was not his way to see her in terms of the generosity she had shown—her invitation to the party the week before and other parties in years past and even pushing him to go out with her best friend, Pam Becker, back when he was in the eleventh grade. No spirit of

reciprocity did he show when, that same year, she asked him to introduce her to his high school friend Thurman Vorster. His shame was an enveloping and separating thing that required him to ignore her request.

That image of a door opening and of his youngest sister as a potential jailor remained powerful in his mind. Opportunities like this did not come often—maybe once in a lifetime. And so a lot was riding on the call he postponed making, until the force of inevitability led him the following week to pick up the phone.

“Van Dine residence.” The voice on the other end was mannered, cultivated. Luther had never heard anyone answer a phone in such a way. It sounded like something an English butler might say.

“May I please speak with Sarah?”

“Who, may I say, is calling?”

Luther identified himself. There followed a pause, as if the man, who could only be her father, was considering the request.

“I will see if she is available,” he finally said.

From the glass encasement of the phone booth on Broadway he watched as his sister Naomi and her husband, Chuck, passed by. Their pace was slow, their rushing days behind them. A feeling of pain, horror, disgust—he hardly knew what to call it—came over him. Thirty-four she would have been by then, fifteen years his elder. And was Chuck pushing fifty? Naomi would have stopped off at the renting office and asked for some money on their mother’s account, and she would have been given it. Twenty dollars, forty dollars. A woman and her husband on the family dole.

And their daughter Jeanne, with her sullen, aggrieved face? Where was she? She would be home from her day at school and in the family apartment on the second floor. Three didn't fit into a single room, not when the third was a thirteen-year-old. They were just going to bed when she was getting up for school. So she lived in the family apartment, and Luther's mother saw that she got to school on time and would see to it that she had clothes to wear and food to eat. Naomi would go to the Moon Palace above the Daitch Shopwell, where Sean used to work, and Naomi would order the green pepper steak with white rice, her very favorite, before they headed back across One Hundred Tenth Street to the Earvin Bar, next door to the Whelan's Drug Store. An older person's bar, where you would hear Sinatra and Mario Lanza and Tony Bennett on the jukebox, not Bob Dylan and the Stones and the Byrds. The sort of bar where people drank themselves to death. A feeling of anger, of bitterness, gripped him, that he should have to witness the spectacle of their failure year after year.

"Hello?" In Sarah's voice he heard uncertainty, a sad earnestness. The husky voice of a girl coming from a place of aloneness.

"It's me, Luther. We met at the party, where you didn't have two words for me."

She gave a startled laugh. "I'm glad you called." Yes, she was free that Friday night. And yes, a movie would be fine.

The conversation was brief. He did not wish to gamble on something going wrong.

He passed the tavern, where he saw his sister and brother-in-law seated on stools at the bar with drinks in hand. Well, that was their life. He was enrolled in college,

headed for his job at the post office, and soon he would be seeing the prettiest girl to ever show an interest in him, he told himself, as he took the stairs two at a time to the subway to catch the train roaring into the station.

It was one of those Riverside Drive buildings he had dreamed of living in, the kind that would fill him with longing and aspiration just to look at, the sort of building where he imagined happy, prosperous families and clean, orderly rooms with tasteful furnishings.

“She’ll be right down,” the doorman said, after calling upstairs on the intercom.

A woman tore through the lobby, pausing only long enough to say, “God, you look ridiculous.”

“I know,” he heard himself respond, as she sped out into the street. Astonishment seized him in the aftermath of her hit-and-run, the words having flown from his mouth as if she had all power and he had none except to acquiesce and defer to whatever mocking thing she might say.

He thought of her as a woman, but she was really a girl, a Vassar College girl, and not any girl, but a girl Luke had seen through all four years of high school. Nancy Becker, her name was, the older sister of Pam Becker, the girl who was friends with Sarah Van Dine.

Always full of talk about Nancy Becker Luke had been back in that room Luther shared with his older brother. Nancy this and Nancy that. As if Luke had discovered her, a diamond in the rough. And then she outgrew him, the way a Vassar girl would have to outgrow a boy who could barely get into any college. Well, Nancy Becker might think he

was ridiculous, but no girl would outgrow him. Sarah Van Dine would be a steppingstone. He would have access to more and more girls of her quality. His mentality was like that on this raw night in early spring.

Footsteps sounded on the marble floor and there she was, like no girl he had ever been with before, with those golden curls falling down her back and that serious, intelligent face. And her clothes. That beautiful suede jacket to go with a black skirt and her thin, strong legs in those black tights and the lavender top over that riveting swell of breasts.

Over the phone he had proposed that they see *A Man for All Seasons*. A highbrow sort of film that would reflect well on him for having chosen it, and playing at the Plaza Theater, right next door to the Plaza Hotel on Fifth Avenue. Couldn't get much classier than that, to use Sean's word.

But she swept aside his plan for one of her own.

"We need to talk. Let's go to that bar up near Columbia."

How she knew about the End Bar he didn't ask, nor did he argue. After all, what was that, two strangers sitting together in the dark watching a movie?

In one seemingly continuous action, the number 5 came zipping past the gloomy old mansion on the next corner, flung open the front door at the bus stop right across from the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument on the park side of the street, and sped them away.

"Those bruises I saw on your face last week. Where did you get them?" she asked, as he returned to the booth they had settled into with a pitcher of beer.

“I had an accident,” he said.

“What kind of accident would that be? It looked like somebody had hit you.”

“I deserved it.”

“You deserved to be hit?”

“Oh, for sure.”

“Deserved it for what?”

“This girl I was seeing. Her father got it in his head that I was mistreating her and so he beat me up.”

“How were you mistreating her?”

“I guess I wasn’t liking her as much as I was supposed to.”

“That’s a reason for the bastard to hit you?”

Bastard. A vibration of vehemence he felt coming from her that took him back.

“I did do things. I wasn’t an angel.”

And so he told her the story of how Maura and he had met, and of his compliance with Fred’s demand that he leave the party, and how soon after Maura came to his room. Somehow it was easier to tell her of that initial fracas than about the pass he had made at Maura’s girlfriend Jill the night Maura’s father came calling on him.

“I’m glad you did what you did. Screw them if they want to treat you that way.”

She asked him about the war. What did he think of it? She wanted to know.

He heard himself say that, like her, he was a child of the Cold War and had grown up with a perception of communism as an implacable force, a metastasizing cancer spreading across the globe. Vietnam was upsetting. The massive bombings, the endless

body counts, the napalm showers, the possibility that we had some ulterior motive for our involvement, that our crusade against Communism was masking an insatiable appetite for Vietnam's resources. But then his fear would hold sway again. And so he was somewhere in the middle, not for the war and yet not sold on the Vietcong and their northern sponsors. On the one hand this, on the other hand that.

“God, you're so smart, much smarter than my father.” Her father was a historian. He would soon be publishing a book. But he was a man in middle age and only now earning his PhD, she said, in a tone he heard as disparaging.

The bar was a magnet on weekend nights, drawing Columbia and Barnard students but also those with no such affiliation seeking to connect with the Ivy League chosen. He was grateful on this night that he didn't have to be one of the lonely ones in the cavernous space.

While he went through two pitchers of beer and held forth on matters of international importance, the hours passed, and now it was midnight. Wouldn't her parents expect her home? But no, she said. Her parents were away for the weekend at the family's country place in upstate New York. Only her oldest sister, Claire, was at the apartment, but she had her boyfriend over for the weekend and already knew not to expect Sarah back.

“I'll be spending the night with you,” Sarah said, quite bluntly, as he noticed for the first time the oversize bag she had brought along.

Like a Botticelli Venus he had seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art she looked to him now in the soft glow of the bar lights. How could he bring someone such as her

back to his dingy room at the Morningside Arms, perhaps only a small cut above some of the other SROs on the Upper West Side? The Oxford, the Belvedere, the Cortlandt, names that conveyed neither the conditions nor the quality of the occupants. Drug addicts, alcoholics, convicted felons, the criminally insane, the feeble, the lost, the unwanted, those who routinely peed in the sink and ate unheated Chef Boyardee ravioli out of the can. Men and women and whole families awaiting the welfare check in rooms with roaches and rats and mildewed carpets and broken fixtures in the public bathrooms and greasy stoves in the public kitchen. Buildings that radiated a sullen darkness, no matter how clean they looked from the outside, the collective misery of their tenants projecting through the walls and out onto the street. The kinds of buildings that cause you to see the world in terms of them and us and to move with fear and distress quickly past and to hope that the blight would be contained, or even better disappear.

Not that the Morningside Arms—or his family's building, for that matter—was really close to that category. Even so, it was too soon.

And yet she did come home with him and they did make love, or what passed for it. He came too fast, and could not touch her without fear that she would recoil at the feel of his cold, clammy hands on her smooth skin, as earlier in the evening anxiety had driven him to drop a speed pill, which now was diminishing the flow of blood to his extremities. It was one thing for her to see him drain glass after glass of beer and the suds drying on the emptied pitcher, but it might give her the creeps should she see that he was on drugs and that they were producing some false, inauthentic self.



The pill kept him up, his thoughts growing darker as the hands of the illuminated electric clock turned so slowly. Sarah had no such problem. She slept soundly and contentedly, never waking once and hardly stirring in her sleep. In the morning she wrapped herself in a sheet and headed for the public bathroom with her big bag and returned having shed her skirt and tights for brown bellbottom jeans.

There was an antiwar demonstration that same morning in Central Park. Would he come? No, he couldn't, he replied. There were things. Exams he had to study for. Would she think less of him for making, what sounded in his ears, like a poor excuse? But his concern was dispelled by the words she left him with.

"I'm going to be around for a long, long time," she said.

A girl like that, saying words like that, to someone like him. Hard to imagine, but definitely words to savor, to hold onto. Words to give meaning to his life.

He staggered out into the sunlight for a quart of orange juice and a muffin at Mama Joy's down the block. Some nourishment was needed after a night like that.

"You look like a gargoyle," the counterman said, adding up the total on the brown paper bag with a pencil. He had a mustache too wide for his narrow fallen face, a face faithful to the sour depression the years had brought. "You're a college boy. You know what a gargoyle is, right?" he went on, when Luther made no reply.

"Sure. Sure I do," Luther said, taking his purchase.

She was not a girl like Dahlia, impenetrable, nor one he had taken from another, as in the case of Maura. She had come to him not entirely without complication. There was a boy,

Ned, whom she had been seeing for some months. Actually, not a boy but a young man of twenty-four she had also met at a party. But their relationship was shaky. He was a bookkeeper who aspired to a career as a singer and songwriter. On her last visit to his East Village apartment, he had asked her to leave, having taken offense at some comments she had made about his singing and guitar playing.

“He has no talent and is so skinny,” she said dismissively, one evening.

“Skinny? Who could be skinnier than me?” Luther asked. He had arrived home from his post office shift to find her sitting outside his door on a school night.

“Believe me, he is,” she said. He wondered at her disparagement of Ned. It was no small accomplishment to have an apartment and a job and a career you were building toward in your spare hours. Altogether, he didn’t mind talking about Ned. After all, Ned was on his way out and Luther was the one displacing him, and so he could afford to be charitable and kind. He heard himself going further, actually cautioning her to keep her options open. She was young. She was still in high school. It made him feel good to show genuine regard for her and be free, for the moment at least, of self-interest. And there was no nagging sense as he spoke that he was in conflict with anything he truly believed. His advice to her applied to him as well. He too would keep his options open. Never again did he wish to return to the living hell of his relationship with Jane Thayer, and all the bondage and obsession and misery that it had brought.

“But really, won’t your parents be concerned? It is a school night.” They lay in bed. Sex happened fast for them now. It was spontaneous, natural, and needed no drugs or alcohol, not after the first night.

“They can’t control me and they know it. I was doing the same thing with Ned. I’d disappear and sometimes spend the whole night with him. As for school, it’s a cheap factory.”

It made him sad to hear her talk in such a way. School was a lifeline. Without it something bad happened. You were left behind. You were forgotten. He should know, having run into difficulty in his junior year of high school. One day of playing hooky led to two and then a week and then a second and third week before his mother was notified. A painful period of dislocation, the feeling that his dream was disintegrating and he was allowing it to happen. It wasn’t right that she should throw away her opportunity for an education at one of the city’s elite public high schools and fall—like those older sisters of his.

She said he lived like a starving Russian poet. But he was not starving. He was not Russian. He was not a poet. He wondered who she was seeing.

“That Coke bottle in your room you use as an ashtray. That makes you a poet,” she said.

She herself was an artist, or wanted to be. She drew stylized men in velvet jackets. Slim and sensitive men with long hair. A painter named Aubrey Beardsley had influenced her.

Beyond its use for lovemaking, he was uncomfortable having her in his room. He was afraid she would open his notebooks and see his bad handwriting and the meager entries taken during classes. He didn’t want her to see that his mind was dull and that he

was at best ordinary. He didn't want to feel the pain such disappointment would cause her or him.

On one such afternoon he walked with her through Riverside Park south along the bridle path, telling her how he and his brother would imagine the different buildings they might live in when they were older to escape the chaos of their family life. And he showed her the Riverside Drive mansion that had once housed the Episcopal school he was expelled from in sixth grade for tossing rolls of toilet paper from the window of the boys' bathroom at the nuns down below on the sidewalk. Recalling the incident only seemed to draw her closer to him.

“God, I wish I had known you back then,” she said.

Verdant spring was showing in the trees and grass, and the wild shrieks of children carried on the soft breezes. The younger ones could be seen with their plastic pails and shovels in the sandboxes and the older ones with their endless energy on swings and seesaws. The world seemed primed for happiness, the sun still high over the Hudson River, on which a green and white Circle Line boat was headed north past a tanker that had dropped anchor.

They came to a bridge spanning an access road to the West Side Highway. Spaced along the brass railing were several lamps on blocks of granite. Luther bent and peered between the stone slab and the verdigris base of one such lamp and saw the two pennies, set there by Luke and mocking Nancy Becker, back in their high school days, with the pledge to always stay together. Luke had shown him the coins on one of their walks after his return from Europe, a trip he had saved for following high school graduation.

“What were you looking for?” Sarah said.

“Nothing really,” he said.

“You must have been looking for something.”

“I was just looking at the patina on the base of the lamp. That’s all.”

It was not for him to tell her about the coins or about Luke. Some things she didn’t need to hear about, not then, like how Nancy Becker had defeated and discarded Luke. She didn’t need to hear about dependency or sentimentality regarding his brother that she might then apply to him. Pam Becker may have told her, but that didn’t mean he had to. Those coins under the lamp were about failure and vanished dreams and he didn’t want anything to do with either.

“That’s us, seven stories up, and that’s my bedroom, three windows in from the corner,” Sarah said. At the base of the beige brick building stood a low border of hedges, and as his gaze rose, he saw that the block-long structure accommodated the gentle curve of the street with a slight concavity of its own. His eyes settled on a window with the curtains pulled back and a clear view down of the phallic Soldier’s and Sailor’s Monument and over the trees of the park to the Hudson River and the Jersey shoreline.

“Someday soon you’ll come and meet my parents. I’ve told them all about you,” Sarah said.

He stayed in place, on the park side of the drive, as she crossed the street and entered the building under its subdued gray awning. Someday soon her parents? Her words sent shock waves through him. Some lines you never crossed. You had to know

your place and accept it, he thought, as he headed toward the subway and his evening shift at the post office.

There was a boy in her building, a popular, handsome boy. Jewish. One afternoon, when she was thirteen, she went with the boy to his apartment on the floor above her own while his parents were out, took off her clothes, and slept with him. She thought they could be friends. But he became cold and rejecting of her afterward. He said she was sick and demanded that she leave as she lay naked in his bed. Sarah went to her mother and cried and cried. It was hours before the tears ceased, but the pain lingered long after. She had suffered a wound. A boy had wanted her and then hadn't wanted her.

Angered, her mother upbraided the boy, telling him he wasn't to treat girls, or anyone, that way. The boy listened in silence, keeping any thoughts he had to himself, though his expression conveyed fear and contempt, as if he knew something that Sarah's mother couldn't or refused to know.

Sarah told Luther this story when next they met. It was a story she wanted him to have and to hold onto. Luther felt pained and sad for Sarah. But why had she taken off her clothes? Had the boy asked her to? These were questions he could not put to her directly because then he would have appeared to be finding fault with her. And if he did wonder about this quick transition to nakedness, he also found himself wondering about the boy, whom he did not like as the boy was described to him. Still, the boy was notable not only for his coldness but his strength. Because the question was: how did this boy, or any boy, find the power to reject someone with the quality of Sarah Van Dine? Someone

had to be feeding the boy. Someone had to have created a structure in the boy's life that mitigated against neediness and left him impervious to her allure. Luther could only imagine the boy's father having a role here. He pictured the father with his hand around the boy's shoulder. Such fatherly girding of the boy was not something Luther wanted for himself necessarily; it was just something to note.

And there was another story, told with no trace of rancor in her voice. Pam Becker had a boyfriend, Larry, an on again, off again student at CCNY who supported himself selling drugs. Larry had an apartment way over east on Ninety-sixth Street, at the border of Spanish Harlem. One afternoon, Sarah had gone with Pam to Larry's apartment, and while Pam went to the bedroom with her boyfriend, Sarah went off to another room with Larry's friend, a boy whose name she had already forgotten, where she slept with him. What she didn't forget was the boy's penis, which she laughingly described to Luther as having the shape of a banana.

Fear entered the picture, not fear for her but fear of her that she could go to bed with a stranger the first time and coolly analyze his penis. And that she and her girlfriend should be having sex in the same apartment with two different boys—this too stayed in his mind as something terrifying but also painfully arousing. And that this boy Larry could have an apartment, not a room, when all Luther could have was a room, and a room a half block from the building where he had spent all the years of his life since infancy, was something for his mind to retain.

One evening, as they lay naked in his bed, footsteps approached in the hallway, stopping outside his door. The presence of someone out there came to Luther strongly. It seemed the longest time before the knock came, but when it did, Luther pulled on his pants and a T-shirt. "Who is it?" Luther called out.

"My name is Peter Van Dine. I have come for my daughter," the man said, seeming to carefully enunciate each word, but giving special emphasis to the last.

Sarah had sprung from the bed at the sound of her father's voice, and now was at the window, ready to jump to the alleyway below, if Luther was to take her at her word.

"You would only hurt yourself if you did," Luther whispered. "Just get dressed."

When he saw she was doing just that, reaching down for the small clump of garments on the floor, he opened the door and stepped outside and was greeted with the sight of a man wearing a belted white trench coat with the collar turned up and a black turtleneck. Though in middle age, he had a full head of still blond hair, which he combed straight back as if unafraid to fully present his face. It was a handsome face, weathered and tanned, the face of a man who had experienced a lot of life. Of medium build and only five feet eight inches tall, he stared up at Luther with steady gray eyes that conveyed not only resoluteness but a hint of fear and anger. He was a man to be handled, Luther sensed, a man he needed to extend himself to. Somehow he must convey that he was on the man's side and that he meant no harm. The man had been harmed enough.

"She will be right out," Luther said.

"Thank you. I will wait outside on the landing," the man said.



Sarah was standing, fully dressed, in a far corner of the room when Luther returned.

“He’s going to kill me,” she said.

“He’s not going to kill you. It’s 11:30 pm on a school night. He’s just worried.”

Sarah had been waiting for Luther in the lobby when he returned from his post office shift. It was no surprise to him that her father should now have come for her. No father wanted to lose his young daughter to the forces of the night. But he had handled her father’s fear. He had treated him with gentleness and consideration and respect. And her father had shown restraint as well. He had not pummeled Luther with his fists or tried to use his head for a soccer ball or uttered dark threats about henchmen arranging to have him sleep with the fishes. Not one such word had Mr. Van Dine uttered. Like two great powers they had come together and found their common ground. Mr. Van Dine would see that he had an ally more than a rival. For the rest of the night Luther basked in the glow of good feeling his kind and sensitive and thoughtful behavior had brought.

Through his daily round of classes and work at the post office the glow persisted. But when several days passed without her being at his door or in the lobby of the rooming house, he began to worry. He understood that night visits would be out of the question, at least for a while, but why was she not seeking him out during the day? Was it possible that she came by his room at 3 pm and then left when he didn’t return shortly thereafter? He raced from the campus to ensure that he didn’t miss her. And once he was back in the room, he didn’t dare to stray until he had no choice but to leave for work.

He wouldn't pick up the phone. He had done that once, but only because Sarah had made the request, through Pam Becker and Vera. Without such solicitation, it would be the beginning of the same path to bondage he had experienced with Jane Thayer. And look what it had gotten him with Dahlia. All his weakness and dependency would be on display.

And yet, by the next week, he understood his mistake. Mr. Van Dine had no desire for a friendly accord. One look at Luther's skeletal frame and tumbleweed hair and that hovel he lived in and Sarah's father was resolved to separate his daughter from such a poor choice for a boyfriend. He saw that Sarah's father had come to claim her for someone better or maybe even he, Mr. Van Dine, was that someone better.

Or suppose it had nothing to do with the machinations of Sarah's father? Suppose she had woken up one morning and realized she was tired of Luther? But to be so cruel as to not let him know, to just impose this hideous silence. She would pay for this. She really would. He was no one to fool with. He would show her what power was, he thought, as he entered the pharmacy at the corner of One Hundred Twelfth Street and Broadway and headed for the phone bank.

Enclosed within the booth, he spun the rotary dial but then hung up, too afraid of what he would hear on the other end to continue. A great divide now existed between them that no phone conversation could possibly bridge. His inadequacy would have been revealed to her, leaving no choice but to dismiss him. How quickly her natural superiority had allowed her to gain the upper hand. And yet he couldn't just leave the booth. To do so would be to relegate himself to a wasteland of pain too punishing to survive.

“The Van Dine residence.” Again that tone, not of affectation but of cultivation, of emphatic declaration. A tone you couldn’t be born with but had to learn and meant to set you apart from the coarse and unthinking of the world.

“May I please speak with Sarah?”

“May I say who is calling?”

“This is Luther.”

“I will see if she is available.”

The shoe on the other foot now, of course. Now Luther as the petitioner.

“Hello?” Her voice cloudy, tentative.

“I was thinking about you, and so I called.”

“I’m so glad you did. I’ve been thinking about you, too.”

“It seems like a long time since I’ve seen you.”

“I know, but Daddy came down pretty hard on me. Mommy too, but mostly Daddy. He wanted me home at night and then he had tickets for a Broadway show so I had to go to that and then he insisted that I come to Camp this past weekend.”

“Camp?”

“That’s what we call our country place. Someday you’ll see it.”

*Someday you’ll see it.* Reassuring words that told him he did have a place in her life. But his fear hadn’t been unfounded. Her father was trying to rein her in, and now Luther could have no confidence that he wouldn’t succeed.

“Well, OK.”

“Look, I’ll be over tomorrow. I promise.”

He placed the receiver back on the hook and pressed his forehead against the side of the booth and closed his eyes. *I promise.* Sarah had heard his concern. She had heard his neediness. He had come to her and she had comforted him, but it was comfort that would come with a price. He would have to find a way to regain his strength and his advantage if he didn't want her to completely destroy him in the name of love.

In the second trimester now, Maureen was showing, and glowing with pride at the swell of her belly. At Maureen's insistence, Luke had installed a washer and drier in the kitchen.

"We had a great wedding. Too bad you weren't there," Maureen said.

"I can't go to something I don't know about," Luther said.

"It wasn't anything. Just a City Hall wedding," Luke said.

"It wasn't anything? We had a reception afterward at my father's apartment. That was something. My sisters were there and my best friend, Carmen, and your mother came."

"Yeah, we did. That's true," Luke said.

"When are you two getting married?" A crafty look came over Maureen's face.

Luther had brought Sarah along, wanting her to meet Luke.

"Never," Sarah said.

"What do you mean, never?" Maureen asked.

"Never means never," Sarah said.

“You mean you’re never ever going to get married? Why would you not want to get married?”

“For the same reason that you got married.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You got married because you thought it would make you happy. I’m happy not being married. We both want the same thing. We just have different pathways for finding it.”

“Are you saying I wasn’t happy before I got married? Because I was. I was plenty happy. And now I’m even happier.”

“And I’m happy for you,” Sarah said.

“Babies are important.”

“Life is important.”

“Are you saying babies aren’t important? I guess you weren’t ever a baby, were you?”

“My parents tell me I was.”

Maureen so invasive and judgmental and *Catholic*, in keeping with the parochial school system she had been a part of before enrolling at Julia Richman. And that combativeness. It was stamped on her face. She either jeered at you or fought with you. It was all she seemed to know.

“Well, he wouldn’t be anybody to marry anyway,” Maureen said, training her eyes on Luther, then turning back to Sarah. “I doubt he’s even capable of making a baby, seeing how skinny he is.”

“Hey, everybody. Let’s cool out. Come on out to the roof. I’ll show Sarah my bike,” Luke said.

Luther and Sarah followed Luke out of the tight quarters, while Maureen stayed behind. Some yards beyond the door to the roof the bike stood sheathed in a tarpaulin flapping in the blustery wind. Luke removed the shroud to reveal the metal and chromed beast. He then inserted the ignition key in the base of the lamp, gave the throttle a couple of twists to ensure the flow of gas, and kick-started the engine.

“Come on, I’ll take you for a spin,” he shouted to Sarah, over the noise of the throbbing machine, one hand on the throttle, the other on the brake handle.

“Here? On the roof?”

“Best place for it. No traffic. “Keep your feet on the foot rails and hold on to me,” Luke instructed.

Luther watched, buffeted by anxiety, as she climbed onto the buddy seat and placed her arms around his brother’s waist. The next few minutes were a torment of dread as Luke raced the machine to all the corners of the roof. An image of the bike surmounting the parapets and plunging with the two of them to the concrete pavement thirteen floors below assailed him, as did the sight of Sarah with her arms around Luke’s waist.

“Now it’s your turn,” Luke said, after concluding the agonizing tour.

“Now it’s my turn for what?” Luther asked.

“Get on and take it for a spin yourself. Just climb aboard and I’ll show you.”

Luther looked at Sarah, but she returned him a neutral gaze. “This is your thing, not mine,” Luther said to Luke, even as he seated himself on the machine.

“Now give me your left hand. That’s it. That’s the brake. Now your right hand goes here.” Luke then instructed Luther to pull in the clutch with his left hand even as he depressed the gear shift into first with his left foot and to turn the throttle.

Instantly the machine flew forward in the direction of the lowest of the retaining walls, three-feet-high. Panicked, Luther gripped the throttle tighter, increasing the bike’s speed. He saw what was coming, the bike flying over the wall with him on it. No room had been left in his mind for what did happen, the bike colliding with the retaining wall and stalling out as it fell over with Luther on it.

“Man, I told you what to do. You didn’t listen. Next time listen to me. OK?”

“Sure. I’ll really, really listen,” Luther said, as he struggled up. “I’ll be all ears.”

“Hey, come on, man. I was only trying to help. You’ve got some things you need to learn.”

“Some things to learn?”

Maureen had come out on the roof. “What’s going on out here? Has there been an accident?”

“No accident. I’m just teaching my kid brother how to ride a motorcycle. That’s all.”

“That’s a man’s world,” Maureen said, addressing herself to Luther. “Got to be a man to ride those one of those machines. Got to feel like you own it. Otherwise you’re going to have trouble. Know what I’m saying?”

“I always know exactly what you are saying and what both of you are saying,” Luther said.

“Hey. You don’t have to be like that,” Luke said. “I was just being friendly. No need for an attitude.”

“Attitude is all he’s got,” Maureen said.

“Let’s go,” Luther said, taking Sarah’s hand. “Let’s just go.”

She had come to him after school, as he had hoped she would. Her father hadn’t reclaimed her after all, and she hadn’t as yet punished him for his weakness in calling her when she was absent for those couple of weeks. And as for Luke and Maureen, she would only say that Luther’s family was incredibly interesting and that his brother was handsome and strange and maybe dangerous.

“Maybe? He would have jumped for joy if I went sailing off the roof, though he might have shed a tear for his motorcycle.”

“Your family really is like something out of Dostoyevsky. There’s so much crazy passion. You’re much more interesting than my family.”

“Failure isn’t so interesting,” Luther said.

“You haven’t failed. You’re much smarter than my sister Claire.”

“I am smarter than your sister Claire?”

“Sure. She has to study morning, noon, and night for good grades and you hardly have to study at all. And you have a job, too.”



Her sister Claire was a freshman at Barnard and lived at home. Sarah had told him as much. First he was smarter than Sarah's parents. Now he was smarter than her sister, who had gained admission to a prestigious college.

"City College is not exactly the Ivy League," Luther said. "Even so, I could still find myself flunking out."

"No, no, I can tell," Sarah said. "You're really, really smart. You know things she and my parents will never know."

"What exactly do I know?"

"You know about the Vietnam War."

"The Vietnam War? I read the stupid newspapers and say some vacillating, incoherent things about the war. That makes me smart?"

"Of course it does."

"Stop it," he said, with his back to her.

"Stop what?"

"Stop comparing me to your parents and to Claire."

"I'm only saying what is true."

"You are saying what you want to be true."

"But it is true."

"Why do you want to send me off a cliff? Isn't it enough that my brother tried to do that?"

"Nobody is trying to send you off a cliff."

“I’m not who you say I am. I can’t be.” Because he would be nudged off the cliff if he did not say these things. The misperception had become dangerous, to him if not to her.

“OK. Be whoever you want to be. How’s that?”

As he turned the corner with Sarah onto Broadway, there was his father shuffling directly toward him with the aid of his walker. Like an oversized creature from the insect world he appeared, month by month his face seeming to grow longer and his nose bigger, while baldness claimed more and more of his scalp. His father’s decrepitude evoked overwhelming shame. How was he to introduce his vibrant, talented girlfriend to such a specimen of disintegration?

“My good son,” his father said, his face breaking apart in a smile, revealing a mess of silver in his mouth. “Your mother and I don’t see enough of you.”

“I’ll be by soon,” Luther said. “Oh, and Daddy, this is my friend Sarah.”

“It is very nice to meet you,” his father said, offering her his smile.

“It is nice to meet you, too,” Sarah replied, as if she wasn’t sure it was.

“Look, do you want me to help you across Broadway?” Luther asked.

“God is my helper, my son. God is my helper,” his father said, and inched forward, alternately lifting the aluminum walker and setting it down.

Suppose his father was struck by a speeding car or run over by a bus? But the sound of screeching brakes and the thud of impact did not come to Luther’s ears. His mind turned to Sarah, and the cool way she had regarded his father. Perhaps she too had been seeing an insect. She had not been seeing anyone important. That much Luther

sensed and noted. It was one thing for him to attach insignificance to his father; it was another for someone else to do the same. Somehow this awareness that had come to him was important, terribly important, even if he didn't know why.

They were not kind people, the management of Morningside Arms. No Christian charity, no letting tenants slide with back rent for a week or two or three, as might happen at the rooming house managed by Luther's family. If you were late by a day, you got a loud, early morning knock on your door from a thick-necked thumper with the message being that you paid that morning or you dealt with him on a different level. Luther had no interest in such an encounter with a powerful black man in a gray sweatshirt and porkpie hat.

The woman in the renting cage at the rear of the lobby snatched the bills from Luther and after counting them, said, "You owe another ten dollars."

"Why? I just gave you the rent," Luther said.

"Louise," the woman barked, at a cleaning woman with her cart headed for the elevator. "Come over here."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tell him what you told me."

Louise looked him up and down. Her skin was so richly black as to show a hue of blue. A heavysset older woman with a kerchief around her head, her big eyes grew hard at the sight of him.

“I tell him right now. I tell him I don’t appreciate no piggish ways. Expecting me to remove sheets red with blood. Tell me if that isn’t a special kind of piggishness expecting me to deal with such filth. You got a mind not working right if that’s what you expect, mister.”

“Ten bucks for the sheets, mister. And it happens again, you’re out on your ass. Understand?”

“Yes, of course,” Luther said. As he fumbled for the additional payment, he remembered that Sarah had warned him about her period on her last visit, but he had gone ahead anyway. And now the landlady and the cleaning woman had the goods on him. Well, the world was as it was and the day was calling to him.

Like Luther, his sister Vera had an aspiration of her own. She too was bent on finding a pathway clear of the building so she would not have to lead a sorrowful life in one of the rooms to which circumstance had consigned her sisters Hannah and Naomi or be on the same sad track as her third sister Rachel, still clinging to her independence in a dreary SRO somewhere nearby. And though her prospects for college were not good, she had an inner resource, a buoyancy, that suggested she had not been born for defeat.

In this time she had a boy friend. There was little use in joining the two words, as that would have been to distort their connection. His name, Roddy Blakely, was as pretty as he looked, with full, sensual lips and the eyes of a doe. He came with an Ivy league pedigree, having failed out of Harvard and numerous lesser colleges before coming to New York City, where he was enrolled in Columbia University’s School of General

Studies. Now in his mid-twenties, Roddy too had descended to SRO status, his room and tuition paid for by his parents. His father, a professor of English at Smith College, Roddy dismissed as having a far inferior quality of mind than his mother.

Seeing Roddy on Broadway, a Gauloise dangling from his lips, Luther would stop and follow him with his eyes, noting the scarf thrown around Roddy's neck and his downward gaze and the soft, silky brown hair falling over his brow and the fat Gaulois dangling from his lips. He would observe Roddy's odd gait, how, with his right foot, he seemed to be stepping into a small hole. For a while Luther even tried to copy Roddy's manner of walking. Roddy was worth studying and emulating not simply because he was beautiful but because he had a way of making failure appear attractive. How glorious to have been given so much to throw away. At times Luther could hear his heart cry out that he had not received a comparable gift to squander.

As much as he looked and noted, Luther could never approach Roddy. That would have been to place himself in danger of annihilation. Even a fallen angel like Roddy had the power to kill. If Roddy had exterminated his father with a withering judgment as to his cast of mind, what on earth would he say of CCNY Luther? No, no, best to stay away.

But he didn't stay away, or not entirely. "Roddy can get you even more powerful speed than the pill you gave me. You should talk to him," Vera said. Somehow Roddy had come into possession of a prescription pad. And while Luther didn't talk to Roddy, Vera did. And so Roddy issued Luther a scrip, through Vera, for 15 mg. Eskatrol, a time-release capsule that would last an entire day. "He's filled dozens of these prescriptions. It won't be a problem," Vera assured Luther.

The pharmacist, a middle-aged man in a white lab coat, stared at the forged prescription and then turned his gaze on Luther. How all-seeing his eyes appeared through the clear lenses of his wire frame glasses. Such gravitas. Holding Luther in his gaze, he said, in a quiet voice, "Come over here, Stan." Had Roddy been wrong in the assurance he had given Vera? Had Luther made a serious blunder in walking into this pharmacy on One Hundred Fifteenth Street and Broadway? He thought of leaving, but fear froze him to the spot.

His partner, a slighter man also in the grayness of middle age, did the same, looking from the prescription to Luther. He took him in slowly, head to toe, all six feet four inches and one hundred thirty-five pounds of him.

"A diet pill for him, a bone-thin young man?" the first one asked, incredulousness in his voice.

"It's a different world," the other shrugged.

He felt their eyes on him as he left the store with his purchase. They would be seeing him as a freak, an alien. The partner had been right. A different world, yes, a challenging world, with a formidable girlfriend and exams coming up. A world in which he needed the things that hadn't been given him so he could meet his responsibilities as they were meeting theirs. Everyone needed a little something.

He moved that spring. Now he would be six blocks from the family building, on One Hundred Nineteenth Street, and even more, actually, if you added on the fact that his new place was just off of Amsterdam Avenue, a block east of Broadway. And a long block that

was too, the equivalent of three north-south city blocks. He would have his own room. True, he would have to share the bathroom and the kitchen, but that had been the case at the Morningside Arms as well. And now he wouldn't have to face the threat of bodily harm if he fell a little behind in his rent. Not that he was likely to come up short, not with a monthly rent of sixty dollars, including phone and gas.

Of course, the room needed attention. He gave it two fresh coats of paint, then sanded the wood floor and applied a polyurethane finish. And he even bought an old oak office desk for thirty dollars so he could have a surface other than his bed on which to study.

The leaseholder on the apartment was Roberto Espillat, a young man with a sunny smile except when he spoke of his stepfather, whom he had endured for many years in that same apartment. When Luther asked where Roberto's mother and stepfather had gone, Roberto motioned upward with his thumb. Requested by Luther to clarify, Roberto said they were now living on the floor above in a smaller place.

"My mother promised me this apartment when I got to college age, and I held her to it. I wanted her out of here. And that creep, too."

Roberto's eviction of his mother and stepfather became the lens through which Luther saw him, not the fact that he had played ball with Lew Alcindor at Power Memorial or was a philosophy major at City College or that he had hopes of going on to Columbia University's business school. Luther couldn't say exactly why the matter stayed in his mind. It just did. The information seemed to give him an edge on Roberto. He could leave home, whereas Roberto could not.

And yet he had a natural affinity with his new roommate, with whom he did not feel socially challenged. He suspected that Roberto had grown up somewhat unsheltered as well. In fact, Luther was sure that he had seen Roberto here and there in his growing up years. He was not an unfamiliar face.

That first week Roberto told Luther of his true love, a girl named Imelda, and how some brute named Joe—Joe Syzmborska—had moved in on him and taken Imelda away. And when Roberto shared this information, Luther could only feel he knew him even more.

One weekend evening Luther went with Roberto to the End Bar for beers. On the way, his sister Vera called to him. She was not alone. Roddy Blakely was with her, and there was a third person, short and with the girth of Falstaff, holding a Great Dane by the leash. In the man's hand was a bottle of Yoo-Hoo, which he shared with the enormous dog before draining the remainder of the beverage.

“God, Simon, how can you drink from that bottle? That dog's mouth is a germ factory. It's filthy,” Vera said.

“My mouth has been on filthier things than that,” the man said evenly. He was expensively dressed, in a dark blue silk suit, and his gold-colored tie seemed to glow in the cool spring night. A powerful sort of man, with big all-seeing eyes. Not only his dress but his age set him apart. A man in his early thirties, Luther estimated. A man established in the world.

Vera and her friends were on the way to the bar as well, and so Luther and Roberto sat packed in with them at a booth. In the short time Simon stayed before



retrieving his dog, which he had left hitched to a parking meter, Luther learned that Simon was a graduate of Yale, had earned a first at Oxford, and was enrolled in a PhD program at Harvard while teaching at Babson, a school, as he put it, of little distinction. He also learned, from the reflexive way Simon's eyes turned to Roberto, that he was taken with him.

"Here is my card. Call me. I have a friend who runs a modeling agency. He might be able to help you. You would be a good fit for *Esquire*. Alas, I can't say the same for your somber friend."

"Don't mind Simon. He tends to be full of himself," Vera said, following the Harvard man's departure. She had seen the pained look on Luther's face.

Though it was hurtful to be spoken to in such a way, Simon's verbal lash was in accord with what Luther heard him to be saying, that he was a man committed to excellence.

"He's full of a lot of things," Roddy said.

"Are you liking your new place?" Vera asked.

"I really am," Luther said.

"Didn't you say you would like to move?" Vera had turned to Roddy.

"Well, I've been thinking about it," Roddy said, after lighting another Gaulois and removing a bit of tobacco on his tongue.

"Are you looking for another roommate?" Vera asked Roberto.

"That was my plan," Roberto said.

“Why don’t you go over there and see the place, Roddy? How would that be, Roberto?”

“Sure,” Roberto said.

Luther didn’t know whether to marvel at or be horrified by his sister’s ability to navigate socially. Yes, Roddy had the untended to look of a falling angel, but still, his pedigree was intimidating, and Simon, if anything he said was true, was in the full flush of Ivy League power. How had Vera positioned herself among such worthies when she would be fortunate to graduate from a run of the mill public high school? Democracy was all well and good. Everyone was equal under the law and a man could rise from log cabin origins to become president of the United States, but still, there were stations in life, and intelligence was one of those stations, and those with lesser intelligence were not meant to mingle with those who had been given more. City College was not Harvard, and Julia Richman was not the Bronx High School of Science. People should stay where they belonged. There was only trouble to be had if they didn’t. But her aspiration wasn’t new, and so could not be considered a passing thing. For several years now she had been going to parties thrown by the frat boys at Columbia University and hanging out in their hovels. If she couldn’t be one of them, she could at least be among them. And now she was pushing them on him, if he was reading the situation correctly. A young man he was afraid to so much as talk to would now become his roommate?

In the not so long ago the barrier of fear and pride had been fully erected, the dividing line drawn between those who had and those who didn’t. It happened that night that his high school friend Tom Smits had come calling on him, and not even calling on

him but surprising him with a one-person invasion, saying, as Luther entered the lobby from the family apartment on the second floor, “So, I’ve finally found you.” Because Luther hadn’t told him where he lived. He hadn’t dared. Not since he first met him, that summer between sixth and seventh grades, on a basketball court down in Riverside Park. Even then, that very first time, something screamed in him not to go to the tall, pale, skinny boy at the other end of the fenced-in courts, not to go to him at all because the boy was from the snooty private school Luther had been enrolled in the year before. But Luther had gone, drawn from one outdoor court to another until he reached the one where Tom Smits had been shooting hoops. And though Luther had beaten him in a game of one-on-one on that first day, Tom Smits had been beating him ever since, just beating and beating and beating him, a beating so savage he could hardly stand. Beating him about where Luther lived, saying “Why don’t I come over and watch the game at your place? You do have a place, don’t you? And you do have a TV, don’t you?” because Luther wouldn’t tell him where he lived. Couldn’t tell him where he lived. Couldn’t tell anyone at that school, lest they put the laughing thing on him that rich kids reserved for those who weren’t like them. Because Tom Smits had an art history professor father and a PhD candidate mother and a Riverside Drive apartment could he throw open the doors of his life. And so the more secretive Luther remained, the more Tom Smits pressed him, though to no avail because fear was fear and death was death if Luther’s secret was revealed. But if Tom Smits couldn’t find out where Luther lived, he could ascertain the quality of Luther’s mind, could say, having rummaged through the booklets in the cardboard box from the Educational Testing Service outside the principal’s office and

found the one with Luther's scores on the verbal and math portions of the SAT, "I admire your test scores. You'll be lucky to get into Slippery Rock U." Beating Luther socially, beating him mentally, and then, finally, beating him athletically, on the basketball court in a varsity game against some equally small private school. Because the game was not about beating the other team, or if it was, that was secondary to beating Tom Smits, because if he didn't beat Tom Smits on the court, then where and how could he beat him? But he wasn't beating Tom Smits in that game. Tom Smits was beating him, beating him in points scored and rebounds. No, no, this could not be. It couldn't. The hell with them, he thought, that afternoon, the hell with all of them, as the team tried to regroup in the locker room at halftime. He didn't join them back on the court but quickly dressed and rushed out of the gym, saying a loud fuck you to all of them and to his life.

That high school in which he hadn't existed except as a body, a smiling cipher, the boy with the flat head and unpronounceable last name and the big nose and the big lips. "Are you a Negro? Someone says you are a Negro? Are you?" some boy with bad breath snicker-whispering to him back then.

And now here Tom Smits was again, in the lobby of Luther's building, hungry for more beating, simply insatiable. Saying to Luther, "In case you're wondering how I found you, I saw this guy standing on the corner and I asked him if he knew you and he said 'Yeah, that's my brother,' and so he told me where to go. Tell me. Does your brother always stand around on street corners with his shirt hanging out of his pants?" Every word from his mouth a beating. He was just back from a summer on the island of Guadalupe, where his mother had been doing research for her doctoral dissertation. "She

didn't want to be made," Tom Smits said, referring to the men on the island whom she turned away following the breakup of her marriage. And now Tom was back in the city and drawn to Luther by neediness, a pain that Luther couldn't see, as how could someone with fifteen hundred SAT scores and acceptances to Harvard and Yale and Princeton know pain? In a coffee shop that night, Tom pressed him for his plans. He would be attending the City College of New York, Luther said, unable to tell Tom that he had in fact been accepted by Queens College, not City College. "Jesus," Tom said. "Well, it used to be a pretty good school."

That same night, back in his room, Luther wrote a note to Tom. "Please don't try to contact me again. I really must be alone. I will have to hurt myself if you don't respect my request." The note was as brief as that. He placed it in an envelope and mailed it that same night. It would not do to wait until morning. Tom had to be disposed of right then and there. With each step that brought him closer to the mailbox on the corner, his savage joy increased. Tom Smits had had many words. He had bathed those words in acid, the better that they might burn and burn. But now Luther Garatdjian would have the final word. Go away, Tom Smits. Go away now. Just go, go, go.

And so he killed Tom Smits so that he, Luther, could live, because with Tom Smits alive there was no way for him to live, no way at all.

Roddy Blakely was not Tom Smits, Luther told himself. Roddy Blakely was descending, not ascending. In four years of college he hadn't accumulated a year's worth of credits. According to Vera, he shot methamphetamine. No, he did not have quite the

power to kill, as did Tom Smits, not in his diminished state, though he would bear watching, given that he had been Harvard even if he no longer was Harvard.

And now Roddy would especially have to be watched, as he did come to check out Roberto's apartment and liked what he saw enough to take the front room, a narrow space separated from the living room by French doors.

And Simon Berlinger liked enough what he had seen of Roberto that one night at the End to come calling. Roddy was an old flame and now Roberto was a new one. He took Roberto to expensive restaurants, let him air out the Porsche in fifth gear on the interstate, and suggested he had connections at the Columbia Business School who could help Roberto gain admission when he finished his undergraduate work. Simon might even be able to arrange a special deal for the Triumph motorcycle Roberto had a longing to own. The Fat Man, Roberto referred to him as, though never to his face, and laughed helplessly at the love notes Simon sent through the mail.

Luther had seen this lavishing of gifts before. Like Sean, Simon had an appetite for life and for love, but Simon was not Sean. Simon did not browbeat lonely old women for his daily bread. Simon was up there on the achievement ladder, with his Harvard and Oxford affiliations and his ability to fend for himself in the world.

"You should see him. We're in some French restaurant where he gets drunk and tells me how much he needs me and starts blubbing. It's really disgusting to see," Roberto said, unable to contain his amusement. The image of importunate Simon, his round face stained with tears, stayed in Luther's mind. It saddened him that a person could acquire things but not love. He thought of Simon lonely in the night in his

expensive suit and fancy car and of his own loneliness after the breakup with Jane Thayer and of the seeming chasm that seemed to open between him and girls thereafter, as if he were living on an island with no way back to the mainland.

The apartment opened on a long hallway, off which there were two rooms, the first belonging to Roberto and the second to Luther. Roberto's room had become a shrine to the past, a clutter of books and photos and trophies that overwhelmed the small space. Seeing the room, Luther had the sense that Roberto was not simply living in that apartment but entrenched in it.

Roberto met a girl that spring. Blessed with a generally happy disposition, he was ecstatic about his new love. "She's the one. I can tell," he said, after the girl had spent the night. A pretty girl, with curly black hair cut short and dark glittering eyes. Luther could see why Roberto would be high on her. But some difficulty arose. The girl was living with her brother. They were close. She needed to spend more time with him. Roberto didn't understand. He pressed her about the matter, but the more he did, the more adamant the girl became. And so, after two weeks, Roberto and the girl were not on speaking terms. It was a mystery, or maybe it was a revelation. Luther couldn't say.

Sarah would come over after school. All his self-consciousness had fled by now, as had hers. They were lovers, accepting of each other's bodies. It seemed a great gift to Luther that he should have her in his life, and both Roddy and Roberto corroborated his sense that she was a treasure, someone truly special.

She knew by now of the speed Luther sometimes took and the prescriptions Roddy forged. She had no judgment to make, and in fact took a 15 mg Eskatrol herself on

a couple of visits. The pills brought her out of herself, she said. She could talk to Roddy without fear and cited their deep conversations. But after her second experiment, she stopped. She grew tired of the synthetic happiness the capsules induced. She said she wanted herself back. And she was no more receptive to grass. “All it does is make me paranoid and hungry,” she said.

Luther wasn't unhappy that Sarah let go of the speed. It was bad enough that one of them was in dangerous territory. To see her high on the stuff was to see himself. Besides, she had a natural endowment that didn't require that sort of boost. An artist. Luther had never met such a person before, not in college or in high school or ever. Actually, there had been one, old Mrs. Kindelberger, back when he was a child. He would find her standing at her easel in room 3B6, overlooking Broadway, with paintbrush in hand dabbing at a watercolor painting, when he arrived some mornings with a plate of pancakes with lingonberries his mother had made for her. How purposeful she had looked, as if in defiance of her age or circumstance, her husband and children gone and her life reduced to that one room. She hardly did more than nod to him when he entered through the open door.

That school Sarah attended, the High School of Music and Art, on Convent Avenue, just beyond the gates of the south campus of CCNY, seemed a place of wonderment to him. It brought him happiness to see the tanned edifice with the strange gargoyles and turrets. Some quality of light and excellence emanated from the building. A school for the musically and artistically talented. Imagine that.



One afternoon, while he sat alone in the rear of the Finley cafeteria, Sarah appeared in the entranceway, accompanied by a tall boy with a high forehead and brilliant blond hair. The collision of the two worlds, the world of excellence that their school represented and the world of CCNY mediocrity, came as a brutal shock. They had come upon him in the extremity of his isolation, the desultory nature of his student life right there for them to see. Should she spot him and the two come to his table, it would all be over. She would feel his sadness, his insecurity, his dismal ordinariness, and turn in horror and revulsion toward her more vibrant and upwardly bound companion. And yet she and the boy headed to the food counter without glancing his way, affording him the opportunity to slip out the rear door with relief as immense as if he had just given the slip to a hit team.

Sarah mentioned the boy and how they would sometimes cut class and head over to the City College cafeteria. She said he was a rock climber who had scaled the dramatic cliffs up at New Paltz. The feat she related gave credence to Luther's image of the boy as strong and ready to take on the world. And yet she wasn't with that boy. She was with him. Imagine that. Just imagine that.

And she talked to him, confided in him, about the things that troubled her mind, as if he was a friend she could turn to. She spoke of Pam Becker, and of how Pam had flat-out betrayed her. She told him this. She did. She said in her freshman year at Music and Art, Pam wouldn't leave her alone. Pam was with her all the time, after school and on weekends, practically living in Sarah's family's apartment and going with them to their place upstate in the spring and calling her father not Mr. Van Dine but Van. She just could

not get enough of Sarah and her family. But the next school year Pam dropped her. It was as if their friendship had never existed. In the hallways at school she would see Pam with Deborah Ault, one of the more popular girls, and feel jealous and resentful and like a social outcast at the sight of her former friend flaunting her social prowess. The two of them would pass Sarah by without so much as a glance her way. And the calls and visits that she had received so frequently completely ceased. It was lonely without Pam. She had grown to love her. Had she done or said something wrong? What had happened to bring their friendship to such a cold and brutal end? Then, when the self-questioning finally ceased, there was Pam again, in the new school year, acting as if there had been no break at all. Sarah was to trust her after such a breach of loyalty? And yet Pam overpowered her. She was so outer-directed, so connected. She pulled her along to this party and that. The alternative was solitude.

“I have to tell her I can’t see her anymore. At some point I have to. This friendship is not genuine. I am with someone I don’t know,” Sarah said.

Terminating her relationship with Pam sounded to Luther as brutal as Pam dropping her the year before. He had no frame of reference for such a thing. It was not like Tom Smits killing him and him turning around and killing Tom Smits. He had no real understanding of friendship from which to speak, and so it was better to just listen.

And he listened to her about her family, and her youngest sister, Lenore, in particular, about whom she had fear that showed itself in her raised voice and panicky tone, as if she was desperate to convey the level of distress this sister caused her. She had held this sister down, pulling down her underpants and in other ways humiliating her. But

now she couldn't hold Lenore down. Lenore was beyond her control at a boarding school in Vermont, where she was a straight A student and had an Adonis of a boyfriend.

However, Lenore was not crazy about the school. She had thoughts of asking her parents if she could finish high school back in the city.

“If she moves back, I have to move out. I have to. I won't be humiliated by her socially. I won't. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“I do. I really do,” he said. A beautiful younger sister. That is the way his mind received her words. Like a drop of dye in a glass of water the mention of this sister spread through his consciousness. Lenore. More. Evermore. A door to sexual adventure opening. Not right to betray Sarah. Not right at all. And yet the fever of excitement. He did not understand. He did not want to understand. It was not his time to understand.

On the express hurtling between Ninety-sixth and Seventy-Second and then down to Times Square, Grace Slick boomed to him “Somebody to Love” and “3/5 of a Mile” and then there was Marty Ballin singing “Today.” Other times it was fat-lipped Mick Jagger snarling “Under My Thumb” or Bob Dylan being wise beyond his years on “Ramona.” He never knew who, from the musical bonanza of that time, would be making a guest appearance in his head. On still other days the hymns of his childhood would play in his ears, brought on by the rhythmic motion of the train, “Blessed Assurance” and “In the Garden” and “Bringing in the Sheaves” and “Rescue the Perishing” and on and on, and his eyes would fill with tears as his mind took him back to his mother and the church and the time of togetherness.

Penn Station, less than a one-minute ride from Times Square, was thick with rush hour commuters as he passed through the arcade to the Eighth Avenue exit. Over the loudspeaker came departure announcements for Long Island Railroad trains bound for West Babylon, Oyster Bay, Massapequa, Quogue, Huntington, Hempstead, Mineola, Freeport, Bayshore, Great Neck, a roll call of names that summoned, for some reason, open sky and the smell of fish, and served as a reminder that the thin island appendage to the city, was mostly, for him, unexplored territory, a place for the Dashing Dans, those trench-coated men toting attaché cases depicted streaking for their trains after a busy day at the office in the railroad's advertisements. Neither the railroad nor the island held any special allure, certainly none of the mystery or longing that flooded his being at the sight of those behemoth burgundy diesels with overhead pantographs of the Pennsylvania Railroad, or the similarly colored coach cars they pulled, that Luke and he would race from the arcade to see, diverted from their Sunday trek to the tabernacle by the romance of the rails. The station, with its announcements of arrivals and departures, and its brightly lit shops and its sweet smell of roasting caramel, was a reminder of the world beyond the stuffy confines of the tabernacle's walls, a world of people in transit under a dome of elegant wrought iron and glass and a concourse of heavy masonry.

He stopped at the Horn and Hardart on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Thirty-Third Street. The cashier took his two one-dollar bills and down a metal chute poured quarters and nickels and dimes into a marble tray, which he took to the banks of small, windowed compartments where sandwiches and side dishes and desserts were displayed. In the slots to the side of the compartments he deposited coins for a green oval dish of

macaroni and a small brown pot of baked beans and a cup of coffee, then took a table for two at the rear of the automat, in a section set two steps above the main area. He twirled the condiments tray, suspended on a spindle, bypassing the crusted mustard pot and the slimy oil and vinegar holders for the ketchup dispenser. How good it felt to eat the food of his childhood, the macaroni and the baked beans flooded with ketchup, just the way he liked it.

“Let us go for some normal food,” he could hear his mother say, when the Sunday afternoon service was over, and together he and Luke and Vera would walk with her down the long, inclined street to the Horn and Hardart. Normal food. She could talk that way. Nothing fancy schmantzy but food that was real. If they wanted an extra piece of pie or a second glass of iced tea, she would give it to them. She could never say no, and not on a late Sunday afternoon, not when she had been so filled up on the Lord, summoned by the spirit moving within her to stand during the service and cry out to the Lord in those unintelligible words that flowed from her mouth, words that transported her beyond time and space into the reality of the Holy Ghost—the *experience* of the Holy Ghost. If once she had been lost, she was now found. How long did the spell last? Was it two minutes? Three? To Luther it had seemed an eternity, and that God, or whomever, had absconded with his mother and might never return her to him. But always she did come back. Spent and slumped on the bench, she would softly weep, just weep and weep, a commingling of sorrow and joy and gratitude. She lived the week for such moments. The service was her time of renewal, her fuel. Gone were the cares of the week, the grinding anxiety that Simon Weill, the building owner, would take the management of the property

away from them, or that some calamity might befall the building, like a raging fire, or that her sister, Auntie Eve, would pass away, and leave her all alone to deal with Mr. Weill and the tenants. Gone too were her concerns for her children, dark and moody Hannah and Naomi, lost to all the drugs those psychiatrists gave her, and Rachel, so angry and crazy. And her concerns and even anguish about Luther's father, who was not always there and not to be counted on when he was, owing to the condition he had. "My only prayer is that we will all be in Heaven together some day," his mother would say, perhaps in recognition that they were not so together here on earth. And was the weeping that she did there in the tabernacle not preferable to the other kind of weeping he had seen her succumb to, when there had been some new disappointment or horror? "What have I done that I should deserve children such as these who treat me as if I am no better than dirt beneath their shoes?" This too she had also said, through her tears, words not at all unintelligible but entirely clear, unlike those uttered in the tabernacle.

His mother's tears. His life had been about them in some way.

It was Friday. Sarah was away for the weekend. Her father wanted her at Camp. He wanted her closer than she had been. And it was payday for Luther. A check, written on stiff, thick paper and tinted a light green, had come in the mail. Do not fold, spindle, or mutilate—those words printed on the check. That word *spindle*, used as a verb, had sent him to the dictionary. Do not impale on the spike of a spindle. The check's value voided if he did. How little he knew. Someday he would know more, have the armor of knowledge around him as protection from harm.

He paused outside the entrance ramp to the post office, held there by the soft spring air, and stared up at the big rosette window of the church across the street. He still had some time before his shift was to begin and so he crossed over and entered through the side door of varnished wood. There was an identical entrance at the other end of the church, and in between a wide set of stairs leading up to the main floor to the church proper. He climbed the narrow, twisting stairs to the next level, bending as he went. The main floor he had climbed above, with its wainscoted walls, was where the Sunday school services were held, and where the restrooms could be found, the sense memory of the strong, ammoniac smell of the small cakes in the urinal coming to him. He peered through a porthole window in one of the swinging doors and saw a scattering of congregants standing in the pews. The men were plainly dressed, in shirt sleeves only. Even with a limited view, he could see that they were predominantly Asian.

“Luther, is that you?” A tall, stoop-shouldered man, had emerged. Luther recognized the man from his mother’s building. His name was Melvin. The immediate aversion he had felt grew stronger as the man, gaunt and pale, approached. “Are you here for the Friday hour of worship?” Luther heard it in his soft, hesitant voice and felt it in his timid manner. His blanched, scrubbed, wholesome face and neutered stance were everything that made godliness off-putting.

“No. I just stopped by the old place.”

“That is good, Luther. That means you still have a feeling in your heart for the Lord. The Lord is very good to me. He walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, just like the hymn says.”

“Of course.” Despite his annoyance at Melvin’s religious zeal, Luther couldn’t help but feel kindly disposed toward the man. Unlike Mr. Fitzpatrick, Melvin wasn’t attacking him. A purity born of desperation drove him, some recognition that without the church, all that awaited him was his lonely room. For whatever reason, Melvin hadn’t been born for this world.

“The Lord calls to us, Luther. Are you listening for the Lord?”

“In my way, I do,” Luther said.

“That is good, Luther. That is so good. It gives my heart such joy to hear. You will come back, Luther. The strays always come back. Your mother knew what she was doing raising you in the Lord. And when you return, I will be waiting.”

Luther was not prepared to say that the prospect of well-meaning Melvin waiting for him was less than appealing. He thanked him for their talk and went on his way.

That evening, while sitting on his stool and sorting the mail into the small boxes in front of him, Luther was visited by Efram Ellsberg.

“I’m going to kick his ass. That is exactly what I am going to do.”

“You’re going to kick whose ass?” Luther asked, looking around and seeing no one worthy of such treatment.

“Ruggiero’s ass. That’s who.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

Carmen Ruggiero was the floor supervisor, a squat middle-aged man with bulging eyes in a big, meaty face, like the actor Ernest Borgnine.



“He’s on my case all the time. That’s why. Says I am not working to capacity and that the breaks I take are too long.”

“Well, don’t kick his ass. You could get in trouble.”

“I’m kicking his ass.”

Though Efram was jumbo-sized, Luther couldn’t imagine him following through. The tough-guy talk sounded embarrassingly out of character for someone so pacific. And yet the lapse, if it was a lapse, was also illuminating. In Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Luther had read of a character described as possessing all intelligence and no brains. Certainly Efram had brains, but just as certainly they were taking a back seat to his emotions. Suddenly Luther found himself looking at Efram differently. In his denim overalls, Efram now appeared to Luther not as an prophet of old or as a Whitmanesque bard but as an oversize baby. He saw an element of infantilism in his friend, and sensed Efram had assumed a reflexive posture of defiance toward his rabbi father that he was now transferring to another authority figure. Such was the picture that came to Luther.

His shift over, he found himself restless and unable to bear the thought of returning directly to the confining Upper West Side, where Columbia reigned supreme, or suffer shackling inhibition through association with his family’s building. And so, down the steps of the subway he bounded at the corner of Eighth Avenue, where he caught the A train and headed for Greenwich Village.

At Waverly Place he surfaced, bypassing the bright lights of MacDougal Street for the quieter stretch along Sullivan. He had in mind Café Figaro or Rienzi’s but stopped outside a small bar called Gosees.

The soft amber glow having called him inside, he ordered a beer and stood back against the wall away from the traffic. Jesus, the beer tasted good, so light and yet creamy. Two quaffs and nothing remained in the stein but suds. He ordered a second and lit a Marlboro to slow himself down.

He stood to the side of the jukebox, attentive to the music. “I’ve Been Lonely Too Long,” a song that made him feel good all over. And then that crazy song, “Hot Town, Summer in the City,” but he survived it. And then “Working My Way Back to You.” It didn’t move him the way the best of the Four Seasons did, like Frankie Valli singing “Dawn” or “Rag Doll.” Too much effort. Too much heavy lifting, and for what? But then it was the power sound of the Supremes with “My World Is Empty Without You.” No “Ruby Tuesday,” as at the West End Bar. Minute after minute of Mick Jagger smelling up the place with that slow, mournful tune. And yet something passé about the Four Seasons and even the Supremes. Relics from his high school years. The bar itself, with sawdust sprinkled on the floor, and the fake-Tiffany lamps, something from the past. Not quite the kind of bar to play the Stones, when what was better than *December’s Children*, an album of Roberto’s that he played over and over, especially “Under My Thumb”? And could anyone beat the Beatles on *Rubber Soul* and everything they did or Dylan or the Beach Boys with *Pet Sounds*, which wrapped him in its warmth and took him to a special place of longing and sorrow?

No matter. He was home. Nobody there to call him the landlady’s son. No oppressive shadow of Columbia University to confer on him inferior status and fuel the

endlessly punishing thoughts about his intelligence. He was free. He was home. He wanted to stay for a long, long time.

The following Friday he called to Sarah to meet him at this boozy oasis he had found. He took a table at the rear with a direct view of the front door and experienced a jolt of terror when several young men clustered at the bar turned and called to her as she entered and walked past them in tight jeans and a suede jacket. Strong, good-looking young men, the kind who could easily win a girl, any girl, to them. And yet Sarah hadn't smiled. She hadn't given them any notice. That didn't mean she wouldn't, not under the right circumstances. She had already told him what she was capable of in the sexual realm.

"Burn me," he said on that night. "Go ahead. Hold it under the palm of my hand." He pushed the small, lit candle toward her.

"No," she said.

"I know you want to."

"Stop it," she said.

"Just for me."

"I said no. I don't like this kind of talk. And I don't like this place."

"Someday you'll do it. You'll see." He felt rebuffed. All he had been asking for was a little pain. She could give him that, couldn't she, the way all girls, all people, gave it to each other? Was that asking so much? And yet he was relieved that she hadn't complied. The pain would come, he told himself. He had no need for an advance on it.

“That’s him. That’s him. That’s my baby boy. Can you believe it?” Luke nudged Luther and pointed to a bundled infant in the front row. He tapped the glass window, on the other side of which the baby lay, not easily distinguishable from the twenty or so others laid out in the hospital’s maternity ward. But the baby appeared to have other things on his mind than instant recognition of his poppa. How old the baby looked. How old they all looked.

“Such a beautiful little baby boy. And Maureen will be such a good wife and mother. I have a good feeling about her. She is a down to earth and sensible girl,” Mrs. Garatdjian said the following week, when Luther came to visit.

“But that’s it. She’s just a girl. She didn’t even finish high school,” Luther said.

“She is mature for her age. She is not one of those foolish, silly ones,” his mother said.

The front door opened and a chubby, sullen-faced girl in a navy blue jumper with a yellow and green crest entered.

“Well, hello, Jeanne.”

“Hi, Grandma. Hi, Uncle Luther.”

Her voice had a mournful quality.

“Come sit with us and have a bun,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“I want to go to my room. I’m not feeling too well,” Jeanne said.

“But what is it, Jeanne? Are you coming down with something?”

“I just need to lie down.”

“You are not running a fever, are you? Come and let me feel your forehead.”

“No, Grandma. I am not running a fever.”

“Come and let me see.”

Jeanne obliged, and Luther’s mother felt her forehead and her cheeks. “No, I don’t think we need to take your temperature. Is there something you ate that did not agree with you?”

“I just need to take a nap.”

“You do that, Jeanne. We will keep our voices low and I will wake you for supper. We are having lamb chops, your very favorite.”

“Thank you, Grandma.”

Jeanne entered the narrow little room off the living room and closed the door. Luther wondered, not for the first time, about the equanimity of his mother, her ability to tolerate chaos, when everything about the family disturbed him, including the shabby apartment. The same box spring with a spread thrown over it served as a sofa as when he had been a child and there remained the unsightly dark blotches behind the sofa caused by people using the wall as a headrest. The clutter. The dirt. The roaches. It was too much.

“She does not have it easy, the poor girl,” his mother whispered. “You must be nice to her. She needs a lot of love and support.”

He remembered staring down at his newborn niece in her baby blanket on that same sofa the day Naomi brought her home from the hospital and badgered him to make a fuss over her. He was seven at the time. But there was no fuss to be made. There was just horror. He saw the infant as simply additional chaos in their lives and, as she grew

older, a surly annoyance. First he had had to deal with her mother. Now he would have to deal with her mother's offspring?

"I try," he said.

Some minutes later, as he descended the stairs to the lobby, he saw Naomi at the window of the renting office. "I will need thirty dollars. My mother said I could have it," she said to the woman behind the grille. Luther moved past without acknowledging her. Only Mr. Fitzpatrick, in that filthy oversize denim jacket remained between him and the street.

"A few good men, Luther. A few good men," he called out.

Luther spun and faced him but said nothing.

"We're praying for you, Luther. We're praying for you," Mr. Fitzpatrick said, showing a face of good cheer from which Luther fled.

"His name is Hegel," Roberto said, of the longhaired gray cat he had taken in.

"You call your cat Hegel?" Roddy stroked the cat's fur tentatively.

"Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The dialectical principle at work," Roberto said.

"And how exactly does this dialectical principle work in a cat's life?" Roddy asked.

"Hegel sees me place a bowl of milk on the floor. Hegel thinks, 'My master is offering me something nourishing because my master loves me.' Then comes the antithesis. 'My master is trying to poison me. My master is no good.' Then we come to the third stage, synthesis. Hegel says, 'If I cannot know with any certainty that my master

means me well or harm, is there a midpoint between faith and fear that will allow me to determine whether the milk is a nourishment or a poison? And so synthesis comes to equal experiment. Hegel will *sample* the milk, having weighed the alternatives of faith and fear. At either extreme the consequence could be death, but at the midpoint it is reasonable to assume that a mere tad of the milk on his tongue will result only in mild suffering if in fact the milk is poisoned.”

“Very good,” Roddy said, as if he were speaking to a child.

The smile on Roberto’s face said he was only too pleased with his explanation,

Roberto amplified on his studies in symbolic logic.

“You see, I am inventing a whole new language of figures that will displace the everyday language of words. The day will come when we speak only in numbers.”

“But there is more to life than numbers, isn’t there?” Luther asked.

“The problem is you don’t have enough numbers in your life so you can’t know what you’re missing,” Roberto replied.

“I don’t have enough numbers?”

“That’s right,” Roberto said. “You have to get with the numbers or you will be lost. It’s all about quantification.”

“If I had the money, I would see a therapist,” Luther said, somewhat off the subject.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because maybe a trained listener could help, and I don’t see how numbers can replace thoughts and feelings,” Luther said.

“No, but they can represent them,” Roberto replied, with a wave of dismissal.

Undeterred, Luther did seek out someone within a couple of weeks at a mental health clinic across from the Museum of Natural History. He told Dr. Bruqualini of his defeat when he tried to move out of Luke’s penthouse suite toward the end of his first year in college.

You weren’t ready. That’s all it was. Don’t read anything more into it than that.”

“But now I’m thinking that I need a place of my own. I’m not sure I want to live with roommates, or at least the roommates that I have,” Luther said.

“Wait before trying again. That would be my advice. It will happen. Just give it time.”

Dr. Bruqualini’s rate was only ten dollars an hour. He could help Luther, Dr. Bruqualini said. But Dr. Bruqualini was a thin man with a reedy neck and meekness showing in his face. The suits he wore were not good suits, and the degree he had was not from a medical college but from a school of social work, which meant that he could not do science, and that meant he was like Luther, poor in his mind as well as his body. As for his name, it was a jumble of syllables that went on beyond the point of reason and order. And so, though Dr. Bruqualini had helped him, he didn’t stay beyond three sessions, because his doubts about Dr. Bruqualini grew and grew, a torment as much as being alone in that studio apartment the year before had been a torment.

“Someday you will be able to be where your feet are. You just haven’t reached that place as yet,” Dr. Bruqualini said.



They were good words, words worth pondering even if Luther didn't quite know what Dr. Bruqualini meant. But Luther had savaged Dr. Bruqualini in his thoughts, had given him a worse beating than the men of violence administer to each other. He had left Dr. Bruqualini bleeding from many places on the floor, and a few words were not enough to undo the damage.

Sarah felt safe and understood with Roddy, but Roberto made her uneasy. She said he had wildfires burning in his eyes that his amiable manner and congenial smile could not hide.

Luther had his own fire burning, dreaming on consecutive nights of a blaze engulfing a barn somewhere upstate and of men with bloodhounds and flashlights pursuing him as he ran frantically through a forest. The dreams filled him with wonder and excitement, seeming to herald a new and exciting chapter in his life, and he marveled that in sleep he could go where his feet could take him in daylight hours. Was the sun pouring through his window in a blaze of morning glory the cause of his joy or was it Sarah, or were they one and the same? Oh, it did not matter. Life had become good, so good.

One weekend morning Luther and Sarah set out for Camp. The idea had been Sarah's. Pam Becker came along, too, Sarah being unable as yet to shake free of her. Why not invite Roddy as well, Luther said to Sarah. Sure. Roddy would be fine, she said. She would like to have him along, she said. But it was agreed that they would not invite Roberto, even though the exclusion weighed on Luther. It did seem a wrong and hurtful thing to go away for a weekend with one roommate and not the other, especially as

Roberto was supposed to be a friend. But they had taken to laughing at Roberto for the strangeness of his mind. Luther could not talk with Roddy about Schopenhauer or Wittgenstein or any of the other great thinkers of Western civilization beyond cogito ergo sum and bird, thou never wert, which even though it was but a stray line from a Shelley poem he had some idea might be applicable, but he could talk with him about Roberto and together he and Roddy could put their laughing thing on Roberto. All that weekend Luther was pained by his mistake and tried to make right in his mind the wrong he had done. People have died for less, he heard himself say to the air.

Sarah said they had no need of a bus or train. They need only go to an entrance to the West Side Highway, where she would hold out her thumb to flag a ride. She said it worked every time.

“Your parents let you hitchhike? It could be incredibly dangerous,” Luther said.

“Dangerous for who?” Sarah challenged.

“Dangerous for you.”

“Dangerous for them, you mean.”

“How is that?”

“If they try something, I just punch them in their balls and jump out,” Sarah said.

“That’s crazy,” Luther said, in that moment grasping that her dwelling place was the realm of the innocent lacking all understanding of what terror the men of violence could summon.

“I know about cars in a way that you will never know about cars,” she said.

“Why do you say that?”

“My father is a car man. Do you understand?”

“Sort of.”

She was right about her allure. She and Pam stood at the Ninety-sixth Street entrance to the Henry Hudson Parkway for less than a minute before a Volkswagen van pulled over. The driver was a good sport about taking on Luther and Roddy as well, who had sprung from their hiding place behind a bush.

“Don’ be insulted, but you boys would be out here a long time without these girls,” the driver said. “You hold on to them. They’re your ticket to the good life.” He whisked them over the George Washington Bridge and onto the manicured Palisades Parkway all the way to the first rest stop on Interstate 87. But their progress was slower thereafter. They needed another two rides to reach the Kingston exit and another two before they got to Woodstock.

Pam frightened Luther. “Whatever image of yourself you are trying to sell to Sarah Van Dine, remember that I know who you really are and where you come from, having been inside your family’s squalid apartment. Who you really are is the boy who struck out with me when you were in eleventh grade.” So he imagined her thinking. It was there in the way she looked at him. Back in the eleventh grade he had gone with her to see *Wuthering Heights*. The book he had not read and the film he had a hard time grasping. There were things he remembered and would always remember, like placing his arm around her during the movie only to find that self-consciousness prevented him from removing it. And those white sweat socks he wore with his charcoal gray school uniform pants to make his legs look thicker and the kiss he gave her to which she did not respond

and during which she kept her eyes wide open, as if to say, “What exactly do you think you are doing?” But the debacle that followed was what most stayed in his mind. To give the impression of a bigger life than he had, he told her he would be meeting some friends at a party uptown. There were no friends and there was no party to which he had an invitation, only the noisy affair at one of the string of Columbia frat houses on One Hundred Fourteenth Street, between Broadway and Amsterdam, where he drank indiscriminately from the bottles on the kitchen counter and bragged to an older girl about the great college he would attend on a basketball scholarship. That night struggling to place his foot on the floor to stop his bed from spinning like that whip ride at Coney Island. Daylight found him covered in his own vomit. The alarm had gone off but he had slept through it, and so had missed the PSAT his junior classmates would be taking at the school that morning. He saw right away that his drunkenness the night before had been driven by fear of the exam and all the deficiencies in him it would expose.

Pam Becker had been a part of all of that, his weekend of failure heralding a life of failure.

“What a great day. Pam said, as they sat in the Bear Café, sunk several feet below Tinker Street, the main drag. Woodstock was a pretty town: the big white Dutch reformed church with a tall spire overlooking the greensward and the traffic circle and the small bridge nearby spanning a little brook and the tiny shops.

“Hyperbole appeals to you,” Roddy said.

“That’s not fair. It is a wonderful day.”

Pam's disposition was as sunny as her silky blond hair. What Roddy wanted to ridicule as an affectation was only her nature, even if it covered some sadness she couldn't admit to.

"Are you someone who says every day is wonderful?"

"Suppose I am? Isn't every day wonderful if I say so and truly think so?"

"Is Norman Vincent Peale on your high school's reading list?"

"No, he isn't, but it's OK to be positive and hopeful. Not everyone has to be dark and gloomy. What do you read all day?" Pam was beginning to look like things weren't so very wonderful. In fact, she was looking close to tears.

"I start my morning off with Schopenhauer."

"Who?"

"You've never heard of Schopenhauer?"

"No. That's why I'm asking."

"Every possession and happiness is but lent to us."

"That's Schopenhauer? I don't have to read him to know that. I can find that in Ecclesiastes. 'For every thing there is a season...'"

"There you go. Ecclesiastes gives you everything you need," Roddy said, using his age and his bigger mind to toy with Pam.

Schopenhauer. Another German with a cliff-like forehead signaling a giant brain. Available in Penguin paperback with a black cover and printed on that fine paper Luther associated with England. Another book to read and then give shelf space to.

“That’s him,” Sarah said, with a start, hearing the car horn outside. They had arrived at the café at dusk, tired and hungry. The last stretch, along less traveled two-lane country roads, would make for really difficult hitchhiking. And so she had called for help.

“Van, I am so happy to see you,” Pam gushed. “Is your book coming out soon? When will I be able to read it? You’re going to be famous. Famous.” Pam’s father was a writer too. So Luke had told Luther. He was trying to finish a novel while supporting the family as a waiter at some four-star restaurant in midtown Manhattan. A man who earned his daily bread bringing food and drink to the table of strangers.

“Publication will be in mid-June,” Peter said. “And I hardly believe a book about some small aspect of Catskill Mountain history will bring me fame.”

“Well, you’ll be famous to Sarah and to me, won’t he, Sarah?” Pam went on.

Sarah’s silence was loud in Luther’s ears if no one else’s, as was her father’s, once he got behind the wheel. The black Chrysler station wagon was the length of a hearse, with white-wall tires and sweeping fins. The contagion of silence spread, even to Pam, as the car gained speed on leaving the town limits. There followed other and smaller towns, little more than a post office and general store. Shady, Mount Tremper, Bearsville. High beam, low beam, back and forth Peter clicked the lights to accommodate approaching cars, the telephone wires strung from poles like silver strands in the dark. How determined and vigilant Peter looked, as if he were piloting not a vehicle but a plane with a panel of complex controls. The road followed the curve of the Esopus River and led them to the town of Phoenicia, bigger, more substantial, the bluestone sidewalks lined with tall trees and shops and lighted by lamps.

He had been to this town, with the Greek name, in the long ago. A fever of wildness threatened to consume him at this reconnection with his personal history, as if that was all he had.

Beyond the town the Chrysler came to a straightaway, where the bracing smell of tar lingered amid the traffic cones and idle Caterpillars and steamrollers and other roadwork equipment abandoned for the night. Minutes later the car crunched gravel as it entered a turnoff and onto a rutted dirt road deep into a hollow, barely slowing to pass between two flagstone columns marking the entrance to the property. The timbers of the small wood bridge rumbled as the car rolled over it, circling a wide expanse of shimmering green lawn lit by a spotlight high on the trunk of a tall pine tree.

Luther stood on the lawn that night, surveying the property: the old wooden house with cardinal red trim around the windows and the trellised flagstone terrace; the barn converted into a garage; a shed with a stable for horses; a second barn that had been converted to a guest house with mullioned windows; a solarium overlooking a pool filled with cool mountain water. Halfway up the mountain, so he was told, was a lean-to where the family slept on warm summer nights.

He had arrived at the highpoint of his life. A riot of feeling he could not articulate held him in its grip. Just as in Phoenicia, his past, his present, his future converging. It would take time to assimilate. Time.

“It’s OK. My parents are not that way,” Sarah said, that night, as she asked him to help her remove the night table between the two beds and push them together. The red

room, she called her bedroom, as opposed to the adjacent blue room, reserved for her parents. And it was a red room, with a throw rug and bedspreads in that color.

“You’re sure?”

“You have no idea what used to take place here at Camp,” she replied.

He woke to the chirping of birds and the sun streaming in through the screened window and sat that morning on the front porch, drinking instant coffee from a blue tin mug. A sight more compelling than the sculpted beauty of the estate was of Peter high up on a ladder twenty yards away applying a coat of brown paint to the barn where the Chrysler was housed. The paint shone satisfyingly fresh. It was good to take care of things, to retard if not prevent their perishing. The day was warm, and apart from an old pair of tennis shoes, the only item of apparel on his body was a pair of black bikini briefs with a white elastic band. The stretched, sagging fabric suggested the size of his endowment.

“If you and Roddy and Pam weren’t here, he would be up on that ladder in only his tennis shoes.” Sarah had joined him on the porch.

“Why do you say that?”

“My father is vain and has a cock like you wouldn’t believe.”

“How so?”

“It’s huge. I used to make fun of him. My sisters would wet their pants laughing,” she said. With her knees bent and her feet obliquely pointed and her joined hands between her legs, she walked as if she were struggling to hold an impossibly heavy object and keep it from dragging on the ground.



“That must have been strange, growing up with your father parading around naked.”

“He has a mystical relationship to this property. He can be himself in a way that he can’t be in the other world, where he feels injured and unaccepted.”

“Injured and unaccepted how?”

“A man of his kind can only be tormented by society,” Sarah said.

“But what is his kind?”

“Refined. Artistic. Aesthetic.”

“He can’t be too tormented if he is publishing a book. That’s an amazing thing.”

“Mommy is proud of him but also disappointed. She wanted him to be out in the world. She thought he would enter politics or teach or do something more than retreat to his study.”

“But to make a living as a writer. People would give anything for that.”

“He’s never made a living as a writer. He’s never made a living at all.”

“How has he lived?”

“Mommy received a large inheritance. My grandfather made a fortune in the real estate business and the money got passed down.”

“That sounds pretty good to me.”

“And to Daddy. It allowed him to stay out of the work world. It’s also allowed him to make his family his bed.”

His bed. The image was striking.

Despite the warm sun, the water in the pool was ice cold, drawn as it was from the mountain stream, and so Luther was spared unwanted exposure. Sarah drove them in the jeep to the lean-to. Like her father, she took on a look of fixed intensity behind the wheel as she slipped the vehicle into low low for the final steep ascent on the rutted dirt road. Along the way, a startled deer sprang gracefully away through the woodland and a pheasant made a shocking racket when it broke into flight overhead.

A thick mattress covered the interior of the lean-to. In a corner were rolled up sleeping bags and on a small shelf a portable stereo system and several flashlights. There was a screen, divided into three sections, to keep out the mosquitoes on summer nights. The roof sloped upward, as if rising to meet the sun overhead, and a small window on either side of the west-facing lean-to had been built to let in light. On the stone terrace that wrapped around the lean-to stood a barbecue pit.

Far below, the hollow road broke the endless vista of mountain greenery, appearing as a thin, uneven part in the scalp of the earth leading to a wider clearing and the Van Dine complex. The mountain provided perspective. From below the estate had appeared vast; from above, like a miniature replica.

Though Sarah's mother, Lydia wasn't there, Sarah made her present. Her mother had grown up on the property, in that very same house. It was a cold house, even in summer, with pockets of great loneliness. There was also the drama of her parents' demise. Lydia's dowager grandmother was not averse to exercising power and banned Lydia's father from the estate. He was of the wrong kind. He had south of the border blood. So she said from her throne of judgment. Lydia's father loved both Lydia and her

mother with a love beyond reckoning and howled on the hollow road for his wife and daughter to leave that house that would not have him. But Lydia's grandmother held the power of the purse. Did Lydia's mother want to subsist on wild berries for her and her daughter? The grandmother could see it in Lydia's father's eyes that he was not constituted to provide. Believing her mother was willing to cut off both her and her child, Lydia's mother had no choice but to surrender. And so, in a final cry of protest, Lydia's father took his life on that very road, in fact, at the entrance to the estate, pulling the trigger on a pistol whose barrel filled his mouth. And within a year, as she lay in a Kingston hospital strapped to an iron lung, Lydia's mother succumbed to his pull and joined him in the earth below. And so Lydia was left in the care of her grandmother and her alcoholic uncle, Ned. At age fourteen, she was sent to Miss Porter's, a boarding school in Connecticut, where she flourished, and won admission to Radcliffe College. In Cambridge she met Peter, who had come to Harvard for graduate school on the GI Bill, having served as a bombardier in a B-52 squadron over Germany. His origins were more humble than her own, his father a plumber descended from yeoman Dutch farmers in southern New Jersey. Lydia would throw pebbles up at the second floor window of the room he rented in a yellow house near the college, calling her Adonis down to her, as she could not stay away. If not for Peter, Lydia would never have returned to her childhood home after her grandmother's death. He helped her to purge the house of the painful memories. They made improvements, including a modern bath and kitchen.

They had a life, an American life. Even with pain and death, the sun had shone on their family. So Luther heard, even if Sarah meant something different. But Lydia's Latin

grandfather, with the pistol in his mouth because he had been exiled from the gates of Eden. That is what he heard the most, heard it with a howling pain of his own.

The wainscoted walls in the living room gave it a rustic beauty and warmth. On the sturdy oak table stood a lamp whose trunk had originally served as a printing roller for wallpaper. Sharp molded metal still attached to the roller. There were three sofas, at right angles to each other, the central one facing the fireplace. On the walls flanking the fireplace were bookcases with old, cloth-bound books by forgotten authors, while the shelves against the front wall were thick with more current books on flora and fauna and horticulture. Throw rugs gave the room added warmth.

I have seen this room before, Luther thought. I have seen it on the cover of the Signet paperback edition of Edith Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed*.

Set into two of the walls were double windows, providing ample light. And there was a second door with small glass panes leading to the porch. To the right of this side door, if you were to face it from the inside, as Luther now did, was a gun rack. And beyond the gun rack was a closet, in which fishing rods and gear and winter coats and boots were kept. But the gun rack is what interested Luther. It held a single-shot .22 rifle; a .30-.30 rifle; a single barrel shotgun with a breech.

He did a bad thing. Because it was there and his mind took him prisoner, he lifted the .22 from the rack and held it with both hands, feeling its heft, then ran his hand over the long thin barrel and placed his index finger against the small bore. How smooth and beautiful the varnished wood of the stock. In the deep drawer of the nearby hutch were boxes of thick shotgun shells in green plastic casings and .30-30 shells in their metal

casings. He reached past them for a handful of the smaller .22 shells and went out on the terrace, where he loaded one in the rifle's chamber.

When a chipmunk appeared on the terrace, he squeezed the trigger. The loud crack of the rifle followed and the creature scurried for cover. He reloaded and fired at a sparrow on the wing, missing the bird as well.

Several more times the rifle made its short report before Luther saw, in the distance, Peter climb down from the ladder and walk slowly up the driveway toward him, his bronzed body and heavy endowment still on display.

"What exactly were you firing at with that rifle?" Peter asked. Like William Holden he looked, with that weathered face.

"Just a little target practice."

"And who or what were your targets?"

"I saw some birds. A chipmunk."

"We don't do that here. We don't kill things for no reason on this property." Peter turned and walked back toward his ladder, having no seeming need to await Luther's reply.

We don't do that here. Some kind of moral instruction Peter had given him, the kind he had heard before, from that boy, Gresham Dodger, in his seventh grade class who had shouted at him, "We don't do that here. We don't do that here," after Luther had punched a classmate in his ugly face for something he had said. Gresham Dodger establishing his excellence and higher understanding as Peter Van Dine now was doing.

Peter had a dinner engagement with friends in Woodstock that night. Sarah drove Roddy and Pam to the bottom of the road in the jeep, where they caught the Pine Hill Trailways bus. Then she and Luther drove up Route 28 away from Phoenicia to the town of Margaretville. The marquee of the Galli Curci Theater was a blaze of light on the otherwise dark and deserted street. Showing was a Japanese film, *Woman in the Dunes*, which neither Sarah nor Luther had heard of.

A young amateur entomologist went off on holiday to a small island. Seeing he needed shelter, some locals encouraged him to stay with a woman whose house was situated in a dune, as was common on the island. A ladder was required for him to climb down and reach the house. And yet, in the morning, when he tried to leave, he discovered that the ladder had been removed. He called up for help. While the villagers did not put the laughing thing on him, neither did they come to his aid, and his attempts to climb the wall were futile, as the sand gave way under his weight. The young man was as trapped as the insects he brought into captivity. His subsequent efforts at escape all similarly ending in failure, the young man slowly began to open to and explore his new environment. His hostility toward the woman, a widow, eased and he drew closer to her.

A foreign film with subtitles wasn't the kind either of them expected to find in the small movie theater of a Catskill Mountain town. And the theme. A man who discovered freedom in a domestic prison. What a strange thing and disturbing thing, Luther thought. A film that stunned, like *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* had stunned.

"Is he angry with me about the rifle? Is that why he avoids me?" Luther asked the next morning. "I mean, since his warning, he hasn't said two words to me."

“You were telling him something by firing the rifle.”

“Telling him what?”

“You were telling him you weren’t under his control.”

“I was?”

“Of course you were. And he was telling you something in speaking to you as he did.”

“What was he telling me?”

“That you were under his control. That we all are.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I didn’t say I believed it. I only said that he believes it.”

Luther looked down toward the barn. Again Peter was up on a ladder with his paintbrush. Gone were his brown briefs. Red was his color for this new day.

“He looks good in red,” Luther said.

“Daddy thinks he looks good in everything,” Sarah replied.

His first night home, someone’s weight on the end of the bed caused him to wake up.

“Who is it?” he asked, sitting up in fear and turning on the lamp.

“Hello, Gargoyle. Do you mind if I call you Gargoyle? Because you are a gargoyle. You know that, don’t you, that you’re an ugly, ugly gargoyle?”

“What’s wrong, Roberto?”

“Did I say anything is wrong?”

“If nothing is wrong, then why have you woken me?”

“Since when do gargoyles sleep, Gargoyle?”

“I don’t like that name.”

“You don’t like being called who you are?”

“No. And I find this creepy, you coming in here this way.”

“So now who’s calling who names?”

“I didn’t call you a name.”

“You didn’t just call me creepy, Gargoyle?”

“No. I didn’t. And you must know I didn’t.”

“I don’t know anything when it comes to you, only that you are a gargoyle.”

“Look, has something upset you? Could you tell me?”

“Did I say anything has upset me, Gargoyle? Did I?” The fake smile, the kind that does a poor job of hiding the rage just to the other side, was now gone.

“Not directly.”

“Not directly. I love the way you speak. Look at me, Gargoyle. Look at me. I am a man, a beautiful man. And you are not a man. You are just an ugly, ugly gargoyle. Try to remember that, Gargoyle.”

Roberto went away, but without the assurance that he wouldn’t come back, Luther lay in bed with the light still on.



In the morning Luther found Roberto sitting cross-legged on the living room floor. In front of him lay the cat on its side, unmoving, on a spread out section of the *New York Times*. Some of its insides had oozed onto the newspaper.

“What happened?” Luther asked.

“You tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me why you pushed the cat off the fire escape so it fell onto the spiked fence below.”

“Why would I push your cat, or anyone’s cat, off a fire escape?”

“I guess that’s for you to know. Unless you put your friend up to it.”

“My friend?”

“That guy in there,” he said, motioning to the front room, where Roddy was still sleeping behind the closed French doors.

“When did it happen?”

“The day you guys disappeared. Quite a coincidence.”

“What kind of coincidence would that be? If we weren’t here, how could we do such a thing?”

“Maybe you did it before you left as a weekend gift to me?”

“That’s not true, so stop it.”

“I should stop telling the truth because you say it isn’t the truth? What kind of symbolic logic is that?”

“Was the cat still alive when you found it?” Luther asked, seeking to get beyond the question of truth.

“Didn’t you want it to be alive? Didn’t you want it to die slowly?”

“Did you take it to the vet, Roberto?”

“The vet?” Roberto gave a derisive chuckle.

“Yes, the vet. That’s what people do when they have a sick or injured pet.”

“What vet? I am the vet.”

“Great. You’re the vet. What do you plan to do, allow the cat to decompose right here in the living room?”

“I just wanted you to see your work, Gargoyle. That’s all.”

In the next few days, with the cat disposed of, Roberto seemed to become more reasonable. He did not address Luther as Gargoyle again, though the name had bothered him as much as the accusation that he or Roddy had caused harm to the cat. He had tried to shoot cute little chipmunks and sparrows and indulged in reckless gunplay. Was it possible he could do something so heartless as to cause a cat’s slow and painful death? No, no, never. He rejected the assertion.

While living with Luke, he had met a young man named Daniel, whose frequent smile often suggested that he had mischief on his mind. Daniel had been drawn to New York City with his wife, Therese, who possessed an unassuming beauty and met the world with a soft smile. She supported them with secretarial work while he sunbathed on the roof of Luke’s penthouse in jockey briefs, like those Peter wore at Camp. He was as loud as she

was quiet, and his walleye and narrow face and severely cut blond hair added to his aura of extraterrestrial strangeness. To Luther, Daniel seemed to be bursting with gayness, and so it was a question in his mind whether he and Therese were actually man and wife. Sometimes a sad expression would come over her, as if to suggest a story she wasn't at liberty to tell. The two were from a small town in Michigan. They had come to New York City for their freedom, the way that many people do.

Therese was afflicted with pleurisy, a condition which would periodically lay her low and even require hospital treatment. Her illness, suggesting a fragile hold on life, only added to her beauty and her appeal. Surely she had to know how much Luther longed to touch and hold her and receive her caring warmth. But for the months that Therese and Daniel rented a room in the building, the majority of Luther's time was spent with Daniel, while Therese toiled in some midtown office.

Then they were gone, as so many others had come and gone, and without a word as to their plans or destination. And yet here, a year later, Daniel was, on the line and speaking with Luther. Therese was fine, Daniel said, in answer to Luther's question, but would say no more about her. He was calling because he had a friend, a young woman, he wanted Luther to meet. In spite of Sarah, Luther hadn't closed the door on seeing other girls. Unfit as he might be for love, girls were the most exciting thing the world had to offer. Besides, Daniel would be coming to his apartment with the girl on a Saturday night, when Sarah would once again, under pressure from her father, be in the country. He might belong to Sarah, but that didn't mean she owned him.

Daniel delivered the girl to his door one night and disappeared. Slight and pretty, her blond hair cut short, Asta stood before Luther in fishnet stockings and a miniskirt. She was Norwegian and spoke little English, but her expression said she knew what Luther wanted and that she would give it to him, and the black fishnet stockings she wore with her miniskirt suggested the same. In spite of her limited English, she had her eyes to scan his face and that of all men to extract the information she couldn't gain from conversation. And she had sex. You could learn a lot with it and less or nothing without it. You could learn who people really were. Her gaze and her garb said she was learning fast.

He had been drinking beer and wine and smoking grass and hash with Roberto and Roddy. Soon the gathering expanded beyond his capacity to deal with it. Vera stopped by and there followed a young man named Robby, a friend of Roddy's. If Roddy, by virtue of his pedigree, cowed Luther, Robby triggered unholy terror. He was good-looking beyond description, and he was Columbia, the real Columbia, not General Studies Columbia. What was such a person doing on these premises, laying Luther bare with his steady stare and bringing to bear his laughing, mocking, scornful thing so Luther could find no place to live, even high as he was? And yet the drugs and wine finally took him where he wanted to go, so that high board score Robby could not destroy him anymore than he had.

The lights were low and the music did the talking. Don't you want somebody to love? Don't you need somebody to love? Who could talk above a driving sound like that? Who would want to? The only integration he sought was with the girl. She was a gift he must not lose or throw away. Something had started and grown between them that could

not sustain itself within that circle. And yet what was this but the Fat Man arriving, in a blue suit and a red tie that glowed in the dark? And who was that behind him? Could it really be Sarah? Someone please tell him he was hallucinating.

But it was Sarah. And why wouldn't it be Sarah, who was supposed to be in the custody of her father and yet had slipped away? Why wouldn't she come crashing into his so infrequent joy? And could he not use this highly awkward situation to his advantage? Could he not practice supreme cruelty by leading the girl away from this group and into his room and make Sarah a witness to his betrayal? Could he not show Sarah just how heart of stone he could be should she ever, ever think to question his power? All these questions he answered in the affirmative by taking the hand of Asta, who showed no unwillingness to be led away.

In his room they lay, in the dark. It wouldn't do to turn on the lamp. Best to just lie there perfectly still, as even motion could draw the crowd to them. And the darkness and the silence were rewarded. The music stopped. Footsteps could be heard and the front door opening and closing. And "I'm so sorry." his sister Vera's voice. That would be Sarah she was addressing surely. And then finally, the stillness, his senses reporting no lurking presence out there. Finally, finally, he could explore this gift he had been given.

And a gift she was. No girl he had been with before—not Jane Thayer or Dahlia or Maura or Sarah—had worn such undergarments. By the light of the lamp she slowly undressed, removing her blouse and miniskirt to reveal herself in lingerie he had only seen in the pornographic magazines he would filch from the neighborhood luncheonette

as a kid, slipping them between the pages of the *Daily News*. A garter belt. The girl was wearing a black garter belt. And her scanty red lace panties had a split in the crotch.

“You like, baby?” she asked.

He could only nod. The sight of her lit a carnal fire neither the night nor the IUD his penis pushed against could suppress.

In the morning, when he woke, he found her staring down at him as she lay propped up on her elbow.

“That girl last night. Who she is?”

“My sister? The tall, brown-haired girl?”

“Other girl. Blond, like me.”

“Oh, her. Just a friend.”

“Girlfriend?”

“A friend.”

“Friend, not girlfriend?”

“Yes, friend.”

Like some all-seeing goddess she seemed, and he like a specimen under her fixed gaze, defenseless against those probing blue eyes. After an eternity she kissed him, then trailed her mouth down along his chest. Down, down, she went, altering her position so she was now between his legs. For now, at least, he had passed her test.

He rode with her on the subway to the East Village. Something had changed in the city. Along St. Mark’s Place boutiques and head shops and legions of kids hanging out on

the stoops, milling on the streets, and in strange getups—embroidered jeans, granny dresses, headbands, love beads. Everywhere the scent of grass and incense.

The scene was frightening, chaotic. He was the child of immigrants with a deep gratitude for their adopted country. “If they don’t like it here, let them go to Russia,” his mother would say of those who spoke out against America. You were supposed to work. You were supposed to do something with your life.

She was staying on Avenue A, in a walkup building not far from Tompkins Square Park. The place was not hers. Nothing seemed to be hers. She was here for “adventure,” she said, in answer to his question. Twice she had been back and forth to California by car in her short time in the States. “America big. Much to see. Free. Not like Norway.”

She was at home in the Village and in this free-floating world, coming and going like the wind. And she would never be his any more than the wind. Her body was her currency. It was how she paid her way through life, trading it for advantage, wherever that advantage appeared to be. These things he saw. He didn’t belong with her. That was the other thing he saw.

Whether lunacy or not, he had some notion that he had secured Sarah to him more strongly by going off with Asta. One night of misbehavior would not dissolve their bond; His display of power would appeal to her in a way that weakness wouldn’t. But her silence over the next few days had begun to make him uneasy when the phone rang.

“Do you still want to see me?”

“Of course I do,” he said, careful not to apologize, not to give her anything, lest she take everything away from him.

“Daddy was furious at me for hitchhiking down to the city last weekend. Now he insists that I come up to Camp this weekend. But I will see you Monday.”

She would be away. Once again her father would claim her. But thereafter she would come to him. In that moment his world grew intensely bright. He could have both her and Asta, his love and his Eros. Several days apart from Asta had renewed his desire to relive the erotic experience of that first night. And now he could. The coast would be clear.

He had the apartment to himself when Asta came to him for another Saturday night of pleasure, but he wasn't alone with her for an hour before a loud and insistent ring brought him to the door. There was his brother Luke, with an uncertain look on his face.

“Hey, Luther, I just thought I would stop by. I haven't seen your new place and Vera was saying it's really nice.”

Luther suspected that Vera had told Luke something more. Luke had come looking for something, like breaking free of the prison he had made for himself with Maureen. “I wonder if you could come back another time. I know that sounds horrible, but I have someone here.”

“I see that,” Luke said, looking over Luther's shoulder at Asta, who had come to the door wrapped in a bath towel.

“You have friend, visitor?” she asked.

“No, it's OK.” Luther said to her before turning back to Luke. “Tomorrow, Luke. OK?” His voice was firmer. His brother was not getting in the door.

“Sure. Tomorrow.” Luke said.



Luther closed the door, but he couldn't close the door on the fear the sight of Luke's grinning face had summoned. What Luke saw he could take. So Luke was telling him with that confident, knowing grin.

"Who your friend?" Asta asked.

"Just my brother. You'll meet him another time."

"Someone else ring at door later maybe?" She frowned.

"No more rings," he said.

But a half-hour later, as he was about to enter her, the phone, not the doorbell, rang, with an insistence he could not resist.

"Hey, Luther, it's me, Luke again." His voice was full of excitement.

"What is it?"

"You're not going to believe this, but as I was leaving your building guess who's walking in? Sarah. She was headed for your apartment. So I told her you weren't home and we walked over to the West End Bar. We're here now."

Luke would have been calling from a phone booth in the rear. There was background noise, the buzz of the Saturday night crowd and the jukebox turned up loud.

"I'll be right there," Luther said.

"Right where? Right where you going to be, baby?" Asta sat up and watched as Luther scrambled into his clothes.

"Family crisis. My mother fell and hurt herself. I will be back in an hour. Just give me an hour."

"An hour. Give an hour. Hour to give, baby."

Driven by terror, he raced up Amsterdam Avenue and through the Columbia mall to Broadway and down to the bar. If he didn't arrive quickly enough, he would lose Sarah to his appropriating brother. He would whisk Sarah away and make her his own. If he did arrive in time, he would lose Asta to him. It was clear as day to him what his brother could and would do, wife or no wife and baby or no baby. Either alternative meant the virus of family spreading to his personal life. He was frantic to quarantine himself from its deadly effects, and sped along as if his life depended on getting to the bar on time.

The lonely, the horny, the educated, the ignorant—somewhere she was seated and hidden from view by the Saturday night throng. And there, she was, by herself, at a booth, staring into the face of a tall guy with a mane of black hair who was leaning down and chatting her up. "Thank you, but no. Here's my boyfriend now," Sarah said. The man shot Luther an angry, withering look and disappeared into the crowd.

"Where's Luke? He just called me." Luther slid in beside her and hugged and kissed her. *My boyfriend.*

"He's gone to the restroom. Where were you when I stopped by?" Sarah asked.

"I was out getting a few things after being in all day. Don't tell me you hitchhiked again."

"I couldn't breathe up at Camp. I just had to get away. Besides, I know how to take care of myself." Once again he wondered if she understood the violence men could bring against women. Such violence might be unfathomable, but that didn't mean it couldn't be seen.

Luke returned shortly and sat facing them. “I was telling Sarah that I was thinking of doing some hiking up in the Catskills. Maybe some fishing, too. Just to get out of the city.”

“You should. There’s a lot to do up there,” Sarah said.

“Where did you say your family has its place?”

“In Shandaken, just up the road from Phoenicia,” Sarah said.

“Hey, that’s near that bible camp we used to go to. Remember, Luther? Pastor Chernenko and all that religious stuff.”

“I remember,” Luther said, as Sarah excused herself to use the restroom.

“You should be more careful. You don’t want to lose what you have. “Is your friend still back at the apartment?” Luke emptied hal the stein in one long swallow.

“Why?”

“I’m just asking. That’s all. It looked like the two of you were in for the night.”

“She’s there,” Luther said.

“Here’s what we do. I’ll go back to your apartment and hang out with your friend while you stay here with Sarah. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Sure. Sure I understand,” Luther said.

“I’m trying to help.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.”

When Sarah came back, Luke drained the last of his beer. “I’ll see you lovebirds. I’ve got things to take care of.”

“I like your brother,” Sarah said, when Luke had gone. “He has nice eyes. You both have nice eyes.”

“Everyone has nice eyes.”

“No they don’t. Some people have awful eyes. Some people have murderous eyes.”

“This is true,” Luther said. He had hoped to hear something different about his brother from Sarah, something very different.

“Luther, I’ve been thinking.”

“Yes?”

“We won’t if you don’t want to, but suppose we were to stay at my family’s apartment tonight?”

“We can do that.”

“You’re sure?”

“It will be fine, really,” Luther said, trying to hide his relief that now he would not have to stall before returning to his own apartment with Sarah.

A vestibule the size of a large room, four bedrooms, a spacious kitchen with gleaming appliances, a full dining room with a mahogany table that seated eight, a maid’s quarters converted into a darkroom. He was as stunned by the apartment as he had been by the family’s country place. What was this world, this universe, that he had entered? He felt safe, here among the antique furnishings, the walnut shelves filled with hardbound books, the prints and paintings on the walls. It was the home he had been looking for his

whole life, a place where he could read and think free of the dirt and disorder and agitation of his surroundings.

“That girl. Are you going to see her again?” Sarah asked, as they lay in her canopied bed. There it was, finally.

“No.”

As she slept, he sat by the window staring down at Riverside Park. All the windows looked out on the park and the Hudson River and the New Jersey shoreline. The Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument directly below rose like a giant luminous phallus in the light of the street lamps. One after another men passed it by from both directions. Homosexual men, driven in the dark by their hunger, as were the seekers back there in the End Bar.

He thought of Asta, and of Luke going where he had been. In his pain he told himself he had lost a little so he could keep a lot. And no one, not Vera, not Luke, would take what he had away and drag him back to where he had been. He would keep his distance and even increase it to be sure they didn’t. He was leaving the world he had known behind for a new one. If he could only hold on and not die during the night from this invasion by Luke. If he could only block from his mind all that Luke would do to Uma and that she would allow to have done to her. If he could only block from his mind the thought that Luke was on his trail and Sarah would be next in his sights.

In the morning he woke with his arm thrown over her as if, even in sleep, he had to hold her close.

Luther could easily imagine his brother tearing that night from the End Bar to Luther's apartment, as Luther had flown from the apartment to the bar. Luke's every step would have been propelled by the fear that the girl he had glimpsed standing behind Luther at the door would leave before he got there or that one of Luther's roommates would move in on her before he could. The image would have blazed in his sex-obsessed mind of the open, curious look Asta had given him. He had seen the possibilities right away.

But there she was when he arrived, only fully dressed now, and no roommates were around to contend with. Luther was to learn that Luke took her that night to the Morningside Arms, where Luther had stayed and paid for her room. He was leaving his wife, he said. He had nothing in common with her. Asta listened. She stared at his face as he spoke, scanning it for lies he might be telling.

Maureen threatened to have her father kill him for his betrayal. Luke said she should do what she had to do because if the choice was between staying in the marriage and being killed by her father, at least the latter would be a fast death and not a slow one. Maureen said he was the cruelest, crummiest man she had ever met, but Luke assured her there were a lot more out there just like him, or maybe even worse. So the story went.

"What ails you, my son? Have you taken leave of your senses? Do you think life is about having your cake and eating it, too?" Mrs. Garatdjian asked, but Luke just rolled up his sleeve and smelled his forearm.

"I did what I had to do. You understand what I'm saying?" Luke said to Luther, the following week.

“Sure. Sure I understand,” Luther said.

“Asta dug me. She really did. We had that Scandinavian connection. I told her Mother was Swedish and that really excited her.”

“Right.”

“I think we can really help each other. You know, provide support.”

“Right. Provide support.”

‘She’s going to be good for me. You’ll see.’”

But what Luther saw was that it was all a bag of shit, crummy Garatdjian shit. A marriage that fell apart in the first year, a baby that Maureen would have to care for on her own.

If Luke was doing what he had to do, so too was Asta. The look she had given him was a transferable look she gave to other men, on the street, on buses and subways, everywhere . Luke didn’t like it that she smiled at some black man in a dashiki while she stood on a grocery line. He didn’t like that she accepted an invitation by a pornographic filmmaker to be in his next movie, or that she disappeared for several days while filming it at some undisclosed downtown location.

“She says, ‘Your suspicion too much for me, baby. I need to do my thing.’ She’s gone two days and that’s what she has to say to me. And here I am paying for this room where we’re supposed to be living. So I raise my hand to her. I don’t hit her. I just raise my hand. And she says, ‘Big mistake, baby. Big mistake.’ All this ‘Baby’ this and ‘Baby’ that shit, so I told her to get the fuck out if she didn’t like it, and now I haven’t seen her in

three days. It isn't right, this shit women do to you. It just isn't right. You know what I'm saying?"

Maureen had moved out with the baby and returned to live with her father a few blocks away. It was like Luke Jr. had no more meaning for Luke than Maureen. A chianti bottle stood on the table, near the washer and drier Maureen had insisted upon. Luke poured some into a coffee mug for himself. It was late afternoon now. The sun was slanting in from the west through the slatted bars on the penthouse window. In the long ago, a man named Guevara had lived in this place. Luther remembered him dimly as a small, wiry man with a mustache who had mopped the landings and performed other custodial duties. And then there was a bearded preacher named Carp, a man drunk on whiskey when he wasn't drunk on God. And now there was Luke.

"I know what you're saying."

"It isn't right the way they drive you down."

"No," Luther said.

"The fucking cunt." He hurled the cup against the wall, but not before draining it. Then he poured more chianti into another cup. It went on that way for a while. They had a history. They were brothers. Like a mirror Luke, his whole family, was, reflecting back to him the grayness of failure, of defeat. A mirror it wouldn't do to stare into too long.

When the Six-Day War broke out, Luther heard it to the sound of the fat-lipped one singing "Under My Thumb." Israeli fighter jets dominating the Middle Eastern skies. The



Egyptian Air Force destroyed before its planes could get off the ground and its army in a state of surrender, surrounded by Israeli tanks in the Sinai Desert. What a thing.

At the post office Jewish workers swore their allegiance to Israel. "I'm ready to go anytime. I'll kill those fucking Arab cocksuckers with my bare hands," said one. Luther listened. He heard the passion in the man's voice, his fury, his pride. Suddenly the man wanted to do something heroic. He wanted to be on the field of battle. He too wanted to be one of the young and dazzling lions of Israel. But he wasn't on the field of battle and he wasn't young. He was in middle age and boxing mail at the General Post Office on Thirty-Third Street and Eighth Avenue.

Luther too wanted to fight for Israel. He too wanted to be Jewish and have Jewish brains. He too, like those older men, wanted substance more than he had. The war put turmoil in him he did not know how to explain.

He headed down to the West Village after work and stood by the jukebox in Gosee's drinking his beer and listening to "(San Francisco) Wear Flowers in Your Hair." He had not heard the song before and it took him over like some songs did, making him soft inside. He saw young men and women talking with each other, and some older folks as well, but he talked to no one except the bartender. He just listened to the flowers in your hair song and other songs.

A woman seated at the bar looked his way. At first, he hadn't been sure she was looking his way because of the dark glasses she wore, but then she lowered them and looked out over the top and he saw that her eyes were on him. This looking that she did made him feel good all over, even when she turned her attention back to the man she was

with. The two of them were drinking martinis. Those long-stemmed glasses made it likely they were martinis. And the drinks had olives in them, the way that martinis were supposed to have. Fancy drinks. He waited for the woman to look back his way because he kept looking at her, but she didn't. She turned her head this way and that but she didn't look at him even once more. After a few more beers he came to see that she was looking at him by not looking at him, that she was studiously ignoring him, as the saying went, ignoring his hunger, his neediness.

Come June, Sarah did not graduate with her class. She would have to attend summer school in order to receive her diploma. But she had no regard for the school or the diploma it was withholding. This attitude troubled Luther and reawakened his fear that without academic certification Sarah could fall and fall. He did not understand how art called and called to a person, and made negligible considerations of importance to those who did not also have this calling. He had heard Dylan sing that someone was an artist and she didn't look back but that was a song, not real life, in which chaos and poverty were always looming.

The country was a calling, too. The family had no need of air conditioners in the windows of its Riverside Drive apartment because it had retreated to the mountains by the time the city was sweltering in summer heat. Sarah lingered a week after school let out before she too felt the pull of Camp and family. New York City in July was foreign to her. She had to go where she belonged.

Luther felt angry. He felt helpless. Sarah had always been coming toward him, but now she was going away. Had she come into his life only to leave it? The days he passed without her were painful. His mind was a torment of anxious, obsessive thoughts.

His sister Vera had given him a job lead. A club down on Seventeenth Street and Park Avenue South might need a busboy or waiter. Robby was working there, she said.

“Robby?” he asked.

“Robby Eastland. You met him. He goes to Columbia and is really, really handsome. He’s friends with Roddy and showed up at that party, if it can be called a party, that night.”

“Oh, right.” Sure Luther remembered him. How could he not remember the young man who had frightened him, with that long tousled brown hair and beautifully slender in a denim jacket and striped boat neck top, and with that Columbia pedigree. A young man playing in a league above Luther’s own.

“He says he goes home with a different waitress every night,” Vera added, as if that might be extra incentive for Luther to follow through. “You know he was seeing Pam for a while. He adored her, but she said he was too much for her.”

Too much for her. Luther had no idea what that meant. Colin Westland had wanted Pam Becker but Pam Becker had not wanted him, Luther. Because excellence chose excellence.

Luther did not have a good feeling about his chances of being hired. He had heard a little about Seraglio Pastime. Much fuss had been made about the audacious name, the sort that came to you while you were in Pot Heaven or stoned on whatnot and thought

you were having a vision about *how the whole thing worked* but really, it lacked any more coherence than those images and thoughts that came as consciousness began to wane and sleep pulled you in. The name messed with you. It tormented your mind, like a big, ugly furnishing you had no use for and yet you couldn't get it out the door and so you tried to make your peace with. Buffalo Springfield, The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Grand Funk Railroad, the Moody Frigging Blues. All over America bands with strange names were sprouting. The whole country had taken to song, factories and farmyards abandoned for the electric guitar. Something was behind it. Could it be love? Luther wondered.

“Who sent you here?” A man stood at the entrance to Seraglio Pastime with lank black hair, his eyes ablaze with darkness. He had a chick pea thing going, popping the morsels in his fish-shaped mouth. A big bowlful sat atop the cigarette vending machine, against which he leaned.

“My sister. She heard of this place.”

“We don't do sisters here,” the man said.

“What?” Luther cried out.

“You're not ready for this place.”

“I don't understand.”

“Yes you do,” the man said. Luther watched the man headed past the bar and the dining area, where waiters and waitresses were setting the tables in preparation for the evening crowd. Pretty young men and women, the kind the eye responded favorably to, although he did not see Colin Westland among them. The man of mystery had spoken. He

had been dropping depth charges, and Luther took the impact of their explosive power back out onto the street. *Yes you do*, Mr. Chickpea Breath had said.

The next day Sarah called. She said he should consider coming up to Camp not for a weekend but for a month.

“I have my job at the post office.”

“Oh, come on. Mommy said she really wants to meet you.”

“But I need my job.”

“You’ll get another job .”

The call, the invitation. Her mother wanting him. Another door had opened. What a surprise.

At the post office that evening, he told his friend Efram Ellsberg about his good fortune . “The American dream, baby. The American dream,” Efram said.

“What American dream?” Luther asked.

“Your American dream. Just be aware when and if it turns into something else.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing else comes to me, man. I’ve given you what I’ve got.” Though not entirely. Efram opened his hand and in his palm, as on the first night Luther had met him, was another heart-shaped pill, which Luther took and swallowed.

Gosees called to him that night. Once again he stood on the sawdust-strewn floor by the jukebox and listened to the flowers in your hair song. High on the pill, high on the music, high on the beer after beer he drained, high on the promise of a glorious tomorrow, and high on the promise of this one night before entering the confines of

Sarah's family. And there the embodiment of that promise was, the woman in the dark glasses had returned and taken her seat at the bar, only now she was without her escort. And she was looking at him, summoning "Pretty Woman" to blast forth in the jukebox in his head, Roy Orbison bringing him to complete attention with his huge sound. The pretty woman was looking right at him, over her dark glasses. Not around him or to the side of him but at him.

"I've been expecting you," Luther said, taking the stool beside her. They sounded like words from a movie.

"You are a patient young man. Sometimes patience is rewarded, sometimes not."

"Those glasses. Why do you wear them, when it is night outside and not so very light in here?"

"Dark glasses for a dark world."

"Sometimes the world does seem dark, really dark."

"You're too young for the world to be dark. And you're too young to have those worry lines on your face."

"What worry lines?"

"Those two vertical lines between your eyes."

"Oh, those."

"What do you do when you're not standing in the corner holding up the wall at Gosees?"

"I work for the post office. In fact, I just came from there. And I'm a student."

"Where are you a student?"

“At CCNY.”

“Not Columbia?”

“Oh, no. You have to do really well on the SAT to get into Columbia.”

“And you didn’t do really well?”

“No. Not at all. In fact, I think about my numbers every day and call myself names. I guess that’s my darkness, the feeling that I lost and that I’m stupid.”

“Well, you look intelligent.”

“That’s the problem. People assume I’m smart because I look smart. I try to tell them the truth so I don’t become a prisoner of the image I think they have of me.”

“That’s pretty smart.”

“Maybe.”

He liked watching as she drank her martini. Every sip that passed her thin lips she seemed to savor. And it was the same with the slow, long drags she took on her Parliament. She was a woman who wanted things to last.

“I can’t smoke those things. They give me a huge headache. I pull too hard on that recessed filter, I guess.”

“You can come home with me, but you’ll have to wait while I have another drink,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard him. Or maybe she had heard him, heard what he was thinking if not saying, that he had lost her by telling her too much.

They passed a police car in Washington Square Park, the memorial arch at the north end pulling them toward it. He felt the scornful eyes of the cops on him that someone of his appearance should be with such a shapely woman. He did not turn to

verify his intuition. He had no need of the trouble that might bring. The night had yielded him a gift; it was for him to protect it.

In the blue-lit living room the woman tended bar as some saxophonist soloed on a jazz number he hashed no name for, as he didn't for the exotic fish in the large tank. Jazz was music from some other world, the world of Slug's in the Far East and the Five Spot, up on St. Mark's Place, with whale-sized Charlie Mingus on his bass, places he had gone to a few times with Luke.

"Cranberry juice and vodka. A little something to raise you above the sodden path all that beer has set you on. And a joint to tuck us in the bleary, syncopated notes of our little sextet. Our ride commences," she said, lighting and drawing on the tightly wrapped weed before handing it to him.

"You talk like a writer. Are you one of them?"

"Language our only means of survival?" she asked, as he the joint back to her.

"The way you talk." Like she had a fire burning within her. And yet she was so methodical and slow-motion.

She watched as he removed his clothes before doing the same. "Skinny, but nice." The "nice" sounded like shows trying to convince herself.

"Those notes." He wanted to tell her that he was tucked into them now, but it was getting harder to speak.

"See if you can stay for the night," she said. It sounded like a challenge, and played in his ears an hour later as he fled in the predawn down the long side streets to the West Side IRT and the safety of his own bed for a few hours of sleep.



That night he showered. How ugly Roberto's bathroom looked, the stained tub in need of grouting, the shower curtain caked with crud. He was crud, with his pale, sickly flesh and meager frame. He had wanted to come to Sarah clean, but the poison was inside, not on his skin, and so he couldn't.

He overslept and, feeling ill, dragged himself that afternoon toward the Port Authority bus terminal. The littered streets of Times Square itself seemed hung over and a representation of the disintegration he feared in himself. Seediness was in every window display of stilettos and racy lingerie and its scent seeped from the movie theaters with the bulging marquees. Danger awaited as well as the bus pulled from gate 37 on the lower level and entrusted itself to the Lincoln Tunnel, as this would be the day the tired tube gave way before the weight of the filthy river pressing in on it. Then there was the horror of the littered medians of the Garden State Parkway and the grotesque commercial strips, some savagery of desecration civilization could not stop itself from. And yet his inner climate brightened, came more in alignment with the sun, when the bus hit Interstate 87 and greenery more and more caught his eye, as tension would ease when he stepped from the city streets to the relative oasis of Central or Riverside Park. And there was further relief, and even a spark of happiness, to see the greensward in Woodstock and the rustic beauty that lay beyond.

Sarah's mother had a face younger than her white hair. She came across the lawn with trowel in hand from the flowerbed at the lawn's border. A boy in his early teens made concentric circles in the lawn as he sat at the wheel of a gas-powered mower, leaving behind the strong, sweet smell of freshly cut grass. The idyllic tableau on a sun-

filled day could not save it from an air of naivety that made him protective of these people he at the same time dreaded. They are actors and this is a stage and they are performing just for me, he thought.

“I’m sick. I’m disintegrating,” he said, in a panic, to Sarah. She led him to the red room, where sleep quickly took him from this new world he had entered, and there he stayed until the following morning.

“The oligarchic stranglehold on this country is beyond the ken of the average mind...Our political parties are Tweedledum and Tweedledee, operating fully in accord with the interests of big business...The metaphysical dictate of the members of the Constitutional Convention was profit, plain and simple. We are a country driven by greed, for more and more...” From somewhere nearby the words were coming, emphatic, urgent. A man in the white heat of his passion.

“That’s my father, holding my mother captive with his morning rant,” Sarah said.

“Your father talks like that?”

“Every morning she is a sounding board.”

He entered her, releasing what felt like poisonous discharge. How sweet the peace afterward.

Her parents were already into their routines when he emerged onto the front porch. Sarah’s mother was tending to the flowerbed again, seeking her peace in the earth while back and forth Peter shuttled from the barn with the jeep and a small wagon attached to the back of it. Sarah said that at the top of the small hill beyond the pool was a shale pile, which her father took from for one of his projects.

Lydia served a lunch of sandwiches and salad on the terrace, and the family gathered at the big round table where only months before Luther had been rebuked by Peter for shooting at the chipmunks and squirrels.

“I’m sorry about yesterday. I wasn’t feeling all that well,” he said, when Ly

“You are an ambitious and serious young man. This I can tell. And you have your hands full. Sarah says you have a job in addition to going to college. It’s no wonder that you were feeling rundown. But now you will have a chance to rest and regain your strength for the challenges ahead.”

Crashed. That is what he had done. He had come to Camp and crashed. An ugly, stupid word. Her words had a shaming effect on him. “You have a beautiful property. It must take a lot to maintain,” he said, seeking to change the subject.

“We have friends who say it is the land of the lotus dwellers, a place of indolence and forgetfulness, but not for us. It’s a chance for Peter to take a break from the strenuous intellectual activity that keeps him at his desk back in the city and work with his hands. The urban experience is wonderful, rich in culture, and we avail ourselves to the full in the fall and winter and spring, but summer is a time to drive our hands deep in the soil and feel a part of this fecund earth.”

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, back in the ninth grade, he had read of Ulysses and his men entering the land of the lotus dwellers, and the indolence that befell some of them as they floated free of their past and of their future. And of patient Penelope, warding off suitors, and Telemachus and Circe and Scylla and Charybdis he had read as well. He was happy that he could recognize Lydia’s allusion and the possibility that all things she spoke of

might not be lost to him and so he might not always have to be afraid of her. He heard the fear in her voice that led her to fill in the hollow spaces in the life she and Peter led than it really was with words bigger and references more erudite than they needed to be.

“Sarah, maybe you would like to show Luther the little bridge I’ve been building over the brook. And you’ll want to show him the vegetable garden, too.”

“I will, Daddy,” Sarah said.

Peter was showing another side, Luther thought. He was not in a state of silent resentment, as he had been when Sarah and Luther and Pam and Roddy intruded on him. He had his wife and children, all of them. And though the weather was warmer, he had covered himself more. Now he went about in khaki shorts and an old T-shirt. He felt no need to show off his endowment.

“How are you today, Miss Claire?” Peter’s voice was teasingly tentative, as if he had to approach Claire with caution. With her black hair and brown skin greedy for the sun, she was darker than Sarah.

“I’m all right, Daddy. I was up late reading.”

“You know what Robert Louis Stevenson had to say about reading.”

“No, I don’t, Daddy,” as if the correction to come were part of a somewhat tiresome routine.

“‘Books are a mighty bloodless substitute for life,’ the great man wrote, in one of his essays.”

“Well, he should know. He wrote enough of them.” Claire’s crankiness was softened with a smile.

“Will we be seeing your boyfriend anytime soon?” Lydia asked. “You know we would love to have him, too.”

“Brian’s out on Long Island trying to put together a band, but he says he’ll be up in a couple of days.”

“Claire’s boyfriend thinks he is going to be a rock star,” Jeffrey said. He had small eyes. When they didn’t hold worry and hurt, they were laughing.

“He never said he wanted to be a rock star. He’s just following his own path,” Claire retorted.

“Doing his own thing, like thousands of other clowns,” Jeffrey sneered.

“There’s no need to make fun of him. He’s trying,” Claire said.

“I myself can’t say I understand the music of today. I’m afraid I belong to another generation. Yours has a passion and creativity mine was lacking,” Lydia said.

“Bomb Hanoi. Nuke the bastards,” Jeffrey said.

“Where on earth do such imperatives come from?” Lydia asked.

“I’m just saying what I think.”

“Well, of course, dear,” Lydia replied.

She was the bringer of reason. Luther heard it in her voice. But what or who was Jeffrey? He had not been gifted with physical beauty, as had been Sarah and Claire. His only gift seemed to be a sharp tongue, but that was not the same as intelligence, was it? Overshadowed, he had to shriek in order not to be totally overlooked. Yes, that was it. All eyes and attention went toward the girls and Lydia, and to a lesser extent to Peter. People were like thieves. They were drawn toward those who could give, or who they thought

could give, even if they couldn't. As for Claire, Luther understood he would have to be careful. She was a magnet for his eyes, with that Barnard status and her dark beauty and stunning cleavage.

Brian did arrive, some days later, tanned and sleek, his thinness the enviable kind that allowed him the freedom to wander barefoot stripped to his tight black bathing suit without self-consciousness. Amused intelligence showed on his face, and the black curls on his perfectly shaped head put Luther in mind of royalty. In another century he would have been a French dauphin at Versailles in a velvet jacket. And yet his mouth warranted special attention. It was tight and ungenerous, the mouth of someone who could cut with his words and whose laughter was not rich and deep but brittle. Peter trained his Nikon F camera on Brian and clicked away. He understood the present would be past and that personal history was in the making and needed a photographic record.

Lenore arrived with a beau of her own, a boy named Malcolm who could make a statement in clothes even plainer than the jeans and green short-sleeved seersucker shirt he wore. A boy who kept his body in motion, as if repose was foreign to it. Brian was handsome, but Malcolm had a dazzling blond handsomeness as American as the white picket fence in a Norman Rockwell painting. That he was country and did not show a peacock's strut only added to his luster. And so Peter got busy again with his Nikon, shooting Malcolm from all different angles, and with the understanding that the past was an accretion of moments it was essential to capture to appreciate what had been lost.

“The pencil generation,” Peter chuckled to Lydia, his imagination and more fired up by the youngness on his property, youngness that lay down with his prized daughters in the night.

The sound that blasted from the stereo in the living room through the outdoor speakers onto the lawn was not Stravinsky or Bach or Beethoven but the Beatles in their new incarnation. Some of the songs on *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* were noisy intrusions of unwelcome sound, but others, like “I Read the News Today” and “She’s Leaving Home,” stood Luther to attention. And there was *Fresh Cream*, Jack Bruce and Eric Clapton and the whole lot summoning an unsubtle but harmonic sound on “Sunshine of My Love” and “I Feel Free,” the latter summoning an image of men out for a high-speed ride on the roof of a car and holler singing on a nastily windy day.

Having wounds of his own, Luther could spot them in others. What he saw in Malcolm was that he was insecure, a prisoner of others’ expectations, real or imagined. If he stayed in motion, then you could not see beyond the facade. Malcolm did not engage in conversation, or if he did, it was of the hysterical kind, as when he bragged of driving down to New York City without a license while high on acid to visit with older brother or of throwing chalk at the math teacher at the boarding school in Vermont where he had met Lenore. He spoke from the point of view of the rich boy who had others to pick up after him. But he also spoke from the point of view of failure. Luther saw it in his face and in the lack of coherence in his speech. At age sixteen he had been defeated. He was failing at boarding school, and drugs were now his solace.

“Everything comes so easily to Brian,” Claire said that summer. “Do you know that he got a score well over 1500 on his SAT while doing no work at all in high school. I had to study and study for every good grade I got and take a test prep class to get a decent score on the College Boards?”

Whether she was expressing admiration for Brian or pity for herself was hard to tell. Luther suspected he had heard a little of both from her.

“Everyone at our boarding school got miserable scores on the PSAT and the SAT,” Lenore replied. “Of course, many of us were stoned, and that may have had something to do with it.”

“How about you, Luther? I’ll bet you did well on the SAT,” Claire said.

“I’m not a whiz on standardized tests,” he said, paralyzed by her question.

“Is that another way of saying you’re an idiot like me?” Lenore laughed at the bluntness of her own question. She had some of Jeffrey’s irrepressible quality, but Luther also heard playfulness in her voice. She wasn’t seeking to pull him down. She was just calling him to her level. Perhaps there was loneliness behind her laughter and she was seeking company, Malcolm or no Malcolm. He heard her words that way.

She had been on his mind before he saw her and was on his mind even more now that he had. He saw how she was open to life in a way that Claire was not. She had jumped from the confines of family to boarding school, while Claire spent her first year of college living at home and showed no sign of moving out for her second. Slighter than her sisters, she radiated sexuality in a stronger way than either. That bowl-cut black hair.



That androgynous look. She would be a girl responsive to his touch. Her laughing black eyes said as much. His thoughts were moving unchecked in that direction.

The day came when Malcolm returned to the city. His older brother needed to see him, but he would not be gone long, he said. Lenore did not accompany him. As Luther saw it, she was alone.

The caretaker , Everett, came to the house that day. He carried in his arms a fawn, too weak to flee from humankind.

“She got separated from her mother. Only a matter of time before the dogs tore her to pieces,” Everett said. A big man with a barrel chest, he had a look of innocence to match that of the fawn, as if he might be a woodland creature, too, his baggy Dickey pants and work shirt and canvas hat notwithstanding. His words came out forced and as if directed not to any one person but to the group.

Sarah lay the fawn on a soft blanket in a corner of the living room and fed it warm milk from a baby bottle.

“He’s so gentle,” Luther heard Lenore remark to Sarah when he took his turn fussing over the fawn, running his hand over its tawny coat. And while he did want to see the fawn up on its long legs, he also suspected he was putting on a show for Sarah’s younger sister. How uncomfortable to hear any kind of goodness noted. Better that she should express a desire to beat him savagely with a stick for wickedness planned than to publicly apply such a label he could not live up to, as Peter could attest, having seen what he tried to do with a rifle.

After a game of hearts, in which Peter had triumphantly shot the moon, sleep came to the house, but Luther was not asleep. He would stay up and read, as he was not tired, he told Sarah, and so he sat with a copy of *Moby-Dick*. After a few pages he put down the fat Signet paperback edition of the novel and filled a cobalt blue glass half with gin and half with tonic, careful to avoid clanking the bottle against the others in lifting it from the liquor table. His hosts might be troubled to see a guest of theirs staying up late to drink their liquor, and a generous amount of it. Not that they would reproach him. They were too kind for that. Still, he had to be careful.

He felt his shirt pocket for the outline of the pill. He had stayed away from speed since his night with the Gosees woman and the awful experience in the shower afterward. But some time had passed. The country air and good food had rejuvenated him. Besides, it was now or never if he was to be with Lenore, and without the pill it would surely be never because fatigue would set in and he would fall asleep before she came down the steps from her bedroom. And she would come down. He was certain she would.

In the room just to the other side of the wall Sarah would be sleeping. How sweet she was in sleep. How warm her body. The choice was upon him. Did he surrender himself into the fold of family or explore the wilder promise of the night with Lenore? He removed the pill from his shirt pocket and swallowed it with a healthy swig of gin and tonic and sat on the sofa and waited.

Soon the floorboards directly above began to creak, as if by force of will he were summoning her into his darkness. Then came the sound of soft footsteps on the stairs.

And now there she was, in bare feet and a black silk robe. Out the side door she seemed

to glide with only an unsmiling glance his way. Though she hadn't invited him, he stepped out onto the terrace after her.

Where was she? The only movement was of moths fluttering against the glass-encased porch lights. He entered the terrace but she was nowhere to be seen, and yet there came to him the pungent smell of marijuana smoke.

"Looking for someone?" She was sitting on a cushioned bench away from the table.

"You couldn't sleep?"

"I guess not."

"I couldn't either. I was sitting up reading *Moby-Dick*."

"That sounds like a lot of fun." She laughed.

"There's much I feel I don't know. I sit in the living room surrounded by so many books I haven't read. Of course, some of them are old and uninteresting. And then I am surrounded by nature and I know nothing about that either, neither the flora or the fauna."

"You're a real fount of knowledge, aren't you?" Laughing as she passed him the joint.

The booze, the pill, and now several tokes on the joint.

"I feel the eyes of the house on me like one giant eye."

"The grass making you a little paranoid?" Again that not unkind laugh.

By the pool she shed her robe and eased down the steps in her tanned nakedness. She swam a lap, face down before moving gracefully onto her back. He followed after.

The water felt cold on his bare body, though it was now mid-summer, and a haze of

insects hovered just above. He showed none of her confidence or skill. His breathing became difficult when he tried the crawl. Panicked, he lifted his head free of the water and gasped for air. After one lap he relied on the less fatiguing sidestroke and came up after her out of the water before having to resort to the doggie paddle.

From behind he placed his hands on her thin shoulders.

“Aha. Criminal intentions.” She pivoted, her upturned face showing a half smile and glittering eyes. The kiss that followed was not like those with Sarah. There was no vague sense, as he had with Sarah, that such intimacy was unwelcome. Rather, she opened to him. A hungry kiss it was, and led quickly to other things.

“We can only do this once, you understand,” she said, holding him off with her hands on his chest as he lay atop her. Only now she was not laughing.

“I do,” he said, and entered her.

Of the many things about that night, the thing he remembered most was how wild she was beneath him, how with him she was, seeking his mouth, his ear, his neck, and how she raised her legs so they rested on his shoulders. A girl who held nothing back.

She touched his cheek to see if he was real before running from her remorse off across the lawn and back into the house. There was nothing to keep them together. No love, no connection. But the house was not his to enter. Not in his condition. It wouldn't do to sleep in the same bed with Sarah with the smell of her sister's silkiness on him. It wouldn't do at all.

Alone with the cricket chorus, he followed the downward slope of the property to the guest house, pulled open the big sliding door, and turned on the light. The room was

large, with three single beds and a pool table and a high, peaked ceiling with cross beams. The small mullioned windows along one side of the room afforded a view, through the trees, of the main house. He lay on one of the beds, holding his head and pondering his filth.

In the morning she shook him awake. He had fallen off to sleep as daylight broke and now fearfully read her face for signs of anger.

“I looked all over for you. What happened?”

“I felt sick. I didn’t want to come to bed and disturb you.”

“Sick? What kind of sick? You were fine last night.”

“It is strange,” he said.

“You’re strange. That’s what strange. I don’t like this.”

“What? I’ve done something? What have I done?”

“Something. I don’t know.”

“Sick. I got sick. That’s what I did.” Not an outright lie but within the outer bounds of the truth, he told himself.

Sweat had formed on his face and body from the sunlight pouring through the windows. From the lawn came the sound of Peter speaking in a modulated tone with the caretaker, Everett. Voices of innocence.

“Well, now, you look like a car dragged you fifty yards along bad road,” Everett said, when Luther emerged with Sarah. “You’re too young to be looking old.”

Luther nodded and kept moving toward the main house. “Good morning, Luther,” Lydia called, from her flowerbed. There were just people everywhere, Claire and Brian

and Jeffrey on the front porch, with their eyes on him, seeing what they saw. But no Lenore.

“You have a good night?” He heard a sardonic note in Jeffrey’s question.

“An OK night,” Luther said, and went on his way through the spring door.

He locked himself in the bathroom, clean and spacious, with subtle, light gray tiling, and a frosted window that looked out on the mountain. The most modernized part of the old house, along with the kitchen. The cleanliness, the beauty of the bathroom, helped. No stained tub, no cracked sink basin. His own dirtiness wasn’t being reflected back to him. “Filth. Filth.” He whispered the word with his head pressed against the tiles and water pouring down on him. If he could just get through the day. If he could just do that.

“Let’s stay out here. Is that all right?” he asked, later that day, about the new barn.

“I guess. But why?” Sarah asked.

“I can’t breathe in that house. There are too many bodies, one on top of the other.”

“No there aren’t. The house is big enough for all of us. We have separate rooms.

We’re not all together.”

“It’s not enough. Believe me,” Luther said. “We need some distance, some separation. You don’t know what a family can do.”

“I don’t?”

“I just mean...”

“I know what you mean. It’s OK.”

Peter drove them down to Sal's Restaurant that evening, at the bottom of the turnoff from Route 28, in Phoenicia. Sal himself came to their table in his loose-fitting flowery shirt and leaned down with his big, open face, what remained of his hair slicked back over his shiny scalp. "How are you all? How's everything going?" Sal said.

Just go, Sal, just go, Luther thought. Go before the trouble starts. Because trouble would always start when people who didn't belong together got together. From a different world Sal was, with his restaurant. Not a man for books. Amazing that Peter and Lydia had talked to Sal as if there were no differences and Sal didn't hate them. It was something for Luther to see. Not that he could ever do that himself. Best to run from the Sals of the world. Just run. That time, in the long ago, standing in the grocery store checkout line, waiting to pay for the quart of milk his mother had sent him out for. The man at the register talking with another man. The two of them talking, talking. Doing their laughing, pleasant thing while the fear grew and grew in Luther, causing him to leave the milk on the counter and run out of the store before the smiling stopped and the men drew knives with which to hack and stab each other.

More amazing was Lenore. He put his eyes on her but she was looking elsewhere, and when he came back to her, she was still looking elsewhere. She was looking at him by not looking at him. He had come to the place of wanting her again, and she was saying no.

But Lydia had no trouble putting her eyes on him. "Tell us a little about your family, Luther. Are they all in New York?"

Now all eyes seemed to be on him, witnessing his discomfort and self-consciousness.

“I guess they are. Yes. Sort of. One of my sisters is missing...”

“Missing?”

“Not exactly missing. She comes and goes, but we think we know where she is.”

“What does this sister do?” Lydia asked.

“She drinks. She smirks. She commits her hair to an orange blaze with henna. She disappears. She is good at that. She wounds me with her absence and her presence. I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not.”

“And there are others, you say?”

“Of sisters I have four. Of brothers I have one. And my one mother and one father. I am in full flight from all of them, all except my mother. No, that’s not true. Actually, I really can’t say.”

“What can’t you say, Luther?” Lydia quietly asked.

“The horrible smell of failure. I don’t feel well.”

“You sound unwell,” Jeffrey said, with a laugh.

“Stop it, Jeffrey. Luther is trying to communicate with us.”

Luther liked Lydia. He could imagine talking with her for a long, long time.

In the car, as they headed back to Camp, these lines came to him: “White lines, continue,” and “Sarah liked to pee in an open field.” They were not lines he could expand upon. He had to take them just as they were. But they gave him hope that more might follow.



It is with a heavy heart that I tell you Jeanne has run away. She has called me twice from somewhere downtown to say that she will not be coming back and is staying with good friends. She is in my prayers, as are all my children and grandchildren. You must understand that the world means nothing, nothing at all, and that Jesus is everything, as he has always been everything. Be with the Lord, my son, so that you may not go where sin is to be found. Love, Mother.”

A miniature booklet with a white cover and the words “Jesus saves” was enclosed with the letter. Inside was printed in red ink the full verse of John 3:16. Poor sullen-faced Jeanne. She had left behind her Episcopal school jumper and run off into the world that his mother disowned. Had that song about a girl leaving home in the *Sergeant Pepper* album prompted her to take off? For the rest of the day and for days thereafter she occupied his consciousness in a way that she hadn’t. He missed her. She was a part of him. And yet who wouldn’t flee from the circumstances she had been born into? He tried to imagine her safe among the flower children around St. Mark’s Place and thought briefly about trying to find her, but couldn’t summon the will. He couldn’t say why.

Sarah drove him in the jeep to the other side of the mountain, where he said something important awaited him.

“What is it?” she said.

“Your father has his history and I have mine. The fact is that I was here seven years ago, when a batter threw a haymaker and broke the pitcher’s jaw.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Bible camp. Occasionally we would get tidings of the world beyond, like the edition of the *Daily News* in which I read that Billy Martin rushed the mound after a close pitch and decked Jim Brewer.”

“I like to hear about your childhood,” Sarah said. “I like to hear that you had one.”

They took a left in Phoenicia past the general store, following the Esopus along a two-lane road. Within five miles they came to a wisp of a town with a gas station and its own general store. An American flag flew above the tiny post office.

He saw that she took driving seriously, like her father, but without his fixed expression and the elevated, complicated status he gave to what was essentially a point A to point B exercise.

“That’s where he baptized the kids,” he said, pointing down to the dried-up creek, now a bed of gray rocks. They had turned off the road and stopped after crossing a small bridge.

“Who?”

“Pastor Chernenko. He owned the property. Maybe he still does. My mother had this thing about fresh air and getting out into the country. An arrangement was made at the tabernacle down in the city for some of the kids to come up here for a couple of weeks each summer. Actually, Vera and I were here for several summers for four or five weeks before the other kids joined us. There was just Pastor Chernenko and these old

Ukrainian women and Vera and myself. Every night he would deliver a sermon in the tabernacle. He was on fire all the time.”

“What would you do all day?”

“Worry. Moan. Be homesick as hell. He baptized the children in the creek.”

“Were you baptized?”

“No. I couldn’t let him touch me. I couldn’t give him that power. He wanted to take something away from me by lowering me in that cold, cold water. He wanted to make me his. All the Christ Jesus people were like that. I screamed at Luke and Vera not to let Pastor Cohn at the tabernacle in the city lower them into the water but they didn’t listen. They just went ahead anyway, Pastor Cohn leaning them backward in the baptismal font. Dangerous rituals inflicted by the Christ Jesus people on perfection-driven children is the way I see it. They want to make you like those automatons in *The Manchurian Candidate*.”

“Your brother and your sister don’t seem like automatons.”

“That’s because I warned them with my scream, even if they did go ahead.”

“Why do you say ‘Christ Jesus’ instead of ‘Jesus Christ.’”

“Because that’s the way they speak. Christ Jesus has more power, more passion, than the other way around. They can stretch it more and hang out longer in it than Jesus Christ, and in the end that’s all they have is their words.”

Things were closer together than he remembered. And smaller, too. The big white house at the top of the hill certainly was. It had the look of death upon it. The wraparound

porch was in disrepair and, peering in through a broken window pane, Luther could see a glass chandelier in the dining hall dangling from exposed electrical wiring.

“They were trying to take our childhood from us with their old rugged cross. But they didn’t have to go away just like this, did they? Just vacate the premises with no forwarding address?”

“Maybe they died,” Sarah said.

The canteen with the conical roof facing the house, where the children had gone to purchase candy, was gone, and the roof had fallen in on the aluminum-sided tabernacle where Pastor Chernenko had offered his blazing sermons long into the cool nights. And the rutted, rocky dirt road had been paved over, spreading blackness where nature had been.

“It started there,” Luther said, pointing to the overgrown field down from the house and the tabernacle.

“What started where?”

“That’s where the children ran after ignoring Pastor Chernenko’s call at the end of his sermon that they come to the prayer rail and kneel on the dirt floor and be washed in the Blood of the Lamb, the way he called to us every night so we could weep and wail and beg God for forgiveness of our filthy ways. Because Pastor Chernenko said we were filth, and only the Blood of the Lamb could cleanse us. But that night we all bolted out the door and into the night and down to the field, where we fell on each other, boys on girls, as if we had all heard the same silent signal. Pastor Chernenko and his Christ Jesus counselors beat the grass looking for us, but we were beyond his summoning words by

now. We had our bodies to live in and our senses to enjoy. He wanted us to find God but we found each other instead. Filth to filth.”

“I wish I could have been there,” Sarah said.

Her words made him uncomfortable. His childhood was his own, his pride and joy. It was all he had and not to be shared beyond what he had just given. He would have to die if it was dissipated.

The site was like the corpse of a loved one. You wanted more from it than it could give. A sense of relief came to him as Sarah drove them away.

Framed photos hung in the new barn. The Van Dines had a history of their own, an organized one: Lydia with her dowager grandmother and alcoholic uncle; a wedding photo of Lydia and Peter, bride and groom emerging from a Cambridge church to a shower of rice; Peter’s father in a top hat and tuxedo at the wedding ceremony; the houses in Vermont and Minnesota where they had lived before coming to New York City; photos of the children. The wedding photo summoned fear, showing as it did the Van Dines throwing open doors and allowing people to share in the bigness of their life. He saw that he could never marry, not in that way. He had no community. Who would come?

The photo that most drew him was of Sarah out on the lawn in a white party dress with a big bow. Four or five and gazing up at a cake on an outdoor table. The gaiety and freedom of the Van Dines’ lives on display. There had been no hellfire and brimstone for the Van Dine children; there had been rich green lawns and birthday parties and adults who enjoyed laughter and cocktails and Broadway shows and, yes, sex. There had been

no place for the gnashing of teeth. He wondered that Sarah could have wished she had been with him there at that Bible camp of pain and renunciation. It would not be wise to tell her how all his early life he had longed for and sought the bounty of America seen in billboard advertisements for Chevrolet cars or heard in train whistles and the show tunes like “Hardhearted Hannah” his older sister Rachel would play on the upright in his parents’ bedroom while Naomi belted out the lyrics. It would not be wise to tell her what it meant to him that she had been on this side of the mountain in this world of light and, yes, *worldliness*, all those days and nights he had lain curled in a fetal position moaning for his mother to take him away from that camp of daily humiliation and punishment on the other side, or the anguish that came to him when he considered the paradise that might have been denied him if the feel-good speed Vera was on that night several months before had not led her to reluctantly offer him Sarah’s name.

Now he could have both sides of the mountain and he could have two histories as well and he could make them his own. One alone was America but the two of them together made for America even more. One was his past and the other his present that would someday be past and it would be for him to hold onto all of it so he could have the thread of his life in hand because a person needed something to hold onto.

Pastor Chernenko came to him that night, and the Ukrainian women with their baskets of laundry set out to dry in the rocky fields came to him, and the rough pine bench came to him, and Angel and Clementino and Peanuts and Eddie and Felipe and Alma and counselors for Christ Bob Pellalugra and his wife, June, came to him, and “Rescue the Perishing” came to him, as if to say that they would be with him forever in

the sunshine and the darkness of his life, because if they weren't there then what would be to give him a story to tell?

And his mother, she came to him, too, calling to him, calling to him, in her sorrow.

And yet, a world of light it may have been, but he was a visitor to this world and someday soon would have to leave. But leave for where, Roberto's shabby apartment? How he longed for an apartment of his own to which only he had the key and in which he could exist alone. Of course, Sarah would come to visit. They wouldn't live together but she would stop by, every day, so they could keep their love alive.

Every day they said now, "I love you," he to her and she to him. And yet some feeling of soreness began to grow in him. He had left himself vulnerable by quitting his job to be among the rich with their easy days and endless resources. And though Sarah had been only too happy to move out to the new barn with him, he had begun to notice how she liked to linger in the house in the evening, playing one silly game of hearts after another, how a whole hour would pass and she would still be there chatting away and having a good time while he waited for her in the new barn.

And of course she would have to pay for such laughter, such happiness, apart from him, as in the long ago his mother had to pay for reciting a litany of names—"Hannah, I mean Naomi, I mean Rachel, I mean..." when his name was none of those. And make his mother pay he did by retreating to his room rather than sit at the dinner table, causing her to come and inquire why he was not eating. And of course he was waiting for her, living for those footsteps in the hallway to approach his room, and when

she arrived he gave her just what she deserved. Nothing. He gave her nothing, as she had given him nothing or worse than nothing for slighting him.

“I have made your very favorite, creamed chicken and rice. Please come and eat before the food gets cold.”

He answered with his silence, just dispatched her, as if to say, I do not need you, I do not want you, now go away. And so she went away, asking what ailed him as she left, and now there was nothing to do but wait for her return, as her return was all that gave meaning to his life, and she did return, with more sorrow but not enough sorrow in her voice, and this time he did speak when she said,

“But Luther, what is the meaning of this that you do not eat?”

Luther saying, “I don’t want your food. I don’t ever want your food. Throw it away. Give it to the dogs.”

Causing her to say, “You treat me like dirt. All my children, every one of you treats me as if I were nothing but dirt beneath your shoes,” her words making her cry and cry, just cry so helplessly, and causing Luther to do the same, because his anger could not leave him until she had cried, until he had made her see what she had done and she had made him see, with her tears, what he had done.

And now it was Sarah taking him for granted and mocking him with her laughter and her happiness with each minute more that she stayed out there at the house. He pretended to read *Moby-Dick* while his whole being blazed with the need to inflict punishment, his ears straining for the sound of her footsteps on the flagstone steps outside. When the big wooden door slid open he allowed her to see his sickness, as his



mother had seen it back in his childhood room. Because he had begun to forget where he was, how much fear he had started with of the Van Dines. The current of his anger was too strong to resist.

“Is something wrong?” Sarah said when he failed to greet her.

“Did I say anything was wrong?” he replied, his resentment such that he could not make eye contact.

“You sound angry or upset.”

“Get lost.”

“What?” “

“I said get lost.”

“Why?”

“I said get out.”

“But why?” she said, her voice breaking.

She would go to the house. If her parents were still up, they would see her in tears. They would ask her what was wrong. Lydia would have a heart to heart with her. Their opinion of him would darken.

It took a half hour, but she did return. He was waiting for her, and for her only, so he could chase her away again with the whip of vehemence.

He packed his knapsack and headed off down the hollow in the dark, with a flashlight to guide him. He would show them what a man of strength was, that not even their beautiful estate could hold him. Along the dirt road he walked, exhilarated by his angry resolve and anticipating the shock Sarah would experience when she and all of

them realized he had vacated the premises. A porch light burned on the rundown house of the caretaker Everett, illuminating an old refrigerator to the side of the front door and a lawn littered with the remains of a tractor and a rusted thresher. The light he wanted to see was a different one, his ears straining for the sound of the jeep's engine. Several times he stopped, but in the silence heard only the constant of water flowing in the brook and farther on, the barking of a dog, probably from the trailers situated a short distance from the main road. Now he would have to finish what he started. He would actually have to leave. Oh my God, he thought. He had evicted himself from paradise.

But then he heard it, not the cricket chorus or the brook but the sound of an engine and the lights, he saw lights as he turned , and a prettier sound or sight he had never experienced. There she was, Sarah, at the wheel of the jeep with its top down. Not that he could show his happiness. He could not give Sarah that, having already given her too much.

"Mommy says we have a sadomasochistic relationship," Sarah said, as they lay in bed that night.

"That doesn't sound good," Luther said.

"Don't worry. She laughed. She thinks it's funny."

"Funny?"

"She likes you. She thinks you're serious. She had an Armenian boyfriend when she was in college. She said she met him in a drugstore."

"Always the best place to meet an Armenian," Luther said.

"You weren't really going to leave, were you?"

“I don’t know,” he said. And he didn’t.

The Van Dines had guests that summer. A homosexual advertising executive brought his own blender and plied the other guests with drinks, one strong daiquiri after another, as everyone sat around the pool: an acerbic office secretary and former actress, with a bitter tone in her voice, who was said to be writing a novel about the Van Dines with the working title “Beautiful Losers”; the Kleiners, Gerhard and Sandra; the Capicis, Maggio and Sally. They appeared to Luther as satellites orbiting around the Van Dine sun. Like children they were, seeking the approval of Peter and Lydia and in competition for their love. They arrived separately and left separately. While together on the property they could talk among each other, but had too little in common to engage on their own.

Gerhard Kleiner was a photojournalist for a German magazine, and traveled far and wide for stories. A boyish smile came easily to his round face, and he had reason to be happy. An Austrian émigré to America, he had done well, with a house just outside Phoenicia and an apartment in Riverdale, down in New York City. He also had an American wife. Sandra was a friend of Lydia’s going back to boarding school, a woman who possessed beauty but little confidence and extreme shyness. The marriage was a childless one, Gerhard not wishing to be a father. “Gerhard is the child in that family,” Luther heard Peter say.

Though Sandra, with her full figure, possessed the sexy beauty of a pinup girl, she was not enough for Gerhard. Luther could see the satyr’s gleam in Gerhard’s eyes when he looked at Claire and Sarah and imagined the same lust directed at others in the course

of Gerhard's travels. Gerhard possessed a large appetite for life; there was little he desired that he would deny himself, Luther was sure.

"The rest of you is nothing to speak about, but I like the way your hair falls down the back of your neck. If I could have that, I would be happy," Gerhard said to Luther one evening, up at the lean-to, in his heavily accented English, while Peter tended to the steaks sizzling on the grill. Having disposed of Luther, he then turned to Sarah. "Have you finished with high school?"

"Not quite. But I'm not going back."

"What will you do?"

"There is an art school in Boston. Maybe I can get in. Maybe not," Sarah said.

"I go to Boston in my travels. You will be sure to give me your address and we will have dinner. Yes?"

"Sure," Sarah said.

Gerhard had managed to hurt and unsettle him, but it was a beautiful early evening in July, the sky cloudless and the air soft, and one he wanted to remember. The beam of lust in Gerhard's eye was the same beam Luther recognized in his own. What Luther discerned when he turned to Sandra was a sexual being who would be as sensitive to his touch as a tuning fork, even if he was, as Gerhard seemed to suggest, a piece of human garbage whose only value was the hair trailing down his neck.

Now, when making love with Sarah, an image would come to him of Sandra slowly removing her tight white blouse and skirt and sitting on the edge of a bed in only her black bra and panties and garter belt. At such times and others, he would feel so

strongly that he knew this woman he had hardly said more than hello to. As when he reached out with his hand for Maura's leg in that room in the Morningside Arms in the long ago, the urge to explore continued. "Can I know you? Can you be known to me?" Why could that not be a question for posing wherever men and women chanced to meet?

If Gerhard Kleiner was prideful about his vocation, Maggio Capici was rather vague. "I do some work for the government," he said, without elaborating, and in so doing removed from anyone's mind the possibility that his brawn might be in the service of the Mob. About his past he was more precise: circus performer, Hollywood stunt man, and, briefly, a Wall Street broker.

"Look at the bulge toward the very bottom of his left pant leg. He carries a holstered gun strapped to his calf," Sarah said. "Mommy says she has heard that he works in the prison corrections system down in the city and that the weapon, which is licensed, is for protection from any released inmates who might want revenge. She says there is a degree of brutality behind that smile."

"She says that to you, about his brutality?"

"Mommy is very perceptive, but then, she is not the only one who can see things."

"See what?"

"I'm not sure, but Maggio may have been her lover for a brief while."

"Why do you say so?"

"Well, when he hugs her as a greeting, she shivers. She has to stifle a moan.

Mommy is love starved. It's not easy for her."

“Why is that?”

“Because she is married to a man who won’t make love to her or can’t make love to her.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s no secret. Mommy is very, very physical, and Daddy isn’t interested anymore. So she has turned to other lovers.”

“Recently?”

“Probably not. But look at her sometime during dinner. She doesn’t just eat. She devours. Her mouth is a giant gash built for consumption.”

“How can you talk with such detachment about your mother and her sexuality? I could never get near to imagining my mother’s sex life. It would be violating a taboo.”

“There are a lot of taboos that get violated around here,” Sarah said.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said ,” Sarah said, and said no more.

They had walked up to the meadow, past the shale pile Peter and Everett drew on for their bridge project. By the gnarled trunk of an apple tree they made love. It had become their way to couple outdoors, either in the meadow or down behind the barn, when no one was around.

Malcolm and Lenore were by the pool as he and Sarah headed back down the path. Since Malcolm’s return from the city, he and Lenore kept to themselves. Those times Luther would encounter Malcolm alone the conversation was perfunctory, and Lenore continued her unwillingness to so much as look his way, let alone speak to him.

He was not welcome in their world, they made clear. Had Lenore told Malcolm about that one night by the pool? If so, would Malcolm not have felt obliged to confront him? Luther didn't know. It was hard for him to imagine how a mind like Malcolm's worked.

But Maggio. If there was opacity about his work life, his desire was easy to discern. There he was all nakedness.

"Hello, Princess," he said, ogling Claire, who lay in her bikini on a swinging sofa on the terrace. She was darker than Sarah, and her sunglasses gave her a starlet quality.

"Stop," Claire said, clearly pleased.

"Stop when I've only begun?" Maggio replied.

Sally, Maggio's own, also had a roving eye, and it roamed all over Malcolm. "He takes my breath away. What I would do to him if I only could," she said, giving voice to her lust.

The middle-aged were among the beautiful young. Luther could only feel wounded that he was not among them, not within the scope of Sally's ardor, as he did at being a less than worthy focus for Peter's camera lens.

He had been reintroduced to his ordinariness, his plainness. He was not among life's chosen. Try as he might, he would always be among the bottom-dwellers in terms not only of intellect but also beauty and physical prowess. If he was to live, it would have to be in some other place within himself, he saw, unless he wished to forfeit for all time a measure of peace and self-acceptance. But what a thing to digest.

That evening Lydia served dinner out on the terrace. Maggio and Sally had come bearing several bottles of red wine and a chocolate cake from what Maggio said was the finest bakery in all of Brooklyn. “Isn’t it something?” Maggio asked of the Beaujolais.

“Oh, it is, Maggio. It goes just perfect with the steak,” Lydia said.

“Very smooth taste,” Peter said.

And similar comments were they obliged to make about the rich dessert, so eager for their verdict was Maggio. The Van Dines meant something to Maggio, born of an Italian father and a Jewish mother and a lifelong resident of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. It wasn’t every day that he and Sally got to enter a world such as the one the Van Dines had created at Camp.

As for Sally, a few glasses of wine gave her the confidence she needed to talk about her job. The law firm she worked for was first rate, she said. The partners all came from top Ivy League law schools. “They handle some very important clients, including big-name politicians,” Sally assured the Van Dines.

Children trying to impress, Luther thought. Children seeking the blessing of the king and queen. Needy children, like himself.

“You should go back to that boyfriend of yours, the one in the East Village,” he said one afternoon, as they sat on the lawn.

“Why should I do that?”

“Because I can tell you miss him.”

“Miss him? I don’t even think of him.”



“How can that be? You call out to him in your sleep.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You do. ‘Ned, I love you. I miss you.’ Twice last night you sat up and said just that.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“It’s OK. I understand. It’s taken a while for you to see that I am not quite what you were looking for. I could have told you that would happen.”

“I’m not listening to this anymore,” Sarah said, and walked off to be with Claire and Brian by the pool.

Someone would come along to claim her for his own. Why not make it happen sooner rather than later, even if it meant lying? Exaggeration was sometimes needed to get at the truth. What was the alternative? Was he supposed to live in dread of the inevitable day after day? The fact that she hadn’t agreed with him, not about Ned but the viability of their relationship, didn’t mean that she wouldn’t somewhere down the road, when he was even more dependent and helpless. No, no. Punishment was needed, and of the severe kind, if she was not to obliterate him.

That night he holed up in the new barn again, having declined to join the family for dinner down in Phoenicia. He would show her what such disloyalty meant, he thought, as he heard the Chrysler rattle the boards of the small bridge. Even more than when she hung back in the house with the family playing hearts on some evenings would he punish her. Laughing, eating, drinking, having a good time. She would see.

Of course, they took their sweet time coming back, and she would have to pay for that as well. When the car rumbled back over the bridge, when finally they had the decency to return, did she come running to say how much she missed him and how she wanted him to stay in her life forever and ever? No, she did some more of her dawdling, just as his mother would dawdle as a way of denying him as a child. And what kind of dawdling did Sarah do? The vicious kind. She hung back in the house and played that blasted game of hearts. Oh yes, did everything have to be paid for. Everything.

She had learned something of his ways by now, and so she did not come to him with a mind of innocence as to what she might find. Even so, she did not expect the intensity of his fury, which hunger had added to, a blast of anger that flung her back to the house and made her question his sanity.

But her father did not question Luther's sanity. He spent no time pondering the condition of Luther's mind. He had seen his long, sad face and his hostile action with the rifle. He had seen him be vile toward his daughter on his very own property and he would not have it anymore. He, too, slid open the door of the new barn, but it was not for Luther to expel the older man back to the main house with the force of his peeve. Peter held his ground and held it strong. In fact it was he who drove Luther back with the force of his own words, saying, "If there is one more instance of abuse of my daughter, I will personally evict you from this property. I will not have your darkness dulling her bright and shining light. Have I made myself clear? Well, have I?" and took a threatening step toward the speechless Luther, who could only say, "Yes, of course, I will see what I can do."

“Never mind with your seeing, young man. Do not mince words with me. You will not abuse my daughter. Is that clear?”

“Yes, of course,” Luther said. “Clear as the day and dark as the night.”

“I am warning you,” Peter said.

“I have heard. Believe me, I have heard,” Luther said.

And so Peter withdrew his force, and Luther could only marvel how he had turned a pacific man bellicose. And he could only wonder at the great peace that came to him following the talking-to. Yes, he was stung and humiliated, but those feelings quickly passed. This same father had come to his door at the Morningside Arms, and now he had come again, allowing for the fact that this door was not Luther’s very own but Peter’s.

And in the morning Lydia came to the door of the new barn and entered and held him by the wrists and said to him, wearing the look of an emissary of earnestness that she reserved for those who were dull and below her capacities, “You are a good young man. You must understand you are a good young man. But you must every day choose the light over darkness. You must choose life.”

He wondered at her earnestness and whether she was talking to herself more than him, even if she had come with trowel in hand to show her purposefulness and connection to the earth. He wondered too that her words did not carry more weight, given the power of profundity they were meant to have. The new barn was a large space, and yet she had filled it with an atmosphere of unbearable goodness. On the wall was a photo of her in a similar pose of entreaty, taken by Peter during a performance of *The Crucible*

at the Phoenicia Playhouse, in which she had a starring role some years before, in her magical summer before the burden of family weighed her down.

“He said that to you?” Sarah asked, when she came to Luther that morning after her mother’s departure.

“Yes. He was quite angry.” Luther’s own anger was gone. Peter had somehow dissolved it with his visit the night before, almost miraculously so. Evidently, there were things a man could do that a woman couldn’t.

“He had no right to talk to you like that.”

“Well, it’s his place and his family, so I guess he does.”

“He was just on a power trip,” Sarah said.

“Just a little while ago your mother came to visit me, too.”

“What did she want?”

“She said I should choose life over darkness.”

“Don’t mind Mommy. She gets that way sometimes.”

“What way?”

“She likes to give advice. It eases her sense of sadness and helplessness about her own life.”

“Why should she feel sad and helpless about her life?”

“Mommy’s a coward.”

“That’s a strong word.”

“But it’s the truth. She had her actor’s equity card and could easily have moved on to have a big career in theater. Instead she became a baby factory and subordinated herself to Daddy.”

“Well, lucky for you.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to forfeit your calling. I think you pay a price when you do something like that.”

“Maybe she just preferred motherhood and family life.”

“Mommy’s unstable. She’s a nervous wreck whenever she has to get behind the wheel.”

“What do good driving skills have to do with stability?”

“All I mean is that Daddy is the stabilizing force in her life. When she was in college, she began to drift into the bar scene and led a kind of aimless life. Daddy jokes that he found her living with a shoe in the icebox in the refrigerator of the apartment she shared with another girl. Daddy is the only foundation on which she can build. Without him the world is one big swamp in which she slowly sinks.”

“My father used to say of my mother...” Luther stopped.

“Used to say what?”

“Never mind.”

“Tell me. What?”

“That she was his rock. That he couldn’t imagine where he would be without her.”

“Why was that so hard to tell me?”

“I didn’t say it was hard.”

“Yes, you did. By pausing.”

“OK. I did.”

“Are you afraid you’re your father?”

“Are you afraid you’re your mother?”

“I’ll never be my mother. I’ll never get married. I was born to live alone.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do. Some things you know.”

“And that can’t change?”

“Don’t you try to change me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“There are lots of things you try to do, and some of them you succeed at.”

“Like what?”

“Now it’s my turn to say never mind.”

Another car pulled into the driveway that weekend. Rodney and Doris Smith had arrived. Rodney was an advertising copywriter and aspiring actor. Any role in any off-off Broadway play he could get he was grateful for. Lydia said he had a prodigious memory and was able to recite entire scenes from Shakespeare’s plays verbatim. She said he also had a prodigious temper, and had beaten his former wife black and blue. “They were in competition with each other. He would fly into a rage at her successes on the stage. The situation was terrible.”

Luther’s perception of the Van Dine’s newest guest was colored by the information Lydia had imparted. It made Rodney’s amiable manner seem like a

performance, a charade. Without difficulty Luther imagined a storm cloud dispelling the smile from that meaty face.

“Luther is a friend of Sarah’s,” Lydia said, by way of introduction.

“And she doesn’t need enemies with a friend like him,” Jeffrey added.

“Is that so?” Rodney replied.

“Daddy says he walks around with a long and disapproving face, as if there isn’t anyone or anything that is good enough for him,” Jeffrey continued.

“I think we’re all misunderstanding Luther. Let’s give him a chance to see what he can do,” Lydia said. “I see great potential in Luther. He just needs time to get untracked.”

That he should have to be spoken for. And yet *untracked*? Did she mean getting off the set of rails he was on so his route would not be so predictable and predestined? Or did she mean going through life without any rails altogether?

One thing was for sure. Rodney would not be doing to his new wife, Doris, what he had to done to his ex. She was a head taller than Rodney and wider than him as well.

“Rodney met me in Azuma. He came in looking for a watering can. At least that’s what he said. I sold him a red one and the next day he was back to exchange it for a purple one. The third day he came back and said green was his favorite color. So I said to him, ‘Sir, are you certain this is about the watering can? Might there be something else on your mind?’ He was too shy to acknowledge his ulterior motive and so I proposed that we discuss the matter that evening at nearby bar, and the rest is history.”

“What a lovely story of love at first sight,” Lydia said.

“And what color did you finally choose for your watering can?” Claire asked.

“Rodney was leaning toward black but I moved him in the direction of yellow,”

Doris said.

“A wonderful choice. Wonderful. Move toward the light. All of us,” Lydia exclaimed.

“Darkness doesn’t have its place?” Lenore asked, though it was more a statement than a question, given her smile.

“There must be rotations, cycles. But we can’t linger in the dark place. Nothing grows in the dark,” Lydia replied.

“Death grows in the dark, and in the light,” Lenore said. “It grows wherever we are. It’s an ever-present shadow. It’s the call of sleep.”

“Don’t speak that way, Poody. Don’t speak that way,” Lydia said.

“Why?” Lenore asked.

“Better to cultivate laughter than gloom,” Lydia said.

“Laughter hurts after a while, and then it ends,” Lenore said.

“Well yes, of course. But it also starts again.” Lydia puffed on her Tareyton.

That afternoon Malcolm took the wheel of the Sunbeam Alpine, with Lenore beside him, he so blond and she so dark. Luther and Sarah climbed in behind them. Malcolm had been eager to take the convertible for a spin, and there were art supplies Sarah needed down in Woodstock. He drove fast, even on the dirt road leading out of the hollow, and once past the road construction on Route 28 he began to burn rubber once again, one hand on the wheel, while the other dangled outside the door. He was showing



off, a stupid grin on his handsome face as he took the turns on the winding stretch of road without any acknowledgment of the Reduce Speed signs. The fucker would get them all killed. “Stop it,” Luther shouted, his words blown about in the strong wind. “Slow down. Point A to Point B driving. Do you understand?” But Malcolm drove in defiance of Luther’s warning, the car descending between two large fields and zooming past a work crew and off the road. Around the thick trunk of an oak tree the car spun, in a full rotation, before coming to a dead stop. No one had been thrown. No one had been injured. They got out to see that, quite amazingly, the headlights had been sheared off.

A member of the work crew came over. Thick-bodied and slow of speech, he said, “You have no idea what mangled bodies look like. Don’t do that again.” He turned and walked off. He had no need of their reply. What could he hope for from people who drove like that? How simple he looked in his jeans and white T-shirt and work boots. How purposeful. A brief longing to know him, to be among that crew, to be on their humble, solid ground, came over Luther.

The imbecilic smile still lingered on Malcolm’s face. He appeared to be in a daze. Sarah took the wheel. That was just as well. Luther wasn’t getting in the car if she didn’t.

Lydia and Peter had words of caution about speeding and driving without a license, but made no great fuss about the expense of replacing two headlights.

But then there was Luther’s recklessness. Several days later he and Sarah went swimming in the nude in the Ashokan reservoir, not far from the town of Woodstock, in spite of the postings against such activity on the site. As they were reclaiming their clothes, Luther heard a cry and glimpsed, against a background of pine trees, men, a large

number of them, running toward them. The men were perhaps an eighth of a mile away. “We’ve got to get out of here,” he said, trying to keep the rising sense of panic out of his voice. “Why? What?” Sarah replied, as she pulled on her bellbottoms. “There are men coming. They mean us no good,” he said, gathering her sneakers and bag. He took her hand and began running for the jeep. No time was lost fumbling for the key. She had left it in the ignition. Maybe it was that which saved them. As she pulled onto the road the men were only yards away. Boys, really. A pack of them. One flung a beer bottle, which flew wide of the jeep.

“What did they want?” Sarah asked.

“It was the kind of situation that could get out of control,” Luther said. He didn’t want to say the word *rape*. He didn’t want to give it a name, or give a name to any of the other things that could have happened.

When Peter got word of the incident, he didn’t scold Sarah and Luther for ignoring the prohibition against swimming in the reservoir. He cast the incident as but another instance of the ugliness of the American temperament. “You can safely assume that there are great numbers out there who, if given half a chance, would maraud over this property and destroy our way of life and us with it. The desecration of beauty is the sole purpose of these folks. ” His tone was emphatic as he stood in front of the dormant fireplace. The cocktail hour had come. Freshly showered, he presented a commanding figure, his hair combed straight back in a power sweep and his nautical white pants and shirt complementing his golden tan.

“Poody, must you express yourself in such an extreme fashion?” Lydia asked, as she handed him an old fashioned. Luther thought of the morning conversations between the two, Lydia a giant ear for Peter’s monologues on the shortcomings of the American empire and of those who founded it. Her gentle query seemed to mitigate a real displeasure with his vehemence and lack of balance, in contrast with her own natural inclination toward the center, not the poles. Was it possible that Peter had intellectualized his personal hurts and that many others did the same thing? And who would these barbarians be, to put a face on them? Would Sal, the restaurateur, be one of the barbarians at the gate? How about Everett, the caretaker? Would he someday show up with club in hand and lay them all low?

“Vision requires what some would call extremism. It comes from seeing what others are afraid to see.”

“Personally, I dig the idea of burning and pillaging. Might be kind of cathartic. What do you say we go down and lay waste to Phoenicia?” Brian laughed, infecting others with his mirth. With those tight black curls around his beautifully shaped head, Luther could see him as a dauphin at the Court of Versailles. How amazing the mocking detachment Brian’s intelligence gave him. Yeats’s poem, “1916,” came to mind, that line about the best lacking all conviction and the worst being full of passionate intensity. Not that Peter was the worst. No one should say a man who was trying to the best of his ability was the worst. Peter had raised a family and earned a Ph.D. and written a book and scholarly articles. He had survived the horror of war and created a refuge from the insanity of the world with the 900-acre estate on which they were now all gathered.

Already he had established a place in Luther's mind. He represented something, even if it was too soon to know what.

That evening Brian strummed on his guitar out on the terrace. The pungent smell of grass lingered from the joint he had smoked. No recognizable tune emerged in the short time he played. His effort seemed to be a series of false starts. And the voice he summoned to accompany his playing never rose above a mumble. After a few such trial runs, he put the guitar aside, as he had the few other times Luther had heard him play.

"Fall is coming. I can feel it in the air," Luther said.

"That worry you, man?"

"I guess. School. Where to live. Money. Stuff like that. How about you?"

"How about me, what?"

"Are you worried about the fall?"

"Not me. I'll take a few courses. Beat the draft. Work on my music."

"How will you work on your music?"

"Get my shit together with a band, like we were doing at the beginning of the summer."

My shit. My music. He made it sound as if music were some sort of possession. More a dreamer and an idler than a resident of the real world. How did anyone form a band with so little talent and a daily tendency toward lassitude?

"I've made a decision not to go back to Barnard in the fall," Claire said.

"Why would you do that?" Luther asked.

"I find the coursework overwhelming."

“But it’s such a great school. What would you do?”

“I’ll take a semester off and try to transfer to another college in the city.”

“What? Like NYU?”

“Maybe Hunter.”

“You would go from an elite college to a very ordinary school? Hunter is like City College, my school. They are both part of the City University.”

“The prestige factor doesn’t really mean anything to me.”

“I would have given anything to go to a great college. It really bothers me that I didn’t,” Luther said.

“You could have gone to Columbia,” Claire said.

“No. I’m cursed with looking smarter than I am. Trust me, I was lucky to get into college at all,” Luther said.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Claire said.

“One of my sisters went to Barnard. She transferred there for her junior year,” Luther said. It made him feel proud, if only briefly, to mention this one academic accomplishment in his family.

“What is she doing now?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve kind of lost touch with her. She’s a bit older. Like twelve years older.”

“That’s a lot,” Claire said.

“I have two other sisters who are even older.”

“The same mother and father?”

“Yes,” Luther said. The question threw him. He couldn’t picture either of his parents with anyone else, or at least his mother.

“So how many are you altogether? I think you talked about it the other week down at Sal’s, but you got embarrassed. I could tell. You shouldn’t be ashamed of your family.”

“You saw that?”

“We all did.”

“I have four sisters and a brother.”

“That’s a lot of sisters.”

“That’s what Quentin says.”

“Quentin?”

“Quentin Compson, in *The Sound and the Fury*. ‘Do you have a sister? Do you even know what a sister is?’ or something like that.”

“I don’t read much fiction, I’m afraid,” Claire said.

“It’s like eating dessert and forsaking the main meal, I guess.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that fiction is light and frivolous,” Claire replied.

He was glad he had said what he did about barely getting into college. It took some of the pressure off. Now he wouldn’t have to pretend to be smarter than he was, at least with Claire and Brian. And he had done so without confessing to his low board scores. Those scores. How they stayed in his mind as something he would have to live with forever and ever. Not a day went by that they didn’t find their way into his thoughts, reminding him of his station in life.

It troubled him that Claire would consider leaving a prestigious college like Barnard to attend a lesser school. People did have stations in life, and it caused unhappiness when those who belonged in the lower stations illegitimately claimed higher terrain and those above them abdicated their lofty spaces. It just didn't seem right.

Sarah had set up an easel in the horse stable below the new barn. There she would paint for long hours portraits which, had she not told him, he would never have regarded as of herself, so distorted were her features on the canvases. During those hours he would walk about or lounge by the pool with a book, as the Van Dines seemed to have no need of his services. "You're our guest. Just relax and enjoy yourself," Lydia said. And so he did. Neither Brian nor Malcolm were given tasks to perform either, so far as he could see. It really was a life of leisure, at least for him and the other guests.

When the clouds came, they came in earnest and to stay, though generally in the later part of the day. On one such day, as rain began to fall, he headed for shelter. The sliding door of the new barn was open, and through the screen door he saw Jeffrey on the bed. His shirt was on but his pants were down around his ankles and his butt was exposed. Under him someone lay. Who that person was Luther couldn't tell. Unseen by either party, he withdrew to the terrace. The rain having eased, he stood under the long green leaves of the rhododendron covering the latticework on the terrace. He couldn't call what he was experiencing pain. It felt more like the excitement that comes in anticipation of a moment of great revelation. Here and there he saw others—Malcolm and Lenore walking across the lawn heedless of the rain still lightly falling and Brian and

Claire on the front porch—and as he did, his fear grew. That lyric from the Dylan song came loudly into his mind, the one about something happening and Mr. Jones not knowing what it was.

But then he did know. He waited long enough for Jeffrey to come down those steps and toward the house, his khaki trousers pulled up and fastened, and for Jeffrey to look his way. His eyes said everything. But Sarah. If her eyes said something, it was nothing he could see.

There was rioting in New York City that summer, and then Newark went up in flames. Trouble spread up the river as well, violence breaking out in Poughkeepsie. Luther saw the discord through the lens of childhood, those summers in the long ago when bicycle caravans of Negro boys from Harlem would migrate to the welfare hotels on his street and visit their unending anger on the neighborhood white boys, beating them to the pavement with their fists and then beating them some more. Then as now, the violence left him afraid that it would find him personally. He thought of Sandra Leventhal, his political science instructor, and how she would have mocked and taunted him for his fear.

But the city was calling to him and so he said his goodbyes. Lydia had him sign the guest book, which presented a challenge, as he had invested much energy in projecting an image of intelligence, applying a crazy intensity to mundane reading matter such as *Time* magazine while the others pursued their frivolous card games. Altogether Camp had reintroduced him to his ignorance about nature, about history, about so many things, and he was desperate to catch up, to provide the cover of facts for his nakedness, a



kind of armor that would make him impervious to the laughing thing that people could put on each other. “We know you will provide le mot juste,” Lydia said, as all eyes turned to him in the living room. He glanced at some of the other entries, so witty, so clever. “The wind/a sigh/Claire and I,” Brian had written. Even Malcolm’s entry shone brightly on the page: “Where keyed-up executives unwind.”

“Well, that’s very sweet, Luther. So sincere. So gentle,” Lydia said, reading the words he had penned, but Luther saw the disappointment on her face. All he had been able to come up with was “It’s been nice, so nice. Thank you so much.” An atmosphere of depression settled over the room as others saw what he had inscribed.

“A wordsmith, if ever I saw one,” Brian mocked.

“Stop it.” Claire’s rebuke of her boyfriend only worsened things, as she must have known it would.

“Enchanté,” Lydia said, escorting Luther out to the waiting jeep. He waved his goodbyes as Sarah drove him off to the bus stop, where he hadn’t long to wait, his goodbye to her coming faster than he had wanted it to.

“I’ll be down next week. I promise,” she said.

As the bus drew nearer to the city, greenery gave way to strip malls and clogged traffic arteries and the indigent and depraved hanging about the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The filth and the seediness of the surrounding streets under the scorching sun brought back end-of-the-world thoughts and only increased his longing to be back in the Shangri-La he had found up at Camp.

But he had things to do. Roberto frightened him. Something was off with him. He wasn't quite right in the head. Like Fred, the troubadour, and Brian, the mumbling man, he had taken to playing the guitar. All that yapping about his music and his jam sessions with Jimi Hendrix when all Luther heard were the same false starts as Brian. He feared that Roberto might have taken one too many acid trips. Some smoldering menace lurked behind that fake smile. Some serious lunacy was gestating in his roommate's mind.

Besides, Luther needed a place of his own, where he could be alone with Sarah and with a clean kitchen he could happily set foot in. And he found such a place. Gorgeous, simply gorgeous. A fourth-floor walkup in an old building just off Eightieth Street and Riverside Drive. A southern exposure and a modern kitchen and bath and a cantilevered table he could use for a desk. And fully furnished. What more could he ask? Twenty-four dollars a week was steep, but maybe he could get back his part-time job at the post office. Besides, he wouldn't have to worry about money. Not right away with the big student loan he had received.

"You'll be back. Don't think you won't," Roberto said. He had taken to wearing sunglasses, even indoors.

Luther visited with his mother to tell her the good news. Mr. Fitzpatrick was waiting for him in the lobby. "Have I not told you that your mother is in need of a few good men? Have I not told you?"

And now here came Melvin, having stepped from the elevator into the lobby. "I am on my mission today to spread the word of God, Luther. I will be in Times Square. I

must do good. I must be good. I must be whiter than snow. Do I look whiter than snow, Luther? Do I?"

"You look fine," Luther said, although torment clearly showed on Melvin's face, some howling loneliness not even God could vanquish.

"Satan tells me to jump out the window, and I say to Satan, Get thee behind me. I don't like to be short with anyone, Luther, even the devil, but sometimes we must take a stand."

"You mustn't listen to that voice, Melvin." Melvin's head like that of an animal on a human body. A giant rabbit. A hedgehog. Or Vincent Van Gogh with a bandaged ear in a tortured self-portrait.

"Thank you, Luther. That means something to me, what you just said."

Luther went on his way, relieved to be free of the burden of Melvin. Luther had been afraid of screaming if he stayed another minute in the unfortunate man's company. Poor Melvin. He wasn't a hedgehog or a rabbit but a bewildered deer that had strayed onto the mean streets of Manhattan.

"Have you been looking for me, my son?" His mother spoke above the racket of the giant washer, in whose steel belly the dirty linens of the tenants were rendered clean, and the whirring extractor and the more gentle drier, which left the sheets and towels and pillowcases warm and soft. The big fan only blew the hot basement air around. How could his mother stand it down here, he wondered, watching her feed a sheet into the canvas-covered rollers of the enormous mangle? Slowly, the machine pulled the sheet through. How satisfying to see it fall pressed and in folds onto a board. But why did she

do such menial work, and at her age? It had to be fear. She was afraid of more complex tasks, and derived the same comfort from tending to the building's laundry as he had from boxing mail for the United States government. Everyone needed a task he or she could do well, menial or not. And yet it was work to avoid work that she was doing, in some way, work that reinforced some image of herself. "I'm not afraid of a little dirt, not like some of these ladies in the building." Isn't that what she would say, showing her farm girl scorn of gentility.

"I just wanted to say hello." And it was true. The time came when he had to see her. It was just there, within him, to do that. The inner clock.

"So you have been in the fresh air?" She had turned off the mangle.

"I was."

"It must have been very beautiful."

"It is."

"They are very educated people?"

"Her father is a historian. He just wrote a book," Luther said.

"Such a fine mind he must have. Your father has a fine mind as well, you know.

He speaks five languages."

"I know. I do."

"He hasn't had an easy time, and now he is preparing to be with the Lord."

"I know that."

"They must have means."

"I guess they do."

“And they are happy?”

“I guess so. I don’t really know.”

“Do they have problems?”

“I don’t see any.”

“And their children. How many are there?”

“Four.”

“And they’re all doing well?”

“They’re doing fine.” He felt the weight of his mother pressing him to give her something, some element of pain in others, that she could grab onto. She wanted him to tell her that the world was a suffering place and that she was not alone with family pain and disappointment.

“That is all I want for all my children, that we be together in Heaven.”

“Right. Heaven,” Luther said. “What about Jeanne? Have you heard from her?”

“The girl calls me and tells me she is all right, but I worry.”

“She is thirteen. How all right can she be?” Luther asked.

“It is in the Lord’s hands.”

“What about the police? Have they been notified?”

“Naomi and Chuck have done so. But nowadays, there are so many runaways. It is not normal. We must turn to the power of prayer, Luther.”

He kissed her goodbye, but not without embarrassment at the somehow unbearable intimacy of it.

She called him back as he was leaving. “Some young man has asked for you on the telephone. His name is Luis. He says he knows you from the neighborhood and that he must speak with you.” She handed him the number on a piece of brown paper torn from a grocery bag.

Luis Fontanez, from high school days. The boy who had bragged endlessly about the baseball exploits of Juan Marichal and Orlando Cepeda and the Alou brothers, Felipe and Matty, all of them with the San Francisco Giants, and of the takeout power he possessed in both his fists sufficient to cave in your chest with a hard punch? The same Luis who had mocked Luther for being ashamed to take off his shirt?

“Hey, Luther, how you doing? Look, I’ve got some fucked up news. Sean is dead. He got shipped back from Vietnam in a sealed box. Got his head blown off. Everyone in the troop truck killed when it rolled over a land mine. The fucking VC are a bad scene but I’m up there in a fighter jet bombing the shit out of them.”

*Bombing the shit out of them.* His words hard and factual. His manner assertive. And no ironical distance between him and the military. He had always been hard and assertive. A boy solidly built, with wiry black hair and brown skin, he threw an exploding fastball in the speed pitching games of stickball they would play. And yet a boy who got on his knees and pleaded with Father Murphy at Bishop DuBois high school not to tell his father of the fight he had been in at the school. Right there in front of Scully’s stoop on Amsterdam Avenue dropping to his knees, his hands together in prayer and looking up, demonstrating how he had implored Father Murphy, saying “Puh-leese, Father Murphy, Puh-leese. Puh-leese.” Because Luis’s own father had no play in him when it

came to school, no play whatsoever, and if Luis had takeout power in his fists, it was as nothing next to the pulverizing power of his father. Because Luis loved his father, respected his father, obeyed his father, was proud of his father. His father a baker who came home with flour in his hair. His father someone who busted his tail for Luis. Luis a boy deferential to his father's authority, as he was now obedient to military authority.

Only two years had passed since Luther's time with the boys from Scully's stoop, and yet he could not shake the feeling that Luis was a voice from the long ago, the passage of time accelerating the differences that had always existed between them. A sense of urgency set in to get off the line before Luis saw that the only thing in common they shared was the death of a friend and that they were otherwise strangers to each other. Before Luis could say, "What about you, Luther? How come you are not in the war?"

That night, in his studio apartment, he dreamt that he was on an island staring out at the vast sea. A speck appeared on the horizon and as it approached grew larger. It was a vessel, a rowboat, and Sean was pulling the oars. An atmosphere of tranquility prevailed, and yet the methodical nature of Sean's rowing and the absence of a smile on his face suggested dark intent. "What is it that you want?" Luther called to Sean, who felt no obligation to respond or even acknowledge the question.

The next afternoon he went to pay his respects. Such a word, *respects*, that it should be plural, not singular, he thought, hurrying east along the rowdy side street to the funeral home on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue. Tenements and hard-nosed Irish and Puerto Ricans, beaten into their toughness by the brothers and nuns at the school of the Ascension and Holy Name, farther south. The kids who would arrive en masse at the

Loews Theater down on Broadway and within a minute be throwing things and punching each other out and giving the ushers all they could handle. The Catholic church a cold, alien domain of endless ritual and ornately clad clergy and incense and Latin carried to the farthest reaches of vast cathedrals by powerful choral voices.

“I’m so sorry,” Luther said, to Sean’s diminutive, white-gloved mother, with her beauty parlor gray hair. Hard to believe Sean had once broken her jaw.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, and placed her hand on his. But then, glancing uncomfortably at the wild mass on his head, she went on, “Is this really you, Luther?”

“I believe so,” Luther said. It was not for him to tell her his hair was necessary to conceal the absence of roundness. Nor could he tell her the same solution had been unavailable to Sean, given that more hair on a head of that gargantuan size would only have added to the oddity problem he had been born with. And if it was not his place to share these inappropriate meditations on the tragic dimensions of one Sir Blockhead and one Sir Hammerhead, it was also not her place to directly approach the matter of his hair, but merely to come to the brink of that discussion with her question, *Is this really you?* But if she could not come forward directly, she had a hubby who could.

“We have barbers in New York City,” Sean’s father said, striking Luther with his bluntness.

“Yes, I have been to them,” Luther said.

“When? Five years ago? Your hair weighs more than you do.”



“Well now, it has been good seeing you, Luther. You take care of yourself,” Sean’s mother said, taking her husband with her to meet with other mourners.

Perhaps it was his dream of the night before that prevented him from embracing the finality of death. And how did you mourn the dead when they had already, in a sense, become dead to you, assigned to a chapter in your life which you might return to in your thoughts but where you couldn’t stay.

“Fucking Luther. Dag, man, is that you?”

Luis stood before him, a head shorter, showing that same pugnacious demeanor, as if he lived for putting holes in people’s chests. And yet he was also different. His black, wiry hair was neatly trimmed and the baby fat was gone. The military had toned and matured him, removed him from One Hundred Ninth Street and dropped him into a larger theater. You went into the military a boy and came out a man. Wasn’t that the saying?

“Hello, Luis.”

“What the fuck happened to you, man? You got all that shit on your head.”

“Yes, shit on my head,” Luther said, resigned to another conversation about his hair.

“That’s fucked up, Sean gone like that. Didn’t even have time to know where he was at before they got him. It happens that way. The first month and the last month are fucking dangerous. That’s why I stay in the fucking air, man. Ain’t putting me on the ground so’s I can be gook meat.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Luther said. It had all been a waste, coming to show his respects—that word again—but no one respecting him. Not that they should. Oh, it wasn’t for him to figure out but to just get through.

“What kind of plan you got, Luther? What you doing with your life?”

“Credits. I’m getting credits. Or trying to.”

“Credits? What is that?”

“College credits.”

“You best stay there. The service wouldn’t want you. You’re all skinny and strange-looking. You take care of yourself. Dag, man. Dag.” Luis laughed.

Luther didn’t dally at the funeral home. He had no need of a reunion with the boys from Fatso Scully’s stoop. He would contemplate the deceased Sean alone; Sean taking out the bully Frenchie the Algerian, who had dropped shavings of dry ice onto Sean’s head from atop the batting cage down in Riverside Park in the long ago; Sean bellowing “A Foggy Day in London Town.” He would remember the antimacassars with which Sean’s mother covered the sofa and the upholstered chair in their living room and the sliver of a room off the living room Sean called his own, and from which he could look out at the gloomy Cathedral of St. John, and Sean’s left-handed stance in the batter’s box and Anthony Newley singing “For Once in My Lifetime” in *Stop the World! I Want to Get Off*, for which Sean had gotten them tickets. And he would be stunned that Sean’s takeout power had met a bigger power.

The next day he bought a soft yellow spread for his bed, which added to the room’s cheery brightness, and a throw rug, on which he sat weeping while Donovan sang

“Seasons of the Witch.’ And he had a place in his heart for some of Joan Baez’s sad and soulful songs as well, though neither her songs nor Donovan’s had the razor blades found in Dylan’s songs. He could only be sad that his life was not worthy of being set to their music; he had no more sadness left, at least on that day, for Sean.

Sarah came to his studio apartment on her return to the city the next week. Now, when they made love, a faceless man was present, standing by the side of the bed, his big, thick penis erect and swollen. The man was a comforting and eroticizing figure, and in no way intrusive or unwelcome. This development was nothing to share with Sarah. Such a disclosure could only do harm. As for himself, he accepted that sex was a complex arena, in which diverse elements might appear to move the action forward.

Luther wondered if that faceless man might be Sarah’s father, and sought to dispel such a notion from his mind. Jeffrey too was in his thoughts, and more problematically, given the activity Sarah and her brother had engaged in. How often was this activity occurring, and what did it mean? Luther didn’t consider Jeffrey a rival, as how could his girlfriend’s younger brother be such a thing. And yet. And yet.

“Is your brother, Jeffrey, OK?”

“What do you mean?” Sarah replied.

“I just sometimes...”

“Sometimes what?”

“Nothing.”

“He comes to me for sex sometimes, and I let him have his way. He has a huge penis, just like my father.”

“What?”

“It happens less and less. Don’t worry.”

“Did I say I was worried?”

“My family is a house of incest. We do things other families don’t do.”

Sarah’s revelation left her brother’s anatomical attribute lingering in his mind, but in that long month before September and the resumption of classes, the future was of greater concern. He would be in school, but where would Sarah be? And where would they be in relation to each other?

“Mommy has planned a trip with me and Claire, since I’m not going back to Music and Art and Claire is dropping out of Barnard.”

“A trip?”

“We’ll be visiting the capitals of Europe.”

“For how long?”

“Five weeks.”

“Five weeks?” She might as well have said five months. Once again he was no match for her family’s wealth. First she had gone off to their nine hundred acre estate and now she would be going across the pond, where men with sophisticated ways would be waiting for her.

On the Broadway bus the next afternoon he picked up a discarded copy of the *Daily News*. On page 3 was an article about the murder of an American girl traveling through Europe. While in Paris, the girl had met a young man, with whom she had fallen in love, and wrote to her boyfriend back in Philadelphia to tell him of this development

and that she would be traveling with this new friend to other parts of Europe. The hometown boyfriend was from a far less affluent family than the girl, but poor or not, he managed to raise the airfare and flew to Paris, where he tried to win her back. Surprised by his unexpected arrival, the girl nevertheless held her ground, and appealed for his understanding. The article suggested that his working class background made change more difficult for him than it was for a girl with her means. The boy continued with his angry persistence, and when the girl asked him to leave, he lost his head and pulled out a knife and stabbed her to death.

The girl's grieving father, who arrived several days later to claim the body, was quoted as saying that he bore no ill will toward the boy. "He will have to live with the consequences of his act for the rest of his days," the father said.

Luther devoured the article, which he then passed on to Sarah, pushing past his qualms about doing so. She read the article without comment and put the paper down on the empty seat next to her.

"I identify with the boy," Luther said, as they prepared to step off the bus.

"Do you?" she asked, fixing him with her gaze.

"Well, sort of," he said. Dismayed by his lack of judgment in making such a disclosure, he could only hope that she would forget, and her seeming lack of interest in continuing the conversation offered him hope that she would.

Time away from Sarah became hard to bear. Fear would grip him that he had become ordinary in her eyes and that she would leave him behind. He remembered her statement from their first night together at the Morningside Arms. "I'm going to be

around for a very long time.” How comforting and reassuring those words had been. But now he was hearing them differently. How long was a “very long time”? Was it one year, two years, five years? It certainly wasn’t forever. *Forever* meant forever. There was only one thing to do. He must ask Sarah what precisely she had meant, or if that was asking too much, then for a timeframe she had in mind when she made that declaration. Of course, he was taking a risk in bringing up the subject, but sometimes risks of this kind were necessary if peace of mind was to be achieved. And so, on her next visit, in the aftermath of lovemaking, he heard himself say, “Do you see us together a year from now?”

Sarah searched his eyes. “I do.”

“And two years from now?”

“Sure. Why not? Though who can know?”

“Who can know? Right,” Luther said, pondering her response. “But a while ago you said a very long time. A very long time.”

“I said that?”

“I believe so,” he said, aware that he now sounded like a prosecutor taking courtroom testimony.

“Well, I probably meant just that. A long time.”

“But you had said a *very* long time.”

“What’s the difference? What’s going on here?”

“Nothing. Nothing is going on here.”

“Something is going on. What is it?”

“Never mind.”

“What I probably meant is that we will have something like what Claire and Van had.”

“Van? Van is your father. At least that’s what Pam Becker calls him.”

“Not him. Van Heusel.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Van Heusel, from the famous, even legendary, Van Heusel family. Forgive me for not knowing who *he* is.”

“He was Claire’s boyfriend through all four years of high school, before she met Brian. That’s how I see us. And you don’t have to be sarcastic.”

He had pegged his life to an utterance she had made in a moment of exuberance after their first night together. The example she offered of Claire and this Van Heusel wasn’t reassuring, and wouldn’t have been if her sister had been with him for twice that number of years. Four years. Eight years. What difference did it make if the relationship *ended?*

And now there was something else as well. Money. Twenty-four dollars a week was a lot to pay, even for a beautiful furnished apartment. The student loan would not cover his expenses for a full year, and he could not count on the post office taking him back before December.

One afternoon, in the park, he saw Miss Winkles, the elderly landlady, who had shown him the apartment. There she was, sitting on a bench, drawing pigeons to her with bread crumbs.

“Where’s that pretty girlfriend of yours? Has she left you already?”

“Oh, no, we’re doing fine,” Luther said, wondering that the old woman should take such a liberty.

“When you’re old, you get to say whatever comes into your head. Don’t be fooled. We don’t like the young very much.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Luther said.

“What can I do for you? Can’t you see I am very busy?”

Luther couldn’t tell if Miss Winkles was being serious or funny. “I am very busy myself,” Luther said.

“You look very busy, walking around the park with nothing to do. That’s all any of you young people do anymore is walk around in the park. Back in my day, we had a purpose to our lives.”

“What purpose was that, Miss Winkles?”

“Never mind what purpose. And don’t think I didn’t hear freshness in your voice just now. What do you want, anyway? You’re scaring away the pigeons.” In fact the filthy things had scattered in their rickety way only to return.

“I was wondering if you have any other vacancies in the building,” Luther said.

“What’s wrong with what you’ve got?”

“I can’t say anything is wrong.”

“We have a full house.”

“And are all the rents comparable to mine?”



“Some are. A few are higher and one is lower. Mr. Chu, right next door to you, pays ten dollars. But it’s a tiny space. Don’t be making any trouble for me, like trying to skip out on the rent. I’ll track you down if you do.”

There was something he had wanted to say to Miss Winkles but had sensed he mustn’t. It was only this. How very much, at that moment, he wanted to be Miss Winkles, to be old and free to sit on a bench in Riverside Park under a hot summer sun. Because he was very afraid, just so very afraid. The future had become a crushing weight and with his thin bones and thin mind, how was he to deal with it? Back in his junior and senior years of high school, he would stare at the brown-uniformed UPS drivers unloading parcels from their trucks and would wonder why he too couldn’t have a future of quiet, stress-free days driving about the city making such deliveries?

Mr. Chu was an old man with an unsmiling face and a solitary life. Perhaps he was an émigré and would soon rejoin his family in China. Well, Luther would speak with the man, who was sure to be reasonable and understanding of the anxieties of the young about money and why his tiny, ten dollar room might be more appropriate to a student than a man of the world, as Mr. Chu surely was. Mr. Chu would quickly see he deserved and could afford the more ample space that Luther was now living in. A swap. That’s what he would propose to Mr. Chu.

All Luther had ever wanted was a room of his own, just like the title of that Virginia Woolf novel, which he hadn’t read but was meaning to. A room of his own where he could go and feel safe and not face the threat of eviction. A room in line with

his needs and his means. Ten dollars. What a perfect amount. And all that stood between him and his happiness was Mr. Chu.

And there Mr. Chu was, that very evening, coming up the stairs with a bag of groceries as Luther was leaving his room.

“I am so happy to see you,” Luther said.

“What you want?”

“I wanted to talk about the possibility of swapping...”

“What is that, swapping?”

“Exchanging.”

“Exchange what?” Mr. Chu pushed past.

“Places. Rooms. You could move into my place and I could take yours.” This was more difficult than he had anticipated. There had been no meaningful communication with Mr. Chu before, and so it was understandable that his neighbor should be resistant. But did Mr. Chu have to lock him in his sights with a look of complete hostility?

“No swapping. No nothing. Leave alone. Call police you don’t.” Mr. Chu closed his door firmly and turned the lock.

With that rebuff, Luther’s anxiety increased. He responded to ads for roommates in the classifieds, but the leaseholders on the apartments all struck him as homosexual and looking for someone more part of their world than he could be. Night after night he would sit out on the steps of the old Baptist church on the corner of Seventy-Ninth Street and Broadway, waiting for the big green *Times* truck to pull up by the newsstand. The *Times* was nothing but quality and would have nothing but quality ads, but each new

edition of the paper failed to lead him to the accommodation he had been hoping for. He felt friendless and alone on those steps. A train was bearing down on him, and he had no ability to get off the tracks.

On one such night, Melvin happened by. He carried with him, as a soldier might a rifle, a sign mounted on a long pole. On one side was written, "Repent," and on the other, "Jesus time is coming." As Luther looked away, hoping to remain unnoticed, Melvin caught his eye.

"I must say, God does work in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. I was just praying for you, Luther. Are you all right? You aren't lost to the night, are you?"

"No, no, Melvin. Not at all. Just thought I would pick up the evening paper and try to catch a cool breeze."

"The summer is God's gift to us, Luther. He gives it to us so we may be reminded what awaits if we are not righteous in the Lord. Are you being righteous in the Lord, if I may ask? Do you scrub your soul as well as your face?"

"Not sure how to perform that task, Melvin," Luther said.

"By their works ye shall know them, it is written. Are you doing good works, Luther? Are you being a fisher of men?"

"I don't fish, I'm afraid. But you do, Melvin. I can see you have your fishing pole."

"Oh, yes I do, Luther, and the only bait on the hook is truth. 'I am the way, the truth, and the light,' the master sayeth."

"Sayeth indeed," Luther said. "And where will you do this fishing tonight?"

“In this world, Luther, what you must know is that where the lights blaze brightest is where the darkness is most entrenched. I am headed for the Great White Way, where worldliness, and its foremost fruit, licentiousness, abound.”

“How you speak,” Luther said.

“Not my words, but His. The master is speaking through me.”

“Yes, of course. The master.”

“You must not mock, Luther. The master does not like that. The tongues of the blasphemous shall be set on fire.”

“Shall be. Of course.”

“I will keep you in my prayers, Luther. Forever.”

Luther headed north for some beers at the End Bar.

“Do you come here often?” the young man on the next stool asked.

“Sometimes. Not a lot,” Luther said.

“I dropped out of divinity school. A crisis of faith, I suppose. I believe in alcohol more than I believe in God. Peter De Vries is a lot more entertaining than Kierkegaard. Have you read *Let Me Count the Ways?*” A paperback copy of the book rested on the bar.

“No. I’m afraid I haven’t.”

“Don’t be afraid. Reading is overrated. By the way, my name is Charles.” Charles had a round face and thinning hair and eyes that confessed his sexual hunger.

“The reading that has most interested me these days is the classifieds in the *New York Times*. I’m looking for a place to stay.”

“You’re without a place to stay tonight?”

“No. Not exactly. I have a very nice place, only it may be more than I can afford.”

Charles lived not far from Luther and had some fine Acapulco Gold, he said.

Luther accepted his invitation to come over and smoked a joint with his newfound friend.

Charles’s apartment was on West End Avenue, only a block from where Sarah lived, and

Luther’s whole being filled with longing for her as the powerful grass took effect. All

along he had understood where Charles was coming from, and was willing to go along to

a point, or had thought he was, but even stoned, he found he could not go forward. In

Luther’s altered state, Charles had been rendered repulsive, having taken on the

appearance of a large cat. And if Charles was a feline with big whiskers, then Luther was

the mouse he wished to devour. Aggression, if not sheer hatred, seemed to be driving

Charles to try to wrestle him out of his pants. He was nothing to this Charles but someone

to conquer; all the prior chatter had been a subterfuge. A scowl now dominated Charles’s

face, and Luther saw, as if for the first time, that vengeance could be a driving force in

sex.

Luther lay on the hard wood floor, kept in place by the fear that Charles would

spring on him in the dark. He waited for first light before stealing away. Groggy and

depressed, he imagined Sarah still in the purity of sleep, lying on her canopied bed with

her head on a soft pillow. But reality gave him something different. Coming toward him

along Broadway, with a triumphant stride, was his good friend Melvin, his sign over his

shoulder as was fitting for the soldier for the Lord that he was.

“Have you been in the land of sin, Luther? Have you been bathing in the sea of

iniquity? Are you a slave to the sodomite kingdom of the flesh?”

“Not now, Melvin. Not now,” Luther said, and fled down the block.

“The spirit *is* willing, even if the flesh is weak, Luther. You can outrun my call, but you can’t outrun the call of God.”

“Pam broke up with him. She said he was in too high a league for her, and so I began to see him. It was fun while it lasted,” Vera said.

“Why didn’t it last?” Luther asked. He and his sister sat at a booth in a coffee shop near the family building. Vera was speaking about Colin Westland, the handsome Columbia student who was friends with Roddy.

“He’s hard to hold onto. He’s got those looks. He’s got a lot of things. Did you know he published a novel last year and was just picked by *Time* magazine as one of the five most promising young authors in America?”

“No. I didn’t know,” Luther said. Some people made your life seem like not worth living, at least as you were living it. Dylan had that effect on him, hearing his blistering songs. And now Colin Westland did as well. Luther had recognized that Colin was a cut above, intellectually and physically, but now to be told he had this extraordinary creative talent.

“Don’t look so crushed. You have your own special talents.”

A talent for mediocrity. A talent for failure. His sister struck him once again as strangely resilient, like one of those cartoon creatures that pops up again after being flattened. “I’d give anything to have the abilities he has,” Luther said.

“Would you? You’re not beautiful and perfect as you are?”

“Beautiful? Perfect?” The things she could say, in defiance of reality. And yet she was in the embrace of reality, having taken a job with New York Telephone up in Inwood, at the north end of Manhattan, after graduating from high school. He marveled that she wasn’t crushed not to be attending *any* college, let alone a good one. Unless she hid it well, she possessed equanimity about her life.

“He has an older sister. She is a graduate student here at Columbia. He told me that he slept with her more than a few times,” Vera said.

“He just told you that?”

“He did. He said the sex was great, too.”

“Well, that’s news, I guess,” Luther said, thinking of Sarah and Jeffrey, but also of himself and Vera with some discomfort.

“Did I tell you that I moved out? I have a nice room in this big apartment on One Hundred Eleventh Street. There are three other women, all of them graduate students at Columbia.”

“That’s great,” he said. It couldn’t be easy for her, having three older sisters with the difficulties they had. And yet she was learning.

“You’ve heard about Jeanne?”

“Right.” You didn’t run off from something good but from something bad. And what you were running toward had to at least appear better, even if it turned out not to be. And if it was worse, wouldn’t she have come back? He frowned considering the possibility that she couldn’t, for some reason.

“Thirteen is pretty young to be on your own. And for a girl?”

“What are we supposed to do? Clean up after the messes our older siblings have made?” Vera had introduced guilt with the question she left hanging out there.

“She is family,” Vera said.

“Family.” Luther pronounced the word with some distaste.

Suddenly Vera was crying, her face an agony of tears. “You don’t care about anyone but yourself,” she sobbed.

“Maybe you are right,” he said.

“She is your niece.”

“Yes, of course. I am her uncle, and have been since age five when she was brought home from the hospital and laid out on the sofa and I thought, ‘Oh, God, Things have just gotten worse. She won’t be taken care of. We will have a bigger mess than we already have.’ Anyway, what am I supposed to do? Go all about the city and country trying to find her?”

“You should care. That’s all.”

Care. Schmare. What was all this caring but an expression of caring? Neither she nor anyone else was doing anything to locate Jeanne.

“OK. I care.”

“It’s not funny. She could be dead.”

“And she could be alive as well.”

“I’m not talking to you anymore.” With that Vera got up and left. She had one message for him, that it was his fault, and it had always been his fault.



He rang the bell on the thick metal door and waited, holding the oversize pass issued to him by the security guard downstairs. As he peered through the chicken wire window in the door a heavy-set attendant approached and filled the small square frame.

“What is it you want?” she said, after opening the door.

“I am here to see my sister Naomi,” Luther said, showing the attendant his plastic pass. His mother had called to say that once again Naomi had abused her medication, mixing it with alcohol and lapsing into a coma. Would he visit her? She needed support. She was going through a difficult time. And those psychiatrists. What good were they? All they ever did was give poor Naomi pills.

Along the long, linoleum-tiled thoroughfare patients shuffled in their robes. The dullness in their eyes and their sluggish gait suggested the potency of the medications they were receiving. In the many-windowed solarium some yards away, sat Naomi in a molded plastic chair, indifferent to the evening news being broadcast on the cantilevered TV.

“The doctors tell me I don’t have much longer to live if I keep going the way I am,” Naomi said. “What do you say, Luther? Am I knocking on death’s door?”

“I brought you some smokes,” Luther said, handing her a couple of packs of Newports.

“I asked you a question, brother of mine. Could you dignify it with an answer?”

“I think the doctors are trying to tell you something,” Luther said.

“And what would that be?”

“That you need to take better care of yourself.”

“Are you saying that I am fat? Is that it? Well, if there is too much of me, there is too little of you. Maybe you are going to die too, and maybe today is the day.”

“Thank you.” His sister was as easy to get next to as a porcupine.

Naomi motioned to a gray-haired man with a curved spine and spindly calves. The man tottered toward them.

“Luther, I want you to be a gentleman and stand and greet my good friend Franklin Valporino. Do as I say now, Luther, and do not be contrary. Mr. Valporino has distinguished himself in the world in a way you can only dream of.”

Luther complied reluctantly, rising and extending his hand to Mr. Valporino, who like his sister and the other inmates was clad in a blue and white seersucker robe. How fragile the older man’s hand felt in his own.

“Nice to meet you,” Luther said, and received a slight nod in reply.

“Mr. Valporino is a talent agent for some of the biggest stars in the country, and is going to put my name right up there among theirs. I have auditioned for him and he has given me the thumbs up. Luther, you meet people of Mr. Valporino’s character only rarely in this lifetime.”

Luther suspected that Mr. Valporino’s amiable smile was the poor man’s only defense against Naomi’s narcissistic lunacy. He sat docilely, his liver-spotted hands resting on his cane.

“How are you feeling, Naomi?” Luther asked.

“Not well, Luther. Not well, if you must know. It is hard being me, but I can’t resist my own impulses. You don’t think life can get away from you, but then it does, and

you can't stop it. Ten, fifteen years go by and you're fat and living with a drunken husband in a crummy room and one day is as relentlessly gray as the next. You know the problem with us, Luther? We were all born stupid and ugly, and as we grow older and realize the extent of our less than mediocrity, we can't handle it. Do you know why Mother had so many children? When she saw the dismal quality of one offspring, she had another, in the hope that the next would be an improvement, but the truth was that each was more disappointing than the previous one. We are an intense disappointment to her. That is why she is always speaking of heaven. Because she can't stand what she has here on earth. You think I am trying to hurt you with this information, but at some point in our lives we are compelled to tell the truth, that trash is trash. That's all we are."

"Thanks for the information."

"You think you can escape by finding a pretty girlfriend and attaching everything to her. But you can't. She will leave you. You aren't man enough to keep any girl, Luther. You're stunted, deformed, a freak. Look at you. You should be here in slippers and a robe, and someday you will be."

"Of course."

"Am I making you cry, Luther? Am I bringing you to the edge? Welcome to that fucking edge, my brother. Welcome."

She hadn't mentioned Jeanne. She hadn't needed to. She had mentioned her by her omission.

His mother. She had put food on the table. Every evening hamburgers or chicken a la king or roasted chicken and a roast of lamb on Sunday. Birds-Eye frozen vegetables.

Baked Idaho potatoes. The apple pies with cinnamon she would bake and the ginger snaps. She had sent them to private schools. With each new school year she would buy him a navy blue blazer and charcoal gray pants. And then to see her cry and cry that her children should be so disappointing, that they should treat her like dirt beneath her shoes. He could flee the hospital but he couldn't flee these thoughts.

London, Paris, Zurich, Rome, Florence, Venice. The itinerary was a torment, but the apartment he had rented was even worse. One minute he should stay, the next he should go. Around and around in circles his thinking went. Everything else was blocked out. And the anxiety, so crippling.

But help was on the way. In fact it was right there. His sister Vera and he made up, and when he told her of his painful financial circumstance, she said her room was plenty big for the two of them. How warm and welcoming she seemed. How much he needed that when the world showed him a wintry coldness. What a good sister. What a wonderful sister. They would be close, as he had wanted them to be when they were children.

He showed up at her door the first night and a woman, one of Vera's roommates, let him in. Vera was in the shower. She would be right out, the woman said. Vera appeared, robed, a few minutes later, her hair in a towel shaped like a towering turban. How good she smelled from the soap and the shampoo and whatever ointments girls used.

They went out that night, to the Greek diner around the corner owned by Greeks. Vera ordered a full dinner, while all Luther could go for was a Coke and rye toast. The

pain had found him again. Now it wasn't about where to live but about Sarah's impending trip. He stared with envy at the waiter in his tight red jacket and black pants, imagining the simplicity of a life handing out menus and taking orders and bringing food to the table.

"Are you OK? You're not eating."

"I'm fine," he said, stifling an urge to get up right then and there and call Sarah. Moving in with Vera wasn't bringing the relief he had thought it would. Being with Vera was like returning to his past and losing his future. But he had to be careful. Vera would turn mean very quickly if she saw any doubt in him about the move.

"You don't look OK."

"No, really, I am. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"It's just that Sarah and her sister and mother will be going off to Europe tomorrow."

"So? They're coming back. Right?"

"Sure they are."

"Then what's the problem? It might be good for the two of you to be away from each other. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all of that."

"Yes, of course."

"It reminds me of those summer camps. Do you remember how homesick you would get, crying all the time and a nervous wreck?"

"How could I forget?"

She was right. He was just being weak and needy, something far less than a real man would be. What was the crazy pain that he had suffered at those camps and then over Jane Thayer when she would leave him, and now with Sarah? Why was it that he could not just tear it out of himself?

As they approached the entrance to Vera's building, Luther balked.

"What is it?" Vera asked.

"Nothing. I just..."

"You just what?"

"I need to make a phone call."

"So make it from upstairs. I have a phone in my room."

"No. You don't understand. I..."

"I don't understand? What don't I understand?" The crossness was growing in her now. Once she got angry, she couldn't stop. She had to go all the way down with it. She had the same emotional sickness as him and as their father, which made it easy to spot. Oh, the stupid, ugly, vindictive, horrible Garatdjians.

He ran off around the corner and down Broadway, as if fleeing the Furies. After several blocks he stopped at a phone booth.

Peter took the call. "What is it you want now?"

"I need to speak with Sarah," Luther said, trying to ignore Peter's contemptuous tone and the import of his question. He hadn't long to wait. When Sarah came on the line, he said he had to see her, if only for five minutes. "But we just saw each other earlier today, and it's late."

“Just a half hour. Please,” Luther said.

They met in Riverside Park, on the bridge spanning the Ninety-sixth Street entrance to the West Side Highway, where Luther began to cry, uncontrollably. “Don’t be sad, Luther. It will all be all right,” Sarah said. He could tell she was impatient and uncomfortable. What girl wanted to see her boyfriend cry?

“Right. It will,” Luther said, staring at the base of the lamp under which Luke had inserted two pennies, one for him and the other for Nancy Becker, in the long ago.

He talked to himself all the way back to Vera’s building, uttering nonsense words into the cool September night to expel his shame and dreading the retaliation he could expect from Sarah for his display of weakness.

The doorman at Vera’s building intercepted him. “You no go up. I have something for you,” he said, in a heavy Spanish accent. “This for you.” He pointed to a big cardboard box, into which Vera had thrown his clothes and his books. A note was scotch-taped to the side of the box. “GET LOST!”

“Wow,” Luther said.

“You no love your woman good, that what happen. You need to love your woman real good,” the doorman said, a smile lighting his face.

“I will be back in ten minutes,” Luther said.

Luther borrowed a dolly from the basement of the family’s building, and slowly made his way up Broadway with the box balanced on the dolly, pausing to rest every half block. It came as no surprise that Chuck was plopped in an armchair with his pint of cheap red wine in the lobby.

“Well, well, the prodigal son returns. Too tough for you out there? Couldn’t make it on your own? It’s a man’s world, sonny.”

“Shut up.”

“I’ll shut up when no more truth needs to be told, you skinny nothing. And the truth is did any of you even try to help find my daughter? Well, did you? You’re the reason Naomi wound up back in the hospital.”

Luther took the elevator to the basement and slept the night in the laundry room on a bed of freshly washed sheets.

He was woken by his bladder to the smell of baking. The cheap Timex on his wrist said 3:25 am. Still in his clothes, he wandered through the maze of rooms. A light was burning in the old upholstery shop, where Luigi the Sicilian years before had restored Auntie Eve’s stuffed chairs and other valued furniture. And there Auntie Eve was, a ghostly, spindly figure, her back to him. The big black pizza oven was going. She was making pies and cakes, as she sometimes would, withdrawing them on a giant spatula and then sliding them back into the oven when she saw they were not done. She sang “The Old Rugged Cross” as she baked, slowly, the way it was sung by the congregation and the only way you could sing that mournful song. A beacon she had been. He thought of her with a fox fur wrapped around her neck, stepping out on a Sunday night, if only to the Swedish church on the East Side. She represented freedom—Stockholm on a cold, starry night, for some reason.

“Who are you?”

“It’s me, Luther.”



“Who do you say you are?”

“Luther. Your nephew.”

“Stop your foolishness and get back to work, you lazybones.”

Luigi had referred to her as “the old pussy.” A violation, saddening and degrading, the words felt to Luther. Some anger the solitary men of the building felt toward her for bossing them around. Like Tall Tommy, who would roll his own cigarettes and play “Home on the Range” on his harmonica . He swore Luther to secrecy after confiding to him that he was here in New York City on a secret government mission. On its completion he would return to his avocado farm in California and take Luther with him. In the meantime he took orders from Auntie Eve. There was the time she had him lug a mattress from one room on the eleventh floor to another two floors below only to ask him to return it to the first room. When he had done so, she changed her mind and asked Tall Tommy if he wouldn’t take it back to the room two floors below again. When Tall Tommy protested, sputtering and fuming, the laughing thing got going in Auntie Eve. So strong was it that she had to lean against the wall for support and even then slid to the floor, completely helpless, because nothing got the laughing thing going in Auntie Eve like seeing men in her employ in torment.

“OK” Luther said.

Auntie Eve continued to fix him crossly in her eyes. “Lesbian filth,” she said, turning back to the oven.

In the morning he woke from a dream of a giant airplane slowly descending from the skies and breaking apart in a ball of fire as it crash-landed on the roof of the building.

He found his mother in the lobby, unlocking the door to the renting office. “You are not looking well, my son.”

“I need a room.”

“But what has happened? You had a place to live.”

“The rent was more than I could afford.”

“It is not normal here.”

“Not normal? What does that mean?”

“Do not become absent from your life.”

“Absent from my life?”

“You heard what I said, my son.”

The cold air is rushing through me. It has taken up permanent residence in my bones. I am back here at home. I had no choice but to vacate the premises of the beautiful studio, so hellishly tormenting were my fears about money. It does make the world go round, just like the song says, and I have none. For one night I tried to stay with Vera, but the experiment didn't last. I am writing you now so you will know where I am. I need to hear from you. Can you do that for me? I feel that I have been laid to rest in the family's burial plot, but I will revive.

One letter after another he wrote on looseleaf paper, the need for communication a constant. The quantity of his letters became the measure of his love.

A woman, Miss Schnell, came by. Tall and elderly, she kept ten cats in her room down the hall. She herself had the glittering eyes and lithe movements of the creatures in her care. “I have seen you coming and going, young man, and it is my impression you need tethering to this world. When we nurture others, we nurture ourselves. This is information sadly lacking from your mind, I can see, but I would like to fill you out so you may have the dimensions of something more than a hanging string.” Miss Schnell stepped past Luther. “I am looking for a home for little Dieter, but are you worthy of such a friend?” she asked, surveying the room.

“Dieter?”

“Frieda has had a litter of little ones, for whom I must now find a home. But I must be sure Dieter is in the hands of a responsible human being. Are you that young man?”

“I don’t really know,” Luther said. “I’ve never owned a cat.”

“You must take Dieter deep into your heart. You must talk and sing to him and allow him onto your bed at night. If you do, he will teach you things that you cannot otherwise know.”

He fell back on the bed, overwhelmed by Miss Schnell’s presence. In his unsettled state he had no room for her. His mind resisted all distractions from Sarah, as if to stop thinking of her for an instant was to display unfaithfulness.

“Of course,” Luther said, hardly knowing what he was saying.

“I will be back tomorrow with little Dieter. I must first prepare him for his new home,” Miss Schnell said, before leaving.

On every floor there were old women such as Miss Schnell. The building was a home for them as well as the many students from abroad. Elderly women who called out in their aloneness to him with pocket change and candy and other offerings. Little Dorothy Ickles, in 4D3, with her jam jars full of pennies, and Melinda Spriggs, in 7A1, who gave him jelly beans, and Amanda Sykes, in 10B4, who made him gifts of coloring books and crayons. He had taken comfort in the sweet peace of their existence. But now there was no sweet peace. There was only turbulence, a wound for which there was no balm.

As she had promised, Miss Schnell returned the next morning with the kitty, and left it in Luther's care, but not before saying, "I will be checking on the progress of my little Dieter. He is my baby, and a mother who does not love her young is not a mother."

It wouldn't do to reply to Miss Schnell that a mother who gave away her young might be a questionable mother, or that perhaps Dieter's mother was the cat who produced the litter and not Miss Schnell herself. But Luther suspected that the line between the cat world and the human world was a very fine line indeed for Miss Schnell, if it existed at all, and that his questions would only perplex or anger or dishearten her, and that he couldn't do. As superior as she came across in her dealings with him, he deferred to her age and feline persona.

And maybe she was right to be so cautionary. Oh, he liked little Dieter, and was sure that the food and water bowls he set out on the floor on a bed of newspaper were full, but it was hard to keep his mind on the little creature.

That night he took an over-the-counter sleeping pill, as he did every night now, and lay still, as his mother would instruct him to do back when he was in high school after giving him a barbiturate from her locked cabinet. The pills would magically dissolve the emotional distress over Jane Thayer's periodic abandonment of him, and now the same peace—call it joy—was spreading through him. His thoughts, which had only minutes before been a match with the darkness of the room, were now bursting with light.

In this blessed respite of bliss, his focus shifted from Sarah to her sister Lenore. He relived their wild night at Camp, the abandon with which she had given herself to him, the bold hungry thrust of her tongue in his mouth and the way she moved beneath him when he entered her, responsive in a way that Sarah wouldn't, or couldn't, be. That one little pill had stilled the roar of anxiety and revealed the desire beneath it. And the thing was she was within reach. His reverie was as much about the future as the past.

Malcolm, Lenore's boyfriend, had refused to return to the boarding school in Vermont that fall, preferring instead to stay with his brother down in the East Village. And so Lenore had followed his lead. She simply wouldn't go back without Malcolm. As an alternative, she had enrolled at the local public high school, but being in the same city hadn't brought her any closer to him. He had done more than drop out of boarding school. He had also dropped out of Lenore's life, succumbing to the lure of the girls lining up to be with him. According to Sarah before her departure for Europe, Lenore was morose. Lydia was sufficiently concerned that she had arranged for Lenore to see a psychiatrist.

A plan bloomed as Luther waited for sleep. He would “accidentally” bump into Lenore as she was returning home from school. They would have a friendly chat, perhaps over coffee, and then he would invite her over to his place, where they would make love as they had that one time, and their afternoons would be filled with pleasure. But then morning came, and he was appalled at the lunacy of his fantasy. He could only imagine the scorn and mockery with which Lenore would greet their supposedly chance encounter. Stalker, pervert, liar, cheat—names such as these she would hurl at him. Passersby would be brought to a stop by her raised voice and inquire if Luther was bothering her and would she like them to call the police. And even if he did manage to win her for the day, how could he possibly think of bringing her to his room, where now roaches had been drawn by the cat food he had laid out for Dieter?

No, there was only the painful day ahead. He walked north to the IRT local at 116<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, which took him two stops from the excellence of Columbia. The train emerged at One Hundred Twenty-Second Street onto the el, leaving behind the Jewish Theological Seminary and the gothic buildings of the Union Theological Seminary and the tenements and public housing beyond these institutions. High above One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street at the summit of the rickety el, it came to a stop. Already he had lived two lives, he thought, divorced from the child who had climbed out a window onto the roof of the escalator enclosure rising at a forty–five degree angle from the street and from there pulled himself up between the wooden track ties and onto the platform, only a minute before the train roared into the station. Gone was the child who had wandered from one station to the next through the dark tunnels, wanting to

experience the onrushing train's breath upon him as he backed up into the recess of the scalloped walls. Now his landscape was not joyful but dreary, like those he imagined of the impoverished souls in the rundown buildings as he emerged from the One Hundred Thirty-Seventh Street station.

That morning he stared at the pale blond masonry and towers of the High School of Music and Art building and felt none of the happiness he normally associated with this institution of excellence, as all it did was remind him of Sarah, and the chapter of their life that had ended with her departure from the school and now the city.

"Why does happiness have to flee?" he asked Amanda Givourney that same day, after their class in Roman Law had let out.

"My happiness never flees," Amanda Givourney replied.

"Your happiness never flees?" Her emphatic declaration was jarring.

"Never."

"How can that be?"

"Easy. I take Dexedrine every morning, and have been since I was age thirteen."

Luther would often stare at Amanda during class. She had a remarkable figure and a pretty face, in spite of a serious acne problem, and he would daydream of being in bed with her. But the thought of asking her out only increased his anxiety. What would it mean for his relationship with Sarah? If he wasn't good, then maybe she wouldn't be either. Besides, he could sense some incompatibility between them. There was a hard, stone-like quality to Amanda, and those jeans she continually wore with a blue work shirt, as if it were some sort of uniform. And the way she talked about her father, with

whom she lived, and never about her mother. No, it was better to just treat Amanda as a friend, or an acquaintance.

How hard it is to live with myself as I am, he thought that day, sitting alone at the counter of a greasy spoon on Amsterdam Avenue, where he had gone for lunch. How punishing the mounting evidence of his inadequacy. Gone that wild child, whose joy had been dependent on ignorance. The world was stratified. You were assigned a ranking, which became a basis for comparison with others. What sense of unity could there be when you lived with the consciousness that you were either above or generally below others?

And yet the Greek counterman with the bushy mustache who served him his BLT and malted milk seemed happy and more than happy. He was ebullient, full of loud, friendly chatter amid the clatter of dishes. If high intelligence was a prerequisite for happiness, why was it so many ordinary souls went through their days full of joy, or at least contentment? Of course, the counterman might have been a genius operating far below his potential, but there were many dull-minded people who manifested similarly high spirits.

Professor Dintenfass looked happy, that was for sure, Luther thought, sitting in a Theories of Personality class in Wingate Hall that afternoon. Surely he possessed an IQ off the continuum to have earned his PhD from Yale University by the age of twenty-four and to already have become an associate professor three years later. And if anyone in the class had any doubt about the mental prowess of the diminutive man in the Harris Tweed jacket and horn-rimmed glasses too big for his narrow face, Professor Dintenfass set them



straight by identifying each of the thirty-five students with their first and last names without reliance on a list in only their second meeting.

Clearly there had to be a restless tumult in Professor Dintenfass's soul that he should be so driven to excel. What a thing, to be standing in the presence of such excellence. Luther didn't begrudge the little man his accomplishment. It was well earned. What made him blue was Maury Felton, seated at the desk chair next to him, who leaned over to say, "An IQ of 118? That's low. That's incredibly low."

Professor Dintenfass had assigned them three case studies, one of them that of Benson Benefisto, who expressed a desire to go on to law school and become a practicing attorney. He was, to all outward appearances, quite the normal young man. But unlike the other two in the study, Benson Benefisto had difficulty on the performance part of the Stanford-Binet intelligence test. Whereas Carolyn Carruthers and Fortley Brimbast easily and creatively organized the blocks to replicate the patterns on the cards, Benson Benefisto grew frustrated and turned his peeve on the psychologist administering the test, going so far as to accuse her of trying to stymie him. Because of his lackluster performance on this segment of the test, his overall score was the number cited by Maury Felton.

"Do you think so?" Luther said.

"What do you mean, 'Do I think so?' You can't do anything with an IQ like that except maybe drive a bus or be a porter or a sales clerk."

"Yes, I suppose so," Luther said.

“I mean, you’re smarter than that, aren’t you?” Maury Felton went on, perhaps sensing Luther’s discomfort with the conversation.

“Maybe,” Luther said.

“Maybe? Just maybe?”

Maury Felton was a pre-dental student. His transcript was loaded with chemistry and biology courses. An acquaintance Maury was, as so many on this campus were. No basis for a friendship existed with someone who had become doubtful of Luther’s basic worth.

As Luther imagined the reassessment going on in Maury’s quick mind, his thoughts turned to the speed he had been taking that spring and into the early part of the summer. The pills had helped him before; maybe they could so again. But it didn’t feel right to be on drugs when he was living in a room in his family’s building, as two of his sisters and his brother Luke were doing. It didn’t feel right at all. If he took those drugs while living there, would he not be just the same as Naomi, and would his fate not be sealed to go on existing in that drafty room? No, he must behave. He must. He was in the danger zone. His survival was at stake.

But he had those over-the-counter sleeping pills. And after his talk with Maury Felton, it was all he thought about, how come nightfall, he could once again be in its embrace as it sweetly ushered him into unconsciousness. The truth was that he thought of that pill every day as the thing he could come home to for relief from a world that had too many sharp edges.

As he was about to take the pill that night, there came a knock at his door. It was Miss Schnell. "I have come for an inspection of my darling Dieter," she said, in her slow but emphatic manner of speaking, giving each word her full power of enunciation. And as was also her way, she stepped inside without asking Luther's permission. "My heavens," she exclaimed. "This is an atrocity. An atrocity. The health authorities, the United Nations, someone should be informed of this situation. There are roaches everywhere. Do you not see them? Do you know what it means for my Dieter if he eats this vermin? He could come down with a case of rickets. Do you even know what such a malady is? No, I see from the ignorance leaking from your eyes that you don't."

"But—"

"I will tell you, because I have been watching. Your only offering to the world is the excuses that you make. Now I will take my Dieter and remove him from the terror of your awful neglect."

In fact Miss Schnell had already scooped up the little creature and held him tight to her chest as she left the room. Luther sat on the side of the bed, feeling the crushing weight of the moral judgment she had laid on him. Unfit to care for her little Dieter. The Indian giver. She never had any intention of letting him keep the kitty. What more proof did he need than the Hun name the dotty old woman had imposed on the little one to establish forever her proprietary hold? Dieter? Dieter? He would have named him Huguenot. Albigenian Crusade. Spud. Any number of names had been possibilities.

But she was right. He stared at the roaches swarming over the food and into the milk bowl. He hadn't done a great job. He had fed Dieter every day, but the roaches had

defeated him. They were like the Vietcong. They had a will that seemed to surpass his own.

In the morning there came another knock at his door. “Who is it?” he called, grateful that he was already up and presentable.

“It is I,” his mother said, in her precise English, as he opened the door. “Your father and I wanted to remember you on your birthday.”

He removed the wrapping on the gift she had handed him, the King James Bible in a leather-bound edition, with an inscription from his father, in blue ballpoint ink: “We dedicate this Bible to our beloved son. Love, Father and Mother.” He thanked his mother, not mentioning his sadness that his father should use the word “dedicate,” as if he and Luther’s mother were the authors. It wouldn’t have been appropriate to call attention to such an error, not when a feeling of love had accompanied the penning of the words. Well, his father would have called it love at any rate, the little burst of sentiment that passed briefly through him. Unless, of course, his father did imagine himself to be the author. But no, such a thing could not be. It was just typical Garatdjian sloppiness. You found it wherever you looked.

“I will read it,” Luther said, holding the gilt-edged volume in his hands.

“I am worried about you, my son. These are not normal times,” his mother said.

“Not normal?”

“You need the strength of Jesus, my son.”

“Yes,” he said.

“You are searching.”

Again he said yes, not knowing what else to say.

“But in the end you will have to find Him, as will Jeanne and Rachel and Naomi and Luke and all my children. It is only there that the answer can be found.”

“Has anyone heard from Jeanne or Rachel?” Luther asked.

“Jeanne called me collect. She is in California. Can you imagine?”

“Who is she with?”

“She would only tell me that she is with friends and that she is all right,” his mother said.

“And Rachel?”

“She came by the other night. She had been drinking.”

“What is she doing with herself?”

“She takes temporary jobs, she says. She has such a fine mind.”

“Of course.”

He sat alone with his parents' gift after his mother left. Above the sink was a mirror. He went to it and stared at himself. How strange it was that his face seemed to show nothing of the roar of anxiety he was experiencing.

We arrived yesterday in Florence from Rome, where I had to fight off these urchins who tried to steal my bag. Mommy would have us believe she is a sophisticated world traveler. At every opportunity, she recalls love affairs she had while living abroad, usually in the evening when she has had a drink or two and settled her nerves. During the day she is quite

insecure. Her money has insulated both her and Daddy from the world. These two Italian sailors asked Claire and me out, and Mommy encouraged us to go with them. But their English was poor and both my sister and I are reliant on our phrase books for the simplest communications. The language barrier alone would have made for a disappointing evening, but we were also exhausted from wandering through the Uffizi for most of the day...

Luther reacted quickly, as if delay could mean losing her. It wouldn't do to tell her about Maury Felton's verdict, as that might increase her own doubts about him, but he could tell her not to incite him to fear and jealousy with mention of sailors from the Italian navy or from any navy, for that matter. He couldn't allow her to walk all over him.

Luke was alone now. Maureen had departed with their son and his romance with Nora came to an end a couple of months later. He accused her of having a wandering eye.

"I mean, we're out shopping in Mama's Delicatessen across the street and Nora's just about throwing herself at this goateed black guy wearing a dashiki. That's not right. And she was making skin flicks. How can you live with someone like that? You get what I'm saying?" Luke seemed to relive his outrage in telling the tale.

"Sure. I get it," Luther said.

"Hey, look, you're not still sore I took her off your hands are you?"

“No,” Luther said.

“I mean, I could have gone off with Sarah instead.”

“Stop it.”

“Oh, come on. I was just joking around.”

Luther couldn't stay angry. Luke looked too sad and troubled, however cheerful he tried to sound.

As if his brother could read his thoughts, he said, “Look at this great Rolleiflex. I bought it real cheap through an ad in *Buy-Lines*” The camera was one of those boxy, 2 ¼” kind with a view finder you looked down into. There weren't many of them around anymore. Most people carried those more compact 35 mm single lens reflex cameras.

“Nice. Real nice,” Luther said. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I'm going to take pictures. That's what I'm going to do. And I'll set up a darkroom so I can develop the film and make prints. I'll get an enlarger and the whole works.”

“Where are you going to take these pictures?”

“I don't know. Somewhere. Why?”

“I'm just asking. A while ago you said you were thinking of buying a 16 mm Bolex and taking a film course.”

“I just want to take pictures. That's all. I want to do something creative.”

“I do understand. I'm just asking where you're going to take these pictures. Will you go out on Broadway with your camera?”

“I told you I don't know. What the fuck is the matter with you, anyway?”

“Are you afraid to go outside with the camera?”

“Did I say that? Did I?”

“No. You didn’t.”

“Sometimes I just don’t want people looking at me. That’s all. I don’t want them looking at my face. You understand?”

“I do. I do understand.”

“Yeah, right. Fuck you, you understand.”

“I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“Fuck you with your sorry shit. Just leave me the fuck alone.”

“OK.”

“You want some wine?”

“No. No thanks.” Wine or drugs, he didn’t want either, not while he was living in the building.

“Have some fucking wine. It’s good. It’s chianti.” Luke handed him a mug.

Luther drank the bitter-tasting wine. “By the way, this big demonstration against the war will be held down in Washington, DC, next week. I’m thinking of going. You want to come? You could bring your camera.”

“How will we get down there?”

“I’m seeing all kinds of notices on bulletin boards for rides.”

“Maybe we could meet some girls,” Luke said.

“Right. Maybe.”



The war was not one Luke gave much thought to or spoke about, except in personal terms. It wasn't right what had happened to Johnny Andrews, the Negro boy from across the street, Luke said. It wasn't right at all. Johnny had joined the army and gone over to Vietnam after high school, where he died in a helicopter crash before the big escalation of American troops began. Johnny Andrews was handsome and smart, Bronx High School of Science smart. Luke and Johnny had shared an interest in shortwave radios. Johnny would come over and play with Luke's Halicrafters set back when they were in grade school. Neither Luke nor Luther got to visit Johnny Andrews in the apartment where he lived with his mother and his grandfather, though Johnny frequently told them about the great model railroad layout he had built. After Johnny Andrew's death, Johnny's mother and grandfather—Johnny Andrews did not have a father, at least one he would talk about--would walk on by on the street as if Luke didn't exist. They did the same with Luther, too. White boys who had been spared what their Johnny hadn't been spared because they were white. Both Luke and Luther could hear that thought loud in the heads of Johnny's mother and grandfather.

It didn't seem right to Luther either that Johnny Andrews should be gone, remembering those khaki pants he would wear with his penny loafers and how he would move his lips to one side of his mouth, the way that some kids were doing back then, and how he would say "Let's not and say we did," something a lot of the kids were saying. And he remembered how Johnny Andrews was in with the boys from Claremont Avenue, not Claremont Avenue as it was down toward LaSalle Street and Tiemann Place,

With Serge and Bosco and the other Catholic boys from Corpus Christi who had takeout power in their fists. Not those boys who hung out on the street corner and harmonized, their oiled hair in pompadours, but the boys who also wore the khaki pants and penny loafers, white boys from good homes who had accepted Johnny Andrews because he was not angry the way that many of the Negro boys were and because they saw his intelligence. By then Johnny Andrews had moved on from Luke and Luther to the Claremont Avenue boys. There was no denying this had happened. But he remembered Luke and Luther. Luther could say that was so, because while Luther was still in high school and hanging out with the boys from Scully's stoop, Johnny Andrews came over to him right there on One Hundred Fourteenth Street west of Amsterdam Avenue, right where hot air rich with the smell of food blew out through the vents from the cafeteria in John Jay Hall of Columbia University into the warm spring air. Johnny called him by his name, saying "Hey, Luther, how are you?" He was in uniform, a soldier boy. Said he was in a helicopter unit flying reconnaissance. "I'm OK," Luther had said, fear separating him from Johnny Andrews on that night, some sense of embarrassment. Johnny Andrews had moved out into the world while Luther was hanging out with the neighborhood Irish on some stoop on Amsterdam Avenue. Johnny Andrews was looking at Luther from a different place, and Luther was rendered speechless, or almost, and wanted only to get away. That look of perplexity on Johnny Andrews's face, that look that said the meeting was terminated too abruptly. That is what Luther remembered about Johnny Andrews, having given him short shrift, having run from him.

But that was then. The world was big, bigger than he could have imagined, and it was calling to him now, calling him to be part of something more than himself and his lonely life. It was calling him to Washington, DC, where he had never been, to confront power. The National Mobilization Against the War Day was a challenge to him, an event Sarah would surely have been a part of were she stateside. And he could tell her that he had gone, that he had been part of this thing, that on a cool, sunny day he had stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial, where Luke photographed him with his Rolleiflex, the tall obelisk of the Washington Monument in the background, and that he had seen girls place flowers in the rifles of soldiers cordoning off the crowds from government buildings and seen as well young men burning their draft cards and even the American flag and heard their chants as they tried to levitate the Pentagon. But he couldn't say he was a part of it, with his whole heart. He could not, like others, burn his draft card, nor could he participate in the burning of the American flag. They had something he lacked, some commitment, some idealism. He had sensed the difference in the car ride down Interstate 95 with several students from Columbia University. How joyful and unselfconscious those two girls and that boy had sounded, tightly bonded with each other in the fraternity of intelligence. Luke, on the other hand, had looked stricken, as out of place as a ghoul wandering about in daylight.

“So are you two in school?” the boy had asked, in an attempt at cordiality.

“I am,” Luther had said.

“Where?”

“The City College of New York.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard of it, I think,” the boy said, conveying from his tone that what he had heard wasn’t good. “How about you? Are you in school, too?” he asked Luke.

“No, not me.”

“What do you do?”

“I work for a family business.”

“What kind of business?”

“Just a family business. That’s all.”

“Yeah, but what kind of business?” The boy laughed. He wouldn’t let go. He thought everybody should be forthright and out in the open just like him.

“A rooming house.”

“So where is this rooming house?”

“It’s on Broadway.”

“Broadway where?”

“Broadway none of your fucking business.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“Stop looking at my face.”

“What?”

“I said stop looking at my face.”

“Bill, just do as he says. OK? Let’s have some peace here,” the girl in the front passenger seat said.

“OK, but…”

“No. Just peace,” the girl said.

It was that kind of ride. Luther longed to be away from all of them, and especially his poorly behaved brother. How ugly and unfit they were for the world that they couldn't be in company without a problem arising. But then Luke surprised him by apologizing and giving the boy the exact location of the rooming house.

“Say, I know that building. I lived there. Jesus, that's the building with all the roaches. They were everywhere. They would run right over your face as you slept. The place was unbelievable. What do you do there, anyway?”

“I help to manage the place.”

“Must be some unique style of management.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So if you don't have a deferment, how come you haven't been drafted?”

“I got in some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I shot someone.”

“Wait. You shot someone?”

“Just joking. But I scared you, didn't I?”

“Yeah, a little bit, I guess. You're a funny guy.”

“A real funny guy,” Luke said.

Some days later Luke made a print of the photograph he had taken of Luther on the national mall. “You see. I can take pictures,” Luke said.

“It’s nice,” Luther said. It would not do to tell Luke that he should have come closer with the lens.

“I think those girls in the car liked me.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I could tell. They weren’t looking at me the same way that jerk was.”

“Maybe he was a jerk, but he was a Columbia jerk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, he was just being open and intelligent, the way that Columbia students are supposed to be.”

“What are you talking about?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know. It was just a thought.”

“Well, keep those thoughts to yourself, will you?”

They had drifted all that day among the crowds but never really a part of them. By late afternoon Luke was ravenous for a hamburger, or any food at all. They had separated from the two girls and the boy on arrival, and now they had no ride home. Wandering about the sprawling open space on the mall grew tiresome and the collective jollity appeared to be fading with the sunlight.

“Burning the American flag. What kind of shit is that?” Luke said, before lifting his forearm to his nose and going into his trance on the Greyhound bus they had managed to catch back home. He didn’t seem to be asking for an answer and so Luther didn’t try to give him one.

But perhaps the world was not great events. Perhaps he did not have to go looking for America in the helicopter gunship flying low over the Mekong Delta or the many thousands thronging to the nation's capital. Maybe America was whoever came to his door. Like Miss Schnell.

“It was you. All along it was you.”

“What have I done now, Miss Schnell?” Luther asked. He had opened the door only partially, so as to prevent her from entering, but she pushed past him anyway.

“To your face I will tell you. You are a murderer. That is who you are. Little Dieter is no more with us. He has fallen from my window sill to the street below. No other cat of mine has taken such a plunge, and so what can I conclude but that the cruel conditions of his stay in your abominable room drained from his young soul any desire to live. You are one who tarnishes and sullies rather than uplifts, and though I suspect you have no friends, should I find that you do, I will inform them of the lethal price your friendship brings.”

“Thank you,” Luther could only think to say.

“You deserve to be thanked in just such a way, you may very well believe.”

As Luther followed Miss Schnell to the door, he heard himself cry out, “Where is my father in all this? Where *is* he?” He could hardly accept that the words were his, and yet they had come from his mouth. It must be the Bible my mother gave me, Luther thought, and that wretched inscription by my father.

Claire wasn't feeling well yesterday, so Mommy and I went out together to a café in Paris, where we will be staying for a few days. Mommy was at it again, telling me that every girl should have the experience she had of a French lover while we sat in some café in Le Marais. I really don't mind when she goes on and on about herself. She is frustrated and lonely within the marriage she has made with my father, and so, though she is relatively young, she has already begun to live in the past, which you can be sure is full of exaggeration, as if fishing there for the love she feels is missing in her life. But she did something last night that really shocked me. I mean, it is one thing for her to present her youth in this inflated way, but it is another for her to call for the check and tell me to sit alone in the café so some Frenchman can make himself available to me for the night, which is exactly what she did. She paid the bill and walked out. The sad thing was that she actually thought she was doing me a favor and gave no thought to what kind of predatory creatures might be floating around just such cafes. Mommy is OK, but she can have some strange ideas...

Sarah's mother had betrayed not only Sarah, but also him. Procurer, madam, pimp. Words such as these were called to his mind. She had tried to corrupt, debase, the love he and Sarah felt for each other. Could there be any doubt? At the same time, Sarah could have thwarted her mother's plan by leaving the café with her. She didn't have to just sit there waiting for some boulevardier to make a move. The letter not only aroused his anger but fantasies of Sarah being ravaged by the more well endowed men of Paris.



You have shown me what I am up against with your letter. The word *perfidy* was written by Shakespeare on English soil but applies to votre mere. I see now what I didn't see previously, that the sole purpose of this European journey was to remove me from your life. Well, that makes me sad, as I am currently in the bulrushes of my life, abandoned by everything and everyone. But my day is coming. See me as China rising...

Melvin came to him in the night with a fever that brought his pale face to fuller life. "I have been sick but I am not dying," Melvin said, trembling and sweating as he stood in the hallway outside Luther's room. "All day all I hear as I lie in bed is 'Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.' Do you want me to sing it for you, Luther?"

"No, please don't," Luther said, not wanting to sound cruel but also wishing to be spared Melvin's solo.

"Luther, I have been good. I have been a fisher of men for some years now, ever since the Christ Jesus called me to his ministry. But sometimes I feel my words mean nothing, nothing. That is a horrible thing to say, I know."

"Why did you come to me tonight, Melvin?"

"Sometimes I see men and women talking with each other on the street or sitting with each other in coffee shops and I say to myself, 'How do they do that, Melvin? How

do they do that?’ And I ask myself why the message of the Christ Jesus from ministers such as me so often sounds not like the message of love but of anger and retribution directed at those who enjoy this worldly love.”

“Is that what you have come to me for, Melvin? For worldly love?”

“No. I cannot say...”

“Go back to your bed, Melvin, and stay warm through the night,” Luther said.

“I will do that, Luther. I will do that.”

Sarah was not home the afternoon he called. Her father answered the phone and said he was about to drive to the airport to meet their flight. “She will be fatigued from the trip, as will her mother and Claire,” Peter went on. The scenario was different, more disappointing, than the one Luther had envisioned. He had been hoping he could let her come to him. Instead, he rushed for the public phone down the hallway from his room and dialed her number, and feared, in so doing that he had showed his abject dependency.

Something wasn’t right. Some colossal sense of dread had taken hold. He was setting himself up for rejection. Sarah had decided, in the course of her travels, like that professor’s daughter, that he was not right for her.

Having dialed her number once and gotten her father, he was powerless not to do so again that same day, all hope of her taking the initiative having fled. “I’m pretty exhausted. Can’t it wait until tomorrow?” she asked, hearing the neediness in his voice. It was the sort of response he had expected but was unable to stop himself from eliciting.

“Just an hour?” he asked, having no idea how tiring an international flight could be.

She came to his room in a black skirt and black tights and black pumps and a white blouse, her brilliant blond hair set off by a black cape, as if she had stepped from a fashion magazine. Her black bag had a long gold chain. The outfit only added to his fear that a transformation had occurred and now he was being left behind. “This place is insane. Don’t you see all the roaches? It’s worse than that room you had across the street,” she said, brushing one of the creatures off her arm after they had made love.

“They are a pestilence,” he said.

“Luther?”

“What?”

“That story about the knife you showed me.”

“What story?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know when you know exactly what I mean. Would you really be prepared to kill me if I left you?”

“No. I don’t know. What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know if I can see you anymore.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’ll probably be going away to art school in Boston sometime in January.”

“Why Boston?”

“The Boston Museum School.”

“There aren’t any art schools for you here?”

“No. Not for me. Boston is where I need to go. But my question is this: Will you kill me if I leave you? I need to know.”

“Who have I ever killed? Why would I kill you?”

“You showed me that article for a reason.”

“It was an interesting article. That’s why I showed it to you.”

“Luther, you’re not right for me. That’s what I came to see. You’re ordinary. Your mind is dull. You write poorly and your penmanship is terrible.”

“Yes, that is true. I try to discipline my hand to shape the letters well, but it all turns quickly to crap.”

“Please don’t come with me downstairs. I’ll say goodbye here,” Sarah said, on the landing, and entered the elevator after Melvin had stepped out. The door closed quickly and with authority.

“Luther, have you entered into sin with this young woman? Have you been leading her down the road to perdition?” Melvin asked. His fever had evidently broken. His pale face was free of beads of sweat.

“Melvin, please. Swim in the waters of your own life and leave me be,” Luther said.

“Are you in pain, Luther? Is that it? Are you in need of the comfort of the Christ Jesus?”

“Melvin, this must stop. Please.”

“I will now begin a round-the-clock prayer vigil to ease your crisis,” Melvin said, as Luther ran to his room and locked the door shut against him.

Sarah’s words stayed with him all through the night and promised, like his SAT scores, to be with him forever. She had only confirmed what he himself believed to be true. The question wasn’t whether he would kill her but whether she had killed him. Had she not stabbed him with her words in his face and chest and all the parts of his body?

I have killed no one and will kill no one. Is that not clear? What must I do to prove my worthiness in the eyes of the few, let alone the many? Where does she get off taking such a liberty, running a mile when her information should permit her but an inch? Yes, I am talking about the newspaper article. What else could I be talking about when it has caused me to be tarnished with such a filthy brush? Fuck all those who would have me die and die and die. Fuck them, I say. Just fuck them.

In such a way did he write on that night when Sarah had left him, some semblance of peace coming to him as his pen continued to move. And then he wrote some more.

She has come to me in her costume, her things of blackness, as an impostor who would terrify me free from the face of the earth. And then she marshals all her financial and cultural power, her individual and family assets, to announce that she will be relocating to Boston with no other purpose than to bury me deeper in

my pain, and to this I say fuck all those who would intimidate me from this life. I say fuck them, just fuck them.

That night Luther took his snooze pill, but sleep did not come as quickly as he had hoped, and so he took another and then another. Only loud and insistent knocking on his door woke him the next morning. Still groggy, he turned the lock, prepared to see the terrible faces of either Miss Schnell or Melvin. Instead, Sarah stood before him, in plainer garb than she had worn the night before.

“Have you come to see if I am still alive, and if so, to finish the job? Is that your plan? Are you here to *kill me*?”

“Stop it,” she said. “I was tired from the plane ride. I didn’t know what I was saying or doing.”

“You were wearing the face of arrogance and conceit. That is what you were doing,” Luther said. “You were trying to scare me into my grave, and that is a coward’s trick.”

“Please talk like a normal human being, or try to.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to be with you.”

“The world has nothing that I want. Do you know who said that?”

“I have no idea.”

“My mother said that.”

“I don’t know about your mother, but the world has plenty that you want.”

“Name one thing.”

Sarah began to cry. “I can’t leave you. I just can’t.”

He took note of her tears in silence. He received them as the assurance he had been seeking.

Within a month she had traveled by train with her mother to Boston for an interview at the Museum’s School of Fine Arts. Her portfolio of drawings included effete men in shirts with ruffled sleeves and high collars, drawings Luther associated with Aubrey Beardsley. The review committee saw her talent. Then and there she was admitted. She would begin classes in February as part of the class that had entered the previous September. The fact that she had not received her high school diploma was no barrier.

The Van Dines had an artist among them, a girl with the recognizable talent to open doors. Claire declared that her younger sister was on track to become one of the most formidable young artists in America, and in so saying spoke for all of them. Luther was present at the family’s apartment to hear their song of praise, but the smile on his face was less than genuine and a mask for the anger and jealousy that overwhelmed his being and which he was afraid everyone could surely see. His emotional reaction shocked and shamed him, and caused him to ask what sort of person he might be to feel so upset by his girlfriend’s success. The news was just another in a series of mountains he must somehow climb, as Sarah’s departure for the country and then for Europe had been. She had started by coming to him, and ever since it had been he who was going to her. If her

life was about change, his was about routine, the drab patterns the world had no interest in calling him from.

In the month since Sarah had returned from Europe, he had become a familiar face at the family's dinner table. He was even permitted to sleep over, and in Sarah's bed, as Brian slept in Claire's bed. The atmosphere was relaxed, permissive, the family's largesse overwhelming.

"Are you happy for her, Luther? Are you really, really happy?" Lydia asked, from across the dinner table.

"Oh yes," Luther said. If he had escaped the notice of the others, he had not escaped hers.

"Even though she will be far, far away?"

"I guess I don't like to think about that," Luther said.

"Do you have the tools for coping with it? That is the question.

"I guess I will find out," Luther answered. He felt the blush come to his face.

"It's hard, Luther. It's really, really hard to lose," Lenore said.

"Luther hasn't lost, dear," Lydia said, after a forkful of delicious lamb. "The world is big, and there will be new opportunities not only for Sarah but for you and Luther as well. We must see life as a continuation, a journey, an exploration. We must choose life, as I was telling Luther this summer when he walked about as if he had a rain cloud over his head. Do you remember, Luther?"

"Oh yes, I do," Luther said. He turned his attention to Lenore. How beautiful she remained to him, with that bowl-cut black hair and those full lips and eyes that pulled you



deep into them. How could Malcolm give up a treasure such as her? “Are you enjoying your new school?” he asked. Lenore threw back her head and from that lovely mouth came peals of laughter, as if that were the only response she could make to a question so absurd. “Well, I guess not,” he said, abashed once again.

In her canopied bed Sarah said that night, “Don’t pay any attention to Mommy. ‘Life is a journey, an exploration.’ God, the way she talks. She’s the one who needs to go on an exploration, if you ask me, and I don’t mean to Europe with two of her daughters.”

“I guess,” Luther said. The world outside her bedroom window was dark and cold. He pulled the comforter over him and lay for a long while with a feeling of dread before falling off to sleep. Once again he woke in the morning with his arm thrown over Sarah, as if to keep her from slipping away in the night.

There were no tears the January day that Peter Van Dine loaded the black Chrysler with Sarah’s possessions and drove her to Boston. Luther did not plead to meet with her the night before and helplessly emote, as he had prior to her European trip. The legacy of her departure was simply a high and constant state of anxiety, the only pocket of peace being that induced by the over-the-counter sleeping pills he continued to take. He had attached himself to someone formidable, after promising himself he would never get so involved again. It was a wonder to him that he could function at all, given the pain he was in.

Sarah found a room on Westland Avenue, within walking distance of the school, just down from the Museum of Fine Arts, on Huntington Avenue. An account was opened for her at the Shawmut National Bank, near Symphony Hall, where she could access the

money from the trust fund her parents had established for her, and for all the children. A financial cushion had been prepared so she might love the new life she had entered and give herself to it unfettered by financial anxiety.

She had promised to call, her first night in Boston, and it took three sleeping pills for him to fall asleep when she didn't. The morning and afternoon of the next day he drank coffee and smoked cigarettes and stared with dismay at the slow-moving hands of the clock in Finley Cafeteria. His day at the college finally done, he forced himself to stay on the subway to Penn Station, rather than rush home and set up a vigil by the pay phone down the hall from his room. The post office had rehired him. She knew he was back at work, and what his hours were. He had to hope that she would call him that night. If she didn't, he would have to take the train or bus to Boston. He could not go through another day of uncertainty.

But an Indian tenant monopolized the public phone, as a reminder that Luther was not the only tenant in the apartment. Every few minutes he would buy more time by dropping another coin in the slot and he would continue in his excitable and voluble manner. As midnight approached, Luther sat on the edge of his bed, holding his head in his hands, when from down the hall came the beautiful ring of the telephone. He tore from the room in his T-shirt and jeans and bare feet to see Melvin approaching the phone.

"No," Luther screamed, tearing the receiver from Melvin and holding it to his ear as he backed Melvin off with a primal glare.

From the other end came Sarah's angel voice. "What was that? It sounded like someone was being murdered."

“Just some confusion,” Luther said, as Melvin retreated to his room.

“I knew you would be worried, and so I called,” Sarah said.

“I was worried.”

The operator came on the line and requested additional payment.

“This pay phone isn’t very convenient. I will have to get my own phone,” Sarah said, after depositing some coins. The room was small but fine, she went on. She had a hotplate and the landlady was nice and the tenants seemed OK, although they were mostly older. There was one young man, a hockey player with the Boston Bruins. He was missing his front teeth, which didn’t stop him from asking her out.

“No, I didn’t go out with him,” she said, hearing the anxiety in Luther’s voice.

A hockey player. A young man with brute strength and professional recognition and a paycheck. The threats were coming from everywhere, like that crazy Tet offensive taking place in Vietnam. He was angry. She had made him fall in love with her only to go away. She had to know that. She couldn’t just throw him away like a piece of trash.

A weekend passed without her, but the following one she came by train. Five hours from South Station, in Boston, to Grand Central. She complained about the time and the expense, shaming him, making him feel weak and needy not only in her eyes but in those of her family, as if he could hear them saying what they had too much restraint to say. Why don’t you let her go, Luther? Why don’t you just do that? It was that he heard in their eyes and expressions.

“I’m so happy for you, Sarah. You and Jeffrey are the only ones who will get free of our family. Claire and I can’t,” Lenore said, as the three of them sat in the living room.

Luther received her words as a revelation. Someone else saw the family as a deathtrap. Never mind that it was a nicely appointed deathtrap. It was still that every bit as much as the building Luther's family operated and in which his siblings, some of them, were slowly perishing.

And later, that same day, there was Brian saying, "Do you two know each other? You act like complete strangers," as Luther and Sarah sat together on the sofa in the living room. Brian punctuated his remark with his mirthless heh heh, as if he could invest no more energy in his laughter than in his life. And yet so fully alive in his perceptive power. When Brian left the room, Sarah said, "Luther, I was thinking, on the train, this just isn't going to work. I have a new life. You have to accept that and let me go. Can you do that without killing me? Can you?"

He had been waiting for those words. All his thoughts about what she owed him had dissolved as soon as he arrived at her family's apartment. There could be no disputing that she was speaking the truth. Brian was right and all those who spoke with their eyes and not their mouths--her mother, all of them— were right and now it was for him to clear himself away so she could grow as she needed to, without the deforming weight of him upon her.

He didn't tarry. There was no dawdle dance. He tore up Riverside Drive, the bitter February cold temperate in comparison with the frigidity he had experienced in that beautiful apartment, where he had been stripped naked for inspection and found wanting. The blow that she had wanted to deliver she had finally been able to. The confidence she

had lacked following her European trip she now had gained after two weeks at art college.

And it was all right. It really was. A clean break had been achieved, as if with the force of a meat cleaver. Did he really need to hear that he was a potential murderer? Whom had he ever murdered? Jane Thayer? Dahlia? Maura? Who was Sarah to speak to him in such a way, to murder him, in fact, with such an image?

There came a knock on his door the following night, just as he was preparing to take his sleeping pills.

“Open up, Luther. I know you’re in there. I can see the light under the door.” His sister Vera showed no respect for the barrier against intrusion a door should be.

“I was just getting ready for bed,” Luther said, having let her in.

“Jesus, Luther, this room is roach heaven. Let’s get out of here and go get a Danish.”

“Yes, well all right,” Luther said.

“By the way, I give resentments. I don’t get them. Just so you know.”

Was she referring to her eviction of him from her room before he could spend his first night there. If so, he had no desire to draw more of her flame throwing by engaging with her about the episode. He had long since come to understand that it was the right of his female siblings to bury hatchets deep in his head. Anyway, he had only himself to blame for allowing her to convince him such a lunatic arrangement could work. If they

had stopped sharing a room as children after a certain age, how could either of them imagine they could do so as young adults?

And yet, sometimes he imagined just such a thing, the two of them not in a room together but an apartment, as once, in the long ago, he had envisioned living with Luke in an apartment of their own. He placed such emphasis on separation from his family, and yet the bonds of underlying closeness remained, extending even to his absent sister Rachel, as if he had to recover her, make her more real to him than she currently was. Oh, he didn't know and he didn't care. He was just in such pain. All he wanted to do was swallow his pills so he could be ushered into the safety of sleep.

Instead he was seated at a booth across from his volatile younger sister in the coffee shop of the Turk. Luther reached up and placed a quarter in the jukebox and punched his selection.

“Why do you go and play that awful song, Luther?” He had punched E3, “Wives and Lovers,” as sung by Jack Jones.

“It is pretty stupid,” Luther said. “Or maybe not stupid. Maybe it's just sad. Or stupid and sad. All songs about love are stupid and sad. It's like no one knows what they're talking about. They just sing any old crazy thing that comes into their heads. Like this idiot Jack Jones, with his wives can be lovers too.”

Uncomfortable, depressing memories of high school, of sitting in this same coffee shop with Jane Thayer came to him. How drab compared to the world Sarah had opened up to him. Like another century those years seemed with Sean and all the kids from

Scully's stoop. And the music. That too had changed. Jack Jones. Tom Jones. Strange creatures from the long ago, with their hideous and glib emoting.

"Are you OK, Luther?"

"Sure. I'm OK. I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine. How's Sarah?"

"Sarah's doing OK."

"Are you still seeing her?"

"Sort of. I don't know. No."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Something had to happen. What is she doing, anyway?"

"She's in college. Art college."

"Where?"

"Boston."

"That must be hard for her. It was for Nancy Becker when she went off to Vassar. She couldn't be with Luke anymore. Her world expanded and she didn't need him."

"Maybe he didn't need her either." She sounded just like Lydia, Sarah's mother, as if he were a piece of garbage requiring disposal.

"Maybe. Anyway, I thought you two were a good match."

"I guess not."

"You'll find somebody else. You found Sarah after Jane left you."

"Right."

“Did I tell you? I’m going to college, too. I already started.”

“What college is that?”

“Queens College, where you went for a year. I’m in something called the SEEK Program.”

“What is that?”

“I’ll be taking remedial courses and at the same time earning college credits. Don’t look now, but I just might be gaining on you.”

Once again he was struck by her resilience. Pride was not the barrier in her life that it was in his. She had been OK with going to public school, and she was OK with entering college through a remedial program. It made things easy in a way, having nowhere to go but up.

He needed to get away. She unsettled and frightened him in ways he sensed it was best not to discuss with her, as she had to know from the confident grin she was showing him. Had she dragged him to the coffee shop only to awaken some old and painful fear? Clearly she knew the nature of it. She had taken their father with her manipulative ways and now she would outstrip him with this college thing, which she had turned into a competition. The future was hers, she was saying.

There, as if it had occurred only the previous day instead of three years before, were her school books resting on a window ledge on the stairway between the first and second floors of the building. The blue loose-leaf binder with her name written in large, looping letters. Somehow she had forgotten these materials and it was only for him to return them to her. Instead he nudged them off the sill and down into the alleyway. In so



doing he had delayed her inevitable ascent. Now it was for him to realize that he would someday pay for his immorality.

The three sleep aids he took that night did their job, but the morning came and as he sat up in the cold room he didn't see how he could live. But she was not done with him. She had not thrown him into the garbage, or if she had, it was now time to retrieve him. And so, there she was back at his door.

"I can't go back to Boston unless things are right between us. I just can't," Sarah cried.

"Why can't you? I am just the dog of all dogs for you to kick."

"Don't talk like that."

"I don't know. This back and forth. You all band together with this idea that you are better than me. I see it. I feel it."

"Mommy likes you. She really does."

"That's why she tries to pimp you off in some Paris café."

"That's just Mommy trying to convince me and herself that she's a woman of the world."

She brought him to the place of peace, proving once again that if she was the cause of his pain, she was also the answer.

He took seventeen credits that semester, five courses in all, in history and political science and philosophy and English. Dutifully he came to class with a tabbed notebook, seeking to capture the essence of the professors' lectures or remarks, but they always felt

sketchy, and his poor penmanship made reviewing them an unpleasant experience. The texts, even those that absorbed him, did not seem to lead to a point of view or insight or questions. A critical faculty seemed to be lacking. He felt tentative, on the outside, only half there, and it showed in his grades. He was a B student who received the occasional A. from a generous professor. Restlessness and sexual torment would afflict him in Cohen Library, at the northern end of South Campus, and after only a short time he would flee the confines of the stacks.

He would look at girls on the campus with interest, but they seemed to be an inaccessible sorority. In Central Park he could assume the cloak of anonymity. He was not a part of the college or the neighborhood boy at the neighborhood bar. He was a stranger in a wintry urban nature setting. By the band shell or on the promenade or by the Bethesda Fountain he might meet girls who, like him, were at loose ends. Or he would visit MoMA or the Metropolitan Museum of Art or head down to the West Village, hoping to find a girl along Eighth Street, maybe in E S. Wilentz's bookstore. And there was the enforced intimacy of the subway, where he could make soulful eye contact with a girl also riding the rapid transit. He had his love, and she was in Boston, but he also had his freedom. She had given him that when she left. What was he to do but have a leg up against the day when she went off with someone else?

Even in Boston, on those weekends when he visited, the impulse would come over him to wander the city. As to what he would do should he find a willing girl, that he couldn't say. All he knew was that something would draw him away from Sarah's room and the book he had been reading and onto the cold streets in search of that sexual

adventure he would find if only he kept looking., though there was actually the question in his mind what he would do should he actually meet a girl.

Beyond the vast and generally desolate parking lot of the Sears building ran the trolley. It thrilled him that the city would keep the poky old cars in service rather than pave the tracks so buses could rampage over them. The Park Street station served as a transfer point to a modern subway into Harvard Square. Just beyond the giant Harvard Coop, the Brattle Theater featured old Marx Brothers films. There they would sit while all around them the brilliant Harvard students would roar with laughter at the antics of Groucho and Chico and Harpo. It moved Luther, stimulated soft feelings in him, that such gifted young people could enjoy entertainment such as this. Throughout the film he remained conscious of their presence, his focus more on their enjoyment than his own. The darkness of the theater was something to be grateful for. It obscured any differences and allowed him the sense of oneness with his betters. The lights, when they came on at the end, returned him to the pain of the real world, and he edged his way out carefully with Sarah to the street, on guard against saying anything foolish about the film that might be overheard and trigger that same strong laughter he had heard in the dark, because nothing was like the laughter of the intelligent to wound and even destroy a soul.

“Hi, Sarah.”

A young man with a penetrating gaze and hair richly black had called to her outside the theater. Even in winter, his skin was kissed with darkness. He was with a girl, whose hand he held.

“Oh, hi, Lane,” Sarah said.

Luther couldn't be sure the young man had even heard her response, so fast was he moving, but he had seen the young man's face, that look of smiling confidence, and something more, of boldness . "Who was that?" he asked.

"That is Lane Halderman. He's the reigning genius at the Boston Museum School. Even the teachers are intimidated by him."

"Because he can intimidate people makes him a genius?"

"Oh, come on, Luther. Genius is genius. It communicates itself. He has power, gifts they can only dream of possessing. And he's rich as well. His father owns half of Boston."

He heard the annoyance in her voice, calling on him to stop pretending he hadn't seen what she and all of the Boston Museum School had seen. Luther held the young man in his mind. He didn't feel so much a wave of fear at a potential rival as envy and admiration and longing to be what he was not, the place of gross pain that the likes of Bob Dylan could bring him to. That was a lot for one look to generate, but Sarah's words only supported the sense that specialness had shown itself.

"Wherever you go you must be sure to be with only yourself. You will always be in the wrong place if you try to be with others. Have I made myself clear?" Miss Schnell had intercepted Luther on the landing in moving mode, his possessions loaded into an industrial strength soap barrel on a dolly.

"Of course, Miss Schnell," Luther said.

“You are a murderer, but that does not mean I do not have your best interests at heart.”

“What is my best interest, Miss Schnell?”

“That you do no harm. But you are at that stage of your life when harm is all you do.”

The wrong place. He thought about Miss Schnell’s words as he rolled his improvised luggage up Broadway and across the Columbia mall.

“Didn’t I tell you you would be back?” Roberto said, as Luther entered the apartment he had left only some months ago.

Luther could have Roddy Blakely’s room, behind the French doors, as there was someone else in Luther’s old room. Roddy Blakely had lost it, according to Vera. He had run naked around the reservoir in Central Park before the police apprehended him. After twenty-eight days in the Bellevue psych ward, he was transferred to a facility near his parents’ home in Massachusetts.

“He is broken. He will have to be on medications for the rest of his life.”

*The rest of his life.* Such finality, as if she were writing Roddy off and even wanted him to fall. It wasn’t anything Luther could prove. It was just something that he felt.

That afternoon Luther fell asleep, and an hour later woke to find a young man standing between the French doors. The sight of the visitor caused his stomach to flip. Short and moon-faced, he had a head completely shorn of hair, which might have been odd in someone so young but no great cause for revulsion. The jagged, angry red scar that

wrapped around the side and back of his head was another matter. It seemed more than anyone should have to look at, liked the liver-colored stub shown him by his father following his leg amputation several years before.

“I’m Marty Branigan. How you doing? You OK? I see you brought your shit.” Marty rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, and the intensity generated by his trauma caused his body to vibrate and his words to be expelled more than spoken.

“Yes, I have.”

“You looking at my head? You looking at my motherfucking head? Look all you motherfucking want, Motherfucker.”

“Yes. I mean no.”

Marty Branigan had been a medic in IV Corps. The assignment had not been a promising one. All seven of his predecessors had been killed in the field. The Vietcong slipped away, but the NVA were another matter. They stood and fought. The wound had come not from ground fire but from friendly fire delivered from above, a fragment from a bomb dropped from an American warplane. He now had a steel plate in his head. He was not afraid of blood and gore, his own or that of others. He had tucked the intestines of the wounded back within a slit abdominal wall and stanching the flow of blood of those with blown off limbs.

Marty’s words flew from his mouth with pressurized force, as a spray from an aerosol can.

“You digging my outfit? You motherfucking digging it?” Marty continued.

“I am,” Luther said. Marty stood in a loose-fitting black pajama top and bottom.

“I took it off a motherfucking VC. We were out on patrol. I said, ‘This one’s mine, motherfuckers.’ I have his motherfucking ear, too, but threw away his motherfucking dick. What are you going to do with a motherfucking dick? You know what I’m saying?”

Sean’s takeout power with both fists had acted as a magnetic force on Luther, and there had been others of his brawling ilk who had that same effect. Marty Branigan was not brawler, but he was equally magnetic. He had secured that place long before he stood before Luther in his VC garb with his battered skull. He remembered Marty from lower Claremont Avenue, down toward Tiemann Place and One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street, a ways from the buildings that housed the prep school boys in their argyle socks and penny loafers and khaki slacks. The strip was just west of the el that bisected Broadway and served as a divide between the working class Irish and the blacks and Hispanics in the housing project to the east. Marty’s older brother, Terry, had achieved legendary street fighter status. A memory remained of Terry sitting on a stoop with his back against the wall of the building. He had been singing a song, something about a girl named Carol, only there was a real Carol in that same building he wanted to come down from her family’s apartment. So wiry, almost skinny, and yet so tough. And the name —Terry. A girl’s name as well as a boy’s. And the names of his buddies, Serge and Bosco. Strange, beautiful names of reckless boys who street-corner harmonized and rumbled as part of a gang called the Freight Kings. Boys cast out into the night into a world Luther could only be on the fringes of, with his brother Luke, a world which terrified Luther when he heard of the baseball bats they sometimes fought with.

Nor would Luther let on that Marty had been with the two boys, Fredo and Wilson, the night they robbed Luther at knifepoint outside the Columbia University gym, Marty saying by standing back that he could be with those boys but criminality was not part of his life. Or that some years later Luther had seen him in that same gym driving with daring brilliance toward the hoop and displaying amazing hang time. That would have been the night in his junior year Luther had snuck into the gym with Tom Smits, Marty and his crew arriving a short time later, and the same night the man child Poppy arrived and struck fear into Luther. Poppy was all “I’m not playing with you” in his manner and known to routinely stick people with his stiletto, and on that night challenged Tom Smits to a game of on-on-one, warning that he would have to hurt him if he let Poppy win.

And there were other connections, as the day only the year before Luther had overheard Marty saying to the counterman at the Ta-Kome Deli on One Hundred Fifteenth Street and Broadway that he had received his draft notice. On that day Marty had looked at Luther as if he recognized him but couldn’t recall from where and Luther did not offer to help him, though he had wanted to acknowledge the legendary status he had conferred on his brother and him and that they existed in his pantheon of heroes.

Of such wisps and strands did his life appear to be made, fragments and impressions that brought a rush of inner excitement but which did not amount to a compelling narrative. He was trying to make much of a little, he suspected, and yet was powerless to stop, as that would be to admit that his life was inconsequential when in his



heart he held to the conviction that his life was terribly, terribly important. Things had happened to him and others that the world must know.

Luther resisted now the impulse to share these points of contact with Marty. It would not do to bring him any closer than he already was. Over the next couple of weeks he lived with his injured roommate as if with a wild but ultimately benign animal. Screams, shouts, profanities, unintelligible eruptions could be heard coming from Marty's room. His jarring physical presence exposed the undeserved softness of Luther's life, that he, a lightweight, mediocre student reading paperback novels should be spared the battlefield while someone like Marty was having his head brutalized by a bomb.

And then there was Marty's tendency to sit on the toilet with the bathroom door wide open, as if the war had rendered meaningless the idea of privacy.

A month of decompression passed for Marty. He began to settle down. The outbursts were fewer, and he was easier to look at as his hair grew in. And yet Luther remained uneasy and awkward around him. It was the sense that Marty had something, the war experience, on him. His questions to Luther as to what he was studying and about other aspects of his life had an undercurrent of mockery and contempt, masked and made all the more unnerving by Marty's smile and superficially congenial manner.

One afternoon Luther came home to find Marty in only his VC pajama bottom.

"What's your take on the war? I'd be interested to know. Seriously," Marty asked, when he saw Luther pause. He had seen Luther carrying a copy of an Isaac Deutscher biography of Trotsky for his World Communism class.

Luther's inhibition fell away. He started slowly, but one word led to another. His monologue veered between moral outrage that the United States would invade a small country and insert itself in what amounted to a civil war and an acknowledgment of the manifest evils of Communism as practiced in some parts of the world.

"That's good. That's really good. I like that," Marty said. Already Luther had begun to cringe with shame at his "on one hand but on the other" diatribe and the fervor with which it had been delivered.

"What's good?" Roberto asked, having just come in.

"Luther here has been talking some good shit about the war and Communism," Marty said.

"Yeah, Luther can get going sometimes," Roberto said.

"Tell me something, Luther," Marty went on. "I mean, you don't mind if I ask you a personal question, do you?"

"No. Sure. It's OK," Luther said, even though he didn't have a good feeling about where Marty was going.

"You see me with my shirt off?" Marty asked.

"Yes."

"And do you sometimes see Roberto with his shirt off?"

"I do."

"Then how come we never see you with your shirt off?"

"I don't know," Luther said, too ashamed to give anything but a reflexive answer.

“Come on, Marty. Leave Luther alone. He’s a gargoyle, but he’s our gargoyle,” Roberto said.

“I’m just asking him a question. That’s all. You don’t mind that I ask you a question, do you, man? Well, do you?”

“No, I don’t mind,” Luther said.

“I just want you to think about this. I showed you my chest and Roberto showed me his, but you haven’t shown us yours. Can you think about this? Can you promise me you’ll think about this?”

“I will,” Luther said. “I promise.”

It had only been a matter of time. Marty was carrying a lot of anger, and sooner or later he would have to direct it at someone and not simply the universe. Marty’s focus on his chest had cast Luther deeper into the lake of shame, the truth being he was unwilling to show Marty his bare chest on demand, as the sight of it could only invite ridicule.

“He’s just jealous,” Sarah said, when Luther told her of his encounter with Marty. Now that she had her own phone, he could reach her directly, and Roberto had supplied him with stolen charge numbers, which he would give to the telephone operator from the phone booths around the city from which he would make his long distance calls.

Her words buoyed him. He could feel her love coming through the line. But it wasn’t as if he wasn’t good to her in his own way, too, giving her the support she needed as she tried to find her way at the school.

There was mention of her painting instructor, a man named Simon Allbury. He had an MFA from Yale, Sarah said, and was a painter himself. Hearing his name set off

no alarm bells in Luther. Perhaps it was the fact that Simon Allbury was forty years old and married and had a daughter close to Sarah in age.

“He showed me some of his work. It looked so dead. And I’m probably just as deluded that I have any ability,” she said.

“Just hang in. You have loads of talent. Tomorrow will look different,” he heard himself say. He was angry that she had left for Boston, but that didn’t mean he wanted her to quit school and return home. He might be afraid of her success, but he had more to fear from her failure. What would she do without school? What would they do? She would be thrown on top of him.

How quickly their life in different cities had become the norm, but while it was the norm, there was also a plan, a finish line. When she graduated in a few years, she would move back to New York City. Then he would be safe from the threat posed by the adoration societies he imagined up in Boston and all the terrible anxiety that he would lose her to another would disappear. In the meantime it was important that he and Sarah speak each and every day so no diminishment of their love could be allowed to occur. Every day is a day that brings her closer to me. Every day that I apply vigilance so others do not claim her for their own brings her closer to me. In such a way did Luther think of himself in relation to Sarah.

He bought tickets for a Doors concert down at the Fillmore East, on Second Avenue, for a weekend when Sarah was planning to come in. But then Sarah canceled. She was behind on a project and would need the weekend to catch up. She had made a friend and emphasized he was only that to reassure Luther. His name was Tom

Castenberry. They would be going to a movie Saturday night. Friend or not, an alarm bell was sounding yet instantly stopped when she added, “Why don’t you take Lenore? Mommy says she’s been really down.”

Sarah’s gift offering astonished him into temporary silence. It was everything for him to hide his joy.

But no moral sense, no memory of the pain he had caused in sleeping with Lenore the year before, could serve as a buffer against his desire, and the speed he dropped before calling on the Van Dines only fed his arousal. He felt, as he stood among them in their living room, that they inhabited one world and he another, and that they had a clear window through which to see his carnality. Not Lydia, who responded to him favorably, saying, in fact, “It is so good of you to take Lenore. She has been feeling pretty low,” but Peter appraised him dubiously, as did Claire and Jeffrey. It seemed an eternity before Lenore appeared from her room in a dress of black velour. By the time they left, his ears had turned red, so exposed did he feel as to his true purpose.

That evening, as Jim Morrison did his bellowing thing on the stage, Luther wondered, not for the first time, whether he might not be a pretty boy psychopath in those black leather pants and open white shirt and with his freshly shampooed brown hair. He was as caught up as anyone in the thunder noise, but he was also outside the performance. Removed from the studio, in the raw, they weren’t as good. Jim Morrison was something of a holler head.

He saw the concert as merely a prelude to the real show. The evening would be a failure if he could not find time to be alone with Lenore and capitalize on this once-in-a-

lifetime moment. In the dark, musty theater he had begun to feel a sense of connection with Lenore. It had been missing on the subway ride down to the East Village; his chatter had been met with an indulgent smile or monosyllabic response. Though she was no more communicative after the performance, she did agree to call home to ask permission to stay out a bit later. A Yippee demonstration was planned for that evening up by Grand Central Station. "Daddy says absolutely not, so I guess you're out of luck," Lenore said, after hanging up the phone outside the all-night candy shop on the corner of Eighth and Second Avenue.

"I have two tabs of acid. I was hoping you would trip with me," he said.

"Back to your criminal intentions," she laughed, for the moment back to the lightness of being he remembered her possessing the summer before.

"Do you think so?"

St. Mark's Place was jumping, kids streaming into the Electric Circus and the bookstore and the boutiques still open. It crossed Luther's mind that Malcolm might appear, and he had to wonder if Lenore might not be thinking the same thing, that life had delivered her into Luther's drab company and not the one her heart burned for.

"Lenore," a girl gasped. She gave her a crushing hug, and then held Lenore by her arms, in the physical way girls could be with each other. A pretty girl, though not as pretty as Lenore, with long silver earrings and a pile of frizzy black hair. They had been classmates at that boarding school in Vermont, but the girl hadn't gone back either.

"How is crazy Malcolm?" the girl asked, as she shot a quick and dismissive glance at Luther.

“I don’t really know,” Lenore said.

“What? You’re not seeing him? You two were great together.”

“I thought so too.”

“Oh, Lenore. I’m so sorry.”

The long subway ride home was awkward. The encounter with her friend had surely plunged Lenore deeper into the past. At the entrance to her family’s building he said, sensing her desire to be free of him, “I guess I should leave you here. I’m sorry for what I said tonight.”

“You don’t have to go. We can do the acid.”

“But your parents.”

“Everyone will be asleep. It will be better than sitting around depressed.”

Tripping had become common at her boarding school, but for him dropping acid was a first. Strange and wonderful how the pale green carpet began to glow and how the honking of a car horn far below seemed to vibrate right through him. And Lenore’s face—it was, for a while, as seen from under a strobe light.

“I’m dead, you know,” she said, when he placed his hand on her thigh.

“Dead?”

“Dead but not gone.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you?”

“Why do you talk like this? You have your whole life ahead of you.” Even on acid he could recognize the cliché, the kind of utterance the old made to the young, but her mention of death had angered him.

“You’re so boring and serious.”

“You’re not being serious? Talking about death? What’s more serious than that?”

But lust resumed its call; the acid did not allow for lingering in morbidity. She made no effort to stop him when he ran his hand up her leg, and yet her apathy proved to be the brake she would not apply physically.

“What’s the matter, Luther? You’ve never fucked a corpse.”

“Don’t talk like that,” he said.

His body turned cold with fright. He was suddenly certain that Lydia lurked in the darkened vestibule in her dressing gown, her face expressing not amiability but stony rage and in her hand, held at her side, a giant carving knife.

“Oh my God,” he gasped.

“What’s the matter? See a ghost?” Lenore laughed.

He began to crawl on the carpet toward the front door. If he stayed low to the ground, Lydia might not see him. He stood and turned the lock and raced into the hallway, where he walked backward to the elevator so he could not be taken by surprise.

As he waited for the Broadway bus, a police siren wailed some blocks away and fast approached on an insane, zigzag path, its red light rotating atop the hood, He hurried back from the curb into the doorway of a photo shop where, fearful of being run down, he huddled. But as it drew near, the squad car ceased its vicious lunacy, abruptly braking in



the bus stop. Two officers sat inside, pretending to pay him no mind. He had done wrong and now he would have to pay and pay. He walked slowly over, bringing his guilt with him.

“Did you want me?” Luther asked.

The officer in the passenger seat looked up from his newspaper. “What’s your problem, pal?” His voice had iron in it.

“Nothing. I just thought...”

“Get lost, freak,” the officer said.

Luther did just that, boarding the bus that had just arrived and moving to the rear, where he sat directly opposite an elderly couple. Whether it was relief at being spared the stabbing knife of Lydia or the police taking ownership of him, the laughing thing had now come to him, not the dinky laughter of Brian, Claire’s boyfriend, but the uncontrollable kind that fed on itself. The couple held their place, not taking the display personally. But others were out there in the night, the “I’m not playing with you kind,” for whom such laughter would be cause for death sentence justice. And so Luther tried to bring the laughter back within himself, where it could not be seen.

A vision for a new life bloomed in his consciousness as he lay in bed that night, triggered by the ongoing acid-induced joy. One, Lenore, not Sarah, was his true love. Two, he was not made for academia, given the deficiencies of mind he would never be able to compensate for. The acid had liberated him to pursue an exciting life in the theater and in movies, where IQ was not everything and other facets of his being could come into play.

Sleepless, he rushed out in the morning to a pay phone to share his findings with Lenore. And she, not someone else in the household, answered his call; clearly, she had been waiting for word from him. Before she could say more than hello, he poured out how much the night had meant to him and his sorrow for any transgressions he had committed. As he tried to convey how bright the future was for both of them, she interrupted, her voice taking on a tone of coldness he did not associate with her.

“This is Claire you’re speaking with. Lenore is fast asleep.” The line then went dead.

He returned home and lay, curled up, with his head in his hands. As the hours passed, his mortification began to ease. He had spoken in generalities and made no explicit mention of acid or sex. Maybe he had not incriminated himself and so could try again. If there was even the slightest chance that Lenore’s heart had opened to him, he must know. Better to risk a crushing rejection than to miss finding out that she really did want him. After all, he had been wrong before, hadn’t he? What about that night he first met Sarah at that party, and she had seemed utterly cold?

Again he flew from the apartment to the pay phone down the block so as not to expose the delicate and profound conversation he was planning with Lenore to their mockery.

“Van Dine residence,” Peter declared, in a voice of iron firmness, causing Luther to wonder if the head of the household had been placed on high alert by Claire, that he, Luther, might call again. Yes, Luther was sure that was it. A posse of the righteous was forming.

“It’s me, Luther.”

“What can I do for you today, Luther?”

“I thought maybe...nothing.”

“You thought maybe nothing? You called for nothing? Surely you called for something. And what would that something be?”

“I thought maybe I could speak with Lenore?” He grimaced, as would a man who expected any moment to receive a blow.

“Would that be my daughter Lenore, my daughter Sarah’s younger sister?”

“Yes, I believe so,” Luther said, his eyes squeezed shut as he braced for the explosion of fury from Peter that would blow him out of the phone booth and onto Amsterdam Avenue. But all he heard was the receiver placed on the small table in the vestibule, and shortly there on the line was Lenore with a tentative hello.

“I forgot everything I wanted to say. Your father frightened me so. But I know. I wanted to say thank you for putting up with me last night and...”

“Luther?”

“What?”

“You must leave me alone.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re boring and idiotic and...”

“Don’t say those things.”

“I have to go.”

As darkness came, he lay in bed with a fat Signet edition of *Dombey and Son*. As when he was a child, he thought, "I am reading. I am actually reading, and moving myself forward in my life." For twenty minutes he was able to continue without distraction. How little it took for his life to feel on track once again. Then drowsiness overcame him and he fell asleep in his oversize T-shirt on the mattress which served as a bed.

Some hours later his bladder brought him awake. The smell of weed was strong. Beyond the closed French doors he heard voices talking softly.

"The bitch says to me she loves horses and so I say what part of a horse you like because I got something a horse would be proud of to show you and her eyes go wide and I can tell her pussy's getting wet. I think I'm onto something with that chick. I truly do." And then someone else, Marty, was speaking. "That girl, Leslie. She practically choked me with her tongue."

Their talk struck Luther as lewd and lacking in kindness. The girls they described were pieces of wanton meat they could simply degrade. His thoughts turned to Sarah. She must never come into their clutches. Never. And then he thought of his own activity with Lenore. What had been driving him but a desire to sleep with her? He just wanted Marty and his friend to disappear so he didn't have to be reminded of his own attitudes and behavior. But they weren't disappearing, and neither was the urgency of his need to pee.

"Hey, Luther, how you doing? I'm just out here shooting the shit with my buddy Leroy. Leroy's from around here. We served together in the Nam," Marty said, as Luther emerged from his room.

Luther turned to see a small, thin black man with a narrow face and big, fogged eyes slumped in an armchair with his legs spread.

“Always glad to meet a friend of Marty’s,” Leroy said.

Luther flinched as Leroy brought his right arm up from the side of the chair and extended it.

“Sheet, don’t be afraid to shake a brother’s hand. You ain’t never shaken a black man’s hand before?”

“Of course I have,” Luther said.

“Then be shaking this black man’s hand. I mean, it ain’t even black. Can you fucking dig it?”

Leroy was right. His hand wasn’t black and it wasn’t white either. In place of his right hand and forearm was a metal prosthesis, attached to which was a moveable claw, which Luther touched gingerly.

“Now that wasn’t so bad, was it, touching a black man’s thing? Sheet.” Leroy threw back his head and laughed as if Luther were the funniest white boy he had ever seen.

“It’s nice to meet you, Leroy.” At the least Luther could take comfort from having the sense not to express sorrow for Leroy’s injury.

“Is it nice to meet me, motherfucking white boy? Or am I a worse nightmare than you probably just woke up from?”

“Actually, I was in a dreamless sleep, which is rare for me,” Luther said, as he headed off to the bathroom. A fraternity of the maimed, Marty and Leroy were. But

would it last? All relationship was tenuous, and those between blacks and whites had a particularly treacherous fault line.

In the morning Leroy was gone, and with him the mirror reflecting back to Luther the tawdriness of his own soul. I am one with you, Sarah, he shouted, in the privacy of his mind, vowing to reassert the primacy of his relationship with her over all others, including Lenore, even if it only came after her firm rebuff of him.

The following weekend would be high stakes. Sarah would be coming to the city. At the same time her parents and Claire and Jeffrey would be up at Camp. Luther would be alone in the apartment with both Sarah and Lenore.

That week, in Finley Cafeteria on the City College campus, Luther did a deal with Scale Master Zach Zeckler for three more tabs of acid, aware that he was potentially undoing his vow of unity with Sarah and heading down the path of mischief.

“Unscrew the locks from the doors/Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs,” Efram Ellsberg said.

“What?” Luther replied.

“You’re in college and you don’t even recognize Walt Whitman?” Scale Master Zach was all astonishment.

“Whoever degrades another degrades me,” Efram continued.

“I’m not degrading Luther. I’m asking Luther,” Scale Master Zach said. He had been in the company of Efram when Luther arrived.

“Let freedom reign,” said Efram, to mark the completion of the transaction. He was far in advance of Luther on the tripping scene, and Luther could only wonder if his

emulation of Walt Whitman with his free verse ramblings was owing to the expanded consciousness the drug had given him. And yet those words, "Let freedom reign," seemed addressed to the air and to signify Efram's supreme detachment from all about him, life warranting little more than mirthful utterance. Efram struck Luther in that moment as drawing on some secret treasure whose source might someday run dry. The time might come when Efram had to dig deeper than to this point he had shown a willingness to do. He had the sudden image of Efram as a bearded and gigantic babe.

"I'm afraid," Sarah said, that weekend, before dropping the Scale Master's acid. And for a while it did take her to a dark and worrisome place. She sat sobbing on the living room floor with her head in her hands and crawled away under the dining room table.

"I admire you so much," Lenore said, joining her sister under the table. Lenore had shown no such fear before swallowing the tab Luther offered her.

"What are you saying?" Sarah asked.

"You have gotten away, something Claire and I will never do."

"Sure you will," Sarah said.

"No. We have been buried alive by Mommy and Daddy, but you are free and so is Jeffrey."

For Luther Lenore had harsher words, out of earshot of Sarah. "Thief. Liar. Cheat." A hysterical laugh followed. "You should see yourself. You look so deranged."

"You shouldn't say those things," he said, having followed her into the master bedroom.

“Worse. I should say worse,” she said, no longer laughing. “Why don’t you go to her? What is wrong with you?”

Sarah arrived, barefoot. “Is something going on that I should know about?”

“We were just talking,” Luther said.

“Talking?” Sarah asked.

“Talking. That’s all,” Luther said.

“Why don’t I just listen while you talk?” Sarah went around Peter’s big desk and sat in his chair with her feet up. She struck a thoughtful pose, leaning her cheek against her hand.

“Does anybody want to go out? Suppose we go to the park?” Luther asked.

“Luther has one idea after another,” Lenore remarked, and fell back laughing. Sarah began to laugh too, and joined her sister on the bed.

“I thought it was a good idea.” Luther backed away, and took the seat Sarah had just vacated.

“Did you hear that, Sarah? Luther just had a good idea,” Lenore said, and they were off on more laughter.

“I will call the police on you if you don’t both behave,” Luther said, having some absurdity of his own to express.

“Watch out we don’t have you arrested,” Lenore said, and both she and Sarah had themselves another laughing jag.

The park called to them. Down the hill they ran to the playground, where Lenore and Sarah pumped themselves high and higher on the swings. On the backward arc they



were almost flying over the wire fence. Such reckless abandon summoned the gruesome image of their skulls broken like pottery vases on the harsh cement floor. Now they were not only swinging but they were standing up, shouting their gaiety into the spring air. Luther was driven to his knees and closed his eyes, afraid to witness the disaster they were inviting with their heedless laughter and physical display. Their return to earth did not ease the danger, as killing time had come, with the park now desolate, the footpaths and benches abandoned. They had been left to the hidden few whose only purpose was to inflict harm, those with knives and guns and no capacity for remorse. The careless chatter of Sarah and Lenore as they walked back up the hill showed their innocence as to what level of violence they were facing. Could they not understand that laughter brought death, not only on the swings but elsewhere, that it was an incitement to those whose only laughter came from the harm they inflicted on others? He restrained his urge to scream at these sheltered sisters, oblivious of the Cape Man or Poppy or others of their kind, acting as if the city was still theirs when it hadn't been for years. You did not show careless laughter in this city anymore, not in the parks or on the subway or on the street, not unless you wanted to be hurt. You had always to keep your voice low and your eyes averted in deference to the aggrieved among you, those who had no play in them, as in "Are you *playing* with me?"

How scared he was. How scared he had been since childhood, and those beatings inflicted on Luke by the boys in the welfare hotel down the block, the city an extension of the apartment he had grown up in, where an explosion could happen any moment.

Though he wanted nothing more than to linger between Lenore's legs once more and feel the wonder of her lips and tongue and the silky smoothness of her hair, the night passed without any such occurrence. Not that he didn't try, when Sarah fell off to sleep, but Lenore begged him, tearfully, to go back to her sister's bed, saying of her own body that it was no place for the living.

"I love you," he said to Sarah, the next morning.

"Don't talk a bunch of shit to me, Luther. You were after my sister last night," Sarah said.

"I said I love you."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she said, mocking him with the Beatles' refrain.

But he did love her, if love meant that he was answerable to her and wanted to die when he didn't hear from her. His mind went to the dark place the following week, after her return to Boston. He called and called, but she did not respond. When the hour grew late and he still hadn't spoken with her, murder offered itself to him as the only possibility and so he phoned the Boston Police Department. A desk sergeant greeted Luther's concern with weary apathy and the suggestion that Luther wait for morning before hitting the panic button. The desk sergeant, to Luther's mind, was not alive in love that he should offer such advice.

Well after midnight, she came on the line. She had been with her friends Maggie Palmer and Sally DeShay. She was coming from the place of good food and good wine and good companionship and he from a place of high anxiety.

“You worry too much, Luther. I feel like you’re watching every move I make,” Sarah said.

“I get anxious. That’s all.” He didn’t dare to say she was all he had. She would hurt him badly if he did.

“I know, but you have to calm down. Everything is all right.”

She was letting him off easy, just giving him a warning.

On his next visit she took him to meet Maggie Palmer and Sally DeShay. Some paralyzing shame came over him, leaving him hardly able to speak. Maybe it was hearing Sarah brag about him, saying to them that he was taking seventeen credits that semester. She was saying that he was learned or on his way to being learned, not knowing that her innocent buildup had defected him, causing a paralysis of the tongue. Maggie Palmer and Sally DeShay were seeing what Sarah had previously seen but now chose to ignore, that he was ordinary and slow and unable to hold his own in intellectual company. Maggie was the daughter of a chemistry professor at McGill University, in Montreal, and Sally had for a father the chief financial officer of a Fortune 500 Company. Surely their mothers were equally brilliant, so how could they not be as well? He sensed from the way they directed the conversation away from him that they recognized his deficiency and that they felt sorry for him. Afterward, Sarah pretended that the dinner had been great, but they both knew otherwise.

And then she stopped pretending. *Don’t Look Back*, a documentary about Bob Dylan on tour in England. See Bob Dylan sing. See him take apart Donovan and young university students with their stupid talk of science. See him put down the press. See him

phasing Joan Baez out of his life. See him composing on the piano or feeling tired in a car. See him with big Albert Grossman. Just see him. Luther and Sarah did, at the New Yorker Theater, on Broadway and Eighty-ninth Street during one of her weekend visits, and she blazed with hatred that she was not The One, as Bob Dylan so clearly was The One.

“You are nobody. You are nothing. He’s a genius, a genius, and you haven’t expressed an original thought since the day I met you. Do you know how embarrassed I was by you in front of my friends? Do you know what they said to me? ‘Well, he has nice hair, even if he has a little too much of it.’ That’s all they could say about you.”

Luther heard her fury and gave it a home where it could live inside him. Not that her news was really news. Bob Dylan had a function on the planet that had gone unacknowledged, to make others wish they were Bob Dylan. He could write lyrics that made no sense and say things that made no sense and that made no difference in how he would be viewed, as he had his force of will to impose on you and make himself happen in your life.

But if Sarah could tell him where he was at in relation to the great Bob Dylan, Luther could apply that same critical focus to others. This man Eugene McCarthy, who had triumphed over Lyndon Baines Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. There was something wrong with him. He was a dawdle dancer, the kind who would do some elaborate and self-defeating steps on the one-yard line rather than run the ball into the end zone for the winning touchdown. The man was also cold, like the state of Minnesota he came from, and no one could honestly say his true dwelling place wasn’t the land of

pomposity and vanity. As for RFK, what was with a grown man hanging on to the diminutive? Little Bobby Kennedy, not Robert Kennedy. His shaggy locks falling over his forehead. His boyish grin. Adorable little Bobby Kennedy Jr., who could not pass over into adulthood the way his brothers Jack and Ted could do. Never mind his wife and all those kids. He was just a little boy. But he was a ferociously competitive little boy with a will to win, unlike Eugene McCarthy, lost in the vapors of his pseudo-poetic mind. Better little Bobby than the one who sucked, in his vanity, on the bitter weed of failure and was likely to play ponderous Hamlet on the field of battle.

In preparation, little Bobby was reading books recommended by those with bigger minds than he possessed, books written by the greats of history, like *The Peloponnesian War*, by none other than Thucydides, so he could be better than he was.

Luther was not condescending to Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. He was just seeing him in the light of his own understanding. That was all. He could not put this in his Poli Sci papers or exams, but he was *feeling* it.

Then came the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., that first week in April. Luther saw the footage on TV, the hotel balcony on which King fell dead, over and over. There was no mockery in Luther for the Jr. after MLK's name. MLK had spoken through him, not to him. The killing brought shock and sadness but also fear. Would the blacks of New York City seek revenge and kill him as the blacks of Cincinnati had killed a college student after dragging him from his car? Would they shake the buildings of the city so hard that they would crumble? Would they display the unending anger that he had witnessed on the summer streets of the city when he was a boy? In slaying Martin Luther

King, Jr. with bullets fired from his high-powered rifle, James Earl Ray had placed Luther's life in danger. But neither Harlem nor the city erupted in flames, as other cities did. There were no stabbings unto death of white men and boys for the crime of another.

Luther believed in order, federalism, the rule of law. He distrusted those who advocated destruction of "the system," whatever that was, the ranting radicals whom he saw and heard speechifying on the CCNY campus with their bullhorns. They struck him as unpleasant, unkind types without a genuine regard for people, regardless of the causes they were espousing. They couldn't organize their own lives, and yet they would somehow reorganize society? It was hard to understand what they really wanted, unless it was anarchy and howling mobs with long knives.

He had read those lines of Yeats, "The best lack all conviction/while the worst are filled with passionate intensity." But did that insight apply as well to the Columbia SDS members? They seemed a cut above what he saw on the CCNY campus. Mark Rudd and Lewis Cole, the two leaders, had a celebrity aura about them. Their Ivy League credentials added to their luster.

Mark Rudd, born Rudnitsky. He had grown up in a small township in New Jersey, where he had been a Boy Scout and a straight A student with a ticket to a number of elite colleges. His parents came to visit him at Columbia, and brought sandwiches that they ate with him in the family car. He had a girlfriend; their relationship had its ups and downs. So Luther read in *Newsweek*, or maybe *Time*, going soft inside at this portrait of the fiery young revolutionary as human.

The Friday night in late April Luther completed his post office shift and returned to the Upper West Side, he headed home to begin studying for exams the following week. The course on Charles Dickens worried him. His mind had a tendency to wander for long stretches of those big, fat novels—*David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* and *Dombey and Son* and *Great Expectations*. He needed to go back, fill in the gaps, grab hold of knowledge so it could be his.

But the thought came to first stop off at the West End Bar, and as he walked along Broadway, he encountered a commotion. Demonstrators had thronged One Hundred Fourteenth Street from Broadway down toward Riverside Drive. There they were in the middle of the street, encircled by helmeted police officers under the supervision of the top brass, in their tailored uniforms with gold braid.

One of the sitters, a girl he knew from CCNY, waved to him. “Are you staying?” she called out. Some degree of compatibility had drawn him to her, but he soon learned that she had mental horsepower, having graduated from the Bronx High School of Science, and this was a good reason to keep his distance. She was simply someone too strong for his frail dimensions.

“What about it, man? Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?” a voice in the crowd called out.

From the fire escape of a third-floor apartment of a small residential building near the top of the hill leading down to Riverside Drive hung a bed sheet. “End Columbia Oppression,” the message read, the words written in angry red paint. Everyone knew that Columbia bought up buildings pretty much as it pleased, and then turned the screws on

non-Columbia tenants to drive them out. But many also knew that Columbia was a source of stability, a kind of guarantor against the neighborhood going into decline. Or maybe most people didn't know these things, but Luther did, and so, staring at the sign he felt conflicted.

As a child he had visited this very block and developed an instant crush on a blond girl, Inga, whom he first saw outside that very building, and in that moment saw from her receiving smile that his feeling for her was reciprocated. Paralyzing shyness had prevented him from ever really talking with her, as everything would have been downhill from that exquisite moment of recognition. A Norwegian girl she was. Her brother Eddie had been the checker down at the Gristede's on One Hundred Eleventh Street. Oh, the energy of America made manifest in the determined expression on Eddie's pale face as he bagged those groceries, an expression that said, "I am making it. I am paying my own way. Nobody gives me nothing."

But the world was not interested in his private musings about Inga and Eddie. It did not want to hear that for the following year he had an abiding fantasy of going with Inga to the tunnel that ran under Riverside Park and lying in a little nook above the tracks where the New York Central freight trains roared past, and what the psychological significance of such a fantasy might be. Or that he had played loadsies on that same street that the Columbias were now occupying. The world did not care that loadsies was a game played with bottle caps and that you scooped out the cork lining and poured melted crayons into the caps to give them weight. The world didn't want to know about the numbered boxes they drew on the street with chalk or the rules or goals of their little



game. And it didn't really need to hear that malevolent Stinky from the welfare hotel down the block had crumpled Johnny, the super's son, to the pavement with knuckled jabs to his spine or that Johnny's older brother had called out the Negroes from the welfare hotel into the street after this violation of his kid brother and that he had broken Negro faces and they had broken his as well before the police could come, that many, many were the faces that had been broken that day.

The musty old Presbyterian church where he had briefly attended vacation bible school, the giant mica schist boulder between two buildings, the bookstore on the corner where he had worked for Mr. Lewicki his last two years of high school. These too had meaning more than he could express or more than these Columbias, who were only passing through on their way to the wider world, would want to hear.

Their laughter and their scorn. His whole life he had feared them. The ridiculing, icy laughter of those whose intelligence was in the highest percentile. And now it was ready to explode on him should he take one more step away from the protestors. He thought of his mother and her own deference to those, as she put it, with fine minds.

A police captain stood with a bullhorn, his tailored uniform ablaze in medals and his shirt as white as a Ford model's teeth. "You have one minute to clear the street. If you don't, you will be arrested for disorderly conduct. Again, if you wish to avoid arrest, you must clear this street." As he delivered his forceful, amplified message, several paddy wagons appeared. Now Luther couldn't walk away. All eyes would really be on him. He would be seen as kowtowing to an edict. And so he sat among the Columbias and minutes later was one of many crammed into the back of a paddy wagon for a rocky ride to a

midtown police precinct for booking. From there, the journey continued down to Centre Street, where he was deposited in a cell in the Tombs with bright-eyed Ivy leaguers he feared as much as any criminals in the grimy old detention facility.

“Yadda yadda yadda, warden,” a burly Columbia shouted, more than once, rattling the bars and pressing his face against them. Luther sensed the young man was aping a hardened criminal, such as William Bendix or George Raft, in some vintage film. Even in the squalid cell he was maintaining his sense of humor with his tone of mock defiance. And then there was another who quoted Yeats. “Everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.” He too speaking in a tone of amusement.

The darker, quieter part of the night came, and with it the chill that a wafer-thin blanket was no answer for. And in the morning, the hunger that could not be appeased by a pale slice of meat said to be bologna between two stale pieces of white bread or the tepid cup of weak coffee served in a stained metal cup.

The Columbias drew on reserves of strength that came with their more robust constitutions while daylight found Luther recoiling deeper within himself. As their conversation grew loud and animated, he longed to be a tiny fly on the wall unworthy of notice or inspection.

Picking up on Luther’s fear, the yadda yadda young man said, “Hey, have we met before? You look sort of familiar.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You’re not from Columbia?”

“No.”

“Where do you go to school?”

“CCNY,” Luther said, as if a shameful confession had been extracted from him.

“Gee, that’s too bad,” Yadda Yadda said. Seeing Luther flinch, he added, “Just kidding, man.”

“Hey, my father went to CCNY. They called it the Harvard of the proletariat back then,” another Columbia said.

They sensed that he was different, and spoke in his company as they wouldn’t among each other. He hated the accommodation they made to him and the pity that motivated it, even as he recognized his vulnerability left them no choice.

That morning they were let out of their cells and led to a large room where they were held before being brought before the judge. Several police officers stood among them, including one, Officer Harry Carpenter, who was in no way afraid of the Columbias but got right into it with them.

“What are you studying at that school of your, Slick?” he said to the Yadda Yadda young man, going nose to nose with him.

“Theater arts,” Yadda Yadda said.

“What’s that? Theater arts?”

“I would like to become an actor.”

“Why didn’t you just say so?”

“I thought…”

“You thought what?” Officer Carpenter challenged, though with a smile. Luther wondered if Yadda Yadda and the other Columbias knew the rage behind that smile, and how hard Officer Carpenter could hit.

“I was just trying to explain.”

“You were just trying to explain. Is that what they teach you at that school? To explain? Hey, you, what are you laughing about? Yeah, you, Goldfarb. That’s your name, right? Solomon Goldfarb? Some shit like that?” Officer Carpenter had turned his attention to the young man whose father had attended CCNY.

“My name is Arnold Weisberg,” the young man said.

“Were you laughing at something, Arnie? You don’t mind if I call you Arnie, do you, Arnold?”

“No, not at all.”

“So was you laughing at me? Was that it?”

“I wasn’t laughing.”

“That wasn’t laughter I saw on your face?”

“No, it really wasn’t.”

“So you’re calling me a liar. Is that it, Arnie?”

“No, I’m really not.”

“Was you the one that hurt my buddies at that school the other week?” There had been a takeover of some buildings on the campus. Some officers and students had gotten hurt in the melee that followed.

“No. I would never hurt anyone,” Arnold said.

“You’re sure about that? A mug like that and you’re not a killer?” Officer Carpenter was nose to nose with Arnold Weisberg, and every few seconds his head would twitch, some impulse for physical action flowing through his thick neck to his brain.

Luther was next in line for Officer Carpenter’s menacing inquiry. “What’s your name, Handsome?”

“Luther. Luther Garatdjian.”

“What kind of name is that? You some kind of foreigner?”

“It’s Armenian.”

“What’s that, Armenian?”

“It’s just something I am.”

“It’s just something you are? That’s how they teach you to talk at this Columbia? How much your father paying for you to talk like that?”

“My father doesn’t pay anything. I don’t go to Columbia.”

“You know, you don’t look like you goes to Columbia. You ever been here before? Don’t he look like he’s been here before, guys?”

Officer Harry Carpenter had broken the Columbias’ dismissive laughter and and demonstrated his skill in using the group against Luther, who could only imagine the numbers of men in the maw of the law Harry Carpenter had pummeled into senselessness, because there was a point with types like Harry Carpenter when the words stopped and their fists did all the talking. Harry Carpenter came from the world of the parochial school, where the brothers and nuns hit and hit and hit, a world in which his father got a load on and then he hit and hit and hit, giving his son Harry a beating so as to

make a man of him. Because you could not know the truth of life until and unless you received a beating and then gave a beating in return. All those books with all those fancy words the Columbias read, as if they could provide a defense against the world of beatings.

But the court was calling, putting an end, at least for then, to the Harry Carpenter show. A skinny old judge lost in his black robes presided over the large courtroom where the arraignment took place. Within fifteen minutes, Luther was a free man, released, as were the others, on his own recognizance, following a persuasive petition to the judge by a smooth talking silver-haired lawyer.

Luther felt the might and chaos of America witnessing the big rigs going to and fro on Canal Street. A memory came to him of Jerry Jones-Nobleonian and him running down this way with tough Italian kids in full pursuit. Only minutes before, on Mulberry Street, they had given over their money for firecrackers, cherry bombs, roman candles, ash cans. It occurred to him now, as it hadn't before, that the neighborhood kids had been put up to scaring them off without the goods they had paid for.

The sidewalks bustled with shoppers inspecting fish on beds of ice and produce. As Luke wandered, the bright sun burned away the chill stored in his body from lying on the concrete floor.

“You won't believe what happened,” he said, having stopped at a phone booth to call Sarah,

“What happened?”

He could hear the sound of turpentine being splashed about as she spoke. Her early morning enterprise diminished his enthusiasm for the report he was about to give.

“Nothing,” he said.

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“I got arrested. That’s all.”

“Arrested for what? What are you talking about?”

“I wandered into a demonstration I really didn’t need to be a part of,” he said, and gave her the rest of the story, leaving out the belittling remarks of the Yadda Yadda young man and Officer Harry Carpenter.

“Luther, can we talk later. I’m busy.”

Her tone of annoyance shamed him. He had been like a child running to his mother with big news only to receive a slap. Once again the meager foolishness of his life presented itself. Though the day was just beginning, he felt tired. All he wanted to do was get home and lie down. Unshaven and dirty, he entrusted himself to the subway to take him there.

As a child riding the subway, men would sit directly opposite him on the rattan seats with their legs spread, offering a view of the outline of their hard penises pressing against the fabric of their pants. When, startled, he would look up, they would lock his eyes into theirs before he could break away. Such intimacy and confidence their half-smiles conveyed, as they sought to penetrate his every defense and claim full possession of his

being. And yet nothing more would happen; they seemed content to display themselves in this way.

Now, at age twenty, Luther too was sexualized on the subways of New York City. He did not turn a penetrating gaze on young children, but the sight of attractive teenage girls was electrifying, and if they showed any sign of welcoming his glances, he would, if they were alone, summon the courage to approach and introduce himself.

In such a way did he meet a high school girl on her way back to Great Neck, Long Island, from her ballet class in the city. The following day she came to his apartment, where their time in bed went fast, too fast, from her standpoint, he could sense, and the failure robbed him of his confidence. She was a slight girl, with a ballerina's figure, a girl of quality and depth and discipline venturing out beyond the narrowness of her community. The anonymity that their encounter ensured had attracted her, but she had been hoping for something more.

He got her out of the apartment and down to the West End Bar. Several tall, thin Ethiopian men occupied the next booth. He recognized them as tenants in his family's building.

"Look. Landlady's son. Landlady's son with pretty girl. Hello, Mr. Landlady's son," Said one of them. There was mischief on his smiling face. Was he the same tenant who the year before had flung his suitcase and radio and books and clothing out the window and onto Broadway, eleven floors below?

"Do you know them?" the girl asked.



“Enough to recognize them,” Luther said, as the excited Ethiopian’s friends quieted him down.

“Is your mother a landlady?”

“I guess so,” Luther said.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” the girl said.

As he walked with her to the subway, he felt she was seeing more and more, and that what she was seeing did not align with the image she originally had. He said a pained goodbye and tried to comfort himself with the understanding that she had been using him, as he had been using her, and yet it was a while before his depression could lift. People took liberties, whether it was Officer Harry Carpenter or Yadda Yadda or the Ethiopian. They walked right in on him, like those men with the erections on the subway in the long ago would do.

In the waiting room of the Long Island Railroad in Penn Station he met another, a blond girl waiting by the gate for the 5:15 to Babylon. “Meet me here tomorrow. Can you do that? I have to see you,” Luther said, with unforced sincerity.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Luther Garatdjian. I am a student at the City College of New York. I work evenings for the post office and before I go there I will sit in the Horn and Hardart Automat at Thirty-Third and Eighth, where I will have a cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie.”

The girl laughed. It was a friendly laugh. “OK. Three o’clock tomorrow,” she said.

And the next afternoon she was there. "Let's go to your Automat," she said, and they did.

Her name was Angelina and she had her cross to bear. She had a boyfriend in a nearby drug rehabilitation center

"What kind of drugs does he do?" Luther asked.

"Heroin is his lover," Angelina said.

"Heroin frightens me," Luther said.

"It should."

"I don't like needles and I don't like what it does to people. Junkies going into a nod out on the street. I guess I shouldn't say that. He is your boyfriend."

"You can say it," Angelina said.

"When does he get out?"

"Not for another three weeks."

"Three weeks. That's a long time."

"It's not the first time."

"I feel sad just hearing it."

"It's not so bad. It's not like he's so great when he gets out."

"I don't ever want to do heroin. I hear it just takes you over."

"That's pretty much it," Angelina said.

"So will you come home with me? We could smoke some grass. That's not heroin."

"Sure. Sure I will," Angelina said.

On the subway ride uptown, Luther thought of Angelina's boyfriend. Suppose he was violent? Suppose he broke bones?

They made love that afternoon, Angelina giving herself to Luther with abandon. Afterward, under the influence of the grass they had smoked, they lay on his mattress.

"I guess that wasn't too good," he said. He had come too fast, as usual.

"It was fine," she said, as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Are you angry at your boyfriend?"

"Do you have to ask?"

"No. I guess not. I was wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"Could I see you again?"

"Maybe. We'll see."

"That doesn't sound too good."

"Do you have someone, Luther?"

He liked the way she said his name. "Sort of," he said.

"What does sort of mean?"

"It means I do, but she lives in another city."

"What city?"

"Boston. Boston has Carl Yazstremski and it has Sarah Van Dine. Do you know who Carl Yazstremski is?"

"Everyone knows who Carl Yazstremski is. At least everyone who lives on Long Island."

“She’s going to be a home run hitter too someday.”

“Your girlfriend plays baseball?”

“Not exactly. She’s an artist, or studying to be one.”

“What are you studying to be?” Angelina asked.

“I read Charles Dickens. I study poli sci.”

“What is poli sci?”

“Political science. I think it’s something about government, but I don’t really know.” He laughed, and she laughed, too.

Sleeping with Angelina and the ballerina had made him happy, really happy. Sex was the most wonderful thing, and he wanted more and more. He wanted to *know* every pretty girl he saw. It was just that way.

“You do well with the ladies,” Marty Branigan said. His hair had grown out, making him easier to look at, and the volatile eruptions were fewer. *Ladies*. A word from another time, and with the sound of false elegance, like Sean with his talk of *class*.

“Not really,” Luther said.

“You have a different one over here every week. Where do you meet them?”

“I don’t know. If I have a feeling about a girl, I just talk to her.”

“Gargoyle love. There’s nothing like it,” Roberto said, having joined them.

“Am I right, Roberto? Isn’t he with a different girl every week?” Marty asked.

“And he’s got a girlfriend in Boston, too. She’s really something,” Roberto said.

“So how do you do that, man? You got a girlfriend but then you see other girls?”

Marty asked.

“Gargoyle does whatever he wants to do,” Roberto said.

“Why do you call him Gargoyle? That isn’t nice,” Marty said.

“Look at his face,” Roberto said.

Roberto’s jealousy made the name calling less painful than hearing Sarah discussed by his roommates. She was the treasure they must not touch.

On one of Sarah’s weekend visits to New York City, Luther found a letter sticking out of her bag. The return address on the envelope had Lenore’s name on it. The letter was not a long one. He read it there in Sarah’s room.

Luther is as dull and depressing as anyone I have ever met. I know he is your boyfriend, but he is a moron of mediocrity, if you ask me. All his talk about law school and fighting injustice. He should fight his own injustice and disappear. Again I know I shouldn’t say this, but you are my sister and you have such a bright future. You really should consider finding someone more worthy of you. Mommy and Daddy love Brian, but they think Luther may have emotional problems after his behavior last summer up at Camp. Anyway, I got through the Doors concert OK. I tried to pretend I was alone, which was hard to do with him commenting on the show every other minute.

Luther placed the letter back in the envelope. OK, he thought. Just OK. He stared out the open window as the screams of children playing in the park across the street rose in the soft spring air and lingered there for the longest while.

“I was just saying to Sarah how much she has blossomed. And how are you doing in your life, Luther?” Lydia asked, as Luther entered the living room.

“I am blossoming, too.”

“What are you studying this semester, Luther.”

“Literature. Poli Sci. A bit of philosophy.”

“Could you tell us a little more about your philosophy course?”

“What to think. How to think. The metaphysical reality of Charles Dickens.”

“How extraordinary. I didn’t think of Charles Dickens as philosophically inclined.”

“He was stuck in his childhood. It made him that way. Moral outrage and all that. All philosophers are liars. Essentially, they want to get their own way.”

“I see. And who are these philosophers you are reading?”

“Immanuel Kant. Descartes. Schopenhauer. I forget. Essentially, I sit in the back of the class and hide.”

“Why would you do that, Luther?”

“Because they speak of syllogisms, and I keep forgetting what a syllogism is.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of. I have only a rough idea and couldn’t give you a precise example. That’s why we have reference books, so we can look things up.”

“You choose to look on the bright side,” Luther said.

“We must. We must,” Lydia said.

He had heard the same from her before. She had a need to rescue and inspire and be an angel of light in people’s lives. But were her children worthy of her? The same

question applied to him and his siblings in relation to their mother. It was all right to be of woman born as long as you knew it and recognized the matriarchal power that sustained a family enterprise. It's when you didn't that you got in trouble, something those philosophers maybe didn't understand.

Then the semester was over. He filled out the blue examination booklets and handed in term papers and took off for Boston, having given his professors postcards with Sarah's address so he could receive his grades quickly. One by one, the cards arrived at the rooming house, and he had to bear the public shame of one B after another, the one exception being the Shakespeare class he had taken with weary Professor Gitlow, who frequently would remind his students that they were not worthy of the bard. What law school would take him with grades such as these? he could only wonder, as he tore up the cards so Sarah would not see for herself what she already knew, that he was forever rooted to the plane of mediocrity.

He wandered down to the corner luncheonette after receiving the last of the cards. In jumbo type the headline of the *Boston Globe* shouted, "Robert F. Kennedy Assassinated in Los Angeles Hotel Ballroom." There it was, a photo of the senator laid out on the stage face up and glassy-eyed in a blood-soaked white shirt. A suspect was in custody. Sirhan Sirhan. A name to remember.

Peter arrived with the Black Chrysler to move Sarah back home. Luther and Sarah carried her boxes down to the car. From there Peter took over, arranging the contents in

the rear of the station wagon. He had a mind for organization and said as much. Peter applied himself to the task with vigor.

The assassination had cast a pall over the day, at least for Luther and Sarah.

“Yes, it is a terrible, but in another sense it means nothing,” Peter said.

They had left behind the Massachusetts Turnpike for Interstate 95 and menacing trailer trucks.

“How can it mean nothing?” Sarah asked.

“Because politicians are puppets controlled by behind the scene manipulators, the moneyed interests who secretly rule this country. Kennedy, Humphrey, Nixon. They are all interchangeable.”

“Then why do we vote Democratic in every election if it doesn’t matter?” Sarah asked.

“Simply to delude ourselves that there is hope for a change for the better.”

“My mother says that if anyone doesn’t like it here, then he or she should just go to Russia and see how they like it there,” Luther said.

“Your mother said that?” Peter asked, allowing himself to smile.

“Oh yes, to Russia with all of them, my mother said.”

“Not an uncommon viewpoint when you think about it,” Peter said.

“I would like to go to Russia,” Luther said. “I would like to go to a lot of places. I really haven’t been anywhere.”

“Well, maybe you will, Luther. Maybe you will.”



“I want to go to Sweden. I want to stand on a Stockholm street corner looking up at the starry Scandinavian sky on a cool, clear Sunday night.”

“Why a Sunday night?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know. I think Sunday night represents freedom. Sunday was always a long church day in my family, and when we got home Hannah was hogging the TV so I could never get to watch *Walt Disney*.”

“So you’re going to watch *Walt Disney* in Stockholm?” Sarah laughed.

“No. Just the stars, I guess. Something like that,” Luther said.

Peter was too disdainful, Luther thought. The leading Democratic candidate for the presidential nomination had been shot to death and Peter could just dismiss the assassination as nothing. Ideas really were powerful. They had the ability to remove you from the reality of people’s lives. Or maybe Peter saw more deeply and was guided by a higher truth that freed him from the attachments the average person developed for this politician or that. Whatever, Luther was stunned and stayed stunned for days that Robert Kennedy was gone and in a frazzle as to what that could mean for the Democratic Party come the fall.

He was counting on Sarah staying in the city and taking a job. He was working. Why shouldn’t she? Isn’t that what college students did? And didn’t she owe it to him that they stay together for a couple of months after making him fall in love with her and then leaving for another city? Lydia too saw the value of her daughter being out there in the

real world. She didn't want Sarah to take the course of withdrawal that Peter had chosen for himself.

A family friend owned a graphic design firm down in Greenwich Village and hired Sarah to do paste-ups and mechanicals. Her first day on the job Luther found himself anxious. Maybe he had gone too far in encouraging her to forsake Camp for a summer in the hot city. Maybe it wasn't his place to tell her how to live her life.

An uneasy sense passed through him of a coming storm as he stood on the tree-lined West Village street waiting for her to emerge from the walkup building where the design firm was located. Some minutes later she came down the steps and blew right past him at such a pace that he had to jog to catch up. At the corner he placed his hand on her shoulder but she brushed it off and turned. "I'm not doing some crappy work eight hours a day with a bunch of creeps making passes at me. Is that clear? I am an artist, not some cunt for them to play with. I'm going up to Camp tomorrow morning."

He could only watch with silent passivity as she headed off up the avenue and descended into the subway before beginning his walk uptown to the post office at Thirty-Third and Eighth Avenue.

He had a half hour to sit in the Automat before reporting for his shift. The cup of coffee and the slice of apple pie helped to settle him. The Automat had a way of rooting him in his history, his mother in her polka dot dress and Luke and Vera and him in their Sunday best after hours in the tabernacle.

The numbness wore off and anger found him. You'll get yours. You'll all get yours, sitting up there in the country pampering yourselves and totally divorced from the

real world. Hearing his mother say, *I work. Why shouldn't they?* of those living in the SRO down the block who received welfare checks.

Walking over that little bridge and into the big gray post office building was hard. She had crapped on his life. She hadn't meant to but she had, saying she didn't have to do the things he did or anything she didn't want to do, that all she had to do was be an artist because everything else was unimportant. She had made his life unimportant, worthless, as Bob Dylan had done in *Don't Look Back*.

That summer he took a course in post-World War II American literature with Professor Earl Lovit. There were no classes. It was something called a tutorial. He met with Professor Lovit one to one in his office and talked about the novels he had read while the professor smoked his pipe. The professor was a kind man who had himself written seven novels, none of which Luther had read. Luther read Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Deer Park*. He read both novels with great admiration but also fear. He would never be able to put words on paper as Norman Mailer had. Norman Mailer had a powerful mind that had elevated him from Boys High in Brooklyn to Harvard University. His sentences were dense and tooled and flowed within a complicated, formidable structure. He could not beat Norman Mailer, but maybe, just maybe, he could beat Professor Earl Lovit, whose seven novels were all out of print. Professor Lovit had gotten his PhD from Boston University, not having been good enough for Harvard or Yale or Columbia or any of the Ivy League doctoral programs in English literature. And Professor Lovit had not gone to a college or university of any renown as an undergraduate either.

Professor Lovit had gone to Chico State University. Hah. What was that, Chico State? And it had taken Professor Lovit twenty years to earn his PhD after graduating from world-famous Chico State. This information Luther found in the City College catalog. Not that Luther even wanted a PhD. What was that, reading a bunch of novels and then writing some words about them sufficient to get your degree so you could complete the cycle by endlessly discussing literature with your own students? No, a PhD wasn't right. It wasn't hard enough. Better to get a JD. A JD was the only possibility for becoming a man for those without an aptitude for science.

He liked Professor Lovit. He liked him a whole lot. It was more that he didn't respect him. What was that, a man who smoked a pipe and offered him a genial smile? No, no, Professor Lovit was just a weightless fool like him, a speck of insignificance floating through the universe.

Surely he could beat Professor Lovit. And maybe, just maybe, he could beat Mr. Norman Mailer, too.

His other summer school course was in modern drama. The course met in Mott Hall, at the south end of the CCNY campus, right on Convent Avenue. The building made him happy, though he couldn't say why. It had a columned entranceway, and beyond it, there was a pleasant stretch of lawn on which to sit.

Ibsen and Strindberg were on the reading list, as the fathers of modern drama. Playwrights were different from novelists; they could produce a world with so few strokes. He remained silent, not participating in classroom discussions, which were dominated by a young, rugged-looking man who offered subtle insights in German-

accented English. How smart the world is, Luther could only think, feeling once again temporarily defeated.

There was, in the class, an older student with a somber, bearded face covered with sweat who stood out as well, though not for his intellect. In his open attaché case Luther glimpsed, among his books and legal pads, a pint of vodka. The sight of the bottle set off alarm bells such as Luther didn't know he possessed; it marked the man as a virtual alien and at the same time stripped him naked.

Sarah reached out to Luther from the safety of Camp. She had set up her studio and enrolled in a drawing class down in Woodstock, and her life was once again in working order. She did not have to be seen as a piece of ass for horny office men or allow pedestrian work to interfere with her dream of greatness. Like her father, she was not made for this world, not as it was constituted.

“Mommy and Daddy asked about you. I told them you were going to summer school and working hard. They were really impressed. Mommy said you should come up when you can.”

With that one phone call she had returned him to the circle of her love, and not only hers but that of her parents. If he remembered Sarah's rage on that day in June, he did not dwell on it.

He felt strong and happy on the warm and sunny Saturday afternoon he boarded the Pine Hill Trailways bus to Shandaken. He was going to Camp as part of the earth, not uprooted from it, as had been the case the previous summer when he left his post office

job to be with Sarah and her family for a month. And there she was, waiting for him in the jeep as the bus pulled to the side of the road in front of the Log Cabin Inn. The presence of her mother seated alongside Sarah was a bit strange, but maybe she simply wanted to welcome him.

As he approached the jeep along the shoulder of Route 28, Lydia stepped out and held him, unsmiling, by both arms and locked him in with her eyes. He could feel the quiver in her hands and see it in her face, the same intensity that Peter's camera had captured in those black and white photos that hung on the wall of the guest house of her on stage during summer stock performances.

"I have some difficult news, Luther. Lenore is dead. My baby is dead."

As she spoke a hearse appeared on the hollow road. The curtains in the side window were pulled closed. How quietly the hearse passed the jeep and turned onto Route 28, raising dust as it went.

Lenore is in that hearse, Luther thought.

Several hours before Peter had noticed next to the bathroom sink his bottle of prescription sleeping pills lying open and empty. He alerted Claire, who rushed to Lenore's room and found, on her made up bed, a terse note, written on a single piece of loose-leaf paper. "I'm sorry. I couldn't stay. No one is to blame."

Maggio Capici had arrived with his wife, Sally, that morning. He had seen Lenore walk past as he sat by the pool some hours earlier. Following her path, he found her lying unconscious in the meadow beyond the shale pile, under an apple tree. She was dead, having choked on her own vomit.

Family friends called, word having somehow spread. Lydia took all of them. She was good on the phone. “Lydia is handling this with such grace,” Sally Capici said, overhearing Lydia a short distance away in the dining room receiving the callers’ condolences. *Grace*. Luther remembered that word applied to Jacqueline Kennedy after her husband’s assassination. It was a confining word. It assigned you a role. It had white gloves on it. It meant be proper. Don’t cry, don’t wail, don’t emote. Whoever assigned you the word could take it away.

Some kind of unfolding was going on, people possibly brought closer to each other by the loss than they really were. The Kennedy assassinations, both of them, though the first more than the second, had been that way. Luther didn’t feel grief. He felt anger. She had disappeared on them. He had disappeared on people too, but not that. What she had done was so violent, so final, so wasteful.

A pastor arrived the following day to say a few words, right there, in the living room. An old and spindly man, he read the twenty-third psalm. During the reading, Luther excused himself and went to the bathroom to relieve himself. Anxiety took him there. Evidently, the sound of the toilet could be heard by the gathered. Well, the indiscretion was just one of many he would have to live with.

After the service, the gathered headed up to the meadow for the burial of Lenore’s ashes. Flowers were laid on the site where the urn was buried and the pastor offered final words, saying Lenore’s soul was now in the care of God. The day was brutally hot. Luther was glad when they could get out of the sun.

More was revealed in the following days. Lenore had gone down to the city in the hope of reconciling with Malcolm, though it had been over a year since they were together. According to Claire, when Malcolm visited with Lenore at the family's apartment, he noticed that the door of the medicine chest was open when he went into the bathroom. Possibly Lenore had been trying to signal her desperation, but though she looked sad and depressed, she hadn't overtly threatened to hurt herself and he couldn't imagine her doing any such thing. Claire said he wept when she gave him the news of Lenore's death.

Lenore has maimed him for life, Luther thought. She couldn't have done more to disfigure Malcolm than if she had thrown acid in his pretty face.

Maggio Capici had access to people who could take care of Malcolm. They could make him disappear, too. In fact, they could do it so no one would ever find him unless they wanted to dredge the ocean floor. Maggio approached Peter with his proposal. He was just trying to be helpful in the family's time of need. But it was not Peter's way to hurt anyone, especially to the point of finality, and not a boy with Malcolm's physical gift. Peter had been young and beautiful, too. He knew the power that came with such beauty.

"No one should love like that. That is terrible love," Peter said quietly, of Lenore, suggesting, with those few words, that her death was not Malcolm's doing.

Luther sat the next morning with Lydia in the kitchen. The house was old, but the bathroom and the kitchen had been modernized. Something, her power, had led him to her. He had need of her now, the warmth she could provide. She was still too stunned, too



bereft, to feel anger. The day was gray, the sky overcast, a match for Luther's mood. He had Cuba on his mind.

“The revolution has gone bad. Everything goes bad eventually. This country has gone bad. Lunatics have been given guns for the purpose of hurting people.”

“You must live on the bright side. Visit the other, but learn to live in the light. Do you have plants, Luther? A cat?”

“I had a cat, but Miss Schnell took him away from me.”

“Miss Schnell?”

“The Cat Lady. She must have twenty cats and looks like a cat herself. In fact, she has the same light, cautious movements as a cat.”

“Why did she take him away from you?”

“She said I was neglectful. You see, the room was overrun with roaches. They would get into Dieter's food and then Dieter would eat the roaches too. Miss Schnell didn't like that. She said he would get rickets.”

“Do you have roaches where you live now?”

“Oh, no. My mother's building, where I had this room, is famous for its roaches.”

A slight humming noise came from Lydia's throat, and there was a tremble in her hands as well. She was a woman holding herself together. He saw the pain in her face. But he was certain that pain was not in his own face. He did not deserve to have the pain of grief in his face. Lenore had rebuffed and reviled him. She had come to see him as odious. But she was in his mind. She had put herself there with what she had done. She had buried herself in the minds of all of them.

“Luther, I know you have had some difficulties in your life. I don’t want you to be offended, but I wonder if you wouldn’t benefit from seeing a therapist. There is one I have in mind. I will provide you with the necessary information sometime soon.”

“What will he do for me?”

“You will have the opportunity to work through problems that hinder you from living your life as fully as you could.”

“But I do live my life.”

“You live in a place of darkness, Luther. You don’t mean to, but there it is.”

“A place of darkness?”

“As I said to you once before, I want you to choose life.”

She exhaled a stream of smoke from the cigarette she had lit, directing it away from him even as she held him with her gaze. Her expression had grown hard; she relied on it to communicate what she had only partially expressed in words.

“Well, OK,” he said, sensing the conversation was over.

For the new school year he had received a work-study grant. During the day he was paid to wander about the west twenties and thirties tallying up the number of residential dwellings and commercial establishments as part of a study commissioned by the New York City government.

“I want us to undertake this survey with energy and vigor,” a young man named Hiram Pell instructed Luther and the other students in the summer program at the start of the day. On the wall Hiram had attached a map of the area. The map had little pins with

red heads in it, as you might find in a war room. Hiram was a student at Brown University, and so Luther could only assume he was the manager in recognition of his high intelligence.

The energy and vigor Hiram exuded and espoused in his war room was not infectious. Luther lived for air-conditioned breaks from the relentless August sun. A slacker he might be, but all in all the survey seemed like an exercise in pointlessness and destined for burial in some municipal vault. And yet, as he sluggishly canvassed the vibrant commercial stretches west of Fifth Avenue as well as the residential dwellings where the lonely refuse of the city dwelt, he recognized that old familiar feeling that he had met his superior in Hiram Pell and equally familiar pang of envy and sadness that Hiram should have access to a world forever denied him by virtue of the high board score numbers Luther had been unable to attain. The world will belong to Hiram Pell and not to me, he thought, outside of Macy's, in Herald Square, on a scorching afternoon.

Hiram wore his hair short and parted on the side. He did not have the bush that had sprouted from Luther's head. And so the differences between them were of appearance as well as disposition. But Luther had returned to the city with a crying need to be heard. Something terrible had happened to the sister of his girlfriend and his girlfriend's family. Death had come and it was not going away. The memory of it, of her, had to be preserved. It could not be allowed to float invisible in the air. He needed a receipt for the pain he was experiencing.

And so, at the end of the day, he approached Hiram, who was sticking more pins in the area map to show his team's progress. Like Bobby Kennedy himself, Hiram had

the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up and the obligatory tie hanging loose around his neck.

“Hiram, something bad, something beyond bad, has happened.”

“Who are you again? Refresh my memory,” Hiram said, turning to face Luther.

“I am Luther Garatdjian, and I have something to say.”

“OK, Luther. Shoot,” Hiram said.

“It’s only this. Someone has died.”

“Hey, wait, are you getting personal? Is this something I need to hear?”

“No. Not if you don’t want to.”

“Because I don’t want things going negative. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So go ahead, speak your mind, because I always want you to feel you can come to me, but frame what you have to say positively. You understand?”

“Yes, of course. Positive. The day was sunny and pleasant on which my girlfriend’s younger sister killed herself.”

“Whoa. OK. Stop there. You were doing fine with the first part of your sentence, and then things went off the cliff. Now can you reconstruct your message for me?”

“No, I can’t,” Luther said.

“I need you to try. You see, much as I don’t look like it, I am a student of the human mind and I can tell at a glance that you hold onto sorrow like a dog holds onto a bone. Now open your jaws and let that stinky old bone go so we can move forward. You hear what I am saying?”

Luther took no deep offense at Hiram's blockage of him from the sorrow gulch. He understood Hiram's mentality, his can-do spirit. Hiram was an American type Luther had encountered before, an unencumbered sort who planned his every move. And yet, he could not live in the space that Hiram inhabited. It was too cold and meaningless and forsaking of all feeling.

"I'll see what I can do," Luther said, and left Hiram to his big board.

The Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia that August. Luther shuddered at the implacable Soviet urge for domination and at the same time fell in love with the sight of Soviet tanks on the Old World streets of Prague, remembering the model Soviet tanks of his childhood with the red star on their turrets. How glorious that adorning star.

And now there were signs of disturbance in the once placid and orderly lives of Peter and Lydia Van Dine, who had left Camp after Lenore's death and returned to New York City.

"Could Sarah perhaps stay with you until she goes back to school? I have asked as well that Claire stay with Brian. Lydia needs to be alone. She is going through a difficult time, such as she has experienced before. It is best that she have as much peace and quiet as possible." There was fear and anxiety in Peter's voice.

"I have two male roommates. Sarah would have very little privacy. And it's not the nicest apartment, to be honest," Luther said. He wasn't ready for Sarah to stay with him, not with Roberto and Marty hovering. And he would be out all day working, leaving

her at their mercy. Luther came to Sarah every night after work at the post office, but always now they met at her family's apartment. He had long since surrendered to the amenities available to him there.

From the kitchen came the voice of Lydia, in tone and content as Luther had not heard her before. "Are the parasites, the bloodsuckers, the leeches, still here? Is the morose moron Luther still here? Well, is he?"

A family friend, a white-haired woman named Molly, was with her. She cared for Lydia, took her out for walks in Riverside Park. In this time of pain there were no more family dinners carefully prepared by Lydia. They were all on their own.

Chicago came at the end of the month. Luther had thought of going, but anticipated the violence of the police, the leaded billy clubs to knees and head and back. He had been afraid. Once again he had been guided by the need for personal comfort and safety.

"Those fucking pigs," Sarah screamed, witnessing scenes on the TV screen of riot police beating demonstrators on the streets outside the Convention Center, where Hubert Horatio Humphrey was chosen as the Democratic Party nominee for president. Sarah would have fought with those police, had she been there. She would not have run from them. Of this Luther was certain.

In early September, Luther opened his mailbox and was surprised to find a personal letter, as he seldom received such mail. The return label had Lydia's name and address, and

there inside, along with a note, was a check in the sizable amount of two hundred dollars. The note was in Lydia's big and forward-sloping script.

The unexamined life is not worth living. So said Socrates. We must all face our demons. All of us. I have called Dr. Gerhard Slaff and given him your name and a brief description of what I believe is your condition. Now it is for you to follow through and make an appointment. Love, Lydia.

How strange that Lydia could put aside her vitriol sufficient to pen this note. Slaff. Such a funny, ingenious name. Such a soft landing, as in a pillow, after the uncompromising given name. And merry, too. Slaff, as in laugh. Luther was only too happy to make an appointment and come calling on the doctor the following week, his survey job having ended. And what a happy location, that the doctor should have his office on Madison Avenue, within a block of the glorious Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The doctor was a small man with a big head. A pair of horn rimmed glasses dominated his round face, on which played an amused and knowing expression. The strong grip in which he took Luther's hand conveyed that he was long on vigor if short in size, and the expensive suit tailored to his compact body and the glowing yellow silk tie only added to his aura of power. This is a man who kills with an air of benignity, Luther could only think, as the doctor led him from the waiting room into his office.

"What has brought you here?" the doctor asked.

"My girlfriend, Sarah Van Dine. You see, I am a student at CCNY purporting to major in English literature, but I do believe she is my true major. I live in fear that she

will leave me because if she does, then how can I exist? Her younger sister, Lenore, took her life, as you may know. She couldn't handle rejection by her boyfriend, and I suppose I feel a lot like Lenore in that way. It doesn't feel like a good way to live, going about the day with all this anxiety."

"You suffer from morbid dependency, a personality disorder that is amenable to treatment."

"A personality disorder, you say?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I said."

"How long would this treatment take?" Luther asked.

"I would estimate two years," Dr. Slaff said.

"Two years?"

"Yes, as I said."

*As I said.* That locution sent a chill through Luther. There had been impatience, if not meanness, in Dr. Slaff's tone as he spoke those words.

"And your fee. How much would that be?"

"I operate on a sliding scale. Given that you are a student, you would come in at the low end. Thirty-five dollars per session."

He had gone where he didn't belong. He was not right for Dr. Slaff and Dr. Slaff wasn't right for him with his barely contained rage. Not that he could say as much while sitting in the doctor's office. That was too fearful an admission to even contemplate, lest the doctor remove his mask and reveal his true face.



“My mother has kicked him out while she decides what further action she needs to take. *What further action.* Can you believe such pompous language?”

On her return to Boston that September, Sarah had found an apartment on Park Row, just across the Fenway from the school. Luther was beginning to grow comfortable with the move, which he had initially feared, worried as he was about the consequences of any change for their relationship.

“Kicked him out where?” Luther asked.

“He’s staying up at Camp. She wanted him to move out altogether and get his own apartment, but he refused.”

“Why did she kick him out?”

“She’s angry and she needs someone to blame. Why not him? The problem is that Daddy is more helpless than I am. You saw what happened to me. I’m young and I couldn’t last a day in that graphics job. Daddy is in his late forties and has never worked a day in his life following his service in the Air Force. Does she really think he’s going to start teaching now?”

How cold the autumn wind felt. Wasn’t it always the same, women with their clobber power no matter how dominated they might appear to be? Though he understood the assessment was neither fair nor accurate, it felt that way emotionally. Hadn’t his own father said of Luther’s mother, in Luther’s growing-up years, how lost he had been until he found her. What was he to think but that men were feeble and entirely reliant on women? Luther had never had money. How much harder would it be for Peter to live without the financial resources of the marriage he had been drawing on through Lydia’s

inheritance? It didn't seem right that Lydia should be punishing him in this way. It didn't seem right at all. And that language she used. Luther was with Sarah on that. *Further action*. As if Lydia were a power to reckon with and cloaked in the vestments of pomposity.

“What do you think is going to happen?” Luther asked.

“I think Mommy is going to try to push him on me. That's what I think is going to happen,” Sarah said.

“Push him on you?”

“Try to bury me beneath his dead weight.”

Luther spent time in Central Park that fall. He needed the breathing space that the trees and grass and footpaths gave him and the happiness that walking could provide. He also needed the anonymity and the promise of adventure the park offered. And there he met a girl. She wasn't any girl but one whose beauty and whose brains should have drawn the proprietary powerful who would preclude her from wandering solitary in the park by virtue of the more meaningful engagements that were part of their robust world. There she was, on the promenade leading to the band shell and Bethesda Fountain, coming toward him. He smiled. She smiled. They sat on a bench and talked.

Beverly her name was. In her restlessness she had cut loose from Oberlin College, in Ohio, one of the finest colleges in the country, and was back living with her parents, in Brooklyn, while figuring out her next move. So she told Luther, establishing in his mind a fear of her high board score power he now had to try to mask.

“Why don’t you come with me to hear Cream down at Madison Square Garden? I’ll get us tickets.”

“I would love to,” Beverly said. She had no sooner handed him her phone number than she was waving to a girl rapidly approaching.

“Sorry I’m late. I got held up,” the girl said to Beverly.

“Gwen, this is my friend Luther. We just met. Luther is getting us tickets to see Cream at Madison Square Garden.”

“You work fast, mister, don’t you?” Gwen said, her real name being Trouble in Luther’s mind. That a woman as lovely as Beverly, with her auburn hair and soft features, should have such a bulldog friend. But then, maybe her beauty required it.

“Work fast?” Luther could only repeat her words.

“You heard me.” A chunky girl, she had gone red in her square face. Her words like missiles.

“Well, I will be going,” Luther said.

“Call me,” Beverly said.

“Are you insane?” Luther could hear Gwen say as he left them. “He could be or a rapist or a murderer or both.”

But Gwen did not have the influence that Luther feared she might. Beverly needed a lifeline to pull her free from the swamp of family. And so Gwen’s Suzy Safety alert had no staying power. It was just something for Beverly to silently disregard.

Meager Luther was the freedom that Beverly must have, at least for a night.

The only tickets he could afford were in the rafters of the new Madison Square Garden, on Thirty-third Street, above Penn Station, with a view down, beyond the rows of pastel-colored seats, to the stage where speed freak Ginger Baker did his frenetic drum thing and Jack Bruce and Eric Clapton did their coarse singing thing. The band was nothing and less than nothing in that arena, unable to overpower its vast reaches with their holler sound.

Something was ending. He couldn't say what. Drug dealers hung out around the arena, the kind who wore dark sunglasses even in the night, subliminally penetrating the consciousness of passersby with the whispered recitation of their goods. And they were in Central Park, too, all about the Bethesda Fountain. They were wherever the young were known to go. Not gentle hippies with dippy flower power but the kind with hardness manifesting and prepared to put a hole in your chest should the impulse arise.

As with Lenore at the Doors concert down at the Fillmore East, he would try to talk to Beverly over the noise, compelled to assure himself she was having a good time and that the concert was not the disappointment for her that it was for him. After months of abstaining, he had gone to scale master Zach Zeckler for a new supply of speed pills. And he needed one be with a girl of her kind on this evening. Not a girl at all really, but already a woman.

Afterward they went uptown to his place, where he holed up with her in his room so as to avoid Roberto and Marty. She had come with a big shoulder bag, which could only mean she expected to stay the night. But the speed proved no defense against his insecurity. How could he ask a poised woman like her to share his single bed? How could

he expect her tanned, voluptuous body to accommodate his emaciated frame? How could he turn off those assailing thoughts that compared his low board scores with her scintillating Oberlin –worthy SAT numbers? How could he dare to even touch her with his hands so cold from the pill? She would immediately grasp that he was high and look at him with contempt and distrust. Or he would do something in the night to provoke her anger.

“I overheard your friend in the park as I was leaving. She was right,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Was that alarm he saw in her big eyes?

“No, no, not that I am dangerous or anything like that. It is only that I don’t belong with you.”

“You don’t belong with me? But you are with me.”

“I am feeling sick.”

“Sick? How are you sick?”

His confession had not elicited the understanding, let alone warmth, he had hoped for but had no reason to expect.

“I have brought you a long way for nothing,” he said.

“This is not nothing,” she said.

“It is. You deserve and need more. I will pay for your cab fare home.”

“That could be almost thirty dollars. Can you afford to do that?”

“Sure I can,” he said.

At the street corner he hailed a cab.

“Don’t be so afraid,” she said, clutching the money he had given her.

Sleep was denied him by the drug. He lay until daylight with his tormented thoughts and at daylight straggled down to the corner drugstore. From the phone booth he watched as people full of morning cheer sat at the counter having breakfast. The drugstore was one of those happy places. His mood brightened just to see it. Why that should be so was a mystery. It brought to mind the tropics, though all there was above it was an apartment building and across the street the new engineering building at the north end of the Columbia campus. Possibly, he thought, he associated it with freedom and Hawaiian shirts and the wild swaying of palm trees bending under the force of a tropical storm. He had no explanation. The mind had pockets of strangeness that he would hold such a locale dear.

But now he wasn't thinking of Florida and of palm trees. He was thinking of Beverly, and of the opportunity he had allowed to slip away and whether she might give him a second chance even as he did not want her to give him a second chance. A man answered the phone. An older man. That could only be her father. "Bev?" he called, when Luther asked to speak with her. And there she was on the line, not a minute later.

"No, I have plans for this week and the week after that, I'm afraid. In fact, I'm pretty tied up for the next couple of months."

"Yes, I see," Luther said, feeling as if he had been shot.

"You take care of yourself," Beverly said.

"OK. I will," Luther said.

He had needed her to close the door on him, as he was unable to do it himself. But then his mind turned to what she had said about the next couple of months. Did that mean

she might be available thereafter? No and no again. He tore the scrap of paper on which she had written her number into small pieces and dropped them through the grate of a street drain. He did not have to go down that road another time. And yet how it hurt, how it hurt so much. Oh Jesus, it hurt.

He could succumb to unbearable sadness if he began to feel that seeing another girl might take him away from her. But girls were a mystery requiring a solution. How could he know them unless he knocked on their door. He did not tell her that the olive drab coat felt tight around the shoulders and heavy on his frame. She is dressing me in the image of her father as he was, he thought but didn't say. She is putting me in a time not our own.

“Dr. Greene says I am like Ariadne leading Theseus away from the minotaur and out of the labyrinth,” she said.

“And I am Theseus?” he asked, recalling the name from a book on Greek mythology he had read in ninth grade English.

“Of course you are.”

He had no basis on which to dispute the doctor's claim. It did seem right to him, in its way. He had been in the dark and she was bringing him into the light.

“Your body is perfectly proportioned,” she said, too, full of newfound buoyancy that he could only attribute to Dr. Greene. Her kind words gave him an inner glow. They offset what he had read of himself in Lydia's journal. Her words made Lydia's and Claire's burn not so hot and bright in his mind.

She had him sit for a portrait over several weekends in her one-bedroom apartment. The painting showed him with a book in hand. The scholarly, sensitive figure on the large canvas summoned discomfort. She was seeing someone he was not, a man cursed to look more intelligent than he was and thus to disappoint the expectations others had of him.

He could not draw Sarah, but he could take a photograph of her, having borrowed his brother's Rolleiflex 2 ¼ camera, and the need arose to do just that, to seize time and hold it on the film if he couldn't hold it in his hands. Because her beauty was unspeakable one overcast fall day as they walked, she with her long, curly blond hair spilling over the green parka with the toggle buttons that she wore. They were across the street from her building, alongside a playing field with concrete stands and a light tower, and beyond that a cambered bridge over a duck-filled brook and, on the other side, the Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Museum school itself. People needed to know who this Sarah Van Dine was, that he was a part of her and she was a part of him. History needed to know.

And yet there was too much to capture and not enough time, and with this feeling came pain and the fear that photography was dangerous.

But the weight of Sarah's intelligent gaze on him as he sought to frame the shot told a different story, one of affront that he would seek to capture her with the click of a shutter while she labored for weeks to capture his true likeness on canvas. He saw that her thought stream had molded her face into an expression of subtle disdain, riotous and mocking laughter building behind the barricade of her gravitas as she paired him with Helja, the family's Estonian maid, in her mind.



She would play Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto* during his sittings for her. The fugal patterns were mesmerizing but also soothing. They allowed him to sit not only for Sarah but to settle within himself, whereas the holler heads seemed to summon a narcissistic, aggrandizing impulse. He expressed his appreciation of the music and so she made him a gift of the three-album recording that he might enjoy it down in New York City. Once again he was struck by the disparity of the worlds from which they came, and could only be grateful for the dimensions she was adding to his life.

He had thought to take the train or the bus, but driven as much by economy as a spirit of adventure, he stuck out his thumb at an entrance to the Massachusetts Turnpike and hitched a ride. The man he rode with made him nervous. He was fully bald and a big gold cross dangled from his neck.

"We have to be willing to kill for Jesus," the man said.

"Yes," Luther replied, his hand on the door handle.

"We have to do a lot of things most people don't understand."

"This is true," Luther said.

As they approached New Haven, the man said, "This is the end of the line for you."

"I'm sorry?" Luther said.

"Got to let you go, son. I have business to take care of." "Business." He pronounced the word as if it had some Z's in it.

The man left him on the shoulder of Interstate 95. The night was cold and the roadway rain-slicked. The cars and trucks that passed made the heartless sounds that

motor vehicles do when the control of stoplights is lifted. Up ahead an oil truck was pulled over. Two flares were burning behind it. A state trooper had left his cruiser to speak with the driver.

Luther remembered that he had seen a roach in the case for the *Brandenburg Concerto* LPs. It might be prudent to dispose of it in the event the trooper approached, but fear paralyzed him. Would the trooper not get suspicious if Luther reached into his bag? And would the trooper not be harder on him if he caught Luther trying to get rid of the roach? Luther decided that niceness, not cunning, would be his weapon in dealing with the trooper, if it came to that, just as the trooper threw the cruiser into reverse and quickly closed the distance between them.

“Get in,” the trooper said.

Luther complied and waited as the trooper filled out a form and handed it to him.

“What is this?” Luther asked.

“Hitchhiking is illegal on the interstate. You have to pay a fine. Now what’s in your bag?”

“Just weekend things. I was visiting my girlfriend in Boston,” Luther said.

The trooper emptied the contents, one by one: books, clothes. He opened the album case Sarah had given Luther and removed the vinyl records.

“And this?” the trooper asked. Inside the emptied-out case was a roach.

“I don’t know,” Luther said.

“You don’t know, or you’re pretending not to know?”

“I don’t know.”

The officer ordered him out of the cruiser. He was young, a block of muscled flesh, with a baby face under the big campaign hat.

“Put your hands on the roof and spread your legs. What is this? What is this?” He was barking now as he held the roach between his thumb and index finger an inch from Luther’s nose for closer inspection.

“I told you I don’t know,” Luther said.

“You don’t know? You don’t know?” the officer screamed, the blood rushing to his face. “It’s marijuana. You have transported an illegal substance over a state line. Do you know the trouble you are in, you long-haired faggot in your army coat when you have never even seen the inside of a barracks? Put your hands behind your back,” he said, before removing the handcuffs from his belt and applying them to Luther’s wrists. He had never been handcuffed before. The metal restraints felt like they were cutting into his wrists.

The officer drove him to the state trooper’s office in Guilford, where the laces from his sneakers and his belt were confiscated and then led to a small cell. Within an hour he was let out for fingerprinting. An officer, not the arresting one, rolled Luther’s fingers and thumb over an inked pad, first one hand and then the other, before impressions were made on forms that were then filed.

In the morning he was driven by another trooper down to New Haven for arraignment. “That’s a serious charge, trafficking in narcotics. You don’t look evil. Are you evil?”

“I don’t think so,” Luther said. “And there were no narcotics. There was just a roach, if that’s what it in fact is.”

“That’s where it starts, with the marijuana. But it doesn’t stay there. It progresses to heroin.” The trooper, in his tight uniform, spoke with calm certitude. Luther realized that the trooper wasn’t seeing him. None of them were. He was just a thing that had gotten snared in their apparatus and cause for their pontification.

The gray-haired judge had a thing for scolding the prosecution and the defense alike. “You are charged with felony possession of narcotics. How do you plead?” he asked, staring down at Luther like a merciless crow from his bench on high.

“Not guilty, your honor. I had no narcotics.”

“Young man, I am not interested in what you had or didn’t have at this point. Bail is set at five hundred dollars.”

“Five hundred dollars?” Luther cried out. “I don’t have five hundred dollars.”

“Well, I guess then you’d better get it. Next,” the judge said, coming down hard with his gavel.

Luther was taken directly to the New Haven correctional facility. His cellmate, Riley, talked incessantly as a way of handling his anxiety. Luther lay in the top bunk grateful at least for a modicum of separation from babbling Riley.

As day passed into night the ceiling light just above his head continued to burn. He could no more turn off the light than he could his mind, his whole being wild with fear, as it had been since he was brought to Guilford and the heavy door clanged shut, separating him from his freedom and Sarah having no idea where he was. Worse was the

news that the phones at the facility were down and no definite date could be given for their return to service.

The next afternoon Luther sat reading at a table outside his cell. For portions of the day inmates were allowed out into the general population for meals and exercise.

“What that you be reading?” a moon-faced black man in prison denim asked.

“It’s something called *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, by Carl Jung.” The authorities had not confiscated the small paperback. Luther had been trying to access the wisdom and insight of the master without tackling the complete works in hardcover, which Lydia had acquired.

“What you say his name was?”

“Jung. Carl Jung.”

“I like that. How you spell that name, that last name?”

“J-u-n-g.”

“J, you say? That Jung, like Jungle. You playing with me, white boy?”

“No, I’m just trying to answer.”

“Yo, Carlton. Get on over here. White boy doing some answering.”

“What kind of motherfucking answering he got for me, LeRoy?”

“This white boy here be reading the work of some deep thinker. What you think about that?”

“I don’t be thinking shit about what some white boy be reading or not reading.

Why I should care what some motherfucking white boy be doing?”

“Now come on, Carlton. Don’t be talking shit like that. Least you could do is listen to what the white boy has to say instead of talking that nasty shit. Not every day we got some answering from a white boy.”

“This better be good. Don’t need some sorry-assed bullshit. Know what I’m saying, white boy?”

“I believe so,” Luther said.

“You just go ahead with your answering,” LeRoy said to Luther.

“Well, I don’t know where to begin.”

“You just begin at the beginning. Now come on, white boy.”

“It has something to do with transformation. The need for some people to change more than they can on their own. Jung says the psyche is crowded with stuff that we have to sort out. Something like that.”

“Damn. That’s all motherfucking white boy got for me? Some psyche shit? White boy in trouble now, taking up a black man’s time with his white boy bullshit.” Carlton said, continuing with his aggrieved stance.

“Give white boy a chance. He make it up to you for your disappointment. Ain’t that right, white boy? You be making it up to Ben for the disappointment you caused him? You don’t want to be playing my man Carlton wrong now, do you?”

“No, no. Of course not,” Luther said.

The announcement was made over the public address system to clear the area and return to their cells. The heightened presence of the corrections officers was a relief.

Now he could get away, at least temporarily, from Carlton and LeRoy. Better the nonstop

chatter of his cellmate Riley than the implacable force of those two as they slowly claimed ownership of him.

That evening, through a partition, he got to speak with his legal defense attorney.

“I really haven’t done anything to deserve being here, and I can’t even make a phone call to raise bail money for my release,” Luther said.

“I understand your frustration. I’m told the phones should be working again by tomorrow evening.”

“I have to get out of here,” Luther said.

“The court date is several weeks from now. Just hold on. I’ll be back to check on you in a couple of days, if you haven’t been released by then.” Ray Abruzzio he had given his name as. Counselor Abruzzio’s haggard face and the folders crammed into his bulging briefcase testified to his workload. He was young, and his extreme thinness and cheap suit did not inspire confidence. Nor did his words.

Luther regretted the desperation he had voiced, as now his anxiety turned to terror. He would be buried alive in this heartless complex of concrete and iron bars and locked, steel-reinforced doors. He saw that he was indistinguishable from the other inmates to the authorities. The symbols of differentiation, other than his white skin, had been stripped from him.

Riley offered no comfort. “You have to go with the flow, man. Don’t be giving power to nobody with your face. You don’t do no trembling here. I’ve been here eight months waiting for trial. They’re giving me my sentence before even trying me, and I’m an innocent man. Look at my face and tell me that isn’t the face of innocence. You see,

my face doesn't hold the mentality of a criminal. You can see that just looking at me. Just because I passed a gas station doesn't mean I robbed it. That's just a bunch of insinuation, a lot of hearsay, after-the-fact bullshit. That's why they don't want to go to trial. They have no case."

The next afternoon, as he was leaving the door-less restroom in the general population area, LeRoy and Carlton blocked his way.

"My friend Carlton here needs you to carry him off. Can you do that for him, white boy, after all he did for you?"

"Carry him off?" Luther repeated.

"How about suck my big black dick, white boy," Carlton himself said.

"No, I can't..."

Carlton gave him hard slap across the face. "White boy needs some fucking manners."

"You be best to carry my friend off," LeRoy said. "Don't think I'll be able to restrain him unless you do."

Several inmates entered, and behind them a corrections officer. Luther seized the opportunity to slip away.

Later that day Luther made a collect call to Sarah, phone service having been restored. Beyond shock and disappointment, there was no guarantee that his mother or anyone in his family would or could arrange for his release. He remembered how his brother had languished in that Albany jail some years before and the fulminating pastor the family had dispatched that Luke might get right with the Lord.



Sarah's response was everything he could have hoped for. She cared. She really, really cared. The next afternoon her parents, though separated, showed up together and posted bail for his release. His left side of the face swollen and bruised, he emerged from the facility in a pair of worn jeans the size of clown pants, his own having disappeared, and climbed into the back seat of the Chrysler.

How expertly Peter negotiated the streets of New Haven, as if he had an unerring instinct for the interstate. Luther equated a good sense of direction with intelligence, and could only wonder if he had not been underestimating Peter's brain power. How self-possessed and in command Peter looked behind the wheel in his brown turtleneck and tweed jacket. How important clothes were. That his skinny legs should be lost in such ballooning denim duds.

And yet the overriding emotion was of exhilaration that he was free of LeRoy and Carlton and Riley and back in his life.

"This girl I used to know, her name is Dahlia and she is from Darien, Connecticut, was in a cell in the same facility. The police are throwing everyone in jail for no reason."

"Is that right, Luther? Men and women socializing behind bars. What a progressive facility," Lydia said.

"Well, I didn't exactly see her. It's just that I received word as to what had happened to her," Luther said.

"Of course," Lydia said, bringing that line of conversation to a close.

Back in his apartment a wave of shame drove him face downward on his pillow murmuring nonsense to keep the memory of the Van Dines' contempt at bay. What else

could their long periods of silence in the car have been conveying? And that preposterous story about Dahlia. What had he been trying to say? That even pretty blond girls from a famously wealthy community in Connecticut got thrown in jail and that he had extensive social connections?

Twice a week, from 2 pm to 5 pm, he showed up at a community center near the college to fulfill the requirements for a work-study grant he had received. From there he went on to the post office. He was supposed to tutor young children from the neighborhood. Often they were very young, and so he would read picture books with them.

“What’s a yawl?” a pretty teenage black girl asked him.

She was preparing to take the SAT and was puzzling over an analogy in which the word was used.

“Oh, you don’t know anything, do you?” she laughed, when he paused, and he had to agree.

During his shift a tall young blond kid in a dark blue Columbia sweatshirt arrived and gathered the kids together, winning them over with his intelligence and his energy. There had been a third tutor, Benito, a pretty fierce guy if his scowl meant anything, but he was only there a short while before blowing himself up in his East Village apartment while making a bomb.

The following afternoon, Luther paused as he was approaching the entrance to the center. *You must return home and claim your patrimony. The women of your family must not do to you what they have done to your father.* Such was the idea that seized him and

brought him to a halt. Astonished by the force of conviction and certitude that accompanied the thought, he found himself walking west away from the center. He heard his name called and turned to see two of the black girls he had worked with at the center, but he merely waved and moved on, staring down at the bald patch of lawn that bordered the massive public housing project towering over the community center. Like Saul blinded by the light on the road to Damascus this revelation has come. It was not in him to understand how a light that blinded could make him see. He just accepted that it was so and that a doorway exiting him from the daily struggle he had known had opened.

With a great sense of urgency Luther entered the lobby of his family's building a short while later just as Mr. Fitzpatrick was coming out of his prayer session.

"I have been praying for your mother and your aunt, Luther. That I have been doing. Are you going to be one of her two good men? Do you have it in you?"

Luther shrugged off Mr. Fitzpatrick and took the elevator to the top floor. From there he walked down the stairs until he came to a landing where he found his mother bending into the big white wooden box on castors for an armload of towels and sheets and pillowcases for the tenants.

"Have you come for me, my son?"

"I have," he said.

"Are things normal for you? You are not ailing, are you?"

He shook his head.

"Are you sure? You are looking meager in your substance, my son."

"I am fine. Really," he said.

“I will be making chicken this evening. Will you not come and have some?”

“No, I can’t,” he said, without telling her that he had to be at the post office. It wouldn’t do to tell her that, not with what he had in mind. “But there was something I wanted to ask you.”

“Are you having difficulty? Is that it, my son?”

“It is nothing like that,” Luther said. “I was just wondering if maybe I could keep the office open several nights a week after Mrs. Greene leaves. In that way tenants coming home from work could pay their rent and get their mail.”

His mother paused to give him a studying look. “When would you like to start?” she finally said.

“I will be here tomorrow at 6 pm,” Luther said.

“Very good, my son. Very good,” his mother said.

Years had passed since she had locked the bathroom door behind them and coaxed open his small hand, that the quarter in the palm of it might be revealed, and made him promise to never again take money from her purse. And it was years since she had taken him down to the tabernacle for another instance of thievery so members of the congregation might place their hands on his head and pray that he be released from the devils within him.

No, his mother had not gone that far back in time in trying to fathom why he might now be volunteering his services.

He had not come to her unprepared for any such contingency, and would have said, had she turned on him her full power to enter his mind, that he was not there to

thieve but to ride to her rescue, as he had so longed to do when he was a child. He would say that if there was villainy afoot it wasn't his but Simon Weill's. Had she not told him that the building owner was the thief of Baghdad come to New York City, taking store rents that weren't his and whatever else he pleased as well? Hadn't she said as much, and hadn't Simon Weill gone on about his trickery of poor Auntie Eve and herself and held over them the threat of eviction if they didn't do exactly as he said? He would have told her that Simon Weill may have defeated them, but he hadn't defeated him, and where was the wrong in taking a bit of money that would otherwise go to a man who wasn't owed the money by terms of the lease Auntie Eve had signed with him to manage the property in the first place?

He was tired of being poor and struggling. He wanted to be able to pay for a decent lawyer, not some ill-prepared soul in a cheap suit from Legal Aid. He would never be able to afford such counsel with the little jobs he held. The renting office would be temporary. A month or two at most. It would get him back on his feet.

How afraid he was that this new opportunity in his life would be taken away from him before he could even begin. Suppose in his mother's dream that night his base intention was revealed to her?

But the next evening came and there was Mrs. Greene—no relation to Sarah's therapist, so far as Luther knew—closing the office window, a small wooden panel that closed over the grille through which the tenants could pay their rents and receive their mail and lodge complaints. Mrs. Greene a woman possessed of New England reserve who lived with her equally petite husband in a childless marriage in what Luther still

thought of as the House of Order right across the street, a building with a recessed entranceway and marble lobby and a doorman and spacious, roach-free apartments in which he imagined model American families to live. They summered in Vermont, and would return with jams in wax-sealed bottles for Mrs. Garatdjian and Auntie Eve. A woman of great competence. Her husband a doctor. What was a woman of her quality doing across the street in the House of Disorder? Her carefully observant eyes behind the pince-nez glasses were unsettling. Perhaps, behind that veneer of civility and acceptance, lurked some judgment of his family for how they lived. His whole being would recoil at the sight of her on the premises. At such times he could only see through her eyes, that is, as he imagined she was seeing him and his brother and his sisters.

“Is that you, Luther?” she now asked.

“Yes. How are you, Mrs. Greene?”

“Very well, thank you. Your mother tells me you are in college. I have forgotten. Are you studying at Columbia?”

“CCNY.”

“Excuse me?”

“CCNY. That’s a college, too.”

“I see,” she said. She was not insensitive. She felt his reticence. It was just that in her circle, the children went off to Princeton, Harvard, Yale, or maybe Columbia. He allowed the disappointment to pass through him that he could not be more for Mrs. Greene than he was. “Well, your mother says that you will be assisting her. I do hope you find everything in order.”

She showed him the wooden box on the office wall where the tenants' mail was kept, with a cubbyhole for each floor, and the money tray in the first drawer of the old and massive roll-top desk, and the envelopes in which she had placed the rent proceeds for the day, and the ledger book in which she recorded them. She showed him the order she could make out of the disorder all around her.

Many times through the years he had seen women behind the grille—his mother, his aunt, Hannah—and now here he was. And as he anticipated, the tenants came—the Patels and the Guptas, the Singhs and the Shahs, the Woos and the Selassies and Mbutos. Bearded and turbaned Sikhs, sari-clad Indian women with those dots in the center of their dusk-colored foreheads. The cat lady, Miss Schnell, came by, and told him she had not forgotten the crime of neglect Luther had inflicted on poor Dieter. And he served them, he did, to the best of his ability, flipping through their “post,” as the Indians and Pakistanis called the mail, and recording their complaints: broken bedsprings, fridges that did not cool, leaking pipes, blown fuses, armies of roaches. His face expressed concern, sympathy, attentiveness to their needs. He was on their side, he sought to say. It wouldn't do to tell them they were on a sinking ship.

The hard part was dropping off the money with his mother, but even that was less than he feared. True, Hannah was there in the apartment, now filled with the smell of the food his mother had cooked. “Nobody deprives me and my son. No one,” she did say sharply, as Luther handed the bag to his mother. And Naomi was there to say, “What does Flathead have in his pockets? Do you remember, Ma, when I tricked him into confessing that he had been in your pocketbook?”

“Ushtah, Naomi. Would you care for a pork chop and baked potato and lima beans, my son?”

“Come on, Luther. Pull up a chair. Or are you too good for us?” Hannah challenged.

“He does have his nose in the air, Ma. You’ve seen it yourself. Always looking down on us,” Naomi said.

“You leave my Luther alone. He is still my Svenska pojka,” his mother said.

“I have to get going,” he said.

“He’s always rushing, Ma. What he doesn’t know is that he has no place to go. You’ll be back here, too, Flathead Svenska pojka, before you know it, forever and ever. No one can get away from Ma. No one. She is too powerful.”

“Ushtah, Naomi. How you speak,” his mother said.

“I mean no disrespect, Ma. None whatsoever,” Naomi said. “But he wasn’t much of an uncle to Jeanne when she was just a little girl and I don’t forget that. She told me many times that he acted like he didn’t even know her. I’m not saying it’s why she ran away, but it could be. Luther doesn’t know how to show love.”

“It’s for sure he better respect my son, Moses, if he knows what’s good for him,” Hannah said. “Nobody deprives my son and nobody disrespects my son. Nobody.”

Hannah’s son. Luther didn’t ask where the boy was. Probably in their room, grateful for the time he could have away from her. It was difficult enough having her for an older sister. What she must be like as a mother he didn’t wish to imagine.



On the stairs leading down to the lobby he paused and pulled from his pocket the five-dollar bill and the five singles he had taken from the money tray. How right Naomi had been she would never know. Now he would see how careful his mother was in reviewing the accounts. Not very careful at all, he was sure. Record-keeping was not her strong suit. And since they had not discussed compensation for his time in the renting office, he could say he paid himself if she noted the ten dollars was missing. Still, he needed a better means of compensating himself. There had to be a way. He didn't ask himself why an hourly pay rate hadn't been established. Money was not talked about in his family, not openly.

The sidewalk in front of the building was blocked off with those wooden parade barricades. Bits of masonry had once more broken loose from some of the cornices. It had happened before. It would happen again. Something would be done about it in the morning. By whom he didn't know.

He stopped at the bookstore on One Hundred Fifteenth Street and Broadway and bought a thick volume of poems by Kenneth Rexroth, a poet he had heard of but had never read. Zach Zeckler, the Scale Master, said he could only read contemporary literature. The nineteenth century and all the preceding centuries were not for him. Luther had thought to prepare himself for the twentieth century by reading *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but really, maybe Zach Zeckler had the better way. Someday he would have a wall-to-wall understanding of literature, of all the books that had been written. Kenneth Rexroth was a good place to start to try to fathom this poetry

thing. A New Directions book. They were classy, those handsome paperback editions with black and white covers.

At the Ta-Kome deli, on the corner, he bought himself a meatball hero and three cans of beer, and headed down the hill. It was one of those Indian summer nights, and he had a yen for something different. Along the bridle path on the top level of Riverside Park he walked till he came to the limestone water fountain at One Hundred Sixteenth Street, where he descended the steps. Strollers were out, reassuring him that he would not be killed in the night. To the very bottom of the park he went, past Dead Man's Hill where he and Jane Thayer had lain in the grass for day after day that summer following ninth grade. He was not that boy anymore. Now there was complexity in his life. That boy. Who had he been, with his amiable face and crew-cut hair?

A wild feeling was in him now. The trains were calling. He couldn't say why. They just were. He kept heading north, into the more desolate reaches of the park, crossing the exit road from the West Side Highway and down an embankment thick with growth and through a tear in the fence to the tracks themselves on a bed of rock ballast.

Oh Jesus it felt good to be down there eating his meatball sandwich and drinking his beer while sitting on a gleaming rail. Just to the south was the tunnel through which the tracks ran all the way to the sprawling freight yard down below Seventy-second Street.

As he ate and drank he thought of his mother and the pork chop he had refused. With a fastidious eye he had regarded the apartment. The feeling of revulsion had been uncontrollable within him. That old and greasy stove on which she cooked, the blackened

basin of the sink where the enamel had been eroded, the legions of roaches, the old checkered oilskin tablecloth, the mismatched dinnerware, the unsightliness of Hannah and Naomi and their unpleasant manner. The very fact that grown women were sitting about waiting to be fed instead of assisting or serving her. They had left him no room to sit. Well, he was not there for a pork chop. He was there for money, for his life, for his freedom. Besides, if he got too close to his sisters, he might catch what they had.

A northbound train appeared in the distance, the warmth of its beam dispelling the uncompromising gloom of the tunnel. Now it was upon him, the throbbing diesel with white war paint on its high gray cheekbones. He stood his ground despite the low and penetrating whistle sounded by the engineer, and felt its power as it flew past, the might of America on display that night. He took away with him the red lights of the caboose growing smaller in the distance. Those tracks. They ran under the George Washington Bridge. They ran to places he had not been.

In his second week in the renting office he hit upon a way to pocket larger sums. The rent receipts were written on tear-away forms with a ballpoint pen and issued to the tenants for their records. The yellow carbon underneath each receipt served as a record of payment along with a notation of payment in the daily ledger book. A third record was in a big loose-leaf binder, which contained a page for rents received for each room in the building. But suppose he were to use a different rent receipt book than Mrs. Greene? Say a tenant paid him rent for two weeks. Luther could issue the tenant a receipt from his own rent receipt book and then record the rent as paid in the big loose-leaf binder. After all, it

was the room card in the loose-leaf that Mrs. Greene or anyone else would check when the tenant returned in another two weeks to pay additional rent. It was on the basis of the dates on that card that she would take his money and write out a new receipt, and because the dates were accurate, the tenant would have no reason to complain. No tenant was likely to proffer to Mrs. Greene the rent receipt that Luther had issued, and even if a tenant did produce a receipt from Luther's personal receipt book, it wasn't likely that Mrs. Greene would notice that the receipt number, printed in red ink, was out of sequence with the receipt numbers in her receipt book. Nor was it likely that Mrs. Greene, or Luther's mother, or anyone, would cross-check the loose-leaf entries against the daily accounts in the ledger book or check the loose-leaf entries against the carbons in the building's receipt book and notice that the entries weren't there. Mrs. Greene would only go to such lengths if she grew suspicious, and she wouldn't grow suspicious because there was no personal dishonesty in her and so she would be less than likely to project such a trait onto someone else. Because it took a thief to catch a thief, or so he had heard.

At the top of each receipt was written:

M.E. Hedberg, Inc.

699 West 113<sup>th</sup> Street

New York, NY 10025

UN 4-5755

The receipt was a reminder his aunt was somebody. You couldn't be a nobody and incorporate yourself. It was proof of her substance and that his mother was right to be

proud of her. It was proof too that something had gone wrong and that something was Simon Weill.

Luther would call Boston from the renting office, after the first-hour rush had passed. He needed to touch base with Sarah and be reassured that everything was right in their world. On nights when he called and she did not answer, he would grow anxious. It occurred to him at such times that he was only in the office because of Sarah, that is, without her he would not be able to be there at all. She served as his lifeline; without her there was only the snare of his family's depressing present and past and the bleakness of its future.

Luke had taken a shine to port. He drank half a bottle with breakfast and the other half afterward to dispel the dark clouds and fortify himself for the day. He could mop the landings, do small plumbing jobs, fix broken electrical outlets. He could do the things his mother needed him to do.

Lenny Cerone was living with Luke now. He had the small room across the landing where Luther had stayed. Lenny was into the wine, too, but heroin was his true love. His skin had turned sallow, his expression had grown dull, and the greasy hair and body odor suggested a falloff in his personal hygiene.

“That wife of mine Brenda. She's got some sick shit going on,” Lenny said. “Nagging me all the time. Like she can't shut up for one minute. Something wrong with that broad.”

“A man can’t afford to be pussy-whipped. That ain’t righteous,” Jerry Jones-Nobleonian said.

Brenda. Luther knew the girl, or had seen her. She lived with her family two blocks south. A tall, attractive girl with sandy blond hair. She had a son by Lenny to raise now.

“Lenny and me, we’ll be going upstate when the weather gets warmer. Maybe get a car so we don’t have to take the bike. Bring some camping gear so we can sleep in the woods,” Luke said.

Always the same it was with Luke. Some assertion he would make, as if waiting for or daring Luther to refute him. An older brother looking for his younger brother’s approval.

“That sounds nice, I guess,” Luther said.

“‘I guess’? What kind of shit is ‘I guess’?”

“It sounds nice. That’s all I mean,” Luther said.

“I’ve been to fucking Europe. You been to fucking Europe?”

“No. I’ve never been to Europe,” Luther said.

“I’ve been farther away from this building than you’ll ever get,” Luke said.

“Maybe so.”

“Fuck you with your maybe so,” Luke said. “You know it’s so.”

“Why are you so angry?” Luther asked.

“Because I hear that attitude in your voice and see it in your face. But I’ll tell you what else I see. I see you in the renting office down in the lobby and you know what that means? It means you’ll be back living in this building before you know it.”

“And would that make you happy?”

“You see? There you go again with your sarcastic tone.”

“He’s not respecting your worth. He’s not seeing you as the man you are. He’s got all that CCNY college shit going on in his head,” Jerry said.

It was time to leave. He had his love to keep him warm, as the song said. He had Sarah and now he was beginning to have some money, and so he had a future, whatever Luke might care to say. And yet how it saddened more than angered him to hear Luke talk as he did.

Orchestration from above was occurring, the kind of mental realignment that had its origins in history. The president of the United States was calling on him to be part of a new national zeitgeist. No matter that Richard Milhous Nixon was that president, having narrowly defeated Hubert Horatio Humphrey (he with the strapped on the chastity belt for the campaign) and in so doing ensured the return of Luther’s childhood., as RMN had been as much a part of those early years as Dwight David Eisenhower. Never mind that Luther was no longer a Republican living in great fear of the Democratic horde and was in fact a member of that horde. He really couldn’t say what it meant that the past was being overlaid on the present, but it did mean something, and that something, whatever it was, excited him, because he had some connection with it.

The president communicated by proxy. In dreamland his personal assistants, John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman, met with Luther in Riverside Park at one Hundred Sixteenth Street. There, on the bridle path, the two of them stood, in expensive Aquascutum raincoats that compromised the darkness with their glow. "Good work," they said, following their succinct message with a thumbs up. Surprised by the presence of these two powerful men, Luther could only offer a weak smile, but their terse, affirmative message and gesture suggested he was fully in sync at the very bottom of the grid with the thieving aspect of their brand of Republicanism at the very top.

Now Luther would have the means to hire a lawyer to replace his harried and slow-moving public defender and elevate above the horde of indigents it fell to his mouthpiece to represent. Luther found J. Robertson Thruster, who met the charge of the state, felony possession of narcotics, with all the vigor his surname suggested.

Wearing a blue pinstriped suit and a radiant yellow tie, his powerful head adorned with neatly cut gray hair such as men of power often possess, attorney Thruster moved for dismissal on the grounds of illegal search and seizure. Luther sought to join forces with his defender, crying out to Judge Hopping Mad, the same gavel banger who had dispatched him to the New Haven jail, "What he is saying, your honor, is that the state trooper invaded my privacy for no good reason, and I swear to you that is the complete truth," leading attorney Thruster to turn his power on Luther and silence him with a formidable stare that simply said, "Do not muck up my well cultivated garden with any of your crazy shit. Do you understand?" Luther could only sit himself down, though the impulse to jump up once again was there. The state, with all its giant apparatus, could



cow him no longer. Now he had a voice, the voice of attorney Thruster. He thought of the trooper who had driven him to the arraignment, the one with the unctuous drivel, so smugly confident within the bosom of the state. Well, OK, Luther was now having his day in court and what he was hearing was good. His case was being dismissed on the grounds of illegal search and seizure. And, attorney Thruster assured him, the arrest would be expunged from his record.

“Then I have the green light to go on to law school and be a lawyer, too?” Luther asked, outside the courtroom.

“Your arrest, as I said, will be no barrier to your entering law school,” attorney Thruster said, speaking in the careful way that Luther assumed lawyers did.

As he headed for the train station, Luther was driven by a sense of unease to review attorney Thruster’s words. Somehow they were serving to dissipate the joy he had been feeling at his courtroom victory. How clever of attorney Thruster. True, Luther’s arrest record would prove not to be a barrier, as the record wouldn’t exist. But what attorney Thruster had left unsaid was that there might be other barriers, such as the barrier of Luther’s mind. Formidable were the barriers between Luther and the law, attorney Thruster had been conveying in his careful, subtle manner. Luther saw that he was not of the kind that attorney Thruster could care for.

Remembering his withdrawal from tenth grade biology, he had sought to atone for that defeat by taking up the challenge of science once again. But as with calculus, the impenetrable introduction to biology textbook text, his queasiness at the dissection of a

frog, and the abysmal feeling of being lost in the lab while others calmly bent to their tasks were too much for him. Once again, he found himself being put in his place. He was free to read all the paperback novels that he chose to, but as for being a man who could perform slide rule magic or explore the workings of living organisms, that would have to fall to stronger types.

But if scientific knowledge did not come to him in the brief time he hung on in the basic biology course, he did come to another sort of understanding. If there were men who were real men and men who weren't, there were also women who were real men. Furthermore, some of these women were gifted with feminine beauty while retaining the steel-like capacities associated with the other sex.

One such woman was Helen Hubert. She was not a woman but still a girl with the full fire of ambition in her slender frame. From Brooklyn she was, by way of Pratt University, where she had taken up the study of art before transferring to CCNY to pursue an academic degree. One morning he saw her sitting alone in the spacious cafeteria in Wingate Hall. He was at his feeblest that morning, a young man already fully defeated by the demands of the course, his thoughts dark as they often were at the start of the day. And there she was, one table over, her head nodding, her face almost falling into her coffee and Danish. The sight of her in a stupor stirred a feeling of hope in him, and so he approached.

“Excuse me, but we're in the same biology class. My name is Luther. I saw you nodding and wondered if you might be on heroin.”

“What?” the girl had come to full attention, his words like smelling salts under the nose.

“I only asked because I saw you nodding, and heroin users are famous for the nods they go into. Some of them are pretty spectacular. You’ve seen them corkscrewing on the street, I’m sure.”

“No, I am not on heroin,” Helen Hubert said. “Are *you* on heroin?”

“I could never do heroin,” Luther said. “That is one blissful state I can never experience because the thought of injecting myself with a needle is too much. I have a good deal of squeamishness about things related to the body, which may, along with a poor scientific aptitude, explain why I am on the ropes with this course. It has defeated me again.”

“Again?”

“In my sophomore year of high school I dropped out of biology for the same reason. I could not face up to the intellectual challenge. There was an additional factor. The biology teacher, Mr. Sadowski, also served as the basketball coach and had asked me to join the team. You could say he became a father figure to me, and maybe it is for that reason I could not bear to be in proximity to him in a classroom or lab setting. I had this great fear that he would fall short intellectually and that some of the students would make fun of him for the poverty of his mind. I suppose my own bad feelings about my father I projected onto poor Mr. Sadowski.”

“Are you all right?” Helen Hubert asked.

“Sure I am. Why do you ask?”

“You sound like you have a lot going on. Have you thought of seeing a therapist?”

“Morbid dependency,” Luther said.

“What?”

“Just something a therapist said during a consultation.”

“I’ve got to go.” Helen Hubert gulped her coffee and tossed her half-eaten Danish.

Luther didn’t follow Helen Hubert into the 8 am lab. In fact, he did not see her again, but all his life he would remember her as she was that morning in that cafeteria where the stench of grease was strong, a girl in the full radiance of her youth taxed with the demands of life and responding by showing up, not doing the dawdle dance that Luther was performing. He hadn’t wanted her to be a heroin addict but he had wanted her to be weaker than she was, needier than she was. What he saw was that her strength precluded any room in her heart for the likes of him.

“They are working overtime. Even in my sleep they are coming at me with their signal,” Roberto said.

“Who is they?” Luther asked.

“Who do you want they to be, Gargoyle?”

“It’s not what I want. It’s what you say.”

“Tell me this, Gargoyle. Do you feel that vibration on your skin?”

“I’m not feeling anything,” Luther said.

“Tell me this, too, Gargoyle. On your way home do you ever walk on the same side of the street where that new engineering building is?”

“Sure.”

Roberto chuckled. “You’re something, Gargoyle. You really are. First you kill my cat. Now you are trying to kill me by following the instructions of the computers in that building.”

“How so?”

“You just said that you walk on the same side of the street as the engineering building.”

“What about it?”

“The computers have you under their command. They’ve got you where they want,” Roberto said, his face lighted by a smile with more than a trace of menace.

The acid trips. Roberto hadn’t been this crazy the year before, unless he had been keeping his craziness to himself.

It didn’t end with the machinations of the computers in the engineering building. The next day he insisted Luther place his ears to the wall in the hallway. “Do you hear? Janis is next door singing, and just for me.”

“No, I don’t hear,” Luther managed to say, hoping to initiate a conversation by not simply indulging Roberto in his delusional state.

“Gargoyle doesn’t hear Janis singing ‘Ball and Chain’?”

“No, I don’t,” Luther said, “and my name is not Gargoyle.”

“Your name will always be Gargoyle, Gargoyle. That’s just the way it is,” Roberto said.

“Have you thought of seeing a therapist, Roberto?”

“Why would you tell me to do that?”

“It’s good to talk about stuff that is bothering us. If we don’t, it can lead to trouble.”

“What kind of trouble, Gargoyle?”

“Just trouble. Unhappiness.”

“Are you unhappy, Gargoyle? Is that it? You want to talk to me?”

“I am talking to you, or trying to.”

“Cat killer Gargoyle is talking to me?”

“This isn’t good, Roberto.”

“What isn’t good, Gargoyle?”

“I don’t know,” Luther said.

“That’s right. You don’t know,” Roberto said.

A thought came to Luther. Suppose Roberto was missing the words that would describe his feelings? Without the safety valve that such communication could bring, Roberto would be trapped within himself with his demons. He would be as much behind bars as Luther had been up in Connecticut, and with no way of getting out. Suppose Roberto’s interest in symbolic logic had been an attempt to invent a language, a language that could only take him further from himself? If Roberto was truly sealed away in his own mad realm, then he could only get worse.

That fall Luther met a girl at a party hosted by a Columbia at his Claremont Avenue apartment. Both Luther and the girl were out of place at the party, and so they left

together and he slept with her with that same night. Her name was Susan Plecik and she lived on Sullivan Street. She was a tall, skinny girl studying art history at New York University who didn't ask anything of him. He could come and go from her place as he pleased. She knew things he didn't know, like the meaning of the word *intaglio*. He was apologetic about how quickly he came after entering her, but she never complained or refused to see him, which was often on impulse after a few beers at Gosees, just one block north from her walkup flat. Susan was Catholic, from somewhere on Long Island, but she didn't act Catholic, not like the girls from Amsterdam Avenue, Mary Marie and Kathy Kathleen, back in high school. Susan was free, or trying to be. Because of her thinness and her undemanding way, he could feel powerful with her in a way he couldn't with Sarah.

“Are you friends with Bob Dylan? You look like you could be friends with him,” Susan asked, during one grass-smoking visit.

“No, I don't know him,” Luther said, feeling sad that he had disappointed her and frightened that she could be so off the mark. For the rest of the day he lied with the sadness that he was not the go away from my window, leave at your own chosen speed man with the great haired great everything.

There was a girl named Rosa Bloom. She was tight with Efram Ellsberg and Zach Zeckler, the Scale Master, from high school days in Brooklyn, and possessed a beauty that rendered Luther awkward the few times he had had encountered her on the campus,

as she had eyes that saw right through to his desire. Rosa went her own way, dropping in and out of CCNY, her intelligence elevating her above any sense of urgency for a degree.

Rosa lived in a ground-floor apartment on Fifty-Fifth Street just west of Tenth Avenue. The five-story walkup building was set back behind an identical building that faced the street. To get to the rear building, you walked through a long corridor and down a few steps into a courtyard. There were actually two rear buildings, Rosa's being to the right. If you looked up, you could see the windowless New York Telephone Building one block down on Tenth Avenue towering over the older, smaller buildings, the new threatening the old.

Rosa told Luther he could have the apartment if she paid him two hundred fifty dollars for the right to rent it. She called it key money. She said a man named Mickey had fallen in love with her and needed to see her more and more. She said this man Mickey wanted her to move upstate and join the commune he was part of, where the members grew their own vegetables and lived off the land. Luther liked the name Mickey. He wondered if he would be a different person with a name like that. Luther wanted to tell Rosa that he had fallen in love with her, too, and how much he wanted to touch her.

"Do you have that kind of money? I would need it all up front," Rosa said.

"I have plenty of dough," Luther said.

"Plenty of dough? Dough?" The word got a laugh out of Rosa.

"I've got plenty of money," Luther said, embarrassed by her laughter.

"It's just that you don't look like someone who would use the word *dough*."

"Hell's Kitchen must be doing something to me."



Luther was glad, some hours later when he returned with the money, that he hadn't reached out his hand to Rosa. He did not go back to her place but one block north to the apartment of Scale Master Zach. Zach himself had a good deal going, living in a one-bedroom apartment for seventy dollars a month. Rosa was hanging ivory-colored curtains she had sewn for him to cover the big window looking down on the street. Luther saw the easy way Rosa and Zach had with each other. They had a shared history, in more ways than one. He, Luther, could only be an outsider among them, a guest.

"Did you clean your ass this morning?" Zach said, as Luther was lowering himself into an armchair.

"What?" Luther asked, pausing in his descent.

"Rosa reupholstered that chair for me. I don't want any fecal matter on it."

"Your chair is safe," Luther said, and sank down on the soft cushion. Luther took no offense. Zach was afflicted with a terrible need for honesty. He simply had to speak the truth of what he was thinking.

"Rosa makes curtains for me but she won't sleep with me. What does Mickey have that I don't have?" Zach asked.

"Manners, for one thing," Rosa said.

"Manners are for the goys. Jews can't afford them. Right, Luther?"

"I wouldn't know," Luther said.

"What do you mean, you wouldn't know? You're not a Jewboy?" Zach asked.

"I don't know any Jews named Luther," Luther said.

"So what are you?" Zach asked.

“I’m not anything. I’m an American, I guess.”

“Right. An American,” Zach said.

Always with the thrust, the jeer, Zach was. But he had wounds. That absent mother.

It was spring now. The air had softened, and the days had grown longer. There had been progress. He had bought his way to freedom, first from jail and now from Roberto. And all the while his supply of cash continued to accumulate under the dresser in his room, where he also stashed his personal receipt book. More and more, his presence in the renting office had come to be accepted and even counted on, at least by his mother. She was getting on in years. She was tired. She wanted her family around her, even if some of them were a torment. And he, Luther, wanted to be around, so long as he didn’t have to stay. That was the thing about the renting office. He had to keep returning so he could leave. There was no way he could leave without it. So it had come to seem to him in the few short months he had been there.

Finally, someone in the family was standing up to Simon Weill. The thought came to Luther: Suppose his mother knew? Suppose Luther was her weapon against the man of darkness?

As he was packing his knapsack and preparing to leave the renting office one evening, the phone rang on the cluttered desk, and he was presented with an opportunity to understand his own craziness in imagining himself as any sort of weapon against

Simon Weill. Because there was Simon Weill on the line, saying, "I need to speak to Mrs. Garatdjian."

"Yes, of course," Luther said, placing the receiver down and frantically ringing the house phone. Every five seconds would he give three short rings, seeking to summon his mother. Never did it occur to him that he could pick up the receiver and simply tell Simon Weill that his mother was unreachable and that she would have to get back to him. His rage grew with her failure to respond to his all points bulletin. Once again she was up to her old and savage trick of stalling him. He pictured her hiding out in some room and indulging in a monstrous chuckle, as she would when he was a child and expressed frustration. His mother playing with him, leaving him at the mercy of a man he was unequipped to deal with.

He pressed down on the two retractable tips in the cradle of the phone and replaced the receiver and was about to pull the phone line from the wall when his mother appeared.

"Where were you?" Luther asked.

"Is something the matter, my son?"

"Mr. Weill just called. I rang and rang for you on the house phone."

"Is he on the line now?"

"We got disconnected."

"I will call him back from Auntie Eve's apartment," she said, but even as she spoke the outside phone began ringing again.

"Please answer the phone. I'm sure it's him," Luther said.

“But what ails you, my son, that you can’t simply tell him...”

“Please,” Luther said, vacating the office space so his mother could sit down and talk with Simon Weill.

Luther went out into the lobby and wasn’t there ten seconds before he realized his knapsack, with the personal receipt book in it, was back in the office. If his mother looked through it, he was dead, dead, and so he rushed back.

“In this world you must learn to speak with the devil, my son,” his mother said. Apparently she hadn’t reached into the kneehole for his bag. She had probably not even seen it.

“What devil are you speaking about?” Luther asked.

“You know the devil of which I speak, my son.”

To hear Mr. Weill described in such an extreme way was disturbing. It did not seem fair to assign such blackness on another human being, though he had done the same.

Sarah came with him to see his new place on a warm April day, and the stricken look on her face made it clear that she was intimidated by Rosa.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Rosa said. They were words from which Sarah could not seem to recover, as they brought to her mind the distinction between image and reality.

“I’ve heard about you, too,” Sarah said, seeking to reciprocate, or perhaps just defending herself with words reflexively spoken. Her voice had a tremble in it.

“Really. I wonder where, and from whom,” Rosa said, applying her level gaze.

“From Luther, I suppose,” Sarah said.

Rosa turned to Luther. “Is that so?” she said, as she handed him the keys, and now it was for Luther to be uncomfortable, not merely for Sarah but for himself. The idea of someone completely tangential to her life commenting on her to his girlfriend surely had made Rosa recoil. What sort of freak was she dealing with? So he could imagine her thinking.

Sarah’s insecurity during her encounter with Rosa was nothing Luther hadn’t seen before. Had her deceased sister, Lenore, not intimidated her, and a girl named Ellen Finkel had done the same at the High School of Music and Art. More socially adept than Sarah and on the party circuit, Ellen Finkel had stolen Sarah’s friend, Pam Becker, away from her. And now, at the Museum School, she had a new nemesis, Debbie Vogel, who had the same social attributes as Ellen Finkel and was competing with her for the affection of Sarah’s teacher and friend, Mr. Atworthy. Didn’t Sarah frequently complain to him of Debbie Vogel’s aggrandizing tendencies?

Still, the episode was enlightening. If he, Luther, perceived her as possessing supreme gifts, that didn’t mean she regarded herself in the same way. She was telling him, with her manifest fear, that there were other girls of value. She was not the only one.

“It’s the least I can do for my gargoyle,” Roberto said, as he sat at the wheel of his stepfather’s van. “We will drive with the windows down so the stink of him doesn’t kill

us,” Roberto said, waving a hand in front of his nose. “We will see what kind of rat hole you have found.”

Roberto had insisted on helping Luther with his move. Well, what did it matter? He asked himself. He was out of Roberto’s apartment and none too soon, as Roberto’s psychosis was not going away. Before leaving the apartment, Roberto had pushed Luther to cup his ear against the hallway wall so he could hear a Jimi Hendrix jam session being performed live for Roberto’s personal listening pleasure. And that damn smile. It was too creepy. Some monstrous rage was going to crash right through it, like a bull through a paper hoop.

A couple of boxes of books. Some clothes. A desk lamp. They were done moving in fifteen minutes into his new place, bare except for a bed, a dining table, a lamp, and a chair.

“How much are you paying for this dump?” Roberto sat on the floor, his back against the wall, contentedly smoking a cigarette.

“Forty-nine bucks a month, if you can believe such a thing,” Luther said.

“You’ll be back. You’ll see. Just like the last time. The next time I’ll make you beg. One day I’ll turn the apartment into a big recording studio to help pay my way through Columbia Business School. Then you won’t be able to come back.”

Luther felt sad but also frightened, hearing Roberto’s poor grasp on reality . He had not cared for Roberto enough. He had not known how to care for Roberto.

“Why don’t we go get some pizza?” Luther said. “It will be on me.”

“Trying to get rid of me, Gargoyle? Afraid I won’t take the hint and leave? Afraid you can’t dispose of me like my cat?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Luther said. “It’s just that I’m tired and need to start dealing with this new situation.”

“New situation. You crack me up, Gargoyle,” Roberto said, as he stood up and stretched and headed for the door.

“I’ll come out to the van with you,” Luther said.

“No. Don’t you do that. Rat stays in his rat hole.”

He had never before lived in a ground-floor apartment. In the courtyard that night, as he lay in bed, he would hear footsteps and follow them as first the outer door to the building and then the inner door banged open. Up the stairs he would hear the tenants or visitors go, before the silence of the night returned. In the morning he woke to the sound of birds chirping in the tree outside the window next to his bed. It was a happy sound, a really happy sound.

To make the apartment his own, he applied two coatings of off-white latex paint to the walls and ceilings. As he was finishing, the phone rang. Sarah was on the line, calling from Key West, Florida, where she had gone with her father, to say that she loved him so much and couldn’t wait to see him. She said her father had come into her motel room the previous day. His presence had disturbed her. He had talked of the sun provoking the flow of his erotic juices. He had lifted up her skirt. More she wouldn’t say.

Light more brilliant than any sun shone within him. Sarah’s father had tried to claim her for his own, but once again she had chosen him, Luther. Oh, happy day, when

Luther could see, more clearly than ever, his value to Sarah was her value to him: *they were leading each other from the death trap of family*. The intensity of such love he had to be alone to savor.

Now these were the neighbors of Luther Garatdjian, and there were not many, in the four-story walkup building. There was Tom Terrell, who could be heard through the pressed tin ceiling practicing “Down on the Boondocks” over and over and accompanying himself on his acoustic guitar. Tom Terrell was in his late thirties and lived alone and waited tables to support his career as a singer/actor and between gigs on cruise ships, on which he sang “Down on the Boondocks” until the tourists could take it no more. Then he gave them “Country Road,” which he also sang with great feeling but less gusto. Tom Terrell had legs too short for his body and pale skin and thinning brown hair and was, like Efram Ellsberg, a denim duds man in his choice of pants and shirts.

Above Tom Terrell lived Nadia Ridenscu, a ballerina/waitress who wore her black hair in a severe bun. She was someone Luther wanted to know and would come to know.

On the top floor lived Sandra Storm, a blond actress/waitress who, though well into her thirties, still had the ability to turn heads. A *zaftig* woman, Sandra had needs that one such as Luther could never satisfy, though there would come a time when, in the grip of delusion, he would extend himself to her and receive a powerful rebuff—that a worm such as he should even think of making an approach.



*Celeste, I have gone as far as I can with the narrative in this vein. The pressure of time is exerting itself. There is not only the need to accelerate but to broaden the discussion, if I am ever able. As we grow older, walls must come down and the opportunity taken to express love directly.*

*What I am saying is that I had to get back to you before I am called away.*

*In this period the past was beginning to exert its pull. The large Irish families crammed into the tenement apartments in this rundown part of the city were dwindling, replaced by the ands, as has been mentioned.*

*The sidewalks heading west toward Tenth Avenue and beyond were cracked and uneven. They led to a small concrete bridge under which ran two pairs of rusted railroad tracks littered with the detritus of contemporary life: soda cans and Styrofoam cups and even an upholstered chair and old stove, a kind of desecration you would never see on the runways and interstates of America. I saw, staring down at this urban dumping ground, the heartlessness of America toward its past, to which it had consigned our railroads.*

*As for the piers along the Hudson, they were rotting and crumbling. The dockworkers gone, the bars along Twelfth Avenue in which they drank gone, the families they supported gone.*

*The superintendent of the two buildings was a woman named Moira Finn. On warm, sunny days, she would sit outside on a metal garbage can. She was old and heavy, with a square, pockmarked face, as if smallpox had paid a visit. Her thin, straw-colored hair was cut severely short, giving her a mannish appearance. I thought of her as a woman who saw without seeming to see, and credited her, perhaps mistakenly, with*

*knowing the business of everyone. In some way, greeting her as I came and went, I felt that I was being inspected by the eyes of God. Having given her the power of judgment, I had to be good for her lest I incur her wrath and be destroyed. In some way I was seeing a harsher, less feeling, version of my mother, I suppose.*

*Celeste, many, many are the times that I have sought to assure those with eyes upon me that I am innocent and above suspicion: police officers, store clerks, token booth operators. A basic need to avoid the punishing blows that might otherwise be dealt.*

*Just down from the corner of Tenth Avenue was a body shop, owned by a man with a powerful build that he doubtless worked on as much as he did the cars in his care. His face was in line with his body, monstrously hard, any trace of gentleness having long ago fled, if ever it had been there. Ben's Body Shop, the sign said. There he was, day after day, kneeling on a tarpaulin with the whirring blade of the sander that he applied to afflicted parts of the vehicles. I would feel the toxic rays of his stare penetrating my back as I passed him by. He was no one I could even try to win over. He belonged to a world of manly pain I had no interest in entering.*

*If I tell you these things in some detail, it is that I was bound to the world I knew, and things different, when they presented themselves, became momentous in my mind, taking on an importance beyond their genuine value, the past but a graveyard for the misremembering to wander lost in.*

*A police horse stable occupied the opposite corner. During the day uniformed officers in riding boots and shiny helmets could be seen on their big brown mounts amid the traffic on the avenue, either beginning or returning from their shifts in Central Park,*

*and the bracing smell of horse manure was a constant. The avenue, you should know, was not a dainty thoroughfare—not a single one in New York City really is—but a pathway for interstate buses and trailer trucks flowing north in a show of remorseless, ruthless power; and so, for the police to be able to negotiate their way and maintain the equilibrium of their steeds in the face of such terrorizing giants was no small feat. But the question that arose in witnessing this equestrian spectacle was simply this: Did these big, strong men, with their aptitude for physical force, really love these animals on whose backs they rode? Did they really, really love them, that is? In these moments was I recognizing that love is the paramount emotion in this universe and that tenderness must have its place amid so much pain. Quite simply, I wanted to believe that these hard, tough men could melt into softness.*

*And it was the same in other venues, Celeste, such as the deli on the northwest corner of Fifty-seventh Street and Tenth Avenue, where, some afternoons I would go for my all-time favorite, a ham and Swiss cheese hero, with lettuce, tomato, and a generous slathering of mustard, or sometimes cole slaw to go with the ham in place of the lettuce and tomato and cheese. (Sean, you may recall, introduced me to this option some years before, way back in the days of Funelli's grocery.) The owner, Mike, was not someone you wished to fool with. A man who spoke with his fists, as it used to be said, only now he was in middle age and perhaps saddled with responsibility for a wife and child. The man, I suspected, was homegrown, a product of the neighborhood that he served. In his employ he had younger men, also from these same streets, who had grown up not with kindness but hard blows. Though no incidents occurred to spark their rage and cause them to beat*

*me senseless, for the owner and his employees I felt myself to be in a performance of innocuousness, my primary purpose being to secure sustenance and my second to get out unharmed.*

*This approach to living is no way to leave an imprint on the world but simply to pass through it as a ghost.*

*There was another new development, Celeste. I entered psychoanalysis. Perhaps it was the strangeness of the secret life I had developed with my activity in the renting office or the strain of maintaining a relationship with Sarah while living in a different and faraway city, or maybe it was the way I could behave in that relationship, or maybe I was simply following through on the aborted attempt I made the previous year, with Lydia's encouragement, but I applied to and was accepted by the Karen Horney Clinic, on East Sixty-Second Street.*

*During the interview, I professed to be more of a student rebel than I truly was. I was hardly rebellious at all. SDS continued to be suspect in my mind. I sensed nothing democratic in their approach to society; rather, they seemed elitists even as they advanced the proletarian cause; Mark Rudd and Lewis Cole and a few other intellectually gifted radicals would hold the levers of power should the movement grow. This anti-establishment pose is what got me in, I have to believe.*

*The clinic occupied a small building between First and Second Avenues, near an alternate entrance to the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. I was to commit myself to three fifty-minute sessions a week. My profile was such that a female analyst was assigned to me. Her name was Marlene Dressler and she had come to this country from Germany*

*sometime after World War II. She had recently earned a medical degree from Columbia University and was now doing her residency at the clinic in order to complete her psychoanalytic training. Perhaps because she was a novice and I was still a student, my fee on the sliding scale was three dollars per session.*

*Her office was a narrow room with a window from which you could look down at the bridge traffic. A woman probably in her mid-forties, she sat in a leather-bound chair in the far corner and I sat the far edge of the narrow leather couch. There was no second chair. The idea was for me to lie down, but I could not bring myself to comply with her request, as I needed my eyes to be on her at all times. What I saw was a congenial smile that communicated insecurity and an excess of amiability but also German ruthlessness and strength. Fear may have played a part in my lack of cooperation. I couldn't be sure what might happen if I did lie down. The smacking might begin.*

*Though thinner than my sister Hannah, she reminded me of her physically. The sleeveless dresses she sometimes wore revealed a thickness in her arms and that same thickness was apparent in her legs and torso. And she had Hannah's richly black hair. The impression quickly formed that darkness might reign behind that cheerful pose. And yet she did nothing to show that she was not on my side.*

*Gratitude was evident on her smiling face. She had changed direction—gone on to medical school—later in life than most, and now was reaping the benefit.*

*I was not fit to be at the institute. That was my essential theme, in those first couple of months. I told her about the sums of money I continued to extract from the renting office and my failure on the SAT and the perversity of God that he would have me*

*face life with such meager physical and intellectual assets. I told her about the names that had attached to me—Flathead and Blockhead and Squarehead, and more recently, Gargoyle.*

*“I am not fit to live on this planet. Do you understand?” I screamed at Dr. Dressler.*

*“It is astonishing to me that you have gotten as far as you have, given your feelings about yourself,” Dr. Dressler said, after one such rant. Because I was incapable of pure psychoanalysis, our sessions required more interaction than she probably had with her other patients.*

*Dr. Dressler referred me to a psychologist down near Gramercy Park for an intelligence test. The psychologist was favorably impressed with my verbal skills, according to the report she sent to Dr. Dressler.*

*“You can go right to the very top,” Dr. Dressler said, discounting the fact that I had received a less impressive score on the performance part. She also dismissed as unimportant the fact that I had taken an intelligence test only a year or so before and so remembered some of the questions I might be asked.*

*“I knew right away, at our first session, that you were intelligent,” Dr. Dressler went on.*

*But her attempts to boost my self-image were of no real avail. Once you have failed, such as on the SAT, it is forever. The record is simply indelible. You know where you stand in relation to your fellows, and a person should have the decency to accept his*

*standing in life with the humble awareness that there are some who are above him in brainpower but also some below him in mental gifts.*

*But acceptance is not an easy state to achieve. We can feign indifference to the world, but when it assigns us a low number, then there will be pain and dejection and lasting damage.*

*During those early months at the institute, I bought a copy of Karen Horney's book, The Neurotic Personality of Our Time, and could see myself on every page of this compelling text: my need to please and rely excessively on one person, as I did with Sarah, and the pain my idealized self was causing me. With the symptoms of neurosis that she laid out, I could easily identify, but I found it depressing that the text seemed to offer no great hope for a solution.*

*That spring was a time of brutal comeuppance. There is that saying, What is good for the goose is good for the gander, and if we were to transpose the goose with the gander, then that little piece of folk wisdom would be applicable to Sarah and me. I have made clear earlier in this text that I was in full sexual pursuit of other girls in this time of my life. On the subway, in Central Park, in Pennsylvania Station, on the streets and shops of New York City, I was ready to make a move. If I had nothing else, I had my height and I had my hair and a nonthreatening manner to compensate for the absence of good looks and a good physique. I also had the fortune, good or bad, of being part of a generation that accepted impulsive action. A number of girls came with me to that Hell's Kitchen*

*apartment. But they were not the defense I had hoped they might be against the pain I experienced when Sarah had her own adventure.*

*This business of the telephone had become a problem, though not from a legal standpoint, as I was no longer using stolen corporate charge numbers for my long-distance calls. I now had the means, thanks to my renting office activity, to make such calls from my home phone and pay the monthly bill. The problem was my inability to go so much as a day without speaking to Sarah. My fear, as I have said before, was that the increments of time between calls might grow longer and longer until we were strangers to each other if we were not in daily touch. Sarah had her difficulties, but she was centered in a way that I wasn't. She had her art and I had meaningless paperback books. The simple truth seemed to be that she needed me less than I needed her, and my frequent phone contact with her only underscored this reality. As much relief as they brought to me, they were also an expression of my need.*

*(Celeste, I hear you taking exception to the word "meaningless" as applied to literature, but the quality of my learning experience at CCNY was poor, and I fault myself that I couldn't participate more. My true major in those years was Sarah Van Dine.)*

*But this outreach to Sarah was taken to a new level when, for some reason, she was not home to receive my phone calls. At such times, the toxin of fear would be released and overwhelm my system. The only relief I could hope for from this torture was the sound of her voice. Sooner or later she would answer, and offer a plausible explanation. A girlfriend had asked her for dinner. She had decided to stay late in the school's print studio. There had been a lecture she went to hear. Sarah was popular, not*



*simply because of her looks, but because her peers recognized her gift and her seriousness. They were drawn to her, as people weren't and still aren't to me.*

*Altogether, Sarah had a more naturally respectful attitude toward the rights of others than I possessed. As much as my overbearing manner lowered her regard for me, it possibly did even more damage to me. How far I had fallen from the kid who let her come to me and vowed never to call her or set foot in her family's apartment. Such an extreme vow in regard to Sarah could only have come from my sense that she was to me what the bottle is to an alcoholic.*

*Generally, she returned home from school to make dinner and work and read. But one night I called, and she did not answer. The second and third night it was the same. She had been spending time with her girlfriends, she later explained, easing my fear sufficient that I could sleep. But when I called her from the renting office the following evening and got no answer, the conviction seized me that I must race up to Boston and see for myself. I closed the office a half hour early and jumped in a cab to LaGuardia Airport, where I boarded an Eastern Airlines shuttle. Less than an hour later I was racing through Logan Airport and into another cab.*

*It may strike you as perverse, Celeste, but I was as afraid of catching her with someone else as I was afraid that I wouldn't. The idea of her stepping into sexual adventure excited me, as had my awareness of her experience with her brother, Jeffrey. What a world we are a part of so long as we are slaves to the body, and what a journey it is to gain our relative freedom.*

*When the cab pulled up outside her building, I was relieved to see that the window of her third-floor apartment, which looked out on Park Row, was dark. The time was 9:30 pm. A light burning in the window would have suggested she was home and eliminated my justification for the hurried trip. I would have had no choice but to return to the airport.*

*She had given me a key to her apartment. As a precaution, I called her from a corner phone. When I got no answer, I went upstairs and stood outside her door. Not a sound. I let myself in and relocked the door. With the lights still off, I went to the window, which had a full view of the entranceway, and set up a vigil, all the while experiencing a level of excitement that seemed unparalleled.*

*You may ask how it is, Celeste, that I could assume she wasn't lying in bed in the dark with her lover, if such she had, when I turned the key? To be honest, the thought hadn't occurred to me, possibly because she would have had to endure the incessant ringing of the phone and all the guilt that might induce were she in fact entertaining her lover.*

*An hour passed and then another. Except to relieve myself, I maintained my vigil. I also went through several cigarettes, risking exposure by blowing the smoke out the window, which I had partially opened. By now I had pulled up a chair so I could sit and wait in some comfort.*

*Shortly after midnight a red convertible sports car came to a stop by a van parked at the curb. The top was down on the convertible, and there was Sarah in the passenger seat, her hair a brilliant blond under the streetlight. At the wheel was a muscular young*

*black man in a dashiki. He appeared to have a goatee. Sarah got out and the man followed her as far as the entrance. For a moment I worried that he would walk away from his double-parked car and follow her upstairs, but he quickly turned and drove away.*

*The justification for my suspicion was right there, below me, I thought, even as it occurred to me that I had no right to have entered Sarah's apartment, regardless of the apparent justification. None of my thoughts were anything against the shock that my worst fear had been confirmed, that she was with someone else. And there was something else, if I am to be honest, perverse excitement that I was a partial witness to her own carnality. The fact that the man she had chosen was black only added to the fever.*

*I was not free of racial attitudes, Celeste, as I have previously indicated. This would be a fair statement to make.*

*"What are you doing here?" she asked. Her tone was unwelcoming, annoyed.*

*"I was worried. Night after night I called, and you weren't home."*

*"I have a right to go out."*

*"I didn't say you didn't. I said I was worried."*

*"Well, stop worrying so much."*

*"Where were you?"*

*"I went out with my new friend Susan."*

*"Where did you go?"*

*"She lives over in Cambridge. We had dinner."*

*"Does Susan drive a red sports car?"*

*“What are you, some sort of prosecutor?” Sarah’s anger and her characterization of me were justified for forcing her down a pathway of lies with my questions.*

*“I saw you get out of the car just now.”*

*“Tell me everything you saw. Tell me everything you know, Mr. Prosecutor. Tell me what you are doing up here uninvited in my apartment.”*

*“I saw what I saw.”*

*“So tell me what you saw, I said.”*

*“I saw you getting out of a car with a black man.”*

*“Ooh, Sarah was with a black man. What are you going to do, Mr. Prosecutor, kill me? Is that what you’ve come here to do?”*

*“I’ve come here because I was worried.”*

*“Well, stop worrying. Nothing is going on.”*

*In this way did it continue, Celeste, until cornered and enraged by the lies she was being forced to tell, she screamed, her face distorted by defiant rage, “You want the truth? You want it? He fucked me. He fucked me tonight and last night and the night before, and he has been fucking me ever since I met him two weeks ago. That is what is going on.”*

*I fled her apartment for the open spaces. At some point I headed over the Charles River Bridge and entered Cambridge. Later, footsore and crazed, I found myself in an all-night Hayes Bickford, across the street from the Harvard dorms. I sat drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. Several hours later, down by the subway, opposite the Harvard Coop,*

*I jumped in a cab. The Eastern Airlines shuttle wouldn't resume before morning, but maybe I could lie down in one of the airport lounges for the rest of the night.*

*Logan Airport was desolate except for a few travelers who perhaps, like me, lacked accommodations for the night, and the occasional airport worker. At some point I passed out in a molded chair. When I came to it was daylight and the airport was bustling. Passengers had gathered on ticket lines and uniformed airline personnel were heading for their planes. Within a few seconds the memory of the night before returned, and with it all the pain, causing me to wish for the solace of sleep once more.*

*Several hours later I was back in Manhattan. On Fifty-Seventh Street, halfway between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, a gold-plated nameplate caught my attention. I made a detour into the ground-floor office of Dr. Arnold Zimmer, where the receptionist asked for the reason for my visit.*

*"I'm feeling some pain," I said.*

*"Where is this pain?" she asked.*

*"It's inside, where you can't see it," I said.*

*She looked at me with some doubt. My wild hair and skinny frame made me strangeness personified, and my peculiar reply probably only added to her concern. Not wishing to probe any further, perhaps for fear of what she might find, she simply said, "Please have a seat. The doctor will be with you shortly."*

*Celeste, there are streets with specialness attaching to them. Fifty-seventh, between those two avenues, was one of them. An ice cream soda sort of street from my childhood sufficient to trigger a delirium of joy, why I cannot explain. Relief was on the*

way. There he was, Dr. Zimmer himself, standing in the doorway of his office in a white lab coat with stethoscope dangling from his neck. “Mr. Garatdji?” he called out.

“Here,” I said, and followed my gray-haired savior into his office.

“What can I do for you?” Dr. Zimmer said, now seated at his desk.

“It is only this, Doctor. I have been seeing a girl. I gave her my heart two years ago...”

“Stop there. I am a medical doctor. Do you have a medical problem?”

“Last night I found out she is seeing someone else, and since then I have been in terrible pain.”

“As I just said, I am a medical doctor. Now what can I do for you from a medical standpoint?”

“I was wondering if you could provide me with a prescription for tranquilizers. I just need something to...”

Celeste, we must apply understanding if we are not to live in the realm of the dinky-dimensioned, those who buttonhole passersby and pour out their tales of trespass and gross violation by others, thus setting themselves up as victims to be loved and universally adored. This doctor may have been a veteran of World War II. He may have been infused with great love of country and angered and dismayed by what he perceived as long-haired hordes indulging themselves in an orgy of sex and drugs and rock and roll and flag burning. He may himself have had a son or daughter who had fallen victim to hedonistic ways. Whatever the reason, the good doctor cut me off. “Get out!” he ordered, then rose from his chair and personally escorted me from his office through the waiting

room and to the front door. "And don't come back," he shouted after me. We can only imagine the self-righteous anger that drove him to this action and that must have lingered in the aftermath.

I was not a manly man. Such had been the doctor's verdict. Manly men did not need drugs. They did not give women the power to destroy them. Manly men were men with minds calibrated to receive and absorb science so they could become physicians and wear those white lab coats. They were certainly not men such as me with scrambled eggs for brains. This was not a matter for argument.

My apartment was intact. I had my single bed on which to lie curled up and moaning, as often I did when suffering, imagining myself as a wounded animal. Some brutal amputation had taken place. That was the wound. I wasn't missing a limb. I was missing my life. But I could not cry. I was not pure, if neurotic, Strelnikov in Dr. Zhivago, weeping and completely undone when he learns that Lara, his true love, has been unfaithful. I had done the very thing that Sarah was now doing, and I had done it many times, and even with her now deceased sister, Lenore. And so there was no basis for tears.

Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, as the hours passed my perspective on the situation changed. Was it possible Sarah hadn't severed our relationship with an ax? Was it possible we could survive this development? Who was this man she had given herself to, and why should I believe, just because he drove a sports car, that he had permanently replaced me?

Celeste, I dreaded returning to the renting office. Without Sarah as a buffer, the building would ultimately claim me as well, and I would be consigned to living out my

*life in one of those roach-infested rooms. I had missed all my classes that day, but now I was pulling myself together to show up for my shift when the phone rang. I had begun to feel that she would call. At the very least, my bolt out the door at that late hour would have caused her some concern about my safety. I had forced her to worry about me with my quick exit.*

*“Are you OK?” she asked.*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“I mean, where did you go last night?”*

*“Why would you care where I went?”*

*“I just wanted to know.”*

*“I went to the Hayes Bickford in Cambridge and then hung out in the airport until I could get a morning flight.”*

*“It’s not a serious thing,” she said.*

*“What’s not a serious thing?”*

*“This thing with Carlton.”*

*“It’s serious to me,” I said.*

*One afternoon, en route to her therapist, Carlton had approached her and suggested they go for coffee. He was a second-year student at Harvard Law School and had his own record company. Law school was a difficult experience for him as a black man, he said. Most of the students were white and square. Being with Carlton wasn’t great for her. The sex felt like a mechanical exercise and she had cried the first time they slept together. When Carlton asked about her tears, she told him that she had a boyfriend*



*back in New York City. Carlton tried to console her with the assurance that it was only reality that she would see other men. "He said I should hang with him, and so I did," Sarah went on.*

*In a sexual frenzy, I approached a lingerie shop, waiting outside for some minutes while the woman behind the counter handled the lone customer, a female. Reflexively, I would cast a furtive glance inside and then look away. If a passerby on the street made eye contact with me, I felt he or she could see right inside my mind and glean the sexual deviant that I was. After all, what sort of man presents himself as a customer at a store whose only commodities are undergarments for women—brassieres, stockings, garter belts, nighties, etc.? A man who is putting his prurience on display and saying his lust is out of control. That is who.*

*"How may I help you?" the store woman asked.*

*"I don't know. I mean, a pair of panties. That is all."*

*"What size would that be?"*

*"Gee, I don't know."*

*"Is the recipient of your gift a small woman? Large?"*

*"Small. I would say small."*

*"And what color?"*

*"Red. Red would be fine," I said.*

*"We have these very fine lace panties," she said, placing a pair on the counter.*

*"Or we have these," she said, beginning to reach into the drawer again.*

*"These are fine. Perfect. Thank you."*

*“Will there be anything else?”*

*“No, thank you,” I said, unable to make eye contact as I clutched my little package and my change. At the door I slid past two women and bolted the scene.*

*The lingerie store was on Seventh Avenue and Fifty-second Street, at the northern end of the theater district and the blaze of neon lights that came on at night. My father, of course, had worked only several blocks away, at Jack Dempsey’s Restaurant, for many years. The Great White Way had always left me uncomfortable, by day or night, and I was relieved to walk west toward Eighth and then Ninth and then Tenth Avenue. The small residential buildings had a stillness to them. They were from a different, less developed time in the life of the city. They were where ordinary people lived, people like me.*

*On the corner of Eighth Avenue stood a Blimpie’s, where I ordered a ham and Swiss hero, which came stuffed with shredded lettuce and thin slices of tomato. I liked the oil and vinegar dressing they squirted on the hero, along with the heavy coating of mustard. That is the way I ate back then, Celeste, stuffing myself with hero sandwiches and hamburgers and hot dogs and French fries and eggs with ham and home fried potatoes, when I bothered to eat. And of course there were the gallons of Coke and coffee and cigarettes and the speed I relied on for brainpower.*

*“You look so sad. I wish I could help you,” a girl said to me that afternoon, there in Blimpie’s, on her way out. I didn’t attempt to engage her in conversation. I guess she saw something and felt a need to speak her mind. She wasn’t like those face police, you know, the self-appointed monitors of your expression who suddenly appear and zing you*

*with admonitions like, "Try smiling. It won't crack your face," and then disappear as quickly as they came. People afraid of their own pain and threatened by the fact that yours is so visible.*

*Sheepishly I gave Sarah the panties that weekend and she wore them for me. I had hoped lovemaking with Sarah in her canopied bed would be my return home, the end of my exile. But the anxiety seemed to have a life of its own. Carlton was a constant presence in my mind. I felt the crushing weight of his Harvard pedigree. How could I compete with such a person?*

*The answer, of course, was that I couldn't compete with him and shouldn't even try, and so I tried to surrender, to accept that I had no power to determine what Sarah would or wouldn't do. I adopted an attitude of meekness. There was no berating her. What would have been the point? She had the upper hand.*

*Unable to sleep, I was up late the following night when the phone rang. A man was on the line asking for Sarah. He may have been calling from a club or a bar, given the sound of music in the background. "She is asleep," I said. "Tell her Carlton called," he said, and hung up. I didn't ask if Sarah had his number, and I didn't ask her either in the morning when I gave her the message.*

*Celeste, I must break here briefly from the ceaseless past that I may be with you in real time. This has not been a good day. A feeling of desperation has gripped me, that feeling where you say all hope is gone and you just can't take anymore. Take any more of what? You would say. And I would say this obscurity, this abysmal failure, this life without real achievement low intelligence has brought me. It may have started last night*

*at dinner when you insisted on lauding the young playwright whose play we saw the other week for its structure. When I hear that word structure, I equate it with those who can assemble blocks in their proper configuration on those IQ tests or who can build a cabinet—those who have the ability to put things together. I did find myself trapped and at the place where often emotionally I wind up. Once again I had to write out my resentment against God for placing me in this world without adequate tools for finding my way. “Is that all you want for me, to be a nobody in the day and night forever and ever?” And then the profanities I never allow myself in everyday discourse flooded the page. “Go f-ing f---yourself, you f-ing sadist,” etc. And no day, even a good one, would be complete without writing, “This is the day I need to die and die and die.” Some might be alarmed by this record of pain, often vehemently expressed, when really, the log is but a receptacle for negative discharge so I can move more freely and in some semblance of emotional balance through the day. Feelings must be acknowledged. There must be a point in the day when we are free to say, “I feel X is vile and should be bashed in perpetuity by the Broadway M104 bus” or “I feel Y should die immediately and forthwith for being such a blemish on the earth.” Not even God should be spared our wrath, blasphemous as it may sound in the ears of some. Love must often have its origin or revival in such expression, because without such honesty how can we move beyond our distress? And so it was that kind of day, but for now peace has come.*

*My physical appearance was a source of amusement to Dr. Dressler, or maybe it was something more like scorn. She would suck in her cheeks to imitate how sunken were my*

*own and laugh that one day soon I would vanish into thin air. And when I noted at one session that some construction guy shouted out, "How you doing, Mophead?" she replied, "Don't complain about the attention your hair draws when that is your intention in the first place."*

*"I want attention? That's why my hair is long?"*

*"Your whole generation seeks attention," she said, with a wave of dismissal.*

*She provided little information about her own life, but I had the impression that she had struggled—the dislocation the war had brought and perhaps her difficulty in establishing herself in a new country. She was, as I have said, in middle age, and her expression exuded deep and smiling satisfaction with her new life as a psychiatrist in training. If there was a choice to be made between deprivation and abundance, or at least material comfort, she would choose the latter.*

*"That's what we do? We seek attention?"*

*"Work and discipline are important. Otherwise you wind up selling shoelaces like those young, longhaired people I see out front of Bloomingdale's," she said.*

*So she had opinions, Celeste, and showed herself affronted by my generation. As for Sarah's involvement with Carlton, she simply said, "You young people. All you do is have sex," her words again accompanied by a wave of dismissal.*

*So far as I know, Carlton disappeared from the scene. I suspect he had other leads to follow, though how anyone could leave Sarah behind was not easy for me to understand.*

*Things returned to normal between Sarah and me that summer. At least I wanted to believe they had. She went from Boston to Camp. There was no discussion about her staying in New York City and taking a job. She was committed to her work, and that was that. Peter returned from his exile, but the reconciliation appeared tentative. I was happy to see him with Lydia. They belonged together. She would destroy herself without him and he would be out in the cold and lost. You never wanted to see people who were used to having money suddenly having to go without. At least I didn't. He seemed vulnerable, unsure of himself.*

*"Lydia wants me to teach at the college level," he said, one afternoon. We had been hiking a trail and now had come to a rock outcrop high above a valley.*

*"Does that interest you?" I asked. Somehow I couldn't imagine him standing in front of a class, preparing lessons, grading papers. He had chosen another kind of life for himself, and Lydia had been accommodating. But that life was owing to her money.*

*The day was quite beautiful, Celeste, with none of that scorching summer heat. It was more akin to a day in May, and above was the cloudless blue sky.*

*"I should never have married," he said, as if in answer to a different question.*

*I did not ask him what he meant. It was not my place to do so. I sensed the words had not been spoken so much to me as to the universe and had been summoned by the call to freedom sounded by the pristine natural environment where we found ourselves.*

*With Lydia I exercised no such restraint, at least in one instance. A person gets to see who he is in certain moments, and then has to live with his discovery. She had a hold on me, as was shown when I expressed my concern to her about Sarah in the aftermath of*

*Lenore's suicide. As much as I truly was concerned for Sarah, it is also necessary to acknowledge once again that the prospect of basking in the approval of Lydia for being forthcoming with this information was a strong incentive as well. And though I was mortified following my call to Lydia about Sarah, now, months later, the desire for approval was compelling me to connect with her once again. Self-knowledge was not the answer, Celeste. Why? Because in the moment the idea seized me of going to Lydia, the memory of my shame back in the fall was unavailable to me. I sat there on the lawn by the swimming pool with no past to guide me on that afternoon. All I could hear was the urgency of my need to go to her as she sat in the shade under the trellis overgrown with rhododendron leaves on the terrace just outside the house. She was wearing her glasses and probably reading one of those Simenon mysteries that she favored.*

*Have you ever thought what it is to be a mother? An absurd question to pose, since you are a mother to one daughter. But what it is child-bearing women go through a man will never know, and so the antipathy such women must feel at times for those such as me who wander unencumbered through life, never truly giving back or engaging. Lydia brought commitment to everything she did, including devouring a Simenon novel.*

*Understand something, Celeste. Understand. Helicopter gunships filled the air over South Vietnam. Fighter jets tore through the sky. B-52s were unleashing hideous ordnance. And on the ground corn-fed infantry called out for their mothers as their intestines oozed into the soil of that Southeast Asian country. A theater of war had these boys entered. They had passed tests, could break down and reassemble their weaponry, had bodies hard as steel and minds finely honed for the purpose at hand. As for me, I had*

*gone nowhere but to a nine hundred acre estate. I sat in a narrow room three afternoons a week talking about myself with a psychoanalyst. I read paperback novels (but what I really read was the sports section of the New York Post).*

*Understand something more, Celeste. Simply understand. There was no real need to go to Lydia for anything. Earlier on in this document, you will see a reference to her journal, in which she and Claire equate me with their Estonian, somewhat hysterical, maid, therein declaring that I am entirely lacking in their social pedigree and am but the son of lowly immigrants from insignificant countries. And so I ask you, is it wisdom—a phrase my mother was fond of—to come to Lydia now, on irresistible impulse, with my pressing concern, as if my very fate depends on her response?*

*As an aside, Celeste, but an important one, we must here declare that such impulses to run to others as if they are the oracle at Delphi must be regarded with extreme suspicion. At such times it is imperative that we go within and call on the Divine Power to rescue us from our looming folly. Nothing is more debilitating to one's progress than the craven need for another's approval. And it is as inevitable as rain that once this tendency is established in a person, it will surface time and time again, in one form or another.*

*We must have our failures on the journey, Celeste. Toward humility can such abject humiliations lead. Many things happened that summer, some of them spectacular, others abysmal. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were lowered in the lunar module from their spacecraft for their moonwalk thing and made America proud (though to be honest, my mind my elsewhere than the conquest of outer space made possible by our*



technology), while Charles Manson and his crew shot fear into all of us with their murderous rampage. But none is larger in my consciousness than the question I posed to Lydia on that late July afternoon.

“Do you think I am good for Sarah?” There it was, naked, unadorned, the truth of who I was.

She had put down her novel and now lit a cigarette, as if stalling for time and wishing to get her words just right. “You were very good for Sarah. Very good. You shouldn’t doubt that for a second, but I suspect you do. Otherwise you wouldn’t be asking. You were a great asset in helping her transition to her new life.”

That word were, Celeste, which she used twice, as if I had been consigned to Sarah’s past.

“Her new life? Do you mean Boston?”

“Of course. And she has blossomed, absolutely blossomed.”

“She is doing well,” I said, unable to do anything more than endorse Lydia’s assessment.

“And this is only the beginning of her opening. More and more awaits her.”

By now I was frightened, Celeste. Her vision for Sarah, by her tone as much as her words, appeared to exclude me. “What do you see awaiting her?” I felt compelled to ask.

“When a girl is as beautiful and talented as Sarah, life will call to her from many directions.,” Lydia said.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

*“Don't you? I believe you understand perfectly well. You are trying to stay on past your time, and you are free to do so, but that can be very painful.”*

*“Past my time?”*

*“She will be seeing other men. That is all I mean to say. There will be adoration councils in every city for my daughter.”*

*“Adoration councils?”*

*“Forgive me if I exaggerate, but my point is this. Sarah's dictate is to grow and grow and grow, and yours is merely to contain. Do you not see the fundamental incompatibility in the two approaches to life? Do you wish to spend your days trying to keep her down? Would it not be better for you as well as her to set her free?”*

*So there it was, Celeste. I was a reactionary force in Sarah's life.*

*It will not do for the mother of a young man's girlfriend to pass judgment on his relationship to her daughter. He will remember the verdict that has been passed and the humiliation he has been dealt. He will remember and he will say, You will see, lady. You will see who you are treating as if he is nothing more than a war-ravaged Estonian.*

*But is it not possible that Lydia was in a state of mind that called for the vanquishing of all men and spoke from a place of smiling fury? Does it bear mentioning that only the previous year, in that same season, she had lost a daughter? Does that not mean anything insofar as how a woman will see men? Lenore had been destroyed by her bondage to Malcolm, but Sarah would not be destroyed by an oppressive tie to any man. Let them have their adoration circles and bow down to her. Let them take a number and*

*stand in the prospective suitors' line. And let Lydia burst her own bonds as well, with her expulsion of Peter, even if she had allowed him back.*

*Celeste, once more I must ask you to bear with me in real time.*

*At the end of the long underground walkway beyond the shuttle platform at Grand Central Terminal, buskers often perform. One evening, a young Japanese group will play mad rock music and offer their CDs for sale. The following evening will feature vigorously fit African American youths doing hand sprints and somersaults and back flips to accompany their rap fever, these displays causing me to fear for them. In the walkway itself are religious zealots handing out pamphlets that seek to pique the curiosity of passersby as to these proselytizers' brand of faith. One such man the other night was wearing a bright yellow T-shirt on the front of which was written, "Even your mother will forget you." Celeste, the message was a jarring one, as it surely intended to be. On the back was the following:, "Judgment Day, May 12. Are you ready?" All the man's chips were on Jesus. His face was a portrait of angry renunciation. Though relatively young and fit and attractive, he had turned away from the earthly forms of love. Or maybe he hadn't. Ten yards behind him was a young woman wearing the same T-shirt. She too was handing out pamphlets, but she possessed a softness and quality of vulnerability lacking in the man. One can only hope that if they were a couple, they would not deny themselves the pleasures life affords to the young.*

*Of course the question presses on me whether I may not have things in common with this angry, evangelizing man. But no, I don't have to go down that road.*

*Celeste, one other thing. Some weakness in me shuns literature or films in which evil inflicts grievous and even fatal harm on the good. I had trouble reading Hamlet for this reason, seeing how King Claudius sought the destruction of the prince after usurping the throne by having Hamlet's father poisoned. And recently I could only watch the last segment of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, having to skip that scene in which Nurse Ratchet achieves her final and lobotomizing victory over that free spirit played by Jack Nicholson. And now, today, watching Disgrace, based on the novel by the great writer John Coetzee, I had to skip the section in which the fallen professor is attacked and his daughter raped by three local black men, as it would have been too distressing. This aversion is not restricted to drama and films but includes some works of nonfiction. Each night now I read ten pages of Armenian Golgotha, a firsthand account by a priest in the Armenian Apostolic Church of the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey, which was carried out in the years 1915-1918. I do feel I owe it to my poor father to better understand that period, and the priest's account, more than any other I have read, bears witness to the carrying out of the plan for the extermination of the Armenian race within the borders of Turkey by a secret government council. My father was a boy of fourteen in Constantinople when the roundup of the professionals and intellectuals in the Armenian community began in that city in 1915. Among those taken away was the priest himself. It's hard to explain, Celeste, but a while back I experienced a great desire to visualize the streets of Constantinople in that time and an equally great longing to be there. A whole new dimension of existence seemed to be opening and calling me beyond the borders, the confines, of this America that is all I have ever known. The heritage I had turned from*

*and even derided now had meaning for me. In any case, the book provides a glimmer of understanding of that lost world. Now and then, through the years, I have heard the term “anti-Semitic Jew.” In reality, can such a person truly exist? You might say so, Celeste, were Hitler himself a Jew, or others in the Nazi Party. Or if some Jew today wrote vile treatises on Jews in general that contained crude and vulgar generalizations about the physical and moral characteristics of Jews akin to that produced by the Nazi propagandists, you might say so. But I have never read or heard of such a treatise by a Jew. So let us say that such a person could exist in theory and leave doubt as to his actual existence. But can we also say the same holds true for Armenians, that is, seriously doubt the existence of such a creature as the anti-Armenian Armenian? No, we cannot, we must categorically say. And why do we suddenly adopt such a tone of certitude, you now ask, Celeste? Because you are talking to one. That is why. If the Turks couldn't complete the job, then I would, or at least continue the devilish work of messengers such as Ismail Enver Pasha and Mehmet Talaat Pasha of the Ittihadist Party. That is the reality I must live with. In word if not in deed I have been involved in the further butchering of my father's own people. And how have I done so? My personal extermination campaign began with the negation of my own father. At an early age I denied him out of my existence by deciding I was the child of one parent, and one parent only, that being my mother. This is old territory. Suffice it to say a characterization of Armenians as hairy rodents is not an incitement to racial pride. Even as we speak, however, awareness of my own exaggerating tendencies comes to me. The real injury has been less to the Armenian remnant than to me. After all, why should they care how some lost soul who is not even a*

*full-blooded Armenian characterizes their race? Odar, they see me as. The outsider. To be Armenian on my father's side but not on my mother's means not to be an Armenian at all.*

*Celeste, I believe it is the ever longer shadow of eternity that compels these concerns about my father, things Armenian, and the past in general. It may be that we will meet again and that I will have to answer to him. Of course, you might say, he will have to answer to me as well, though I do wonder if I would have many questions for him. I imagine they would be of the historical kind. What happened in 1915 that he and his family were not taken away? Yes, I have heard the story that the Turkish authorities came to the family home and that a Turkish servant saved the family members' lives by asserting to these authorities that they were not home. But would the authorities not have returned at another time? I would want to know more about his father and mother. Was his father a businessman? How many brothers and sisters did he have, and what were their fates? About one such brother I have a vague understanding that he vanished during World War I, but was he one of those led away on a death march into the deserts of Der Zor? What school did my father attend in Constantinople?*

*Family photos are stored in the back of my walk-in closet, Celeste, including a number of my father after he married my mother. No photos of his earlier life are available. I don't often look at them, and the one time I hung a portrait of my mother and father, I soon had to take it down. Why? Because suddenly, I felt the weight of them upon me. They took away the present and left me with only the past and the crushing realization that I have not served them well with the life I have been leading. It is one*

*thing to revisit the past in my mind and another to see a visual image of those who gave me life on the wall of my apartment; the effect was entirely overwhelming.*

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*Though I had the necessary number of credits for graduation by the end of the spring semester, I had decided to return to school in the fall and take a full load of courses. My hope was to raise my grade point average to make myself a more attractive candidate for law school. That summer I purchased a Law School Admission Test preparation book. Perhaps if I familiarized myself with the exam beforehand, the LSAT wouldn't turn out to be the debacle the SAT had been.*

*“You must understand there is a voice in you that tells lies. It says you cannot succeed, but you must not listen to that voice,” Dr. Dressler said. “You must understand that voice is in all of us and tells us to turn our faces to the wall and die.”*

*I thought back to Mr. Arbuckle, my ninth grade algebra teacher, and the assertion he made to the class that the SAT was as important, or more important, than our entire high school transcript. He then added that we either had the ability to do well on the SAT or we didn't, and no amount of preparation would help us one iota. As I have already mentioned in My Path to Greatness, I thought he was speaking directly to me and took his message to heart.*

*The money I had accumulated gave me a sense of well-being and security I had been seeking my entire life. Since beginning my adventure at the renting office the previous fall, I had been amassing a cash reserve. Under my dresser were bulging envelopes stuffed with tens and twenties.*

*That summer I opened savings accounts at several midtown banks, depositing equal amounts in each of them. I had some naive idea that deposits of cash in different banks would be less noticeable to the IRS than one large amount in one bank. At this time I also opened a checking account at the Chase Manhattan Bank, right up the block, on Fifty-sixth Street and Tenth Avenue. While this sad and forlorn branch did not seem long for this world, nevertheless this was the Chase Manhattan Bank, well known as an industry leader. I can't tell you the time I spent just staring at the pale blue checks with my name on them.*

*Celeste, some quality of light entered my life when I moved into that little incense-scented apartment. Oh, that light had been there before, but now it seemed to burn brighter. But yes, there were a few rainstorms amid all this intense sunlight. The circumstance of joy was not entirely uninterrupted.*

*One thing to note is that I don't possess a psychopathic personality. Where I have done wrong I will experience the effect. There are no airtight chambers in my mind where I may freely and endlessly seal away the awareness of harms done. That said, in the matter of this renting office enterprise, I did generally take money without qualms. But then there were those occasions when, in the night, I would wake with the need to pee and see, there in the darkness, with utter clarity the lowness of this shady enterprise. In such instances would I be defenseless against the truth. Trembling, I would pray for the return of sleep.*

*"Suppose I were to be caught? Would I be sent to prison?" I asked Dr. Dressler.*

*"That could happen. But would it be such a bad thing?" she replied.*



*“What are you talking about?”*

*“Are you not in prison now?”*

*“Stop it,” I said.*

*“Many people find their freedom in prison. Malcolm X would be one such person.”*

*“What do you know about prison?” I challenged.*

*“I know a great deal. In fact, I even have the keys.”*

*“What do you mean, you have the keys?”*

*“I have done work in the prisons.”*

*“What kinds of work?”*

*“Psychiatric evaluations.”*

*Now at the time, Celeste, these were provoking words in my ears. They revealed Dr. Dressler to have a soul as black as her tinted hair and to be little more than an apparatchik of the state in full alignment with its power, like hideous Nurse Ratchet. And the slight smile of satisfaction that played on her face as she spoke simply confirmed her punitive, even sadistic disposition. My analyst was nothing more than an agent of repression.*

*In that moment was she my sister Vera, calling on the power of the state—my father—to demolish me.*

*Speaking of my sister, she appeared to be doing well in this time. She had graduated from the SEEK remedial program and was now enrolled in night school at CCNY. Her name could easily have been Vera Persevera, as perseverance was her long*

*suit. She would have done Dr. Dressler proud by exemplifying the kind of person who does not let the voice of doubt and negativity stop her. Vera displayed peasant fortitude. Like my mother, she just kept marching forward, taking life's difficulties as they came. If she was merely a night school student at CCNY, she did not see it in this way. She made no comparison of herself with high-flying Barnard girls or the like. She was where she was and let's get on with it. No laughing thing in her, no self-loathing. What I am telling you is that the girl had a great hunger. And in truth she had shown this hunger at an early age, being early wedded to books such as Charlotte's Web, which she read perhaps twenty times.*

*But life was not entirely easy for her. After all, she was in her blood and bones a Garatdjian.*

*Because money was tight, she rented the room I had vacated in Roberto's apartment and for some months had she been living there under somewhat harrowing circumstances. Roberto's communications with the greats of rock were ever increasing, and there were many invitations to join him in these concerts just beyond the walls of the apartment. "He has taken to wearing dark sunglasses all the time. They give him the appearance of a giant bug. And always with that smile, as if he has no awareness of the pain he is sitting on," she said.*

*Celeste, to be honest it surprised me to hear Vera express concern for Roberto, as I had come to the notion that her agenda called for driving others down. A bit of schadenfreude was apparent in her, at least to my eye, as when she said of Roddy Blakely, "He will have to be on medications for the rest of his life. He's finished. Kaput." It is not*

*attractive when we take delight, or at least comfort, in the misfortunes of others. This tendency, I should note, was sometimes seen in my mother as well, as when she would inquire anxiously about Sarah's family.*

*"Are they very educated people?" she would ask.*

*"Sarah's father holds a doctorate in history and her mother is a graduate of Radcliffe College, which is a sister college to Harvard," I said.*

*"I see. Then they must have very fine minds."*

*"They're OK," I said.*

*"How many of them are there?" she asked.*

*"Sarah has two sisters and a brother," I said.*

*"And you say they live on Riverside Drive?"*

*"Yes."*

*"And their apartment. Is it very nice?"*

*"It is pretty nice," I said. Love must have its place in this world, Celeste. We can't be barbarians with those we profess to love. By not saying, "Their apartment is fabulous, and Camp would put the Garden of Eden to shame," I was protecting my mother. Protecting her from what, you ask? From the world she said she did not want but was not of one mind about. Anyone who esteems "fine minds," as she did, cannot be of one mind about the world. What son wouldn't want to shield his mother from the reality that other parents had it better than her in this world and that their children had turned out better as well? My mother was never far from her sorrow or her tears. And so she was risking pain when she inquired about the lives of others and had to hear that the world had not*

*turned away the Van Dines as it had turned us away. Not even God could protect her from the anguish she experienced on hearing that the Van Dines were doing just fine. I do not mean that she collapsed in despair or let out a loud groan. It is only that the anxiety evident in her face as she asked these questions was replaced with a frown when the answers were given. All reward was promised in the next life, not in this one, which was a vale of tears, and never more so than for those who lived without the Christ Jesus. And surely the Van Dines, with the fine minds they possessed, were not of the Christ Jesus kind.*

*My mother's disposition toward the success of others was entirely understandable, Celeste. No mother deserves bums such as her children turned out to be. Dirty, temperamental bums is what we were. Take the broom and sweep us all away. That was my mentality.*

*This is not monstrosity I am describing. We are talking about a human being, my mother, who was love herself. She did not do a victory dance when I gave her the news of Lenore's death. She was genuinely sad at the destruction of a young life. You must not think otherwise. You mustn't.*

*How to express one's love for his mother. Even when I try, I fail. And for this I suspect I may pay in eternity.*

*An incident occurred early in the summer of 1969, Celeste, during my shift at the renting office. Mr. Fitzpatrick had just paid his nightly visit in which, not for the first time, he expressed doubt about my fitness to be behind the grille, when who appeared but Vera. She offered no greeting, only a pained expression, as she fished in her big bag.*

*Finally she pulled from it a folded receipt book, which she shoved at me. "I found this behind the bookshelf in my room in Roberto's apartment, you creep," she said, and disappeared.*

*She had come to me with the element of surprise and riding a wave of moral superiority. As when we were children at that Bible camp in the Catskills and she said she was embarrassed to have me as a brother after I had been caught boosting loads of candy, so now was she again disassociating herself from me. The weight of her disapproval was hard enough to bear, but I was terror-struck that the scam itself was now in danger. Would she tell my mother, who then would come to me with her look of sorrow and unbearable sadness that she should have to add a thieving son to her list of misfortunes?*

*But the worst did not happen. Vera did not race up the stairs and into my mother's second-floor apartment and expose me to one and all in the family. She fled back out into the street. Later that evening I called Vera and she agreed to meet with me. Over coffee in a diner, I told her that I had been experiencing anxieties about money, going back to the previous fall and my arrest and the expense of hiring a lawyer. I told her the truth, or a truth, that I was tired of our family turning over wheelbarrows full of money to Simon Weill when the money didn't belong to him. I said I was only taking as much I needed to get by, which wasn't quite true.*

*I may have sold Vera short, Celeste. She may have had more loyalty to me than I was given to credit her as possessing. Her judgmental demeanor was gone, and for the hour we spent together we sat peaceably as brother and sister. In that brief time a*

*glimmer of understanding came to me, as it would now and then, what it could be to have a sister.*

*But there may have been another reason for my sister's forbearance, and a subsequent development would seem to reveal that reason. Within a couple of weeks, the renting office had another mother's little helper on those evenings when I wasn't there, and it was none other than Vera herself. Evidently, I had shown her the path forward, and just as evidently, she saw that path not in the light of corruption but of liberation. Of course, how much she was appropriating for herself, if anything, is not for me to say.*

*At this point, Celeste, you may ask, why it was that Vera and I couldn't have gone to our mother and asked for a specific hourly rate? Well, we could have, perhaps, but this rooming house operation was not a normal business. My mother was in the employ of Hedberg, Inc., Auntie Eve's corporation. I believe she was on the books as earning a weekly salary of eighty dollars, or thereabouts, and had not received a raise in years. Clearly, she could not support herself and the family on such an income, and so she took what additional money she needed from the rents paid by the tenants, which is exactly what I was doing. But why do things in such a fashion, you may also ask? Why wouldn't my mother be on record as making a salary more in line with her actual needs? Here I will have to say I don't have the answer, but my guess is that she was afraid to ask for more. Afraid of what? Afraid that her enhanced salary would come to the attention of Simon Weill and he would find a way to remove her. Yes, I suspect the abysmally low salary was her way of appearing undemanding and cowed and served as well as an indicator of her low self-esteem.*

*My mother was ruled by the fear of wholesale displacement. Where would we Garatdjians go if we were expelled from the apartment and those rooms my siblings occupied? As I have previously reported, she would say, “Simon Weill can have us on the street like this. Like this,” snapping, or trying to snap, her fingers for emphasis.*

*And so she couldn't ask for what was hers; she had to take it by other means.*

*The Summer of Love had its share of tribulation for our family. Naomi, my second oldest sister, had grown big with child. The child she was carrying was not her husband Chuck's but that of a man with the improbable name Caswick Cheerio. Naomi was at pains to tell me, at every opportunity, that this Caswick fellow was a real man. Putting aside the predictable inference that I was not a real man—for every real man there must surely be a faux man—Naomi was simply asserting that a robust physique and a face set off by a square jaw compelled the perception of a manly sort. “I like a man with some meat on his bones,” Naomi said, words she used to describe her husband Chuck as well. With such testimony as to its importance, some might be fooled into concluding that the carnival of flesh we find here on this earth must be taken seriously, and must further note that women are in the market as keenly as men. This matter of female sexuality was not an easy one for me to embrace, given the virtual divinity that attached to my mother. All my life it had been a struggle for me to believe that women truly enjoy sex rather than endure it as their gift to men, and utterances such as my sister's were not the convincers that I needed.*

*Chuck was well into his fifties by this time, being twenty years older than Naomi, and all that boozing had sapped his sexual drive. Naomi had also taken to asserting that*

*Chuck had a liking for little boys. Impotence and pedophilia she cited as reasons for Chuck ignoring her amorously, and to give herself cause for a dalliance with this Chadwick, who lived just down the hall. He was close to Naomi in age. He may have been a drunk. Men in their mid-thirties living alone in roach-ridden rooms often are. In any case, Chadwick offered Naomi love of the kind that comes to a woman who sleeps into the early afternoon and has a runaway adolescent daughter, Jeanne having shed her Episcopal school blue jumper and heeded the call of the hippie horde. Whatever Chadwick lacked, his apparatus was in working order sufficient to make Naomi big with child, and by the summer of 1969, this infant, whom she had named Robert, was approaching the terrible twos, and mainly in the care of my mother, who soon made arrangements for his adoption by a Christian family living just across the Hudson River in New Jersey.*

*And what of Luke in this time? He had complexity of his own kind going on. The stillness of morning, well into which he slumbered, unless woken by the pounding of my importuning mother, would by early afternoon be broken by the loud sound of the Rolling Stones or some other addictive noisemakers. He was living with a woman named Brenda by now. She was the wife of Lenny Cerone, Luke's best friend. Lenny was looking increasingly dilapidated, as I have previously noted. He was no longer snorting heroin but mainlining it, and his rich tan had faded to prison pallor. Brenda was fed up with his unreliable ways. She needed a man who would provide security for her and their baby boy, not someone who was hustling to scrape together the bread for his daily fix. So she left him for Luke, who offered her and Benjy a rent-free accommodation in the penthouse.*



*Luke had had his eye on Brenda for some time and did not mind moving in on another man's territory. Qualms of conscience were for others. Even when Lenny raised up and denounced him in a confrontation on the street, calling him a backstabbing creep, Luke was able to dismiss the invective as the ranting of someone whose trouble was of his own making.*

*Brenda's hedonistic makeup, her "let's get it on" tendencies, made her a good match for Luke. She was younger than him by a few years and brought some baggage, including a reform school background and an alcoholic father who had shown less than parental restraint in her growing up years. Though she was clearly vain about her looks, she never wore a skirt or a dress. Always she appeared in jeans or slacks. Knock knees or thick ankles may have compelled her to cover up.*

*On the wall she would tape lingerie ads and ask me to critique the bras and panties sleek models appeared in. Such inquiries had a way of charging the atmosphere. Sex was the domain in which she could exert her power, and the amused smile on her face as I pondered my answer suggested she knew as much.*

*A pattern established itself. Luke would abuse Brenda and she would take off. The boy, Benjy, she would leave with her mother, who lived two blocks away. Several times that summer I visited Luke only to find him sitting alone in the dark drinking wine out of a mug. His pain at such times would be such that alcohol was his only solace. How depressing to see that we had the exact same emotional wiring. The girl left and we could neither eat nor sleep.*

*After each row, Luke would send me out to look for Brenda. I was unable to refuse him. At the same time, I had no faith that my search operation would be a success. The problem wasn't finding her. She hung out in a luncheonette up on One Hundred Twenty-Second Street and Broadway with a group of Irish guys she knew from her school days. Whether she was engaging sexually with one or the other of these young men or simply seeking the refuge of their company, I had no idea. She would sit with me at a booth while the guys stayed with themselves at the counter. They were rough types, quick to use their fists, but they saw no occasion for that with the likes of me, given my emaciation and crazy hair.*

*"Your brother is a pig. He doesn't deserve to live with anyone," Brenda said, for the few minutes we were alone.*

*"Yes," I said.*

*"I don't have to live with a pig. Do you understand?"*

*"I do," I said.*

*"He should be more like you. Nice."*

*"I'm not always so nice," I said.*

*"I can't imagine you not being nice."*

*"He's hurting. He misses you," I said.*

*"Let him hurt. Let him miss me. The big ape."*

*He hadn't paid enough, Brenda was saying. She would need to deal him some more pain by continuing her absence. It was all very understandable, very familiar, to me. On that same block had lived Jane Thayer, my high school girlfriend. How distraught*

*I would be when she would break off with me and take up with another boy. I was too young for such emotional involvement, much too young. I fell into a hole I couldn't get out of. And then I met Sarah Van Dine. And then I met you.*

*Celeste, if some would choose to see Luke as being caught in a vortex of moral turpitude, I do not. He had an appetite for life and made some impulsive choices, but he was simply trying to find his way. Yes, he appropriated the girlfriends or wives of others for his own needs, but he was only taking advantage of opportunities that life had presented him with. One thing he did not do was appropriate other people's money. Driven by lust he may have been, but he was not a thief. He did not question me as to why I was in the renting office or adopt an attitude of suspicion. Why? Because he couldn't see in me a character deficiency that wasn't in him. He had a conscience that would have prevented him from such underhanded activity as I was engaged with.*

*But there was another whose attitude was one of cynical knowingness in regard to my renting office service. That was Jerry Jones-Nobleonian, my closest childhood friend. He was on the fringes of my life by now, Celeste, and what little contact I had with him was awkward and unsettling. His appearance was unsightly owing to the pinkish blotches on his otherwise copper-cored skin. The blemish had been caused by an allergic reaction to penicillin, as he explained it, and was visible on his face and hands. In fact, it covered his whole body. The one seeming benefit of this disfigurement was a quick discharge from*

*the United States Army when it was found that his fellow recruits were merciless with their hazing of him in boot camp.*

*Back in high school I had let myself into the renting office before bars were placed on the window, and had helped myself to fifty dollars. Jerry Jones-Nobleonian had served as a lookout on that day. From there we had gone to a bordello in Spanish Harlem. An eventful day, and one he remembered when he said to me that summer, "Is the fox looking after the chickens?" Lenny Cerone had long since replaced me as Jerry's best friend. Like Lenny, Jerry was developing a heroin habit, and I worried that one day Jerry would turn to the renting office for easy money, as he remembered me doing those years before.*

*Celeste, it did amaze me, in those days, that I could grow indifferent toward those I had once loved and been inseparable from. After only the most superficial conversation with Jerry I would move on.*

*The Woodstock Music Festival was held that August, and Sarah and I were there for the third day of the event. The sky was overcast, with rain falling on and off. By then the grass on Max Yasgur's farm had been worn away and the slopes a muddy mess on which strung-out kids, hungry and unwashed and wearing the wet clothes they had come in, milled about. Country Joe and the Fish, raspy-voiced Richie Havens, and Santana performed, placing themselves at risk of electrocution on a stage loaded with amps and speakers and other gear. A stupid and ugly day. The physical discomfort had us longing for the amenities of camp, and so we lasted a few hours before fleeing.*

*“You have a lot in you. You should do something with your life,” the girl said to me. Her name was Nadia. I had become friends with her through frequent contact coming in and out of the building where we both lived. She was a pretty, dark-haired girl with a troubled past. Put up for adoption at an early age, she lived with her foster parents for some years, but the abusive tendencies of her new father drove her away. She fled from the small town in Wisconsin where she had been raised to Milwaukee, where she found friends to look after her. Several of those years she lived in an attic, she said, hardly seeing anyone. At eighteen she came to New York to study ballet. She got by working as a waitress.*

*Her remark sounded like a judgment. What I heard her say was that I wasn't doing anything with my life and should try to change that sad state of affairs. I felt like a nonentity, a cipher, in her eyes. And yet, had I not given her the facts of my life, that I was a student at CCNY and headed for law school? Wasn't that doing something with my life?*

*What I couldn't see was that law school, for Nadia, wasn't really life. It did not impress her. She did not understand the law or its significance. And she may have recognized that I didn't either. She was a girl who lived for her art and had the tortured toes and feet of a dancer to show for it. We became intimate. To say we were lovers would be to exaggerate. In bed as in general, she negated me. When we lay together, it was as if she didn't feel me. She said as much. Her heart was with the pianist at her dance classes, an older man who elicited feelings she did not experience when thinking of other men. She had been dealt an injury. That is what I see now, remembering back to her*

*sexual passivity. She had been talking about herself, I suspect. She was the one with a lot in her; a lot she couldn't look at.*

*I did not value Nadia, not in the way a human being should value another. I dismissed her. She had her roots in the poverty of a nation renowned for nothing but obscurity. Rumania. Men and women with metal teeth feeding on the toxic waste of their Soviet rulers. Such currents of thought were dangerous, I understood. They could not go unchecked. The attitude of Lydia and Claire that drove them to identify me with their Estonian maid was there in me as well. All my life I have wanted to be an American, which means that all my life I have been chasing an illusion.*

*I did not keep Sarah a secret from Nadia. There seemed no need, as Nadia had no more attachment to me than I did to her. It had already been established that her only love was the Rumanian piano teacher, about whom she had such intense fantasies. And yet an uneasy feeling could surface hearing myself mention Sarah's name. What was this investment I had in her? What in fact was our relationship? Had I made it all up?*

*Sarah had given me a painting, a nude self-portrait. It hung on my wall, unframed. The painting was bold, even shocking. It showed her with pale and doughy flesh. She stared out at the viewer in a pose of full-frontal nudity, her palms up and on her face an expression of defiance. Could she not have kept her clothes on? What was she saying?*

*Whatever its effect on me, the painting's impact on Nadia was visible and startling. She looked like a woman who had stepped on a live wire. When I asked for her reaction, she made no reply, but it was there in her face. The painting had visibly jolted*

*her. Celeste, we have no need to conjecture what meaning the painting may have had for her even if, in some way, we are tempted to say that it brought her painful past to life in some way.*

*In this period, some aspiration for eternity had surfaced in me. Luke, as I have mentioned, had given me the Rolleiflex, but I began to long for a smaller, sleeker camera and now had the means to buy one. I purchased a new Nikon F with a standard 50 mm lens and, when that was not enough, added a 35mm lens, an 80 mm portrait lens, and a 105 mm lens.*

*Nadia allowed me to photograph her naked in her apartment. I was surprised, given her reaction to Sarah's painting. No great amount of persuasion was needed for her to disrobe. The photograph was taken with natural light only, and showed her reflection in a mirror as she sat in a chair leaning forward and looking beautiful but sad.*

*These cameras and accessories were not good for me, as I did not relate to them properly. I would become more obsessed with the object itself than the task it was designed to perform. Hours I would spend marveling at the exquisite manufacture of the lenses and the body rather than taking pictures. Before too long, the urge to purchase more equipment would come over me.*

*Possibly the idea had taken hold that art was a refuge from intelligence and drew on other qualities in one's being. How disturbing to learn that spatial relationships and all elements of composition were problems requiring intelligence for a solution, and that the rich blacks and whites and shades of gray in the prints of the masters were not by chance but by design. There was a science of photography Edward Weston had mastered*

*with his zone system. He had even devised a light meter to take readings of the light. And of course I bought the light meter and quickly grew intimidated by the technical aspects of the photographic process and the same thoughts that defeated me in that calculus course now were beating me down.*

*Celeste, let's be honest. People like me should not attach themselves to cameras or stereo equipment. We should not own bicycles and certainly not gas-powered vehicles. We should, at most, be allowed a box of pencils and pads of paper and a library card. College should be out of the question, as all higher learning is lost on us. Such jobs as we hold should require simple tasks. Feats of engineering, the marvels of science, award-winning literature, excellence in any field of endeavor are beyond our capacity. We must, for our happiness, find a park bench to sit on in the warm sun and simply stare at the passersby.*

*If it wasn't enough that the camera gear gave me a sense of incompetence, I soon responded to an ad in Buy-Lines and bought an upright piano. My mother had paid for piano lessons for me as a child, but I was not diligent and soon lost interest. However, this was a different time in my life, one in which, now that I had some means, I sought to improve myself. Once a week I would come in the morning to the apartment of a man who was bleary-eyed from the excesses of the night before and in need of strong black coffee to bring him to a state of alertness. For an hour I would sit at his gleaming grand piano and simply "play," as he put it, with the keys. A graduate of Yale and the Juilliard School of Music, he was a gifted man who did not believe in imposing a formal structure*



*of learning. Rather, through experimentation and improvisation, I would find my way into a relationship with the instrument. His manner was casual and cool, endlessly patient, even though from one lesson to the next I made no progress.*

*At home, sitting at my upright, I found myself imprisoned by intense self-consciousness, unable to press down on the keys for fear that my neighbors would hear me butchering one piece of music or another and erupt in riotous laughter. The paralysis shocked me, and yet I could do nothing to free myself of it. At one point I cried at the unshakeable power of this shame. It seemed to have a personality, a malignant one. This fear of ridicule, it can be a potent force.*

*The unexpected happened that fall. Sarah did not return to Boston. Instead, she chose to stay at Camp. She had the guest house winterized so she could use it as her studio when the cold weather came. She said she needed a break from the Boston Museum School but offered no further explanation. A second surprise followed. Her father would not be returning to New York City with Lydia. Instead, he too would stay at Camp for the winter. Sarah had already made her decision when he let his be known. Lydia had decided she still needed some time apart. He wasn't happy about the circumstance, but the alternative, which Lydia had pressed, was for him to get his own apartment, and that was a step he was unwilling to take. Peter was once again a frightened man, in middle age facing the prospect of stepping out into the world on his own and earning a living, when his only income as an adult had been the pay he received from the United States Air Force.*

*Peter's anxiety was in a sense my own. I too had a terrible fear I could not make it in the world. Along with greed, was that not why I had situated myself in the renting office? And I had concern for Sarah. What did it mean for her school life that she would be away from Boston for the semester?*

*But Sarah's only concern was her father. "This is my worst nightmare, that someday my mother would dump my father on me and make me take care of him. She has wanted to do this all along," Sarah said.*

*"Why do you say that?"*

*"Don't be fooled. My mother wants sex, and my father, even with his elephant trunk cock, can't or won't give it to her. She is hungry."*

*It brought me no happiness to see Sarah sequestering herself from life in the snowbound mountains. You should not think so, Celeste. I had seen enough hiding from life to recognize the peril that came with retreat. The building where my family lived was sufficiently compelling evidence against such an approach to existence. I needed for her to be strong, regardless what that strength might mean for our relationship. It would not do if she were to begin to tell herself the lies that my siblings Luke and Naomi were telling themselves.*

*"I'll go back to Boston in February. I just need a break," Sarah said, when I expressed my concern.*

*Her father's depression was a burden. No child likes to feel she has to carry a parent. At night, in the adjoining bedroom, she would hear him groan, the barbiturates he regularly took unable to induce a restful sleep. More than a few times he fell with a thud*

*to the floor, and she would have to revive him and get him back to bed. Her father's fragile condition caused her to wonder if he might go under. The denuded trees and the heavy snows that came as fall passed to winter only added to the bleakness. The nightmare she had dreaded had come to be.*

*The photographs I took were of poor quality. Those of Sarah had too much foreground. It was not an uncommon mistake. Every day I would see some husband or boyfriend snap the shutter as he stood ten feet from his beloved. Some days later they would be staring at an image that showed the woman in only a small portion of the print. In trying to get too much in—the loved one's full body as well as the surroundings—they had gotten nothing. The answer was a simple one. Move closer. And yet I didn't.*

*Was it possible that the distance in the photos was also there in our relationship? Were we far away from each other even as I chose to believe we were close? What I can only say again is that Sarah had my heart even as I looked elsewhere for sexual experience.*

*One sunny but cool afternoon I found a girl with golden hair, a tall striking girl in jeans and a brown suede jacket walking north through the memorial arch away from Washington Square Park. She was fine with having coffee with me, she said, when I approached, and afterward I walked her home. Along the way I kissed her and she kissed me back. A state of blissful wonder that I could meet such a girl on the streets of New York City stayed with me for the rest of the evening.*

*All that fall and winter I saw the girl, whose name was Addy. She had come to the city from Morristown, New Jersey, to study at Cooper Union. Her enrollment at the school could only mean she had high intelligence and scintillating College Board scores, and so an inevitable line of thinking came to dominate my consciousness in relation to her. All my low numbers were there, in blazing neon, in my mind. How appalled she would have been if she had been made aware of those numbers. With a shudder of revulsion, how quickly dismissive of me she would have been. People need to stay with their own kind, Celeste. Their own kind. If they are stupid and lacking in talent, they need to go where the stupid ones go. And yet I couldn't, and so I had to endure the terrible beating my mind inflicted for those moments of pleasure I could have with her.*

*We kissed a lot that fall. Deep, long kisses they were, the kind that generally lead to something more. But there was no more, not with Addy. She would brake my hand if it began to wander. There was a boyfriend back in Morristown whom she had been going with since high school. She was supposed to come back to him when she finished her course of studies at Cooper Union. This boyfriend drove a Corvette. His father had built up a thriving real estate business, and now the son was a principal in the business. "You don't know Ed," she said. "He could stop by any minute. He likes making surprise visits." By now she was having me over to her apartment in a doorman building in Union Square.*

*Does this sound familiar, Celeste? Does it? I represented the freedom the poor girl could achieve. I was her walk on the wild side.*

*The day came in late January 1970 that Sarah packed her possessions and returned to Boston, as she had said she would, while her father maintained his winter exile. She took an apartment right around the corner from her school, and within a week some new difficulty began. For two consecutive evenings I could not reach her. Had she reconnected with Carlton? I had a series of dreams about him, all of them similar, in which I was on the landing directly outside his apartment. He never appeared in these dreams, as if, even in the sleep state, any image of him would prove too punishing. They were not unhappy dreams, the kind one awakes from with relief. A feeling of longing permeated them, as if there was something I was seeking on the other side of the door. Was it possible I was seeking not Sarah but Carlton himself, seeking, that is, the autonomy of his life and the status Harvard Law School had conferred on him?*

*Addy's Ed and I had the common bond of bondage to our family's businesses smothering the flame of life in us even as we held onto the blond goddesses in whom we had invested our dream of a new life.*

*At this point, Celeste, I once again swung into action. My heart in Sarah's hand, I had no choice but to board the Eastern Airlines shuttle one night. Several hours later I was in Boston, and saw a light burning in her window as I entered the building. This time I had no key, as she hadn't offered me one, and so I knocked. She was quick in answering.*

*"I was expecting you," she said. "Did you come to kill me, to rape me? What's your business tonight, mister?" Bullets were flying from her mouth. Altogether she was different. Her hair was shorter, bowl-cut, a blond version of black-haired Lenore. She had*

*also lost weight. The package she presented, even with her defiance, was attractive. Sexy, androgynous.*

*“You didn’t answer the phone. I grew worried. I didn’t know what was happening.”*

*“Didn’t you?”*

*“What is happening?”*

*“My life is happening. That’s what is happening.”*

*“What is that supposed to mean?”*

*“It means I’m seeing someone.”*

*“That Harvard Law School man?” I asked, not wanting to say his name in front of her, as in my dreams I could not give him a face.*

*“No,” she said, with seeming disgust.*

*“Then who?”*

*“If you weren’t so stupid I would try to explain. You know that you are stupid, don’t you, standing there with your mouth hanging open?”*

*“Maybe. I don’t seem to know anything anymore.”*

*“Lane. I’m seeing Lane. The school genius. He comes up here and fucks me and then he leaves. He wants me as his little whore. I’m now on his list with all the other cunts at the school.”*

*“I don’t understand.”*

*“I held him off as long as I could.”*

*“Held him off?”*

*“He’s been pursuing me ever since I came to this school. He’s the reason I stayed at Camp in September. I was afraid I couldn’t keep resisting him.”*

*“You make him sound like he’s some inevitable force.”*

*“Once you’re exposed to genius, you’re not the same. You can’t just close your door against it and you can’t hide out in the country from it. It will find you again and again and again.”*

*“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”*

*“You pretend not to but you do.”*

*She was right, Celeste. I did understand. All my life I have been bowing down to those above me, at least in my thoughts. You must remember my mother’s expressed regard for those with fine minds, a circle of exclusivity she did not place herself in. And this Lane was certainly one worthy of such a ranking. I had seen him only that one time, as Sarah and I were coming out of the Brattle Theatre, in Cambridge, but that was enough for me to sense his specialness.*

*I stayed with her that night. She did not ask me to leave, and I did not have the wherewithal to leave when morning came. We went over to Cambridge that evening, where my pain got the better of me and I insisted she stop seeing this genius boyfriend, as I came to refer to him, no more able to say his name than I could that of Carlton.*

*“Go home. Drop dead. Do whatever you need to do, but leave me alone,” she screamed.*

*I stood in the slushy snow by the newsstand across from the Harvard Coop. Celestas she streaked off in her green parka. Acute self-consciousness kept me in place.*

*“What’s the matter, buddy? You can’t take a hint? The girl don’t want a creep like you,” the vendor said, his hands blackened by the ink from the papers he had been handling all day. I heard the rough, brutal justice of the street in the man’s voice and crossed the street slowly. When I was a block away and reasonably sure I wasn’t being followed by the vendor and a posse of the righteous, I broke into a run and caught up with her a short distance away.*

*The sight of me threw her into a state of terror. “Are you here to kill me? Where’s your knife. Which pocket? Bring it out, motherfucker. Bring it out. Stab me in the heart with it, why don’t you? Help me. Someone help me. Please, please.” She snagged two Harvards coming from the dorms, the kind with short hair and the ability to live within their own dimensions. “Please, please. He wants to hurt me. He’s insane. Just hold him here so I can get away. Please. Please.”*

*“What’s going on?” said one, wearing a crimson-colored sweatshirt to designate that he had been chosen as he looked from her to me.*

*“He has a knife. He’s come to hurt me. Please hold him or get the police,” she said, and tore off across the street.*

*“Do you have a knife?” the young man asked, turning to me.*

*“No,” I said quietly, needing to win their trust.*

*They moved on, not being the kind to go where they did not belong or make unfounded assumptions as to who I was, unless it was that my world was not their and never would be.*



*I returned to the Hayes Bickford that night. I thought I would pass a few hours and then head out to the airport, as I had the previous spring when I made my first surprise visit to Boston and discovered Sarah with Carlton. Once again I was grateful for a public place where I could have shelter and sit and drink coffee and smoke cigarettes. Things were pretty haywire in my mind, Celeste. I had found refuge for my body but not from my mind. Oh, the humiliation. There was nothing to do but to live with it.*

*My thoughts turned to a high school classmate. Michael had come to the Claremont School in the middle of tenth grade. The principal, Mr. Horst-Lehman, had asked me to extend myself to Michael, who lived with his father several blocks away. Michael's mother had died the year before from cervical cancer. His father had sold the home in New Jersey and moved with Michael to the Upper West Side. But I was unable to follow through on Mr. Horst-Lehman's request. If Tom Smits, my one friend at the school, didn't know where I lived, how was I to extend myself to Michael or anyone else? Michael adapted quickly enough, finding his own circle of friends. I remember him remarking that the stellar students in our class wouldn't have stood out in the Bergen County public school he had attended. I remember him bursting into the assembly room one April day and shouting, over and over, "I got in. I got in. I got in to Harvard. I don't believe it. I got into Harvard." That kind of joy is something you get to live with for the rest of your life, that moment in time when doors fly open and a life of untold accomplishment and fulfillment is clearly promised. We remember those days, Celeste. We certainly do, the separation of the winners from the losers, the chosen from those not chosen.*

*Following the commencement ceremony that spring, I got a call from Michael. He and a few classmates were at his apartment having a beer. Michael wanted me to join them. I said I would be right over, but I didn't follow through. I knew where I belonged by then. I had always known where I belonged.*

*This kind of self-pity, this sense of separation, can only be addressed spiritually. There must be a full reconstruction. We are not talking about a car being brought into the body shop for a new fender. The hood must be popped and a master mechanic must revitalize the engine. A reconstruction is in order.*

*Celeste, the truth was that I was all right back then. I had gotten into some colleges: Colby, Gettysburg, Franklin and Marshall. But I hadn't gotten into Michael's college, Harvard, or any of the other top-tier colleges to which many of my classmates were headed. And the College Boards had exposed me as underweight. All my clothes had been stripped from me and in front of thousands, millions. I had been forced to stand naked in the poverty of my endowment. The proximity of Michael's building to my own and the fear, even with high school now about to be behind me, that he and the others would find out where I lived and put their laughing thing on me, as well as shame at my lowly academic status, compelled me to stay away. But there was one thing more, and that was to punish, to say a loud fuck you to all those who had hurt me by beating me in the game of life. The only tool I had at hand was to absent myself, to disappear at them.*

*What was the missing ingredient? Quite simply, it was humility, or the lack of it. Unable to accept who I was, I needed to be something more. At some point, we must come out and show ourselves as we are, Celeste. We must. We must adopt the motto of the*

*comedian Flip Wilson's character, the great hot pants Georgette: What you see is what you get.*

*Now a great defeat had been imposed on me that night by my own self-will. I had gone where I didn't belong in flying up to Boston, and I would like to say it ended there, but it didn't. Over the next few months I was to make several surprise visits. Why? Because whether Sarah was a vision or a dream, I was bound to her. Her beauty, her artistic spirit, the refuge her family provided, Camp—all these things and more made her for me the symbol of America's bounty. And, in all fairness, she didn't let me go either. She would call and confide in me that the great Lane was destroying her with his greatness. The more she saw of him the less enthusiasm for her own work and for living she seemed to have. He was taking her strength and vitality, suctioning it from her body and soul, or so it seemed.*

*“He says you are a nobody and that you are not with me. I know you are a nobody but is it true that you are not with me as well?” she asked.*

*The truth may have been that she wanted to believe in me. Yes, she had it in her consciousness that I would bring her to a violent end, based on that newspaper article about the young man who stabbed to death his girlfriend when she told him she had found someone else. And yes, it was forevermore my job to prove that violence was not part of my makeup. But is it also possible that, in some degree, she wanted to believe that I couldn't live without her because on some level, she sensed that she couldn't live without me? After all, she did say, on more than one occasion, that someday I would have to take care of her, which I would have been inclined to give less credence to if she hadn't*

*shown antipathy toward the work world by walking out on the summer job that had been found for her after one day. She was saying that she was her father's daughter. Some things she could do and do well, but providing for herself was not one of them. **Stopped here***

*"He sure knows a lot about me, never having met me, but I guess geniuses can do that," I said.*

*"He wants me to be a woman. I don't know if I can be that for him," Sarah said.*

*"He's got a rich daddy and is used to getting what he wants," I said.*

*"Don't talk that way," Sarah said.*

*"You talk any way you please, calling me a nobody."*

*"You're not a nobody."*

*It happened that I did meet him, on one of my unannounced visits. There he was, in the lobby of his building, in a pair of white painter's overalls, his shoulders exposed and beautifully tanned. Gone was the mod haircut that I remembered from seeing him a couple of years before. His black hair was now cut short, and parted on the side. He had no need of the fashions of the time. He was also taller, trimmer, more athletic than I had remembered him. In a state of complete passivity as he took me in with big, dark, omniscient eyes.*

*"I'll fight you for her," he said calmly Perhaps he remembered me from that one brief crossing of paths. Why shouldn't he have, since I so immediately identified him?*

*"That won't be necessary," I said, a statement more reflexive than reflective and driven more by fear than prudence. I simply sensed that he would destroy me in a fight,*

*given his rippling muscles, and he wouldn't have made the proposal if he hadn't thought the same. In that one brief exchange did he add to my ignominy. Not only was he sleeping with my girlfriend but he had now exposed me as a coward.*

*Celeste, shoot-em-boy-run-runs abound on this earth, gun-toting and shirtless and muscle-flexing. With their big strong teeth and capacious mouths do they bite off people's heads. The words NO FEAR are tattooed on their brows and they are given medals for their courage. But is not courage as well living with an acceptance of our weakness, our cowardice, and going on in spite of it?*

*It could not have been easy for Sarah dealing with the likes of me. She had not experienced anyone with my neediness and persistence. All those phone calls. Every day, without exception, the phone ringing and ringing. The accusations, the close questioning, the oppressiveness of my fear. I had started off so generous and easy-going in those months that she had been pursuing me; thereafter a very different side emerged. Now, even two hundred forty miles away in Boston, she was aware of my shadow.*

*One afternoon, during another surprise visit, I went to her school, where a girl told me she had gone to a movie in Cambridge. From the rear of the darkened theater I cast my eyes over the patrons, row by row. There she was, sitting toward the front, watching the last few minutes of that hideously depressing film *Viridiana*, in which the invited beggars murder their altruistic but naïve hosts. To be honest, I was disappointed that she was alone. Although the pain of her adventures inevitably overwhelmed me, there was a sexual thrill in imagining her with another man. When she emerged from the*

*theater and saw me standing in the sunlight, she began to cry. "I don't know what to do. You're so crazy. You're so sick. How do I get free of you?"*

*"This is what happens when you don't return my phone calls. Don't you understand? I get worried."*

*"It's you who doesn't understand. In spite of everything you're a decent person, but I don't want you anymore."*

*Next door to the theater was a submarine shop, a real hole in the wall. "Why can't they just call them heroes? Why do they have to be different up here in Boston? They call an oversized sandwich a submarine because it's supposed to look like a U-boat? Of course, why do they call them heroes? That makes even less sense. Just because they're big, that makes them a hero?"*

*"Goodbye, Luther," Sarah said, and ran off. This time I didn't chase after her. I was tired from racing here and there. All those frantic phone calls. All that horrendous anxiety. I went inside and had a ham and provolone sub, with lettuce and tomato and lots of mustard. Just the thing. Normal food, as my mother would call it. I ate half of it and headed for the airport. I didn't cry, Celeste. You don't do that when you get the punch in the face you deserve.*

*I took my law boards that February so I could be on schedule for my life. As I said, Celeste, I hadn't enrolled in a test prep course but I did buy a big book containing simulated exams so I had some understanding as to what to expect. As a further aid, the night before the LSAT I saw a hypnotist, who put me in a deep trance by waving a*

*pendant in front of my eyes, just as we see in the movies. On my way home, feeling woozy, I stood back from the edge of the subway platform so I wouldn't fall on the tracks.*

*A second chance at life does not come often. Looking for redemption from my SAT debacle, I nevertheless set the bar fairly low. I had bought a small suitcase with a combination lock. The numbers I chose were 5-5-0. That was my goal, right there, a score of 550. Mediocre, perhaps, but acceptable to me.*

*Columbia had simply beaten me. I could never walk the streets of Morningside Heights without feeling that I had been cut from inferior cloth. It had been a mistake to take the SAT at Hamilton Hall, on the Columbia campus. Not wishing to repeat that same mistake with the LSAT, I traveled downtown to New York University that Saturday morning with my sharpened pencils.*

*Throughout the exam I was curiously calm. The SAT had been a rush to the finish line. A math problem would stymie me and I would in a panic go on to the next. If that one caused me difficulty, I also moved on. The result was that I did a lot of wild guessing. If the previous answers had been A and B, then the following one must be C. Such was the logic I had applied, unaware that it was preferable to leave a problem unanswered if I wasn't sure. Nowhere throughout the morning portion of the law school exam, which was supposed to measure verbal and quantitative aptitudes, did that same anxiety grip me, and the same held true for the achievement part of the exam in the afternoon.*

*Afterward I suffered through a period of torment, realizing I had wrongly checked off "sarcasm" when the correct answer was "irony" to a question on the verbal segment. This seemed to be particularly unforgivable, as I had read Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and**

the Damned, and so had full knowledge of Anthony Patch discovering irony at age twenty-three, the age I now was at as well.

*The law schools I applied to were Harvard, Boston College, Boston University, New York University, St. John's, Brooklyn Law, and Rutgers. Though the chances were nil that Harvard would accept me, I completed the lengthy application, including an embarrassing, maybe even insane, essay, in which I claimed special powers of empathy with the poor and underprivileged on the basis of the unsheltered childhood I presented myself as having had. Not all of us believe we have a story worth telling. There are many who go on about their daily lives with little thought whatsoever along that line and who would be embarrassed, astonished, if someone were to suggest that they in fact "tell their story." "What story could you possibly be talking about?" they would likely say. "I'm an ordinary Joe. Now please, let me just get back to my job." These people are the salt of the earth, Celeste. They are to be revered, although such attention might corrupt even them. By not taking undue interest in themselves, they can turn their attention to things that matter—physics, chemistry, medicine, you name it. They are not invested in their own personal narratives, as "story" slaves are compelled to be. My little "essay" exposed my self-serving nature along with a great deal of self-pity and grandiosity.*

*As the weeks passed I began to approach my mailbox with greater anticipation, and of course the day finally came when an Educational Testing Service booklet was waiting for me. There is no need to go back to my junior year of high school, that lost year when I dropped out of Claremont because of emotional difficulties and spent the remainder of the school year at the Dwight School, over on First Avenue and Sixty-Fifth*



*Street. There is no need at all, except to recall sitting in the playground across the street from the school with a similar booklet and the feeling I experienced of a gray mist rolling in and the future being taken away as I stared at the abominably low numbers. Forgive me, then, Celeste, if I allow myself to acknowledge the dread when, back to front, I read the score numbers one digit at a time, and the elation that followed on discovering that I had exceeded my modest goal, if only by a modest margin.*

*Now was I free to walk the earth not as a high board man might, but at least with a modicum of self-respect. I even sought to find out how a score such as mine on the law school exam would correlate with a score on the SAT and was told by a man at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, that it would predict a score in the low 600s in both the verbal and math portions of the exam. Celeste, you must understand that spring had come to New York City by now, and that I was beginning to bloom in my own right, as it is no small thing to be shown that you have, if not a fine mind, a better one than you had imagined. It was akin to a ninety-nine pound weakling, as those such as me used to be called, waking up one morning to find himself with a body he could show on the beach at Coney Island or any beach in the world. I was now a young man of substance, finally shed of the dreadful image my past had earned me.*

*There was one thing, however, and the word honest cannot be applied if I do not confess it. I cheated. You heard me, Celeste. I cheated. Not wholesale cheating, but toward the very end I ran out of gas. With two questions remaining in the morning session, I stole a glance at the exam sheet of the young man to my left and saw the choices he had shaded with his pencil. He was not ruffraff if appearances mean anything,*

*but had a well-shaped head and formidable brow that could only have housed a sizable intellect. I had full confidence in his answers to these two remaining questions, Celeste, and could not go against his choices when I went over those questions again. He was not a young man who made wrong moves, Celeste, but one who had earned his air of certitude.*

*What is a man to do with such self-knowledge, Celeste? As I have said before, I had no psychopathic tendencies, no stainless steel chamber in which to seal away wrongful deeds, unless you were to say that extracting sums of money from the renting office should be so classified. But in that instance I would have argued, in my benighted state, that I was righting an ancient wrong by engaging, if in an underhanded way, with he who had been tormenting my family through the years. And you cannot say that I was fully unvisited by sanity in those years. Recall, if you will, those nocturnal instances in which I would wake to the startling and terrifying reality that my renting office activity was a dreadful moral violation.*

*But here, in the matter of this cheating, the stain of wrong action was coming to me not in the black of night but during daylight hours, suddenly bringing clouds to a previously azure sky. The mind that would separate itself from God is not a holy place, Celeste, but a site of anxiety and even torment.*

*And then there was Dr. Dressler's reaction. She was less interested in my score than in my percentile ranking. The fact that I did better than little over seven in ten test-takers was not exactly cause for celebration in her judgment, I was left to conclude, from the grunt of disappointment she responded with when I gave her this information.*

*From Harvard I earned a thin envelope with a brief letter of rejection, and thicker ones signaling acceptance from Boston University and Brooklyn Law and St. John's University. Boston College and Rutgers placed me on their waiting lists. A person with torque in his engine can shift into high gear and zoom to the next level, but I was not constituted this way, at least in regard to law school. I had the tendencies of a dawdle dancer, like the ponderous faux poet Eugene McCarthy, with his heart as cold as the state he hailed from. (Yes, this is a mean thing to say. It most certainly is.)*

*Celeste, living just above me was the singer/songwriter/actor/playwright/cruise ship entertainer Jackson Holyoke, a pasty-skinned, moonfaced man with thinning hair for whom a blue work shirt and jeans were as much a staple of his dress as the olive drab garb of motor mouth Fidel. Through the pressed tin ceiling of my apartment would pour, every afternoon, the sound of Jackson Holyoke practicing "Country Road," a song of longing for West Virginia, which, I have learned, is a state of entrenched poverty but singular beauty, at least those portions that haven't been ravaged by strip mining. Jackson sang this song with great passion while accompanying himself on acoustic guitar in preparation for his next entertainment gig on a cruise ship. I could only imagine tourists with glasses in hand taking in Jackson's rendition of this nostalgia-drenched country western song on a moonlit night in the Caribbean, tears welling in their eyes. We all want to go home, Celeste, each and every one of us.*

*But more to the point, Jackson Holyoke was allowing himself to be who he was with the bellowing and strumming he did through his innumerable starts and stops. There he was, a man in his late thirties shrouded in his singleness, practicing this little tune*

*with no apparent self-consciousness, while I could not so much as play a chord on my tiny upright. Nor, I discovered, could I step into the identity that awaited me at the invitation of any of the law schools that had accepted me. The laughing eyes of Peter Van Dine, as well as Lydia and Claire, were upon me when I imagined myself enrolled at one of these second tier, at best, institutions. Without the cover of a prestigious law school, they would see me as the mediocrity that I was. In this way did my mind serve as a prison, preventing me not only from playing the piano but from moving on with my life.*

*The necessary ingredient, a measure of humility, was lacking. Evidently, I was still bound by an exalted self-image some part of me clung to, in spite of all the evidence. I had made intelligence the end all and be all of existence. If I could not have the IQ of a Columbia or a Harvard or a Yale, then what was I? I did not understand the simple truth that it was all right to be ordinary.*

*Actually, Boston University might have been acceptable, but the idea of relocating to another city, even one somewhat familiar to me, created the same degree of anxiety as I had experienced when debating where to go to college. And I could not discount the effect of the renting office on me. Did I really want to give up the easy money I had come to rely on? Could I give it up?*

*"I'm not sure about law school anymore," I said to Vera, in this time.*

*"Oh, really?" she replied.*

*"I'm thinking maybe I'll wait a year or maybe I won't go at all."*

*She let the half smile my words had elicited speak for her. Was she showing satisfaction at my ambivalence? Was there some facet of my personality she gleaned from*

*prior experience? The memory of those childhood Bible camps came to me, and of the same expression that had played on her face as homesickness, acute longing for my mother, caused me to cry uncontrollably in front of her. It is all very understandable with hindsight. Vera hadn't bonded as intensely as I had with our mother, and so did not experience the same degree of withdrawal when we were away. And now, was she once again seeing me as the momma's boy she had pegged me for? Little Luther afraid to go off to law school as he had been afraid to go off to Camp?*

*This exchange with my sister fueled my fear of her rising power. Clearly she was gaining momentum. The steady accumulation of As in all her courses made her night school college experience harder to dismiss. But why did her newfound success have to feel like it was at my expense? Why couldn't I be happy for the positive direction her life was taking, given the failure my older siblings were mired in?*

*Celeste, I came to another way of seeing my law school situation. Rutgers was the best choice. It had a higher rating than any of the other schools, was only a bus ride from New York City, and, being a state school, had a modest tuition. The only problem was that it had wait-listed me. And so I made a call on the dean of admissions, a man named Henry Fletcher, himself a graduate of the law school.*

*"In any other year you would easily be accepted to the school," Mr. Fletcher assured me. "For some inexplicable reason this year has seen a record number of applicants, but I can assure you that if you reapply you will be admitted next year."*

*Oh, what a happy day. In that one brief meeting did Mr. Fletcher return to me my future. The city may have been crumbling—burned out shops were still visible on the*

*main streets and a sullen atmosphere hung like a dark cloud—but the law school building was modern, bright, and cheerful, a world unto itself.*

*In this time, Dr. Dressler pressed me to get a job. She said I needed to do something with my time. What exactly was I doing? Well, there was the renting office four evenings a week by now. My mornings and afternoons I would try to fill with reading the New York Post and more enduring literature. With Dr. Dressler's encouragement, I had begun to keep a journal. In one dream, I was walking along the circumference of a circle but had no ability to actually enter it. The dream established me as an outsider. I certainly felt that way.*

*The effect of the journal was transformative. How? It seemed to provide me with a center. The little entries I made were a means of going home. You must understand that words were all I had. What else was there? I did not understand music, showed no aptitude for numbers or science, did not possess a large and assertive personality I could project onto the world. I was an introverted ectomorph, a nobody in the day and night, primarily concerned that I give no one the incentive to beat me into the state of unconsciousness by lapsing from my generally polite manner. A prisoner of my own guilt, I wandered about here and there.*

*Maybe there is meaning in the Scriptures where it is written, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But what meaning is it that equates the Word with God? What word is being spoken of here? Well, what does it matter, Celeste? Words on paper call us home, and what is home but the still point where God is found. Writing, then, is a spiritual act, a meditation, a form of prayer, an*

*admission that we need some raising of our spirit. Words are a way of being comfortable in our apartness and at the same time making it go away.*

*I don't know anything about words, except that I have been writing them every day since Dr. Dressler encouraged me in this direction. "Sarah liked to pee in an open field, with only the crab apple tree and the lazy, solitary cloud in the sky as her witness. And in her father's car, she liked to whisper under her breath, 'White line, continue, just continue. Don't ever end.'" Entries such as these I would make, and go no further. I suddenly wanted a record of all my experience. I wanted nothing to escape my detection.*

*"I want to be a writer," I said to Dr. Dressler.*

*"What do you want to write?"*

*"I want to write stories and maybe a novel."*

*"Have you written anything?"*

*"I have been keeping a journal, as you suggested."*

*"Show me your journal."*

*"Why should I show you my journal?"*

*"I'm interested in your writing. That is why."*

*Her request for such a personal document seemed strange and even inappropriate, but she suggested that the journal might reveal things I wasn't able to present about myself during our sessions and enhance the effectiveness of the analysis. What embarrassed me most was not the ordinary content but my poor handwriting, a sure indicator of a feeble mind, I was inclined to believe. "I must have it back," I said, as I handed her the small, leather-bound loose-leaf.*

*Dr. Dressler returned my journal at our next session. "You have no talent, or maybe just a tiny bit. Now you must go out and get a job," she said. She had approved of my Rutgers decision, agreeing with me that it was the best of the schools that had accepted or wait-listed me, and since my enrollment had been postponed, she was advocating for a life for me beyond my little apartment and the renting office. Celeste, I will not lie to you. Her judgment of my writing I took as a smilingly delivered affront. At the same time her verdict had no staying power. The reason may have been that she was not herself a writer, so why should it matter what she thought. And perhaps she would not have been so dismissive if she realized that I had found the very thing I not only wanted but needed to do. Or perhaps she would have.*

*"Well, I'm going to continue. I may not have any choice," I said.*

*"Go ahead. Do what you want. Send out your work. It will come back to you, of that you can be sure."*

*"Why are you so cynical about pursuing a life as a writer?"*

*"Because most of them fail. A life of nothing they get. That goes for dancers and painters, too. Believe me, I know," she said with some vehemence. She was at an age when she was wedded to the practical. Life had bruised her. Perhaps, in a previous and thinner incarnation, she had been a performer of some kind that provided her with no more than a struggling existence.*

*I suspected that she had neither a husband nor children and that the colorful outfits she wore over her thickening body were a last desperate attempt to attract a man*



*before old age claimed her. And yet the outcome seemed predetermined, in spite of her attire and her cheerful, positive manner. She was a woman consigned to aloneness.*

*Celeste, this new life I made for myself with my renting office activity was already corrupting me. What it provided, in addition to money, was time. I had grown up with the idea that work was important and had taken some pride in holding a job, whether delivering dry cleaned garments or groceries or being a bookstore assistant or sorting mail at the post office. But now I was struggling with Dr. Dressler's suggestion that I get a job, by which she meant a real job. When I told her I wanted time to try to write stories and even a novel, she gave me some of her German fire.*

*"I have your novel. It is right here. You have already written it," she said, holding up the notebook in which she recorded our sessions.*

*"That's not nice," I said.*

*"Nice I am not here to be. That you get from others maybe. Here it is for me to tell you the truth. You are not so interested in writing as you are in maintaining your distance from the world. Now go get a job and come out of hiding."*

*"Reading the screenplays of Ingmar Bergman is hiding?"*

*"Ingmar Bergman is a cinematic genius. You are ordinary young man. Go get a job."*

*Sickness is sickness, Celeste, and Dr. Dressler was trying to shout it out of me, but a life such as mine has been driven by trying to make a lot out of a little. I had a two inch vertical leap and yet saw myself as the second coming of Jerry "Zeke from Cabin Creek" West of the West Virginia Mountaineers. I could barely power a baseball beyond the*

*infield with my 32-ounce bat and yet, in my mind's eye, I had the downtown swing of Mickey Mantle. And now, when that dream had met the test of reality through the passage of time, a new dream was emerging. I would be a writer. I had to be a writer. I read One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and Sometimes a Great Notion in this period and was astonished by their scope and the vision of Ken Kesey, their author, but also depressed when I compared my skinny sentences with his vibrant prose. It was not for me to simply admire. The idea was taking hold that I had to do the same, and if I didn't, then I would have failed. And to meet this goal, I needed time, no matter how much of the laughing thing Dr. Dressler put on me.*

*Celeste, it didn't occur to me that I could get a job in an office, even if I had wanted one. I had no suitable training for the workplace. All I had done through four and a half years of college was read a few paperback novels. Beyond my lack of education, I didn't feel fit to be part of an office team. My co-workers would talk about me. If I were lucky enough to land a job, I would be quickly dismissed.*

*For several months I worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, not as a docent or in some other capacity that might require a college degree, but at the audiotapes booth for special exhibits. For three dollars, visitors interested in Cezanne's late period or early Mesopotamian art or whatever received a bulky audiotape that provided commentary on the individual pieces in the exhibit.*

*The job was part-time and paid an hourly wage for unchallenging work in a familiar, pleasant environment. For half a day, I had been given a place to go and a function to provide. Although at first it was difficult getting free of the apartment, I came*

*to look forward to my morning walks across Fifty-seventh Street and up Fifth Avenue, especially when spring arrived and Central Park again turned bright green. It could seem at such times that my life was truly ahead of me.*

*A number of young people had been drawn to these part-time positions, some like myself in a sort of limbo status. I shared a booth with a guy named Ralphie, who told me right away that he was on leave from Princeton University, where he was studying for a PhD in art history. "By the time I was thirteen I had memorized every painting in this museum," Donnie asserted, that first day.*

*"That's pretty impressive."*

*"I snort cocaine and the fruit in one of those Cezannes explodes off the table. You have no idea."*

*"No, I don't."*

*"I've had to cool it with the coke. I took so much that it screwed up my tear ducts."*

*"That's not good," I said. In fact, his eyes were red-rimmed and bulging in their sockets, as if something unnatural, some violation, had occurred. To be honest, his eyes were hard to look into.*

*"I could be a curator here if I wanted to be. You understand that, don't you?"*

*His tone had turned challenging, sharp, as if the only point of our one-sided conversation was to establish his credentials. "Yes," I said.*

*His name was of interest. Ralphie. Little Ralphie. The diminutive once again, in line with his aging boyishness, the yellow Izod shirt worn outside his faded jeans and the high-top Converse black sneakers.*

*His wife, Louise, worked in the gift shop. She would come by on breaks. A young woman with a worried look, perhaps wondering about this man she had tied herself to.*

*I do not like to see promise unfulfilled, Celeste. It pains me. I was sad, but also relieved, when, a week later, they were both gone. The rumor was that Ralphie had been caught putting museum visitors' money in his pocket. It may be, as my mother would say, that God's mercy is ultimately all we have to turn to.*

*There was another at the museum who got the sad thing going in me. Her name was Eunice, a young woman who moved with what appeared to be meditative slowness and turned out to be the result of the severe diminishment of her motor skills and cognitive powers owing to the use and abuse of methamphetamine.*

*"I had perfect College Board scores and graduated with high honors from the University of Chicago, but my IQ has tumbled drastically, according to the psychologist who tested me at the hospital, where I was admitted for long-term care. Essentially, the methamphetamine has eaten away at my brain."*

*She fixed me with a dull stare as she spoke, her words coming slowly, in a droning monotone. An image came to me of her head, her entire being, having eggshell fragility. What on earth would happen to her? How would she survive? It was too painful to contemplate her fate. She too was there a week or two and then gone.*

*But then there were those who summoned quite a different emotion. Tall, striking Cynthia, with a model's looks and thinness, was the daughter of a psychiatrist who, she claimed, was the discoverer of electroshock therapy.*

*"I was the apple of his eye. There was nothing he wouldn't do for me. Nothing." Her mouth, observed in isolation, was shaped for cruelty. As she spoke, her teeth flashed white and showed a knifelike sharpness. She was not as young as Eunice.*

*"I ruined my life. Crashed several Corvettes my father gave me, got expelled from Yale, but now am rebuilding."*

*At age thirty, she was finishing her undergraduate degree at New York University.*

*"I have a thirst for knowledge, a thirst. My professors rave about me. They see who I am."*

*In my own way I too saw who Cynthia was. I saw the expensive outfits she wore, and the student life she supported with only a flimsy part-time job. She was a daughter of privilege, seeking to tether herself to reality. She was a woman as insecure as she was boastful. She had the manner of a woman who had been given a second chance at life.*

*I also saw my own lust. Behind the booth I would graze against her, taking liberties that wouldn't have been mine to take with others. How I could have sensed she would not protest with a bark or a slap is beyond my ability to explain. That same night I met with her at the Cedar Tavern, down on University Place. In addition to her academic studies, she was taking a drawing class.*

*“My instructor, Mr. Flinty, is pinning all his hopes on me. He says I am the best,” she asserted, as she pulled from her oversize bag a pencil sketch that looked like a child’s stick figure rendering.*

*At that moment I thought of Sarah, the content of her mind, her depth. Cynthia and I had several drinks and returned to her place on a gritty East Village street and made love in her loft bed after smoking a joint. But we didn’t kiss. Her age had gathered in her face and so I didn’t go there. She called attention to this lack, and I heard it as a warning sign.*

*The next time our lovemaking was more one-sided. She took me in her mouth and that was that. The third time I called to meet with her she was with a friend from college.*

*“I told him you go out fucking every night,” she said, laughing. “Isn’t that right, Greg?” she asked. An unflattering portrait had been presented that showed me alone and apart, a wild creature of the lowest realm operating in the dark, with only sex to offer. That someone was in her company as an audience added to my sense of shame.*

*The following week I visited with her at her apartment. She greeted me in an old bathrobe and wore a towel in her wet hair like a turban. Her face was slathered with cold cream and in her hand she held a carton of cottage cheese.*

*“Come in and give us a kiss,” she said, between the table spoonfuls she fed herself. In this way did she exact her revenge not only on me but on men in general. Her performing days were over.*

*“I’ll come back another time,” I said, and headed for the door.*

*“There won’t be another time, Mr. Skinny Dick. Do you know that I don’t even feel you when you are inside me?” As she spoke, I saw that her tongue had been coated white with cottage cheese.*

*What I heard her to be saying was that I should take it on the lam and so I did.*

*Celeste, the obstacles to her growth were difficult to clear away, but she was trying. And perhaps I represented one of those obstacles. She needed to find a way to be herself while living with the crushing weight of an imagined ideal. Even in her depleted state, however, she was above me. She had gone to Yale. I was a graduate of the City College of New York. Most women need a man to have a mind commensurate with their own, or even bigger, for an enduring connection to be made.*

*There was another at the museum, a beautiful black-haired girl. She worked the information booth in the center of the great hall. But she was someone to approach only with my gaze. I saw her as reserved for young men with a loftier status than I possessed. The forbidding aspect of the girl was not simply physical but what I perceived as her propriety.*

*And yet delusion began to have its way with me, and one afternoon, after several false starts, I pushed through the force field keeping me at bay and asked if she would be free after work. Two hours later we were sitting in a nearby coffee shop on Madison Avenue.*

*“What do you do when you’re not here?” Zoe asked. The name surprised me, as once again life had that I should knock on a door and it should open.*

*“Well, I’m headed for law school, but I decided to postpone it for a year.”*

*“Law school? Why?”*

*“I’m not sure. I guess I need to have something to do, and maybe the law is a field I could do well in.”*

*“But it’s so crushingly boring. How disappointing.”*

*“Why would you be disappointed?”*

*“I thought you would be working on developing a cosmic consciousness, not pursuing something so ordinary.” Her aggrieved expression suggested she wasn’t joking.*

*“To be honest, I don’t even know what a cosmic consciousness would truly look like.”*

*“No. I’m beginning to see that you wouldn’t. So what else are you doing while waiting for this fascinating new chapter of your life to begin.”*

*“I am trying to write.”*

*“What are you trying to write?”*

*“Stories. A novel. Maybe I’m not doing anything but wasting paper, but it gives me a sense of purpose.”*

*“Elliot wanted to be a writer.”*

*“Elliot?”*

*“My boyfriend. He’s out at Stony Brook now studying for a PhD.”*

*“Do you get to see him often?”*

*“I don’t see him at all, except when he stops by to pick up some things he left behind. Me, he left me behind,” she suddenly screamed, causing the patrons at the next booth to turn and stare.*



*We got together again the next evening at a bar on Ninth Avenue, a dark place with a loud jukebox and young Irish toughs sitting in the back.*

*“Sex is at the top and bottom of everything,” she said, running her hand up and down the neck of bottle of red wine we had ordered.*

*“Why do you say that?” I asked.*

*She laughed, uncontrollably, for a while, drawing the attention of the young men. It was not the place for us, me with my skinny neck and the shrub on my head sharing a bottle of wine with a beautiful girl with a pack of Westies looking on.*

*“My father is a slumlord. He owns more rat-infested buildings in Harlem than anyone,” Zoe said, as we headed down the long side street, a forlorn stretch between Ninth and Tenth Avenue.*

*“My family used to own a couple of buildings,” I said. “We lost them both. Now we manage one of them, though it’s more like it manages us.”*

*“Is that right?”*

*“Sort of,” I said, wondering if I had said too much.*

*It being a warm evening, the superintendent, Moira Finn, was seated on her garbage can. As I walked on by with Zoe, my mind turned to my mother and the building she managed farther north. Moira might think we came from different worlds, but I too knew what it was to sit on a garbage can and watch the world go by. Only right now I wasn’t watching the world go by. I was with sensational, if caustic, Zoe.*

*“Slow. Slow. I want this to be a long night. I’m a sex addict. I belong on Forty-second Street.” So she said as we lay in bed. She had an appetite for sex I hadn’t*

*experienced before, not even with Asta, the girl from Norway who later took up with Luke. Zoe was aggressive, exploratory. I was startled when she inched her finger up my butt and darted her tongue into my nose. Celeste, there is real meaning in the word know, when used in the Biblical sense. I had not known Zoe. I had no idea. I had thought she might be on the decorous side. And now, in knowing her, I still did not know her, for who can fathom a creature such as she was showing herself to be?*

*“No, no. I said slow, slow,” she screamed in protest, when I came ten seconds after entering her.*

*I stayed for a while with my face down on the pillow. When the feeling of shame had sufficiently passed, I suggested that we get dressed and go out again.*

*“Go out where?”*

*“We’ll find a bar. A nicer bar,” I said.*

*“But we just got here.”*

*“I feel restless.” What I felt was uncomfortable. I was afraid of what she would see. It was not an unfounded fear.*

*“Play something for me on the piano,” she said.*

*“I can’t, I’m afraid.”*

*“Why can’t you?”*

*“Well, I bought the piano hoping to learn, but I so far I haven’t.”*

*“You look intelligent, but you’re not. You look like you would have an evolved consciousness, but you’re ordinary. You’re nothing, aren’t you?”*

*“I’m doing OK.”*

*“You’re doing OK? You have a part-time job working for the museum that is hardly enough to pay for weekly bus fare.”*

*“I’m building on it,” I said. For some reason, Melvin, poor, plain, and pale Melvin, with his missionary mindset and his meekness, came to mind as Zoe tore me down.*

*“You’re building on a job handing out audiocassettes four hours a day?”*

*“I’m really, really good at rewinding. That’s a skill worth having.”*

*Zoe had to brace herself against the piano to keep from falling on the floor with laughter. When she recovered, she said, “Well, could you at least show me a sample of your writing?”*

*“I’d better not do that,” I said.*

*“Why is that?”*

*“Dr. Dressler said I have no talent when I showed her my journal, and I am afraid that you would only concur. I am trying to get better. That is all I can do.”*

*“Who is Dr. Dressler?”*

*“She is my psychoanalyst. I am on the road of progress so long as I see her. That is how I see it, anyway.”*

*“You are retarded.”*

*I had been thinking about my journal, and whether there wasn’t anything I could show her. Then it occurred to me. Why not show her my first creative impulse? “Here. Read this, I said,” giving her one page from my journal.*

*“White line, continue. Sarah liked to pee in an open field, with the crab apple tree looking on”? This is your literary output?”*

*“I think I’m on to something. I just haven’t seen deeply enough into it as yet, but that could come with time.”*

*“You can’t fuck. You can’t play the piano. You can’t write. What am I doing with you?”*

*Though the report card she issued sounded harsh, I couldn’t dispute it. Strangely, her verdict had a liberating effect. She had discovered the worst about me, and yet I hadn’t died. Now there was no need to run out into the night. “Let’s find out,” I said.*

*We have these opportunities for intimacy, Celeste, for penetrating the circle and ending or interrupting our stay on the circumference. At some point we have to enter. We have to.*

*The bed could be converted to a double by pulling out the mattress underneath, which I did. We lay together, a small candle burning in the dark and the sound of trucks rumbling up Tenth Avenue coming to our ears.*

*“Elliott used to piss and shit on me. We did this all the time,” she said, offering a reminder once again that she lived in a world beyond my initial comprehension, and that if I had her so wrong, what else was I misunderstanding?*

*Cynthia paused at my table in the employees’ cafeteria the following week, a tray with one item, a tuna fish sandwich, in her hands. “Be careful, Luther, you don’t catch something from Zoe. She told me over lunch yesterday that she hasn’t cleaned her*

*diaphragm in over a year.” She then moved on to a table some distance away where Zoe was seated with several others. I hadn’t anticipated that Zoe would express admiration for Cynthia, citing her intelligence, or that they would become friends. The possibility that they would discuss me was not comforting, but if Zoe brought up her diaphragm, why wouldn’t she have more to say on the subject of sex?*

*My connection with Zoe began to go sideways rather than deepen. We saw each other a couple of more times, but my ineptness in bed continued to be a source of complaint. She was simply not used to such incompetence and could not easily tolerate it. “The only thing I like about you is your lips. I couldn’t wait to kiss them. They were all I could see. Did you know that?”*

*“No. I didn’t know that,” I said.*

*“This man has stopped by the information booth several times. He wants me to come work for him,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard my response.*

*“What kind of work?”*

*“He makes pornographic films.”*

*“What would you do?”*

*“What do you think?”*

*“And you’re seriously considering his proposal?”*

*“Why wouldn’t I?”*

*Celeste, a man of greater capacity would have followed with more questions, seeking to fathom Zoe’s mind on this matter. But the truth was she had once again revealed a side of herself beyond my ability to imagine in relation to her. This may speak*

*to the larger issue of women in general and sex, that is, my difficulty imagining that they truly enjoy making love. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, the idea still lingers that sex is an activity that women endure rather than relish. And pornography has not entirely eliminated this doubt, regardless of the seeming sexual voraciousness of some of the female actors. They are actors, after all, in a male-run industry. Of course, there may be an element of self-protection here. How easily could I live with the belief that all women had the same sexual proclivities as Zoe? Would it not be uncomfortable to ascribe voraciousness to all of them? Who are we exactly? Tell me, Celeste, does the question not impact you. Does it not summon the desire to vacate the premises of this body we are housed in, that we may move entirely to the spirit realm? How much of urination and defecation, of our own smells, and of our own unbridled appetite in all areas of life, do we need before we say goodbye?*

*Often, in the years that passed, I would say that I let Zoe get away, that I should have tried to claim her for my own or at least argued the case against Mr. Pornography Man, but remember something, Celeste, please remember, one of the first things Zoe said to me was that she was a sex addict who belonged on Forty-second Street. Possibly I understood that it was not for me to get in the way of her destiny. Besides, I had come too close to her fire to wish to be burned anymore.*

*But I had her last name—Bergen—and on lonely nights for some years thereafter, when I had come from a bar alone and full of longing, I would call directory assistance and try to find her, believing, in my drunkenness, that alcohol could dissolve all barriers and bring me close again with those I had once liked if not loved. But directory*

*assistance had no listing for a Zoe Bergen, or if it did, the party had requested that the number be unlisted. And so I would be grateful and relieved at the same time. Then came the night when directory assistance did have a listing for someone with that name, and so I called. A woman with a French accent answered. When I asked for Zoe, a tone of hostility and suspicion entered her voice. "Who is this calling?" she asked. Shortly Zoe herself came on the line.*

*"How are you, Zoe?" I asked.*

*"How am I? How am I? I'm fine. How are you? Are you drunk? You sound drunk. You sound like a speed freak alcoholic. Get some help." Just like that did she speak to me before the line went dead, leaving me alone and shattered on West Broadway, between Spring and Prince, from where I had placed the call. These voices that come not soft and murmuring but like a sharp-edged knife or with the bludgeoning authority of a sledgehammer. She was all business, all about prescience and the heart of the matter, having drawn from the universe mystical, intuitive powers. In the care of. This phrase came to me as I backed away from the phone booth. And then it came more fully. She has placed herself in the care of this woman. She has placed herself in the care of many women. She has placed herself where she has to be now that Mr. Pornography Man has done his work with her.*

*Celeste, there is one thing I have omitted, if you will bear with me. It is only this. Zoe's father, the slumlord, was also a joy killer. Zoe told me so. There she was, on a sunny spring day, singing a Beatles' song, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," when her father brought the hammer down, ordering her, without explanation, to stop. In telling this story,*

*Zoe was reliving it. Resentment filled her face and set her eyes ablaze. A resentment as black as her lustrous hair. And who can say what other trespasses he committed to further stoke the flames of her ire. What we can safely say is that resentment is the lens through which she saw the world, including me, as when she screamed, "You're so controlling. Do you think you could stop, if only for one second?" And what was the cause of this outburst, you may well ask? While on a walk with Zoe in the park near the museum, I had retrieved a ball that had gotten away from a little boy. Harshness undeserved, except in the light of her family experience. We must strive for understanding, Celeste. We must.*

*How was it for me with Sarah in this time? She didn't go as far away as you might have imagined, and my excursions with Cynthia and Zoe were not exactly flight paths from her. Suppose I were to tell you that this fellow Lane, Sarah's genius lover, drank her blood and ate her soul, leaving her lifeless out there on the Fenway? Sarah didn't so much want to be with Lane as to be Lane, while all he wanted was sex with an attractive and previously unavailable girl. Following his visits, she was unable to work. She filled with loathing for her projects, saw them as he did, tradition-shackled, derivative efforts. For days she would lie in bed, seeking the solace of sleep. If he was an opinionated dink, a twerp riding the crest of a wave that would ultimately leave him beached, a narcissistic little rich boy, she could only see what he had and she lacked. There is thievery and attempted thievery going on in this world, and not always of material resources.*

*And so she began to look at me in a new light. Whatever my flaws, I did not destroy her confidence in her own work or demoralize her to the point that she spent her*



*days in bed. The influence of her mother may have been such that Sarah thought she was supposed to move on from me, but it turned out not to be a dictate in accord with her own. Evidently, I had more staying power in her life than she had realized. She took me back.*

*Celeste, if I address you constantly, see it as a measure of my constancy, or see it as you will. But I cannot speak to the void. It is too lonely, too barren a landscape for me to contemplate without shuddering. I must come in from the cold. I must.*

*After my shift at the museum I would walk across the park to my family's building on those evenings I had arranged to be there. The museum had given me some modest exposure to the world. It was a happy place free of the burdens and associations of family and the past, all of which awaited me, I was reminded, on seeing the verse of Scripture on the building wall. The renting office, so small and cramped and cluttered, was my means for expanding my life, but sometimes I couldn't help but feel it was keeping me small and cramped and cluttered as well.*

*By now my mother was in her late sixties, her gait slower each year. And my father, with his prosthesis, had already hit the biblical threescore and ten. On nicer days he managed, with the aid of his walker, to struggle out to the traffic island in the middle of Broadway. There, while other old folks fed the pigeons or stared vacantly, he would sit and involve himself in outdoor prayer, thanking God for his mercy and waiting to be taken. Constantinople, Marseilles, Nice, Paris, Boston, New York City, where he met my*

*mother. A tired, tired man he was. He had walked the streets long enough. He had been wrapped in his solitude long enough. He wanted out. He wanted a place on the other side where order would prevail and he would be safe from the sharp knives, the axes, the hoes. Soon he would be gone. I could hear the grave calling to him. All my life I have heard the grave calling to my family, saying only here can order prevail. It cannot be obtained while you are going about on this earth. For others, maybe, but not for you.*

*By now my sister Naomi was big with her second child. It wasn't enough that Jeanne, her daughter, had run off and followed the hippie trail out to California. Naomi had to try again. "But Luther, the father is not my husband, Chuck. I am pregnant by a man named Al who lives down the hall from us. Chuck doesn't want me anymore. He is only interested in little boys. What was I to do? I am a real woman and I need a real man. But please, do not breathe a word of this to Chuck, as Mother would say."*

*In this way did Naomi speak to me that summer. She was ready to depart well before threescore and ten. Do not say that the possibility for order lies anywhere but on the other side.*

*Sarah and I went away that summer. Other kids were crisscrossing the country and backpacking around the globe and it weighed on me that I had not really explored the world beyond my hometown. And yet, in preparing to leave, I saw once again the trap the renting office, and the easy money it offered, had become. It was hard to let go, but there we were, boarding a flight chartered by CCNY, with identical backpacks I had purchased at Hudson's, down on lower Third Avenue.*

*With hindsight, I see the foolishness of my ways, that I would board an old jet owned by a no-name company, the kind that bursts into flames on the runway or loses an engine on takeoff. When it comes to airlines, one must seek out quality.*

*Celeste, the trip was difficult, and things I am loath to describe took place. But you must understand that relations were not quite right between Sarah and me. I was not good enough for her. She had said as much. Only because Lane was too good for her, or too destructive of her, had she come back. And then there was an incident at Camp before we took off for Europe.*

*Efram Ellsberg and his friend Zach Zeckler, the Scale Master, came to visit us at Camp. Why? In a moment of hysteria I invited Efram, who invited Zach, who invited five others from their City College crowd. Sarah came to me, astonished, to say that Efram and his pals had called to say they were down at the Log Cabin Inn at the bottom of the road. And so we fetched them, making two trips with the jeep to bring the band onto the property. Peter and Lydia were together again, or appeared to be, and if they were miffed at this surprise visit, they kept such feelings to themselves. But it wasn't lost on me what I had done in extending such an invitation when it was not my place to do so, given the simple fact that the property wasn't mine. Other than Efram and Zach, I didn't know who these people were, though a couple looked vaguely familiar from the college. I felt stupid and unprepared, overrun.*

*The visitors bathed naked in the pool, and when Sarah joined them, I felt obliged to as well. Seeing my pale, meager body, Efram looked away. "Some of us look better in clothes," he said later, as if obliged to give verbal confirmation of what I had sensed.*

*How low those of us who have nothing can be and still survive, Celeste, while beauty such as Lenore personified perishes young.*

*Some sparking was going on that day. The distorting light of lust was in Zach Zeckler's eyes for Sarah, and she showed reciprocal desire.*

*"I'm taking him up to the lean-to," she said that afternoon, after she had shown Zach her studio.*

*"She's an artist. How come you don't do something with your life?" Zach asked.*

*"I'm trying to," I replied, but they were gone before the words had left my mouth.*

*I watched them begin their ascent of the mountain in the jeep and walked up into the meadow, where, on an earlier weekend, I had photographed Sarah as she took me in her mouth, that is, until she said, "Please don't do that. I don't like it." Right then and there did she identify and protest against the pornographer in me. I say these things, Celeste, to acknowledge a degree of sickness that mitigates against true partnership. There are things we don't and can't understand about the forces that shape us, but is one of them, in my case, the dominating role of women? Can anyone without a sister, as Quentin Compson asked, really know what it is to have a sister? Excuses, excuses, I hear myself say. Always with the excuses, Luther, as if it is anyone's fault but your own that you cannot walk a straight line.*

*When a dog bites, without provocation, it will often be put down for its treachery. Why? Because having crossed that line once, it will surely do so again. So too did I cross a line that weekend, striking Sarah when she came back, her face flushed, from her*

*outing with scale master Zach. By then, Efram and Zach and their friends had gone, and we were alone in the guest house.*

*“You pathetic bastard,” she said quietly, before fleeing to the main house.*

*Why had I lashed out with my open hand to her cheek? You must know, Celeste, what the feel, the texture, of humiliation is like. Countless ways have you experienced people walking all over you and then expecting you to smile. But I should not seek to excuse myself by dragging you into the situation. Cowardice is cowardice, and it was on full display when I raised my hand to Sarah that day. Had I called Zach Zeckler out for sparking with Sarah? Had I offered even the mildest protest? Not at all. Why? Because stripped down to his birthday suit, it was clearly seen that he had a greater endowment than I possessed, and what is a man to do when he sees such a thing but to step aside, especially when the woman who is the object of the other’s desire sees the same thing as well?*

*In London Sarah noticed that her locket was missing and questioned the male maid, who had no light to shed on its whereabouts. When she persisted, the only conclusion he could draw was that she was accusing him of theft. Later, she found it in the bottom of her knapsack. The incident pained me. From the window of our room I saw the man, in his gray smock, on the street below smoking a cigarette. A humble man, I thought. A man who cleaned rooms, as my mother cleaned rooms. A good man who had made peace with his lot in life. A man who had the telly and his smokes and Manchester United or Arsenal to root for, I thought, as he stood there stolid on his break under a gray*

*sky. He could meet life head on. He could say, "I'm a bloody maid, Jack, and it's OK. Just minding my business and smoking my fags."*

*I had left him a note of apology and five pounds, but Sarah was less contrite.*

*"I didn't like his eyes. Even if he didn't take the locket, he's the kind who could have," she said.*

*In Piccadilly Circus we heard, behind us, gentle voices singing a gentle song, "I'm forever blowing bubbles." I turned to see that the singers themselves were less than gentle, with their shaved heads and stomp boots and hard smiles. Three skinheads, all in a row, had come up behind us. The song, from their mouths, was, I now understood, taunting, insinuating. Kick, Gouge, and Maim moved past us as we stepped aside.*

*From London we took the train to Dover, and then a ferry to Calais, where the white cliffs and the English Channel were not enough to keep us from fighting.*

*"Lane's better in bed than you. He's better, period. Don't you get it?" she exploded, as ocean spray broke over the bow.*

*I retreated to the dining room, where the mocking glances of formally clad French waiters drove me back outside.*

*We must be honest, Celeste. We must. The time is too short for anything less. I, more than some, have seen the way that words can fly here and there and miss the mark.*

*Paris was wide boulevards that reminded Sarah of the Bowery, in New York City. It was books in quality paperback editions that made you want to possess them. It was the strange contraption called the bidet and old men in the Luxembourg Gardens playing boules. Paris was also a man's blood pouring onto the cobblestone roadway near the*

*Louvre as he lay unconscious, Peugeots and Citroens whizzing all around him and the wail of an ambulance siren a distant cry. In that moment, I saw the coldness and self-hatred of the French. Everywhere was the strong, sharp smell of those fat Gauloises. I had given up smoking the month before and was managing to resist. We were OK in Paris. We were doing fine.*

*How the mind works is this, Celeste. I imagine myself with a better score on the SAT and my classmates looking at me with interest and respect for the first time. One of the prettier girls is among them. In the moment that our eyes meet it is understood that we will be alone together soon. But then I see the sneering face and hear the caustic words of another female classmate as she says, "The only thing funny about you is the shape of your head." Do you see what we are up against, Celeste? Do you see? The door perpetually slamming shut as we move toward liberation. Vigilance, Celeste, vigilance.*

*The light was different in Spain. It had a clarity you didn't elsewhere find. And Spanish trains ran on a wider gauge track, causing a delay at the border. These were countries that had been at each other's throats. There was no need to increase the number of invasion routes.*

*Spain was dying, the old Spain anyway. A waiter with a long, solemn face stood haplessly in the wood-paneled dining car, the linen-covered tables empty except for Sarah and me, her long-haired friend. Elegance and normalcy had fled. The riff raff were here.*

*The sun was a beast we hadn't the sense to avoid at its peak, even after finding a pension in the historic part of Madrid. A feeling of torment and helplessness took hold. Our jeans were not light enough for the heat. My impatience with the map left us with my poor sense of direction. Our time was being squandered. We weren't navigating the streets and finding the sights. In and out of it, my blood was set boiling by the Spanish sun. Sarah touched my Nikon the wrong way in our room. My slap turned her face into a red mask of rage. She hit back. We wrestled on the floor. I held her down.*

*"I'll kill you, you skinny dick," she screamed. In that moment I saw the old man whose fury Jason Compson ignites toward the end of *The Sound and the Fury*. It was not good.*

*The next day we made an outing to the Prado, its artwork displayed in a murky light. Though the sun was at its cruelest, Sarah wore long sleeves to cover the bruises on her arms.*

*Franco was still in power. There were proprieties to be observed, a member of the Guardia Civil declared, with a sharp rap of his nightstick to my knee as I lay with my head in Sarah's lap in a peaceful moment outside a church. Liar, Luther, liar. Not a sharp rap. More like a tap. Be faithful to your plain experience.*

*I had bought an expensive camera, and with it took mediocre pictures. At times the camera was a torment, testifying to my unworthiness and incompetence. A pencil, a piece of paper, a book. The world of mechanical things I was as ill-equipped for as to father and care for a child.*



*We met two French-Canadian women at the pension. Their plan was to head for the Costa Brava in a Citroen they had purchased. Would we join them? Louise was short and fat and voluble. Simone was tall and thin and reserved. We said OK, placing ourselves in their hands.*

*In fact, they were afraid of rape. Other female travelers had been assaulted, Louise said. "You are big, strong man. You will protect us," she said, indulging in ironic mockery with a smile.*

*Celeste, my brains had been scrambled by the Spanish sun. There are those who laugh when all the markers are gone and they know not where they are, but I am not among them. Leon Trotsky claimed to be amused by his "topographical cretinism," but such disorientation summoned in me only panic and rage, bad enough when I was alone but shameful when Sarah was with me and I made her the target of my wrath. Now here came Louise and Simone, with an offer to organize our trip for us. Suddenly we were not alone. For a while I could put away the maps, sit back, and relax.*

*But the Spanish driving culture did not inspire peace of mind. Every five miles we came to scenes of carnage, vehicles in flames and occupants screaming in agony or already dead. There is no malady like car-induced psychosis. Sitting with our foot to the gas pedal and our hand on the wheel, we ascribe to ourselves special powers. Sarah's father showed a controlled madness in the elaborate fuss he made over what is a point A to point B exercise, but the Spaniards took it to another level, passing at will on the right as well as the left, regardless how tight the space or how close an oncoming vehicle might be. Seemingly, it never occurred to them that lives, their own and those of others,*

*could be spared by a more modest, less crazed approach to operating a motor vehicle. For the sake of a few seconds they would kill themselves and everyone around them. Children drunk on their own sense of power. And so, my vigilance was called upon to soar there in the back seat if I did not wish for calamity to strike.*

*We were in August now, and if the streets of Paris were not thronged with Parisians, it was because they and those from elsewhere on the continent had converged on Spain: thirty-one million tourists in a country with a population of 22 million. For some reason, this statistic I cited many times, even when its repetition began to sound strange and off-putting to my own ears. Celeste, when you cannot speak informatively about the topography of a country, on such humble facts do you rely.*

*But the impact of the influx was that there was no room at the inn. As night fell, we discovered that every roadside place was booked full. A carful of young Spanish men offered their services. They appeared to have taken a shine to Sarah and the two French-Canadians. We followed behind them to a number of different accommodations, but the result was the same. After a while the young men became a torment to me, as I imagined them plotting among themselves to lure us to a desolate area where they would rape the women and kill me. Who were these strangers we had entrusted ourselves to, after all, and what sort of recompense might they ask? It was a relief when they abandoned us and I no longer had to look at their red tail lights in the night, which had begun to glow with demonic power.*

*That night we slept on a sprawling beach in Gandia, at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, too tired to care about the warnings that sleeping on the cool sands*

*was against the law and could wind us up in a Spanish jail. The next morning, woken by a blazing sun, Sarah and I found shelter on the outskirts with a poor family in a small house along a dirt road on which chickens wandered. Louise and Simone found similar shelter somewhere nearby.*

*That same afternoon I came out on the beach wearing a pair of shorts. My pale, thin legs and knobby knees were not a hit with either Louise or Simone. A look of disappointment can easily be distinguished from a look of interest. "You should be careful with your expensive camera," Louise said. "Did no one ever tell you that sand is not exactly good for it?" Their glances and Louise's contempt-tinged reproach were enough to sink me. Many times we are slain in this lifetime. Many times. Sometimes our assassins are known to us. Sometimes they are perfect strangers.*

*Louise wasn't quite done with me. "Take that ice cream and push it into his face," she suggested to Sarah, the following day, in Valencia, when I seemed to be making her personally responsible for the fact that I could not find color film for my camera.*

*Then, in Barcelona, Louise was done with me, and Simone as well, though not before a tour of the Ramblas and Gaudi Park and that crazy cathedral. We had checked into a hotel, where one afternoon Sarah and I had a huge fight, worse than any of the others. My insanity had led me to focus on her mouth, a churning mass of mocking red, all her venom concentrated in that one orifice. There, in that room, with the door locked, I slapped her, then slapped her again. My open hand craved her cheek. It could not get enough. Sarah tore a lamp free of its outlet and swung it at my head and then tried to*

*gouge me with her tweezers. "I'll put your eyes out in your sleep. I'll cut off your useless dick," she shouted.*

*Celeste, no one had ever before struck Sarah. She had not grown up with Hannah of the tongue clamped between her thick lips as she smacked and smacked. She did not have a father such as mine who had perfected the art of the smack. And so it was for me to present her with this education in vileness. Such was the nature of the gift I came bearing. Ultimately it is best for someone like me to go off alone and find God, as there is no other I can have or who can have me.*

*Louise and Simone had their own method of inflicting brutality, unless we are to consider it a kindness. They simply disappeared. Possibly they came to our door and, hearing the row, said enough was enough of that ludicrous freak and his masochistic girlfriend. Or maybe they heard nothing and simply decided we had served their purposes and because we would not be needed in the future, there was no need to say goodbye before checking out. In any case, they were now gone, vanished, and we were once again alone.*

*Our trip ended in Holland, where the sun was warm but not malicious. In Rotterdam we walked along the waterfront and engaged with a young Dutch couple who took us into their home for dinner, an event of dubious value, unless there is some benefit to be derived from passing time feeling uncomfortable with strangers you will never see again. The young man, an architecture student, had designed their living space. Rather than take pleasure in the airy, comfortable dwelling, I could only play host to the usual set of miserable feelings that set upon me when I sensed I was in the presence of a*

*creature entirely my superior. Love is not a virtue easily come by, Celeste. We must die and die and die before accessing that wellspring.*

*All the while we sat with this earnest young couple, struggling to understand and be understood, a great weeping was going on in me at my deceit. In truth, a bit of quid pro quo was in the air, the basis of all social contracts: I will do for you if you will do for me. Because they had taken us into their home, the expectation arose in them that we would reciprocate when they journeyed to the New World, as they someday hoped to do. Sarah had the capacity to receive people. Guests were always arriving at her family's home, whether at the apartment in New York City or at Camp, and their lives were rich beyond measure because of these friendships. But did my father and mother have people into our home? Did we have dinner guests, or guests for any kind of visit? Never. Not once. It did not happen. It was dangerous to have people into my family's apartment. The word "pigsty" resounded throughout the school following such a visit, as I have reported elsewhere. The message I received is clear: the Garatdjians receive no one, absolutely no one, on a social basis. You want to meet with me? I'll see you at the coffee shop, at Chock Full O'Nuts, at Horn and Hardart, etc. So no, Celeste, this earnest young Dutch couple might be received by Sarah, but me they would never see again.*

*We spend our whole life striving to be presentable, and do so in loneliness and solitude only to lie alone for an eternity after passing from this life. At some point it must stop, Celeste. It must. We must disrobe and say, quoting once again the great Georgette, "What you see is what you get."*

*In Amsterdam we slept one night in a low-budget facility with several floors but no outside walls. On these floors hundreds of young travelers such as ourselves lay through the night. The absence of privacy was too much for Sarah, and so we rented a small room under the eaves of a gabled house. From our window we could stare down at the quiet, tree-lined street and the narrow canal.*

*Dam Square was cluttered with the young lying unwashed and stoned. Such riffraff were a source of great concern to the elderly proprietor, Mr. Joost, and his wife, who lived comfortably on the floor below. Evidently these young people were a source of concern to the Dutch authorities as well. We watched on TV as a phalanx of gray-uniformed police with shields and batons moved against the young people resisting expulsion from the square. A clip was shown of a truck equipped with water cannons trying to hose the squatters away as a shopkeeper might try to hose litter from the sidewalk in front of his store into the street.*

*“Garbage. Vermin. They are not our own. They come to us with nothing but their sick attitudes and contribute nothing. They should be expelled, all of them.”*

*Mr. Joost, in his evening robe, and with a glass of brandy in hand, was visibly upset. His face had reddened and his voice filled with self-righteous anger. “Do you know how hard I have had to work? I came to this city with nothing, nothing, as a boy.”*

*There is no cause for me to go histrionic and put the laughing thing on Mr. Joost, Celeste, as he was only expressing an emotion that has gripped me many, many times. In truth, the apathy and the indolence of those who occupied the square was a disturbing sight, but not to the extent that I could be in full sympathy with the solid burgher, for*

*whom propriety was clearly everything. And possibly this ambivalent attitude of mine was not lost on Mr. Joost, who, after his outburst, seemed for the first time to take note of my hair and in that same instant to associate its wildness with the anarchy in the streets. Suddenly, it may have occurred to him, the enemy outside had breached the boundaries of his own home.*

*“Your hair has an interesting shape. It goes in different directions, like a vacillating wind.”*

*“Yes, that is true,” I said, unable and unwilling to dispute with Mr. Joost, who, after all, had taken us in.*

*We rented bicycles and rode them over the cobblestone streets of Amsterdam. More than once I felt the wild thing rise in me and succumbed to the psychosis that I so routinely accuse those with vehicles of being afflicted by. I too experienced a degree of madness while pedaling among the mechanized behemoths. Celeste, the speed I achieved made me heady with my own success. I began to ascribe to myself special skills. Gasps of admiration could be heard from all those who witnessed my performance as I whizzed between cars and trucks and flew around sharp curves. Abandoned by the side of the road was the principle I had so steadfastly applied to others of point A to point B driving, remanding all those who exceeded such utility to the madhouses of the world. It was for Sarah to come fetch me with her sharp words.*

*“Stop it. Just stop it. You’re an idiot. You’re going to get killed,” she screamed, after I fell from my bike to the rain-slicked street and was nearly struck by a car. I want to tell you that her words sank in, even if their staying power was not for eternity.*

*We visited the Rijksmuseum and drank beer at an outdoor café in Vondelpark, where the bees hovered but did not sting. At night the city would call to me in our little room, where Sarah was already settled into bed with a book. I too was reading, a nonfiction paperback by Tom Wolfe called *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, and once again was dumbfounded that someone could write such energized, well-tooled prose. Was that what Tom Wolfe was really getting at when he said you were either on the bus or off the bus, meaning you either had the necessities or you didn't.*

*"Where are you going?" Sarah asked, surprised to see me heading, fully dressed, for the door.*

*"I just need to take a walk. I'll be back," I said. By now the crisp air was signaling the advent of fall. I drifted toward the red light district where women in erotic lingerie stood or sat behind big windows. Neither their undergarments—halter tops, garter belts, black stockings—or the bodies they adorned drew me to them. They wanted your wallet and nothing more, and there were men who wanted only one thing from them as well, and so business was conducted. And yet their commodity status was not the sole deterrent, Celeste. These women looked into your soul. They saw who you were as a man, what your proclivities might be, a shy sort though you might present yourself as. Such knowingness as was seen in their bold stares was too much for me to stand up to.*

*Now Celeste, Sarah had a feel to her, a warmth, when we lay together that I took with me into the chilly night. As I left she sat curled up with her book. Her curiosity and her rootedness in her art caused me to wonder whether I was on a deviant path as I headed toward the bars, drawn by the thrilling sound of "Bad Moon Rising" and the*



*hideously compelling sound of "Satisfaction." Wild upon the street were several GIs calling to a blond woman ahead of them, but she only increased her distance and so they turned back to the bar from which they all had streamed.*

*Heineken's was the national beer, and that night I drained two green bottles. A special kind of beer Heineken's is, with a bracing taste not as creamy as Budweiser or as metallic and quarrelsome as Miller. It is a taste you can trust, as you can that red star on the label. In Paris I had been able to drink the cheap wine served in a carafe and not order a second, but here, in this crowded nightspot in Amsterdam, far from Gosees in downtown Manhattan, it took some effort to break away. Though I had no way of seeing it, a change was occurring in my drinking and would more fully manifest in the coming year.*

*Either Mr. Joost ran a tight ship or he was a light sleeper who didn't mind being woken in the night by late-returning tenants. The door was locked, and as no key had been given me, I had no choice but to ring the bell. Shortly, the door opened. Attached to the latch was a long thick rope, the other end of which ran to the top of the steep stairs, pitched as such a sharp angle as protection against flooding. Mr. Joost had only to pull on the rope for the latch to lift and the door to swing open. There he stood, at the top of the stairs, a stocking cap on his balding head and a pair of slippers on his feet and with a robe over his pajamas. He appeared to be a state of high dudgeon, judging from the sizzle beaming down at me from his small eyes.*

*"Good evening," I said.*

*"Do you know the hour?"*

*“The hour?”*

*“It is after midnight. We have a curfew. Was that not explained to you?”*

*“I must not have heard.”*

*“You have come home alone? Where is your friend?”*

*“Asleep, as you probably were. I am sorry to have woken you.”*

*“You leave your friend all alone and go out into the night?”*

*“I was restless.”*

*“Restless? What does that mean?”*

*“I thought there was something out there I needed to see,” I said.*

*“I am sorry for her that she is with someone such as you,” Mr. Joost said. Having nothing more to say, he returned to his dwelling and closed the door.*

*The next morning we packed our bags and headed for Schiphol International Airport for the return flight home. Having finished the Tom Wolfe book, I had begun to read Portnoy’s Complaint. The vitality of the writing and the explicit treatment of sex led me to want to share the contents with Sarah, but after reading less than a page she threw the paperback so it skittered along the terminal floor. “He’s a sexist pig,” she said, with vehemence. Sometimes a question does not need to be asked, Celeste, or if it does, the question is more for me than for the other person, especially when her pissed-off reaction evokes in me nervous laughter rather than annoyance, as it did that day. Sarah could slap a label on Philip Roth and hurl his novel, but it occurred to me that her angry display was an expression of jealousy and hurt. Philip Roth was Jewish and running amok among goy women and Lane was Jewish and he was doing the same thing. And if this was so,*

*then the question was really for me. Why was I laughing? Because if she had left me for Lane and caused me pain, why shouldn't I take some satisfaction in knowing that Lane had left her and caused her pain? How did it feel to be a nobody in the day and night? It didn't feel good, did it?*

*But there were other things as well. There always are, with these minds of ours. Who but a sadist can for long take satisfaction in the pain of another?*

*Now Celeste, we must discuss a matter fairly rank, as these things go, but candor is essential at this late stage. Let me begin by saying I am not an especially odoriferous man. Being someone who bathes regularly, my smell is within the normal range. I am not one of those who go without soap and water and a change of clothes for months and whose stench is sufficient to cause the evacuation of an entire subway car or public bus. And as for flatulence, I have been keen on containing myself in the public sphere and have even tried to be decorous about breaking wind when in the privacy of my apartment, at least during daylight hours. But such restraint was not in evidence on the return flight. My bowels were speaking to me. Great silent gusts of wind broke from me, summoning the attention of those near and far.*

*"Jesus, is that you? What did you eat?" So spoke Sarah, in a state of astonishment, her hand to her nose and mouth, even as more gas passed through me. One cannot always fight the currents of his time, nor should he have to. If the moment calls for gaseousness, then let gaseousness fill the air.*

*“Hey, Lord Stinky, put a cork in your ass, will you?” shouted a man across the aisle. Here too my only response was to let loose a topflight stinker that drove my outraged friend from his seat.*

*Celeste, all facets of our being must be revealed and accepted for true love to be born. From the false image we strive to maintain to the reality of the stink machine within must the embrace of love extend. Homeward bound we were, with me still far from such an understanding.*

*That fall I registered for a writing class in fiction at the New School, down on West Twelfth Street. The class was led by Alison Redd, an author whose novel *The Penelope Puzzle*, had received great acclaim, including the National Book Award. The novel was over one thousand pages in length and represented a lifelong labor of love for Ms. Redd. In fact, it was her first published work of fiction. At age sixty-four she found herself famous, and she was seven years into that new period of her life when I came to her class. Whether those years were fallow or new seeds of growth had been planted she would not say, but no new work had appeared in print under her name.*

*Ms. Redd had the craggy face of W. H. Auden in his later years, a downturned mouth, and the dolorous eyes of a basset hound. That first day she spoke of the flow, the flow, and urged us to read Anais Nin, her literary hero. The eight other students, I came to understand, were devotees of Ms. Redd, having studied with her for several years. And in fact, they emulated her prose style with long sentences that went along like a lazy, meandering river. “Great flow. Wonderful flow, George. Keep up that flow,” she said,*

*after the student had read several pages of his novel in a dreamy voice and with an annoying smile of self-approval. He had been working on the section for five years, he said, adjusting this and that sentence to create maximum flow.*

*The atmosphere felt stultifying, as if I had walked in on a cult. I dropped the class and enrolled in another, called "Free-Style Writing." The instructor was a man named Bill Gofner. At age twenty-three an accident had left him paraplegic. Until then he had been a man headed for a big life, given that he had all the necessities: good genes, an Ivy League degree, ambition, and the drive for excellence. Now he went about in a wheelchair and had need of an aide to get through his days. The opportunity had been given him to contemplate a reality more profound than the one he had been living in: mortality, the meaning of life, how to adapt oneself to a circumscribed existence. His mind turned to such considerations. Writing became his means of salvation. Reflection would be his alternative to a life of action.*

*Though we couldn't help but be aware of his disability, he did not call attention to it, except for the several times the racket of a motorcycle on the street below caused him to shout, "'Right on. Far out. Do your thing, psycho mother f'er." In that lapse from his usual modulated manner he told us everything we needed to know about his pain. Actions had consequences. Be mindful of your life. Be vigilant. Here was a man who spoke my language, at least in this one area. I would see a driver, when the traffic light became green, burn rubber from the cross street where he had stopped into the avenue, only to brake sharply because the light at the next corner was still red. For what purpose such histrionics? For the purpose of power and nothing more. Or perhaps something more.*

*Perhaps for the opportunity to hurt someone and still be able to claim, as the driver, that he was innocent by virtue of having the right of way. Agents of pain existed in the world, and maybe Bill Gofner as well as I suspected some drivers were among them.*

*“Did I not tell you that you have no talent?” Dr. Dressler said, when I told her of my activity.*

*“I don’t care what you say. Actually, I would prefer if you keep your opinion to yourself, or refrain from telling me every week. Or how about you just drop dead? Would that be too much to ask?”*

*“So violent. So much anger. So much pride. I have hurt your feelings?”*

*“Isn’t that what you want to do?”*

*“What I want is for you to have a reasonable life and not be a bum.”*

*“A bum?”*

*“You will hide from life if you are given the chance. That is what I am saying.”*

*“I don’t think you know what you’re saying. Someone who hides from life is not necessarily a bum.”*

*“I do not want to see you develop bad habits while waiting to go to law school next fall.”*

*In such a way did she speak, as if to impose on me her own hard-won experience. And yet, that was only one side. When I came to her anxious about Sarah, who had returned to Boston for what was called a fifth year competition, and requested a prescription for tranquilizers, Dr. Dressler explained that she wasn’t authorized, by terms of her service with the clinic, to prescribe such medications.*

*“Try the old-fashioned tranquilizer,” Dr. Dressler said to me that afternoon.*

*“What old-fashioned tranquilizer?”*

*“Wine. Try wine.”*

*Now Celeste, I have been honest and forthright about my drinking to this point. At the same time I would have to say that alcohol was out of favor with my generation. Drinking was for older generations. It caused people to be loud and belligerent, to smell bad and vomit. Grass and hash and acid, on the other hand, made a person mellow and contemplative. There was also my mother’s warning about alcohol. I can’t say that somewhere in my mind I was entirely heedless of her concerns. But here was Dr. Dressler giving me the green light to drink. Her suggestion was all I could think of for the duration of the session, and afterward I made a beeline for a liquor store on Tenth Avenue, a tiny space you could barely turn around in, where I bought two bottles of chilled rosé wine. I returned to my apartment a block away, where I quickly opened one of the bottles and began to drink.*

*Sometime later I came to on the floor in the dark, and had no idea where I was. I struggled to my feet and turned on a light. Evidently, I had drunk both bottles, as they stood on the kitchen table drained of the pinkish wine. I had no regret about the wasted hours. On the contrary, I was aware only of a sense of elation. I had found a friend who would not be fickle and who would never abandon me, as Sarah might. It would be with me on the rocky road of life and see me through all of its vicissitudes; it would open doors for me, boost my intelligence, and spark my creativity. This was a friend that would turn the night into a call to adventure and fling open doors of possibility.*

*I began to stop in at a bar on the corner of Fifty-Seventh Street and Tenth Avenue. The bartender had gray hair and a cold manner. He seemed to reserve any kindness he possessed for the regulars, older men from the neighborhood, and the staff from WABC, whose studios were just down the block. One was a newscaster who appeared regularly on the evening news. His name was John Judd, the way all newscasters had to be named John Judd. In the bar as on TV, his face generated a dominating power. The bartender had nothing but friendliness for John Judd, who spoke in the same deep, earnest voice with which he delivered the news of body counts and Vietcong atrocities and whatnot from the broadcast studio. But I saw what I saw. The bartender was not really friends with John Judd anymore than a doorman is really friends with the tenants whose bags he helps them with. It was only a matter of time before the bartender began to live in his differences with John Judd: the fact that John Judd wore an expensive suit and tie and he, the bartender, wore an apron; the fact that John Judd earned a high salary and the bartender was dependent on tips to augment his modest wages. Yes, it was that, their stations in life that would ultimately bring an end to the affable exchanges so the real story, the one of difference, could emerge. And it was not for me to be there when the conflict that followed erupted.*

*In this time I was reading the Paris Review Interviews with Writers series, and the one with Truman Capote stayed in my mind more than any other because he made the all-important link between creativity and drinking. The author of Breakfast at Tiffany's and In Cold Blood started his morning with coffee and then followed with sherry and brandy and other necessary facilitators of the muse. We are talking about Truman Capote here,*



*who published three stories in the New Yorker when he was only seventeen and so earned the rightful designation of genius.*

*We all need enhancers in this life, Celeste, to provide us with what we haven't otherwise got.*

*One fall afternoon I was walking along Broadway when the thought occurred to me that a drink would be nice, and so I purchased a bottle of sweet vermouth at a nearby liquor store. The great Nelson Rockefeller, governor of New York State, drank sweet vermouth. I had read as much in some publication, and so, if it was a drink worthy of our powerful governor, maybe it would do for me as well. Besides, nobody could put the laughing thing on me for ordering a sweet wine favored by someone of his caliber. To be on the safe side, I ordered two bottles. Dubonnet, it read on the label. A classy French name.*

*In Riverside Park, children were scampering about in the playground under the watchful eyes of their mothers or nannies. It would not do to drink from these bottles in public, and so I entered the railroad tunnel that ran under the park not far from the Seventy-ninth Street boat basin. Like liquid candy the Dubonnet sweet vermouth tasted, and yet with a cutting sharpness to let you know you were engaged with serious stuff.*

*Far down the straightaway, you could see the rail yard beyond where the tunnel ended. Soon a northbound freight entered the tunnel. I had been sitting against a near wall but now stood as it roared past, saluting the power of the Penn Central switcher pulling a string of boxcars. As the cabooses rolled past, I turned my back, succumbing to an old fear that the workers were armed with guns capable of firing blasts of rock salt at*

*intruders in their realm. Even with the overhead vents, the diesel fumes were strong and lingering, not quite up there with the smell of a wood-burning fire, but fine all the same. The smell summoned the image of men hard at work and brought a feeling of bright promise.*

*I wandered outside. There, on the grass by a footpath, drowsiness overcame me. Sometime later I was woken by a child's voice.*

*"Mommy, Mommy. Why is that man sleeping in the grass?" The girl stood with her big, inquiring eyes only a few feet away. The girl's mother came to her quickly and took her by the hand.*

*"Are you all right?" the mother said. I told her I was.*

*"What's wrong with him?" I heard the girl ask, in a loud voice, as her mother led her away. I didn't hear the mother's answer, but it wasn't necessary. She had seen the second bottle, empty, by my side.*

*Celeste, no one likes to be regarded as a bum, but we are in a city of eight million, and the page can be turned as one day is followed by the next.*

*"I'm uneasy about my drinking," I said to Dr. Dressler soon after the park experience.*

*"How do you mean?" she asked.*

*Regretting my admission, I held back. If I said too much, she would take away what she had given me, and then where would I be? I could not let her destroy my life when it was just beginning.*

*"Nothing," I said.*

*“You are just worried because you have older siblings who drink,” she said. I had told her about Luke and Rachel and Naomi.*

*When I was a child, Hannah would meet Luke and Vera and me after our Friday Bible school class at the tabernacle. Often she would have a girlfriend with her. From there we would go to the St. George Hotel, down on Clark Street, in Brooklyn, and swim in what the hotel advertised as the largest indoor pool in America. I would stay in the water until my lips turned blue and my skin was covered with goose bumps, then run shivering to the steam bath, where, in the mist, I would sit on a wooden bench among the old men with big bellies and skinny legs. Having sought refuge in the warm embrace of the steam bath, I was unable to go back into the water. And it was a bit like that with drinking. By now I had experienced the warmth that alcohol could provide and I could not live in this cold, cold world without it. Even at this early stage, alcohol had become the thing of value in my life from which I must not be parted by anyone or anything.*

*Some years ago you and I were driving back to New York from a weekend in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where we had visited with your sister Melba and her family. In the car with us was Mia, your daughter from a previous marriage. My topographical cretinism, as Trotsky called it, kicked in, and soon we were off course, all the road signs pointing us in an unwanted direction. Because of these signs, we knew to turn around. But alcoholism is not like that. By the roadside are beautiful, scantily clad women with signs that read, “Pleasure pit five miles ahead. Keep going.” And so, with the promise of hedonistic delight the bait, we continue on our course, going farther and farther afield of a more proper destination.*

*Alcoholism is the discovery of an alternate route through life, one that has no toll booths or traffic snarls or potholes. It is smooth cruising all the way, with the top down and a gorgeous woman by your side.*

*All through college I had been reliant on others to type my papers, as I did not imagine myself to have the mental suppleness to master QWERTYUIOP and all the rest. But as part of my self-improvement program, I bought a typewriting manual and did the practice lessons. (Also, at this time, Celeste, I took the Evelyn Wood speed reading course, so I could finish the fattest book in record-setting time with full comprehension, but I'm afraid I soon returned to my old way of going slowly from word to word.) For these practice sessions I had bought an old L. C. Smith office machine with elite, not pica type, so I could fit more words on the page. Though it was difficult to get past "white line, continue," the conservationist in me required that space not be wasted. As for the heft of the machine, I wanted a model that would provide the assurance of permanence.*

*My neighbor Jackson Holyoke had gone to sea as the entertainment director on a cruise ship, where he could earn his daily bread and perhaps find companionship with a pretty admirer of the vocal artistry he displayed on such songs as "Country Road, Take Me Home." Though the impulse is to mock him by suggesting the more desperate passengers might jump overboard if all efforts to silence him failed, I must not go down that road. I mustn't. As a man thinks, so does he become. I must not elevate above Jackson Holyoke, with his thinning hair and pasty skin and denim duds. Let me be courteous and just, so I may escape this prison of my own making.*

*While Jackson was away, I would see a man substantially older than me entering and leaving the building. He would have been memorable for his dark, handsome features alone but the crescent-shaped scar starting near his left eye and ending midway along his chin added to his staying power in my mind. We got to talking one afternoon, and it turned out Roddy Rumble was a friend of Jackson's from their army days. While Jackson was away at sea, Roddy would be staying in his apartment. He came from Louisiana and had the Southern drawl to prove it, as if talking was a wearisome thing you needed to be sparing of under the hot sun.*

*It turned out we shared an interest in baseball and a similar fascination with that simian-like creature Pete Rose. We noted his appropriation of the plate, in particular that manner he had of not only following the pitch as it flew past and into the catcher's mitt but also smelling it. We both agreed the moniker Charlie Hustle fit, given the way he ran to first base even when he had drawn a walk, and the firebrand style of baseball that was a trademark of his game. Rose, as a rookie, sought out Frank Robinson and Vada Pinson, the two reigning stars of those early 1960s Cincinnati teams. Both Robinson and Pinson were black, and Rose had gone to them because they were, in his estimation, where the action was. They were with it, and everything in Pete Rose screamed to be with it, too. With the moment, Celeste, with the moment. To go where the wind took him, where his impulses took him, regardless of circumstance.*

*But I could not forgive the Cincinnati Reds for their new incarnation. They had abandoned the name "Redlegs" and their distinctive uniform, which featured a sleeveless top worn with a long-sleeved red sweatshirt, for garb as ugly and synthetic as the*

*grotesque Astroturf management had substituted for sod in a hideous new ballpark called Riverfront Stadium. Gone was the inner city gem that Crosley Field had been. Where are you, Ed Bailey and Ted Kluzewski and Jim O'Toole? Where are you childhood? These are things we must ask from time to time, even if the answer is obvious and the predictable chorus stands ready to blast us with its predictable cold chant, "Your childhood is gone. Get over it." Childhood is never over. Never. And memory is never over, calling us back, through images, to a shimmering world in which adults in uniforms played a children's game where grass and dirt complemented the artifacts of man to create unearthly beauty, and in these ballparks we sat closer to the face of God and yet some distance away. All memory is only a disguised longing for that face, that unity, Celeste.*

*Roddy Rumble lived at the margins of life. Lacking the temperament for a nine to five existence, he got by as a freelance copy editor and proofreader, dependent on the assignment here and there of some big manuscript from a publisher on a tight deadline. Evidently he had no killer overhead back home, no wife and children and no home with a monthly mortgage or rent. He lived in a trailer given him by his older brother Eustis, a big-time businessman in the local community. People can hang free and easy when they have a safety net beneath them, and Roddy was of that kind. The earth wasn't giving way under his feet, as it was for me. He seemed to look at the world with some detachment, as if it was a place for others, not for him. What he liked was sitting in front of the TV all afternoon with a big bag of chips and a six-pack of beer watching the Cincinnati Reds and the Baltimore Orioles go at it in the World Series, and so did I.*

*Now, Celeste, I can no more tell you why I was drawn to Roddy Rumble than I was to Efram Ellsberg, my City College chum, except to say that they were both older men and perhaps in the image of my brother, Luke. I seemed to have no power of choice in these connections.*

*“My face is real pretty, isn't it?” Roddy said to me one afternoon, when Jim Palmer was dazzling the Reds with his elegant delivery and over-the-top stuff.*

*“Pretty?” I asked.*

*“You heard me. Isn't it pretty?” he went on, with uncharacteristic gruffness. Possibly the beer was speaking, though you wouldn't think two cans would do that to a person of his size.*

*“I don't know if pretty is the word I would use. Can I say handsome?”*

*“Liar. It's not pretty and it's not handsome. My face is fucked up, and do you know who fucked it up?”*

*“I really don't,” I said.*

*“Pussy fucked it up. That's who.”*

*“Pussy fucked up your face?”*

*“That's right. She fucked it up real good.”*

*“Where? Why?”*

*“A drugstore in Mobile, Alabama. I'm minding my own business browsing the dime store novel rack when she walks in. She smiled at me and I did what Poppa told me to do. ‘A woman smiles at you, you smile back at her. It's called politeness,’ is what*

*Poppa said. So I did, and I won't pretend I didn't take a shine to her. But Poppa didn't tell me about Cut Man."*

*"Cut Man?"*

*"This guy comes over and starts with me. 'You like my lady friend Luella here? You like her real fine?' All the while he's got this insane smile on his face. So I say, 'I don't know her so's I could say, but she seems nice.' What I don't see is that this whole little exchange is his way of priming himself for the violence to come."*

*And come it did. Roddy Rumble's inquisitor whipped out a box knife and sliced open Roddy's face as deftly as if he were slicing through packing tape.*

*"Now you go on and check out my work in a mirror, you hear, and if you're satisfied with the job I've done, you just let me know and I'll come back and do the other side. You hear what I'm saying?" Roddy reported Cut Man as saying.*

*That same night I lay in bed, still unnerved by Roddy's story, which seemed only to underscore the tendency of the world toward random violence when it wasn't busy organizing for a more sustained and lethal effort. Roddy Rumble, despite his name, was a relatively harmless soul who, like my brother, received punishment in excess of his crime. I thought of the harm's way I had placed myself in with girls, namely the beating Joe Szymborska had dealt me for breathing the same air as his girlfriend Imelda and the beating Maura's father tried to inflict on me. As I grew drowsy and my thoughts grew wispier, the phone rang.*

*"Is this Luther?"*

*"Yes. Who is calling?"*



*“This is Luella? Luella from Baton Rouge, Louisiana?”*

*“Luella? Louisiana?”*

*“Are you looking to make me repeat myself so as to rile me, Luther?”*

*“No, not at all.”*

*“You be good now and go on upstairs and tell Roderick Luella does not appreciate him not responding to her calls and to pick up the phone, you hear? Unless maybe you want me to fly on up there and tell him myself? That would make me mighty unhappy, and am I right in understanding that you don’t want to see me unhappy?”*

*“He has your number?”*

*“Does the world need one more foolish question, Luther? Now does it?”*

*It wouldn’t do to tell her she was the queen of questions and that in fact I did have one more for her: how on earth had she gotten my name and number? But Roddy Rumble supplied the answer, saying only, “Trust me, she has her ways.”*

*One evening, in Bill Gofner’s writing class, a man read from his rambling story about a family of elves that takes up residence in an East Side townhouse. He prefaced the reading by asking the class to be alert for symbolism and what he called the aura of myth in his tale. The head of the family was named Cherokee. His wife was named Beulah, and their children were named after the states of the Union. One of the elves had been caught trying to sodomize a sheep while on an out-of-town trip and all the other elves had mobilized for his defense. The writer stopped there and assured us that he had a firm outline for the rest of the novel.*

*Celeste, during this reading I whispered to the woman seated next to me, "An epic of American culture." In so doing, of course, I was making the mistake of asserting my superiority. Equally as bad, I had assumed an identity not my own. Earlier on I mentioned a young man named Colin Westland and presented him as the crème de la crème. His first book published when he was sixteen, a Columbia undergraduate, and named by Time magazine one of the most promising young writers in America. What I failed to report was that, after his brief involvement with Pam Becker, he took up with my sister Vera. In fact, they showed up at Camp one summer day in his rented car and, after a brief visit, drove Sarah and me back to the city along winding Route 9W, which follows the Hudson River. At one point, in the car, Vera asked Colin, as he was driving, "Do you have a brush?" "Does it look like my hair has seen a brush?" he replied. There was no humor or affection in his voice, only testiness, and right there I filled with sadness, as it was clear to me that Colin did not have the same feelings for Vera as she did for him. Once again a Garatdjian going where she or he did not belong, trying to engage with our betters instead of accepting our place as unsightly creatures with ugly last names whom no one on this planet can truly accept, let alone admire. A remnant of the filthy, forgotten Armenian tribe.*

*On our journey back to Manhattan, Colin Westland had the hit parade going on the radio: "Proud Mary" and "I've Been Loving You Too Long" and a lot more, with all those commercials in between.*

*"An epic of American culture," Colin remarked.*

*There it was in one phrase—humor, irony, wit, perspective—as if he were looking down from above. And is that not what intelligence is, to look down from above? Is that not the vantage point of the gods? Right there I saw the difference between us. He was Olympian and I was ordinary, a drudge among the horde.*

*And now, here I was at the New School, not Columbia, uttering that same phrase in something called a free-style writing course, in that moment succumbing to my desire to be Colin Westland. What victory is to be gained from such falseness, you may well ask, and I would, without my own experience as a guide, perhaps say none. But if I am to draw on my experience, then my conclusion must be a different one. Everything was to be gained. And what exactly was that everything, Celeste? It was you. You are what I eventually gained by uttering that little phrase.*

*The woman touched my arm, and after a moment of looking startled, had to hold her hand to her mouth to muffle her laughter. Her name was Hermione Grunfelt and she told me that evening that she wrote poetry to rock and roll music. Her current favorite, she said, was “Maggie May,” by Rod Stewart. She had gotten a lot of good poems from that song and hoped to get more. We had gone together to the Cedar Tavern, down on University Place. The artists like Jackson Pollock who had made it famous had gone elsewhere by now or were dead. A soft glow of golden light held off the darkness.*

*If Hermione and I had anything in common, it was a desire to be special but no particular talent that would warrant such a status. Her music-inspired poems were stream-of-consciousness bits of prose broken into arbitrary lines.*

*Her father had remarried after her mother's death, and it was a painful blow to be told nothing had been left for her in her mother's will. She was not without some means through a trust fund set up for her by one of her aunts, but Hermione's mind went dark in the matter of the larger inheritance she suspected she was being denied. The wicked stepmother had seen to it, Hermione was sure, that she was written out of her father's will. Hermione's father had taken up with her even as Hermione's mother was slowly dying of cancer.*

*Something was owed to Hermione. She had been deprived, cheated, and her grievance against her nemesis, the wicked stepmother, was severe. I thought back to my epiphany years before, en route to the community center, which had led me to enter the renting office of my family's building and claim my own inheritance so I too would not be deprived. Celeste, both Hermione and I were operating from a sense of entitlement, only my desire was being fulfilled and hers was being thwarted. She had no job, only her poetry, and I had no job either, or not one I wished to speak of with any honesty.*

*The evening came in Bill Gofner's class when it was my turn to present. I had given him a long story for his comments and he now wanted me to read it out loud in front of the other students, but lack of confidence in the story's quality prevented me from going forward. Seeing my reticence, Mr. Gofner offered to read it himself. The lengthy story involved a man of limited mental capacity and no means who marries a plain, petite woman and quickly goes through her modest assets. The story was most notable for its long, run-on sentences and the thinness of the writing. A meager mind and body will produce meager prose. It will lie there, skeletal, on the page, unlike the high-specific*

*density a reviewer noted in the work of Heinrich Boll (and which is present in the writings of Colin Westland as well). Being present for the reading of a small portion of the story, and the comments afterward, was no less difficult, as everyone knew who had penned the piece. It was everything for me not to bolt from the room.*

*“Marvelous, just marvelous,” Hermione opined afterward. “Such energy. Such exuberance.” She was a big bird who took flight often into the realm of hyperbole*  
*We had gone once again to the Cedar Tavern, where I drank a great deal of red wine. By and large, in this time, I stayed with the “old-fashioned tranquilizer,” as Dr. Dressler had recommended. Drinking wine and beer was not really drinking, I could tell myself, as a way of easing any lingering qualms about drinking at all. By the time we got in the cab, I was drunk and looking at Hermione in a different light. Her dowdiness and sad face had worked against any sexual interest, but now, in the back seat of the Checker, I felt aroused and became verbally aggressive. She was living farther uptown than me at the time, and so I got out first.*

*The next morning I received a call from her. “What on earth happened to you last night? Are you all right?”*

*“How do you mean?”*

*“You were so changed in the cab. It was like being with a different person.”*

*I thought of Lydia and what she had written in her journal: “When he drinks, the beast comes out.”*

*“I’ll see that it doesn’t happen again,” I said.*

*Sarah had not gone away. You should not think she had. But something had gone out of her. She was afflicted with ennui. You could say I was many things to Sarah, among them lover and tormentor, but my main role was that of helper. It was understood by each of us that she was the superior person and in the dominant role. Fearful as I could be, I was mainly her cheerleader, offering her support when she was dispirited about her work. But now it was not a matter of a bad day but of bad weeks and even months.*

*Celeste, Sarah had not so much loved Lane as she had wanted to be Lane. She had always measured up, and now she wasn't, in her own mind.*

*And if the truth is to be spoken she wasn't fully measuring up in my mind either. Some of the luster was gone. Why did it depress me to consider that perhaps she didn't possess as special a talent as I had believed? And I was having reservations about another matter. This is a great failing on my part, but where women are concerned, it is hard for me to see beyond the body. Sarah did not have an entirely womanly body. Her hips were not curvy but those of a man. She had said so herself early on. What hadn't attracted my notice then now did.*

*Celeste, if I have dwelt in the realm of spiritual pomposity, seeking to pretend that I see beyond the body to the spirit, then you have every right to hurl at me the word hypocrite. But a man has to be honest with himself if not with others, in the event such honesty should cause harm. And what manner of person tells a woman that he cannot be with her because she has masculine hips, even if he is only confirming what she already knows? The truth without love is an attack. So I was told and so I believe. And there can*

*be no love in such a statement. And yet, Celeste. And yet. Was it not true that what drew me away from Sarah to you years later was your womanly figure? Was I not in thrall to your physical as well as spiritual dimension?*

*And here is another “and yet, and yet.” What is one to do when, in fear of hurting her, a man withholds the truth or asserts its very opposite to the woman in his life? Can that be said to be love, or is it the very antithesis of love, given the harm that can ensue?*

*One truth I could freely assert was a feeling of liberation from the constraints of the academic life I had pursued and in which I had fallen short. I was writing, Celeste. I was writing. Or maybe it was only typewriting, as Truman Capote dismissively said of Jack Kerouac’s prose, but even if there wasn’t an ounce of merit in my white line, continue approach, the therapeutic value was enormous. All I had to do was hit the keys of my L.C. Smith office machine and I had my center—I had myself—for the day. I was making something, something of my very own, not just endlessly following the words of others in the paperback books I read. As once I dreamt of being the second coming of Mickey Mantle or Jerry “Zeke from Cabin Creek” West, I could now dream of literary stardom, where no such dreams were possible in the drudgery fields of academia or the law.*

*The bars of New York City were calling to me, and to them I went to drink my red wine. There was one, the St. Adrian Holding Company, on lower Broadway, just north of Houston Street and next to the old Broadway Central Hotel. Into it I had dashed in an earlier chapter of my life for a bag of ice to take back to the room I had rented with*

*Dahlia from Darien . (Some years later the hotel would collapse into a pile of bricks without so much as a kiss from the wrecking ball.) But now it was not about dashing but about settling in. The wine came in something the bartender called a shell glass, narrow and not very tall and so in frequent need of refilling.*

*The bartender was a big guy with a sloping forehead and, I suspected, a high capacity brain. In size and demeanor and ability he reminded me of my friend Efram. His name was Dave, a grotesque truncation of David. Why would anyone drop the “id” and substitute a one-syllable sound that summoned the image of a square-faced man with a buzz cut and a plastic pen protector in his shirt pocket?*

*Dave gave the impression of a man of quiet earnestness. He was a jazz musician, a saxophonist, so how square could he have been? But his sober demeanor—I never saw him take a drink and suspected alcohol was not part of his life—began to feel like a reproach to those of us sitting for hours on those stools. I couldn't help but wonder what sort of man works the stick and witnesses others lose control while he remains in full possession of himself? It was a puzzle to me and also a source of resentment.*

*There was another bartender from that time, a light-skinned and handsome black man, only his was a smiling countenance and he wore dashikis and other garb more stylish than the denim duds favored by Dave.*

*A smile. A friendly request for more. My relationship with these men never developed beyond such superficial interactions. I feared them. I may have sensed they had power—the power to cut me off—and I had no power.*



*It felt good to listen to Carole King sing "Tapestry" while I drank my wine in the dark and soulful bar. The song entered me into the pathos of my own life. And then along came the rousing, upbeat "I Feel the Earth Move" to take me into a state of jubilation. Oh, what a happy thing to have found such a place. And my muse was present. Words and ideas came to me. Some I would scribble in my notebook for consolidation into my work the next day. Others I would simply pledge to remember.*

*One night I even met a woman at St. Adrian's. Her name was Flo. She was a secretary at a Park Avenue law firm. I told her I was interested in the law and would be attending Rutgers-Newark in the fall. I let her know that I was busy working on a novel and some short stories and that the working titles for all these manuscripts was "White Line, Continue." I told her nothing was more beautiful than the white line down the middle of a country road in the day or the night.*

*"Gee, I never thought of it that way, but you're right. I think I see that you mean," she said.*

*Her friend Roxie didn't take the same shine to me. Evidently, our spirits were not in alignment. It will sound unkind, Celeste, but this was a woman who broke rocks with her big teeth and then swallowed them. The light of calculation and assessment was always on in her mind of case-hardened steel. A real net assets type was she even in this idlers' paradise. That is a lot to say of a woman who had nothing to say to me and little to say of me, though the little she did utter was devastating.*

*"Don't go with him. He has only himself," she said, just as Flo and I were about to head off to my place. And when Flo wavered, like a tennis ball deciding which way to*

*fall as it paused at the top of the net, I thought all was lost. But the promise of the night was calling to her as well as to me, and off we went, putting some distance between us and Roxy's basilisk glare and shouted words. "You'll be sorry. He pees in the sink. He doesn't change his underwear. He has a teeny dick. He's a rapist, a serial killer. He likes little boys."*

*So Roxie, from Brooklyn, had her little orgy of words, and who is to say love, not jealousy, was not informing her outburst. Is it not possible that Roxy went on to a better life, with a husband and children, while Flo, having entrusted herself to some deranged man, was found by the police in the trunk of an abandoned car, Roxy's cautionary words exploding in her terrified consciousness as it sank in that she had been left to die a slow, painful death? Life is serious, and the night is serious, and I was serious about only one thing, the pleasure to be had in the privacy of my Hell's Kitchen apartment with Flo, whose last name I never learned, on a cold fall night in 1970.*

*A young man began to appear at the bar. Not only the frequency of his visits but his appearance brought him to my attention. He had an intelligent face, informed by the powerful brain I suspected his big head of housing, and the wire-frame glasses, Oxford shirt open at the collar, and tweed jacket only added to the impression of an intellectual. A writer, maybe, or a graduate student in a challenging field. But what really came across was the nakedness of his intent. As he stood away from the bar against the wall with his glass of Scotch in hand, he was clearly identifiable, to my eye at least, as a hunter. His expression was one of seriousness, even Van Gogh-like intensity, as if a smile was foreign to him. But there was also an aura of guilt, or at least acute self-*

*consciousness, as if he had to try to mask his lascivious hunger with a somber air. His obviousness was astonishing; even more astonishing, and painful, was the recognition that his singleness of purpose mirrored my own.*

*“He has only himself,” Roxy had said, of me. Perhaps she had been right, and all context for my life was lacking except for this imprisoning solitude. And perhaps she would have said the same about this man I have identified as my double, the shock of recognition constituting a repelling force field so severe that I never learned his name or exchanged a single word with him. Or perhaps Roxy’s judgment was incorrect in regard to me and would have been incorrect if applied to him as well. Perhaps she would have had to modify her statement as follows: They have only themselves, and if they each have women whom they see regularly, they still have only themselves, as these women are shelf items in their lives, books they have collected that will have pride of place yet remain unread.*

*What is a bar, anyway, Celeste? It is a church for the damned, a haven from the street for those who, in their own misguided way, are seeking. And where did this seeking lead me? It led me to a place where, when Sarah called from Boston one day, clearly out of sorts, and screamed into the phone, “Do you still want me to come down to New York City? Do you still want to live together? Well, do you?” I could only say yes while something in me was saying, no, no, I don’t know. Because sometimes to tell the truth is to cause yourself to die and the other person to die as well, or so I believed. A man who thinks he is the be all and end all for another person, when he has full evidence to the contrary—what is that but the tyranny of misplaced responsibility established in the long*

*ago when the lesson I learned was that my mother would die without me, absolutely perish from this earth, and then where could I go but to the same resting place?*

*Sarah's phone call, left me feeling utterly sad. The burden of her neediness was worse than the pain I experienced when she would discard me. And yet, the question remained, even though I had answered in the affirmative: If I was emerging into a new life, could she be part of it?*

*On a March night in 1971 I sat in the balcony of the Riviera Theater, on Ninety-sixth Street and Broadway, and watched on the screen the Ali-Frazier fight of the century, as it was billed. Ali had entered my consciousness years before when, as Cassius Clay, he had defeated Sonny Liston, older and more experienced, for the heavyweight championship. My mother had given me a small white radio in the hope that I would listen to broadcasts from the Calvary Baptist Church. Instead I would tune to Measerri Measorri Murray the K, who hosted the Swinging Soiree every evening. But on this evening I was listening, with my heart racing, to Clay take on Liston, the heavyweight champion of the world, a bruiser and an ex-con with a baleful stare. Clay was young, an Olympic gold medalist, brash and boastful, an irresistible life force. Having given myself to him before he stepped into the ring that night, I thought I would die, when clearly ahead, he couldn't see. Ointment had gotten into his eyes and he balked at coming out of his corner for the next round. And yet, one round later, it was Liston who stayed in his corner. "I am the greatest," Cassius Clay said over and over that night. Hadn't I said something similar back in junior high school, writing in my books "Luther is great," before I learned not to.*

*Now it was seven years later, and Cassius Clay was now Muhammad Ali and in the embrace of Elijah Muhammad and the Black Muslims. I had no historical understanding of the Nation of Islam. I had only the memory of the violent young Negro boys who would migrate from Harlem to the Upper West Side during the summer months and the beatings they would inflict on some of the white kids in the neighborhood. As for the former Clay, could a playful, flamboyant, bombastic young man remain so when he discarded his light and happy name for one so earnest and foreign?*

*Celeste, I had a history with that theater, and its companion, the Riverside, right next door, as I have previously noted. (The Riverside you could understand, as the Hudson was only down the way. But the Riviera? Was that to make one think of the French Riviera, to add a touch of false elegance? Well, why not?) In early adolescence my mother had taken a belt to me. In a moment of rage she had struck me across the face. This from a woman who had never before lifted a hand to me and shown me only kindness and love and endless patience. But my father had flown off to Marseilles to visit with his remaining two sisters and it is possible she was going through a difficult time with him, given his tendency to stray. There was also the possibility she was in physical pain owing to the severe case of varicose veins in one leg, the other having been operated on the year before. Suddenly she felt the absence of love and saw the squalid conditions in which we lived and heard the bratty sound of her repulsive second son and revealed her other side, the side she had always left it to my older sisters to show. And so I went with my brother Luke that cold, rainy night to a movie down at the Riviera, or was it the Riverside, and watched a sad film called Town Without Pity, with an even sadder theme*

*song of the same name, as sung by the very great Gene Pitney, so full of the earnestness and pathos of his own sound. Four American GIs were accused of raping a girl from the town in West Germany where they were stationed, and it was for Kirk Douglas, as their attorney, to save them from death. Like a turbulent ocean my emotions grew, my true self obscured not only the feelings triggered by my mother's blow but now the sorrow and concern for these unjustly accused young men as I followed their plight on the silver screen. How was one to live in such a world with Gene Pitney filling the old theater and my head with his mournful song?*

*And I thought of those Friday nights during my high school years at the theater with the boys from Amsterdam Avenue—Fatso Scully and Luis and the Itty Bitty Little One whose name I am now forgetting. Ben Hur, Spartacus, The Magnificent Seven, Hud, West Side Story, Irma la Douce. As with Town Without Pity, those films and others like giant waves crashing down on our small lives and carrying us away. And, of course, the men who loitered in the bathrooms I was drawn to who took me in their mouths.*

*Celeste, Joe Frazier was a good man from the land of everyday people, a former worker at a meatpacking plant. He did not spew braggadocio into the air of America and ride the crest of the fomenting zeitgeist of the nation. He did not say, in his manner and his speech, that he was in his time and of his time and for all of time. He was as slow with his words as Muhammad Ali was glib. He showed himself a relentless forward motion machine, living for the chance to land that left hook that would separate his chatterbox opponent from his senses.*

*But my identification was with Ali. The boxing commission had done him wrong with banishment from the ring for over three years for saying "I ain't got nothing against those Vietcong. They never did nothing to me" and refusing military induction. Like a mythic hero, he had suffered exile, and now he was returning defiant, unbroken, undefeated, even by the government. And yet, the fight was hard to watch. In the early rounds, long before Joe Frazier put him on his back, I had the fear that time had diminished Ali's skills. The winds of change do not cease. It is hard to experience the death of a dream by a machinelike one-man wrecking crew.*

*"Red," I called to a young man outside the theater. The man was black, not red, and he too had been one of the boys from Scully's stoop, if only on the periphery. In fact, he was the son of the superintendent of Scully's building, and so while Scully came down the stairs so he could stand on the street, it was for Red to come up the stairs from his family's basement apartment. He was short and muscular, with broad shoulders and a thick neck, and though untested in battle, no one in our bunch wise-mouthed him, for fear of the damage he could inflict. Not even Red's stammer could tempt Scully into a piece of mouth-flapping foolishness.*

*"What?" he called out, when he turned and saw me. I heard anger in his tone and saw it in his scowling face. Red didn't want to have to deal with the likes of me now. He was dealing with his blackness. Ali had brought him out of the basement and given him a voice.*

*"Never mind," I said.*

*"That's right, never mind," Red said, and went on his way.*

*Don't be calling some people out of the past, Celeste. Don't be doing that. They might not give you the reception you were hoping for.*

*But there was one that night who was not from my past, not then and maybe not ever. He was doing his doofus strut right past the theater in pants sized for a clown as the crowd emerged. "God is the end all and be all. Do you understand what I am saying, Luther? Do you?" A plea for understanding played on his holy fool face, seeking to communicate the state of consciousness he had reached, that made of current events like the one that had just roiled my emotional waters nothing more than piffle.*

*"I do," I said, kowtowing to his earnestness.*

*"Then get on your knees with me right now and embrace the Christ Jesus as your savior. Will you do that?"*

*"Another time," I said to Melvin, another master calling to me on this painful night.*



Luther was woken in the dark by the ringing phone. He had been sleeping off a drunk. Sarah was on the line, and in a state of agitation he had not heard from her before. “A man has been here. A man has been here,” she said, and then repeated herself again.

“What do you mean?” Luther asked, all the fear in the universe now coursing through him.

“A man. He came and went.”

“A man came and went? Who was he?”

“He came through the window.”

The story emerged. A burglar had entered and taken what money she had in her wallet, then tried to rape her, but was too afraid to succeed. No, she had not called the police. She had not called anyone, just him.

“You must call them right away,” Luther said.

He boarded a flight early that morning out at LaGuardia Airport, but something was wrong, he thought, as the plane rose above the clouds. He didn't deserve her trust. It was as simple as that. Where had he been the night before but in St. Adrian's, drinking his red wine and trying unsuccessfully to meet a woman he could fool around with. Sarah could have been killed during his pleasure cruise.

And this too, he thought: the windows are broken, the doors are off the hinges, the roof has been blown away, and there is no protection to be had from the hard rain that is falling and has been falling all my life, only I thought it could fall only on the Garatdjians, never on the Van Dines.

He held her later that morning and they both cried. He had older sisters dead in life and now he had to fear that he would lose her, but at least they could take precautionary steps to reduce the potential of disaster. An unsightly gate went up on the window through which the intruder had entered.

Sarah's parents came up that weekend as well, and her painting teacher, Mr. Allbury, whom Luther suspected had fallen in and out of love with her. The presence of these adults was reassuring, as was a visit by a girlfriend of Sarah's from the school. She wasn't alone. There would always be someone there for her to bring light where there had been darkness.

"We're so glad to finally meet you. We've heard so much about you," Lydia said that day, to Mr. Allbury. "You've meant the world to Sarah, the world," Lydia went on.

Mr. Allbury had Cary Grant hair, and had aged well. He did not have the look of a hound. As befit a teacher, he had no lewdness showing. Sarah had been out to his house in Brookline, where he lived with his wife and daughter. Mr. Allbury had taken her to his studio and showed her his paintings. They were the paintings of a dead man, and if his paintings were dead, then he had to be dead too. He was just a dead man walking about in his life, hanging around the young he sought to draw from but could not touch. It had made Luther sad for Mr. Allbury that Sarah had described him in such a way.

Mr. Allbury put Luther in his place that day. He didn't mean to. It wasn't a conscious decision. It was just superiority asserting itself. Mr. Allbury had gone to Yale. He had received an MFA from that prestigious school. This information had come from Sarah, not from Mr. Allbury himself, who was too under the cloud of midlife depression

to trumpet his own achievements. Yale had not fixed Mr. Albury. It had not given him permanent happiness or glittering success. It had given him dead paintings and flight into the consolations of teaching to mitigate the reality of his failure. But on this day, perhaps because he was still hung over from his wine binge of the night before and feeling suspect in the eyes of all, Luther could only focus on the Yale aspect of Mr. Allburys' life. He thought: Mr. Allbury is Yale and Lydia is Radcliffe and Peter is Harvard, if only briefly, and I can only draw a stick figure and copied the drawings of others in grade school because I could not come up with my own. He was sure his deficiencies were obvious to Mr. Allbury and that this recognition of his inferior status was the reason Mr. Allbury did not so much as look his way in the brief time they were together.

One image persisted, a detail provided by Sarah. She had been wearing a sleeping gown. The intruder lifted it before attempting to rape her, as if to see if she merited his attention. It was an image Luther didn't want, and yet it lingered. A man realizing the treasure he had found.

Luther couldn't draw or paint, but he could try to capture what he saw with his camera and the assortment of lenses he had purchased in those gold Nikon boxes. Oh, Jesus, what fine equipment. Sometimes he just wanted to sit there and stare at his purchases. Their beauty made him crazy, created genuine torment in his mind, like those feelings he would have in the long ago about the model railroad in his room Luke had assembled, Luke having the mind to wire a transformer and make it work and Luther being terrified of such challenges. How he would stare at those Lionel catalogs, the images of gorgeous

twin diesel Southern and Santa Fe and New York Central engines, tormented by the need for more than the unsatisfactory Texas Special O27 gauge train he and Luke had purchased on sale at Macy's as a Christmas gift for themselves. But now he had what he wanted in the way of cameras and it still wasn't enough. Maybe what he really needed was something of German manufacture, a Leica, instead of these Japanese products.

He was photographing *and* writing. He had seen the work of Cartier-Bresson and Atget and Walker Evans and Eugene Smith and Berenice Abbott and Alfred Steiglitz and many others and had begun to sense that intelligence was required in this medium as well, that the arts might not be as free of this prerequisite as he had hoped. Composition was intelligence. It meant an understanding of spatial relationships. It meant using existing elements to create an aesthetically pleasing print. And you needn't be a phrenologist to notice that many of the great photographers had bulging foreheads or foreheads like sheer cliffs and to correlate these shapes with superior intellect. And, of course, there was Edward Weston and the zone system, from black and shades of gray to white, for which light meter readings were necessary. Well, what was he to do? He had a need to capture what he saw.

"Of course you can use the darkroom. You're family," Claire said, when he called with his request. Family. How strange. Only four years before he had resolved never to set foot in the Van Dines' apartment, and now he had just requested and received permission from his girlfriend's older sister to use Peter's darkroom.

Developer. Fixer. Stop bath. All the chemicals he needed were available, and the trays and the enlarger. How organized Peter was. One photo album after another on

shelves in the maid's quarters he had turned into a darkroom. Peter's father had been a plumber. Plumbers were intelligent. They had to be to assemble pipes and joints properly. He had thought these thoughts would stop after the LSAT, but they were worse. Anyway, he had cheated on the law school test. His thoughts turned to sex, Peter's big cock, but that was no place to stay either.

"When are we going to see your photographs? I'll bet they're great," Claire said, when he emerged some hours later.

"They're not very good," he said.

"I'm sure you're just being modest," Claire said.

How she talked to him, he thought, as he left. Teasing him, asking him to do what he couldn't do. That journal entry of Lydia's came to mind, the one in which Claire said he was like their Estonian maid.

He came home to find his door off its hinges and splintered. Two thick boards were nailed to the battered door and the frame and a note was attached.

If you want your stuff, what's left of it, come get it across the street.

NYPD.

Stuff. What's left of it. What kind of note was that? A flimsy door. Why hadn't he seen as much. A door that wouldn't protect anyone. But he hadn't needed protection. He had felt safe. Now he didn't.

A uniformed officer sat eating a Blimpie's hero at his desk and sipping from a big container of Coke.

“Hey, Bill, take care of this guy. Will you? I’m busy here.” The officer had sized Luther up with his crafty eyes and decided quickly he wasn’t anyone to give up hoogie heaven for.

A second officer appeared. “What’s the story?” he asked the desk officer.

“Those perps. That Felix and Ramon crew. You know who I mean?”

“What about it?”

“I got this guy here they ripped off,” the first officer said, handing Officer Bill the note.

“Kid, you’re lucky you weren’t home. Those fuckers don’t care if someone’s in the apartment or not. They’re just coming in, and if you’re there, they waste you. It ain’t even about the merchandise with them. They just dig sticking people and doing the shoot em boy run run. Two of those fuckers was out on parole for murder. You dig what I’m saying?”

“Murder. They were murderers?”

“Don’t matter how much you beg for your life with those guys. Like I said, they dig closing their victims out.”

“Where are they now?”

“Who the fuck knows. Down at the Tombs probably.”

“What’s going to happen to them?”

“What happens when you make a full turn through a revolving door?” Officer Bill said. “So there’s your junk. You want it?”

“That’s all?” Luther asked. On a table stood a big gray tape recorder, its casing broken and the spools missing. Luke had given it to him, as he had the old stereo receiver and turntable and speakers. Hand-me-downs, like those shirts of Luke’s that got passed on to him when they were growing up.

“Like I said, we only caught the two of them. That was a big crew. You got a lot of old shit in there they left behind. If there was anything valuable, believe me, it’s gone,” Officer Bill went on.

“What am I supposed to do?” Luther’s question came out as a wail of distress.

The reply from the first officer was emphatic. “You get the hell out of here. That’s what,” he said, then wiped away the remains of his Blimpie with the back of his hand.

Luther stood on the dark street. It was late now, after 10 pm. He couldn’t go back into that building. He just couldn’t, anymore than he could live in a place that had been overrun by rats. Maybe tomorrow, in daylight, he would be able to. He called Claire. She had said he was family, even if she meant like Helja, the Estonian maid, might be considered family.

“What a terrible thing. Yes, please don’t stay there in your apartment tonight. Come up here immediately,” Claire said.

The doorman building had always stood as a symbol of security, and never more than now, as he passed through the marble lobby. Claire received him in her nightgown.

“I’m sorry. I’ve woken you,” Luther said.

“Not at all. I was just reading in bed. Come talk to me.”

And so he did, following her into the living room. Trauma had its benefits. It helped to bridge the divide. He felt close to Claire as he sat with her going over the details of his evening. And he sensed that she felt close to him. She was a frightened human being herself. Why else would she still be living at home and clinging to her family?

He stayed in Sarah's room that night. As he lay in her bed, he visualized the bottles in the little hallway passage to the dining room. He could always drink whiskey if there was no beer or wine in the house. Claire's door would be closed, and chances were she was already fast asleep. And even if she did see him with a glass in hand, would that be so bad after the shock he had experienced? Surely she would understand.

He returned to the bedroom with a tall glass three-quarters filled with bourbon and the rest with water so he wouldn't have to make a second trip. He didn't know about mixed drinks and he wasn't sure he cared. He just wanted the effect the alcohol would produce in him. Anyway, he had picked up a bartending book lying around Camp a while back, thinking he might like to be a bartender, but the recipes were hard to retain. The difference between a rob roy and a manhattan seemed like too much to master, especially under the pressure of impatient patrons. Bartending was just another thing he wouldn't be able to do, like chemistry.

But Claire could do chemistry. She could do biology. She could do everything. That was why she was at Barnard. The college had recognized she was a girl of substance. That's why she was with her high IQ boyfriend, who put his laughing thing on everything. It was why she could recognize that Luther was nothing more than a menial,



like Helja. That's what intelligent, substantial people did: they saw to the heart of the matter. They had the capacity to strip away all the excess and just *see*.

As he drank, he began to have other thoughts about Claire. Just on the other side of that shared bathroom was her bedroom. He had only to pass through it to be with her. And he did want to be with her, to experience the dark fury that lay behind her mild manner. In the stillness, a perfect medium for communication, what he was hearing was that she wanted him, too, that they were alone together in the universe through circumstances beyond their control, and now their attraction to each other was beyond their control as well. The burglars had knocked down his door. He would not do anything so crude. He would simply knock. That was the excitement of sex. You knocked on the door and you didn't know what to expect on the other side. That was what the Bible meant by knowing a woman. You couldn't possibly know her until you had lain with her. And Claire had invited him to knock. She had already received him. When the call of adventure came you were supposed to heed it.

He entered the bathroom from Sarah's room. Even half-drunk he understood that he had a choice. If he returned to Sarah's bed, he could wake without remorse in the morning and go on about his day. But what kind of choice was that? The night was too long. It was not humanly possible to hold out. He would have to be placed in restraints. It did not matter that he had gone down this road with Lenore. The memory of that brief experience of pleasure was far greater than that of the pain that had followed.

He pushed the door open slowly, just a crack. He did not want to startle her. He just wanted to make a request, and in a reasonable manner. Nice, he wanted to sound nice.

“Claire?” he called.

“Luther?” He had not summoned her from sleep. She had been lying awake, waiting for him.

“This will sound strange, but may I come in?”

“Why? What is it?”

“Can I stay with you for the night?”

“No, you can’t.” Her answer came flat and emphatic.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He had no reserves of confidence on which to draw, no clever power of persuasion he could use. No was no.

Back in Sarah’s room he stood with his head pressed against the wall and his eyes closed. He should leave, but he couldn’t leave, couldn’t go back to his wrecked, unsafe apartment, not in the dark of night. Where then? The park? The subway? No, he would stay and get up early and leave, so he didn’t have to see Claire. He was family after all. Claire had said as much.

“I cannot make you more intelligent, but I can make you more moral. Have I not told you this before? Do you want to be more moral?”

He had told Dr. Dressler about the incident with Claire. What he was thinking. What he wasn't thinking. Everything. "Why can't you make me more intelligent?" Luther asked.

"That is not for me to do."

"Who can I see about doing this for me if you can't?"

"That is part of your sickness that you want more than you have. More intelligence. More sex. You want what isn't yours."

"What kind of analyst are you, anyway? Are you a priest? You sound like a priest."

She said nothing. Sometimes she would go silent, just leave him on his own.

He told her about the break-in. He presented it as an extenuating circumstance.

"Thieves attract thieves," she said.

"You shouldn't talk to me that way," he said.

"They will go back to jail, and you could end up in jail, too."

"I said don't talk to me that way."

"What way should I talk to you?"

"You should be nice, like me."

"You? You are not nice. You are not so nice at all."

"You don't know me."

"Don't I?" she said, holding up her notepad.

"I don't like you," he said.

"Now we're getting somewhere."

The two women came together to the bar, as women often did. The taller one was sickly thin, her skin sallow. She was recovering from an illness that she didn't specify. Her jaundiced complexion made him think it was a liver problem. Luther talked with her, but really, it was her friend he was interested in, and the friend seemed interested in him. But before he could be alone with her, the sick woman, whose name was Sadie, insisted that he come to her apartment around the corner and listen to a record that had important information for him.

“What is this record?” Luther asked, but Sadie wouldn't say.

“I'll be here. Don't worry,” the other woman said. Her name was Maggie.

Luther went with Sadie to her apartment, where she played the record, as she had promised. The animal sounds he heard surprised him, the vocalizations of elephants and wolves and the hideous laughter of hyenas. He could hardly listen, his mind so much on Maggie back in the bar. The fear was growing in him that she would be gone by the time he returned or that someone else would have claimed her for his own. Seeing that the album of animal sounds was not doing the job, Sadie gripped him by the wrists and delivered the message herself.

“You are not the person you want to be. You are terribly disappointed with yourself. It shows in your face. Admit it.”

Her face and voice were full of intensity, as warranted by the holy truth he imagined she thought she was dispensing. In spite of her gravity, he laughed, not dismissively, but from nervousness.

“I am sorry,” he said, before fleeing from the woman. And he was sorry, sorry that she appeared to be dying and that he couldn’t help her. But there was also wonderment at her proprietary hold on him. How did someone presume to take such possession of another person, a perfect stranger? What in him had invited such an onslaught of peculiarity?

Maggie was still at the bar. That she was alone surprised him, and yet she had a plain face that might not attract some men. Still, she attracted him. They went back to her place in the East Village.

“I’ve been dying to get out of these clothes,” she said, as she undressed. Small and thin, she had a pretty body under her garments, a body that would not overwhelm him.

They did fine in bed and had enough between them that they could see each other a second and a third and even a fourth time. But seeing Maggie brought anxiety. She was not like the other girls he came and went from. She wanted something more than sex. Her father was a professor of comparative literature at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick.

“You should come out and meet him and my mother,” Maggie said.

By this time Luther had told Maggie that he was writing. It was the same thing he told everyone. He was writing fiction and in the fall would be going off to college at Rutgers, in Newark. He heard what he said as a prerecorded message and in darker moments saw himself as a lunatic, an *incompetent* lunatic, with his hand in his mother’s purse, a man who lived more for reading the *New York Post* and eating hero sandwiches

than for any strenuous literary activity. And as for law school, well, it was beginning to feel like a fake ID.

“What should I do about my filth?” he said to Dr. Dressler.

“What filth are you talking about? Your filth in stealing money or your whoring filth?”

“You have no right to talk to me this way. I could report you to the police. Or at least the head of this clinic. I am talking about my whoring filth, as you call it.”

“Tell me about this new whoring filth.”

“I get frightened before I meet her. I feel it is a betrayal of Sarah and that I should pick up the phone and call to cancel.”

“We are here to make you more moral, as I have mentioned before.”

“Who are you? Have I asked you that question?”

“Who do you think I am?”

“I will tell you if I ever find out.”

“We regret to inform you that because of the unusual number of highly qualified applicants, you have been placed on the waiting list....”

He returned the letter to its envelope and placed it atop some books on the shelf. The dean at Rutgers had promised. He had promised. And now he had gone back on his word. Luther had placed his whole life on hold awaiting this new chapter. Yes, he had been unsure as to whether the law was right for him, but still, a promise was a promise.

He put a call in to Dean Fletcher. "I must speak with him. It's urgent," Luther said to the dean's secretary.

"May I ask who is calling and what the call is in reference to?" she asked.

"My name is Luther Garatdjian and it is about my life. I need to make an appointment."

"I see," the secretary said. She asked for the spelling of his last name and put him on hold. The hold was a long one. He could only imagine Dean Fletcher guessing the nature of the call and trying to figure out a way not to see him. Who wanted to meet with a reject? But the secretary came back on the line and said the dean would see him the following week.

"At some point you must accept reality," Dr. Dressler said.

"What reality?"

"Maybe you are not good enough for that law school."

"Stop it. Stop it. You are killing me," he said.

"You are killing yourself," Dr. Dressler said.

"Were you born mean?" Luther asked.

"No one is as mean as you," she replied.

"Oh, what am I doing here?"

"Yes, what are you doing here? That is as good a place as any to end this session," she said, closing her notebook.

As the bus entered the Lincoln Tunnel, he imagined the walls crumbling and the foul water of the Hudson River quickly pouring in. A view of old, sad-looking towns and marshland poisoned by the toxic chemical plants and refineries awaited him on the other side. It wasn't right that the world should be so ugly, laid out with roadways for cars and trucks and buses to roar about on, turning the air gray every day. New Jersey was for the dead and dying and shunned. He didn't want to be forgotten, left to live in obscurity. Leaving New York City was like giving up a front row orchestra seat for the far reaches of the balcony.

Famous. He wanted to be famous, or at least seen. Invisibility was a kind of death. Before receiving the rejection letter he had begun to see law school, and the tunnel vision it required, as a graveyard where his true ambition, a writing career, would be buried. But law school represented confirmation that the world wanted him. It was a way of packaging his life. He was afraid what too much failure would do to him. He saw what the failure he had met with had already done. He had thrown himself at the world and grown more and more cowed and depressed as the evidence mounted that the world was indifferent and even outright rejecting of him.

Dean Fletcher received him in his office. Dean Fletcher was God, though he didn't look like God as Luther imagined God, not with his mild, cautious manner and blond hair. And yet he was God, having given Luther all his pain and being the only one who could take it away.

“What can I do for you?” Dean Fletcher asked.



The question lacked warmth. It was hard to find any hope in it. “That’s what I’m here to try to find out. I feel I received from you assurance last year, when I was wait-listed, that I would be admitted to the law school this year. Instead I got placed on the waiting list again. I’m very disappointed. I feel my whole life has been on hold, and now I’m worried I won’t get in.”

“Why do you want to come to this law school?”

“Because it would offer me a quality education at an affordable tuition.”

“And why have you chosen to enter the field of law.”

Luther thought to tell Dean Fletcher about how, since childhood, it had been his ambition to right the wrongs that Simon Weill had been visiting on his family. But that would have been yesterday’s answer, as dated as last year’s newspaper. He thought of saying he wanted to become a lawyer so he could help people, but he would have had to shout “Liar! Liar!” immediately afterward, as he saw by now that he was only, or primarily, concerned with himself. “It’s a field, I sense, in line with my abilities and in which I may be able to do some good,” he said. A lie too, perhaps, but not so great he would have to denounce himself.

Dean Fletcher surprised him with a smile. “I will see what I can do. You’ll be hearing in a few days,” he said, and rose to signal that the meeting was over.

The girl Maggie brought up her parents again. Would he come meet them for dinner? But he saw that he had made himself something he wasn’t by telling her about law school and his writing activity. He had made himself into a liar and her father, being a full professor

and thus a true intellectual, would see what his daughter could not, that Luther was a sham. Maybe her father even knew Dean Fletcher, who would tell him how Luther begged to get into his law school. In any case, she had no right to make him adopt a third family when the two he already had were more than enough. He could not take his betrayal of Sarah to that level. He had his limits. And so he said yes when he really meant no, wanting to sleep with her too much to be honest.

They did it the other way that night, a way he had never done it with Sarah or any other girl. Maggie said she wanted to do it that way, too. She didn't say if she had done it that way before, and it wasn't for him to ask, though he wanted to. After a while she said she was sore, and so he stopped. Although she didn't say so, he had gone too fast and too hard. It bothered him to think that that in taking his pleasure he had caused her pain, and that it had been left to her to tell him. What did it mean that it was in his nature to do such a thing? He thought of Dr. Dressler. It wasn't anything to discuss with her. God only knew what she would say. Not true. He knew very well what she would say.

"He took pity on you," Dr. Dressler said.

"Pity?" Dean Fletcher had come through for him. A letter of acceptance had come.

"He saw how desperate you were. Did you thank him?"

"Sure I thanked him."

"Gratitude does not come naturally to you. It is an old-fashioned virtue young people dismiss."

“That’s not true.”

“Name one thing you’re grateful for.”

“I’m grateful I’m not you.”

“Do you care to explain?”

“I’m sorry. That is not true. I’m grateful to have this room to come to three times a week and to have you as a composite of my three older sisters.”

“In what way am I a composite of your three older sisters?”

“Don’t ask me things I cannot say.”

“What can’t you say?”

“Some women hit with their hands. Some women hit with their mouths.”

“Are you saying that I hit you?”

“Never mind.”

“What never mind? We are here to discuss such things.”

Hitting was her birthright. He would never ask her to give up such a thing.

Lewdness was now part of the fabric of his life. The Summer of Love had given him permission to fall on the floor and “ball” (the hideousness of that term), and in his mind it was linked with another turning point, that summer night in the late 1950s he and the other children had taken flight from Pastor’s Chernenko’s fiery sermon in the aluminum-sided tabernacle in the Catskills and flocked to the meadow for the kissing and other activities twelve-year-olds were capable of. But this growing preoccupation with sex worried him. Hemingway hadn’t been lewd, nor had Fitzgerald or Faulkner. Yes, Henry

Miller had filled his pages with bawdy yip yap, but he was an anomaly whose winning personality shone through. Now too there was Philip Roth, with *Portnoy's Complaint*, but he overpowered you with his comic genius and intelligence. There were social mores but Luther was coming to see there were also literary mores. It was all right for others to be sex-driven, but the main character generally had to possess a core of moral fitness. Being in there with the rabble meant automatic dismissal. And Dr. Dressler herself had said he was immoral.

Sex. It was like drinking. It was what you turned to when you couldn't turn to anything else.

And intelligence. You had to have that. You could play-act at failure, but the reader had to know you had the goods, however little you did with them. Otherwise the reader could not love you.

"We're going out tonight, Luther. We're doing something big, but I'm not going to tell you what," Brenda said.

He had stopped by the penthouse to visit with his brother, but Luke had stepped out.

"What's big, Momma? Tell me." Her son, Benjy, raced into the room. He was three years old and cross-eyed.

"The world is big," Brenda said.

Benjy's little body felt hard when Luther lifted him. The boy pulled off Luther's glasses and threw them on the floor and laughed.

“Benjy, you shouldn’t do that. Apologize to Luther,” Brenda said.

The boy made no apology. He flopped onto the bed and buried his face in the quilt after Luther had put him down. Luther did not hold out too much hope for the boy, conceived as he had been in the womb of selfishness and his father, Lenny Cerone, having a proclivity for con artistry and heroin.

“Where will he stay tonight?” Luther asked.

“With my mother,” Brenda said. “Do you like this blouse?”

“Sure I like it,” Luther said, of the skimpy white blouse through which he could faintly see the cups of her bra.

“I bought two of them. I like the cut, the way it shows me off a little bit. Don’t you?”

“I do,” he said, hesitation in his voice. He sensed she possessed a defense as thin as her blouse against sex. It was the language she spoke in.

“Why do I have to stay with Grandma?” Benjy had rolled over onto his back.

“You like Grandma and she likes you. That’s why.”

“But Grandpa smells bad.”

“It’s just for the night,” Brenda said.

Brenda’s mother was a thick-set, careworn woman. Her sad, defeated face testified to the difficulty of her life, having a husband come home with a load on after spending his evening in the Irish bar down on One Hundred Ninth Street and Broadway drinking whiskey with beer for a chaser. It was said by Luke that Brenda had a hard time

being with her father, especially alone, and that he was a man who had crossed lines with her.

“I should be going,” Luther said.

“Are you sure? Luke won’t be gone long.”

“No, I need to be going. Tell him I stopped by.”

“OK. I’m still looking forward to meeting your girlfriend,” Brenda said.

“That will happen. It’s just a little hard right now. She goes to school in Boston.”

“Luke says she’s really pretty and talented, too.” Brenda’s grin increased his discomfort.

“Well, I agree.”

“It must be hard being apart like that. So many things can happen when people are apart. You know what I mean?”

“Sure. I know what you mean,” Luther said.

Out on Broadway he saw Luke coming out of a liquor store on the other side of the street with his purchase in a brown bag. Luther didn’t feel obliged to call to him. Luke and Brenda had their evening planned out. He had his own.

Adult films had begun to appear in some of the movie theaters around the city. Names like *Philly Foxes* and *Nancy the Nympho* had begun to appear on marquees. When the thought of such a film came to his mind, he would run to it, the way he would to a bar or liquor store when his mind turned to alcohol. But you couldn’t just duck into the theater. You had to pay the admission price at the ticket window right there on the street where

passersby would see you. He learned to glance at the ticket price as he walked past so he could turn over the exact amount to expedite the transaction. And he also learned to wait until the street wasn't packed with pedestrians. It wouldn't do to be seen going into such a theater. It wouldn't do at all.

Big Broadway theaters that once filled with laughter were now as silent as a tomb. No smell of hot dogs or popcorn, as the refreshment stands were closed. On the dirt-flecked screens no coming attractions, and in the seats only men sitting scattered and separate, feasting on carnal images of women taking giant penises in their mouths and their vaginas and sometimes in the third place.

Among these men Luther sat, feeling the same arousal provided the porn did not feature drug-addicted street walkers like those out on Eighth Avenue wearing enormously high heels and garish makeup. He wanted on the screen normal-looking women such as you would find on an Ivy League campus. He wanted to believe what he didn't fully believe, in spite of his own experience, that women as well as men actually *liked* sex. Did they not simply tolerate semen in their mouths but actually enjoy the taste? And was that a grimace or a smile of pleasure when the man stuck his giant penis in her butt? If it was the former, then the scene would be ruined for him. He was there to witness pleasure, not pain.

He stared at the sturdy black phone. Every month now he paid his bill promptly so that the folks at New York Telephone would see that he was a trustworthy customer. He no longer relied on stolen credit card numbers for his long-distance calls to Boston. If indeed

his activity at the office amounted to little more than thievery, and he generally didn't believe that was so, it had nonetheless made a dependable man of him with his creditors.

Sometimes he would reposition the phone on the small round table Vera had given him so he could only see its back while lying down. Other times he would turn it so the dial was visible. Such delight his phone gave him. Happiness was in feeling safe, and the phone was a visible symbol of that safety.

Not that he always felt so safe anymore. Following the break-in, management had replaced the old wooden door with a plainer, unpainted door little more than balsa wood. But he had gone and bought a police lock, the kind with an iron bar that extended from the lock itself to a groove in the floor. He told himself that the lock would provide the necessary deterrent from unwanted visitors.

But on this day he wasn't deriving any pleasure from the phone, however it was positioned. He was thinking about Maggie. One minute he was intent on calling her. The next he considered that he should just leave her alone. But he needed to find out that her door was closed. He owed it to himself—and to her—to let her hurt him, as he had hurt her. The situation called for it.

“Hi,” he said.

“Oh, it's you.” She was not a nasty or unkind person, not by nature. He had led her to this pass. He could accept that this was so.

“I just called to say hello.” *Just*. He wanted the word back.

“Did you?”

“How are you? Are you OK?”



“Sure I am.”

“I’m glad to hear. What are you doing?”

“What am I doing?”

“Right. I mean, you don’t have to answer.”

“What are you doing?”

“Me? Nothing.” He answered as if had been an accusation.

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe...”

“Look, Luther, I don’t think we have much to say to each other. Do you?”

“Maybe we could get together and talk?”

“I have plans for this evening.”

“Plans?”

“I’m going out with friends.”

“I’ll call another night.”

“I don’t think so, Luther. Don’t call here anymore. OK?”

“OK. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

“But I am. I feel I hurt you.”

“It’s OK. It really is. Now goodbye.”

He didn’t like that word *goodbye*. He didn’t like it at all. Not at that moment he didn’t.

The girl said, “Are you interested in me or only in my body?” as she stood naked before him.

“Can I be interested in both?” he asked.

The girl, a different one, said, “You should see yourself. You really, really should.” He had taken her photograph in Central Park and persuaded her to come back to his apartment. She was not laughing when she said what she did to him.

The girl, again a different one, said, “No, don’t do that,” when he moved down between her legs with his mouth.

The girl, a very different girl, said, “Oh, oh, oh, I didn’t know it could feel this good. Oh, oh.”

The woman—she was no longer a girl—said, “OK,” when he followed her out of the bar and asked if he could ride with her in the cab she had hailed. She lived in a big loft in a terra cotta building on Prince Street. Six other women lived in the same loft, in sheet-rocked rooms. He made love to the woman that night in her bed, a sheeted mattress on the floor. In the morning he woke alone. The sun came strong through the skylight and was a torment. His head ached from all the wine of the night before. He found the woman in the kitchen in a terrycloth robe drinking from a carton of milk.

“Who are you?” he said.

“I’m Elsie.”

“Where are you from?”

“Indiana.”

“Why are you here?”

“To make my way in the art world as a painter.”

“There is no art world in Indiana?”

“There is only basketball in Indiana. And my alcoholic ex-husband.”

“Why do you call him such a name?”

“What name? Alcoholic? Because he is one.”

“Why is he one?”

“Because he just is. And you’re one too, though you are just starting out.”

She had said a word she wasn’t supposed to say. He went away from the woman and returned home and knelt in front of the toilet bowl, where he threw up.

“Oh, God, I won’t do this again. Please help me. Please help me,” he prayed. He then lay on the floor before crawling into bed.

The woman—she had been a girl when he knew her in college but now she wasn’t—said, “I’m an alcoholic.” Right there on Broadway did she say such a thing to him, and with a smile of acceptance to accompany her admission. In the long ago she had been walking about the campus with the collected poems of T. S. Eliot clasped to her chest. In that time she had said that her boyfriend had twenty-five pairs of underwear, and expressed a

desire to buy for Luther a jacket to protect him from the winter cold. He would always remember her for that. But now she was telling him this, and this too he would remember.

“It doesn’t compute,” Luther said.

“What doesn’t compute?”

“I don’t know,” Luther said.

He had seen the girl wandering back and forth along a dreary stretch of sidewalk not far from where he lived and so brought her home with him. “I don’t do that with boys or with anyone,” she said, when he touched her.

“Is sex so important?” the woman said. He had met her in a bar. She had a French accent, and so he listened to her carefully.

“Yes,” he said, and went ahead.

He said to Nadia, the girl from upstairs, “I want to photograph you naked. Can you do that for me?” She would always be back there in that time when she was a girl, at least for him.

“Why?” she said.

“Because I have to.”

“Why do you have to?”

“Because I see the photograph, I really do, and I can’t get it out of my mind.”

He felt strong with Nadia, and she surrendered to his confidence. She shed her blouse, her skirt, everything.

He took the photograph right there in her apartment, in natural light, using a slow exposure. The photograph turned out well. Though she was naked, not too much of her showed. A nude, yes, but not an explicit nude, not a pornographic nude. And yet it was sensual, Nadia sitting cross-legged on a chair in the afternoon light in her apartment, her image reflected in a mirror.

In addition to writing, Luther had enrolled in a photography course at the New School. The instructor had won acclaim for a photo essay on a community in Spanish Harlem. He was admiring of the photograph but he also said, “Did you get her permission to circulate this print? You understand that you are not free to do that without her consent? That would be immoral as well as against the law. You do understand that, don’t you?”

“I...I don’t know...”

“What don’t you know? That it’s illegal and immoral?”

The instructor’s words hit Luther hard. He had opened Luther’s eyes, making him see he was a thief in more ways than one and that his thievery had no beginning and no end.

But there were other thieves in the world. It didn’t make his thievery any less, but they were there. How did he know? He called Nadia one night and asked her if he could come upstairs and be with her. When he arrived, Nadia opened the door but offered neither a greeting nor a smile.

“Is something wrong?” Luther said.

“You. You are wrong,” she said.

“I am wrong?” It was the first time she had directed anything like peeve at him.

“Everyone is wrong. I am wrong,” Nadia said.

“What is going on?”

Nadia did not live in a void. She did have people in her life, in addition to the Rumanian piano player about whom she fantasized. There was a couple who came to visit her, a loud, brash woman of sizable girth and her thin, introverted boyfriend. The woman had proposed to Nadia several times that she join them for a ménage a trois. The woman finally bent Nadia to her will and now Nadia wanted nothing more to do with the woman or her boyfriend or anyone.

“It was disgusting,” Nadia said, and began to cry.

“I wonder what will happen to all of us,” Luther said.

“What are you talking about now?” Nadia said.

“I don’t really know. It was all I could think to say,” Luther said.

Nadia began to laugh through her tears. “Did you bring some wine?” she said.

“Oh yes. Hearty burgundy. I think it will be pretty good,” he said.

Nadia laughed some more. “I like it when you come to me. Sometimes.”

They drank the wine and smoked some grass and lay together for a while.

*When you come to me.* In the smoke heaven he had entered those words became so big, so revealing of the secret of the universe. Of course, of course. You must go to *it*.

In Central Park he met a woman whose skin was so pale as to make him believe she did not keep daylight hours, though in fact it was daylight when they met. She took him home, where they made love. "For many years my brother and I did this every day, and some days more than once," she said to Luther. When he remained silent, she said, "Don't you want to say something? Don't you?"

"My sisters do not look like you," he finally said. It was all he could think to say. She too was some sort of secret of the universe, her strange, out-of-the-way life a quiet respite from the roaring trucks.

"You're with me for a reason. Just remember that," the woman said. "You're a dink, just like me. You're just a taller dink."

"A dink?" Luther said.

"You heard me," the woman said.

Central Park was not his alone. Roberto had found it as well. By Bethesda Fountain Luther saw him one afternoon.

"Remember me, Gargoyle?"

In the three years since Luther had left that apartment, Roberto was beginning to have the appearance of a derelict. His hair had grown to a ball of steel wool and his front teeth were chipped and stained. He neither shaved nor bathed, judging from the unpleasant facial hair and the oily sheen of his skin.

"I do," Luther said. One thing hadn't changed. Roberto still had that smile that said he was on top of things even as he edged toward the cliff. The smile of a lunatic, of

someone well defended against the truth. But Luther softened. That smile was all Roberto had. For some reason he didn't have the gift of connection. He didn't know how to say he was afraid or hurt or what was on his mind. Just that smile. That damn stupid smile.

"All I have to do is flash and they come to me," Roberto said.

"Flash what?"

"You know what I mean, Gargoyle. Don't pretend you don't. I show them my thing and they can't resist. Then I take them to my pad right here in the park."

"You have a pad here in the park?"

"It's my very own, and beautifully furnished. I make sure they come and go blindfolded so they can't find their way back."

"I'm worried about you, Roberto."

"No, you're worried about yourself, motherfucking gargoyle."

"Maybe you're right." Seeing Roberto was only seeing some more horrible version of himself and made him want to flee. "Goodbye," Luther said.

"Goodbye, Gargoyle. And remember, it's all about symbolic logic." The anger that had briefly frozen Roberto's face was gone. The imbecilic smile had returned.

On the terrace, near the fountain, an outdoor café served sangria by the pitcher. How happy it made him to come to the park after a morning of working on his manuscripts and sit by himself at a table watching strollers gather around the fountain. He stayed in the recess of the café in case Roberto showed up, but on this day, a week after their encounter, Roberto was nowhere to be seen.



The fountain was where he had come after the high school commencement at the Barbizon Plaza, just south of the park. He remembered that awful scene with Mr. Sadowski, how his basketball coach had approached and said he would be proud to have a son like him. The nerve of him saying such a thing. The nerve. But nerve wasn't quite the right word, was it? More the pain of him saying such a thing. Even six years later it came as a shock that Mr. Sadowski had dared to care. And then fleeing from Mr. Sadowski, well-meaning Mr. Sadowski with those tears in his eyes. Just fleeing from him and all of them and the chance he had blown to make something of his life, to be better than the garbage he was with his low SAT score. Fleeing from Mr. Sadowski and his mother and all his Yale- and Harvard-bound classmates. Fleeing, just fleeing the unbearable intimacy of that moment.

He had trouble with the long set of stairs leading away from the terrace. Now that he was out of the shade, the overhead sun was brutal. His legs had turned to lead; his whole being felt sodden. He sank down on one of the steps.

"Are you all right?" he heard a woman say.

He nodded, without looking up.

"Are you feeling sick? Do you need a doctor?"

"He needs a cup of coffee. He's drunk. Come on, Louise." A man's voice.

He made his way up the remaining stairs and found a bench near the band shell on which to sit. "Help me," he heard himself say. Over and over did he say the same thing.

From nearby came a voice. "You here to hear my music, Gargoyle?" On the deserted stage of the crumbling band shell stood Roberto in dark glasses, strumming his

imaginary guitar. Luther eased away. “Hey, Gargoyle, I’m only warming up,” Roberto called out.

Sarah and her family serving as an anchor, of sorts. They were given a trip to Puerto Rico by Sarah’s mother. Luther thanked Lydia but she said, “It’s not for you. It’s a gift for my daughter on her graduation from art school.” Luther told himself Lydia wasn’t trying to hurt him but only to explain, and yet he was hurt, he was very hurt. The way she had said *my daughter*, as if to make Sarah hers and separate and apart from him and at the same time to make clear that he was not family, he was not anyone to her. He felt like a big sloppy dog running excitedly to his master only to receive a kick. But Lydia was not his master, and he was not a dog. And yet she was, and he was. He would be more careful. He would be on guard. After all, they had compared him to their maid.

They stayed three nights at the El Convento, in San Juan. Because the beaches in and around the city were polluted, they drove to a sandy stretch thirty miles away, where he underestimated the potency of the sun and was badly burned. It was a day before the torment began to end.

From San Juan they drove across the island to Ponce, where they were startled by the black and red Moorish firehouse, and on to Mayaguez. En route, in the hills, he pulled off the road to relieve himself, and heard, from somewhere far above, someone call, “Yo, hippie.” Though the voice was playful, it was cause for uneasiness that he—*they*—were being watched by unseen forces who could, if they chose, as they clearly did, play with them, as that meant they could also possibly do worse. He didn’t entirely trust an island

with a passion for cockfighting, creatures with razor-sharp metal talons set loose in a confined space to tear each other to pieces for the amusement of the spectators. Some blood lust there.

Sarah had her own thing going on. It came suddenly, with virulence and viciousness, as if a door within her opened and something new and dangerous was let out.

“Do you want this plate in your face, mister? Do you?”

They were in a restaurant. Chicken with rice had been served them.

“What have I done?” Luther said.

“Shut up,” she hissed. Her eyes were ablaze. “Those homosexuals at the next table? They are listening. Do you hear me? They are listening.”

Luther did see two men at a table not so close to their own, but they were talking animatedly with each other, seemingly unconcerned with the life around them.

“Why do you say that?” No sign of eavesdropping was apparent. And Luther couldn't say the men struck him as being clearly homosexual, if anyone could verifiably know such a thing at a glance.

“I said shut up and I mean shut up.”

Luther ate quietly, and Sarah did the same, though she did not spare him periodic glares. The situation was preposterous but her pain was evident, and so he did not dare laugh, though he wanted to. That would have been so wrong, to laugh at his girlfriend's pain. But laughter came from a mysterious place, just like her paranoia. That was the word he was looking for. Paranoia. Her father had a strain of it and so did she.

Her father. Did he have something to do with this? Luther could only believe that he did, though he could not exactly say why.

On the trip he thought: her neck is short, her shoulders big, and her hips those of a boy. Why have I not seen this before?

On the trip she said: "I can put the blocks together a hundred times faster than you. Remember that."

Those words. They had come from a different place. It was her place, just not a place she showed him every day. In fact she had not showed it to him before. It was a place that lay there in waiting, a place from which she could strike him dead if she chose. She had crashed through his gates with those words; she had launched her Tet offensive, said she knew all about him and there was nothing he could do about it.

Lydia came back to Peter with the proviso that she could keep the lover she had found through the personals ads in the *Village Voice*. She did not give Peter clobber, but she did not give him exclusive love either. The lover's name was Ron Howell. He was a black man with a solid build. Luther saw the three of them together at the Riverside Drive apartment one afternoon. No one got killed. Then Lydia and Peter and Ron Howell spent a weekend together at Camp as well, and no one got killed there either.

Lydia wrote in her journal: Now I can have my eros and my love. My life is finally whole and complete.

How did Luther know? Because he read her journal. *He read his girlfriend's mother's journal.*

Then Ron Howell disappeared. Nothing of a violent or criminal nature had happened. Lydia came to see that she couldn't have her eros and her love, or that Eros maybe was a fleeting thing.

Luther came to see...Luther couldn't say what he had come to see.

Then Peter went and got famous. Genius entered and filled the solitary spaces of his life. He wrote a play, and after an out-of-town tryout, it was brought to Broadway by a director whom Lydia and Peter had met back when summer stock was alive and well at the Phoenicia Playhouse. Bill Buhle possessed a hunger for the bright lights of Broadway going back to his childhood in an impoverished town in east Texas. He was hard as glass and just as brittle, in Luther's eyes, a man who had no time or appetite for the likes of him. But Peter could command Bill Buhle with his beauty, and then there was Lydia to keep him warm with her unreserved receipt of him.

The play featured a president pulled from the graveyard of history. His name was Woodrow Wilson, but his real name was Agony; he was tortured day and night by his decision as a man of peace to send young men to war.

"Thy will, not mine. Show me Thy will," the president prayed.

History was a light shed on the past so it could be fully understood while the earth rotated through space where oblivion, not contemplation, awaited.

Or history was a hot iron applied to a wrinkled shirt, so it could be worn presentably. Was that what history was, too?

The God stuff stirred memories of varnished wood pews in which men and women wailed for Jesus, the tumult causing Luther to worry not only for them but for the world, because if grownups were crying, what hope was there for children? Bad things happening in the skies and on the earth to make these adults cry.

But Peter sent Woodrow Wilson to his knees, right there on a Broadway stage. The play was about faith, or the lack of faith. Luther heard the same despair and barrenness as he did in an Ingmar Bergman film.

Lydia's eros, Ron Howell, may have been gone, that love falling away like a dead leaf. Lenore was surely gone. Lydia's life as it could have been, with her actors equity card and people begging her to stay on the stage, was gone. But Peter, the agent of her pain, her failed god, was not gone. He was still there and he had lurched from the graveyard of history and brought it with him into the realm of the living in invading her domain. Luther saw the tremble in Lydia's hand and the distress in her face. He saw how inhospitable her mind and being had become to Peter's success.

The play did not have a long run. The reviews were not favorable. Pedantic. Strange. Irrelevant. A real yawner. Words like this were applied to Peter's play so the obscurity he had known could reclaim him.

"Lydia wants me to teach. She has always wanted me to be part of the world," Peter said to Luther. "But there is no place in the world for someone such as me, no place whatsoever."

Luther did not say to Peter, "Why is that?" A question could be begging to be asked and yet not be called for. Besides, Peter was surely hearing the question without

Luther asking it. In that moment, feeling Peter's anxiety, Luther wanted to hold him and protect him from the cold that awaited him. He did not want to see Peter try to enter the world in middle age lost and confused and rendered sad and ordinary in his own sight by teaching a bunch of community college students or whatever he would be assigned to do. He wanted Peter to remain inviolate in that Riverside Drive apartment and at Camp, whose grounds he had sculpted to conform to his ideal of beauty. He surely did not want Lydia to cut Peter loose so he would have to see how little he was worth in the world. That would have been too cruel. Lydia and Peter were not his parents, but they were like his parents. Luther wanted them to stay together. He did not want them creating anymore earthquakes in his mind with their fissures and fractures.

“Luther, between you and me I don't believe in psychiatry. It is but a tool to preserve the capitalist order when you analyze it,” Peter said.

“How is that?” Luther allowed himself to ask.

“Because you have to be part of the system in order to afford it,” Peter answered.

Luther did not tell Peter about the Karen Horney Clinic or the three dollars per hour he paid. He had no spirit of contradiction going where Peter was concerned.

Lydia was herself out in the world, teaching reading, writing, and math skills to children in a remedial learning program. Dr. Norton, her therapist, had encouraged her, now that the children were in college, to engage with society through work. Her employer encouraged her to stay on in the education field and was willing to pay her tuition should she enroll at Teachers College, but she declined. Teaching minority children by day and

taking courses in the evening toward a master's degree in education was more of a commitment than she wanted. She had raised a family on her inheritance. She was done.

With the money he was extracting from the building. Luther made frequent trips to Willoughby's, near Grand Central Station, where weary-looking salespersons with cynical faces filled his orders for Nikons cameras and lenses, and even a Bolex 16 mm Bolex. Somewhere he had read that it was the top-of-the-line hand-held camera for independent filmmakers.

Colin Westland was a filmmaker. At least his character was in the novel he had published. And so it was for Luther to follow in Colin's footsteps even if the gifts that had been bestowed on him were not of a kind or quality that Colin possessed. A writer, a filmmaker, and a photographer he could be. He didn't have to be tied down to just one thing.

New York University offered a summer filmmaking course, led by an old man with gray skin and gray hair. Aram Manoogian had made a name for himself in the film industry as a young man, but over the years slowly succumbed to the security of a faculty position. It had been decades since his last movie, and he had seemingly made peace with the reality that his former life was forever behind him. Such effusiveness he displayed when addressing the group. Was joy an Armenian trait, Luther wondered, or did young people dependent on his guidance offer him a sense of reprieve from a sense of uselessness? And why did Aram Manoogian look so dirty and to be disintegrating right before Luther's eyes? Why did he so clearly throw himself at his students? Where was



the dignity in an old man acting like a clown in trying to make young people like him? And Luther had another question: why was the laughing thing so fierce in him at the very thought of the old man? He saw once again that he didn't believe in Armenians and that they were a virtually exterminated race, the remnant so beaten as to be useless in the world, as was the grinning old fool. To be a Jew was something; to be an Armenian was to be a hairy joke.

"You're so contemporary," his sister Vera sneered at him, when he shot a clip of her twirling in a room and then stand in a chalk-drawn circle on the street. But he couldn't build on the idea. It lacked a structure. Things fell down or fell apart as soon as he thought of them.

The film projector at the school defeated him. He fumbled trying to thread the loops, and grew self-conscious when he sensed the eyes of others on him. Once again he was defenseless against the truth that the performance part of the intelligence test had revealed.

"Let me help you," a woman said, and quickly wound the film through the threads, as she had done on her own.

"Thank you," he said.

"Don't mention it," she said.

So many secrets to conceal. The flatness of his head. The emptiness of his mind.

And yet he did have thoughts, even if they were not good ones.

During this time he took several photographs of Vera. Head shots, not the nude kind that he had taken of Nadia. Vera photographed well. She did not flinch with the lens on her and the camera responded by capturing her even more favorably than real life.

Some days later he went back to her for another photograph, but she said no. When he pressed the matter, she said, “Get some help” and hung up the phone. The photography sessions had drawn him close to her, but now she had pushed him away. More than that, she had inflicted on him another defeat, and he understood it was all his fault. With her sharp listening device, she had heard his anger sickness and laid him low with the club of her imperative.

That she could beat him in this way. But she was not the only one.

He fell in with two other students, Enrico and the woman who had assisted him with the projector. Hadley was her name; it had the sound of classy English distinction to it, if also a touch of manliness. Enrico had a leg up on all of them, if photography skills were transferable to the medium of filmmaking, with a portfolio of museum-quality prints, full of those rich blacks, grays, and whites that would have made Edward Weston, master of the zone system, proud. The things he photographed were mundane—a streetlamp, a driveway, a parked car, a tricycle left on the lawn of a suburban home—but his technique gave them a profundity that entered you into a space of meditative stillness.

That portfolio. It was a credential but also a weapon. It set Enrico apart as a man among boys. But a small man, round-shouldered, with the sliver lips and fixed gaze of the predator. The kind who could hurt you from the smallness of his being. Luther wanted to like Enrico, but he mostly feared him, Enrico being a man as connected as Luther was at

loose in the world. Luther struggled to minimize Enrico in his mind, so he could have some room for his own existence. He told himself that Enrico might be a gifted photographer but that didn't mean he was America's chosen one.

Luther wondered if Hadley might be in love with Enrico, especially after she saw his portfolio. She struck Luther as a woman oriented toward excellence and with the eyes and ears for finding it. Fear and resentment had built in his heart toward her since the episode with the projector, as a manly man woman of her kind could have no room in her heart for him. At best she might see him as a feckless child. Actually, he had no idea what Hadley was thinking or not thinking, but her steady gaze unnerved him and led him to believe she was seeing into his vault of secrets and drawing conclusions based on her findings. At times he wanted to come out into the open with his hands up, like a holed-up bandito who throws in the towel. Subterfuge—call it image—could not stand up under such scrutiny.

But one day he did come out of hiding, or *it* came out of hiding, not through any conscious decision-making process but because it just appeared. He arrived late for class and the auditorium was abuzz. Aram Manoogian was in rapture over a short film of Enrico's that had just been screened. He said the film was one of the finest things he had seen in all his years at the school. Luther wasn't prepared for such a development. He had no time to process his emotions and keep them from flooding his face. And there Hadley was with her clinically observant gaze.

"Enrico, everyone, look at Luther. Just look at him," Hadley shouted, and quickly not only Enrico but the whole room was staring at Luther.

“That’s not nice,” Luther said quietly to Hadley.

“Not nice? Not nice? What’s not nice is the envy written all over your face,”

Hadley retorted.

Back in his apartment, Luther opened a bottle of red wine. As he drank, he remembered a summer from his childhood and a pickup game he was part of on one of the baseball diamonds down in Riverside Park. Something had gone wrong. Some kid hadn’t done what he wanted him to do. He couldn’t quite remember. What was clear was that he had walked off the field while the game was still in progress, just as he some years later he quit a basketball game in high school because things hadn’t been going his way. It was all right. It had to be all right to be the way he was, a quitter when things, when the world, didn’t go his way. And all those people out there just waiting to do him dirty. That was all right, too. He deserved what he had gotten for being around a person like Hadley with her penetrating power. He didn’t have to kill himself just because life wanted him to.

Claire never did kill him for his indiscretion in requesting to lie between her thighs that traumatic night. She did not go to Sarah with his blunder but simply placed the incident in her sealed vault in the way that oldest sisters can do. And so Sarah remained with him and he remained with her despite all that was going on in his life and all that was happening in hers, their love surviving the hideously mournful “Hey Jude” and “Bridge Over Troubled Waters” and the tortured vocals of Blood, Sweat, and Tears. “I love you,” he said to her, all the time, and “I love you,” she said to him, some of the time. He did not make love to Sarah and then run from her but had a need to stay beyond the act itself, and

she was the same way, and even if they were both beginning to have other thoughts, they still saw no way out but to be together. When he was with her, he was home. She was still the America of his dreams, the one for whom he had grown emotionally configured.

But he also remained in love with the mystery of women and the adventure of knocking on their doors so he might discover who they really were. Sex was as much a journey into the unknown as drinking and being stoned. And so, for the magic to happen, he had to be at the bar every night drinking his shell glasses of wine. On those nights he returned home alone he would emerge from the subway at Fifty-seventh Street and Eighth Avenue and stop off at a twenty-four diner next to the newspaper stand and order fried eggs over easy with bacon and whiskey down, as the counterman called rye toast. Ravenous, he would devour the food and soon thereafter be in bed, the clock often showing three or four a.m. when finally he passed out.

Late to bed meant late to rise, often not before noon. Though it made him unhappy, the cycle was one he could not seem to break.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get up when there are real demands on your time,” Dr. Dressler said. By that she meant the discipline, the tunnel vision, that attendance at law school would impose.

And yet, as the reality of this new phase of his life loomed, he grew more reticent. “White line, continue” had taken hold of him, the few hours a day he could spend pecking at the keys of his L. C. Smith office machine. He should postpone his dream of a writing life, and all the satisfaction it gave him, for the rigorous demands of a dry, tedious curriculum? For three years he should forfeit his freedom for a straitjacket and, in so

doing, give up the financial bonanza that the renting office had become? He should spend all his waking hours reading about writs and torts and other matters he had no real interest in when he could be reading paperback novels? He should remove himself from the spirit of his generation—wild and crazy abandon— for a buttoned-down existence? Was this not insanity, that he should try to be more than he was by entering a field he was no more suited for by temperament than he was by aptitude for science or math?

In the dream he sat on the terrace outside the law school building with two young men. The two were also students at the law school and had developed a hard masculine casing that made them impervious to everything but the task at hand. Whatever their inner reality, they did not strike him as the kind to ever be in gross dependence on women. Their lives were progressing in orderly fashion, each step carefully planned out. Calibration. Calculation. These were words Luther applied to these young men in bondage only to their ambition.

A feeling of unnaturalness persisted in Luther. The two were friends, he could see, from the ease of their rapport. Compact, self-contained young men who could live in the world of ideas and avoid lurching into ad hominem argument. A passage from one of the volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past* came to him in crude paraphrase; Proust noted that at some point in their lives, solitaires seek, often awkwardly, to integrate into society. And was that not Luther's situation? In entering law school, was he not giving up a state of being, a whole way of living in the world?

A forest bordered the law school, and from between the trees now came a barefoot goddess in a diaphanous white robe. Incredibly, she walked in a direct line toward him,

her eyes locked on his, and held out her hand. He took it and she began to lead him away across the lawn and back toward the forest.

“But where are we going? I have law school to attend,” he cried out to the goddess. What else could he call a woman with such a graceful and ethereal manner?

“That is too common and unworthy a goal for you,” the goddess replied.

Dr. Dressler, as he might have expected, had a different take on Luther’s goddess.

“That was no goddess. That was just your arrogance and your cowardice,” Dr. Dressler said.

“My arrogance and my cowardice both? And they are both so beautiful and wear such a gown?”

“They come in many guises.”

“And your brutality comes with no disguise,” Luther said.

“Don’t chick out. Don’t chick out. Your fear is your only enemy.”

She was who she was, sometimes a scold and sometimes kind, and often a more benign version of his sister Hannah. Luther had no choice but to love her. However dark she might appear, she embraced life, she was out there in it, not hunkered down in that damn building like some of his older siblings. How frightful to be given life without also being given a life force. In her sometimes crude and even discouraging way, she was calling him into the light. Germans were like that, brimming with vitality, flocking to the beaches, scaling mountains, hard-wired for science and math and forcing these disciplines to yield their secrets. Well, the Nazis—that was another matter.

Roberto or no Roberto, Luther would not be kept from the park. It was his sanctuary and connection to childhood. That Labor Day weekend, he sat on the edge of the band shell stage and stared out at the empty seats. In another lifetime a plainclothes cop had slammed him to the ground with a flying tackle as an audience was enjoying an outdoor classical music concert. Prior to the ruckus, Luther had filled his mouth with water from a nearby fountain and spit it into the face of Jerry Jones-Nobleonian, then ran away helter-skelter. Jerry followed in full pursuit, wanting only to return the favor, and Luther turned over a garbage can to block his path. In so doing he brought himself to the attention of the plainclothes cop who, after flattening Luther, pulled him up by the back of his polo shirt and gave him a hard kick in the ass. To those cultivated classical music lovers who had gathered for a tranquil evening, he must have been an example of the juvenile delinquency that was plaguing New York City, just another piece of urban riffraff, but that wasn't who he was in Luther's memory. He would never abandon that child. That child was a fury of sweetness living within him.

A woman came to him that evening, making her way through the empty chairs. She too was alone in the city, except for her father, whom she had come to visit. She lived in Pittsburgh, she said, and Luther felt obliged to tell her he had been to that city, if only passing through on a Greyhound bus en route to the Mickey Owen baseball camp in Missouri, back in the summer following sixth grade. He didn't tell her of the unbearable homesickness that cut short his camp time or of the sight of his mother moaning in the living room on that hot summer night he returned home. She had been released only



hours before from the hospital, where she had undergone an operation on the varicose veins in her right leg. The sight of those legs, with blue veins showing, was enough to make his stomach flip. There was no need to tell the stranger any such thing, but he did tell her about the flying tackle.

“You want me to love you but I’m only passing through,” the woman said.

“You don’t know what I want,” Luther said. **NB—stopped here**

“I feel so bruised and hurt,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard him.

“What about?” he said.

“None of your business,” she said.

He took her home with him. She needed no persuasion.

“Amor fati,” he said.

“What?” she said.

“Love of fate. I read that somewhere.”

“So?”

They passed through the narrow corridor of the front building and sat on the steps leading to the courtyard.

“You see that big windowless white building?” he said, pointing to the New York Telephone Building a block south that rose over the rows of tenements.

“Sure I see it,” she said.

“That’s the future trying to obliterate the past.”

“You have something against change?”

“Only that the past is always better. Always,” Luther said.

“Would you rather have a toothache in 1871 or 1971?” the woman said.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Luther acknowledged.

“There’s a lot you haven’t thought of. You look smart but you aren’t smart.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m not the first person to tell you so, I’m sure.”

“No. You’re not,” he said.

“Don’t hang out in the past. It’s musty back there,” she said, exercising her right to a scary wisdom beyond her years.

They went inside, where she allowed him to make love to her after they both had entered smoke heaven. She was more hungry for contact than her impassive manner suggested. Her mouth flew open, as if she were a creature with a retractable jaw and might initiate a devouring, but he found a way forward, grateful for the gift she had made of herself. Luther thinking, I knocked on your door and you answered.

Afterward she wailed, “He left me. He left me,” as had Zoe, the museum girl with the pornography future.

“Who left you?” Luther said, as amplification was not forthcoming.

“Ronnie. My black hero. My liberator. He just left me.”

“When did he leave you, and why?” Luther felt the fear coming over him.

“His name was Arthur. My little white man. He had me in a box of his own making. He was finishing up his doctorate in engineering at Carnegie-Mellon, and thereafter we were to be married. But I was restless. I could not see myself as part of his

package. I began stepping out. Do you know what I mean by stepping out? I suspect you do.”

“Please tell me,” Luther said.

“Stepping out means going out when you have every reason to stay home. It means the bar, not your home, has become your home. It means returning at 4 am with your makeup smeared and your clothes disheveled and the smell of another man on you. It means full rebellion against the servitude that has been placed on you by your fiancé. Have you ever heard a more ludicrous word in the English language? In fact it is so sissified we had to borrow it from the French.”

“So what happened?”

“One morning I came in the door and Arthur was waiting. With his back turned he said I would have to leave. It was hard for him to come to that place, but I had left him no choice. We both cried and I was gone that same day.”

“Gone where?”

“Gone to Ronnie. I had met him in the bar. He was an artist who could capture the whole world in a single drawing or just in his tone of voice. I guess that sounds extreme but he was just that way.”

The story was not one that Luther liked. He had wanted the woman to stay with Arthur, not bust loose for a life in the bars and with this mysterious artist Ronnie, whom Luther instinctively feared. In that moment he did not care for the woman and the chaos she had brought on herself but even more on Arthur.

“So what is the problem? You got what you wanted. You got Ronnie.”

“But that’s just it. Ronnie left me. He packed up and moved back South. I begged him to take me but he said he had to travel alone.”

“Do you ever think of going back to Arthur?”

“That’s over.”

“Does it have to be over?”

“Over is over.”

“I don’t like that, over is over,” Luther said.

“It will happen to you someday.”

“No, never. I will never leave her.”

“Her? There is a girl in your life?”

“I don’t know,” Luther said.

“You will know,” the woman said.

“That’s what you say,” Luther said.

“Yes. That’s what I say,” the woman said.

The air smelled rank even after she had left. Talking to him that way. Trying to bust him loose into a future he did not want.

Free of city traffic and the crawl through the Lincoln Tunnel, the bus rolled toward Newark. His gray thoughts were a match for the gloomy spectacle of strip malls and refineries pouring poison from their stacks into the air and toxic swampland. And yet, suddenly he experienced a burst of light that brought with it joy that had eluded him since childhood. He would go to law school. He would stay the course. He would elevate in the

world above the station he now occupied. He would expand beyond the confines of Manhattan into the greater world. His mother would be proud of him. Sarah would be proud of him. He would leave behind the lifestyle of easy money and late nights in the bars and sleeping until noon. His life would be full of purpose and industry. He would actually give something to Sarah and his mother. Jesus, they would be proud of him.

New students had gathered outside the law school building prior to the orientation. The warm early September day had turned beautiful, the sun having burned away the gray clouds. A happy buzz came from the gathered as Luther stood across the street. The motion of the bus had lifted his spirits, but now, on foot, the inner glow had dissipated, and once again he was afraid and conflicted. As a precaution, he stepped back even further. A little safety was good, but more was even better. How delicious that he knew who they were, these socializing students, but they didn't know who he was. And they needn't know and shouldn't know because then his safety would be gone; there would be no cloud cover to shield him from their bright, intense rays. Yes, he wanted to go over to them but no, he didn't want to at the same time, and what difference did it make what he wanted or didn't want. He couldn't cross over. He wasn't fit to cross over. He had bullied and badgered his way into the school. A person should never go where he was not wanted. Never. Not ever.

The peaceful clip-clop of a horse sounded in Luther's ears. Luther looked to see a mounted police officer approach on a big beautiful bay. For a while Luther followed, as if entranced by a metronome, the casual swishing of the horse's tail. Surely the law school had requested the officer's presence, given the sense of danger almost palpable in the

riot-ravaged city. He had been sent to protect the precious enclave of mostly white students across the way.

As if reading Luther's mind, the officer expertly turned his mount and said, "You see those kids over there?"

"Yes," Luther said.

"I'll bet you wish you were one of them."

"Sure. I guess," Luther said.

"You've got to be smart to be on that side of the street and to want it. You understand what I'm saying?"

"Sure. Sure I do," Luther said, feeling the officer beginning to take control of him from his seat of power.

The horse had drawn the attention of several women from the law school, and as they approached Luther eased away.

As the bus looped down toward the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, a truck passed on the left. The name "Hemingway" was written on its side in red letters. A beautiful name. A one hundred percent American name. Not a name such as Garatdjian, lying amid bleached bones on desert sands. Luther took it as a sign, Hem showing him the way.

Others had signs. Others had wonders. Why shouldn't he have signs and wonders, too?

He returned that evening to the security of the familiar. Soon after his arrival in the renting office, Mr. Fitzpatrick showed his sweaty, ruined face, red with the wrath of God, in the window. "One good man, Luther. One good man. That's what your mother needs. I don't see you fitting that bill. I don't see it at all. I'm praying for her. I'm praying

hard for her.” Mr. Fitzpatrick placed a pile of single dollar bills and a small mound of coins on the counter. “This is for two weeks’ rent. Two weeks. I always pay in advance. Money has to be earned, young man, earned. No freeloading in this country.”

Melvin followed right after. As if he had access to Luther’s mind, Melvin said, “He means well, but he is a Catholic. It does not do to have a woman like Mary as a saint. It doesn’t do to have any woman as a saint or any man for that matter. We cannot have that kind of hierarchy in Christianity. It leads only to deceit and ruination, the amassing of wealth for sin and worldly pleasure. Luther, would you like to come to my room for a prayer session and a glass of lemonade? Would you like to do that when you are through here?”

Luther thought of Melvin as a simple man without guile, and could see no hint of duplicity in his eyes. And yet the invitation to his room did set off an alarm bell. Was it possible Melvin didn’t know himself as well as he might? Suppose there was a beast dwelling in his basement dying to get out?

“Maybe another time,” Luther said, while holding to kinder feelings about Melvin than he had for Mr. Fitzpatrick.

He drank that night, as he did virtually every night now, at the downtown bar, with the money he had taken from the renting office. There were no women to pick up on this night. There were only the glasses of red wine he consumed and the rock and roll music from the jukebox. “Tapestry” was a favorite, the easy pathos of it. And the joy of “I Feel the Earth Move.” But some songs were stinky or at best to be endured, like “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” Well, maybe it was OK, like the licorice Chuckle in the middle of

the pack, but definitely not up there with the cherry or orange or lemon or lime Chuckles. Definitely not. I'm free, he thought, as he lifted his glass.

But back home and lying in bed, he began to cry. After a while there were no more tears. They had come and they had gone. As he waited for sleep, he remembered a line from F. Scott Fitzgerald, something about taking the back door out of reality. He wondered what that might exactly mean but was asleep before his exploration could begin.

"Chick chick. Chicky chick. You chicked out."

In such a way did Dr. Dressler greet his news that he had not set foot in the law school before leaving the scene. He did not feel the need to tell her that her favorite expression was not quite correct. She had been banking on him to perform for her so she could go before her supervisors and cite the progress he had made while in her care. And now a sizable indicator of that progress was gone. Well, it was all right. Let her have her ire.

"How do you come to do such a thing? Do you know what you have done? You have walked away from your future. You will be nothing, a bum who steals money and writes nothing anyone wants to read. Is that how you want to spend your days?"

"A bindlestiff."

"What is that you say?"

"A hobo. A bum, as you call me."

"What is your plan?"

"White line continue. That is my plan."



“What?”

“Never mind.”

She had no children of her own. She had made him her child, her ugly child. But now she recoiled. He could feel her disowning him. It was OK. White line continue was more important than anything she might have to say about it or him.

Sarah continued with her own commitment. Her world was painting and sculpture. That was the world she had entered and could not leave. There was no sense asking her to. Lydia had tried and Lydia had gotten her answer. Sarah had flown out the door of the paste-ups and mechanicals studio at the end of the first day and had not gone back. She looked like her father and she had the same disposition toward the work world as her father. They were not made for any other world than the one they were in. She was entered in a fifth year competition at the art school. A panel of judges would evaluate her work in June of the following year. They would tell her if she had excellence or not. It sounded scary. Somehow Luther sensed that she would not win. The bloom was off her rose. True was true. All she had now was her hunger and her drive and her despair and desperation. The rest would not come to her. He did not say this. It was enough that he should know. Even so, she had more than enough. She had the gift of her genes. She had read *The Nude* more than once. She had a way of seeing that was not his. She showed it with the occasional photographs she took with his camera. Beautifully composed photographs that caught your attention.

She had shown him the way out, and he had no choice but to take it. White line continue meant what? That his experience meant something, whatever that experience might be. Mr. Fitzpatrick meant something. Melvin meant something. Get-it-on Brenda and sybaritic Luke meant something. The building his family managed meant something. He had been here. He had seen things. People must know what he had seen. He had a story to tell.

That fall he applied to the Columbia University School of the Arts for a master of fine arts degree in creative writing. He was on the other side now. He was not only reading books but also trying to write them. Why not find out how? Columbia had no test, no Graduate Record Exam he would have to score high on for admission. Now he could be a Columbia without being a high board score man. He sent the school a writing sample, as requested, drawing heavily on white line, continue. How happy he was at the prospect of acceptance and that he should soon find such a wonderful home.

The school wrote him back quickly. The thin letter in the mailbox contained a punch in the face. Jesus, what a punch. The school didn't even give him time to get into his dream before delivering it. Not even any mention of an exceptional number of qualified applicants. Just "We have considered your application and will be unable to admit you to the program."

He lay face down on his bed for a long while, wondering what he could do now that the school had taken away his life. Then Bill Gofner's face appeared in his mind. He called his former writing teacher at the New School. Bill Gofner listened as Luther told

him of the rejection and his distress. Luther sensed sympathy and compassion in the sound of Bill Gofner's listening and in his words as well.

"It means nothing, absolutely nothing. Do you hear me?" Bill Gofner said.

"Yes, I hear you," Luther said.

Then Bill Gofner said, "Anyway, in a short while many people will think you are a good writer."

"Thank you. Thank you," Luther said. Oh Jesus. He could hardly believe how instantly good Bill Gofner's words had made him feel. Bill Gofner had given him his seal of approval. What an amazing thing.

All day he lived in Bill Gofner's words, but as he did so, doubt began to enter his mind. "Many people," Bill Gofner had said. Bill Gofner hadn't been speaking for himself. He had been speaking for others. Bill Gofner had withheld his personal endorsement; he hadn't wanted to compromise his personal integrity by saying something he did not believe to be true. Bill Gofner didn't believe Luther was a good writer because *many people* meant many people, not Bill Gofner.

It was all right. It was just all right. Luther would go to the bar. He would sit there and drink. In the bar he could get away from such thoughts and have better ones. There was magic in the bar that he had found. That's why it was important that he keep going back.

Jane Thayer was in town, only she wasn't walking so tall or feeling so proud. So Luther sensed hearing the insecurity in her voice as she asked to come over. But he did not have to go down the path of crazy hate in "Like a Rolling Stone."

She came to his door in cheap pink boots and a matching dress a size too small and only a flimsy coat as protection against the fall cold. Life had gotten hard for her. She had overdone her stay down in Mexico City. After all, how long could you live with your relatives? She had tried college, but it really wasn't for her. She was staying with her parents down in Brooklyn and working the ticket window at some midtown movie theater.

He didn't tell her that he had died and died and was living again in the way that he could. He did not gloat that she could not put the laughing thing on him with her incessant talk of parties and the names of young men flowing ceaselessly from her tongue. He did not marvel at the powerlessness of the La Rochefoucauld maxim, "Whom one has loved once one cannot love again," to destroy him as it had when he translated it in his tenth grade French class. He had heeded Benvolio's advice to lovelorn Romeo and taken some new infection to his eye, that the rank poison of the old should die. Jane Thayer had died to him. Even his sadness at her go-go girl outfit and extra pounds and faded looks and insecure manner was fleeting.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked him that night.

"I do," he said.

"What's her name?"

"Sarah. Sarah Van Dine."

“That’s a nice name, I guess.”

“Yes.”

“Is she in school?”

“She’s an art student.”

“That’s something,” Jane Thayer said. “Is that one of her paintings?” Jane Thayer said, motioning to the nude on the wall.

“Yes,” he said.

“She’s kind of out there,” Jane Thayer said.

Luther remained silent. He could not give her that. He had a love for Sarah Van Dine that would not permit it, regardless of his shortcomings. Jane Thayer felt his silence. Her face contorted and she began to cry and cry. She had tried to pretend but now she couldn’t. She was so hurt and lonely and lost.

“You’ve grown up and I haven’t,” she sobbed.

He didn’t know what to say. His history with her got in the way. She gave him a kiss on the cheek as she left. He could smell the alcohol on her breath. She had needed to drink before her visit. She had become a drinker, like her mother. Like his sisters Rachel and Naomi. Like him.

Jane Thayer went away, as had the woman from Pittsburgh, one representing the old, the other advocating the new. As in a dream, he had no warning who would come next. His sister Vera reached him through the telephone.

“He’s dead. Daddy’s dead. Mommy wants to know if you will even bother to show up.” She had her hysteria, her anger, her complication going, some unspecified emotion promoting incivility and the justification for it. There was another word he hadn’t used. Histrionics. She had that going, too. Doing the weeping and wailing thing, Luther picturing strands of spittle in her agape mouth. That she had the freedom to be all over him with her big reaction, leaving no room for anything but asperity and outrage, even grief being something they had to fight about. Not that he had any.

“Stop. Stop,” he said, resisting her assault and unable to ascribe a genuine sense of loss to his younger sister. And why should he? She had only lost what he had never had, her phony tears just another way to rub in the fact of her theft. Now she had only the nothing he had always had where his father was concerned.

He took a cab uptown. Hildy Gomez was at the wheel, her hair in a duck’s ass and her face cast in a permanent smile, as if to deny the world an admission that it continued to screw her. She had a monstrous case of teeth-sucking going on, now and then casting a glance at him through the rear-view mirror to check whether she had driven him bat shit with her hideous noise. At Seventy-second Street and Broadway, her delight peaked at the spectacle of two cars in a smashup, one of the drivers slumped and unmoving over the wheel.

“That is one dead rigor mortis,” Hildy exclaimed, rubbernecking so she could take her fill of the sight. It was that way with some that death could make their day. Best to understand what the world contained, he thought, sensing that he might be the same.

Who was there in his family's apartment that night? His sister Hannah and his nephew Moses; his sister Naomi but not her husband Chuck or her daughter Jeanne; his brother Luke but not his girlfriend Brenda or her boy Benjy; most present of all was his sister Vera. What Luther heard was a jumble of emoting he had no patience for, arriving as he did with a cresting sense of empowerment. That his father's death should make him feel so strong, so *triumphant*.

He pushed beyond them through the dining room and kitchen. At the end of the hallway, smaller than he had remembered, were the two bedrooms, the one on the left for his parents and the one on the right for the children. But the children were gone, at least from the apartment, and his mother had found it easier, in the last few years, to move into their room. Her sleep was too interrupted sharing the same bed with a man missing half of one leg who had to get up frequently during the night to urinate. And so it was there, in his childhood room, that he found her, lying in bed, her glasses off.

On the night table was an amber prescription bottle. His witchy older sisters had tried to get her to drink—"Come on, Ma, stop trying to be a saint"—but, to his relief, she never took the glass of wine they pushed on her those few times alcohol was brought into the home. Though alcohol was not part of her life, she did rely on sleeping pills and pain medication, and Luther imagined the small plastic bottle contained something of the kind.

"Lie still so it can take effect," she would say, after handing him one of her sleep aids, during those times of torment when Jane Thayer would break up with him and find another boy to be with. The effect was miraculous, a whole change in his psyche and

outlook. Brimming with confidence and joy, he couldn't wait to take his new self to school the next day. But the morning would find him back in his contracted, fearful state.

"I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye," his mother said, and wept, as he stood in the doorway. He could only listen. This was her pain, not his. She understood that, he was sure. For her tears there could be no scorn, no dismissal. She had loved his father. She had always been his and his alone, though the same could not be said for him. And there was the loss of her own father, to drunkenness, when she was young. Two sorrows would be joined as one, Luther sensed. He felt afraid, tentative. He felt *suspected* by her, as if at any moment her tears would dry and she would turn on him with fury for having killed his father. On that night he didn't dare come near, for fear that she would strike him, and soon he fled the minefield of her sorrow.

There was a doctor with a feline face luminous with intelligence. His name was Doctor Edelbaum and he had an office and an apartment in the building of order that stood in mockery and reproach of the building of chaos just across the street. Dr. Edelbaum walked alone and with a feline step. Often he was seen in the neighborhood with his little black bag. House calls were still being made. He had been the Garatdjian's family doctor for many years, and though Luther's older sisters Naomi and Rachel would go delirious in describing the doctor's attempted advances, Luther understood, even at a young age, that histrionics of a gross kind were on display, as no one of the doctor's caliber could find his older sisters alluring. Sometimes Dr. Edelbaum could show his claws. There was



the time Mrs. Garatdjian sent Luther across the street to ask the doctor for a medication to keep Chuck, Naomi's husband, from drinking.

"Give him arsenic," Doctor Edelbaum said, while writing out a prescription for Antabuse.

The doctor's office was on the main floor. Often, in his growing up years, Luther would see Molly, the doctor's maid, peering out at the street from behind the curtain on the kitchen window. A Scotswoman, she had a friendly manner toward Luther. She would see him with Jane Thayer and when he was alone say, "You will have lots of girlfriends before you are through." They were not words he heard as frightening, as her face at such times was like the sun gently shining on him.

And Dr. Edelbaum could also shine a kindly light on Luther, as when he said, during a physical examination in Luther's senior year of high school, "You have a good set of shoulders. You should join the Air Force." No one had ever said anything good to Luther about his body, and here was the doctor offering his seal of approval, if only to a portion of his anatomy. The doctor also confided his dream of serving as a pilot in the Israeli Air Force. What a strange world, that the cat doctor would wish to fly high above the world.

None of the above would have mattered much except for the fact that Dr. Edelbaum was also the Van Dines' family doctor. But he was more to them than a doctor. Lydia adored his drollness and was intrigued by the fact that a man so seemingly stable in the world could not accomplish the same stability in his home life, the doctor having been married and divorced four times.

Lydia had invited Dr. Edelbaum to a party earlier that month. A wave of fear hit Luther when he walked in the door and saw the doctor chatting with Lydia and Claire. With the window Dr. Edelbaum had into the lives of the Garatdjians, Luther could only imagine what the doctor might say of them to the Van Dines. Would he tell them of Luther's drunken brother-in-law Chuck and Luther's often institutionalized sister Naomi? Would he tell them of the squalid conditions of the Garatdjian family's apartment, which he had visited on house calls, or of the decrepitude of his father? Luther was unable to negotiate with the shame that came over him at the sight of the doctor, and so he drank great quantities of champagne. He might have done so anyway, but his fear turned him in desperation to the bubbly.

And yet, even fortified with champagne, Luther could not approach the doctor. Nor did the doctor make any attempt to engage with Luther. With his serene, penetrating gaze, he had seen all he needed to see right there on Luther's panic-stricken face. He had seen the low IQ, the emaciation, his unlovely sisters and the squalid conditions in which the Garatdjians lived. He had seen defeat and, having no desire to be a part of it, was choosing to stay with the Van Dines and all those who were on the side of order. Once more Luther was the Estonian maid.

He retreated to Sarah's room, where, feeling woozy, he lay down. The fall night was cold, and the guests' coats and jackets covered Sarah's bed. Thinking he would only rest for a minute or two, he passed out quickly, and might have snoozed straight through to daybreak, if Sarah hadn't shaken him awake.

"Luther, the guests are leaving. They need to get their coats," she whispered.

Several of those guests, including Dr. Edelbaum, stood behind Sarah, he saw, as he sat up. The sight of Luther laid out drunk on the bed had brought the doctor to the peak of amusement. Luther stood up, steadying himself against the wall.

“I guess that wasn’t too great,” he said, when he and Sarah were alone.

“Dr. Edelbaum asked me if you do this a lot.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him we’re not at parties a lot.”

“Thanks,” Luther said.

“I think he was interested, sort of excited, seeing you on top of the coats.”

“That doesn’t sound quite right,” Luther said.

The following day Lydia reported on a conversation she had had with Dr. Edelbaum.

“Dr. Edelbaum says there are two sets of children in your family, and that each set has a different father.” She was delivering a fact; no question mark appeared at the end of her statement.

The doctor had graduated from Townsend Harris High School, a New York City public school for the supremely gifted that was no longer in existence. He had attended Brown University. He was of the Jewish faith. What had Luther’s father done but be an Armenian?

Luther took this information into his session with Dr. Dressler following his father’s death. It had not been alive in his mind the night he saw his mother laid low by her loss and in bed in his childhood room, but now it was.

“My whole life I have been lied to. My father was not my father,” he said, his face contorted with self-righteous anger. He was to weep for a man who was not even his flesh and blood? Not that he had ever wanted him to be his flesh and blood.

“I know you are sadistic, but if you were to say such a thing to your mother, especially at a time like this. Nothing could be lower than that,” Dr. Dressler said.

The poverty of his mind had already been well established, but Dr. Dressler was now addressing his poverty of spirit, saying to him that he was downtrodden in his way of thinking and being and feeling. He heard her words as he could, through the filter of the historical forces driving him, and met her assessment not with outrage or even protest but with a smile that indicated the language she was addressing him in he could easily hear but not absorb.

Dr. Dressler did have other things to offer besides her verbal hand.

“You are beginning to look like a somewhat normal human being,” she said, seeing him in a suit and tie. He had also cut his hair to a reasonable length, and this too met with her approval.

He went forth, that afternoon, from the clinic west to Central Park. His state of being felt glorious, radiant, as expansive as the tall trees whose thick branches he walked beneath along the footpaths. He couldn't say where this joy approaching delirium was coming from, but he felt like a man coming into his own strength, a conqueror in his time of triumph. He did not wonder for his sanity. Energy was sanity. Joy was sanity.

At the top of the stairs heading down to the terrace and the Bethesda Fountain stood a dealer in an army jacket and I-can-see-you-you-can't see-me-shades. Down

below some white kids sailed a Frisbee back and forth. Luther imagined them as hard and alienated. Something had changed. He couldn't say what. The door had closed on whatever had been. The flowers were gone. Something new and more menacing had begun.

On Columbus Avenue, he stepped into a restaurant with a bar for a drink. It was a cheery place full of light and plants hanging in the windows. He ordered a cognac, as he had seen someone else do at the bar downtown. It burned as he swallowed. Then he ordered another and a couple after that.

A girl was walking past as he left. She filled her jeans well and wore her brown hair boldly short. He followed in her path as she turned and headed across the avenue in the same direction he was headed. Just beyond the awning of the funeral home he approached her.

"Meet me here at 8 pm. Can you do that?" he said to her.

"Why? Who are you?" she said.

"My name is Luther. I have to go into the funeral home for a wake. A relative passed away," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Can you do that? We'll have fun."

"What kind of fun?"

"We'll go for drinks. Dinner. You'll see."

"OK," she said.

His decisiveness had summoned her compliance. So he thought as he stared at the signboard with the moveable white letters that spelled out, just below Agnes Fulgencio, his father's name in the third floor viewing room. He was laid out in an open coffin in a coat and tie. His waxy face was cast in a serene smile, an expression he would have worn more often if only the world would behave itself. Luther recalled his mother's words. "Your father has a condition. He can't handle much stress."

But now his mother had different words for him. "Have you been drinking, my son?" she said, after he had kissed her on the cheek. A mole had formed to the side of her mouth, from which a whisker had sprouted.

"Yes." He was overcome with shame that she had noticed.

"Wine is a mocker. Have I not told you that, my son?"

Vera arrived with her boyfriend, Max Geller, a bear of a man with gleaming dark eyes under a crown of thick black hair on an uninterrupted path to success: The Boston Latin School, in Cambridge, where he had been taunted for being a Jew; Columbia University; now Juilliard, to study music composition.

"They have such fine minds," Mrs. Garatdjian would say, of Jews in general. Vera had taken her words to heart. And why wouldn't she? All of Manhattan had taken her words to heart without having heard them. There was no need for hearing them. They had only to see for themselves.

What further proof did Luther need that his sister was fundamentally histrionic? The girl going to any length to make his father's death about her, first with less than genuine tears when she broke the news to Luther over the phone and now making Max a

captive audience for the ongoing spectacle of her phony mourning. People of the caliber of the Garatdjians had no capacity for genuineness. His mother was the exception. What hideous deformity drove such a need? And then to bring a genius, a genius, into their midst, to witness their filth, to tyrannize and terrify them with his excellence, his academic glitter, when they were in servitude to failure. It was too much. If he had no relationship with his father, why should he ascribe one to her? Beyond his scorn, he could only find himself in a state of perplexity at her ability to reveal his family to the world.

He took the roll call. Hannah and her son, Moses. Naomi and Chuck. Luke and Brenda and her boy Benjy. And he noted the absent: Jeanne, somewhere out there with the hippie horde, and his sister Rachel, who lived for nonappearance. And yes, Max Geller a beacon of reproach. They, Luther's family, would never be good enough. He would never be good enough.

Then Rachel did arrive, a different Rachel in a long brown coat and low-cut black Converse sneakers several sizes too big for her feet, the kind he would hear kids refer to as gunboats. A straw hat with a fake cluster of fruit sat on her dull brown hair; a black veil hung stapled to the brim. On her hands she wore the ribbed white linen gloves his mother was given to wear on church days. By intention or otherwise, she was a startling presence as she knelt briefly before the casket and then sat down.

"Rachel, is that you?" Mrs. Garatdjian said.

"Hello, Mother," she replied, in a dull, tired voice.

If a change had come over Rachel, Mrs. Garatdjian intuited its nature. "She has come home to the Lord, my son, as I pray all of my children will."

The girl was waiting for him after the viewing. “Who did you say it was for?”

“A relative,” Luther said.

“What relative?” the girl asked. He had taken her by surprise, with the momentum all his. But now she was recovering. Luther heard her showing her substance in her line of questioning and her tone.

“My father,” Luther said, almost as a confession. His energy and confidence had left him.

“Your father?” A puzzled look came over the girl’s earnest, pretty face. She was not out of alignment with the patriarch in the way that Sarah was. She had no rebellion flag flying. Luther saw that she was one who would practice filial devotion.

“We weren’t that close,” he said, sensing he must bring circumspection to any discussion of his father and not display the jeering lunacy of his oedipal mindset. “Let’s go for a drink.”

“You had been drinking when I met you. I smelled it on your breath,” the girl said. It was a statement but also an accusation.

“A little.”

“There’s something wrong with you, isn’t there?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re so skinny. Is that what you do, drink instead of eat?”

“No, I eat,” he said, her body blow bringing his head low.



“Look, I’m sorry, but this was a mistake. I should go. Goodbye,” she said, hearing the defeat in his voice, and walked off quickly. He offered no argument. There was no argument to make. She had put him in the shame place.

The next morning he dressed in a pair of dark blue velvet pants, as tight around his legs as his socks were on his feet. Then he put on an equally tight black corduroy jacket with a mod cut and slipped into a brown pair of expensive Bally shoes. He looked in the mirror and saw the same miracle of transformation that had been reflected back to him in the mirror of the East Side boutique where he had purchased the pants and jacket. He had heard the girl’s words the night before. He had felt her rebuff. But each day was new, and brought its own promise.

Luther turned into a saloon just above Columbus Circle for fortification. He downed the brandy and ordered a second. At the other end a man brought his mouth to his drink rather than risk lifting it from the bar with his unsteady hand.

“That’s you down the road,” the bartender said.

“What do you mean?” Luther said.

“You’ll find out,” the bartender said.

“Go away,” Luther said.

The bartender lived to put a bruise on people’s faces and bodies with his fists as well as to wound their minds with his words. “You want me to come over the bar? You want the kind of trouble I can bring you?”

“I don’t ever want that,” Luther said.

“You’re too skinny to fight me. You’re too skinny to even be breathing. I was just trying to save your life. Now finish your drink and get out of here.”

Luther did as he was told, wanting no part of the bartender’s fists and fury.

Mrs. Garatdjian had called on the son of Brother Nyquist, the pastor of the church in the garage in Astoria, Queens, where the men of the Christ Jesus came together to worship, to deliver the eulogy, as Brother Nyquist was unavailable. Mrs. Garatdjian trusted the men of the Christ Jesus more than anybody in the world because they were bathed in the Christ love. The Christ love was a love your own father could not give. It was unearthly and eternal love.

In Luther’s memory, Brother Nyquist was a man empowered by the sense of his own competence. He wore a tool belt and jeans he filled as well as any man and showed an intense determination that was the antithesis of the open-mouthed stare with which the Garatdjians approached the world. He was imbued with God love but he could do the things of this realm too, from installing flooring, electrical wiring, and plumbing. He had no need of corporations or their kind to make his way and wore a suit not for money but only for Sunday worship.

Brother Nyquist was Mrs. Garatdjian’s Swedish connection. She turned to him when his skills were needed at the building but she had also turned to him at a time Mr. Garatdjian was out of sorts with the tabernacle where the family worshiped on West Thirty-third Street. The problem was that Pastor Cohn, the man in whose face the sun shone forth as he uttered his disappearing words, was unwilling to give up any of his word time so Luther’s father could share his words with the congregation, too. A woman

such as Mrs. Garatdjian could have the virtue of her own silence, but a man was full of his own foolishness. A man had to give voice to his words. It did not matter if the words fell on fallow ground. They had to be uttered.

Mrs. Garatdjian did not say to Brother Nyquist that Mr. Garatdjian had to be important in America beyond the job he had as a midtown cashier. She just said words were important to Mr. Garatdjian and that he had to witness to what he had seen and heard. She expressed concern that he was too alone, walking as he did the great distances of Manhattan and stopping off at the Horn and Hardart Automat for coffee and the Danishes he was supposed to stay away from, as by this time he had been diagnosed with diabetes. Brother Nyquist heard what Mrs. Garatdjian was saying, that walking could not be the solution for everything, that now and then you had to stop and talk to people, but that Mr. Garatdjian didn't stop and talk. He just walked and walked, saying he didn't need anyone, he had never needed anyone, and now he had a need for anyone even less because when you filled up with God, how could you ever need anything else?

Brother Nyquist sought to bring Mr. Garatdjian into the fold. He gave him time to speak his words and slap his Bible as Pastor Cohn did at the tabernacle on Thirty-third Street. Brother Nyquist made it possible for Mr. Garatdjian to feel he had not been erased, and the gathered were compassionate when Mr. Garatdjian's words led him to weep and weep, tears falling onto his Robert Hall suit and tie. They felt his joy that he had been saved from a life of wretched drifting when he met Mrs. Garatdjian, who took him into her softness, and they felt his joy that he was here in America, and why he might shout, of those who burned their draft cards and the American flag, that they should be shot and

why Republican blue made him feel in the fold of normalcy, while Democratic red could only mean the anarchy of the horde. But only Mr. Garatdjian himself understood the gratitude he felt at being removed from Constantinople to the safety of New York City, where he could sip his Horn and Hardart coffee without fear of extinction by the hate-filled Turk, and that his most abiding desire was to be left in peace.

“It would make him so happy,” his mother had said, in urging Luther to go with his father to the garage church and hear him preach in the long ago. He would have been in the fourth or fifth grade. It hadn’t been for his father to ask him directly. His father’s one grievance against Mrs. Garatdjian was that she had kept the children away from him. What did it matter that he had said, “Are you trying to aggravate me? Because if you make me get up, I could lose all control and will not be responsible for what I do” to the children when they were rambunctious? Or that he flew into a rage the few times they tried to ask him a question related to their schoolwork. So what if he had knocked Luke to the floor and then kicked him hard in the face with his shoe. “Are you crazy that you would do this to a child?” Mrs. Garatdjian had said, stooping to tend to Luke’s bruised and bleeding face. Or those battles with Hannah, including the one that led him to shout, “In Armenia you would be stoned to death for speaking to your father in this way.” Luther had needed nothing more than these outbursts to steer clear of his father. Mrs. Garatdjian presented his father as a man with limitations. “He has a condition. He cannot take much stress.” But she also said, with a tone of lament in her voice, “He has no ambition,” while noting with approval and admiration how accomplished so many in the

Jewish community had become. “They came here with nothing. Nothing. Look what they have done. Doctors, lawyers. Scholars. My word.”

So he had reluctantly gone with his father that evening. The Mad Bomber was still on the loose, leaving his lethal pipe bombs in public places, including the subways of New York City. But as they passed through the Times Square station to catch the R train to Astoria, Luther’s fear was not of a hellish explosion courtesy of the madman on the loose but of the human time bomb right beside him. And yet there was no flare-up. His father did not strike him, as he had Luke before they had gone a few steps from the building on an outing to Coney Island. En route they did not stop for dinner at any of the Greek coffee shops but went directly to the garage church of Brother Nyquist. Luther had seen his father at the height of his anger and he seen him act silly, but he had never seen him cry. It shamed Luther that his father would stand before other grown men seated in folding chairs set out on a cement floor and show himself in such a light. Was this what his father had intended for him to witness, a spectacle of tears and his choked avowal of love and gratitude for Luther’s mother? What was he supposed to do with such tears? He did not see them as contrition or sorrow or love or any such thing. They did not evoke compassion for his father. They were just one more reason to be dismissive of him. It did not occur to Luther then that the power of a father was such that the one uncomfortable outing he took with him alone would stand out above all others.

Blond and aggressively ebullient with his chipmunk face, Brother Nyquist’s son began his eulogy. “Brother Garatdjian was a kind man, a good man, a man who loved God and his dear wife and his wonderful children. He worked hard to put food on the

table. But he also prayed. Brother Garatdjian was always praying. You had only to look at him to see he was a man of prayer. And his prayers had given him Mrs. Garatdjian, his dearly beloved wife, and so many beautiful, wonderful children. Prayer is work, too. To be a man of prayer is to be working all the time...

Pastor Nyquist's lack of familiarity with the family showed. He was just another word man. Words and more words and Bible slaps and that self-satisfied smile that told you he was not so much a preacher as a preening performer, as they all were, full of the smug assurance that Jesus was theirs and they were fixed in this life and the life to come. The kind who would preach at you but do nothing to help you.

As Luther surveyed the room, he saw that his thoughts were not only with his father but the half-dead, those who would be better off dead, such as Naomi, and that his family had been dying when he came from the womb. You couldn't reverse decay. What was there to do but accept that simple reality? The mirror that family held up to him was hideously unflattering.

Two limousines and their drivers—a pair of thuggish-looking men in dark suits and shades—awaited them outside the funeral home. The drinks had made Luther sodden. His head hurt, and those expensive shoes were too tight.

“Where did you get those pants, Luther? Your legs look like twigs in them,” Vera had climbed into the same limo. Luther had been hoping she wouldn't, as she had in tow her genius boyfriend.

“I don't know. Somewhere,” Luther said.

“You stink. Have you been drinking?”

“Ushtah, Vera. Don’t speak that way to your brother,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“Do you remember at Camp, Luther, how the counselors would all say you were underweight?”

“Is that what they said?”

“Max, they would run their fingers up Luther’s rib cage as if it were a washboard.”

“That wasn’t a nice thing to do,” Max said.

“They were trying to help him. That’s all. But he wouldn’t eat. He called the food stinky food. And he was homesick. All the time. He cried and cried for you, Mother. Did you know that?”

“You leave my Svenska pojka alone,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

It was a long time since his mother had referred to him as such, Luther thought. As a child the proprietary claim had embarrassed him. Now it seemed grotesque, as if for the first time she had said something untrue. He wasn’t her Svenska pojka. She had discarded him long ago when he became ugly in her sight.

“I feel Daddy chose me to carry on his name. I will never give up my last name. Do you hear that, Luther?” she jeered at Luther.

“How can I not?”

“Jesus, your breath really does stink. What’s wrong with you?” Vera said.

Wrong. Nothing wrong, other than that she had driven a spike through his heart.

The limo had a comforting heft and offered a cushioned ride through the pothole-strewn streets of the city. Once beyond the congestion of the Lincoln Tunnel it seemed to

glide along the New Jersey turnpike toward the cemetery, the funeral home director having recommended Rosedale as a far less expensive alternative to a burial plot in Manhattan. Luther stared at the thick neck of the driver. All throughout the ride he was concerned that one of the family members would offend him and incur his wrath? How could he, Luther, keep things peaceful? And if it wasn't the driver on his mind, then it was Max, and the contempt he must be feeling behind that amiable smile. Such preoccupations might be a waste of time, but what could he do? He had the mind that he had been given.

Pastor Nyquist offered a prayer that God receive Mr. Garatdjian in his everlasting arms. Holding tight to canvas straps, a crew of workers lowered the casket into the six-foot grave. Nearby a worker leaned against his backhoe and flicked away the cigarette he had been smoking. As tearful family members tossed flowers into the hole, Luther took off his shoes. Without thinking he then flung them into the grave, where they landed on the casket with a thud.

"Are you crazy, my son?" Mrs. Garatdjian had a look of fury he had seldom seen on her face.

"They were killing me."

"So you throw them in your father's grave?" Hannah demanded.

"Lunatic. Drunken lunatic," Vera screamed. "Why don't you throw your socks and pants in there, too? In fact, why don't you jump in yourself?"

Maybe in some other culture such an act might be perceived as grossly disrespectful, but Luther hadn't meant it as such. Did he need to show them the blood-



soaked back of his socks to prove the distress he had been in? Still, he felt the weight of their opprobrium, and when his mother said, through her tears, “You are not my son. You are not my son, it pains me to say,” he felt it even more.

But a mother’s love is a longtime thing, and if she had cast him out, it was only to take him back in, as she may have lived in the place of sorrow but the place where lack of forgiveness dwelt would never be her home. By this time in her life she was hearing the call of the other world, and had built substantially on her conviction that this earthly realm had nothing that she wanted, and if the world had nothing for her, then it could have nothing for Luther or Luke or Hannah or any of them, and it could only be a matter of time before they came to this same understanding.

“You are searching, my son. Your father was a searcher before he met me. He went here and there when what he needed was to go inside where the Christ Jesus lives. Rachel has been searching, but now she has begun to find herself. She thought she had to live among all those with the fine minds, but what she needed was to get right with Jesus. You know it is my prayer that we will all be in Heaven together. You know that, my son.”

So his mother said, when next he saw her at the building. Rachel had come home, or as close to home as any of the children came after they had left. Like Hannah and Naomi and Luke, she was given a room of her own—7B6—in which to live out her days in satellite orbit around Mrs. Garatdjian. Her face, scrubbed clean of war paint, had settled into an expression of childlike innocence. The smirk, the caustic tongue, the belittling remarks had vanished, along with the bottle. She has been on one track, and

now she has been switched to another, Luther thought, visualizing her in railroad terms. It was mysterious, if not spooky, what a father could do. He it had to have been who threw the switch.

“Hello, Luther,” she said now, in a somber voice, and then would move on, as if further communication were an intolerable strain. Or if she happened to be in the family’s apartment when he entered, she would simply leave, with nothing more than a quick and explosive “goodbye,” the one word sounding like a rebuke more than a farewell. But a rebuke for what? For his being there. For any of them, except for his mother, being there. One afternoon he saw her in the Chock Full O’ Nuts, across from Columbia University, but when he entered through the revolving door she hurriedly finished her coffee and took her powdered doughnut with her.

The books that he remembered blanketing the floor of her room when he was a child were gone. Now she read only the Bible, as if everything she needed to know was there in the King James version. At night she would go out on the roof and stand on the parapet overlooking Broadway. When Luke saw her up there, he was terrified that she was preparing to leap. When he asked her gently to come down, she turned and coldly told him not to interfere and that she was about her father’s business. As to what business that could be, she replied that getting closer to God meant just that, getting physically closer, and if Luke didn’t mind, would he now please leave her alone. When he attempted a second time, she turned and said, with vehemence, “Have I not told you that I am about my father’s business?”

Gone too was the sharp-finned hairdo and the henna. She let her naturally sandy brown hair grow out and wore it in a braid, as she had years before. As for her clothes, they were as plain as her face. Day after day she would be seen in the same baggy, shapeless blouses and skirts she had picked from the GoodWill bag, her feet like those of a wading bird in low-cut Converse sneakers.

Instead of riding the subway to midtown each weekday morning, Rachel could be seen strolling along the bridle path in Riverside Park with her Bible in hand. “She has been planted in new soil. We will see now how she grows. What is not normal to your afflicted eye may be a delight to God,” his mother said. To offset the financial burden of Mrs. Garatdjian having to support Rachel, Vera assisted Rachel with a successful disability claim. Her stays in the Bellevue Hospital psychiatric ward were sufficient to compel the doctors who had treated her to testify to her unfitness for the world of work.

In his growing up years he would at times hear Rachel accompany Naomi on the upright piano in their parents’ bedroom as Naomi belted out Broadway show tunes, sad songs like “The Man Who Got Away” and more upbeat ones like “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair” and “Hard-Hearted Hannah.” The wonder of these two sisters embracing a world of glitter and gaiety condemned by the tabernacle was like the sun burning away gray and oppressive clouds. The realization of having such sophisticated sisters filled him with joy and hope that he too could escape the confines of drabness and dire contemplation of hellfire and brimstone.

And Hannah too at times provided access to a world beyond that of the church pew. True, she had dragged him from the Nemo Theater soon after he had entered it,

depriving him of the film noir *Rififi*; not that, as a nine-year-old, he had any knowledge of such genre films. But then she relented from the stricture against movie theaters and took Luke and Vera and him to see *Lady and the Tramp* at the Symphony Theater down on Ninety-fifth Street and Broadway. And that too was a revelation, that he could enter a theater and watch a motion picture, even if it was only a Walt Disney movie, when previously such a venue was off limits. But that gesture by Hannah, as well as the evening outings following Friday Bible School to the swimming pool of the St. George Hotel, down in Brooklyn Heights she arranged offered only a flash of brightness quickly obscured by the billowing darkness brought on by the experience of her hand striking his cheek and the general oppression of her depressed and angry manner. And that same resentment extended to Naomi. She too had betrayed him with her smiling malice and physical assaults. As he grew older, Hannah and Naomi became, far from beacons of hope, cautionary tales of what could and would happen to him if he didn't break free of the debilitating swamp of family. Their legacy was one of dread that he might become like them.

But Rachel did not summon a similar emotion. True, she had been cutting in her remarks, joining with the others in calling him Flathead and Squarehead and Blockhead, and in other ways humiliating and ridiculing him. True, she had to be kept away from him when he was an infant, or so he was told. But her acceptance to Vassar College was the first tangible evidence of success offered by any of the older set of children. Hannah and Naomi seemed mired in failure, while Rachel was heading off to a top college just a short train ride away. She had escaped to the world of bright lights and he would imagine

following after her along the train tracks, starting with the railroad tunnel under Riverside Park and up beyond the George Washington Bridge. He would leave the city environs behind and be where greenery abounded, and sleep under the stars alongside his beloved railroad tracks during his journey. His pride about his older sister continued when she transferred to Barnard for her junior year. Back then a wooden fence bordered the campus along Broadway. The fence was painted a heartbreaking forest green so in line with the pastoral look of the small campus. My sister goes here, Luther would think. She has been let in. But her grades at Barnard had not been good grades. They lowered her overall average when she returned to Vassar for her senior year. She learned that she would not be graduating with honors, and so she quit, unable to tolerate the ignominy of defeat.

The downward trend continued. A good job, then lesser jobs. Bellevue. Drunkenness. Smirking. Bellevue. Running naked down Broadway while drunk. Bellevue. That he should care about someone moving away from him even as he came toward her. That he should care about a woman who didn't care about him.

He typed up some white line poems and stuck them in an envelope along with an application form. He had read *Tarantula*, by Bob Dylan, or part of it, at the Coliseum Bookstore opposite Carnegie Hall. If Bob Dylan could write craziness, then he had a right to write his craziness, too. It did bother him that his poems were in free verse, but he had to say something on paper so he would not be lost forever and could have a chance to feel good. He mailed the envelope to the admissions office at the City College of New York,

hoping that he would be accepted into its newly begun master's degree program in creative writing.

His writing sample was not science. It was not facts. It was not an organized system of tightly formed logic on the page. There was no beginning or middle or end, and his words did have *his* smell on them. But the program was just starting. Maybe there would be fewer applicants than the school was hoping for. When a month went by without any word, Luther rode up to Harlem on the number 11 bus, and then walked a few blocks to the campus.

The New Year had come. Richard Milhous Nixon was still installed in the White House with his Vice President. Spiro Agnew was taking off the gloves to punch the nattering nabobs of negativism in their eyes and all the different parts of their bodies so they would fall to the ground and be heard from no more. Spiro Agnew had well-oiled hair. He had small eyes that spoke of his ire. He had the ability to smile even when he was angry so you knew that though he was smiling he meant business. And he had an IQ of 135 and had graduated from night law school, and that really meant he meant business.

A Quonset hut had been built on the south campus since Luther had graduated. Aided by the harsh fluorescent lighting, Luther sought out the professor he had been told to see by the admissions office about his application.

"Professor Malkinoff?" In spite of the question, Luther was certain he had found his man, as the nameplate outside the office door said "Professor Melky Malkinoff."

"Speaking," Professor Malkinoff said, a response that left Luther wondering as to its appropriateness. Did Professor Malkinoff not know that you said "speaking" when

verifying your identity to a caller on the phone, not in face-to-face communication? Or maybe Professor Malkinoff simply had an understanding of words and their usage that Luther should accept rather than question. Or maybe Professor Malkinoff was more innovative than he looked and breaking new ground. Luther, allowing common sense to be his guide, got on with it.

“My name is Luther Garatdjian. I am here to inquire about my application for admission to the writing program. I am a word man and I put some of those words on paper for you in the form of what I can only loosely call poems, but I also included something from my white line *oeuvre* which I hoped would grab your fancy. But now I am in fear that my best was only good enough for your garbage can,” Luther said, seeing the receptacle overflowing with discarded papers. He was aware of an arch and even affected manner—*oeuvre?*—in which he was now communicating, but he could not help himself. *Go with the flow*. He heard this imperative and resolved to do exactly that.

“I would never do such a cruel thing as to deposit an applicant’s work in the waste basket,” Professor Malkinoff assured him, as he set about going through the stacks of paper on his desk. “Here we are,” he said, having pulled from one teetering pile the manila envelope Luther had dropped in the mail. As Luther sat there, Professor Malkinoff opened and sampled the content, now and then nodding his head as he read.

“OK. You’re in. You’re definitely a word man,” Professor Malkinoff said.

“I’m in?”

“We can absolutely use your kind. The new term starts in February. I will see to it that you receive your acceptance letter so that you can register before the deadline.”

The assurance was welcome, but an asterisk had to be attached. Had the diminutive, rumped professor with the personality of a church mouse been intimidated by the sudden presence of a supplicant? And what on earth would have been the fate of his application if he hadn't shown up at the professor's office door? More than likely it would have sat there for several months more. The professor had been negligent, and now, motivated by kindness, an unwillingness to hurt Luther's feelings, he was allowing him to enroll. As with law school, Luther hadn't earned his way in. Persuasion, in one degree or another, had been necessary. Merit and Luther Garatdjian do not go together, his mind said.

Professor Malkinoff may have been dwelling in his own special hell. The smallness and timidity of his persona suggested a man adrift in the valley of depression. Luther was not completely unaware that Ivy League bona fides did not assure one's happiness, though he could not imagine why. If Luther was in need of a clearer perspective on Professor Malkinoff, it was provided as he was leaving when a man popped his head in the office. It was a massive head, as a genius or a man of considerable intellectual firepower might possess. Crafty, or Foxy, could have been his nickname, given the look of smiling deviousness he offered law-abiding, dutiful, and endlessly dull Professor Malkinoff. A trickster, a joker, a laugher at all things, most immediately the preposterous institution trying to contain someone of his dimensions. All this did not come to Luther immediately, but a significant portion did hearing the man say, in a teasing manner, "See you, Malky."



I must go to this man, Luther thought. I must be in his class. No, I must not, was his next thought.

In that brief sighting facial recognition had occurred. This was a man whose deeds were in line with his appearance. His novel about World War II had been recognized by critics for its profundity as well as its comic genius, and his author photo on the back cover ensured that every literate person in the country would also recognize him. Forty-seven-year-old Solomon Reisner was in fact a war hero, an Air Force pilot who had received many medals for the bombing missions he flew over Nazi Germany. Following the war he had attended Cornell University on the GI Bill and then spent a year at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Before the publication of his novel, *Heads Up, Kraut*, he had worked for many years in the field of advertising. Not bad for a boy from Brooklyn, whose education prior to the war had gone no further than graduation from Brooklyn Tech.

Luther assessed the situation vis a vis Solomon Reisner. Yes, he had gone to the finest schools, as Bob Dylan had said of the girl he berated in “Like a Rolling Stone,” and yes, he was a decorated war hero and the author of an acclaimed novel, placing him in a category far above Mr. Van Dine, who had only served as a bombardier and was turned down by Harvard when he applied for admission on the GI Bill, but Luther would surpass him all the same. How could Luther be so certain? Because Solomon Reisner, gray-haired and approaching fifty, had written only one novel, and Luther would write many. That was why. Beating Solomon Reisner was only a matter of time. In such a way did Luther think.

“I will be frank with you,” Sol said, in addressing the six students who showed up for his class that first day. “You’re not geniuses. In fact you’re without talent. Judging from your writing samples, some of you belong in a remedial English program. Let’s face it. You’re bottom-dwellers, but the school is paying me a lot of money, so I am obliged to read your self-indulgent scribbles. All I ask is that your manuscripts be typed and double-spaced and free of any dinner droppings or gross bodily emissions. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure. We’ll do whatever you say, Coach,” a chinless young man said, causing Sol to erupt in laughter. The dimwits laughed along with him, nervously at first, but then surrendering to it, as to a giant wave that swept them along. Luther was, if not entirely comfortable with Sol’s brutality, accepting of it. Not everyone could be a comic genius, and such individuals, for all he knew, were obliged to tell the truth.

“By the way, you can leave manuscripts for me between classes. I live at The Dakota, on Seventy-second Street and Central Park West, but I would prefer you bring your work to my office at 230 Central Park South. You can drop it off in an envelope with my doorman.” The Dakota location was noteworthy for having an IND line subway stop on the mysterious B and C lines en route to Harlem. The Polo Grounds, up at Coogan’s Bluff, Willie Mays running out from under his cap in the direction of the Rheingold sign in the recesses of centerfield in pursuit of a long fly ball, Billie Holiday singing “Gloomy Sunday”—a complex of associations, of longings, were summoned in Luther when Sol told them where he lived. And what was that golden light Luther saw at the mention of Central Park South? Was it Cary Grant, at the Plaza Hotel? Was it America calling him to

a life he did not have? That same emotion had been summoned by the illuminated Chevrolet billboard, above the West Side Highway, up near the meatpacking plants, on One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street, back in his childhood. Life calling to him but always somewhere where he was not.

“We’re going to do good, now,” Luther said, to his L. C. Smith typewriter. “Everything is grist for the literary mill,” he went on, having read as much somewhere. Every week he would take his writings to Sol care of Sol’s doorman at the Central Park South address. The frequency of his appearances led the doorman to become familiar with him rather than maintain that doorman distance of one who was supposed to know his place in life.

“You again?” this one particularly rude doorman said.

“Oh yes,” Luther said.

“What are you, a messenger or something?” the doorman asked.

“A special kind of messenger,” Luther answered, hearing with his third ear how the doorman was trying to bring him down to his doorman level.

“You’re not sick, are you?” the doorman said, being a very bold and presumptuous doorman.

“Not at all,” Luther said.

“Because Mr. Reisner is not a doctor, so he can’t help you if are sick, and you do look pretty sick.”

“Do I tell you your mother looks sick?” Luther said. The worst thing you could ever do with these doormen types was talk about their mothers. Their mothers were the reason they were doormen in the first place.

“Don’t be talking about my mother,” the doorman said.

“Then don’t talk to me about my mother either,” Luther said.

“Have you heard me talk about your mother?” the doorman said.

“You just did,” Luther said, dealing harshly with the doorman only because he understood how some doormen could adopt the haughty ways of their masters, as this one so clearly had, and forget they were crumb bum Louies in the eyes of those same masters, who never thought about them unless the doormen stood in their presence

“I may just have to throw you a beating,” the doorman said.

“That wouldn’t be very doorman-like,” Luther said.

Luther returned several days later with a story titled “The Doorman.” He placed great quantities of tape on the envelope so the doorman wouldn’t snoop. He sensed that doormen, by and large, had to be snoops, by degrees infiltrating themselves into the lives of the building tenants in a psychic attempt to move up socially. Like Luther himself and that Estonian maid Claire so identified him with. And should the doorman in fact snoop and read the unflattering characterization of him in the story, then surely he would be throwing him a beating.

“It’s against the law to read other people’s mail,” Luther said to the doorman as he handed him the envelope.

“This isn’t mail. It’s a package,” the doorman said.

“Even so,” Luther said.

“‘Even so.’ You should hear yourself.”

“Even so,” Luther said, “I expect the package, as you call it, to be delivered to Mr. Reisner sans tampering. Is that understood?”

“What is understood is that I don’t like you.”

“Don’t personalize our relationship,” Luther said. “This is about business.”

“Don’t come back here when I’m on duty. Can you manage that?”

“Frankly, I don’t know what I can manage,” Luther said. “I’ve been feeling a great deal of stress.”

But the doorman didn’t respond. He simply closed the front door to signal the conversation was over and Luther went on his way. If the doorman had bested him with his symbolic rejection, Luther was willing to give him that.

After the next class Sol Reisner called Luther aside. “Have you been getting into trouble with my doorman?” Sol said.

“No. Why would I do that? Luther said.

“He said an unusually skinny young guy was giving him a hard time every time he dropped off an envelope for me. So that wasn’t you?”

“No, not me. Luther said. I don’t cause anyone any trouble.”

“And that story about the doorman you submitted. The one in which you call him ‘sliver lips.’ You weren’t writing about my doorman?”

“No, no. That’s fiction. It’s true fiction, but it’s fiction all the same,” Luther assured Sol Reisner.

“True fiction?”

“All fiction has some truth to it,” Luther said. “Even science fiction. Not that I’ve read any of that stuff.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but do you have a job?”

“Sure. I have a job.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m the assistant manager of a hotel. Sort of,” Luther said.

“Sort of.” Sol laughed. “I like that.”

A month into the semester a new student arrived. The girl was gap-toothed and round. She had frizzy brown hair and a sweaty face and a low center of gravity. She wrote short pieces about a Jewish family in the Midwood section of Brooklyn that had Sol Reisner laughing out loud. It was everything for Luther not to stop up his ears and run from the room, as he had no place in his heart for the excellence of others.

The following week he saw the girl enter Sol Reisner’s office. Feigning an interest in the fliers on the hallway bulletin board, he strained to overhear the conversation between Sol Reisner and his star pupil. He was looking for pain, old pain; he had to have it. Sol Reisner did not disappoint. “Look, I called you in because you are too good for this program. You can see that as well as I can. My other students are interesting but not very bright. Some have emotional difficulties and one is completely

strange and hopeless. I'll put you in touch with my agent. She could use some new talent. And I would encourage you to apply to better programs, like Columbia or Stanford or Iowa..."

There had been a boy in his third grade class he had been friends of a kind with, but then the boy got promoted to the next grade in the middle of the school year. The boy's advancement dismayed Luther. He would fill with fear and anger on seeing the boy, whose existence would forever be a reminder that some were chosen and some were not. And that experience was repeated over and over in the years that followed, the high board score boys and girls separating out from those who were less intelligent. How wrong he had been to think he could escape from such hierarchies and quantification in the word world.

"Luther, you must not die and die and die." This and more he said to himself back in his apartment that evening, while listening to his Billie Holiday record and drinking his red wine.

Sometime later he climbed the stairs to Nadia's apartment. "I'm a complete and worthless bum," he said, his self-therapy having proven unsuccessful.

"No one is a complete anything," Nadia said.

"Thank you for that," Luther said, and began to laugh. Nadia laughed, too.

"You really stink of wine," she said, as he opened the bottle he had brought along. having finished the first.

"Bums do get stinky, even partial ones," he said.

"What is wrong?" Nadia said.

“Everything and nothing. I’ve trapped myself in something I can’t get out of,”  
Luther said.  
“What is that?”  
“Luther is great.”  
“What?”  
“The idea of being great, when clearly I am a bottom dweller, just as Sol Reisner  
says.”

“Who is Sol Reisner?”  
“You’ve never heard of Sol Reisner? He’s a world-famous author.”  
“I don’t read that much,” Nadia said.  
“How do you find out the truth?”  
“I look into people’s faces.”  
“How far will that get you? People are opaque. There are barracuda in human  
form in this world.”  
“Far enough.”

He had run into the wall of her certitude, as could sometimes happen. It was good to see that she was finding her strength, and that it did not occlude him from her life. Still, there was strangeness, the fact that, with the brief exception of a couple of visits by Nadia to his apartment, he had only been with her at her place. No restaurants. No walks in the park. No movies. Several times he had run into her either coming in or out of the building. Such occasions had been awkward, as if they were meant to see each other only in the dark.



He lay with her that night. She let him have his way. He wondered again at his lack of effect on her that she should be so passive. He left as he always did, guiltily, as if he had stolen something.

Luther went down to the railroad tracks to orient himself, hoping that the grayness of the afternoon would find its way into his photos as he trained the Rolleiflex on a boxcar on a siding. Jesus, it was good to be down in the rail yard, even with the reduced scale of activity. Once again he thought how the truckers were killing rail freight in a country that was indifferent if not hostile to its own past. He brightened as a Penn Central switcher pulled a string of gondola cars from another siding, then came back for the boxcars. Still, it wasn't right that all this should die. There was no power like railroad power, the throb of a diesel engine and the clatter of the rolling stock it pulled in its path.

He had not yet read Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha*. He had not come yet to her clear understanding of what railroads signified to men of his kind.

"What are you doing here?" Luther said, seeing Jerry Jones-Nobleonian sitting on a rusted rail.

"I'm here to see your moms," Jerry said.

"Stop. We're not in high school anymore." There had been much sounding going on back then. Your momma wears combat boots. Your momma goes down for wooden nickels. Your momma this, your momma that. Verbal cruelties he had been unable to participate in.

“We are in high school, Luther. You and me, we don’t ever get to leave high school.”

“Why do you talk that way?” Luther said.

“You don’t know?”

“I guess not.”

“You’re fucked up just like I am. You just want to pretend that you’re not.”

“You know a whole lot.”

“I know you’re here.”

“I’m here to photograph.”

“You’re a jerk,” Jerry snickered. He had become more openly hostile, but then, his situation wasn’t good. His little sister was selling herself down on Forty-Second Street. His Estonian mother had to be institutionalized for talking loud and crazy on the street. His father was serving a sentence for killing a pedestrian while driving his taxi drunk. And there was Jerry’s brief experience in the army. The pinkish blotches on all parts of his body made him an easy target of the recruits. The hazing got out of hand and was to the detriment of morale and unity so the army sent him home.

“Stop calling me names,” Luther said.

“Like you haven’t been calling me names for years?”

“What names have I ever called you? I called you by your name. That’s all I ever called you,” Luther said.

“Calling me nigger under your breath. That’s what you’ve been calling me.”

“Never.”

“Thinking of me as a nigger. Acting toward me as if I was a nigger. The whole world thinking it could nigger me some more with a giant shit. But I throw your shit right back at you. Understand where I’m coming from with that?”

“I don’t understand anything you’re saying,” Luther said, although he did understand. Jerry Jones-Nobleonian was calling him on the unspoken attitude of superiority he had carried since they met back in grade school at a time when he had received his first rebuff from his classmates, the realization that they were having birthday parties organized by their parents and that he hadn’t been invited. They had said no to his flat head, his cutup ways, his odd last name that didn’t fit with Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy or Alison Pauley or any of the other girls they had claimed for their own.

They had been drawn into the tunnel, with its high walls and tunnel smell of things rank and yet pleasing. A sense of heightened expectation it summoned, as if the creation space itself where sex and birth were joined and the forever quality of childhood could be rediscovered by following the line of the tracks down the endless straightaway. You had entered another universe distant from the highway sounds and fragments of conversation that came to you through the vents and the overhead grates.

In the long ago it had been dread of the Freight Kings and the baseball bats they were reputed to bash your head with. Now it was of more solitary predator types.

“Be quiet? Shit. A nigger don’t have to be no kind of fucking quiet. That’s just what the white man want him to do. And another thing. A nigger don’t have to be afraid of no railroad tunnel and the things and people in it. A nigger can go where he goes with no fear because his time is coming. It is coming.”

Had Jerry been listening to Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown and Huey Newton? Jerry's whole thing had been to be white. He would tell everyone his black cabdriver father was only his stepfather. His real father had been Estonian, like his mother, and had been crushed by a Soviet tank while resisting the invasion of his homeland. Given his resemblance to his clearly black "stepfather," Jerry's story could only be a fiction, a desperate attempt to deny the reality of his lineage. And that last name, Nobleonian, he had insisted on. The last three letters would have suggested Armenian, not Estonian, descent.

"You the same as me, nigger. Don't ever forget it. You still pretending your father ain't your father, but your ugly-assed father is you and you is he. I done copped to my lie, but you still be lying through your skinny white ass. Talking to me all these years as if I was so much shit. Fuck your motherfucking bullshit self, motherfucker."

"Yes. And fuck you, too," Luther said, but without vehemence. That had been obliterated, if only for the moment, by Jerry's truth bombs.

"Don't be making me cut you, Mr. Phony Assed White Boy Nigger. Black man has the right to cut any white man he sees. Cut you so your own mother don't know who you is."

In the long ago, as well, the time of Breyer's ice cream and Old Gold cigarettes, those days spent exploring, alley climbing, finding pathways from Broadway down to Riverside Drive without using the street and of entering basements and hauling empty bottles to the grocery store for refunds, Jerry Jones Nobleonian would say, "Ellie's good too. Right?" of Elston Howard, the black catcher for the predominantly white New York

Yankees, and Luther would understand, with full clarity, that Jerry was really asking to hear that Elston Howard deserved a place at the table with Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris and Tom Tresh and Clete Boyer and Bobby Richardson and Yogi Berra and all the rest of those Yankees players. The question would bring so close to the light the lie that Jerry was living, but all Luther could say in that time was “Sure, Ellie’s good. Ellie’s great.” He had heard you never startle a sleepwalker back to consciousness, and in the same way, it would have been dangerous to call Jerry on his fiction. Not only dangerous, but unkind. What he saw now was that perhaps he had not so much been protecting Jerry as protecting himself. If he left Jerry alone with his lies, then maybe Jerry would leave him alone with his own lies.

“Motherfucking pretend white boy need a lowdown nigger living in a stinky hotel to feel good about hisself,” Jerry continued, as if fully attuned to Luther’s thoughts.

Far down in the bend of the tunnel, a warm and light spread on the high walls, bringing them both to attention. Though the approaching train lacked regal bearing, being only a workaday switcher and not a twin diesel—it commanded respect. Behind it came the boxcars and the gondola cars and refrigerator cars and oil cars that Luther remembered from bygone days. He did not reach for rock ballast to bang off the rolling stock, nor did Jerry, as they would have back then. That phase was over. Now it was about—Luther didn’t know what it was about. He only sensed that he had to be there. And so too, evidently, did Jerry.

Jerry Jones-Nobelonian's shit storm stayed with Luther for some days. A substantial dose of guilt had been injected into his system by his former friend. But what could he do? Was it really his fault if an unreasoning fear of blacks had been instilled in him by traumatic childhood incidents, mainly the terror spread by bicycle caravans of young black men in summer migration from Harlem to the two welfare hotels on Luther's block? Hadn't they not beaten Luke's friend Whitey, just beaten and beaten on him until he fell to the sidewalk in front of Luther's building, then kicked and kicked him until driven off by the sound of an approaching police siren? His skull fractured, his jaw broken, his teeth knocked out, and his eyes blackened, Whitey lay crumpled on the sidewalk, his white shirt soaked with blood. His black attackers had been smiling as they did their work, work they could not get enough of. But had he not brought it on himself earlier in the day when, passing a couple of these same young blacks, he had been heard to sing, "If you're looking for trouble, you've come to the right place"? Where had that piece of stunning stupidity taken place? On Riverside Drive, as Luther was walking with Luke and Whitey. How was it that Whitey could not grasp what Luther grasped even as Whitey sang his idiotic song, that you don't, through innuendo or direct address, rile those born with bottomless anger? How could he not understand that those same black kids would be on them, like a swarm of yellow jackets, by the time they reached Broadway, where Whitey and Luke and Luther withdrew into a store for safety? Or that, still later that day, they would be waiting as Whitey emerged from Luther's building? Whitey had thought dressing up in the costume of toughness, with his garrison belt buckled on the side and the short sleeves of his tight T-shirt given an extra flip to show

off his biceps, and his blond Elvis hairdo, was the same as being tough. Whitey could not understand that these black boys did not need the adornment of garrison belts and tight T-shirts, that they were born for battle and needed neither food nor water for sustenance when they had their own rage to feed on. And so, on that day, Luther had been given to see, from the safety of his window, the disproportionate response a minor offense could and would bring, that when a young black or a black of any age said, "I'm not playing," then in fact it must be completely understood that he wasn't playing. He did not see that their bottomless anger was, in some way, his own, that as a child, when he grew angry, that anger took on a life of its own.

And his mother. Though she was love itself, did she not have her own attitudes? Did she not say, "We cannot have this here," referring to the ceaseless violence that occurred in the two welfare hotels for the Negroes on that same block? Did she not rise above them in saying, "I work. Why should they not do the same?" Did she not deny them rooms in the building, saying there were no vacancies, when they came to her and she saw bedlam in their eyes and smelled the fury in their fists? She had grown up with the sound and the reality of violence in her home. She could not have it where she now lived. She could have the Kenyans and the Ethiopians and the Nigerians and the peaceful Negroes of New York City on the premises, but not those still formatted for violent rage.

And so his mother's world became his world, a world predicated on personal safety and not the larger issue of morality and justice and an end to rampant inequality. Not that those things didn't matter, but ultimately, fear was what really mattered, and fear told him he had to be good, he had to be very good, to avoid the same savage beating as

the young blacks had inflicted on Whitey. *We will beat you senseless*. Such was the message he heard in the angry rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown and Huey Newton.

Only a couple of years before noisy demonstrations had taken place at City College in favor of open enrollment. Selective admission was discriminatory, some said. Throw open the doors. City College was situated in Harlem, and yet where were the black and Puerto Rican students? Luther saw not a plea for social justice but an angry mob at the gates, with vengeance as their driving force. He had been afraid—afraid for the college and afraid for himself. He was barely qualified to be there, and now even those whom tests had determined were not truly “college material” would be allowed in. People shouldn’t ask for things they didn’t deserve. He thought of Rutgers Law School. He had not earned his way in. That was the real reason he couldn’t cross the street and join the other first-year students at orientation. He had not been fit to be there. And if you were not fit, you were not fit. No amount of angry shouting, no amount of violence, could still that voice that told you so.

He felt so stripped, as if he stood naked on Broadway with his ribs showing and that ugly declivity in his chest for all to see. Where did you go but to the railroads or the obscurity of other desolate spaces when the conviction arose that a number was a number for all time to bow down before, to be beaten by, whipped and broken and left for dead, like poor Whitey in the long ago. Because a number was a hellish thing that had no mercy and still it was beating him, not into humility, but into a state of abjectness where all he could do was watch the trains go by.



Luther thought of Tom Smits, the boy to whom, with savage glee, he had sent the suicide note that summer day after Tom stood in the lobby of Luther's building, having finally discovered where Luther lived so he could put his laughing thing on him, as he was always putting his laughing thing on Luther, being born to do nothing but laugh at Luther *the way that white folks were always laughing at the black man mocking the black man saying the black man lacked the necessities*. Only he wasn't laughing. He was in grief that his father had left his mother and now summer was at an end and he would be going away to his fancy high board score college, a real college, and Luther hadn't called him or returned any of his calls, in spite of all the calling Tom Smits had done, Tom Smits saying without laughter all over his face that Luther meant something to him. Luther saw Tom Smits's pain but didn't care, seeing it as the phony pain of someone who had the security of his high intelligence to keep him afloat in the waters of life, like a man secured to a lifeline who pretends to be drowning.

Such a cleaver that suicide letter had been, severing for all time their connection. But had it? He thought of Tom Smits frequently, and of the Claremont School, as a paradise lost. The SAT. Jerry is to Luther as Luther is to Tom. That wasn't right. That wasn't a proper analogy. Anyway, Tom would have embraced Jerry. He wouldn't have shunned him. Tom was always embracing the other, those different from him. He thought back to Tom's adulation of Chicago Loyola University and its all-black starting five, led by racehorse guard Jerry Harkness, as it destroyed its mostly white opponent at Madison Square Garden, or the way he whooped when unheralded and all-black Texas Western crushed the Kentucky Wildcats, with its overrated white boys. How amazing that Tom

could be so unthreatened by the progress of blacks. Tom had the cosmic consciousness that Zoe, the museum girl, had scolded Luther for lacking. But such a consciousness was dependent on an intelligence Luther didn't possess. He saw once again that his whole life was in service of holding others back—his sister Vera, Sarah, the blacks of America. And why? Because he could not move forward? Because he could not even leave Manhattan?

Sarah had not gone away. She was still in Boston and completing the fifth year program. Apathy was having its way with her, depositing her in the slough of despond for days on end. By now he had read *Malone Dies*, and he tried to give her Samuel Beckett's courage. "I can't go on, I won't go on, I must go on," he said, quoting or misquoting from the text.

But Sarah waved her hand dismissively. "You don't know anything."

"What does that mean?" Luther said.

"It means I'm being steamrolled by the genius. That's what it means."

Luther fell silent. There was no use pretending he didn't grasp what Sarah meant. The genius had become part of his life as well. Try as he might to resist the aura of the genius, Luther was in thrall to him, too. Wasn't the special power of a genius to make you bow down in recognition of his gifts?

"Well, this is very worrisome," Luther said, Sarah having pulled him into her sadness. But it was a sadness from the long ago too, summoned by his mother crying in front of him over something either he or some other of her worthless children had done. The kind of sadness that brought the end of the world so near, because if Sarah couldn't

live, then how could he? If her sun went out, then he too would have to live in the cold and the darkness. She was still his guiding light. Or was she?

Sarah had, for a brief time, tried to make herself part of Lane's social circle, but she lacked the social confidence to hold her own among his friends. At a gathering in his apartment, she had gotten drunk and disgraced herself by making love with one of Lane's girlfriends. Luther learned of the incident not from Sarah but by reading about it in her journal. She was like him in some way. Her social footing was unsure, in some circles, even if she possessed the gift of friendship far more than he ever would. The humiliation was reassuring, if sad to read; it confirmed that she did not belong with Lane and his cool kind.

The social failure and the cloud of impending defeat in the fifth year competition allowed a thought to enter Luther's mind. Maybe Sarah was not everything he had thought she was. Maybe now was the time, with June approaching, to reconsider whether it was really a good idea for her to come to New York City and live with him. Evidently, Sarah had the same matter on her mind, if she expressed it a different way.

"So are we going to live together? Are we?" she screamed into the phone.

These were not words, or a tone, that Luther ever expected to hear from Sarah, but he had taught her well, he understood, how to be uncivil. And he saw too the sadness that was driving her words, the sense that she was being defeated by her genius boyfriend on two fronts, artistically and socially, and so she had nowhere to go but to Luther and that it would be all right for her to show her ugly and unbecoming side, as he did all the time. Or maybe she thought if she made herself unpleasant, that would be sufficient to drive

him away. He saw the freedom highway calling to him. There was no use saying he was unaware of the fork in the road that Sarah had brought them to and that he might be better off taking the road less hard and burdensome. But he could not forsake her, however she might be presenting herself to him in that moment. He could not allow the anarchy and death that a parting of the ways would bring and so he said, in a tone as moderate as hers was inflamed, that of course he wanted them to live together. Of course. A plan was a plan, and what was life without one?

“The wages of sin are death. The *wages*. Do you understand the seriousness of that, Luther. Do you?” Melvin’s mouth hung open as he awaited Luther’s response.

“I don’t know,” Luther said.

“Maybe I can help you to know, Luther. Would you like me to instruct you? Would you like to be under my wing?”

“Maybe not,” Luther said.

“Are you hungry, Luther? Would you like a hot dog? Would you like my hot dog?”

“Your hot dog?” Luther said.

“I did not mean that, Luther. Honest I didn’t. I meant your hot dog. I meant...I’ve got to get away. The devil is calling me,” Melvin said, and left Luther where he had found him.

*The Godfather* had opened. Luther saw it with Sarah at a theater along the Great White Way, and the film opened his mind to the possibilities of an acting career, as the acid trip with Lenore had some years before. He would follow Marlon Brando and Al Pacino and James Caan and Robert Duvall onto the silver screen. He too would be seen. He had to be seen. Such was his calling. It did not matter that he was ugly and had too many bones showing and a head that evoked laughter and even ridicule. Acting, like writing, would be a reprieve from the gnawing sense of inadequacy so much a part of his mental life. He would have something more than his words, which went nowhere but onto the page.

Luther was troubled as well as inspired by what he saw on the screen that night. Sonny's love for his abused sister and the rage he displayed on learning that his crumb-bum brother-in-law had beaten her once again, was something of a reproach. Sonny was showing him what a brother should be, what a man should be, even if his passion did get him killed in an ambush before Sonny could get to and kill the wife-beating son of a bitch. Such horror and sadness Luther felt on seeing Sonny massacred, to use the Godfather's word, by Tommy gun wielding gangsters. Don't go there. Just don't go there, Luther had shouted, in his mind, as Sonny's car approached the toll booth, which even before the bullets flew had the forlorn look of death. It was not right to obliterate human life, especially that of someone so vibrant. It was just not right. And something else was not right. He, Luther, was not right. So Sonny was telling him with his displays of outraged fury that anyone should lay a hand on his sister. Because Sonny had love for his sister, not competition, not petty jealousy. *Love*. He was his sister's protector. He was Harry Hotspur, the theme of honor's tongue, when it came to that sister of his.

And good Lord, Michael Corleone, Sonny's younger brother. He had all the necessities. Dartmouth College. (Those green and white book covers Luther bought at the Columbia University bookstore when he was a kid and the Ivy League was everything and Steve Spahn, the nifty Dartmouth guard, crying, crying, when violence broke out on the court in a varsity game at the Columbia gym. Players just beating and beating each other. No, no. It was very understandable why Steve Spahn would cry as he did, given that he came from the world of intelligence and not crazy fists. And then that big, rugged boy who lived down the hill on Riverside Drive in one of the houses of order who had applied to Dartmouth College, only he wasn't sure if his 1300 board scores were high enough. What more proof was needed that geniuses and only geniuses entered the realm of the Ivy league?) A decorated hero fighting for America in the United States Army. Michael Corleone had stepped out of Brooklyn. He had stepped out of college. He had stepped out of family and into the world and now he was returning to family with a girl who was not from Brooklyn, not from that world. A young man who had the love of his father and who loved his father right back with the love a son should feel for his father. There was love abounding between father and son that did not need to speak its name.

All this Luther saw, and this as well, that Santino, Sonny, for all his power and passion (those *suspenders*) was afraid of his younger brother, because Michael Corleone had been out in the world whereas Santino had not. You could see the fear that had traveled from his mind to his face that he was nothing but the Sonny that his family and friends called him. That Luther could surely see.

And these were the things that Luther heard as well as saw, that men could have such names as Luca Brasi and Bruno Tattaglia and Virgil Sollozzo, names that needed to be sung, not said, and demanded repetition and lived uncluttered with consonants. Names you wanted to eat with a knife and fork or do something with, they were that delicious.

“The Italians have always been something,” Luther said to Sarah that same night. “They will do battle with anyone. Anyone. They are the one ethnic group black gangs won’t mess with in this city. Why? Because blacks know the Italians will fight with ferocity. They don’t play. They simply don’t play, just as blacks don’t play.”

“Is that right?” Sarah said, because she heard him with her third ear. Heard how he was trying to make the movie his, not theirs, with the imposition of his nebulous experience. At the same time she wanted to be kind, recognizing that the past, inflated though it might be in his consciousness, was his only treasure trove.

“Did I ever tell you about Raymond Donatelli, older brother of Johnny Donatelli, who was beaten to the pavement by the knuckle punches to the spine of a black kid who wore the smile of savage revenge as he did his work? Did I ever tell you how Raymond Donatelli called on the black kid to come from the hotel where Raymond knew him to live and how many, many blacks poured from that building to do battle with Raymond Donatelli and how he broke many of their faces even as they broke his?”

“Tell me,” she said, in spite of her previously supercilious-appearing manner. Childhood was their bond; family was their bond. His somewhat unsheltered life growing up drew her to him.

And so he did tell her what little more he could about Raymond Donatelli as an exemplar of the fierceness of Italians, though his brief account did not fully convey what he was trying to say. And how could it, since words inevitably fell short. To be honest, he could not say that he truly liked Italians. Hardness and a lack of forgiveness were part of their makeup. They were like a diamond with an incredibly sharp edge. You touched their beauty and you bled. *The Godfather* gave them a human quality. The family gatherings and the wedding of at which the Godfather dances with his daughter and drops dead in the garden as he plays with his grandson. But the Godfather was a dog. He was a parasite and a murderer and an egomaniac. At the risk of being beaten to the point where he could not be recognized, Luther had to be free to think such a thing. And the fatuousness of the Godfather's concept of respect when he had no idea what the word meant, given the way he walked over those who opposed him. No, no. You could give yourself to a father only so far. Then you must kill him.

“And you know what?”

“No. Tell me.”

“I'm going to be an actor too, just like them. I made up my mind while sitting in the movie theater.”

“Luther, I don't think so.”

“Why not? I had a part in the senior play.”

“I know, but...”

“But what?”

“Nothing. Go ahead. You'll be fine.”



“I’ll be fine?”

“That’s what I said.”

“You’re not telling me I’m going to swim with the fishes, like Luca Brasi?”

“It’s not swim with the fishes. It’s sleep with the fishes.”

“Same difference.”

“Same difference to you.”

He heard what she was saying. He wasn’t precise. He would try to be more careful in how he expressed himself. If everything else defied order, you could at least try to line up your words.

“I don’t think this one is quite right,” Sarah said.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s too finished. Too slick. It looks like something out of a magazine on home design.”

The loft was on the top floor of an old building on Canal Street overlooking the Bowery. Luther stared at the new and gleaming wood floor and the modern kitchen and wondered what it meant to possess such capability. The man showing them the loft made his living renovating raw spaces and making them habitable. This is a real man, Luther thought, a man who can dispense with paperback books and actually do things.

He was so sorry to hear Sarah put the nix on it, because, in Luther’s estimation, they were standing in a loft of order, if he could not quite say the same of the dilapidated building itself. But he was also aware that he was with his lady love, a grotesque term

that had just sailed into his mind, and that every cell in his body wanted to do right by her. How much space, after all, did you need for a typewriter? The loft was for her glory, not his own, and required a vast space for the big canvases she was working on, while “White Line Continue” he could simply hide in a drawer. And hiding would be something he needed to do, he understood, lacking, as he did, the substance she possessed that allowed her to show herself through her art. She could stand behind what she did without putting the laughing thing on it.

“Amour propre,” he said, pronouncing the second word to rhyme with rope.

“What?” she said.

“Self-regard. Self-love. You possess it,” he said.

“Don’t start with your bags of bullshit,” Sarah said.

“OK. But it’s not bullshit,” he replied.

A Chinese man, shriveled and old, hawked up phlegm and spit a gob, narrowly missing Luther’s foot as he and Sarah passed by on the narrow sidewalk.

“That’s pretty disgusting,” Sarah said.

“Lo fan. That’s what they call us, or what some of them call us.”

“What’s that?”

“White devils, I think. I read that somewhere,” Luther said.

“Well, we’ve managed to piss off half the world. Why not the Chinese?” she said.

“They aren’t always so nice either. They can do some nasty stuff. How would you like to be called a running dog of capitalism?”

“I see your point. God, it’s hot.”

The sun was directly overhead and scorching as they hung a sharp left on the Bowery onto East Broadway at Chatham Square. He had never heard of East Broadway before responding to the classified for a loft in the *Village Voice*. Did that mean there was a West Broadway? And what the hell did it have to do with Broadway, which curved from Inwood to the South Ferry. East sounded so repellent, like day-old scrambled eggs, and anxiety-inducing, like a flapping hinge precariously attached at an odd and impossible angle to the main structure. He could only wonder at the skill of cartographers in organizing the earth for easy inspection.

“Topographical cretinism,” Luther said.

“What is that?” Sarah asked.

“Trotsky, living in exile, had difficulty finding the British Museum. And so he gave himself that diagnosis.” He had begun reading the Isaac Deutscher trilogy on the great Bolshevik revolutionary. It gave him hope when the prominent men of history were humanized in such ways.

“Why are you talking this way?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

A classic Greek coffee shop on the corner and a public library, but otherwise a street teeming with Chinese commerce. Strips of orange-glazed duck meat hanging in one store window, while next door, on a sidewalk stall, fish and crustaceans were laid out on a bed of ice and in the distance, banded grayly across the sky, the Manhattan Bridge. Here he felt himself in a different world, faceless, anonymous, and yet safe; the hum of industry, not violence, was in this community’s bones.

The second loft was a disappointment, as old and dilapidated as the first was modern and sparkling. Two sad-looking wicker chairs and a wicker sofa with stained cushions in the living area, a hotplate but no stove in the kitchen, and a bathroom that had a toilet but no sink and a curtain hanging from a rod as a gesture at privacy. But Sarah surprised him. She was taken not with the possibilities of the two-thousand-square-foot space, but with the space as it was.

“This is a loft for artists, not a decorator’s showplace,” she said.

There was no elevator, and it was a long walk up the brightly lit staircase to the fourth floor. But the downstairs door had a locked door and an intercom, which provided a sense of safety, as did the firehouse directly across the street.

“I am having a nervous breakdown,” the woman who had buzzed them in said. “My husband is leaving me, I fear. All our money he has poured into this new loft we have rented on Wooster Street, just a block east of West Broadway...”

“Did I just hear you say West Broadway?” Luther was beside himself in anticipation of her answer.

“I did,” the woman said. “Is that important?”

“No. Yes. Maybe. I believe so.”

“Luther, do you suppose you could let her finish what she was saying?” Sarah asked.

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry.”

“He is over there now, as he is every day. The space looks like a construction site. New wiring, new plumbing, the list is endless of the things he has set himself to do. I

have no doubt the place will be functional and livable, but I never feel it will be those things for me. I feel I have no place in this new loft and no place in his life, and he does nothing to reassure me. He is relentless and has become inhuman. Hungarians can be that way. Mean, small, petty. We are not nice people. The French are not nice either, but they have their pretty language and pretty faces to hide that reality.”

“I love Hungarian goulash. Properly spiced, nothing beats it,” Luther said. The normal thing when a woman, or anyone, expressed pain and despair was to try to wrap them in his warmth, but he could not do that with Edit Kadar. She had a huge overbite, which for some reason mitigated against compassion, and the fact that she was a graduate student in art history at Columbia University was something to hold against her as well. It meant she had a core of toughness and competence over and above anything he possessed. Why should anyone stay with a woman who stuck her nose in paperback books while he seized life with his two strong hands? The words *just deserts* came to Luther’s mind. He visualized the second word correctly as having one ‘s,’ sensing as he did that a second “s” just wouldn’t cut it. And then these unspoken words also came to him: “When something is over, it is over,” because already he was understanding who Edit Kadar’s husband was. He was the train that you could only stand back and watch as it roared down the track.

And something else was over—his time at the Hell’s Kitchen apartment. That does not mean he did not have loose ends to tie up. Roddy Rumble, the footloose man with the crescent-shaped scar who was living just above him with Jackson, the sliver-lipped singer

(and whatever else he said he was) of “Country Road,” had found a place in Luther’s heart as well as his psyche. The prefecture of pain Luther sensed Roddy Rumble silently walked in and his resemblance to Luke had fostered that bond, as had their time together watching the Big Red Machine and Manny “Jump for Joy” Sanguillen and all the other Pittsburgh Pirates and the Birds of Baltimore with revenge-seeking Frank Robinson in playoff baseball. Because there was no bond like that which baseball established. None whatsoever.

“Roddy, I want to make you an offer you cannot refuse,” Luther said.

“What’s that?” Roddy said, oblivious of the Godfather influence.

“A new chapter of my life is beginning. Sarah, my girlfriend and I, will be taking a place together farther downtown. My thought was that maybe you would like this place for yourself instead of having to room with Jackson upstairs.” Luther went on to explain that Roddy could move in as a subtenant, which the lease permitted. Luther couldn’t see making a clean break. He was entering new and scary territory, and a vast one, down on East Broadway, and his Hell’s Kitchen cubbyhole could provide security. You didn’t just let go of an apartment renting for fifty bucks a month. That wouldn’t be normal, as his mother would say.

“Sure. I could go for that,” Roddy said, in his laconic way.

“And who knows? Maybe you and your friend from down south will come up and join you. You never know, right?” Because if Luther was crossing a line with Sarah, then maybe Roddy would also. But Roddy didn’t give him any words in response. Laconic he might be, but now all Luther could hear was his unsmiling silence.

“You must do your business with Janos. I am just his secretary, not his wife,” Edit Kadar said, continuing with her theme of despair. Luther had returned to the loft with a check to seal the deal, but she said firmly, “I will arrange for you to meet with him.” Faithful to her words, she reached for the phone and said, “Janos, he is here. I am sending him to you to do with what you want. Am I being clear?” Evidently, she was, though what secretary spoke to her boss in such a manner Luther could not imagine. “You must go to him. He will not come to you. So he said to me,” Edit said, after hanging up the phone.

“Is this some sort of Hungarian tradition?” Luther asked.

“Do not ask me to think of the Hungarians. It will only make me ill. Of beautiful art you may speak, but not the Hungarians.”

“But I love the Hungarians. They are the bravest people on this earth, standing up to Soviet tanks in Budapest in 1956.”

“Have you not been listening to me?” Edit asked.

“I will go to him. That is not a problem.”

“I will give you the address. But first you will have a cup of tea so you will have the strength to deal with him.”

“Thank you,” Luther said, when what he really wanted was to be out the door.

“Your girlfriend is pretty. Is she a good artist?”

“Oh yes. The very best,” Luther said.

“And how about you? Are you an artist, too?”

“I am not an artist at all,” Luther said.

“I am not surprised. You do not look like an artist. You look like a man who sits around and drinks a lot of tea and coffee and stronger things. Is this true?”

“Yes. This is true,” Luther said.

“You are like me. You are a woman, but this is not a good thing. I am a woman, so it is OK for me to be a woman. But you are a man, so that is not OK that you should be a woman. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Luther said. It was all right with him if Edit Kadar assigned herself the role of truth-teller.

“Do you want to love me? I wouldn’t mind,” Edit said.

“I don’t think I can do that,” Luther said.

“Why is that? Do you believe, in your fictional world, that a woman cannot make love to a woman? Are you not a progressive spirit?”

“No. Of course not, but...”

“It is OK. Let us drink our tea.”

It was good tea, smoky and delicious. “I am sorry to leave you like this,” Luther said, after a long silence.

“Pah. You have been in my position before and will be again. Women are always being left by their men,” Edit said.

An hour later he entered a corner building on Wooster Street, at the north end of SoHo. The prestigious galleries and fancy boutiques Luther had passed on the cobblestone streets supported his sense that in leaving East Broadway, Janos Kador had moved up in the world. When he opened the door of the tight, narrow elevator, he stepped



directly into a space easily double the size of the Chinatown loft. Wires hung from the ceiling, an assortment of pipes of varying size and shape lay unassembled in a mound, and plaster powder covered the floors.

In the midst of this chaos, shirtless and wearing only a bowler hat and shorts and sneakers, knelt a man with a face as hard and tough as his wiry body, poring over a folded out diagram. Luther had read an inflammatory quote that Frank Sinatra weighed ninety-eight pounds, and that ninety-two of those pounds were in his dick. Surely the preponderance of Janos Kadar's meager weight was in his massive head. And he would need all the mental powers available to him, as at a glance Luther judged the diagram to be of considerable complexity and to contain figures of a kind that had appeared on the army intelligence test he had failed.

Reduced to superlatives by the spectacle of industry before him, Luther said, "You are an expansionist empire, a sleeping giant now awakened, like mainland China. You definitely have a plan. But if I may also say, my aunt came to this country and bought two buildings and now she lies dying."

"You are stupid American man, coming here with your stupid American noise," Janos Kadar replied, without looking up.

"That's not a very friendly thing to say."

"Hungarian people tell truth when not telling lies. You Americans. I spit on you. I laugh at you. I pull down my pants and take giant crap on you. And the more I do that the more you love me."

"Why is that?" Luther asked.

“Why? Why? Why you have to ask why all the time? Why you not just know something?”

“You just asked why. In fact, you asked why four times.”

But Janos felt no need to defend his obnoxious pronouncements. He simply went where the currents of his mind took him. “You bring check? You talking the turkey?”

“I am very much talking the turkey,” Luther said, unworried that Janos would pick up on his mockery. Janos might be a force—in fact, he and his wife together had been serving up some Hungarian clobber—but that didn’t mean Luther had to negate his own existence.

“Let me see.” Janos’s plaster dust-covered hand moved with the quickness of a snake for the check. “This a forgery? Some kind of swindle? You a crook?”

“No, no, and no,” Luther said.

“You too stupid for crook. Crook need this,” Janos said, tapping his temple, a harsh smile revealing his bad Hungarian teeth.

Luther had wanted to say something nice and even insightful to Janos Kadar. He had wanted to express his longstanding conviction that the Warsaw Pact countries would tear the asses off the wimpy Western European forces gathered together under NATO’s command, that Rumanians and Bulgarians and Albanians and Poles and Czechs would as well break the face of Western civilization in many different places. But now he couldn’t and wouldn’t. He had had just about enough of Janos Kadar.

Outside, Luther sat on a standpipe and sought to gather himself. He held his sides as if he had received a merciless flogging. After a while he began to walk. So this is

SoHo, he thought, passing under a beautiful corrugated metal awning sloping down over a disused loading dock. The image of a cold beer in a big, sweaty glass came to him. Soon he passed a bar with a cantilevered TV and soft amber lights. Let me go in, he said to himself. Let me be among friends.

Hungarian love is better than no love at all. This thought occurred to Luther as he came to the following morning. It hurt to move his head and he was a while before getting up and relieving the cottonmouth with a glass of water. Another thought came to him that morning, that he might be truly insane for turning over the key money to Janos Kadar and finalizing the deal. He stared with bleary eyes at himself in the mirror over the kitchen sink. You are stealing money, Luther. Your hand is in Mommy's pocketbook, as it was when you were a child. You are a thief. He heard the word in his mind as his mother would pronounce it. *Tief*, as in leaf. You must end this. You must stop. But how? He had "White Line Continue" to write. He had an acting career to launch. He had a girlfriend to be with so he didn't have to die and she wouldn't have to die. He had a piece of garbage degree, failing even to graduate with honors from a college with such low status that recruiters stayed away. What company would hire him? How could he possibly fit into an office environment? Interviewers would look at his mediocre transcript and embarrassing test scores and laugh.

But as the morning progressed his mood shifted. We're not going to do the monkey shit thing, Luther. We're not going to piss and shit all over our self and beg forgiveness. We're not going to reduce our self to nothingness. We're going to put the

laughing thing on this fear, this guilt, and remorse. We are going to move forward with our life and see what happens. No more old rugged cross, Luther. No more Calvary. No more tired old rocks of ancient Judea or whatever. No more gnashing of teeth and all that blah de blah blah blah. Do you want to be blown back into one of those shithole rooms of your sisters and brother? Do you want that? Well, do you? Jamais. Jamais. Take what is yours if the others are too timid to take what is theirs. Do not wear the hair shirt. Do not do the long-suffering thing. That's right, Luther. Laugh. Put that motherfucking laughing thing on the whole sorry business of your fear and get on with it.

Edit Kadar had invited Luther to a party that evening. He would have an opportunity to meet artists from the Chinatown community. In fact, the party was in a loft right across the street from where Luther and Sarah would be living and was hosted by a dear friend of Edit's, Olga Masaryk. Luther quickly discerned that Olga's husband, who had the unfortunate name Glyt, was a woman, too. It wasn't Glyt's ponytail. Many manly men wore their hair like a high school girl, including Hell's Angels and contract killers and slice and dice knife men of the night. Men named Bruce and Ron Doug and Bruno had ponytails. Nor was his womanliness determined by his scary smile, like that of a snake, or any other aspect of his appearance.

"I try not to take up space on the planet. That is why I write poems in very tiny handwriting so the reader needs a magnifying glass to read them."

"Why would you want to do such a thing, Glyt? Don't you see you are full of self-hatred when you try to hide yourself that way."

“There is no hiding. This is aesthetic, if you even know what the word means,” Glyt said, clearly annoyed by Luther’s question. “My wife is artist, too” he said, nodding to Olga, a woman as large as Glyt was slender. “Just this morning, with my friend Horvath, I carried a bathtub up all these flights and installed it. Now she can take all the baths she wants. That is good, is it not?”

“Oh yes, that is very good,” Luther said.

“So maybe now you have something more of criticism you want to make of me?” Glyt asked.

Glyt may have been a woman, but Luther suspected that he may also have been a homicidal woman. Some bottomless fury, ancient in origin, was informing his face. Across the room Luther saw a real woman staring at him even as she lifted a glass of wine to her mouth. “If you will excuse me,” Luther said.

“You been seeking to assign my worth, and now you are moving on?”

“Nothing of the kind, Glyt. Nothing of the kind. But it would be good to circulate, wouldn’t you agree?” Hearing himself as some English actor with an air of refinement.

“Do not make mockery of me. I burn your house down with you in it. Do you understand?”

“Oh yes, Glyt. I *do* understand. But let me leave you with this. Let reason prevail.”

“I don’t talk to you anymore. You are nothing. Nobody. You are not even air.”

“Yes, Glyt. It will not profit you to speak to someone who is not here.”

“Shut up your face. Just shut it up,” Glyt said.

Luther nodded, in deference to the enraged Glyt's imperative, and made his way to the woman. "I have been looking for you for a long time," he said.

"Is that some line you heard in a movie?" the woman asked.

"It could be," Luther said. "You take what is available to you."

"Does that apply to women as well?"

"Some air might be nice. Can we walk?"

"Sure," she said. Such a sexy, expressive word, opening the doors of heaven when she spoke it.

He paused to consider the wisdom of leaving with a woman he had just met. Hadn't Edit gone out of her way to introduce him to others living in the community? And had he not explained, more than once, that the loft was more for his girlfriend than for him? One in particular, to whom he had spoken, a sad-faced handsome man with earnest, compelling eyes, was staring at him from across the room that very moment. A filmmaker who lived where he worked, in the loft below Sarah and Luther's. Some kind of film production company he owned. A man rising on his own strength and innate capacity. A man with the goods, in looks as well as brains. Where did they come from? They couldn't all be in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile. A Dartmouth dropout. Gregory. John Gregory. Four years in the military. From Tennessee. Jesus, who knew what drove such a person?

But Luther couldn't wait. He would concoct a story later. What later? He was nothing to these people, except for crazy Glyt, who wanted to murder him.

He told the woman, Lindsay, about the loft but not about Sarah. She was poor, just out of the Peace Corps. A two-year stint in Kenya where she had taught and tried to

nurture malnourished children. Essex, Delancey, Rivington, Stanton. Up they walked to East Houston and on into the East Village, where she lived.

A storefront on East Fourth Street, with a boarded-up window that bulged into the street. Who knew what it had been? A grocery? A hardware store? A store such as Luigi, the building upholsterer, had moved into years before up on First Avenue, in Germantown. At the back a four-step staircase leading to a door and her private quarters. An artist, she was. A storefront artist, not a loft artist, for now.

She opened a bottle of wine. Red wine. The kind with a foil wrap and a cork.

“I’m an alcoholic,” she said, as she sat cross-legged and applied the corkscrew.

“What?”

“I’m an alcoholic,” she said.

“Why are you that?” Luther said. The word disturbed him beyond his ability to say.

“Because when I open a bottle I have to finish it,” she said.

“But suppose you’re sharing the bottle with someone?”

“Then I have to open two,” she said.

“Jesus,” Luther said.

“Jesus liked his wine, but I don’t think he was an alcoholic. Although if he lived long enough, who knows?”

“Jesus living on the Bowery?”

“You never know. He could be there right now.”

“You’re scaring me,” Luther said.

“Why am I scaring you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because if I’m one, then maybe you are, too?”

“I said I don’t know.”

“It’s not the worst thing. My father was a drunk and he got sober.”

“Sober?”

“He doesn’t drink anymore.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun,” Luther said.

“I agree, so let’s drink up.”

She had a life force all her own that had told her who she was and where she needed to be. It had settled her on the Boston Museum School long before she had arrived, as if Park Row and the Fenway had been her destiny. But now that same school was saying she must go off on her own. It did not want her anymore, and told her so emphatically in giving the fifth year competition award to the genius, who had already flown off to Greece with the prize money and was sending her brilliant letters about his travels. Such a thing genius was that to get near it was to be burned by its bright flame. And Sarah had been badly burned.

“He has killed me all over again,” Sarah said.

“No he hasn’t. He hasn’t killed you or anyone.”

“What do you know? Are you a genius? Are you anything?” Sarah said.



“I don’t know. Am I?” he said. It wasn’t a club she hadn’t beaten him with before, and though the wound smarted, he had faith it would not be life-threatening. She was disappointed. That was all. She was saying that she had nowhere to go but to him, but that didn’t mean she had to be happy about her situation. Many, many times she had said she was born to live alone, childless and husbandless, and that a family life was not suitable for her. Because she had a vision. She wanted for herself the life neither her father nor her mother were able to take.

She did not hear his question, or if she did, she ran right over it. “If I am to live with you, you will have to sign a contract,” she said.

“What kind of contract?”

“A contract that you’re not going to push me around. You’re not going to dictate to me. Can you do that?”

“Sure. Draw up a contract and I’ll sign it.” He found himself laughing in a way that later made him uneasy. An image of his mother laughing after saying they were living in the last days came to him, her laughter fed by his furious protest. He saying to her, in the long ago, in his child’s voice, “You have had your life. Can you please allow me to have mine? Can you do that? Can you?” As if enjoying the fear she had elicited in him that he would burn and burn in hell unless he were just like her. Yes, yes, the laughter of someone who had power over him, as he was now exercising it over Sarah with his laughter. We cannot have this. We cannot have this. These words too he heard, in his mother’s voice, in reference to his laughter.

The roar of the trains rumbling over the Manhattan Bridge carried to the loft, causing it to vibrate. Edit had said they would get used to both the noise and the shaking, Luther recalled, and after a week he did. Something else he got used to was her, Sarah, the two of them living together. It was good to go to sleep with her and to get up with her, in the continuity of days. Finally, finally, the geographical barrier had been removed. The finish line—that improbable five-year plan—had been reached. Union, of a kind, had been reached.

No contract was needed; he didn't hear from her about a written agreement again. The shared purpose of organizing the loft, placing their modest stamp on it, fostered a sense of harmony, as did the sense that a new and possibly exciting chapter of their lives was beginning. And possibly she was grateful for the security he was providing. She was her father's daughter, at a loss how to move forward in the world outside of the structure of school.

“You cannot build a life on a lie. No architect builds a house on quicksand. Only time will tell what you have made. You have done nothing for me, while I have done everything for you, but I am not in this profession for gratitude. I am in it for healing.” So Dr. Dressler said, at what she announced was their last session.

“You sound so bitter,” Luther said.

“Three years with you would make any person bitter. I feel for your mother, your siblings, and for Sarah and her family. “

“You don't have to be talking this way,” Luther said.

“I asked you to do a simple thing, to write a report stating the progress you had made while in my care. And you did not do it. You refused.”

“Yes,” Luther said.

“Why? Why would you do such a thing?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I asked you to lie down, and you wouldn’t do that either. For three years you cast your eyes on me like a mongoose eyes a snake.”

“Do you want me to lie down and die? Would that make you happy?”

“I am not your mother. Do not start this sort of thing with me.”

She was tagging him with the guilt she sought to induce. She was letting him go without letting him go. She was saying she would see him again sometime in the future. Well, it was as it was.

The walls in the living area were too uniformly white. Their whiteness was confining, oppressive. And so they knocked down the plaster on the portion of wall behind the box spring they had bought at the Salvation Army in order to expose the brick. With hammers and chisels they worked away, covering their mouths with scarves. The plaster came loose in large and small pieces.

At night, as Sarah lay in bed, he stayed up and drank beer, trying to hush the sound of the pull tab on the cans he opened. The unfinished project was a burden. He was not built to tolerate disorder. He was not Janos Kadar.

Halfway through Luther began to fear that structural damage might be done and that the owners might not share his and Sarah's aesthetic appreciation of exposed brick with a coating of shellac to seal in the dirt. Suppose they were hit with a bill for damages? Suppose they were evicted? He began to worry that the job would never end. When the plaster was entirely off the wall, the hard part of hauling it downstairs in plastic garbage bags began. Even when the plaster was sitting bagged by the curb, the problem wasn't entirely solved. Day after day the bags stayed in place, as evidence of the destruction they had wrought.

From his window one night, he saw a dark green garbage truck pull to the curb. Santorelli Brothers, the name on the side of the truck said. Santorelli. Like Santino. Like Corleone. Like bodies, human bodies, as well as garbage could be crunched in the truck's maw and wind up in the belly of the beast. I am messing with the Mob, Luther thought. They control this area. I am showing them colossal disrespect in assuming they will pick up bags of my garbage. They will learn I am responsible and sleep me with the fishes.

A thirty-foot dumpster was sitting down the block. For an hour Luther hauled one heavy bag after another and, with maximum effort, deposited them over the side of the dumpster. Exhausted and aching, he drank his beer that night and peered out the window. Suppose Santorelli Brothers owned the dumpster as well? Suppose they came with their gloved hands and broke his bones in many places and said, "You want a fucking dumpster? We'll give you a dumpster," and threw him in it, too.

But no posse of the aggrieved arrived at his door to break his bones or take issue with him in any way, and for this he was relieved and grateful.

The floors were a light and unappealing gray. And so, starting with her studio, they gave the boards a coat of high-gloss forest green. The project was much easier on his nerves than the wall had been. No landlord could object to tenants brightening their property.

“We did it,” Luther said, admiring the gleaming floor after the paint had dried.

“Yes. We did,” Sarah said.

Luther went over to the sink area, where he broke the seal on a pint bottle of Clan MacGregor scotch. Then he poured the scotch into a glass and added some tap water. He now drank scotch in the bars when he got impatient with the beer and wanted to speed up the action so he could get there faster. There was that happy place, which he knew when he found it. And now he could do the same thing at home.

He turned, and as he raised the glass to his lips, saw Sarah standing in front of him. She had arrived so quietly, almost mysteriously, from her studio.

“Luther, people in my family don’t drink this way.”

With those few words she summoned a feeling of unbearable shame, as if she had stripped him bare and was now shining a glaring light on his weakness, his sickness. Her tone, free of judgment, only added to the force of her words. She had taken a mental snapshot, far more revelatory than the endless photos he took of her.

A set of shelves and cabinets, the top portion designed to serve as a loft bed, divided the living area from her studio. She turned and went back through the underpass to her easel. Relieved that she had left him to himself and was now out of sight, he went over to the bed and sat on it, still holding onto the glass. Drinking the scotch wasn’t the

same now that she had said what she did, and yet he couldn't just throw it away. She had said he was a cripple, a man who needed a crutch because he couldn't make it on his own. As gross as a grown man who had not been weaned from his mother. And she was right. Her family didn't drink the way he did. An old fashioned before dinner, maybe a drink after dinner, and that was it. Peter didn't just break the seal on a bottle and drink all by himself, as Luther did. But it wasn't right, the fact that Sarah would stop him in his tracks just when his train was leaving the station. That was what wasn't right. His new life had barely begun. She was trying to take away from him the very thing he needed to survive and flourish.

“I like happy endings. I've always been that way. Did you know that about me?” He had come into her studio as she stood with a brush in hand at her easel. “Audie Murphy had just come home from the war to learn his mother had died. He leaned his head against a wall and closed his eyes. That was unbearable sorrow. Unbearable. Poor Audie Murphy.” Audie Murphy had been a World War II hero who became an actor, playing himself in one war movie.

“Everyone likes happy endings, Luther. But I'm working. Can't you see that?”

“Yes, I do. OK,” he said, and went back to the glass he had left in the living area.

In the morning, when he was further away from his shame, he said, “Please, you have to understand. Drinking takes away my anxiety, but it's more than that. It helps me with my writing. I can't explain, but it's true. All those writers I read about in the *Paris Review* interviews drink. Truman Capote drinks and William Faulkner, he drank. Norman

Mailer drinks. All of them. I'll do this. I promise to drink only beer and wine in the loft. I mean, that's not really drinking. How would that be?"

"Fine. It's OK, Luther. It's OK," Sarah said, as if she were no longer the person who had said those earlier words to him and he was speaking about things that didn't need to be said, at least to her.

The Van Dines came to visit. Though fatigued from their long climb up the stairs, Lydia reached into her bag for a smoke. But Peter did some conspicuous sniffing of the air.

"Am I smelling gas?" He asked, while reaching for Lydia's arm so she wouldn't light her Tareyton. He moved toward the kitchen area. "That isn't a pipe. It's a garden hose. Someone has hooked up a garden hose to run from the gas outlet to the water heater." He moved closer. "And good God, the hose has been sealed at either end with duct tape. *Duct tape* Who did this?"

Peter's father had been a plumber. Peter had grown up with admiration for his father's skill and loved him for the sacrifices he had made so Peter could go on to college. Peter did not forget where he had come from; his life was about remembering.

"Luther and I didn't do that, Daddy. It was that way when we moved in."

"Janos Kadar. Janos Kadar did it," Luther said.

"Janos Kadar?" Lydia asked.

"The previous tenant. He knows a thing or two about plumbing. Maybe he learned it in Budapest, or wherever in Hungary he is from. He came to this country with only a change of underwear and now is putting the finishing touches on a loft double this size on

Wooster Street, in SoHo. I saw the evidence of his competence with my own eyes.

Diagrams of unbelievable complexity and mounds of piping and Janos sitting amid this chaos smiling serenely, the master plan clearly fixed in his mind.” So Luther said.

“This Janos obviously means something to you,” Lydia said.

“Excellence does have a way of standing out, but so does lunacy. And this handiwork is decidedly the latter,” Peter said.

“Yes. Well, we’ll deal with it. But why don’t we all sit? That was a lot of stairs to climb,” Luther said, ushering Sarah’s parents toward the wicker sofa, which creaked and sagged under their weight. He then opened the chicken wire window that looked out on a back alley to lessen the smell. A thought came to him to take flight, not out the window, but out the door. The pain of having Sarah’s parents’ eyes on the loft was almost too much to bear. Those old feelings, from childhood, were still there in him, the shame he had experienced when Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy had made their surprise visit and then let one and all at the school know he lived in what they called a “pigsty.”

“Honey, where is the stove? All I see is a refrigerator,” Lydia asked.

“We don’t have a stove. We have a hot plate. See?” Sarah said, standing up and pointing to the two-burner old thing that the Kadars had left behind along with the creaky wicker furniture and a filthy shower curtain.

“A hot plate? You can boil water and heat soup on a hot plate. That’s about it,” Lydia said.

“That’s all we need it for. Luther eats those ramen noodles. All you need to do is add boiling water and you’re done. And he eats slices of rye bread sprinkled with salt.”



“Rye bread sprinkled with salt?” Peter made a face.

“He says that Leon Trotsky subsisted on that regimen while in a czarist prison camp.”

“But Honey, Luther and you are not living in a czarist prison camp. You are living in Chinatown and in a city with great food resources.” So Lydia also said.

“Right. Chinatown. Luther and I go to Joy Palace, right down the block and get the house special, Joy Palace steak on a bed of bright broccoli.”

“I see,” Lydia said, from the vantage point of a woman who had poured her vast energy and intelligence into homemaking. Luther was certain that she did see, and that what she was seeing was so far below her own standard of good living as to be painful. Down and down he spiraled, to that place of excruciating self-consciousness, as if, in seeing where and how they lived, Lydia and Peter were seeing right into the core of him—his low IQ, his low board scores, his naked underweight frame, his flat head. All this they had access to when they walked through the door. In less than two weeks of living together, he had managed to corrupt their daughter and bring her down to his own feeble level.

They headed into Sarah’s studio, Lydia having expressed a desire to see her work. Sarah had wrapped and sewn canvas, such as used for a drop cloth, around cylinders of foam to create a long, thick sphere. Like a giant snake the thing lay on the floor, its phallic symbolism all too obvious. Luther stared with dismay at the splattering of paint in the area around Sarah’s easel. The droppings were a reminder that while she had her domestic side, in her studio order would be secondary to art.

“Oh, honey, it’s so creative, so expressive. You are growing so much.”

Luther saw what he often saw, that Lydia was a brave woman, always there exhorting and encouraging. She really did try to live in the light, all the more, he suspected, because darkness was so close by. And why wouldn’t darkness be close by? Her mother dying in an iron lung; her father a suicide; a lonely childhood at Camp with her dowager grandmother and an uncle rendered unreliable by his alcoholism; and then for her prize daughter, Lenore, to take her own life, driven to that place of despair by an Adonis of a boy, as Peter had been her Adonis. It brought Luther to a place of weariness to hear such cheerleading, as if Lydia were resisting a foe as implacable as the ocean tide in her daughter. And yet he sensed that his heart, which opened to her now, would close again. It would have to.

Peter’s response to the work was more restrained. “There are father’s daughters and then there are father’s daughters,” he simply said.

Luther was relieved when they all left the loft for Joy Palace, even if the restaurant was an indicator of their failure as hosts.

“You sit,” Shing Lo, their waiter, said, as he placed menus on the table and followed with glasses of water, a pot of tea, and small cups. In less than two weeks the old man with the opaque, solemn face and padding gait had come to represent the mysteriousness of the neighborhood into which they had moved. Disappointment, scorn, sorrow—all manner of emotion Luther ascribed to him. What kind of journey had it been that brought a person of obvious intelligence to serve platters of food, including fish with their heads still on them, to strangers? Did he live alone? Did he have family? Was he

from the mainland? From Hong Kong? It wasn't Luther's place to ask. Shing Lo was Charlie Chan, from the days of his childhood. He wanted only to be good for Shing Lo.

What he really wanted was for Peter and Lydia to be gone. They were too good for the loft and too good for the plain décor of the restaurant. He wanted to be alone with Sarah again.

And when they were, he said, "I felt embarrassed that we have only a hot plate and not a stove. Growing up, I saw that my older sisters did not cook but relied on my mother to serve them food. Your parents seeing that we don't cook brings me closer to these sisters in my associations, and that is painful."

"You're brooding over the wrong thing," Sarah replied.

"And what would the right thing be?" Luther asked.

She pointed upward. "How about that little matter of the garden hose?"

"Oh, right," he replied.

Though I am not Janos Kadar, I can do the things that Janos Kadar does, if in a smaller way, Luther thought, having assembled the pieces of piping that he would need. And he was sure to have a wrench to make the connections fast, and a stepladder, too, to reach the gas outlet suspended from the ceiling. As he prepared to begin, he imagined a great ball of fire and the end of his and Sarah's days. Safety was essential. Thoroughness was essential.

After shutting off the gas valve, he checked twice to be sure the flame had gone out on the water heater. Then he applied sealing compound to an elbow and attached it to

the mouth of the gas outlet. From there he added a long length of straight pipe and then another elbow for the descent to the mouth of the water heater, just above the floor. But would the last section fit or would it be too long or too short? Would he need some hideous apparatus to cut pipe and another gizmo to add threads to that cut pipe? Jesus, what had he gotten himself into? But he found that the joined pieces were not a rigid construct; they could be moved to accommodate the last short section of pipe.

He had done it. He had constructed a gas pipeline.

That the gas flow was unmetered and being stolen from Con Edison was not an issue. Janos Kadar had evidently given no thought to the matter in all the years he had lived at the Chinatown loft, and so Luther would dismiss all such thoughts of the theft from his mind. What he could not dismiss from his mind, at least for a few days, was the fear that the piping would fall in a loud clatter to the floor, to be followed by the strong smell of gas permeating the loft.

And so, just as safety and thoroughness had been his watchwords when assembling the connection, vigilance was now key. As the water heater was near the toilet, both Sarah and he must be sure not to grab hold of the pipe when lowering themselves or raising themselves from the toilet seat.

“Can you do that, Sarah?”

“I believe I can, Luther,” Sarah said.

“OK. Now comes the test. Let’s light up,” Luther said. Because, in deference to Peter’s concern, they had gone out on the fire escape to cop their smokes, and now here

they were right there in the loft. “Are you ready? Have you made your peace with your maker in case its ka-boom?” Luther went on.

Sarah shrugged, then struck a match and put the flame to her Tareyton. Luther followed suit with the Marlboro he had extracted from the crush-proof box.

“So far, so good,” Luther said.

“So far, so good,” Sarah agreed.

“You can’t learn to swim the English Channel by reading Proust,” Bill Lahr said, that first day of classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Luther was to learn that he was a man who lived for pith and who would have you hang on his every word because, in the sag of his middle age, he had nothing else to attract you. He kept a pack of Larks on his desk, a Ronson lighter centered on them to signify his need for external order, but Luther was not fooled by his sad, wistful smile. He saw that Bill Lahr had a fire burning within him as hot and bright as the tip of his smoke when he drew on it. The force with which he suddenly slammed his hand down on the desk in demonstration of the deep reserves of emotion an actor had to be able to tap served as confirmation that he had the capacity for conflagration.

Bill Lahr was saying that Luther’s paperback novels, even the entire *Remembrance of Things Past* in those handsome Vintage editions, would not cut it.

“Can you be an open book? Can your face serve as your novel? Can you tell a story with a gesture?” This too Bill Lahr said.

Bill Lahr is a drinker. He sits at a bar at night as he now sits at his desk, only he has a scotch to go with his Lark cigarettes. Because the alcohol is the only way that he can deal with the fire within. This too Luther thought, picturing Bill Lahr in some quiet East Side tavern sipping scotch amid clouds of smoke.

Bill Lahr said, "I want each of you to stand in front of the class and do an activity that requires you to concentrate. The goal is for the activity to have your undivided attention."

One girl did figures in her checkbook, bringing it up to date. Another held a hand mirror as she brushed her hair. Another applied eyeliner. A man tried to correctly assemble the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

"Aces," Bill Lahr said, after each one, or "Simply aces," showing that while he was full of fire, he had the exhortatory and encouraging impulse required of a good teacher, which was all he probably was by then. Because you needed a job by day to be able to sit at a bar by night. This too Luther also thought, seeking to meet pith with pith.

Luther understood that Bill Lahr was saying he should lose himself, that is, lose his self-consciousness, and remembered a time when, in the E. S. Wilentz bookstore on Eighth Street, he looked up from Rimbaud's *Illuminations* to see a pretty girl staring at him. And why was she staring at him? Because she saw that for that moment at least he had something more than himself, an interest in the things of life, and this interest excited her, made of him someone worth knowing, made of him a challenge. Could she ever be as interesting to him as his book? These moments were precious but also painful, enough to bring him to his knees in recognition that there was a world ready to shower him, even

him, with adulation, if he could only engage himself in the proper way, if he could only achieve.

And so Luther was ready when his time came. He stood and went before the class with his copy of *Swann's Way* and began to read silently from the spellbinding overture, in which young Swann blows out the candle and falls asleep only to dream that he is still reading. He read to the bottom of the page and onto the next when Bill Lahr cut in, only he didn't say "Aces" or "Simply aces" or some such. Bill Lahr said, "I'm not feeling it," in a tone that lacked all warmth.

"What is this *it* you are not feeling?" Luther inquired, to a ripple of laughter.

"I am not feeling you. That is the *it* I am not feeling. Authentic absorption is lacking. Next."

And though Luther felt dismissed and put down and had a resentment against Bill Lahr, he had to acknowledge the truth of what the teacher had said. Authentic absorption had been lacking. His mind had been on those watching him all the time. Even Proust had not been sufficient to pull him from preoccupation with how others were perceiving him.

As often was the case, he dwelt not on the thing at hand but in the realm of the personal, finding this or that to note about each member of the playhouse faculty. The voice teacher, Mr. Groon, was ashamed of himself that he was a voice teacher and nothing more. This Luther understood when a celebrity graduate of the playhouse whom Mr. Groon professed to know and know well came to visit and Mr. Groon was nowhere to be seen, though he had been clearly visible before the guest's arrival and after her

departure. Luther took it as a sign of some deep shame abiding in the man as to who he was or could ever hope to be.

Of course, Mr. Groon had his own shame meter, as when he said to Luther, in the context of no context and yet it in the context of everything, “CCNYU,” as if to say, with supreme concision, that he knew Luther’s origins, his rank in the world, everything he couldn’t be.

And there was a movement teacher, Miss Borden, who said, “Your bones are too stiff. They are not meant for this,” when he showed up in jeans and not the tights the others, male as well as female, had put on.

As if the three teachers saw, understood, that he was lost and lesser than the kind needed to make the grade. That even here, in the arts, you could not escape a ranking. As if they were saying, “You need to stop and think about who you are, but not too much, lest you grow even more depressed.”

Luther brought his mind to attention on the students, too. They did not escape his detection, and in some cases, his love as well.

Ron Rocco was his name, and it can be surmised that he too had seen *The Godfather*, and so had come from the UC Berkeley campus to the playhouse to also follow in the footsteps of Al Pacino and even surpass him. White T-shirts and jeans were his staple dress. He had to live with great economy, he said, as he was getting through college on scholarships and loans his transcript of straight As had earned him.

“Do you see a silver spoon in my mouth? Well, do you?” Ron Rocco demanded, and Luther had to say he didn’t.



“I am Mr. Intensity,” Ron Rocco went on. “That is how I have gotten to where I am.”

“And where is that?” Luther dared to ask.

“Don’t fuck with me. I am Italian and I read minds,” Ron Rocco replied, and though a statement of fact had been followed by an assertion, Luther was not inclined to be disputatious with him, lest Ron Rocco inflict his Italian wrath on him.

Ron Rocco did not love or even like Luther, but had an affinity of some kind with him, seeing that Luther was relegated to the margins of life and he would be too, in spite of his great expenditures of energy, for at the end of the day Ron Ricco was still Ron Ricco, and nothing he said or did could change that. Being that he was, like Luther, in the assessment business, he dropped a bomb on him, saying, “You need a massive personality reconstruction.” A context could be requested, but what context is to be had when Ron Ricco approaches him with this truth as Luther is catching some sun outside the playhouse during the lunch hour? Like Smoking Joe Frazier putting the clobber on Muhammad Ali with a ferocious left hook did Ron Ricco come at Luther, but Luther did not fall down dead on the sidewalk, crushed with a system-destroying blow to the temple. He somehow slipped under the intended wrath and let it just whoosh on by, though forever the statement was to orbit within the circuitry of his brain.

Every group has its shining star, the one in whose light the others can only bask, having denied themselves the discovery of a light source of their own. Such a person was Robin Sedgwick, his status certified by the pedigree of his name. He had the necessities to go far, but his heart belonged to Daddy, who was calling him back to his oilfields in

Oklahoma even as Robin felt the pull of the stage and screen. The beauty and power of his deep-set eyes and the handsomeness of his face were strangely enhanced by the lingering acne that roughened his full cheeks.

O that this too too solid flesh would melt

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God God

Mr. Groon had them recite Hamlet's soliloquy, and Robin Sedgwick put his laughing thing on Luther for his diction and his deadpan manner. Luther had shown Rob Sedgwick his nature and the limits of his talent with that one scene, and so Robin Sedgwick had no need to feel unsafe with Luther from that point on.

They were mostly passing faces on his journey, as if there wasn't enough to hold onto, but they were also faces that stayed in his mind, and so they existed as a record of where he was and who he was with and gave some texture to his days beyond simply continuing to work on "White Line, Continue" and also to avoid the oblivion portal toward which he was headed. Because someone had to know—someone—that amid the viciousness of rushing vehicles and the ceaseless rise of new and taller buildings, he had existed and to acknowledge his existence. If he could not count on anyone else providing the documentation, then he must do so himself.

Along with a feeling of joy at having been taken into Robin's circle of warmth, Luther had misgivings, the fear that he would do or say the wrong thing in Robin's company during those lunches at McCann's Bar and Grill, up on Third Avenue. Not that

he was alone with Robin. Alvin Cordet had come along from Penn to study at the playhouse as well, and where Robin went that summer, so did Alvin, with his long, sunken face and the level stare of those mournful basset hound eyes. Maybe it was the things he had seen that made him look older than his twenty-four years. He had spent time in the army, including a tour in Vietnam, before entering college, and Luther came to sense that Alvin was silently communicating that he knew things he wasn't saying, and that those things included things about Robin more than the things Robin himself had said, such as his adulation of Merle Haggard for those wise, sad love songs he wrote and sang. Robin's spontaneous admission about Merle Haggard only added to his stature in Luther's book. It said something to Luther that someone with Robin Sedgwick's looks and material as well as physical endowment could also be such everyday people. But Alvin Cordet's face was saying his knowledge of Robin Sedgwick went beyond his musical tastes and that although he was sworn to secrecy about this knowledge, if you hung around long enough then possibly you would know what he knew, too. What Luther came to see was that Alvin Cordet's face was not so much a face as a mask, and that the man who looked out from behind that mask was intent on ascertaining the degree of astonishment you felt at the simple ugliness of it. But the thing of Alvin Cordet's knowingness about Robin Sedgwick was this. He offered a smile when Robin Sedgwick expressed his interest in some girl or another at the playhouse, which Luther might have dismissed as sheer envy on the part of Alvin that his buddy could effortlessly attract girls in a way Alvin Cordet could only dream of, if not for the day that Alvin said to Luther, "Robin likes to drive on both sides of the road."

“What is that supposed to mean?” Luther replied, wanting to be sure that Alvin wasn’t signifying more than he could deliver.

“Is Robin the name of a boy or a girl?” Alvin asked.

“I see,” Luther said, not saying that what he saw, more than anything about Robin, his reticence and unease generated not by Alvin Cordet’s smile as by the flames of a laughing hell in his eyes. Luther became afraid, as if Alvin Cordet was mocking him with a glimpse of his own tormented unknown. It was not territory for Luther to wander carelessly into; even in a corrupted life, he had some sense of propriety. Alvin Cordet, if Luther read him correctly, was signaling a proclivity for lewdness and extending an invitation to join him. In that moment Luther saw Robin Sedgwick as Prince Hal and Alvin Cordet as a prurient Falstaff long on lechery and short on honor, an assessment he felt compelled to moderate as too harsh and undeserved for his conscience to allow; Alvin Cordet might be a lonely boy but he nevertheless merited respect, as he was U of P, and fools were not allowed to set foot in that particular paradise.

Alvin Cordet’s innuendo notwithstanding, Robin Sedgwick was seen driving on only one side of the road that summer, having claimed a girl from the playhouse as his own. Her name was Cassie Dintenfass, and the light that was in her blond hair was in her mind and being as well. She had come from behind a white picket fence in small-town America to become a Broadway star, though no one was fooled into believing that she placed fame above love.

Now if Luther had closed the door on participating in the lewdness of Alvin Cordet, he had of course long since opened it in regard to himself. A great leap forward

was the screen performance of John C. Holmes doing it to the women who presumably wanted to have it done to them with his gigantic dong, and it came as a source of amazement as well as arousal to Luther one afternoon in the locker room following a class in movement that Robin Sedgwick had an apparatus of commensurate size. And so he would stare in wonder at Cassie Dintenfass, his mind inevitably seized by the image of her accommodating someone with the massive tool of Robin Sedgwick between her long thin legs.

Some mornings, riding the First Avenue bus to the playhouse, Luther thought of the “white line, continue” life he was betraying in venturing out into the world in this unlikely way. He asked himself what kind of life he was creating for himself, given that it was built on so much air. Would it not be better to go someplace, like NYU (not CCNYU, Mr. Groon), and study Spanish, so he could have a solid footing in this world? What was it to live in New York City and know only three words, cerveza and vente, meda, of that language, unless you were to include the expletive mardecon? I am air and my life is air, he thought on such mornings. I really am a hanging string, just as Miss Schnell, the cat lady from my mother’s building, said in the long ago.

As the bus moseyed up First Avenue, he stared out at the shimmering green skin of glass on the United Nations and thought, I have never so much as set foot in that building, let alone the General Assembly, and of how Cary Grant did exactly that on some glorious day, also in the long ago, when he fled from the Plaza Hotel and a posse of the righteous to that landmark seeking to avoid arrest for a murder he hadn’t committed,

before further fleeing to Grand Central Station for his rendezvous with Eve-Marie Sainte on the New York Central's Chicago Limited. And what was all of that but heaven in Luther's mind, the East Side commingled with Cary Grant, the two together giving new meaning to the word *excellence* in a way that made Luther indescribably happy, as did the sight of a coffee shop along the route, Luther saying, Oh what I would not give to stop in there every day of my life for a vanilla malted, poured from a metal shaker, though it was not a beverage he any longer drank, as his mind sought to find permanence in all that was evanescent.

I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want to be good. I just want to be love itself. Such was Luther's mindset in his time at the playhouse. And most acutely did this aspiration apply to his interaction with Robin Sedgwick, as it was not every day that someone of his caliber, with his U of P status and physical beauty and endowment, allowed him into his life. He must not disappoint Robin Sedgwick. Such was his feeling. Robin Sedgwick represented the bounty of America, as Sarah and Roddy Blakely had represented it. And what was the bounty of America? It was excellence in the bright light of day, all shadows banished. Everything was in America as it could not be elsewhere. He had been to Europe, and knew a retirement community when he saw one. And so you did not mess around when people who embodied the best of the USA appeared.

On this one night, toward the end of the playhouse term, he went out drinking with Robin Sedgwick and Alvin Cordet and Cassie Dintenfass. As they entered the subway at Fifty-ninth Street and Columbus Circle, Cassie walked with Luther behind

Robin Sedgwick and Alvin Cordet, and said to him, "I don't want to go home alone. Will you come home with me?" Robin would not be with her that night, she explained. By now they had reached the turnstile. At the moment of her asking he did not have the power to refuse, because when a woman opened a door you were obliged to walk through.

Robin gave him a look of smiling surprise and even shook his fist when he saw Luther heading with Cassie for the stairway instead of following with him to the downtown platform, and Robin continued with his remonstrations, shaking his fist but with that smile still on his face, as Luther and Cassie stood moments later across the four sets of tracks on the uptown platform. Because Robin was complex, but he was also from a part of the country where a man knew who he was and when he was being wronged in a matter involving the woman he loved.

The night had no rhythm to it, a silence falling between Luther and Cassie that he was unable to break as the train roared north, as if, in the absence of Robin, they had been rendered strangers to each other. And the awkwardness continued all the way to her older sister's apartment on Riverside Drive where she was staying, her sister being away for the summer. He didn't quite know why he was with Cassie and he wasn't sure she knew either, and yet he was willing to live with that discomfort, as evidently she was too, though he was grateful when she went off to bed in the one-bedroom apartment after offering the sofa and some bedding to him. And so he called Sarah to tell her he would be back in the morning, given the lateness of the hour, and that he was staying over with friends from the playhouse.

On the side table he had seen the bottles of scotch and gin and vodka, and now they were calling to him. But the apartment was small and tense with the sound of active listening. He imagined Cassie lying in bed monitoring the situation for any movement toward her he might make. He waited ten minutes, and after another ten, was still wide awake. But if sleep hadn't come to him, he could reasonably assume Cassie had fallen off. By the light of a standing lamp next to the sofa, he headed for the liquor supply and filled a sixteen-ounce glass half full of scotch before adding tap water from the kitchen sink.

Jesus, the scotch tasted good, soft and smooth, and it also had the magic effect of burning away his imprisoning diffidence. Now he couldn't go to sleep. Now Cassie wasn't in dreamland but waiting, perhaps impatiently, for him to come to her. Why should he live in the shadow of Robin Sedgwick, or of anyone? Why?

But he did not have to go to Cassie. The bedroom door opened and she appeared in a thigh-length robe, in transit to the bathroom.

"Are you still up?" she asked, when she returned.

"I had some trouble falling asleep," he said.

"What are you drinking?"

"Just something to help me sleep," he said.

"Why couldn't you sleep?"

"I don't know. I was thinking of you and Robin and Alvin, I guess."

"What were you thinking?"

"Just stuff. I don't know."



“Tell me,” she said, sitting down beside him on the sofa.

“Actually, I started off thinking about Robin and Alvin and you, but then all I could think about was you. You came to occupy my mind. You just became this great presence in my mind, in the room. I guess I shouldn’t say such a thing to you.”

She reached for his glass and took a sip. “Why shouldn’t you say such a thing to me?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I mean, Robin and all.”

“Nothing is obvious. Nothing,” she said, bringing her face close to his.

The wonder that night was that Cassie took him to her bed, his meager endowment no deterrent. Though he was not Robin Sedgwick, Cassie responded to his touch. Even so, there was a price for his pleasure. When morning came, he shook in horror at what he had done and the consequences he would have to face. My life is not good, he thought. I am not good, he thought, as sleep continued its hold on Cassie.

What he did not understand was that Cassie’s time with Robin Sedgwick was over. Robin Sedgwick had taken his big gun and used it on other women at the playhouse. For that reason, and maybe others it was not for Luther to comprehend, Robin Sedgwick did not break his jaw in many places when the weekend passed and Luther encountered him at the playhouse the following Monday.

But Cassie did not allow Luther back in. She had plumbed his depth, extracted his essence, and was now moving on. Because like Robin, she was unattached, or only temporarily attached, a way Luther couldn’t be, not fully. He still had his new life with

Sarah, the life he had waited five years for, and it had just begun, even if there were distractions.

And he still had the building, too. That had not gone away either. He saw the sadness of the arrangement, the string that tied him to his family. He saw it every evening he came over to the West Side from the playhouse for his shift in the renting office. And he heard the voices of those who lived or worked there and recorded them, because they too were now a part of “White Line Continue” if he was to show where he had come from. And everything he did or said or heard, or that was done to him, must go into the novel.

Nothing must be wasted. Nothing.

He heard the voice of Hannah, saying as she often did, “No one deprives my son. And no one deprives me either. No one. You pay your rent, you Pakistani towel head, or I’ll come out there and cut off your beard and your goddamn ears.”

And he heard the man, not a Pakistani but a Sikh, with a turban shaped like the prow of a ship, say, “But are you in your senses that you speak in such a manner?”

And heard as well, Hannah retort, “This is America. We speak as we please.”

And felt no love for his oldest sister that she should speak in such a way to a man of obvious intelligence and refinement, from a culture she knew nothing or little about, a man who had journeyed far from home to further himself only to be berated by a woman who had gone nowhere.

And heard his mother as well say, “But what ails you, Hannah, that you speak in such a way. We cannot have this,” when she happened upon the scene.

*You lack forgiveness. You have no compassion in your heart.* So Dr. Dressler had said to him when he spoke poorly of his older sisters. And he supposed she was right. Life had hit Hannah hard. He should try to understand what it meant being the oldest and bearing the brunt of parental dictates. It wasn't her fault that she was a creature of moods, bursting with good cheer one day and in the darkest depths the next. She was disappointed. That was all. Disappointed in herself, in her life. She had failed. She hadn't measured up. A graduate of a lesser college, Long Island University. A legal secretary when she could have been so much more. There had been men, men who came and went. She expected them to leave. There was no cause to claim heartbreak because they did. The sailor from the Greek navy no different, even when she found she was pregnant. A man adrift with nothing but his seaman's papers and his anger. No, she had not really wanted him, but she had wanted the baby. After all, Naomi had already given birth, and now it wouldn't do to go through the rest of her life without a child of her own, not with Naomi taunting and belittling her with that cruel mouth, and whispering that Daddy was the only husband she would ever know, and when Hannah began to show, that Daddy was in fact the father. And Rachel no better with her taunts. Living in a room given her by their mother on the same floor as the apartment. Sharing that room with her newborn son. The son not bringing her everything she had hoped for in the way of happiness. Oh, he was a gift all right, but then having to live with all the talk. A woman giving birth out of wedlock. And then the cancer. The removal of her left breast in its entirety three years after the birth of her son. Still young she was when that happened. And the following year the lawsuit she filed after tripping over a partially open cellar grate outside a

neighborhood hardware store. Why wouldn't she file a lawsuit? She had fallen to the pavement and struck her head. Shouted for a lawyer before she shouted for an ambulance. Said then and there to the concerned owner that she would sue him for every penny and gave him a tremendous clout across the face when he tried to help her to her feet. The owner saying to her, "Lady, what's your problem?" as he held his battered head. She replying, "You're my problem, and I plan on fixing you real good. Nobody deprives me, and nobody deprives my son. Nobody." Telling one and all of the apartment she would rent and the big color TV she would buy and the trip to Greece she would take with the money she was awarded from her lawsuit. Saying to anyone who asked why she would go to Greece and not some other country, "Don't get personal unless you want me to get personal with you. Understand?" But she had gotten personal. Her revelation of her dream, which the lawsuit would make come true, was personal. Saying, "You don't have to believe," when their mother said she didn't believe in lawsuits.

The Sikh had come thousands of miles, and Hannah had not left home. That was what Luther saw.

And his sister Naomi. He heard her, too. Naomi saying, "Chuck beats me, Luther. He beats me black and blue. He beats me because that's what real men do when they drink. And I deserve to be beaten. I do. I really do. I was unfaithful. I broke my wedding vow. I lay with another man and carried his child to term. These things I did, Luther, so beat me, beat me, beat me. I will tell you, Luther. I will. It is very black. Very very black. You don't think so. You think my words mean nothing, as Mother would say. You think I don't see it, but I do. I *feel* it. I know you don't care about anyone. Why do I know that?"

Because I don't care about anyone either. I didn't care about giving up my newborn son to a Christian foster home. Someday I'm going to die, and this will all be over. You will see. You will definitely see. Have I ever told you, Luther, that Chuck likes little boys, and not in the way that older men should like little boys? But he never liked you. You were never in danger. You were too ugly to like. Your time is coming, too. Are you drinking now, Luther? Are you?"

Like raw sewage flowing from a rusty pipe. In this way did he receive his sister Naomi's words.

And Rachel. He heard her too, in the silence she imposed, continuing to say goodbye after you had said hello, just as the Beatles had predicted. *Goodbye*. Expelling that word like a bullet, the second syllable heavily accented, and after her breakfast of coffee and sugar doughnuts at Chock Full O'Nuts, walking down to Riverside Park, where she could be with the trees and the grass. Even now, Luther thinking, this is my sister from Vassar College, still wanting to see her in the light of the world and not of God. Luther thinking, she had been on one track but now she is on another track because God threw the switch. Imagining Rachel as a train racketing through the tunnel under Riverside Park on tracks that ran past Vassar College but not through it.

Thinking, a train did not need friends or interests or possessions or books. But a train did not need a room either or clothes from the Goodwill bag or any other source or food. A train did not look for God or talk to God or read about God. A train was God.

It was very confusing, this thing about trains and Rachel and God.

And he heard his brother, Luke, say “Fuck” and his girlfriend, Brenda, say, “Lingerie,” and his sister Vera say, “I am the one. I will go right where my sisters have gone wrong. I will carry on Daddy’s name, as there is no else to do that.” And he heard his mother say, “We cannot have this” and “I am tired, so very tired.” And he heard Auntie Eve say, “I am dead. I was dead a long time ago. But now I am really dead, but also risen, just as Jesus Christ told me I would be.” Because she was dead, having expired in her ground-floor apartment, a woman hardly able to lift herself from the sofa on which she lay in the last year of her life. And he heard his mother say, when she discovered her sister’s body, “Now I am alone, so utterly alone.” And heard himself say, “I am here but not here. I am but a witness. The earth is my family’s friend, but we must be in the earth, not on it. A hole must be dug for us to be laid to rest in and then dirt must be thrown on us, many many shovelfuls of dirt. And that dirt must be tamped down and smoothed, and grass must be allowed to grow. Then and only then will order prevail.”

He had a place to go now with death and with all the things of life, and that included Boston. He had not forgotten. He had a story to write. A boy from the other side of the tracks met a girl from the side of the tracks that was not the other side in New York City. But then she went away to college, and his pain began, though in truth his pain had begun long before she left. It began when he understood that she was the thing of value in his life and that he might think he was majoring in poli sci or soc or English, but his real and only course of study was her. And he had not forgotten the genius boyfriend Lane and what he, Luther, did to her life in trying to stop this star of the Boston Museum School

from claiming her for his own. He could right the wrong he had done in the story, if not in life, by making himself the loser in the triangle. Did he not owe Sarah an acknowledgment that he had marred her college experience with his interrogations and panic-driven surprise visits? All those incessant phone calls an indicator of his fear and woeful insecurity. Not only Sarah but her whole family had seen his pathetic neediness. How shameful. He would call the story “The Way It Ought to Be.”

The writing was going well. The story, it seemed, was writing itself, so easily did the words flow. He had a thought: if the writing is going this well now, how much better will it go if I get some wine and really prime the pump? Because he wanted the words to continue to write themselves. He wanted writing to be like a button you pressed to set a machine in motion.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he called to Sarah, in her studio. He did not want her to think he was just disappearing on this night. But she did not respond. He understood. Her silence was meant to discipline him to not need or expect a receipt for every word spoken, or maybe he didn’t have to speak the words at all when clearly he saw that she was in her studio working. She had rebuffed him, and he felt the pain of it. Felt too the pain that she could concentrate in a way that he couldn’t. She didn’t look for escapes the way that he was often doing.

The owner, Shing Lo, reached back and took a bottle of red wine from the shelf as Luther entered the store. “Spanish wine. Very good. Your favorite,” Shing Lo said. But Shing Lo was wrong. The wine was not Luther’s favorite. The wine was harsh and acidic. The cost, one dollar ninety-five cents, made him partial to it. That, and the fact the bottle

had a cork in it and a foreign label. He wasn't a connoisseur of wines. He didn't know a pinot noir from a hearty burgundy. Sweet and dry, red and white, that much he had grasped.

"I see you tomorrow. You very good customer," Shing Lo said, as Luther turned to leave. He was a large man in a tunic with an open face and an easy smile. Luther felt his laughing eyes on him as he passed back out through the door and onto the street, the bottle in its brown bag under his arm.

There was no priming of the pump as Luther turned back to his story. The wine made him sodden before he was halfway through the bottle, and by the time he had drained the contents he wanted only to lie down. He remembered what the Peace Corps girl had said. If she opened a bottle of wine, she had to finish it, and for that reason she was an alcoholic. What a terrible thing to say about herself, he thought, as he passed out.

That night he dreamt of a young man dressed in a suit on the Manhattan Bridge. But the man was not one of those on the pedestrian path alongside the vehicular traffic. Far above the cars and trucks and everyone, he moved along the catwalk, his face aglow with happiness. Then he did the craziest thing. He stepped off the catwalk, that smile still on his face, and plunged in front of an onrushing Brooklyn-bound subway train. Luther woke up at that point, and so was spared the grisly outcome of the man's plunge.

In the morning Luther shared his dream with Sarah. "Who on earth do you suppose he could be?" Luther asked. "I mean, he looked sort of like me, but he wasn't me."

"I don't know, but don't go walking on any catwalks," Sarah said.



“No, I won’t. Thank you for that,” Luther said.

“In fact, don’t go walking on any bridges for a while.”

“OK. I get it,” Luther said, even if he didn’t truly get it.

Some days later he showed her the finished story, all thirty pages. She took it into her studio while he stayed back in the living area with his wine. As time passed, he had to restrain himself from going to her with an insecure noise to the effect that she needn’t read the story if she didn’t want to. He pictured her reading with full concentration, as she was given to do everything.

But this was not some little old thing. This was a major piece of work. He needed to know. When he didn’t think he could wait a minute longer, he heard the sound of hurried footsteps, as if she was coming at him in a great rush.

“You bastard. You thief. You stole my life and put it in these pages. Don’t ever show me something like this again,” she said, her eyes ablaze with fury, and tossed the manuscript at him before returning to her studio.

Though I have been in this place before, Luther thought, with the opprobrium posse riding hard, their sole intent being to shower me with shame, and then depart when they have done their work of debilitation, I will be methodical in the restoration of order, collecting one page after another until the document is secure and chaos has been defeated once again. Luther did just that, but a lingering and painful question remained. Had Sarah dropped on him a chunk of truth? That one word, *thief*. Was she not simply saying what he himself had thought, in certain moments, that like thievery, this writing thing, as he used it, constituted a wrongful appropriation of experience?

I have been caught dead to rights. I have been exposed, he thought, as he lay face down on the bed. Oh had she flattened him with her hellish truth bomb. Stripped him. Taken away his writing as she had tried to take away his drinking. With his hands up he was to come out and live joyless in the world? He did not see how he could go on deprived of “White Line Continue” in its many manifestations, but then he saw a way forward. She had only tried to confiscate his bottles that first week they were together in the loft. But what had in fact happened? He was still drinking. And if he was still drinking, maybe he could find a way to still write, even if he lacked imagination and his work for the most part was a naked transcription of event.

“I didn’t steal from you,” he said, when he could.

“Liar,” she said.

“I am not a liar. I am the one who gets punished in the story for my wickedness, not you. You get to be with the genius.”

“Shut up about that. Just shut up,” Sarah said.

But he wasn’t harming anyone, he thought. He was just telling the truth about the way it ought to be. He was writing truth fiction, or true fiction, even if the story had a twist, because he didn’t know any other kind to write.

“Do you want me to lie down and die? Well, do you?” Luther asked.

“Stop it.”

“Do you want to beat me with a stick?”

“I said stop it.”

I am a bad man, Luther thought, when even my best effort is not good. But maybe that is just the way it ought to be, too.

In the days that passed he continued to put his mind to the matter. She had thrown Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint* halfway across Schiphol Airport, in Amsterdam, after reading half a page, and now she had tossed aside his little offering. Had Philip Roth reminded her, with his shiksa obsession, of the genius Lane? And that little offering he, Luther, had made of "The Way It Ought to Be"? Had she disposed of it in the same manner because it reminded her of what she had had with Lane? Was it less to do with writing about her than writing about him, the genius? He surely didn't know, but he wondered what it would be like to be free, the way she was, with her artwork all around and visible to everyone.

Was he living a lie? Was that what it meant to be living with the same woman you were writing about? The question terrified him, put him in the cold place of unrelenting pain and darkness. Whatever else she was to him, Sarah still represented the light. To be deprived of her—well, he couldn't fathom such a thing. And yet Ernest Hemingway's second wife, or was it his third, divorced him when she discovered he had made her a character in one of his works in progress. On the other hand, Arthur Miller freely admitted that some characters in his plays were closely drawn from family members. But Arthur Miller had a brilliant mind. His characters were probably composites barely traceable to his uncles or aunts or whomever.

Luther wished he could think these things through. What he really wished was to be able to say that Sarah wasn't being fair. She could paint someone from life and make

him different. Hadn't he witnessed such distortions in the portraits she had made of him? Wasn't that an appropriation? And yet he would never throw the word "thief" at her when it was more a matter of vision and artistic license.

But it wasn't the same. It was different. He didn't know how, but it was.

Even so, he must not let her trespass. He must not let her shut down his operation. He had things to say, even if he did not know how to say them. He had a truth to find out, a reckoning to make. He had a past that would burn a hole in him unless he could bring it to life. He must let people see he had been here. What was "here"?" Here was everything. It was the disappearing words of Pastor Cohn. It was the Ukrainians for Christ camp in the Catskills and the rubber-lipped girls he kissed. It was Louie, the Columbia University guard, and the excitement he brought to Luther's life. It was the trains. Always it was the trains that ran and ran and that vicious, vicious America was always threatening to kill. He could not stay alive without "White Line Continue" in all its manifestations just as he couldn't without alcohol.

"So, Luther, what do you think about this so-called break-in at the Watergate complex? Don't you think it's the liberal media making a big deal about nothing?" Hannah was animated and happy that afternoon, as she could be before the darkness claimed her. But her happiness, in this case, seemed built on mischief. She was baiting him, seeking conflict, not harmony, her smile suggested. Politics was not a road he wished to go down with his oldest sister. A lightning bolt would strike her dead should she vote anything less than a straight Republican ticket. Or their father would come back from the grave and

inflict the mortal blow. And she had to realize he, Luther, wasn't enamored of Richard Milhous Nixon or his administration.

"How so-called can it be? They were caught red-handed breaking into Democratic national headquarters," he said, taking the bait in spite of himself.

"You don't think that's just the liberal media's slant on things?"

"The Washington, D.C., police placed them under arrest, not the liberal media,"

Luther said.

"But they love to exaggerate," she said.

"Who is they?"

"All of them."

"All of who?"

"Don't get personal."

"Don't get personal?"

"You heard me."

The door opened on the small room off the living room where Jeanne, his niece, had stayed before she ran off. "Do you need me, Ma?" His nephew, Moses, was strapping for a twelve-year-old. He filled his jeans and T-shirt well.

"It's all right, Moses. It's all right. You just go back to your room," Hannah said.

"I'll go back because I'm your son, but I'll be listening. I don't want you upsetting my mother. You understand, Luther?"

Not even Uncle Luther. The boy's tone and manner were menacing. Intimidated, Luther sensed that anything less than compliance would cause an escalation, and yet it

pushed at what self-respect he had to be bullied by a child, or a man child. Hadn't there been enough of that kind of thing from his mother? "No, I don't understand," he said.

"You keep pushing me, there's going to be a problem. Don't be making me tell you a second time."

"All right, Moses. That's enough. You've made your point," Hannah said.

His point? Moses had made his point? In that moment was confirmed what Luther had feared since Moses' birth, that his nephew would grow up to be an extension of Hannah and in some way her weapon. Hannah might be friendless in the universe, but she had broken her son's wing sufficiently that he would always be under her control. Luther had lived with the threat of her as a child and now he would have to live with the threat of her son as an adult. We've got you. We've got you in our power. I have done things to you and there's nothing you can do about it because if you dare to bring up my mistreatment of you, all you will get from me is a bigger smile, and if you continue to press the issue, then I will have no choice but to call on my son, who will know how to deal with you. Nothing more nor less than that was his oldest sister's smile saying.

And that power extended to the president as well, at least in Luther's mind. The president now came into sharper focus as a kindred soul with Hannah, a man who pressed the levers of power for a malign purpose. She was comfortable with the president's tricks, his deviousness. A dark and secret sort of man, as she was dark and secret. A president who, like her, would never own up to what he had done.

A thought from Luther: I do not know the lyrics to a single song. When a song moves me, I become awash in feelings that don't leave room for words. No one must know this. Titles and snippets, and that is all. "John Wesley Harding." And "Lay, lady, lay, lay across my big brass bed." And "Dawn, you're no good for me" or "I'm no good for you." And "Rag doll oooh."

He read *Advertisements for Myself*, by Norman Mailer. He read *Play It as It Lays*, by Joan Didion. He read *The Sotweed Factor*, by John Barth (professor at Johns Hopkins U., as well as author). He read *The Moviegoer*, by Walker Percy. He read *The New Yorker*. He did not read the Bible that his father had given him, but he took good care of it, never placing it on the floor. That would be disrespectful. (But he could place *Play It as It Lays* on the floor.)

Other disturbing things involving the president were happening. His dirty laundry was beginning to hang out.

The President is blotto in the Oval Office by 11 am every morning.

So Luther read in a *Village Voice* column by the newspaper's political writer, Rose Bannon. Three times Luther read her column to be sure he wasn't imagining this astonishing assertion. And there was more.

Aides Haldeman and Ehrlichman serve as his male nurses during these sprees.

Luther had some notion he needed to talk with the columnist and found her listed, to his surprise, in the White Pages. Faye Dunaway wasn't in the White Pages. Of course Rose Bannon wasn't Faye Dunaway. Still, many people read her column. Suppose some crazy person objected to what she wrote? He could show up at her door and do all kinds of violence. A crazy person like him. But he wasn't a crazy person. He was just inquiring. He just wanted Rose Bannon to put his life back in order after breaking it apart. Blotto by 11 am? His aides serving as nurses? Luther wouldn't have been more shocked if Rose Bannon had reported that the president was a cross-dresser.

He had been drinking Shing Lo's Spanish red wine, and now he had a little more before dialing. A woman answered.

"Is this Rose Bannon?"

"Speaking," Rose Bannon said, showing a firm directness with her brevity.

"I am a reader of your column and a longtime follower of Richard Milhous Nixon. You could say I grew up with him and even campaigned for him in 1960. I was twelve at the time and impressionable, the pastor of my church suggesting John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the anti-Christ..."

"How can I help you?" Rose Bannon cut in.

"I need to know this. Is it really true that the president is blotto in the Oval Office by 11 am every day?"

"It's absolutely true," Rose Bannon said.

"Well, that makes me very sad. Worlds are in collision now."

"Excuse me?"



“I will not take any more of your time,” Luther said, and hung up.

He opened another bottle of wine, having finished the first. He had made Shing Lo a happy man with his purchase of two bottles instead of the usual one. “You very good customer. Very good,” Shing Lo had said once again, putting pressure on Luther to maintain his goodness in the eyes of the liquor store owner. And a good thing he had picked up the spare, as Luther was needing both to get through his night.

As he continued to drink, he had a thought: Rose Bannon is like Chinese food. I talk to her and an hour later I am hungry for more. A closer reading of the column turned up four words he had previously overlooked: *according to my sources*.

Luther once again reached for the phone. “I have one more thing to ask, and then you will hear from me no more. Who were your sources?”

“The Rockefeller people,” Rose Bannon said.

Good to his word, Luther hung up. But a meditation on Rose Bannon’s response followed. Rockefeller? He was granite, stability itself. And yet, even so, suppose his *people*, as Rose Bannon referred to them, had an ax to grind with jowly RMN, who had crushed Rocky with his wily power. Suppose those Rockefeller people were living in the land of the snit?

Once more the need for certainty drove him to the phone.

“Hello?” Rose Bannon said, in the voice of one who has just been roused from a deep sleep.

“Luther Garatdjian here. Are you sure these Rockefeller people are credible? Suppose they have been to spitefulness driven owing to the whipping they took from RMN?”

The dial tone sounded. She had done hang up on him.

Luther had another thought: Rose Bannon is like this wine. I have to drink it all, just as I had to take my inquiry to the limit. That is what thoroughness is all about.

One night Luther surprised Shing Lo, going not for the Spanish red wine but for the modestly priced Clan MacGregor scotch. He needed more than the wine and beer he normally drank at home could give him, and because he had been very good in maintaining his pledge to Sarah, he was certain she would not mind if he took an occasional break from his routine. Consistency was the hobgoblin of little minds, he had read somewhere. Oliver Wendell Holmes had said that, or something like it. There was a name wrapped in a bowtie. Maybe Luther could offer the quote to Sarah should she remonstrate with him, but no, that might not be wise.

Shing Lo was bearish in his build, with sloping shoulders, and tall for a Chinese man. Perhaps it is his height that gives him his serene disposition, like a man looking down from the vantage point of a mountain top, Luther thought. Once again he was struck by how defenseless he was against Shing Lo’s smile. He reads me as if I were an open book, noting the staying power of the cliché in his mind. Well, that was OK. He would leave Shing Lo’s smile right there in the store. He didn’t have to carry it with him and make Shing Lo’s knowingness a source of constant torture.

And another thing. Because Shing Lo was slow in his movements, Luther could call him Slow-Mo Shing Lo in the privacy of his mind.

He came to the darkened public library up the block and was reassured by its presence. He recalled his several visits and the joy he experienced seeing young Chinese boys and girls combing the shelves and reading quietly at the tables. He ascribed to them a quality of mind not his own and bowed down to their excellence.

Farther along was the Fire Dragon Lounge, where young Chinese men with sleek physiques and dangerous smiles hung out, playing backgammon and drinking Johnny Walker Black. How did he know? He had dropped in briefly for a drink and heard the clatter of their board game. There were reports of Hong Kong bang-bang toughs in the community, and Luther had some sense, seeing the traffic in and out, that the Fire Dragon Lounge might be their watering hole.

Next door was a narrow firehouse, with room for a single fire engine. Two firemen stood outside. Their voices were strong and masculine, the voices of men who preferred facts to feelings. Luther was all right with that. He felt a certain love for these men standing there in their rugged handsomeness. He had seen the bravery of these smoke eaters. Thinking, I am not of their world. They must not hear these feelings I harbor for them. Let me be as inconspicuous as possible lest I be beaten. Let me be good.

When are you going to be a man? The night cried out.

When I am able, he answered back.

Luther drank his scotch that night. He did not take it neat, because a fire without water could be dangerous. Sarah did not shine a light on him. She did not shame him

close to death. And as he drank he thought, “I am not a connoisseur of fine wines. I do not have time to tether myself to such detail. I must save myself for the things of importance in this life. The ingredients of a martini I am on shaky ground about (though I could ask for it shaken, not stirred, as James Bond has instructed, should pretentiousness seize me).

After a while he was startled to see a silhouette on the alley wall beyond the open window, and was further astonished that when he raised his arm to bring the glass to his mouth and then lowered that same glass back to the table, the silhouette did the same. This was not right. This was not normal, as his mother would say. But what was not right? What was not normal? That his neighbors should see him about his business. Because it was not normal business. It was drinking business. Oh, the shame of it, that now not only Sarah but others would know his name, and that name would be He Who Bends His Elbow All Hours of the Night.

The phone rang that night. His brother Luke was on the line. His brother was still his brother. He had a feeling for him as such, even if he was stealing Luke’s birthright. He had never liked that Bible story much. Jacob left him cold, that he should be rewarded for his thievery and cunning. Poor Esau. Even God didn’t care for the slow and dull.

“Me and Brenda want to come down. We want to check out your place,” Luke said.

“You want to come down?”

“Didn’t I just say that?”

“You can come down tomorrow.” Luther moved the receiver away from his ear and covered it while he took another sip of his Clan MacGregor scotch.

“Are you drinking?” Luke asked.

“Why do you say that?”

“Why do I hear ice cubes rattling?”

“I’m doing OK,” Luther said.

“What kind of answer is that?”

“I’m doing OK, I said.”

“Sure you are. We’re all doing OK,” Luke said.

It was foolishness (his mother’s words) to love his brother from a distance and think he could love him up close. And now Luke would be bringing his darkness down to the loft. Once again he resented his older siblings for making a mess of their lives so he was less free to make a mess of his.

Luther had no name for the dance that Brenda did the next night. That world of fancy footwork was lost to him by his inhibition. He might be able to distinguish a Funky Chicken from the Lindy, but not much more. All he could say about her shimmying and pelvic gyrations shortly after she and Luke arrived at the loft was that she was living up to the name he had secretly assigned her, Get It On Brenda. When “Proud Mary” finished, Luther lifted the needle on the Creedence Clearwater album to bring her to a stop. If he hadn’t, she might have gone on for an hour. She was definitely in a trance.

“I just love to let loose,” she said. “Don’t you?” She had turned to Sarah.

“Dancing can be a lot of fun,” Sarah said, taken back by the unbridled performance.

“You guys have a nice place here,” Luke said

“Thank you,” Sarah said.

“How much do you pay?” Luke went on.

“Four hundred a month,” Luther said.

The question begging to be asked was where did the money come from? And yet, where could it come from other than the renting office, which Luther spent four evenings in now, getting in and out as fast as he could? Couldn't Luke see what was going on? Couldn't anyone else in the family see? Luther wondered. He just wondered.

“We're not always going to be in the penthouse. We're going to get ourselves a nice place,” Luke said.

“I like your place. It's really nice,” Sarah said.

Luke's expression grew sullen. He went a different way. It was as if Sarah hadn't even spoken.

“Luther thinks he's hiding his drinking from me while we're on the phone. He thinks I don't hear him gulping and the ice cubes rattling,” he said.

“Don't listen to him. He's just trying to make trouble,” Brenda said, directing her comments more to Sarah than to Luther. “Besides, everybody likes to drink. Luke and me do, especially when we party.”

“We've been doing a different kind of partying,” Luke said.

“Don't,” Brenda gasped.

“It’s OK. They’re cool. They were at Woodstock,” Luke said.

“It’s not OK,” Brenda said.

“We’ve been doing a little experimenting. That’s all. It keeps things fresh.”

“Luke, I mean it.” There was finality in Brenda’s voice.

They had dinner that night at the Joy Palace, where Luther and Sarah had the Joy Palace steak again, and convinced Luke to do the same, while Brenda held out for General Tso’s chicken. Luther could only wonder who this General Tso might be that a chicken dish was named after him.

The evening passed without incident, or further incident, or something like that.

“What did Luke and Brenda mean about partying? And what was that about experimenting?” Sarah asked, later that night.

“I don’t know,” Luther said.

“Whatever it was, Brenda didn’t want him to say.”

“True.”

“Whatever it was, it didn’t sound good.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, how good could it be if she was embarrassed to talk about it?”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Aren’t you curious to know?”

“I’m not sure I want to know everything my brother is up to.” Was withholding the same thing as lying? Luther wasn’t sure.

“She’s kind of wild.”

“She’s had a twisted life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her home life wasn’t good. Her father was too free with her, Luke said, and she ran away.”

“Free with her?”

“He did things to her he wasn’t supposed to do.”

“The pig.”

“Anyway, she wound up in reform school. Spent a number of her teenage years there. I think that’s why she can’t ever be beautiful. She’s supposed to be beautiful, with a face like that, but there’s this hardness in it that shows. She looks like she has seen too much.” He didn’t tell Sarah that Brenda’s father was a get-a-load-on-Louie every night of the week. There had been enough reference to alcohol earlier in the evening. He didn’t want Sarah associating him with Brenda’s trespassing old man.

“I see what you mean,” Sarah said.

“I felt like we let wild animals into the loft tonight. It’s a horrible thing to say, but that’s what I feel.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that they could go out of control.”

“It was that dancing, wasn’t it? That was pretty uninhibited.”

“Yeah, it was the dancing.”

“It was like a jungle dance. Primitive. Sexualized.”



“I guess,” Luther said, muting his full agreement with her.

“How did Luke meet her?”

“Lenny from Long Beach.”

“Lenny from Long Beach?”

“Long Beach, Long Island. That’s how I used to think of him. My friend Jerry brought him around the neighborhood back when I was in high school. Lenny wasn’t like the rest of us. He looked good in a T-shirt or those sharp outfits he would wear, you know, dress slacks with a crease and tight shirts. None of us had cars but Lenny did, a Bonneville. He would drive us up and down the West Side Highway and over the GW Bridge to the Palisades Turnpike. Once we got stuck out on Long Island on a brutally cold night when the car broke down. We stayed at his mother’s place in Long Beach that night. Lenny was living with his father in Manhattan by then. His father was a building engineer. But then his father accused Lenny of stealing his tools and selling them and kicked him out. Lenny did OK on his own. He had an amazing mechanical aptitude. He could pop the hood and take an engine apart and put it back together again virtually blindfolded. And he understood electricity and how to work with it, so he didn’t lack for jobs. Anyway, it was about this time Lenny met Brenda. They got married and had a kid, Benjy. But then Lenny went and got involved with smack. It took him down. They lost their apartment and she and her son had to move back in with her parents. Anyway, Luke had met Brenda through Lenny. Soon she moved in with him and Benjy. I guess he offered her a roof over her head that wasn’t her parents’ and some kind of security.

Brenda was a high school dropout, a teenage mother with a drug addict husband. What was she to do?"

"What happened to Lenny?"

"The last time I saw him he was wearing a T-shirt that had once been white but had since turned gray. He looks like a man going down."

"That's sad. But Luke and Brenda look pretty good."

"Dirt is the only solution for my family."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Six feet under. That is the only way order can prevail." It gave him savage satisfaction to render such a colossal judgment and he had no power to resist. In that moment he saw himself as a mental executioner.

"That sounds pretty extreme."

"Yes, I suppose it does," Luther said.

Although all of America had its eyes on him now, *The Village Voice* was not only about Richard Milhous Nixon. In a following issue it ran an article on niacin, explaining that it was an essential nutrient in the B vitamin family that showed astonishing results in alleviating the craving for alcohol. And so it was for Luther to run on his long legs, as his mother would say when he was a child, and purchase this miraculous remedy, and he did just that. Soon after swallowing three pills, he experienced a feeling of great heat in his face, which had turned an alarming red. From the neck up a thousand tiny needles were

pricking his skin. He rushed to the sink and drank glass after glass of water to put out the fire, and after a short time the crisis passed.

The niacin did just what the article said it would do. Oh, happy day, Luther sang, all that day, in the privacy of his mind, as the hours passed without him once running to Shing Lo for Spanish wine or to buy a six pack at the Chinese grocery down the block. Every second of every minute of every hour was he aware of his victory.

The next evening, to celebrate, he visited Shing Lo for two bottles of red wine and stopped off at the Chinese grocery for a six-pack of Budweiser. He could stop drinking any time he wanted to. It had been proven.

There was an OTB on Doyers Street where men went to lose everything.

Pell Street. Division Street. Catherine Street. Bayard Street. Mott and Mulberry—Chinese people lived here too, in their world of mystery.

Some evenings they went to Schezuan Taste for sesame noodles—noodles flavored with sesame paste. No noodles were as good as that.

On the corner was the restaurant of the Greeks, where he would sometimes go for breakfast. “What will be it, Boss? Yes, Boss. OK, Boss,” the counterman said, bursting with morning energy and American good cheer. Luther ordered eggs over easy. He ordered home fries and rye toast. “Whiskey down,” the counterman shouted.

Luther thought, I could come here for the rest of my life. I could make this my home.

Canal Street. There had been boats and barges on it once upon a time, or maybe not.

History. History was a world you excavated and which you hadn't seen in a long time.

Holland Stationers was its name, to remind you that the Dutch had been here, with all the hope and industry they could bring. The store was roomy—too much space for what it sold. Luther bought discounted paper—reams of 16 lb. weight white and pink and green bond so he could have a system. Drafts on the pink and green and white on the final so his life could be in order on the paper.

“Will you be here for a long time, or will you disappear now that I have found you?” Luther said to the owner.

“What?” the owner replied.

“I withdraw my question,” Luther said.

“Are you all right?”

“I'm cash-on-the-barrelhead all right,” Luther said, as he pulled out his wallet.

Later he had words for the reams of paper as well. “Will you be here for a long time? Is your quality substantial or will the years erase you, too? Speak. Let your intentions be known.” He spoke under his breath so as not to worry Sarah. Not that she had any cause for concern.

Antioch Review, The Paris Review, Michigan Quarterly, Southern Review, Agni, Epoch, The Virginia Quarterly, Sou'wester. These were some of the publications to which he submitted his fiction based on fact. Publications seeking quality fiction.

*Thank you for considering these stories. A SASE is enclosed.*

*Due to the volume of submissions...we wish you the best of luck...*

The stories came back in manila envelopes, slipped by the mailman through the slot in the locked front door leading to the street. There were no individual mailboxes. It was for the tenants to sort the mail themselves.

*Sorry! Thanks! Try us again!* Such handwritten comments sometimes appeared along with the boilerplate.

Once again he was forced to see what the problem was. Because he did not have enough weight on his bones or in his mind, there could be no such weight in his sentences. Long or short, complex or simple, they lay on the page as just so many strands of skinniness.

And he saw something else. He saw once again you could not hide from intelligence in the realm of art. It was there in Janos Kadar, who by now had probably completed his massive loft construction on Wooster Street. And it was right there in the building with the sad-eyed Dartmouth dropout John Gregory, whom Luther had met at the welcoming party. And now here it was revealed in the man sorting through the mail.

“I see your returns all the time,” he said, handing Luther a manila envelope along with a telephone bill.

“Yes,” Luther could only say, reduced to that one word.

“Lance. Lance Whiting is my name. I live on the floor above you with my girlfriend, Sheila Starr. We see your silhouette on the wall of the adjoining building when you are getting into your cups. We both marvel at the metronomic rising and falling of your arm. In case you’re wondering, I’m a graduate of Amherst College and the Yale

School of Dramatic Arts. Sheila and I are having a blast working our way into the theater. Where are you from and what do you do, besides send out manuscripts unsuitable for publication?"

Luther could only be struck by how worthy of his first name Lance Whiting was. "Sir, you have had at me and run me through. In answer to your question I eat Joy Palace steak when I am not elsewhere here in Chinatown devouring noodles with sesame paste," Luther simply said.

"You are a man who will go far."

"And you are already at the top—at the top of this building anyway," Luther replied.

"Do you use a persona in your fiction?" Lance Whiting asked.

"Persona non grata," Luther said.

On weekends when they were not at Camp, he and Sarah would wander through SoHo. Sarah had come under the spell of the synthetic creations of Eva Hesse, though the latex cylinders erect on the gallery floor only put Luther in mind of the sad messiness of life. And she was taken with Agnes Martin's vision, the frail purity of those lines across a field of white or gray. Luther could not fathom the distillation process, how all of life could be captured in such small vessels. They must be doing computations beyond the reach of the average mind; they must be speaking a visual and tactile language I am not privy to, he thought. But my life is ahead of me. "White Line, Continue" must continue. I must follow that road where it leads.

I am happy to be out and about with my girlfriend.

Her name is Sarah Van Dine.

We sleep in the same bed.

We make love all the time.

I tell her my dreams and she tells me hers.

These things he also thought.

But the nights, some of them, were for him alone. The galleries of SoHo would have closed but the bars were open, and the one on Spring Street called him to its amber softness. There he would listen to the great Otis Redding and the great Wilson Pickett and the equally great Carole King (of Brooklyn, New York), but the one who sent him soaring and plunging was fabulous Freddy Fender with “Before the Last Teardrop Falls” and another song, this one in Spanish, whose name he did not know and whose lyrics he did not understand. Freddy Fender drove right to his heart, or wherever the locus for the maudlin or ecstatic emotion he aroused could be found.

Heineken had a royal strain of European complexity, easily establishing its superiority to creamy Bud and without the metallic taste of Miller High Life. After several bottles there were the scotches, topped off with several Courvoisiers.

*What was that bar to you, Luther?*

It was where doors opened.

*What doors?*

You know what doors. The doors every man wants to knock on.

*What else?*

It was a way of saying nobody controls me. Nobody puts their hands on me. Nobody. So I could do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it and as often as I wanted to do it.

There was another bar with a kitchen a block south where during the day Sarah and he went for burgers on pita bread. But it was not a bar where he liked to drink. It had a jukebox, that was true, but nothing could happen there. Nothing. It was a bar where he felt conspicuous.

Another bar, the Three Roses, was down on Canal Street. No loveliness was on display at that bar, no artists, only the sadness of older men drinking in a light that lacked all softness. He never started at that bar, but sometimes he wound up there.

Some things he wished to note about that amber-lit bar, things that were important to him:

1. That the owner dared to have a heavy presence of hair on his moon-shaped, meaty face. Brown hair, with traces of gray. He sat at the end of the bar facing the front door, as if his mind was not concerned with who was there but who was yet to arrive. Was he longing for love itself to walk through that door? Did he wish for his lips to be on something more than the mouth of the Heineken bottle he was never without? His beady eyes signaled those of a man of great calculation. The owner's shiftiness was not in lieu of his intelligence but in service to it. Luther could see that the owner placed himself in a higher realm and so had no reason to consort with the likes of him. They were on different paths, and if each was leading straight to hell, it was along different routes.

The talk was that the bar had been funded by cocaine money. A deal had been done along the Canadian border, and the owner was now set up for life with holdings



from Bogota to Bologna. The owner was in the upper echelon of crime, commensurate with his intellect and shrewd, cunning nature.

Suppose you didn't need to talk to a person to *know* him? Suppose the picture emerged more clearly by not talking to him? This too Luther thought, while sitting within two feet of the beard-faced owner.

2. That the bar, apart from the machinating owner, had a hierarchy, drawing the worthy and the unworthy. One night he crossed into territory not his own and spoke with Vesuvia, an artist whose sculptures and paintings were regularly showcased in a first-rate SoHo gallery.

“You are a famous artist. You must be very happy with your success,” he said.

“Happy? Are you a newspaper reporter? Am I being interviewed?”

“I got off on the wrong foot. How clumsy of me.”

“What is the foot you want to get off on?” Vesuvia said, in her gruff impatient English.

“I don't know.”

“I will tell you something I have told no one, but you must guard my secret with your life. Is this understood?”

Luther paused, overwhelmed by the weight of the responsibility Vesuvia was placing on him. “I can do that,” he finally said.

“Do you know oceanography? What it is?”

“It is looking at the water and seeing its content, not just sailing over it like Christopher Columbus did,” Luther said.

Vesuvia gave him a hard look before going on. "Oceanography is my heart's passion. I will never be happy till I have understood its depths."

"Yes, I can see that," Luther said.

"Tell me what you see."

"I see a sadness so intrinsic to your face that not even the face police would dare to bust you for the absence of a smile."

"Are you borracho? Tell me that you are borracho."

"Not quite."

"What is this 'quite'? You are or you are not."

"Is that true?"

"Is an earthquake not quite? An earthquake is or is not."

"But--"

"Do not contradict me. Do you not see that I am Colombian?"

Luther was left to ponder this last in a void, as the cold shoulder Vesuvia turned to him was not a passing thing.

Luther thought, as he wandered drunkenly home: Suppose all conversations are one conversation? Suppose all women are one woman? Suppose not all women are women? Suppose not all men are men? "Oh, I really don't know or care," he shouted at the trucks of America rampaging along Canal Street in the dead of the Manhattan night.

3. That a man appeared, his true intent unfathomable, at least to Luther, in that same bar, and said, “You think you are here for the women, but you are really here for that.” The man then pointed to the rows of pretty bottles on the shelves behind the bar.

“Why do you talk to me in this way?” Luther asked.

“Why do you think?” the man replied.

“Would I ask if I knew?”

“You’re scared to know. You don’t want to know.”

“I don’t like you. I don’t like anything about you,” Luther said.

“Why would you? You feel that I am threatening your life.”

“Are you a prophet? Where is your robe? Where is your beard? Where is your fulminating Isaiah face? You are too bland and anonymous for prophet status.”

“I am saying only this,” the man went on, holding to his steady course. “Someday you will step over the body of a naked woman to get to those bottles, and then you will see what I mean.”

The man was looking for no response from Luther, and Luther gave him none. Instead Luther backed away, putting distance between himself and the message-bearing man in the thronged bar.

His mother was not far.

“I love you,” he said, and kissed her on the cheek. His mother, in whom all goodness was to be found.

No, she said, "I love you," and then he said, "I love you" and kissed her on the cheek. Sequence was important.

That fall he left behind his acting dream to take another course with Sol Reisner. He was happy on those days that the class met in the Quonset hut. Why? Because the class gave him structure. As the weather turned cool, he wore a patterned dark blue wool jacket and corduroy slacks with his low-cut black Converse sneakers. A class to give him structure and a jacket to give him the security slacks and a shirt by themselves could not provide.

He had not defeated Sol Reisner. Why? Because Sol Reisner was a formidable foe, a trickster who also happened to be a real man, i.e., fighter jet pilot and decorated war hero, Rhodes Scholar, winner of the Atlantic Monthly short story award with his first submission anywhere, advertising executive genius, family man.

But now Luther was hearing of a crack in that family image. Sol Reisner revealed to the class that he and his wife of many years were living apart. Still, he let it be known a propos the libertinism expressed in a story by one of Luther's classmates that his own generation was not driven by the hedonistic impulses that so many of the younger generation seemed to be ruled by. Sol Reisner took disapproving note of a character receiving a phone call from his lover at the family residence. What Luther heard Sol Reisner say was that with high intelligence and high achievement went high moral purpose. Sol Reisner was saying that a real man was capable of restraint.

One weekend afternoon Luther did not hear but saw something else in regard to Sol Reisner and his family. He was riding the Broadway bus and just minding his own

business, trying out keeping his eyes out of other people's faces so he could have his life and they could have their own, when who came aboard but Sol Reisner himself, not in the duds of his teaching life, but a pair of faded jeans that yes, he wore so well. He has come from the Apthorp, Luther surmised, a block-long residence with a carriageway and an elegant courtyard. He goes to Zabar's and gnoshes on bagels and lox. He is a West Sider if ever I saw one, Luther concluded.

His experiment with avoiding eye contact over, Luther saw something else. With Sol Reisner was a boy who could only have been his son, but who could want a son with the face of a bulldog and of whom it might be said, "Boy, you are the spitting image of Edward G. Robinson"? Indeed, Sol Reisner's son looked older than Sol Reisner himself.

Well, who could fathom the ways of the world, Luther could only conclude, while acknowledging a more pressing issue than that of Sol Reisner's unsightly son and the sadness it evoked that the boy should have been born with such a face and of the weight his father had to bear. The issue was simply this: How do I deal with Sol Reisner here in the open space beyond the confines of the classroom and the group? Not very well. Not very well at all, came the answer. In that moment that they made eye contact, Sol Reisner surely had to see that he had defeated Luther completely, that Luther could not hold his own with a real man and was exposed as nothing more than a lowly worm in Sol Reisner's august gaze. A weak smile was all Luther could muster.

Luther thought: I must not go where I do not belong. I must not do that ever. And I must not be where I do not belong, as happened today. But then something else occurred to Luther: Sol Reisner does not live in the Apthorp. His wife lives in the Apthorp with

their son. Sol Reisner lives in that writing studio down on Central Park West now that they have separated. He has come for his weekly outing with his only child.

In this time Luther continued with his reading, and one day found his world explained to him by Gertrude Stein, once of America but later of Paris, France, so she could be close to Pablo Picasso and other luminaries of the art and literary world she held in high regard.

The story Luther read was “Melanctha: Each One As She May.”

Melanctha liked to wander, and to stand by the railroad yard, and watch the men and the engines and the switches and everything that was busy there, working. Railroad yards are a ceaseless fascination. They satisfy every kind of nature. For the lazy man whose blood flows very slowly, it is a steady soothing world of motion which supplies him with the sense of a strong moving power. He need not work and yet he has it very deeply; he has it even better than the man who works in it or owns it. Then for others that like to feel emotion without the trouble of having any suffering, it is very nice to get the swelling in the throat, and the fullness, and the heart beats, and all the flutter of excitement that comes as one watches the people come and go, and hears the engine pound and give a long drawn whistle...

*For the lazy man.* So Luther was led to an understanding of his nature by this passage in a way that he had not been before, and he could only be amazed that Gertrude Stein could expose him so completely, shining a light into all the places he would hide.

But her insight did not cause him to repudiate the railroad under Riverside Park that he held dear anymore than the first two sentences of *Molloy*, by Samuel Beckett (also of Paris, France, but by way of Dublin, Ireland)—“I am in my mother’s room. It is I who live there now”—made him sever his involvement with his mother through the renting office. Quite the opposite, in fact. There was only one course of action to take, and that was to intensify his commitment to the path the universe had laid out for him. “White Line, Continue” must go on. He must go on. Still, that Gertrude Stein should write such a thing.

His past would come calling in some of the faces that appeared in the grille as he worked his renting office shift. Like that of Tall Tommy. Sad, defeated, pale, an old man now, reliant on a cane to support his big, bent frame. A lonely man living in a small room and dependent on the government check in a brown envelope Luther handed him. The communication was brief, minimal, as if by mutual agreement. The ashes of a relationship. There had been long walks with Tall Tommy and his black Labrador retriever Bib, where they would light small fires in the fall with dry kindling. Sweet memories of Tall Tommy playing “Home on the Range” on his harmonica and tapping tobacco from a string pouch into those thin papers he rolled and then smoked. The beef stew dinners Tall Tommy would heat up on the small stove and serve to Luther and Luke in his room. Tall Tommy saying to Luke, “There’s something wrong with your little brother. He likes sitting on my lap too much,” as he lifted Luther off him. Luther hearing Luke’s laughter and feeling shame. And then Tall Tommy saying, “Look at him, going so

greedily for the meat before the vegetables.” Casting that kind of light on him, on that particular evening. But also like a father Tall Tommy had been. A man Luther ran to. Lying in bed at night thinking happily about the avocado farm Tall Tommy owned back in California and of his promise to send for Luke and him when he moved back there. Of course there were the times Tall Tommy could be disappointing, like the crazy railroad layout table he constructed for them. A table with a perimeter but no center. What were they supposed to do with that? Or the holes Tall Tommy drilled in the tubeless tires of Luther’s bicycle thinking that the change would make the bike lighter, but who ever heard of riding around with a bike that had small holes in the tires? And there was the night that Luther went alone with him into the park and Tall Tommy confided that he had been sent to New York City by the government on a secret mission. Luther must not tell anyone, Tall Tommy said, unless he wanted Tall Tommy’s life to be in danger. Did Luther want that for Tall Tommy? Well, did he? Tall Tommy demanded. In that moment Luther saw how unimportant Tall Tommy felt that he had to make up such a story. Luther was sad for Tall Tommy and protective of him but also disappointed and ashamed for him that he had to tell such a lie.

Tall Tommy was one of those men Gertrude Stein would have buried with her insight and moved on to her luminaries. And maybe Luther had buried Tall Tommy too, that he saw him now almost without seeing him, leaving him in a past that was no more but that had become no more too fast.

Then another Tommy came, Little Tommy, and he too lived in a small room in the building, but Luther and Luke had not gone to him for beef stew or walks in the park as



he was a man with anger in his blood and no need for children around him. “Give me twenty dollars on account—on account of I’m broke,” he laughed, and Luther gave him the twenty because Little Tommy was the housepainter and Luther had heard him say the same thing for years. Yes, Little Tommy had his joking side but he also had his fury, saying one night, as he stood outside the building, “Those Barnard girls? They come to New York City from their small towns and then go back home and marry their high school sweethearts, who have no idea what kind of whoring around they have been doing with these black guys—orgies up in Harlem and all kinds of sick shit. It’s not right. It’s just not right.”

A man talking from his loneliness and his apartness from the world. A man who had the ponies to bet on and his Pall Mall cigarettes and his buckets of paint and his bulging muscles and the veins threatening to burst from his neck as he ranted. But he no longer had the woman. She had left because of his fists. Little Tommy, from a small coal-mining town in Pennsylvania. His heart grown as black as the coal he had left behind.

The building. It was like a gift Luther couldn’t properly wrap, a thing with too many parts. And yet he was supposed to wrap it. He was.

And there was another gift that did not have to do with his past but with his future, and he had only to think of this gift for his thoughts to turn golden, and all because of a young man who wore the number 32 on the back of his UCLA Bruins jersey and went by the All-American name Bill Walton.

*“And where did you meet this young man, Luther?”*

“I met him in the West End Bar, where he appeared on the screens of the cantilevered TVs toward the back, and where I had come after my office shift on a night in early April of 1972. I had not been expecting love. I had not expected my heart to open on this night, but who among us walks about expecting such a thing? Is it not when we are looking the other way that such miracles occur and only can occur?”

*“And what did he do on this night?”*

“He did the reject. He controlled the boards. He performed the outlet pass with perfection. And he was only a sophomore. A sophomore.”

*“And what did you do with this love?”*

“I put it where my heart is and carried him about, and though he was big, he was light in my being. This was not a heavy love. This was the light of America shining, and the light is always light. It cannot be otherwise.”

*“Tell us now where that love truly started, that we may know.”*

“Keith Erickson. Gail Goodrich. Walt Hazzard. Nineteen sixty-four. Alcindor. Silk Wilkes. All-American names. All-American colors. Who could resist? John Wooden. Westwood. Pauley Pavilion. ‘California Dreaming.’”

*“And before that?”*

“Jerry ‘Zeke from Cabin Creek’ West. Number 44. West Virginia Mountaineers. Johnny Egan, Providence. James “Slow Train” Hadnot. Tom ‘Slicer’ Stith, the Bonnies of St. Bonaventure. Jerry ‘Straight A student’ Lucas and the tyranny Paul Hogue and the Cincinnati Bearcats exercised over him. No one must ever forget. No one.”

*“And before?”*

“Mickey Mantle. Willie Mays. The Duke of Flatbush, number 4, most of all. Frank Robinson of the Cincinnati Redlegs (never *Reds*, never). The way he wore his pants so high. Stan Musial, number 6. Don Drysdale, number 53. Coming from the side. No, that was later.”

*“What does it all mean?”*

“What does God mean?”

*“You tell me.”*

“Don’t talk to me like that. Don’t do it, I say.”

Luther saw the genius boyfriend before the genius boyfriend saw him, though who could say for sure with those penetrating eyes the genius boyfriend possessed. The genius boyfriend there in a light black suit and a spiffy red gingham shirt, showing he knew how to dress, how to model himself. His black hair shorter than Luther remembered. Trim and cool and a cut above the rest. Probably down from Boston to claim SoHo as his own. It was only a matter of time before he sought a bigger stage for his talent. A show at the Castelli Gallery or some such venue for the art world royalty he was. Whatever he was about, at least Luther didn’t have to deal with him without the fortification of a couple of beers and three Scotches.

Luther had a choice. He could do just as Dionne Warwick instructed, and walk on by, even if Luther hadn’t been seen walking down the street or begun to cry or had any romance with the genius boyfriend. Quite the opposite, in fact. Or he could make an approach. He could close the door on Lane or keep it open.

If it occurred to him that he had no business with Lane, that Lane was not his friend and in a league far above any that Luther should even aspire to, still the two beers and three scotches he had consumed had sufficient power to diminish their differences. His low numbers were not assailing him. Besides, he was living with Sarah now. It was Lane who was on foreign soil. Luther would show himself magnanimous. It wasn't even that. He could just put the past behind him, just pretend that Lane hadn't challenged him to a fight over Sarah, a challenge he had lacked the courage to meet. Besides, why shouldn't he? Who was he to deprive her of Lane and her connection to Boston? Could Luther really say he was enough for her?

"Hi. I'm Luther. Do you remember me?" Luther had to shout over Freddy Fender to make himself heard.

"I do," Lane said, with matter-of-factness in his voice.

"How are you? What brings you to New York?"

"Visiting friends."

"Great. How is your work going?"

Lane reached into his jacket and took out a card that showed a four-color image, a sculpture of a terribly distorted head. On the back was Lane's name and that of a gallery with a Fifty-seventh Street address.

"Jesus. You're taking New York by storm."

But Lane appeared not to have heard. He was looking over Luther's shoulder and waving to someone. Luther turned and saw why Lane's bored expression had given way

to a victor's smile. A girl, dizzyingly gorgeous, was threading her way through the throng.

"If you'll excuse me," Lane said, and headed off with the girl to the dining area.

I must go where his eyes cannot find me. I must vacate the premises. There were some things that even a state of semi-drunkenness would not allow him to endure. Lane must not see how alone he was, how dependent he was on conversation with complete strangers. I must take my business elsewhere. So Luther thought.

And he did just that, heading down to Canal Street and the Three Roses Bar, which had no amber lighting or a jukebox, just a black and white television. Though Jesus, Luther sure could have done with Roy Orbison belting out "Only the Lonely" right then and there. Well, the important thing was to get his drinking done with, because until then he wasn't ready to go home.

In the morning he spent time in his corner talking to himself, trying to block out the horror of the night before. I should be locked up. I should be made to sleep with the fishes for this self-betrayal. That I would bring old pain back into my life. Have I not had enough of what the genius boyfriend can do? Am I a masochist as well as the sadist that Dr. Dressler called me? I should go before the general assembly of the United Nations and denounce myself for crimes against my own humanity. In this way did he speak to himself out of earshot of Sarah.

That card. Why had he not dropped it down a sewer? Because while he was not the theme of honor's tongue, he was not inclined to indulge in merciless acts against his

own life. To have destroyed the card would have been admitting to his pettiness, his inability to acknowledge his betters on the world stage.

By afternoon the self-recrimination and shame were in abeyance and he had once again given himself the right to live. He credited the action of the typewriter keys for his brighter mood. Even if what he wrote was rubbish, sentences embarrassingly thin, the mechanical exercise of typing enabled him to reclaim the terrain that Lane had appropriated. These geniuses had to be watched at all times.

“I have something to say to you,” he said to Sarah that evening.

“What is that?”

“I saw the genius last night.”

“You saw Lane?”

“I said I saw the genius.”

“All right. You saw the genius. Who and when have been answered. Now we come to where and why.”

“This is not journalism. This is life.”

“Try to make sense. Can you do that?”

“He gave me this,” Luther said, handing her the card.

She withdrew to her studio without a word, leaving him to wonder if he had assaulted her or gifted her. The continuing silence made him uneasy. He began to sense anger building in the atmosphere and soon saw the storm clouds gathering. And soon after that did he hear her fast steps approaching. A one-person posse of the righteous riding hard and kicking up dust on the trail.

“Stay out of my life. Just stay out of it. Stop stealing from my life. Do you hear me?”

“How do I do that? Do I disappear?”

“Yes, you disappear from my business. You don’t get involved where you don’t belong.”

“Yes. The limited role of government.”

“What?”

“Poli sci.”

“Stop it, Luther. Just stop it. You’re not a child and you’re not a lunatic. Not always, anyway.”

“Beat me with a stick, why don’t you?” he said.

“I can’t talk to you,” and so she didn’t, for several hours.

Sometimes he did not speak the language of foolishness, of self-deprecation, of simple weirdness. Sometimes he spoke the language of anger, pure and unrestrained.

“You don’t like it here? You don’t want to be with me? Then get out. Just get out. Go home to your parents. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Not once but many times would he repeat himself until she fled, leaving him in the place of pain. As the hours passed without her return, his fear would grow, not that she had left him forever, but that, having fled into the harsh city, she had met an evil fate. Vile and degrading forces had ushered her through the gates of death after having their way with her. He would never have the chance to tell her how much he loved her and

how sorry he was. At such times he would experience the same devastation, the same ceaseless anxiety, as his brother Luke when get-it-on Brenda bolted from his tormenting treatment of her. Not that he would reach out to Luke as Luke would to him. To do so would bring chaos and the lower depths right to his door. It would bring the unbearable recognition that Baudelaire had expressed—“Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère.” And the thought of the renting office would be equally unbearable. No, all he could do was load up on beer and wine and keep a drunken vigil, pacing the loft and praying that the footsteps he heard on the stairs would be hers.

Sooner or later the footsteps would be hers. Not when he wanted. Not when he was listening but when his listening had been defeated, when his mind, through drunkenness, had gone through pain to unconsciousness. Only then, when he had been annihilated, would she reappear.

He had shown her his anger. She had shown him her power.

He was tied to a woman he didn't love in the way he should.

She was tied to her table.

Sometimes too, when he was drinking, he would dance. Al Green made him get up and try some moves, especially when he sang “Love and Happiness.” Luther had never heard singing like that, the alterations of pace and sound, from a high-pitched squeal to a low growl. Oh Jesus, Al Green was good. Al Green had some slow, crazy, churning power that needed to express itself, and Luther couldn't help but get caught up in that expression of it with some expression of his own.



He did his dancing alone in the privacy of the loft while Sarah was out. He had no mastery of steps or even any knowledge of them. You could not say there was any pattern to the movement of his feet. And he relied greatly on flailing his arms, like a man trying to wave away a swarm of bees. Now and then he danced when Sarah was in her studio and she would begin to dance as well, staying apart from him. It wouldn't do for them to dance together. Somewhere it was written that they must not. They could share a bed and their bodies and tell each other their dreams, but dancing was too intimate—like kissing, real kissing, was too intimate.

In part Luther liked Al Green because Sarah liked Al Green. Maybe he would have liked Al Green anyway, but Sarah liking Al Green made him like Al Green even more. When he thought of how much he liked Al Green, a special happiness came to him in knowing that Sarah liked Al Green, too. In fact, her liking of Al Green came to take precedence over his liking of Al Green to the point that Luther wondered if he could ever have liked Al Green if Sarah had not liked him first.

Sarah liked James Brown, too. She did not call him the Godfather of Soul, as some did. She just said he was authentic and knew how to “get down.” Luther could not say “get down.” Those words were a breach of propriety. They would have tied him to sex so directly as to bring embarrassment and probably outright shame and the memory of the mocking laughter of his sisters Naomi and Rachel that he had experienced as a child. No, he had no business talking that kind of language even if James Brown and Sarah could.

Besides, “get down” was black talk, like “get it on” was black talk (he could refer to get-it-on Brenda, but that was different because he wasn’t getting it on, she was). He had no right to sound black when he wasn’t. Black people didn’t need a white boy like him trying to sound like them. They didn’t need any more phoniness than there already was in the world.

But Sarah—Sarah could say these things, not because she sounded black but because she respected black and had been with black, the Harvard Law School man. These things Luther understood and so there was no need to discuss them with her.

John Gregory, the sad-eyed man in the loft below, tried to befriend them. Luther had met him at that party across the street just after moving into the Chinatown loft. Luther wasn’t fooled by John Gregory’s sad eyes. He understood that whatever sorrow patches life had led John Gregory into, this man was a real man infused with the American spirit of industry and self-reliance. And John Gregory understood where the two of them stood in relation to each other, that one was higher on the continuum by innate endowment than the other. Seeing John Gregory on the stairs or on the street, Luther just shriveled inside. Any talking he did with John Gregory was while in a state of contraction. Because when he encountered John Gregory, Luther did not have the confidence, the sense of purpose, that he felt while engaged in the act of writing. All that good feeling fled in the presence of the sad-eyed man. His security blanket gone, he had only John Gregory’s Dartmouth College numbers versus his Queens College/City College numbers. Because numbers did not lie. That’s why they were numbers in the first place. A word could speak a lie but not

a number, and even if that was not true, it felt true at the moment he was confronted with the presence of John Gregory.

Then it occurred to Luther that John Gregory was approaching him from a place not of neutrality but concern and even reproach, that the sad-eyed man was developing a bias against him, not because he had nothing visible that he did in the way of art but because the sad-eyed man had been hearing his sounds and seeing the silhouette of him bending his elbow on the alleyway wall. It came to Luther that John Gregory had been hearing his anger binges and had been thinking, the way that real men, sad-eyed or not, can, what kind of man is this who abuses his girlfriend so that she must flee the loft where the two of them live?

Because John Gregory said to Sarah one day, “I need someone to make sketches for this work of animation I am doing. I can pay you five dollars an hour.” Do not think it was insignificant that John Gregory was asking Sarah, because it wasn’t. Why? Because John Gregory saw something in Sarah he didn’t see in Luther, that she was at home within her own self and was a true artist, and the same could not be said of Luther.

And though Sarah graciously declined, Luther understood that John Gregory was seeking to bring her into his sphere of influence so he could provide comfort and the goodness that he, Luther, was so obviously deficient in. In short, he had declared war on Luther.

But Luther’s research showed that John Gregory had some issues of his own. He had a wife he no longer lived with, and now he had a tiny girlfriend who appeared to have only one blouse—a black lace thing that racy underwear was made of and through

which you could clearly see her black bra. Hah, Luther could have said if he had had a mind to, but John Gregory had too much quality notwithstanding his exhibitionistic girlfriend to incline Luther in that direction. Luther did allow himself to wonder if John Gregory ever spoke to his girlfriend about her attire but concluded it was not John Gregory's way to interfere in anyone's mode of being and that this quality was a sure indicator of John Gregory's integrity.

This is a summary of Luther's brief relationship with John Gregory before his downstairs neighbor followed wherever his eroticized girlfriend chose to lead.

John Gregory did not leave a physical void. A new tenant moved right in. His name was Ned Fuller and he was an architect. He seemed someone who went his own way in regard to dress. The tight-fitting suit he wore on his tall, thin frame was within conventional bounds, but the ten-gallon hat and cowboy boots he was seldom seen without gave him a signature style and suggested he had a depth beyond the placid, amiable Howdy Doody smile that ruled his face. Sarah got close enough to learn that he was recently separated, and she expressed sorrow that such a sweet-looking man should be alone, even going so far as to say she wished there was someone she could think of to introduce him to. But Luther couldn't go on that sorrow and compassion journey with her. He saw in Ned Fuller a man with an aptitude for seeing the world three-dimensionally, a man who could keep lines straight and in their own true place in space so they didn't collapse on each other. He saw a high board man and more than that, a man guided by rectitude he had acquired on the plains of Texas. Further, he saw a man who

could admit a mistake—his marriage—and build a foundation for a new life. Ned Fuller was a rectilinear man—whatever he might be to others, that’s who Ned Fuller was to him.

Information was pouring in from all over. More than he could handle. And yet none of it should go to waste. He was too slim a repository for such a mass of material, but he must try. Others had their job. He had his.

His mother saying, “When you have your health, you have everything.”

Saying, “When you are seventy, you cannot do the things you did when you were sixty and fifty.”

Saying, “Whatever happened to that apartment you lived in downtown?”

And he, “It’s still mine. I sublet it, but I can take the apartment back any time. I’m still the prime tenant.” He felt no need to tell her Roddy Rumble, the man with the crescent-shaped scar on his face, was living in that apartment.

“And is it a nice apartment?”

“It is.”

“And the rent is affordable.”

“Fifty dollars a month.”

“My goodness.”

“Why do you ask, Mother?”

“No reason. I was just curious.”

“Are you asking for yourself, Mother?”

“Ushtah. Do not burden me with your foolishness, my son.”

“Why is it foolishness?”

“Because it just is.”

And so he left it there because she had told him without telling him. She was looking for her way out.

And he no son at all. Taking from her but not giving. Not helping her to find that way.

Then the others came. First Hannah in her black overcoat and next Naomi, in her sack dress, saying, “We’re looking forward to some of that chicken you make, Ma. No one makes chicken like good old Ma. Isn’t that right, Luther? You should stay and eat and let Ma put some meat on your bones so you can be a real man. Don’t you want to be a real man, Luther?”

“You are much too skinny, Luther,” Hannah said. He heard genuine concern in her voice and humanness beyond wrath in her being.

Grown women who couldn’t boil an egg showing up with their feedbags on and surviving his unkind thoughts.

A summons to jury duty came in the mail and so he reported to 100 Centre Street, as instructed. In truth, it filled him with pride to fulfill his civic duty, to enter a government building of granite designed to endure, grimy though it may have become through the years. A criminal case, as it turned out. Sitting in the jury box with the other prospective jurors, he listened as the judge explained that, if chosen, they were to base their decision on the law as it was read to them. The voir dire followed. Did any of the prospective

jurors have a relative in law enforcement? Had any of them been a victim of a crime? Did any of them know the defendants sitting in that same courtroom? Were any of them related to the defendants?

The four handcuffed men, all black, cast baleful stares at those being questioned in the jury box. They were of a kind that sets mind and body quivering at the endless fascination a murderer, or one so accused, can spark. Luther could not say that he loved or adored them, but to say he was not in their thrall would have been a lie. They had gone where others dared not go in ushering their victims into eternity. Suddenly, Luther was seized with a desire to say, the murderers are me, and I am them. But the moment passed as he saw something else, that a panther, black or otherwise, was a predatory carnivore with a dictate to kill.

Advocating for the defendants was a young man with the bearing of an elegant dauphin. Oh Lord was he a worthy rival of the baleful ones for the eyes of the prospective jurors in his tailored suits and bright ties, his black curls cut short and tight and his deep-set dark eyes glittering with intelligence and his whole being exuding sexual brio. Solden Sondem definitely had the allure to create a heartthrob nation all his own and could only have been born of parents determined to give his name the alliterative force that would in itself propel him to the head of the pack and let the world know that he was of his own rare kind.

Of significance, to Luther if to no one else, was that Solden Sondem had earned a JD not from Harvard or Yale or Columbia but from Brooklyn Law School, and yet had the power to transform that lowly institution into one that was fully acceptable.

Something else of a transformative nature was happening. Luther was eager to speak about the whole process of jury selection he was engaged in when he encountered the Howdy Doody man in the loft below and Lance Whiting in the loft above. He now had a world beyond the hidden one of “White Line Continue” and his “job” at the renting office to share with them and others, a visible world. Sure, he still inwardly recoiled when someone such as Lance, in a tone of voice that carried a hint of mockery, asked about his writing, but the jury experience was proof that he had a place in the world.

One afternoon, while Sarah was out, Luther stood at the far end of her studio staring out the window. Down below the fire truck, its siren beginning to wail, was emerging from the firehouse. Those men, in their fire-retardant long coats, might find, at the site to which they had been called, an inferno or a false alarm. The fact was that their lives were on the line. Lance Whiting, the actor living upstairs from him, could strike no sardonic tone with these men, whose lives were right out there for everyone to see.

He remembered that bus ride out to Newark for the law school orientation and the elation that rose in him like a glorious sunrise. He would be a lawyer. Sarah would be proud of him. His mother would be proud of him. He also remembered Dr. Dressler’s words. “You chicked out. You chicked out,” she had said, and her dismissal of his writing ambition as a way of maintaining his distance.

And he remembered something else. Dr. Dressler had said, “They listen,” of those who gave undue weight to the negative voices in their minds, the voices that would prevent them from moving forward with their lives. Solden Sondem hasn’t listened to such voices. Solden Sondem hadn’t considered Brooklyn Law School to be beneath him.



Probably Solden Sondem hadn't given a rat's ass to what others might think. Why? Because all Solden Sondem cared about was practicing law, and one curriculum would suffice as well as another as a means to getting him past the bar exam. But I listened, Luther thought. I listened to the laughter and the ridicule and the pity that would come from Lydia and Peter and others. Poor Luther, they would say, when he was exposed as unable to get into a top-tier law school. Oh, what were those voices anyway that they should have such power?

All he knew was that coiffed Solden Sondem in his snappy suits made his life seem small.

The writing had been on the wall that would make star-status Solden Sondem necessary in the first place. Many, many walls, in fact, and on subway cars as well. Those dayglo-kissed trains spoke of spirits seeking a medium all their own for the full expression of their pain and aspiration. Luther, in his better moments, understood that once he had been with the urchin flock and too had taken the vandal's path, as if to say this window, this streetlight, are not a part of me nor I of them, and so it was for him to sing the song of disenfranchisement with the rocks he hurled against them. And while he as a boy had been driven to a track ballast-chucking frenzy by the boxcar might of America, this unbridled expression on the rolling stock of the transit system seemed different, a warning that the bells of anarchy were sounding louder and shoot 'em boy run run days were ahead.

Dayglo was one thing, but headlines screaming that bullets had been fired into the backs of two police officers on street patrol? Luther did not want to be part of a new world order of a kind planned by the Black Liberation Army, who were being accused of the assassinations. He was happy enough, Nixon and Watergate aside, with things as they were. He believed in federalism and the rule of law, even if he sometimes lived outside it. Mark Rudd and Lewis Cole and the firebrands at City College had scared him. He wasn't comfortable with those who had the vision or the recklessness to break the mold. He wasn't good at putting things together, and even if they were la crème de la crème, he couldn't believe that they were either, at least not whole countries.

Sometimes "Sally Go Round the Roses" played loud in his head. It was the most wonderful and mysterious song. The roses knew what secret? The Jaynettes weren't telling. Oh, he wished he could be in a room with the girls who had recorded that song so they could sing it just for him and he could watch them dance and make it fully comprehensible.

All this preoccupation with Solden Sondem did not mean that Solden Sondem was similarly thinking of him. Solden Sondem had a jury of twelve good men and women, and one alternate, to select who, in his estimation, would return a verdict of "not guilty" on all counts of the indictment. To aid him in the selection process, Solden Sondem had a man of soaring intellect and a thick beard worthy of an Old Testament prophet. Reese Farragut sat at the right hand of Solden Sondem, and when he was not making notes, he

was whispering in his ear. These were not sweet nothings that Reese Farragut was whispering into the ear of his beloved. And yet he was arousing Solden Sondem with the insights he was providing: the peculiar things that the prospective juror in seat number 11 was doing with her hands and the hard stare seat number 11 was putting on the alleged perps. A blend of hard fact and surmise went into Reese Farragut's final analysis. Luther had learned in the newspapers of the painstaking research Reese Farragut had conducted as a scientist and now sought to apply in developing a science of jury selection. Reese Farragut's careful technique notwithstanding, Luther came to believe he and this man were in sympathetic accord. Why? Because Reese Farragut was in the image of Efram Ellsberg, Luther's friend from City College and post office days, sufficient that Luther could say of him, I know this man and have the strongest feeling that I am in his heart. And, in truth, Luther was attempting to thought-beam to Reese Farragut that love through the air even as he held his face expressionless.

Now something else of consequence was occurring to negate all of Luther's mental communiqués to the defense team. It came to Luther's understanding that for every defense there was an offense, and that offense could have a fearsome countenance, as the scowling face of the lead prosecutor, Stace Chunkly (BA, Amherst, JD, Columbia Law School), surely did. Stace Chunkly did not need wings of mercy or Judy Collins to remind him what love was. Love was muscular thought. Love was justice. Don't give me the historical injustice of slavery. Don't give me inequality and the ongoing iniquity perpetrated by white men against the black race. Do not give me Hattie Carroll being a maid in a kitchen. Do not give me any of that. Give me the fact that two young policemen

on foot patrol on an East Village street had their lives taken when assassins fired bullets into their backs, extinguishing them forever. Give me the fact that wives and children and parents and siblings and friends were left to grieve their loss. Eternity. Do you know what eternity is, gentlemen and gentlewomen of the jury? This life is to eternity what a drop of water is to the ocean, vast beyond reckoning. And eternity is where these defendants wantonly dispatched these brave young men who were doing their duty in protecting you, the citizenry of this city. And why? Because these defendants were driven by a hateful ideology that gives them a license to kill.

Such was the muscular approach to the affairs of the world that Stace Chunkly took. No riding the crest of the wave of black rage like pretty boy Solden Sondem was doing. And no need for the services of the expert Reese Farragut to determine who he wanted and didn't want impaneled on the jury. Of each one, he asked the same question: Would the fact that the slain men were police officers have any bearing, one way or the other, on their verdict? No was the answer given by the prospective jurors whom Stace Chunkly questioned before coming to Luther.

"How about you, Mr. Garatdjian? Will the fact that the slain men in this case were police officers have any bearing, one way or the other, for you?"

"I can't say it will," Luther said.

"Then there is a possibility that it might?"

"You must understand that this is New York City, and danger is everywhere, and so the police must be everywhere, only they are not, because they cannot be," Luther said.

“Do you wish to explain?”

“When the men with violence in their bones came and knocked down my door, though the light was burning in my apartment, they would surely have deceased me had I been home. They were there but the police were not there.”

“Meaning?”

“Sometimes the police are where they need to be and sometimes they are not.”

“Thank you, Mr. Garatdjian,” Stace Chunkly said, and moved on to question another person in the jury box.

Luther had no apology he wished to make for his response, which the circumstances, and the presence of fearsome Stace Chunkly, seemed to elicit, and yet could only be sad at the peremptory dismissal that followed. Now he would not be a party to the courtroom drama sure to follow, in comparison with which his own life was a monotony of days.

“Oblivion-bound.” “Le malaise, c’est moi.” Message T-shirts such as these Efram Ellsburg, Luther’s friend from college days, was given to wear. Quaaludes, hash, grass, were staples of his day, his antidotes to despair. And yet, though Efram spent his evenings zonked and captive to prime time TV, Luther still thought of his friend as Buddha breath or Walt Whitman spouting bardic yip-yap, singing the song of democracy as he strode across the Brooklyn Bridge or the Continental Divide. Luther suspected Talmudic wisdom of the ages was stored in Efram’s genes.

Through much of college, Efram was hooked on Rosa Hessen, a woman who could smile but also fight you with her face and more, should you wish to get into it with her. She had long, thin dancer's legs and unruly hair she allowed to have its way. Luther had once gone to Rosa's apartment for grass so he could return to smoke heaven, Efram having alerted him that she had the goods. Luther felt overwhelmed by her sultry power. Evidently, Rosa lacked the capacity to be a do-right woman in regard to sex; she had not left behind the right to bed with others when she paired up with Efram. Those were one-and-done deals until she met Professor Hiram Forcemet, whose big head housed a big brain that had assimilated and synthesized the whole body of Western philosophic thought, from Aristotle to Heidegger to whoever the big cheese of the day might be. As a student of Professor Forcemet, she came to love him for his body as well as his mind, and he came to love her, too. And while it was true that she loved Efram for both his body and mind as well, she could not stop her love for Professor Forcemet from growing, and he did nothing to quell her ardor, simply saying, "Passion must have its expression. We must deny ourselves nothing, nothing."

Luther had not read the novel *Of Human Bondage*, but he had seen the film and could apply the same words to Efram's thing with Rosa as he could to his own desperate need for Sarah. Rosa did not try to hide her love lust. "I can't stop," she said, leaving aside Immanuel Kant and Nietzsche for plain speak.

"And I can't stop seeing her," Efram said to Luther. This was back in their post office days, which Luther now remembered fondly as a time of rich experience and growth. Penn Station. The tabernacle. The General Post Office just across the street. The

area a wonderland of memory and smells from childhood that would overwhelm him with the sweet pain of longing, though for what he could never say.

And so Efram Ellsberg, sad-eyed and stressed in his farmer's overalls, had his time of torment too. But he also had a moral compass that he followed. His heart and his eros were one; they were where his treasure lay. He did not seek to relieve his anxiety or take his revenge by pouring his seed into other women. He stayed the course. And if Luther ever needed a window into Efram's soul, it occurred when in his hysteria he invited Efram to meet a speed freak woman, Desdemona, following their evening shift at the post office. Luther had introduced himself to her in Washington Square Park some nights before. She had the fragility of an insect and was in need of medical and psychiatric attention, but Luther had not been seeing her dire circumstances. He had thought to show Desdemona off to Efram and thus to demonstrate that he, Luther, had a wonderful life full of exciting, alluring women. He had not understood that he would be showing Efram sickness or that Efram, far from responding with prurient interest in this woman with the figure of Olive Oyl, would shortly take his leave. Even before Efram's departure, Luther had begun to see through his friend's eyes. He had felt Efram's sadness at the spectacle of the emaciated woman, a reality Luther had not been able to fully see on his own.

Efram's departure validated for Luther his friend's higher status. He had no choice but to place Efram in the moral pantheon with Gresham Dodger. "We don't do that here. We don't do that here," Gresham Dodger had shouted into Luther's face, having seen Luther strike a loathsome classmate back in seventh grade. And he had absorbed

Gresham's message. He understood when a being from a higher order was addressing him, through his actions or his words.

There had been another occasion for moral instruction from Efram. Luther had found himself one night in a Bronx apartment with Efram and some of his friends. Because the hour had grown late, Efram encouraged Luther to stay over, as he would be doing. There were young women in that apartment, and Luther's shy contact with them had awakened sexual desire. While Efram slept the sleep of the supremely just, Luther struggled to restrain himself from knocking on the door of one of the women with whom, at least in his imagination, he had exchanged a look of mutual understanding. Actually, as he lay on a makeshift bed on the floor, he imagined, there in the dark, the entire apartment coming to prurient life, a full orgy erupting. He experienced this carnality as a fever, a torment.

Mercifully, he fell off to sleep, and in the morning Efram offered a raised eyebrow when Luther shared his impulse to knock on the woman's door, leaving out the fantasy of group sex. That raised eyebrow told Luther everything. Efram and his friends, all of them Jewish, had modes of communication and points of reference beyond Luther's ken, and they needed neither word nor gesture to achieve full understanding, their cohesiveness having been established in ancient times. We are brothers and sisters first, and lovers second, Efram was saying, casting Luther deeper and deeper into his apartness mindset.

But that was then and life had its turnings. Long after Luther had left the post office for the more profitable renting office, Efram had remained, giving himself daily to the meager challenge of the box scheme and those bins of mail lifted from the conveyor



belt. And yet, even within the system in which he recognized himself as a mere cog or because of it, his voice had to be heard. Efram took to decorating first-class mail that passed through his hands with a hand-drawn peace symbol without thought to the potential consequences, including the federal marshals who arrived at his work station as he was engrossed in one of his doodles and led him in handcuffs from the general post office to a federal detention center in lower Manhattan for the alleged crime of defacing United States mail.

For one of the few times Luther saw his friend in this period with less than a serene visage. Wary of the system, he became its victim with his felony conviction for destroying government property. More humiliating was the absence of legal options; at the urging of his lawyer and his family, he entered a plea of guilty in exchange for a suspended five-year sentence and probation.

Deep in debt to his family for legal fees and shamed and humiliated that a cute gesture should summon such disproportionate clobber—what was that to be chewed up in the maw of the law for doodling?—he became a production coordinator for a corporate annual reports company. A more mainstream girlfriend than Rosa soon followed.

*“Luther, where is the reason in this? I need to know. You just go on and on and on.”*

*“Do you not believe that order must prevail and that a full accounting must be made? Are you wedded to your foolishness in espousing anarchist principles so chaos can reign? We must sweep the floor and put things where they belong.”*

Maude was not hooked on philosophy or the life of the mind. Her deference and humility led her to ask Efram the difference between modern and contemporary. She was simply present in the world, creating a niche for herself in a midtown marketing company, and lived in a ground-floor apartment in an art deco building on West Eighty-First Street. Her previous boyfriend, a photographer, she asked to leave when she learned he was doing the hanky-panky with some of his models. Maude was a one-man woman, and so Efram did not have to fear the cruel blow that sexual treachery or abandonment could deliver. But Efram did have to fear the closeness that Maude sought, the long cuddle time she required to assuage her asthma. He tried in vain to imagine train whistles in the night when he heard her wheezing in bed. Security being her goal, Maude could not long endure the limbo status of just living together. She had grown up in Brooklyn. She had heard the song "Today I Met the Boy I'm Going to Marry" and in fact sang it in a pretty soprano right there for Efram in the sunken living room on their first day together. She was not always so private with her vocals. On subway platforms and on buses she might be led to launch into other oldies but goodies that pertained to her man, like "He's a Rebel" and "He's So Fine," and was particularly vibrant on the doo lang doo lang part. Altogether he was perturbed, not reassured, when she offered her rendition of "I Will Follow Him," as he by now had a strong sense of her doggedness.

Efram saw that Maude, her song bursts notwithstanding, was the floor on which he stood, or sat, and if that floor opened up, he would fall and fall back into Midwood, Brooklyn, and the clutches of his loving but smothering mother. Evenings spent watching *Hawaii Five-O* and *Ironside* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* replaced all interest in

literature and his own writing. Whereas he had once walked around with a knapsack full of books, he now rode the subway as part of the daily grind with his face in *The New York Post* or *The Daily News*. He wanted no reminders of where he had been. And yet he had enough of the manly thing that Maude, who recognized his potential, would overlook his lethargy and continued to claim him for her own.

The apartment of Efram and Maude had the things an apartment should have: a sofa, a color TV, a wall unit, a dining table that seated six, and a functional, modern kitchen. Once again wonder was summoned in Luther that there were those who could impose not only order but imagination on their domiciles.

By contrast, it was evident to Luther that Efram and Maude were seeing less than they had hoped—and perhaps more—when they came to visit the loft. There was sadness and even displeasure on their faces as they took in the stove-less kitchen and the crude sink-less bathroom with a shower curtain serving as a door. Does he really shave and brush his teeth in the kitchen sink, the same sink where they wash the dishes? So Luther could imagine Efram and circumspect Maude thinking. And the two of them sitting on the small wicker sofa that sagged and squeaked under their weight. Luther even caught them exchanging a look of commiseration. But was it for Efram and Maude to hose him down, and Sarah as well, with their unspoken sorrow and their pity?

Well, it was something of a relief when they could all go to the Joy Palace, as Luther and Sarah had done with Sarah's parents, where Luther once again ordered the house special, those glistening chunks of beef and bright green broccoli. There was nothing like warm, hearty food to make him feel substantial in the world.

It happens in this life that we are asked to step up and show what we are made of. So it occurred to Luther years later when he reflected on the invitation that followed to the wedding of Efram Ellsberg and Maude Sodenberg. Not that it was a formal, printed thing Luther received in the mail. Efram simply let Luther know that he and Sarah would be welcome at the ceremony and the reception to follow. Luther had never before received a wedding invitation, formal or otherwise. Luke's marriage to Maureen had been a City Hall kind of deal. But here life was calling to life. A ritual practiced through the centuries was to be enacted, tailored no doubt to Efram's sensibility. Even as Efram spoke, Luther could hear, in the background, his bride-to-be's soulful rendition of "Going to the Chapel." Wedding bells were no small thing, but Luther could not see what he could not see. He had come to occupy his own space and no other. The more time he had, the less time he had. The more time he had, the more time he needed. He couldn't give himself to Efram and Maude, not when he had words to write. OK for Efram to watch *Ironside* and *HawaiiFive-0*, given his high board score status. But not OK for Luther. Not OK at all. Luther had catching up to do before he could even hope to be presentable. Besides, Luther would be out of place among Efram's high board score friends.

Luther saw that he lacked a deep desire for friendship, the give and take required for a lasting bond to form. He wanted Efram to serve as an oracle whom he could come to with his anxieties about Sarah, but now that he had Sarah, he had less need of Efram. For the rest, he had the bars and the doors to magical, sensual nights that alcohol opened. The known left him nothing to explore, and what was more known, in his mind, than the suffocating normalcy of marriage.

As a child he would race up the stairs of the station at the Grand Concourse and 149<sup>th</sup> Street, in the Bronx, and transfer to the Jerome Avenue subway. Soon the train would leave behind the dark tunnel for the lingering daylight on a spring or summer evening. Before him came into view the cream-colored walls of Yankee Stadium. From the vantage point of the elevated rail line he would glimpse, through a space between the scoreboard and the right-field stands, the rich green outfield grass and Yankees in pinstripes or the visiting ballplayers in their road uniforms running wind sprints or shagging flies. That subway tunnel being the loft and Efram's wedding the waning light of day that alcohol and his own tendencies prevented him from experiencing.

That November Richard Milhous Nixon punched gentle George S. McGovern in the face and broke it in many different places. And Spiro Agnew took off the gloves and did the same to the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, Sargent Shriver.

“Well, we won the East Village,” a man who walked on the sunny side of the street was heard to say.

To Luther Spiro Agnew had cruelty in his bones and in his blood; in Greece, his ancestral homeland, he would surely be prime junta material. He stood out in his shiny, expensive suits and with his thinning hair slicked back and that constant look of peeve on his face even when he smiled. Spiro Agnew was not afraid to put his face, smiling or otherwise, before the public, and tell that public he had attended law school at night. But he also had a weapon with which to similarly bash John Q. Public should it wish to mess with him about his lack of Ivy League status, and that weapon was his IQ of 135.

Luther was showing some concern about other faces belonging to the rulers of the land. And why shouldn't he? RMN was surely deserving of the moniker "Tricky Dick" after his Checkers speech, though no one could say his face displayed the same cruel streak as that of his veep. As for his underlings, Bob "Buzz" Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, Luther had his eye on them as well. Ehrlichman had the malignancy gene, Luther feared, seeing the way his lips curled into a sneer, and Bob Haldeman appeared equally formatted to inflict pain.

The Grand Old Party had been wrapped in the colors of the American flag. It was the party of Lincoln he had read about in the history books, the Union Army, the Battle of Gettysburg, Grant's Tomb, the granite structures of government. But how was it he had come to demonize their competitors, the Democrats, and viscerally experience them as anarchists, the great unwashed, a frenzied mob seeking to storm the gates of government and sully and eventually destroy all our institutions? What engineering feat had been performed on his mind that he should sit as a child with his father's copy of the *New York Times* and fill with terror on reading that the Democrats had a chance to increase their number of statehouses and Senate seats and control of state legislatures?

And what had changed him? Kennedy had changed him. The denunciations by Pastor Cohn of Kennedy had changed him. Love had changed him. The handsome president. His beautiful wife. The assassination had put Kennedy in his heart forever. LBJ had changed him. And mean Barry Goldwater. He too had changed him. Leaving behind Pentecostalism meant leaving behind the Republican Party, meant leaving behind those who said no to life, meant leaving behind his narrow past for more open spaces.

Solomon Reisner had been a good father, a man who understood how to maintain distance and keep the thermostat set to cool. But two terms with Solomon Reisner, or any teacher, was enough. It was time to move on.

An additional feather had been placed in the cap of CCNY. A poet who had been the recipient of many prestigious literary awards and prizes was now the college's poet-in-residence. Many times Luther had contemplated abandoning the burden, the bondage, of "White Line Continue" and freeing himself of the merciless tyranny of narrative as he experienced it, packing every scrap of his existence into his meager sentences, seeing as he did that he lacked the engineer's aptitude for structure? He admired the freedom, the distillation of experience that permeated poetry but remained intimidated by the technical demands, still having only a passing acquaintance with dactyls and trochees and spondees and the like. But maybe Louise Richter would receive him. Maybe she would give him the direction he was seeking.

Through the half-open door of her small office he saw the poet standing by her desk. "I was hoping so much I could have the chance to be in your class. You see, there is another world..."

But Louise Richter was a woman of fire and constant in her ire. A demonstration of her fidelity to this animus quickly followed. To the door she strode, her eyes twin pools of darkness, and slammed it shut in his face without so much as a "no."

Such decisive action required a meditation. It could not simply be dismissed as rudeness. And so he came to the understanding that the slammed door was an expression

of her commitment to principle. And what exactly was that principle? Simply this: People whose faces you do not like you do not let through the door. She had not liked his face. Why? Because it was a face worthy of being disliked. That was why. Because the time had come to actively dislike the fucking pricks. Because the fucking pricks had been getting away with murder and now their time was up.

Louise Richter was an avenging angel. She had staying power in his mind. Over and over the same scene he replayed, she coming to the door and slamming it resoundingly without so much as a “no,” giving him the silence he not only needed but deserved.

And Luther came to another understanding: the more sterling your quality, the more emphatic your rejection of non-quality had to be if you were to preserve your unalloyed status so integrity could continue to speak its name. After all, Louise Richter had gone to Harvard, and bards such as Robert Lowell and Wystan Hugh Auden were in her praise corner.

In pursuit of thoroughness, Luther headed for the St. Mark’s Bookstore, where he pulled from a shelf a slender volume of Louise Richter’s verse. Clearly the poet had been in communication with the Gertrude Stein of *Melanctha*, as where was he led but to lines that read “When the men in my life hit the hobo trail/I remain/ My power is local but I know my power.”

Oh dear God, Luther thought, there are those among us with special powers of perception. This woman has been sent to strip me to my essence and put me in my place. A feeling not of chagrin but of great joy suffused his entire being as he cried out, “I have



been remanded to the railroad tunnel of my childhood. It is there that I must eventually go.”

Dov Drosky was his name. He too was from Harvard and came to CCNY with a master’s degree in creative writing and three published novels to his credit before the age of twenty-six. He didn’t try to be older than his years, freely acknowledging that he was a young writer struggling to learn his craft and leaving ample room for mentors in his life. A merry gleam often showed in the dark eyes of this man on the rise.

Dov Drovsky provided his students with a comprehensive reading list, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to Kleist and Knut Hamsun and Borges. And he was very big on John Hawkes, who wrote skinny books and, Luther somehow assumed, had skinny legs and was famous for his obscurity.

“I don’t care if you are underweight, but I don’t want you under-read. If you want meat on the bones of your prose, then you must devour, gorge, tear the very flesh of the text with your teeth. Do whatever you must so you absorb good writing into your bloodstream and let it carry to your very soul.” A tone and expression of earnestness accompanied this declaration by Dov Drovsky, though Luther suspected a prankster’s laugh was lurking behind his serious demeanor, as no Harvard man could be lacking in ironic levity.

Dov Drovsky was not the underweight kind but a serious devourer if his oak tree thighs and barrel chest were any indication. And yet suppose mesomorphic endowment was not owing in the least to nurture but entirely to nature? Had Luther not seen this

thing before, men who went days and weeks without anything more than a sprig of parsley maintaining their robust physiques just as men and women blessed with encyclopedic knowledge often seemed to have that knowledge encoded in their genes? And what of Dov Drosky's passion for skinny-legged John Hawkes and his inscrutable texts? Here, Luther had a declaration of his own to silently make. I will not engage in such fruitless speculation but move forward with my life, he vowed.

Dov Drosky had a second declaration to make. "If you want to be published, you have to start your own magazine. Life is a quid pro quo thing." He himself had started a fiction magazine, *Flame*, on the college's budget, and used his own office as the base of operations. A beset-looking and overweight young woman in the writing program served as the magazine's unpaid intern. Dov Drosky's own work appeared in every other issue. He had everything: intelligence, vision, energy, charm, perseverance. But his prose lacked elasticity; it had a musclebound quality.

Dov Drosky was generous in the comments he attached to Luther's submitted stories. He did not hit him with a hammer, as Sol Reisner had done. Though his hair was black and his clothes equally dark, a nimbus of light shone around him and he communicated hope. Luther was grateful to have such a man in his life, even if the inevitable comparison between him and his not much older teacher was an unfavorable one. After all, Dov Drosky had a life of full responsibility and sizable accomplishment, while Luther, in quiet moments, understood that he was filching money from the renting office of the family business and had nothing to show for his years on the planet.

*You must not continue on this path, my son. Did I not tell you to attend bible college and to prepare yourself for God's ministry? Do you not know that the Christ Jesus is the risen Christ, and that all cries and whispers and murmured lamentations, in writing and in the spoken word, are but prayers for salvation?*

At Dov Drosky's first class, Luther came to notice a woman seated on the other side of the table. She would look and then look away and a minute later, set her eyes on him again. She appeared somewhat older than the other students and had arrived wearing a tight red silk blouse, the kind that might have come from an expensive boutique. The designer top didn't quite go with her workaday Levi jeans. But it was her unsettling and unwelcome attention to him that was more his concern than her mismatched outfit. She seemed to be communicating neediness and a plea for connection. It occurred to him that her attention to him was not so much abject as appropriating; some assumption of instant intimacy she had conveyed. He resolved to steer clear of her, fearing she would otherwise try to smother him. He wanted to do this writing program in the right way and intuitively sensed he would not be able to with her in his life.

She was waiting for him at the door when the class ended. "Are you heading for the subway. Because if you are, I have a car and could give you a lift."

"Sure," he said, her invitation setting aside the conclusion about her he had drawn.

Seeing that the gate near the Quonset hut was locked, Luther suggested they leave through the main exit at the northern end of the south campus. But the woman, whose name was Marge, said no, she could easily climb the seven-foot-high gate. Besides, her

car was parked on the street just outside the gate so why take the long way around? A sense of danger was growing in Luther even as she spoke. A treacherous rain had begun to fall, the kind in which cars skidded and crashed and in which cold, sharp steel met unsuspecting flesh on garbage-strewn streets. Harlem, with its random bursts of deadly violence, felt like an encircling menace in the darkness beyond the confines of the now desolate campus.

The woman's innocence, her can-do spirit, was out of place with the sullenness, the atmosphere of grievance, that permeated the community around the campus. A scene from childhood came to him of Luke's friend Whitey swarmed over by black kids from the welfare hotels down the block. He saw him being beaten senseless and left curled in his own blood on the street, and with the images came fear bordering on panic, as it had during the open admissions controversy that had engulfed the college several years before, when he imagined thousands of angry blacks marauding through the campus. An intelligent woman emotionally stupid about the inherent dangers in the city was not someone to be with in a ghetto. No, she was the kind to summon the forces of rage to spring at her milky white throat and draw him into the danger zone as well.

The woman gripped the vertical bars of the wrought-iron gate and secured a foothold on the flat, diagonal bar that rose at a forty-five degree angle. The high-end hiking boots, with their lug soles, were designed for rugged trails, not climbing a rain-slicked gate, but she persevered, inching forward as if she were scaling a sheer cliff. Soon she was halfway over the top, her abdomen hovering less than an inch above the sharp,

spiky tips of the bars. Terror-struck that she would lose her footing and be impaled on those tips, he coaxed her down and they exited through the main gate.

Her gray Buick sedan was in need of body work but offered a cushioned ride. As she drove out of Harlem and toward Morningside Heights, he learned that she was an adjunct lecturer at the college and eligible to take the writing class tuition-free. He also learned that she lived by herself on Riverside Drive and One Hundred Fifteenth Street in a building he had a history with that he had no need to share with her.

Waiting in the subway station for the Broadway local, he told himself that he had escaped. And now he could establish a new line of defense against this woman Marge. She could, if she wished, chauffeur him to the Upper West Side from CCNY, but he would make sure it stopped there.

And yet the new line he drew turned out to be no more defensible than the first. Following the next class, she overran it as quickly as the Germans had penetrated the Maginot Line.

“Let’s go for a beer. What do you say?” She went past the subway stop at One Hundred Sixteenth Street without waiting for a response and parked in front of the End Bar a couple of blocks south.

“Thanks for asking,” he said with some sarcasm, miffed at her high-handedness.

Her car. The soft lights of the End Bar. He would yield to those. But him she would never get. About that he had ironclad certainty. Physical attraction was lacking. He was saddened by her reliance on jeans as a staple of her dress, as he was by get-it-on Brenda. The jeans spoke of her shame about her body. They hid the knock knees or

poorly shaped calves or thick ankles a skirt or dress would have exposed. He was grateful that even in warm weather he could wear long pants to cover his bony knees and meager calves.

But there was more than physical revulsion. Marge was his sisters and his sisters were Marge. There was the deterrent of incest.

Marge returned to the booth holding two steins, each with a straw, filled with cola and ice.

“Why the soda and not beer? And why two?” Luther asked.

“Your last question first. Because I get very thirsty. As to your first question, because alcohol makes me crazy. I do things I shouldn’t do.”

“Like what?”

“I throw my drinks in men’s faces. That’s what I do,” Marge said.

“You’ve done that?”

“I did just that in a bar last month, and caused a big scene.”

“You don’t like men?”

“I like them too much,” she said.

“That’s why you throw drinks in their faces?”

“Not exactly. Because they don’t do what I want them to do.”

“And what is that?”

“Love me.”

“They don’t?”

“My last boyfriend didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“He left me for another woman.”

“That must have been rough.”

“I put all his clothes in the bathtub and burned them.”

“Jesus.”

“I had to have some revenge.”

“Well, better that you burned his clothes than him.”

“Believe me, I would have set him on fire if he had been around.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

“I have nothing to say to Elgard Finnebrand III. We are done.”

“He sounds like royalty.”

“That’s how he thinks of himself, as a prince among men.”

“I’ve never met a prince.”

She was not royalty herself, but she was privileged. She made no secret of the enormous trust fund that enabled her to rent a spacious Riverside Drive apartment and see a therapist twice a week and own a car on the meager salary of an adjunct lecturer. Her father had reaped a fortune from a patent on a component essential for military defense systems. She might be off balance emotionally but she had her father’s smarts, and they had brought her a B.A. from Vassar College and an M.A. in English from Columbia. And so, because she was stamped with the seal of excellence, Luther had reason to fear her.

And there was another thing to fear, the smashing of his dream. His literary treasure was the building a half block away. He had done something risky and foolish in

bringing Marge close to that treasure. He couldn't say what exactly would happen were she to discover his family ties and learn about his family's management of the property or of his three shifts per week in the renting office, only that he needed to be seen as alone and unattached. This was his time for inventing himself. Whatever Marge's image of him, any knowledge she gained of his origins would only destroy it.

"We should get together and do something sometime soon," Marge said.

"What should we do?"

"Something."

"Yes, well," Luther said.

"Well, what?"

"Nothing," Luther said.

For that night, at least, the wrecking ball did not come in. As the days passed and the memory of Marge's predatory manner receded, his attitude toward her began to soften. A little pushy, maybe, and even crazy, what with throwing drinks in men's faces and burning her ex-boyfriends clothes, but so what? She hadn't burned anyone with acid and in spite of the violence she had claimed to be capable of toward Elgard Finnebrand III, nothing of the kind had actually occurred. She was just a lonely woman going through a rough stretch. That was all. And it was kind of nice to have someone who thought so highly of his writing when all he had received were thumbs down. And yet, how nice to have the safety of the Chinatown loft to withdraw to, where he could have his life with Sarah.



That weekend Sarah called him to the phone. “A woman named Marge wants to speak with you,” she said. Astonished, he took the receiver.

“Luther, I’m very angry with you.”

“How did you get my number?”

“I have my ways.”

“What does that mean, you have your ways?”

“I went to the registrar’s office and said you were a student of mine and that I needed to speak with you because you had been missing classes.”

“You lied to get my number. That was an underhanded thing to do.”

“I will tell you what an underhanded thing to do is. You tried to undermine my growth. What is lower than that?”

“What?”

“You heard me. You saw me about to climb over that gate and insisted on pulling me back.”

“I believe I kept you from impaling yourself on the spiky tips of that gate.”

“I won’t get into the obvious Freudian implication of that fear. You couldn’t handle the fact that I, as a woman, could do something only men are supposed to do.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“I will tell you what is ridiculous—men who think they can hold me back. You’re just like those four men who came along and fixed my flat tire over my strenuous objection. I won’t go so far as to say you were one of those men in that car, but you could have been. Is that all you want for yourself in life, Luther, to be someone who purposely

creates barriers for women? What other women have you been doing this to? Tell me.

Tell me now.”

“Please don’t call here again,” Luther said, and hung up the phone.

He hadn’t a minute to fathom the exchange that had taken place when the phone rang again.

“No one hangs up the phone on me. No one. Do you hear me?” Marge screamed, before hanging up the phone herself.

“Who is this woman?” Sarah asked.

“A woman from the writing program,” Luther said.

“What did she want?”

“She wanted me to stop interfering with her growth.”

“What?”

“That’s exactly what she said. She said I interfered with her growth.”

“How did you manage to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Interfere with her growth?”

“I didn’t interfere with her growth.”

“Then why did she say so? You must have done something.”

“I talked her down from a gate she was trying to climb because she was going to get hurt.”

“How was she going to get hurt?”

“Her belly was hanging over the sharp tips at the top of the gate. I could see she couldn’t make it over.”

“You couldn’t have let her try?”

“I’m not in this world to let people hurt themselves. I’m not. And if they do want to hurt themselves, then I don’t want it to be in front of me. Do I have to tell you all the times I see people, in the throes of their own sly viciousness, walk out into the street against the light looking in the wrong direction for traffic or not looking at all? Or those so-called victims who stand at the very edge of the platform as the train approaches the station and then ‘accidentally’ fall to their death? Don’t think for a minute I don’t get what they’re up to.”

“What were you doing with this woman anyway?”

“It was late and dark out when the class ended. She offered me a ride to the subway station in her car. That was all.”

“Obviously it wasn’t all for her,” Sarah said.

“I guess not. The really outrageous thing is that she tricked the people in the registrar’s office into giving her my phone number.”

“How did she do that?”

“By telling them I was a student of hers. She has some kind of temporary teaching position at the college.”

“She sounds like trouble.”

“She won’t be. You’ll see.”

“Just don’t go interfering with her growth anymore. Maybe killing herself is what she needs to do.”

In this time Sarah paid a visit to Dr. Edelbaum, the family doctor for both the Garatdjians and the Van Dines. “He said someday I will be a large lady, like my mother, and then he laughed,” Sarah said, when she returned to the loft.

Though Luther commiserated with her at the doctor’s tactlessness, secretly he sensed that the doctor was accurate in his projection of Sarah’s bodily dimensions some years down the road, as already her waistline was thickening. Shallow as it was, Luther at was disconcerted that she was not as striking as she had been when they first met.

The doctor could not have anticipated Sarah’s radical response to his forecast. Out with Palace of Joy special steak. No more pizza or ice cream or chocolate cake. No more sesame noodles. In with a dozen boiled shrimp, two cups of yogurt, and three boiled eggs per day. So her crash diet continued, into a second month. Gone the puffiness in her face and the ballooning waist. The transformation was stunning. She took on the appearance of a wan and fragile—and very sexy—waif.

In this time as well, a woman from the Edgerton Foundation, in Madison, Wisconsin, visited the loft to consider Sarah’s work for a possible grant. The trust fund money would last only a year more at most, and Luther had encouraged Sarah to apply.

*Why? Why did you do that, Luther? We will not thrash you should you speak less than the truth, but we have the expectation that you will rise to the occasion.*

I will tell you why. Because she had fallen into a hole back in that ruinous fifth year competition at the Boston Museum School, when the Prince of Darkness was holding sway and driving her down to the domain of death itself. That is why. I told her to apply precisely because I did not believe in the work she was producing there in the loft. That enormous stuffed canvas sculpture looked like nothing so much as a giant turd or her father's dingus. She was lost and fading. The signposts providing direction had vanished, hidden by a blizzard of doubt. In my perversity I held out hope that a lady from the suburbs of Madison could rescue her even as I suspected that she would hasten Sarah's demise. Why? Because if I had lost faith and Sarah had lost faith, then this shift had instantly been communicated to the lady from the Midwest. Sarah's connection to me had finally afflicted her with the loser's taint.

*What else, Luther? What else? Do not dilly-dally. Do not shilly-shally. Do not go that route with us.*

Other forces for her demise were accelerating. Despite my self-flagellating manner, a ruse to keep you from the happiness I was oftentimes experiencing, I was in the ascendant, if the attention I was receiving from this woman Marge and from Dov Drosky himself meant anything. Perhaps I was sensing that my time had come. After all, I had the structure of the writing program while school life was over for Sarah and she was on her own.

*Go on with your narrative. We will be watching you. Of that you can be sure.*

This woman from the Edgerton Foundation. It grieved Luther to hear that she was cold and proper and that flecks of metal bit into Sarah's face when the woman deigned to

speak at all. Altogether the woman reached new heights of haughtiness in casting a dismissive eye at Sarah's offerings—paintings, prints, her canvas sculpture.

“We will have to wait and see if she was truly an agent of death and destruction,” Luther said. The waiting was not long. A letter came within a month informing Sarah that she would not, alas, be a recipient of a foundation grant, causing Sarah to dream that she was being buffeted by cold winds on an arid, desolate plain under the gaze of a steel gray sky that gave new meaning to the word *infinity*.

Luther had a dream of his own in this period. He was in a small town and had not paid his bill at the hotel, as he had no money. The townspeople sought to shame him. The usual treatment. Men, women, and children jeered and hurled rotten tomatoes as he passed by. The spectacle of four youths urinating on a bum passed out in a fetal position in a doorway the night before while their pink Cadillac idled calmly revealed the harsh character of the town. They nonchalantly hosed down his hair, his eyes, his beard, and directed their stream into his ears and open mouth, as if they were idly chatting while standing at restroom urinals. Luther had seen enough. He grabbed the string end of a big red balloon and let it take him away.

Some dreams, at least in part, came from real life, Luther could say, because he had one night witnessed, outside Umberto's Clam House, the sons of Joey Bag of Doughnuts Gonsofuerto showing similar disrespect to a drunk passed out in the doorway.

Luther got nowhere when he remonstrated with Marge about her phone call to the loft. She simply belched fire.

“You have been teasing me. You have been leading me on. You have been playing with my affections. Don’t even try to deny it, because you will only be a liar if you do. And remove that look of feigned incomprehension from your face. Remove it, I said.” In such a way that did Marge speak, seeking to bend him to her will.

But she had another and more effective tactic than fire. “You’re clearly some kind of eccentric genius,” she said, not understanding that the person she was so describing was her father, with his brilliant inventions, and not poor Luther, who struggled to put weight on the bones of his meager sentences and had just read, that evening, an undernourished story about his beloved railroad tunnel that ran under Riverside Park.

Another line was crossed that evening when Marge took him to her apartment. Such memories it brought back to enter that sturdy Riverside Drive building. The time that he and Jerry Jones-Nobleonian had turned over the fire extinguisher, the foam streaming from the nozzle and soaking the hallway as they raced down the stairs. Or the afternoon he spent with Jackie “Him-Who-Covers-His-Mouth-As-He-Snickers” Maltor, the bookstore owner’s son, who supplied him with martinis that left him passed out drunk in Jackie’s home the first time and falling down drunk in front of Luther’s building the second time. Or the homosexual man with the dyed blond hair who took him to his apartment for sex in that same building one summer night. The blue lighting in that apartment. The aquarium. The man’s aura of freedom. Luther didn’t tell her any of these things, lest she extinguish the light of love in which he viewed his childhood.

And if the line that excluded her from his past held, so too did the line against sex. She could serve him a beer, but she could not serve him herself. That much he remained clear about.

*Celeste, an endless wave of minutiae keeps me from you. The past has made me its slave and would keep me from the moment. Where is it written that I must present every last detail of my existence and like a flagellant on the wearying road to Mecca whip myself bloody in the process? What can it be but an enduring concept of sin that roots me so permanently to a time that did not exist, if we are to believe that in the present is eternity to be found? There is no righting a wrong or assigning blame when an infinite number of influences from all areas of the universe are reporting simultaneously.*

*I had been down, going along in a grim, persevering way, imprisoned in a sense of my own mediocrity. A new professor, or writing instructor, or mentor, or whatever those people are who encourage us on the path, came into my life. And so did a woman, somewhat older than me, and with sadness in her bones. Together they gave me a lift. Once again I was in the springtime of my life; the drab winter landscape was gone. In this atmosphere of excitement, I said and did foolish things. This is not the stuff of criminality.*

*Nor is it criminal on my part that a quality of empathy was lacking in my relationship with Marge. Yes, I saw her wound: the mother who had left her for death when Marge was only twelve; the father who had left her for Florida and the inland waterway he cruised along in his yacht; his new wife, in whom Marge discerned a heart of stone; and the boyfriend who left her for another woman. Depression spoke loudly in*



*her downcast face and in the tears she sometimes shed, but who would assign me responsibility for being its source? The truth was that Sarah was still at the center of my being, even if the mythology I had burdened her with was dissipating. There was no room for strong emotional connection with another woman.*

*The wages of sin is not death. The wages of sin are the mistakes we make and then correct. How long has it taken me to refute that sign commissioned by Auntie Eve, that verse of scripture, Romans 6:23, and how much longer will it take to emotionally assimilate the refutation?*

*In a state of lingering malaise Marge may have been, but it was not she who was run through by some spiky tip as threatened her that night she tried to climb the gate. She it was she who was the agent of penetration, lancing me with her words. Such was the power of her accusation that I had sought to retard her growth. Not that I felt its force all at once but over time was compelled to consider that her complaint could not be so easily dismissed as I had thought. Had I not hidden my sister Vera's books back in high school, motivated to do so by the fear that she would surpass me if I didn't? Hadn't that one act revealed my monstrous fear that she was gaining on me? And can it be said that I was an angel of light and kindness during those years Sarah attended the Boston Museum School? Would it not be fairer to say that I lived in great fear that admiration societies would spring up and draw her irreversibly away from me? And while it is said that unconditional love, that love which seeks only to give and furnishes its own reward, is merely a goal that we aspire to, and further that I must not beat myself mercilessly for*

*falling short, the dictate that drives some of us for a perfection not our own must be acknowledged.*

One night in early March Sarah put on her winter coat and headed for the door. “I need to go out,” she said.

“Out? It’s two in the morning,” Luther said, as he sat up in bed. The lights were blazing in her studio. She had been working late, reproaching him with her industry.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Sarah said. “Please don’t worry. I’m not going back to Lane.”

“Where are you going?” he asked, unsettled not merely by the mention of the genius boyfriend’s name and the hour but her tone of innocent earnestness.

“I need to be where the air is,” Sarah said.

“There is air here.”

“This is troubled air.”

“What is troubled air?”

“You know what troubled air is, mister,” she said, taking a harder tone.

“I don’t, and I’m not mister, at least with you.” The night was dangerous, and full of depravity. Her beauty would make her a magnet.

“Are you trying to deprive me of my growth? Is that it? Are you afraid I too will be impaled on the sharp tips of the gate?”

“It’s late. That’s all,” he said, ignoring the jibe, or pretending to.

“I don’t want to hurt you. You understand that, don’t you?”

He followed her partway into her studio. The sight of it in the unflattering light dismayed him. The paint-splattered floor, which he had so carefully given two coats of forest green enamel, and the array of cans and bottles and tubes and fabrics arrayed willy-nilly on her work table with scattered sketches were in contrast with the orderly little desk and set of shelves he had in his corner of the loft. And those plain white curtains of thick cloth sagging from the twine that supported them in front of the big windows looking down on East Broadway. They didn't even fully cover the windows. The acute physical discomfort took him back to his family's apartment and the garbage cans in the kitchen overturned by the dogs—coffee grounds and banana peels and gnawed pork chop bones on the splotchy linoleum and roaches everywhere. She was a true artist; she could break the mold and embrace turbulence while he couldn't abide so much as a pencil out of place.

“You don't have to watch me. Nothing will happen to you. Sarah sat on a cot in a corner of her studio. Her coat remained on, though the loft was well heated.

“I'm not concerned about myself,” Luther said, though he wasn't sure that was true.

He returned to bed and lay there on alert, imagining her crashing through the window. Some minutes later she was at the door again.

“I'm not here to hurt you. I promise you won't get hurt. I just need to go out.”

“Go out where?” he said, springing up from the bed.

“In the air. I have to go out in the air and see my parents.”

“Your parents are asleep. They won’t be happy to be woken in the middle of the night. Let’s wait for the morning. Then you can see your parents.”

Once again he had placed himself between her and the door and grabbed her as she made a fierce effort to bull past him.

“I told you I wouldn’t hurt you. Isn’t that enough? What more do you want?”  
There was fury in her voice as she struggled to break free.

The morning did come. He woke and found her asleep in her coat on the cot. She looked peaceful and childlike. A drama had begun to unfold. The anticipation of bringing her family into it filled him with excitement.

*“Why would you want to bring her parents into the situation, Luther? Why would you want to concern them?”*

*“You needn’t ask why when you already have the answer. I had thinness in my bones and a meager quantity of flesh. I was not built for this kind of financial responsibility. I wanted to be Momma’s little helper.”*

*“And who would Momma be in this instance?”*

*“Lydia, of course. I wanted to be in the sunlight of her love with the gift I could offer; that gift being her daughter Sarah.”*

*“The gift of a damaged daughter?”*

*“Is not a daughter with a broken wing more of a gift than a daughter who has gone to the land of the dead, as Lenore had done? Am I not to be seen as a life-giver for such an act, a man choosing the light in the face of vast and complex forces?”*

*“Go on. Say what you need to say.”*

*“Do not take that tone with me. Do not do that.”*

*“Do what?”*

*“Do not suffer me to come to you. This I will not tolerate. Greet me with love or not at all. Have I made myself clear?”*

*“You have. Now please continue.”*

*“I swung into action. I suppose such a statement sounds grandiose given the simple step I took, which was to pick up the phone to put her parents on high alert as to what was coming. Yes, I’ve done it again. You can hear the drama, the self-importance, the casting of myself in an important if not heroic role. A winter wind blew through the phone when Peter picked it up. It was not merely the stiffness of his manner in saying “The Van Dine residence,” but his cold manner when I identified myself. I asked to speak with Lydia, who brought a definite warming trend to the interaction as soon as she came on the line. Recalling her reading of the collected works of Carl Jung, published by the Bollingen Press of Princeton University, I could be confident of her intuitive understanding when I said that Sarah was in distress and that we would be coming up together. That Lydia did not demand a fuller explanation or react with alarm suggests that my confidence in her was well placed. As to why Sarah did not speak for herself on the phone, let me just say that at the least both Lydia and Peter might have suffered befuddlement if Sarah came on the line and said she was in need of going into the air or made other baffling utterances. But do not say I was holding her back, as I have grown sensitive to that accusation.”*

*“Have no fear of that.”*

*“The ride uptown was uncomfortable. Sarah made it a point to go up against people in the subway with words. A man asked me for the time in the Canal Street station and she replied, ‘I’m so lonesome, Uncle Albert,’ provoking his annoyance. Had he been a more dangerous sort, he might have thrown us on the subway tracks. I suspect that whatever genuine suffering she was experiencing, she was also giving herself the freedom to be a cute little girl with a streak of eccentric freshness.”*

*Celeste, understand something, please. The previous exchange was not with you. I would never be short with you in this new life we have together, but there are times when I am and must be short with this God of my understanding, if I am to call him that. Even God must accept the need for discipline, as his history of distraction shows. OK, I have gone pompous, or perhaps just silly. This I understand. I will try to pull it back.*

*What I had intended to say was that Sarah’s parents were world class in the love department. For them there was no life without love, no sacrifice they would not make for their children. You could say that the removal of financial insecurity from their lives made this most sublime of emotions more readily accessible to them, that is, they did not have to get into the down and dirty like the rest of us. But that was money earned, if not by them, by Lydia’s forbears, prodigious in their entrepreneurial brilliance, the product they manufactured a staple of all those who owned a fountain pen. Peter had not coveted wealth. He had followed his own star to Harvard and Lydia, still at Radcliffe, had come calling on him with those pebbles thrown up at the window of his boarding house room, as I have previously mentioned. She had come to worship at his mighty throne. She did*

*not foresee the radical nature of his mind, that he would dig and dig and unearth the lie of America for all those who wished to see in a scathing examination of the metaphysics of American history, and in doing so expose the driving force of these founders of our new republic. And why? Why would he launch himself in such an alienating, extreme way, rejecting the moderate path of the Arthur Schlesingers and his ilk? Because he was built for a truth all his own, a truth that would leave him all alone. It was that for which he had been made.*

*But these years later he was not alone, and Lydia, who was not built for aloneness, was not alone. They were in the presence of me, increasingly in the custody of the bottle, and their gone-dark daughter.*

A sense of relief and gratitude filled Luther as he and Sarah passed the doorman and entered her family's building. With so much uncertainty, the marble lobby offered the reliability and permanence of a government institution. And the warm greeting that followed when Lydia answered the bell assured Luther that it had not been a mistake to reach out to her. If Lydia noticed the mocking, impudent tone in which Sarah said, "Hello, mother," she did not let on. In the living room she chatted easily about Camp and a possible trip she and Peter might take in the fall, her one-sided conversation so seemingly oblivious of the fact that Sarah was sitting on the sofa staring at her apathetically that Luther began to wonder if possibly Lydia was unaware that things weren't quite right with her daughter. But as Lydia's chatter went on, Luther decided that she was merely circling the drama and that her strategy was to put Sarah at ease rather than confront the matter head on. Perhaps the master, Carl Jung himself, was working

through her. But strategy or no strategy, Sarah herself dispelled the charade when Lydia asked if she might like something to drink.

“Your days of giving me poison are over,” Sarah replied flatly.

Like a punch in the face Lydia received Sarah’s words.

“I don’t understand,” Lydia said.

“You don’t understand that the milk you fed me at birth was poisoned?”

“Sarah,” Lydia gasped.

“Don’t Sarah me. Don’t even think of Sarah-ing me,” Sarah said.

Peter had entered the living room in time to hear the exchange, but being the tactician he was, he kept his troops off the field of battle. A scuffle about mother’s milk was not one for him to enter. His intense scrutiny of his daughter suggested a perspective was being gained as to the nature of her malady that words would conceivably be fruitless in lessening.

“Is there something else that you might like?” Lydia asked.

“Air. Can you get me some air?”

It was not long after this exchange that Lydia swung into action with a phone call to Dr. Edelbaum, from whom she received a referral for a psychiatrist who would give her daughter back her mind and give Lydia back her daughter. Not that she could ever have Sarah as her daughter in the way that she had had Lenore. Sarah was her shadow, the perpetually dark side of her moon. But Lydia could love the darkness. She could do that.



*Celeste, there is ailment and then there is ailment. Can you know what it is to lose a child, and be threatened with the loss of another? Can you? We must love Lydia. We must bow down to her as the Spartan woman Peter declared her to be. Well, I must, anyway. I cannot continue to resent my betters, those born with a more robust endowment than my own.*

*Did I tell you that following the destruction of the Twin Towers, I canceled my planned trip to Europe and instead rented a car, thinking I would see New York State and thus avoid the anxiety of international travel? I was afraid. That was the simple truth. I let those terrorists influence my decision, just as they hoped to do. A day or two before I picked up the car, I was sitting alone in my apartment when an image came to me of Peter and Lydia and it hit me that they were gone, gone, and I had never told them that I loved them, nor had I ever really expressed my gratitude for all they had done for me or the important role they had played in my life. I found myself weeping as I hadn't since my mother passed away some years before. I was weeping not only for them but for myself and the passage of time and all that had been lost. Then an image of that swing attached to the huge oak tree just up the way from the little wooden bridge over the brook came to mind. I suppose that swing represented a lost time I could never get back to, except in my dreams. But I was crying for America too, because America, in spite of its transgressions, was in its own way an innocent. As you may remember, I shared with you a while before 9/11 that I found myself one day in a state of terror. A sense of the excruciating vulnerability of our country came to me. A surprise attack was imminent, not from a network of stateless terrorists, but possibly from China, which was prepared to annihilate*

*us with nuclear weapons. For all our power, we had come to be perceived as soft, afraid to mix it up. Our success, our indulgent lifestyle, had led us to this state of unpreparedness. We hadn't properly gauged the ruthlessness of other regimes. I suppose it will appear that I am attributing to myself some psychic power and thus am guilty of boasting. But you shouldn't assume that it is a welcome thing to be given a glimpse of the future, particularly when that future is a dark one.*

*Now Celeste, I will tell you, the flags of America were flying that fall, and while the red, white, and blue has been a stirring source of pride to me at various times in my life (none more poignantly than in Nashville, where a huge such flag gently ripples behind Ronee Blakely as she heartbreakingly sings "My Idaho Home"), I must report to you that, as I was heading up to the Catskill Mountains and beyond in my rental car, it became an affliction to my eye and a torment to my mind to see that same emblem of our country hanging from the private houses and stores that I passed. When too much attention is called to a thing, then that thing is lost, lost. That is what those flags meant—that our country was but a memory, a stupid flag, and I began to pray that if I just continued to drive and drive, I would come to a clearing and be free of this emoting madness.*

*Now Celeste, I had my pilgrimage to the past to make, if I am to be honest; atonement must have its day even for those such as me who have rejoiced in separation and made it the driving force in our lives, given the death trap of family we perceived ourselves to be born into. This shift can seem impossible, but nothing is impossible in the holy instant when love comes shining forth and takes its rightful place. We must give our*

*due to our betters, or if not our betters, our mentors. And so I took the Kingston turnoff on I-87 and stopped in Woodstock. No, I did not go to the Bear Café, on Tinker Street, where Sarah and I had hitchhiked with Pam Becker in the spring of 1967, there to wait for Peter to arrive in his big black Chrysler for the last leg of the trip, as darkness had fallen by then and the cars on the road were particularly savage in their snubbing of us. The smell of burning wood was in the air and this sensory reminder of a finished chapter in my life almost brought me to my knees in grief. I took my pain into a nearby eatery where all was not as I had hoped it would be. What I am saying is fastidiousness did not reign in this establishment. Flecks of dried food on the fork and eggs swimming in grease and a slovenly waiter providing table service did not win my trust. In that moment I understood that a campaign of national excellence would have to be mounted, as it could not be trusted to be summoned from within, and sensed anew that those outside the generating power of New York City and such metropolises were in danger of a torpor not our own. A woodsy environment it might be, but one conducive to daytime TV and all-around sleepiness.*

*I pushed on. Sleepy Hollow. Mount Tremper. Bearsville. Shady. Phoenicia. Like local stops on the IRT they stayed in my mind, as we don't forget paradise once we have experienced it. Not that Camp was paradise in terms of the happiness it summoned, as strife and discord and rancor were often in its place, but in the ideal of placid beauty it aspired to. We must honor our past and those who loved us in the way they could, and not apply a scorched earth policy to all we have left behind, as if to burn the evidence that we had even been there. At some point we must stand and have the humility to say, This was*

*the best I could do in the moment I was living then. These reserves of power we give our shame must not go on.*

*All at once the past I held at bay through rounds of daily meditation was breaking clear of such spiritual restraints and calling me, calling me to a tortured longing that nothing can ever satisfy but a return to the holy instant we have temporarily abandoned. The fall sun was falling fast as I followed the curve of the Esopus River, spotting the occasional fly fisherman in his waders. By the time I came to the straightaway stretch of Route 28 heading toward Shandaken, darkness had come. Though there were reports of growth in the area and increasing subdivision of the land, the roadside had not become the commercial strip I had feared.*

*Anticipation was succeeded by fear when I came to the turnoff. Slowly I drove up the hollow road, fear of the unknown and the past only growing with the car's progress. Some avenger in the night would come for me with Norman Bates-like fury, a carving knife in hand. And who else would it be but Jeffrey, the Van Dines' only son. I had heard he was struggling and that he was still living in the small house that had been built for him along the hollow road.*

*By this time Camp had been sold to New York State with an agreement that the property would not be developed. This commitment to its conservation did not bring the feeling of comfort I had hoped for as I cautiously crossed the little bridge over the brook. I got out and explored with the aid of a small flashlight, as the property was completely dark. The pool was empty, the walls and floor showing big cracks. The gazebo next to it*

*was falling apart, and an inspection of the main house itself showed the same neglect, including broken steps on the front porch.*

*My fear turned to panic when, down the slope of the hill, a light went on in the new barn, where I had sequestered myself years before. I froze anticipating the sound of the big wooden door sliding open or seeing a completely deranged Jeffrey appear in one of the many windows. The mystery remained when a minute passed without any such occurrence, but if I thought the atmosphere could not grow more ominous, I was wrong. It was everything for me not to scream and pray to God for the morning to come when the light went out. Now he would come for me, the berserk avenger of my sordid past. After sinking his sharpened knife deep in my chest, he would hack me into pieces and scatter my remains throughout the mountains. The fear that immobilized me was the ancient fear that rooted me to the spot in my childhood dreams even though I had an enormous lead on my pursuer. He will go easier on me if I don't try to escape. Such was my thinking. In the minutes that passed I had to bear the torture of waiting for Jeffrey, the youngest of the Van Dine brood. Who else would have the pathological structure for such a deed? Unloved, unlovable, the least gifted of the offspring, a boy I had shown little interest in and a rival for his sister Sarah's affection, why would he not turn his rage on me?*

*But he did not show his face on that evening, nor did any other with homicidal intent, and yet, as I pulled away in the rental car I finally mustered the courage to return to, I was certain this least of the children, unable to leave, had made it his domain.*

*"You have made an assertion about this young man Jeffrey Van Dine. Would you care to tell us how you come to speak in such a manner about him?"*

*“Least is least and greatest is greatest. He was a boy with feebleness in his bones and no aptitude for anything but soreness. His father pitied him and his mother ignored him. Bard College, in Annandale-on-Hudson, took him when no other would, and his junior year he spent abroad at some obscure school in England. He returned with a pretty Irish girlfriend from the same college, and when they married, Peter had a house built for Jeffrey on a property just a ways down the hollow. Jeffrey did not build the house himself, nor did he contribute anything to the house’s interior structure either. He could only stand to the side while contractors and craftsmen came and went. His wife had a sharp tongue and soon zeroed in on his ineptness, and then found townies to sleep with as a prelude to leaving him. She knew a dead-end scene with a dullard when she saw one.”*

*“Where is the love here?”*

*“Yes. Where is the love? It is where you can find it. It is in every look of significance a woman gives you, whether she be in revenge mode or otherwise. And such a look was given me by the wife of young Jeffrey on the terrace at Camp many years ago. But her Irish ire was too much for me, and even I couldn’t summon the brazenness for such a romp in the fields of infidelity, sensing she would hurl a spike through my heart as she had through Jeffrey’s. To ‘know’ a woman may be among a man’s greatest desires, but a web of malice conspicuously displayed will not be an enticement.”*

*“You are troubled, my son. You carry a pain you can’t own.”*

*“Stop it.”*

*“You are like a cat doomed to forever attempt to clean itself in the wrong places.”*

*“Stop it, I said.”*

At this point Dr. Milton Frodkey entered Sarah's life. A graduate of Yeshiva University, in Washington Heights, and Columbia Medical School, he had the credentials to heal Sarah's ailing mind. Such was the determination of Dr. Edelbaum when Lydia turned to him with her phone call for assistance on that day Luther and Sarah arrived at the Van Dines' door. That Aryan aristocracy was kneeling at the throne of Jewish intellect was not lost on Luther, though later he had to discard that assumption when Lydia was heard to say, "I would have preferred that Sarah be treated by a Jungian analyst than someone in the Freudian fold." So much was said; so little was understood.

Dr. Frodkey found time for an emergency consultation that afternoon. As the cab sped along the Eighty-sixth Street transverse through Central Park, Sarah sought to open the back door and fling herself out. The savage energy she applied to reaching her goal required the maximum resistance Luther could muster from where he sat beside her.

"What the hell is going on back there?" the cabbie shouted. It was not an easy question for Luther or the Van Dines or Sarah, for that matter, to answer.

Dr. Frodkey was a square-faced man with a head of cropped wiry hair. Luther was struck by his powerful physique—the barrel chest and running back's thighs and thick, strong neck. The slight smile he gave them from behind his heavy desk suggested that he was a man confident of his powers, and why wouldn't he? The man had a medical degree from Columbia University and a well-appointed office on Fifth Avenue, just a block north of the Guggenheim Museum.

Confident the doctor may have been, but he was also confused. “Which one of you is here to see me?” he asked, having taken in his four visitors.

“Well, Doctor Frodkey,” Lydia began.

“Butt out, lady. He’s mine, all mine. Got it?” Sarah said. Turning back from her rebuffed mother to Dr. Frodkey, Sarah said, “What have you got to show me, Doc?” Though Luther couldn’t be sure, there appeared to be on Sarah’s face a salacious grin, as if she were capitalizing on her mysterious malady to give herself the right to complete freedom of expression. And yet he wasn’t willing or able to denigrate her obvious suffering by labeling it histrionic, as he could with the monotone monologues of his sister Naomi. No, fakery was the domain of the Garatdjians. Authentic suffering he still reflexively reserved for those with a superior endowment than his own family had been gifted with.

Nor was Dr. Frodkey dismissive. Hearing from the Van Dines that Sarah had sought to bull her way out of a speeding cab, he shortly recommended that she be admitted to Gracie Square Hospital for further evaluation and treatment.

At the hospital, she had another truth bomb, this one for Luther, as a nurse was leading her away. “I’m sorry to hurt you by saying this, but I have always loved Lane. You came in only a poor second, which means you didn’t come in at all. Forgive me.”

The humiliation might have been less had Peter and Lydia not been present to hear her declaration. “She doesn’t know what she is saying,” Lydia said. Her innate kindness had no healing effect. If anything, her words only worsened his mood, as they were offered as a balm for the wound that Sarah had obviously inflicted. Besides, why try



to lessen his pain? He deserved such treatment from Sarah, after all he had inflicted on her. After all, what was he but a potential murderer who had interfered with the one great love of Sarah's life?

That afternoon, Ned Fuller, the architect, was climbing the stairs as Luther entered the building. Though Luther had hardly spoken a word to the man, he now began to relate the events that had transpired since the night before. So desperate was he to bridge all differences with Ned with his sad account that Ned asked him in. But Ned had moves of his own to counter the personal drama gushing from Luther. He reached for a small mechanical monkey and after winding the key on its back, set the monkey on the floor. The light that came into Ned's face and the giddy glee with which he clapped his hands and slapped his thighs was almost a match for the wild performance the monkey gave before toppling into stillness even if Ned's unspoken message was a more sober and serious one: come to me with your tale of cheap sorrow and this is what you will get. Being from Texas, Ned wanted to share with Luther, in an oblique way, his understanding of what a man is. A man did not go the dinky route with a tale of woe as his calling card. A man laughed in the face of pain and said, with full defiance, is this all you can show me?

Well, there were mysteries continually unfolding and Luther, understanding he was a part of life, further understood that he had to give his full attention when the next person, whoever that might be, came down the road.

Ned did not hit Luther anymore than he needed to. After setting him straight, he invited Luther to a party he was throwing that night.

Luther had an idea for his own party: a six-pack of tallboys from the grocery store and a bottle of Spanish wine from Shing Lo's liquor store down on the corner. It was not lost on Luther that Shing Lo no longer talked him up. Shing Lo had no need to. He understood that Luther would keep coming back. Some nights Luther just didn't want to walk the few extra blocks and take his business to the liquor store north of Canal Street. Well, Shing Lo could lay his knowing smile on him if that's what he needed to do, and Ned Fuller could talk through his toys if he needed to. Luther had gotten the goods and was bringing them home to an empty loft where he could do himself up right. Something monumental had happened. His love had been brought low and Luther needed to drink himself straight about that.

He called his mother and gave her the news that afternoon and heard her say "Is that right? I pray the doctors don't give her the pills as they have given to Naomi. Pills and more pills are all they have to offer her. Is that right? Is that normal? Is that the Lord working through them or something else?"

The flame of resentment flared in Luther on hearing the sullying comparison of Sarah with Naomi, as if his mother was attempting to breach the wall of separateness Luther had erected between his girlfriend and his family. To compare his flower with the tawdry spectacle of his histrionic sister. It was not right. It was just not right. But the beer, and then the wine, seemed to douse the fire that had been building and he returned to a state of borderline weepiness, elevating Sarah's plight into a tragedy that was as much his as hers, given their closeness.

Ned Fuller's party, which had seemed beyond him to attend at the time of the invitation, became more of a possibility as he continued to drink. In fact, hearing the sound of soft music come up through the floorboards that evening, he found himself brimming with confidence and eager for social connection. His tears were a thing of the past; he now heard the night calling to him.

The party was a sedate affair. Only a handful had gathered by the time he arrived; mostly, they seemed to be members of the same architectural firm where Ned was employed. Drawn to a blond woman sitting alone on the sofa, Luther presented himself as Ned's neighbor and a writer. He told her of his white line continue project, how it was separating into different parts, and of the colors of paper—light blue, pale green, and pink—for his drafts. "I will know I am in the homestretch when my typewriter keys strike white bond. Mind you, the colored papers are bond as well, but I'm sure you will understand what I mean."

In his initial enthusiasm for the woman, Luther had not seen the carapace of hardness in which she was encased, nor that she had been born with a governor on her soul and lived in the province of calculation and caution, that a methodology had to be employed before she could move forward. He had not considered that the exactitude she brought to her profession as an architect might be in play in the social arena and that, a modest sampling of his repertoire having been received, she was already dead certain that the only movement she would offer would be away from this young man she had marked as predatory, egotistical, and useless.

“Is that right?” she said, the brief question meant to hold his foolishness up to the light and stall his pursuit. But on this night he was deaf to her subtle signal. What he saw obscured what he heard.

“How about you? Do you write, too?”

“What kind of writing are you referring to?”

“Fiction. Poetry. Do you have your own designs on immortality?”

“I’m afraid my concerns are more immediate and day to day.”

Seeing her look beyond him to the new arrivals Ned was greeting at the door, Luther sought to lock her in for the evening. “Would you like to come upstairs? I could show you where I live,” Luther said, only then realizing Sarah had been omitted from his conversation and now the woman would see that he did not live alone. But there was no need for concern, as the woman wasn’t going anywhere, at least with him.

“I don’t think so. It’s been nice meeting you,” she said, getting up to join the others.

If she meant that last as a hard slap, she had gotten the job done. Now were all eyes on Luther, and his social skinniness was showing at depth. The crying need arose to put some weight on his social bones. He could not have the death-dealing spectacle of him stripped to his aloneness for the gathered to see. *I will get Marge on the line. She will be the cover I need for the thinness I am showing.* These were the exact words that came to him, and after asking permission of socially engaged Ned Fuller, he picked up the phone and put out the call for immediate assistance. To her credit, Marge responded

favorably to his plea. In a jiffy did she traverse Manhattan in her Marge mobile to stand, in her trademark jeans and hiking boots, in the loft of Luther's downstairs neighbor.

Luther was not a friend to Marge in the way that a friend should be. He did not sing her praises or give any recognition to her finer attributes in his mind, let alone directly. But seeing Ned in thrall as he greeted her at the door caused Luther to acknowledge why men without his baggage might find her attractive. That manly attire aside, she did have a pretty face and figure, her long black hair had a luster that could not be denied, and she showed an appealing openness to life and new people. Still, this newfound awareness of her attributes was less cause for admiration than for fear. Luther had expected her to be at his side, not his neighbor's, and he could only watch in horror as Ned appeared to claim her for his own. Not only had nuclear weapons been placed on the island of Cuba, but he, Luther, had aided in their installation.

He saw something else that evening. Marge had staying power and substance, the ability to present herself and also show a genuine interest in others. By comparison, he felt himself ungrounded, a flitting flighty thing, a mosquito pricking people for their blood and then moving on. He saw why, apart from Sarah, he was essentially friendless.

When Ned was distracted by even newer guests, Luther whisked Marge away on the pretext that he needed air, but she didn't go easily. "I was just settling in to a nice conversation with that friend of yours," she protested, as they headed down the stairs.

"Give me the keys. I'm driving," he said, perpetuating the evening's theme of lunacy.

"Do you even have a license?" Marge asked.

He did and he didn't. He had surrendered his antipathy to motorized transport sufficient to take a road test in a driver's ed car, which he failed, but then passed a similar test on his brother's motorcycle. Upon renewal some years later, he was astonished to discover that New York State had mistakenly issued him a license to drive both a vehicle and a motorcycle, a gift he had no intention of giving back, as by now he was certain that he was no more capable of passing the vehicle road test than he was of gaining a stellar score on the SAT.

"I'm fully licensed," Luther said. Even drunk he wasn't imprudent enough to give Marge any evidence of his incompetence. Things had been out of control in Ned Fuller's loft, but now there he was in the driver's seat as he put the car in gear and felt it lurch into the sparse traffic on East Broadway before turning up the Bowery.

"You're so crazy," Marge said. "You remind me so much of my friend Sally. If you met her, you would understand."

"How about tonight?"

"It's Saturday night. We can't just show up at her door unannounced."

"Let's do just that," Luther said. Such a soft, cushioned ride, even over potholes, the car provided. They had left the tightness of the avenue behind, and were now sailing over the wider thoroughfare of Third Avenue.

"Well, I guess we might. We're headed in the right direction. But it's really crazy."

Within minutes they were in the vestibule of an old East Side building and Marge was ringing the buzzer under Sally's brass mailbox. A feeling of fear came over Luther.

The false confidence and bravado were gone, and he was left with the prospect of meeting a stranger on the basis of nothing more than a drunken whim. He could easily imagine coming undone in the presence of this woman and of she and Marge discussing him the next day. The conclusion they would both arrive at would not be a flattering one. Marge had invaded, at Luther's invitation, his turf, and now he had invaded hers. And yet the net result had led to extreme discomfort.

"She's not answering," Marge said, and Luther tried to hide his relief as they returned to her car. His recklessness had not yet run its course. In backing out of the tight parking space, he knocked over several garbage cans lined up against the curb, and drove off without setting them right.

"You really are crazy," Marge said. Eccentric. Crazy. It was mainly these qualities that drew her admiration.

At Lexington Avenue, he pulled over and handed her the keys. "That's enough," he said.

"Enough of what, Luther?"

"Enough of me," he said, as he opened the door.

"You really are nuts," Marge called to him, but he didn't turn to respond.

He had come to expect a degree of guilt and remorse after a night of drinking, but the next morning was especially hard. He came to on the box-spring astonished by the degree of his betrayal. What kind of lunacy was that to bring a woman he feared and who had an interest in him into the very building where he lived on the night of the day his girlfriend had been admitted to a mental hospital for an unnamed psychiatric disorder?

And then to drunk-drive her big car through the streets of Manhattan and badger her to call on her crazy girlfriend?

He was pondering this pathetic madness when the phone rang. As if running on the energy of the night before, Marge was on the line, only her tone was not light and admiring.

“Did I not tell you once before not to interfere with my growth? Did I not?”

“You are knotting me up with your nots this morning,” Luther replied.

“Don’t mess with me, Luther. Don’t do it. Stay focused. You commandeer my car. You coerce me to barge in on my girlfriend. You knock down garbage cans with your drunken driving. All this I can forgive. But I don’t forgive you for trying to snatch my happiness from me, and don’t deny that’s exactly what you were doing or I will come down and tear your face off. Remember—I know where you live now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about Ned. That’s what I am talking about. You whisked me out because you saw that he and I were beginning to spark.”

“Spark? What is this spark?”

“We were connecting, Luther, and you couldn’t handle it. Ergo, you had to move us apart.”

“Ergo minus the ‘r’ spells ego.”

“Nice try, Luther. Nice try. But here’s what you do. You give me his number and his last name, unless you want me to make the long trip down to East Broadway myself.”



Her threat worked well. Luther gave her Ned's last name. "You'll have to get his number from directory assistance. He hasn't been here long enough to be in the white pages."

"Good boy, Luther. Good boy," Marge said, and hung up.

*Now, Celeste, what are we to say about such a development? That Luther G. opened the door to his own destruction when he called Marge the night before and told her to come on down? Or that he opened the door to his own liberation? Luther G. had no insight into his life to offer. He had only his own folly/wisdom and the inevitable remorse that followed.*

What Luther didn't say was that while at the party he had called another, and if he did not speak the word *love* when it came to her, he did speak the word *desire*. One night some months before he had been at the bar on Spring Street where, after a few drinks, he made eye contact with a young woman seated with her girlfriend in the table area, and so he joined them. She spent her days working at OTB after graduating from the Chicago Institute of Art. She said she was a conceptual artist, explaining, when Luther asked, that ideas had a place in art and that the idea could even be art. Luther nodded as if he understood and said, "Are you by any chance a friend of Gertrude Stein? You don't look like Gertrude Stein but you feel like Gertrude Stein. Do you have any idea what I might mean by that?"

The young woman laughed. Her name was Gillian Brower.

“Gertrude Stein is God. Literally,” Gillian Brower said.

“Then I may be in trouble,” Luther replied, thinking of *Melanctha* and Gertrude Stein’s understanding of the railroads and the powerless men drawn to them.

“How do you mean?”

“I would need to gather my thoughts and overcome the shiver of fear that went through me when you asked. All I will say for now is that it has to do with Samuel Beckett. ‘I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now.’ Shaping forces are collaborating on my destiny, and those two, from way over yonder in gay Paree, are playing a powerful role.”

The other young woman, her beauty being on a higher level than Gillian’s, maintained her reserve. Beyond her name, Chardonnay Flower, she said little. Luther, in his semi-drunkenness, had a wild beating in his heart for her, as he did for all upper echelon women in whom beauty and intelligence were fused. She too was an artist, a Cooper Union kind, thus verifying for Luther that she was in the realm of the intellectually gifted.

A man approached their table. Luther recognized him as the author of several books of light fiction. Rock Golden’s gray hair testified to his older age and his handlebar mustache and Mr. Green Jeans duds made him right for the Sixties but not the new decade. He was a shy man hungry in the night for flesh but unable to ask for it in other than an oblique manner.

“Are you two young women lesbians?” he inquired, but they did not take the bait. When cold stares didn’t drive him away, they stood and broke into song, drawing on the

repertoire of the fat-lipped one, Mick Jagger. Their baby was obsolete. Their old-fashioned baby was out of time. So they sang.

The redness in Rock Golden's face showed he understood the import of their words. He headed back to the bar for a refill of his glass of Scotch. Luther could only wonder what it meant that a published author, even of flimsy works of fiction, should be lonely in the night and not find the companionship he was seeking, and whether he too was scavenging for scraps of affection like that poor man.

But on this night Luther didn't have to scavenge for anything. The table was soon swarmed by Chardonnay's suitors, young and vigorous, and Gillian Brower found herself settling for Luther as a mediocre but acceptable option. They walked west and then north to Houston Street, where Luther's attention was drawn to a small crowd outside a leather bar. Two men were in a faceoff on the street. The men were young and beautiful, but they had gone to the place of impending violence. Perhaps words had been spoken inside the bar after the fifth vodka and tonic. One was in full leather regalia and held an open switchblade of terrifying length. The other had been liquored up into a machismo state. The cool night was no deterrent to the removal of his shirt so gawkers could take in his bronzed and muscled chest. Luther was back in those childhood dreams of Mexican peasants facing off with knives on a dusty village street. Believing his horror to be Gillian's as well, he led her away, every cell in his body braced for the cry of pain that did not come.

"Why did you pull me away?" she asked.

He froze on hearing her question. A crushing dismay threatened to send him to the pavement. "I was pulling myself away."

"Why?"

"Why? I was afraid."

"What were you afraid of?"

"Nothing is more disturbing to me than the thought of a steel blade penetrating flesh. I must not be witness to such a thing, even in my dreams."

"Why are you so focused on that?"

"Because murderers are not human. They have gone to another place. They walk around as humans, but they are not one of us. The truth is that there are many humans who are not humans, not only murderers but many others. And yet our eyes are too often not discerning." They had come to her building at the west end of Broome Street. All the while they had walked he had heard the calculator in her mind assessing whether she should have him over. He could only wonder now if his patter had sunk his chances. But she surprised him.

"I agree," she simply said.

An old woman all in black who wore the affect of disapproval on her wrinkled face had come outside and now dared them to break through the force field of her judgment. Gillian took him by the hand and led him forward through the front door. No maledictions were heard and yet they were acutely felt, like a body blow, by Luther. I must have my own life. I must not be broken by the indictments of the elderly. So Luther thought as he followed Gillian up the three flights of stairs.

*Celeste, I made love to her that night, or as much love as a man such as I could muster. She was not just anybody but a young woman of quality and not the kind to become a habitu  of the bar on Spring Street, or any bar for that matter. She had movement in her mind as she fixed you with big appraising eyes. She wore her hair short, extremely short, as Gertrude Stein would have done, and showed herself that first night in the fetching attire of black tights and a skirt. I was still at a point in my relatively young life when I could forgive the blemishes and deformities of the flesh. That her head was bordering on massive for a woman of her modest height I certainly saw, as I did the threat of thickness in her thighs, but I was not yet ruled by the all-encompassing deficits of the physical. I had not come to that place of revulsion with the creaturely nature of our beings that would require me to be bound to my aloneness and constant focus on my breath. Quite the opposite. I was in a riot of desire for the things of the flesh. When she figured out, after our third meeting, that I was living with someone, she called me a bastard, but the word was not spoken without affection. She had measured my deficiencies by then and saw clearly the areas in which I was lacking, including the realm of sexual performance. Progressively, it became more difficult to achieve and maintain an erection. Possibly, guilt was a suppressant, but maybe I simply could not feel at home in her. It is not a good thing when completion cannot be achieved; alternatives are sought, but the cloud of failure hangs heavy, at least it did with me.*

*Spontaneously I would call her, often from the bar after a few drinks and the awareness that no new adventure awaited me on that night. In that sense, she quickly became an afterthought, as had Susan Plecik, the Sullivan Street girl who scared me with*

*her knowledge of what intaglio meant when I had no idea. Or not exactly an afterthought, but someone I had to go forward from before I could go back, as I continued to be driven by the compulsion for new territory to explore. Some nights she would let me come to her but some nights she would turn me away, no matter how painful my longing was for her after a drunken and futile vigil in the bar for the next one.*

*She had the honesty thing going in her to a degree that I couldn't possess. "Some people just wait until after midnight to come to the bar so they can pretend they had someplace else to be on New Year's Eve," she said, when I called her some minutes after New Year from that very bar, saying I had just dropped in. What she was saying was that she saw me better than I saw myself and that I could not hide from her the wretched reality that I was one of the unwanted on this earth. So it will come as no surprise to you that Gillian rebuffed me the evening I called her from Ned Fuller's party in the hope that she would be impressed to find that in fact I did have friends and many of them and that I didn't always have to be calling from the bar on Spring Street.*

"Would you like something to read?" Luther asked Sarah, when he called her the day following her hospitalization and Ned Fuller's party.

"*War and Peace*. Samuel Beckett." The emphatic nature of her reply, he slowly came to understand, meant that no reading material was required, war and peace being the condition of her mind and Samuel Beckett the insanity sandwich she had already eaten.

She was kept in the hospital for six weeks. During that time Luther returned to the railroad yard, sometimes during the day with his camera and other times at night, with a pint or half-pint bottle of Old Mr. Boston blackberry-flavored brandy.

One night, on the subway, he had encountered Lance Whiting, his upstairs neighbor in the loft building. Lance had pulled from the pocket of his sweater vest a half-pint bottle of just that brandy and took a nip. And so it struck Luther that if Lance, with so many marbles in his handsome head, could go about openly with alcohol, then so could he, because Lance Whiting had Ivy League credentials, as did Dr. Dressler, who had given him a green light to drink. No one understood better than Luther that not only did excellence have to have its say but that it had to be listened to as well, because what purpose did excellence serve if it couldn't command his ear? Besides, wasn't a green light always a green light, not a red light or an orange light? And since the sighting of Lance Whiting having his subway car *taste*, he had read of Tom Paine, back in Colonial times, writing his pamphlet *Common Sense* with brandy as his muse. So there it was. Brandy had turned on the lights in Lance Whiting as it had turned them on in Colonial Tom Paine, and so why wouldn't it do the same for Luther?

The blackberry-flavored brandy tasted like liquid candy. Luther was happy to have this portable new friend and would nip from the bottle as he watched the occasional freight come and go and the rail workers as they went about their tasks with a slow sense of purpose. There was a great drama going on on this earth and it all had to be recorded lest it be swept away by the tides of time. And whatever that drama was, it had its personal element, not only his continuing thievery in the renting office but more centrally,

the situation rising to possible tragedy of Sarah's breakdown. A great woman was being brought low by an affliction she hadn't asked for, and it left him weepy that this should be so.

*Celeste, in this time two things happened. One, a sense of my own mortality came to me. I saw myself laid out on a mortuary slab. For a full day did this image persist. Evidently, I was fully deceased and naked and lying face up. No autopsy was performed; no implements invaded my person. In fact, my body lay there unattended in a dim light. The constancy of the image wore me down, and yet I would be wandering into the realm of the histrionic were I to claim that the image caused me considerable distress or any distress at all. While it was not comfortable or pleasant to see myself in such a state, someone was delivering a message, not necessarily that the men who walked the path of remorseless violence were approaching and that my demise was imminent but that death is a part of life and this needed to be understood, and so there was a quality of appreciation in my mental state, as if a mysterious benefactor was presenting me with a gift. At no time did I have a sense that malevolence or intimidation was the purpose. What is, is—that was the purpose. And if I experienced no sadness of terror, it may be that at no time did it truly feel like my demise was the end. Somehow it was just an event to be observed and the scene would inevitably have to change. Did I go about my day during this visit? No. I didn't, though I did briefly try to write. For the most part I lay in bed, as I came to feel I was expected to do.*

*A second message came through the New York Times. A writer contributed a guest editorial to the newspaper on the subject of drinking. Alcohol had become a*



*nuisance in his life, threatening his job and his health and his family relations. A man of strong willpower, he just decided he would stop and quit cold turkey. No more martinis with lunch or wine with meals or after-dinner drinks. Three months into his alcohol-free life, he wished to report that his productivity as a writer had greatly improved, his relations with his wife and children were fully restored, and he was feeling better than he had in years. Did he miss his cocktails and aperitifs and all the rest? Not at all. He was a new man.*

*Celeste, great emotion welled up in me as I read this account. Liar, this contributor should have signed off as instead of Anonymous, for a liar he truly had to be. Later, I modified my judgment. He was not a liar at all but just a terribly sad man grieving the loss of his best friend and trying to put a brave face on it. More than sad, he would have to be worn down with anxiety, each day a gray horror to be endured. Surely the bright light in his life had grown dull and his moment-to-moment existence had become an agony.*

Not a day went by that he didn't visit Sarah. His rigidity, he suspected, was compensation for the comfort he experienced being alone. She was needier now than she had ever been, her talk of Lane notwithstanding. She wouldn't be going anywhere, except back to the loft, when she was released from the hospital. He kept his visits brief. They didn't need much time together to maintain their connection. The facility seemed clean and safe. Cheery pastel colors predominated. And she had her own spare, private room, such as he imagined a nun would live in. It was nothing like the drab institutional confines of the

Bellevue Hospital psychiatric ward, where he had visited Rachel, or even Clark 8, at St. Luke's, where Naomi had stayed.

One day he arrived while Dr. Frodkey was visiting Sarah. "This is my new love. I'm so sorry, Luther, but he loves me better than you do and can provide for me in a way you never could," she said.

"I see," Luther could only think to say.

"Luther is a murderer," she said, turning to Dr. Frodkey. "His ambition is to kill me. He will never let me go. He loves me that much."

"Is there any truth to what she says?" Dr. Frodkey set upon Luther with a hard stare, as if to fathom his essence in one gaze.

"No," Luther said.

"Why do you imagine she would say such a thing?"

"It goes back to an article I showed her some years ago."

"An article?"

"Some boy from the other side of the tracks got involved with a girl from a wealthy family. When she tried to leave him, he lost his head and stabbed her to death."

"Luther's from the other side of the tracks. Sometimes Luther is on the tracks. He likes railroads. He goes to them all the time."

"Why did you show her the article?" Dr. Frodkey was intent on continuing with his line of questioning.

"There were similarities between the boy and me."

"Luther is that boy. Don't lie to Dr. Frodkey. He's on to you," Sarah said.

“Have you thought of seeking help?”

“I’ve been in analysis,” he offered, feeling no need to mention the clinic or Dr. Dressler by name. Luther had grown resentful at Dr. Frodkey’s forceful handling of him. He had been intruded on far enough. To be spoken to in such a manner, as if he was dirt, as his mother would say. Whether Luther’s answer sufficed or Dr. Frodkey was using some cheap trick of silence to leave him hanging, Luther couldn’t say and wanted not to care. And yet he did care. He cared painfully.

“His analyst told him to drink, and you give me drugs,” Sarah said to Dr. Frodkey.

“What drugs do you give her?” Luther asked.

The empathic answer that came appeared in Luther’s mind as a long trail of chemical formulae in the shape of a blunt weapon with which the good doctor was smilingly bludgeoning him for his temerity in asking such a question in the first place. The doctor had a bulletproof head. He had soundproof ears. Was it possible there were human beings going about their day who were not in fact human beings but something else? He is showing me his power, Luther thought. He is showing me he is from the land of the big dicks. What am I to do but to lie down and die in the face of such a force?

Though they were not the kind to say it doesn’t grow on trees, money was a source of concern to the Van Dines. It was the basis of their freedom. They had carefully laid aside funds for their children’s college tuition and perhaps more, if the children were frugal, and with the expectation that beyond college they would be off on their own. And yet neither Peter nor Lydia had truly been off on their own. Luther would find himself

wondering how Peter would have fared had Lydia's inheritance not rescued him from the world after their marriage, and surely she had to wonder herself, given the sequestered path he proceeded to take. And Lydia, after a brief experiment with teaching, decided that dealing with manipulative school kids five days a week was not the path for her. If they expected the children to choose a different model for living than the one they had shown them, they now had reason to doubt the likeliness of this happening, at least in regard to Sarah. There she was in a Chinatown loft exhausting her trust fund and now they had been presented with a truly staggering bill for her stay in the private mental hospital. Not only that. Dr. Frodkey had proposed that Sarah see him twice a week, and that too was an expense they would have to help her with.

*Celeste, I had no sense of responsibility for Sarah where money was concerned. We shared the expense for rent and electricity and the phone and food and all the rest. I did not have the stature of a provider, other than to pay the key money for the right to move into the loft. It came as something of a shock when Dr. Frodkey blithely suggested that Sarah apply for Medicaid as a means for meeting his fee for therapy, as it also came as a shock that he would dismiss the Van Dines' distress over the huge cost of the hospitalization. "They owe you this assistance after the harm they have done," Sarah quoted him as saying.*

*In this time Peter took me aside and said, "I do not believe in therapy. It is merely a tool of capitalism, meant to mold you as a functioning instrument of the system." And around this same time he also said, in a more emphatic and angry tone, "I will not pay to*

*have my daughter see a man who feels it is his right to sit in judgment of me and to encourage such judgment in her.”*

*Now Celeste, he may have had a point, as all over Manhattan and the outlying counties and in many of the states of this Union are women and men in their therapists' offices building a case against their parents with the tacit if not spoken approval of these professional men and women. Such a viewpoint surely will sound jaundiced and extreme and shows a lack of gratitude and perspective for those who practice this healing art, but do we not often hear those in the thickness of middle age, childless and alone, inveighing against Mommy and Daddy and laying all their tribulations at their feet? And did I not become one of them, not in middle age but long before?*

The sight of poor and needy people filling out lengthy forms and waiting to petition the city for financial aid confirmed for Luther what he had suspected from the start. Dr. Frodkey's idea that Medicaid would come through for someone with Sarah's background was absurd. The rows of steel-gray desks at which sat weary and hardened caseworkers under the harsh fluorescent lighting further disheartened him. The reality the entire scene presented that he and Sarah were on the same plane with these indigent petitioners was more than he could comfortably contemplate. He just wanted to get away from this bureaucratic maze through which she would have to walk.

She was different now, more subdued. Dr. Frodkey had prescribed a medication for her, Mellaril, which she took twice daily. On the subway and on the streets as they made their way to the social services agency on Thirty-fourth Street and Ninth Avenue that morning, she had moved slowly, tentatively, like a frightened and wary child, and in

the institutional glare of the agency, she maintained the same posture, cringing in the face of questions from the metallic-voiced representative.

“Why you here when you ain’t got that information available? You got to get your thing together you want to be successful,” the woman said, Sarah having misplaced her social security number. “How I don’t know you not a millionaire without I see that card. Maybe you Rockefeller’s daughter. You look like you could be.”

“No, no, I’m not Rockefeller’s daughter,” Sarah said.

“Did I say you was or did I say you could be?”

“Could be,” Sarah replied, bending submissively to the woman’s urge for domination.

“You come back another day when you got your facts together,” the woman said.

But they didn’t have to come back another day, thanks to a call to Lydia, who had the information virtually at hand.

Luther had been aware of something darker coexisting with his compassionate protectiveness of Sarah that morning and early afternoon at the agency, a feeling of impatience and even fury at the fact of her disability. On the subway, heading home, he snapped at her when she fumbled with her purse and spilled the contents while searching for a subway token. For a moment he felt a surge of the wild anger that could come over him and which inevitably resulted in a torrent of abuse as destructive in its way as physically tearing the loft apart. A desolate section of the subway was not the place to be spilling her bag, virtually beckoning the muggers to come for them. How dare she dog-whistle their arrival? How dare she pull such a sly trick? Did she not know that he needed

protection from the marauders, the murderers, the ones who wanted nothing better than to lay hands and knives and bullets on him?

But the worst happened when they had returned to the safety of the loft. Sarah unintentionally tore loose the intercom wire as she entered the door. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you? You did that just to make more work for me. Tell me you did just that,” he demanded. Sarah covered her face with her hands and began to weep, leaving him in the turmoil of a fear-driven rage he hardly knew what to do with. She had not simply destroyed an intercom; she had destroyed his whole world, and he was incapable of fixing it. She had exposed his incompetence, his unmanliness, and she had done it deliberately, so as to humiliate him.

*Celeste, my father was alive in me. I could not handle stress. I had a condition. All the things my mother said of my father were true of me. If he was not a man, how could I possibly be? The same brittle temperament I had displayed in Europe was now manifesting. Like my father, I could not take care of a woman.*

Spring was now here, and Sarah heard its call. She needed the comfort of nature, the soothing sound of crickets at night, not the horn blasts and the noises of bellicose drunkenness on the street below. She needed the sight of buds on trees and green grass and to walk woodland paths. She wanted to go where she could heal from the fracture in her mind and be whole once more while Dr. Frodkey was away for a week.

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I am not forsaking you. Please believe me,” she said, and though her words were similar to those she had used at the onset of her illness, they

did not have the same worrisome effect on Luther. Her father was already at Camp, preparing for the time when spring would fully arrive in earnest and then the glory time of summer, subdued as that brightness would continue to be by the memory of Lenore.

Luther kissed Sarah and hugged her and told her he loved her, as he did many times in the course of most days. Even in his own sickness he could surrender to the call of love. It was not foreign to him in this time. In his secret place he understood it was what he lived for, even if other feelings could seek to intervene.

Then something happened that couldn't have been expected, or even if it had, its arrival date could not possibly be known, except to a savant or some other with a special link to the future. The outside phone rang in the renting office, which he was remaining faithful to, and Luther steeled himself to pick it up, braced for the panic he would inevitably experience should it be Simon Weill laying that tired yet thoroughly commanding voice on him. But that voice did not greet him with its dreaded sound. Rather was it Naomi, her tone mournful and oppressed.

“Brother, can you help me? Can you please, please help me?” Naomi began.

“What is wrong, Naomi?” He had not heard her quite this way before, and sensed that the usual histrionics he often judged her to be indulging in were not in play now.

“My life is what is wrong, Luther. They are threatening to take my life.”

“Who is threatening you?”

“There are men on the ward who hit me. They ask me for cigarettes and money and then they still hit me. They terrify me, Luther. Can you do something? Can you please do something?” She began to cry.



“Where are you?”

“They have put me in Manhattan State Hospital, on Ward’s Island. Luther, it is horrible. The male nurses do not protect us. Everywhere there is violence.”

*They.* They had gotten tired of her visits to Clark 8, at St. Luke’s. They had decided to dump her in that hellhole in the middle of the East River. They had put her where no one could save her now. What was he to do? Was he to drop the phone and rush out there? This was his sister, after all, and her plea had summoned a feeling of love. Once again he was that boy on the porch of the cabin at the Bible camp in emotional turmoil to get back home and rescue his mother, only now it was his sister in peril.

Suddenly the line went dead. Without a number to call her back, he waited, but the phone didn’t ring. His mother happened by and he told her, with anxiety in his voice, of Naomi’s plight.

“Is that right, Luther? It makes my heart heavy to hear such a thing.”

Her heart was heavy? In that instant he saw what he had been seeing for some time, that she was old and virtually beyond caring. The world ended for her at the front door of the building, if it even extended that far anymore.

“Should Chuck be told?” Luther asked.

“We might want to tell him, but he will only get upset, and it may give him more reason to drink.” She sounded vague, distracted. The matter was not one she could fully give her mind to.

Luther took the elevator upstairs and knocked on Chuck's door. He repeated the knocking several times. It was now approaching 5 pm, roughly the hour when Naomi and Chuck's day began, Luther had long since learned.

"Who the hell is it?" Chuck called out.

"It's me, Luther."

"What the hell do you want?"

"It's about Naomi."

"Since when do you give a good goddamn about your sister?"

"I need to speak with you," Luther said.

The door opened. "All right. I'm here. What is it?" Chuck stood in his socks and boxer shorts. There was redness in his brother-in-law's haunted eyes and broken blood vessels in his nose. How stale the air in the narrow room was. Luther wondered if Naomi saw her stays in these various institutions as a break from the monotony of her days in the cramped, stuffy room.

"I got a worrisome call from Naomi. She said some of the inmates were violent and was pleading with me to get her out of there."

"This is not new. I have had the same report and am right now working on getting her free of that wretched institution. I am using all the power at my command, and that is substantial, as you well know. Now if you will excuse me."

"But Chuck..."

"Never mind but Chuck. Can't you see I am busy?" Chuck said, punctuating his fit of irritation by slamming the door.

He was busy getting ready to drink, Luther sensed, as he headed upstairs to the penthouse.

“She said that?” Luke asked, when Luther gave him the news about Naomi.

“Yes,” Luther said.

“Some of those places can be rough. I had to fight when I was in the Albany lockup,” Luke said, referring to that time when he had been arrested for attempted auto theft for putting a car in gear in someone’s driveway.

“She’s in a psychiatric institution,” Luther said.

“You think those fuckers in that jail who wanted to rape me weren’t crazy?”

“I’m sure they were,” Luther said. It was the way of some in the Garatdjian family, should someone be suffering, to top their accounts of adversity with tales of their own.

“Hey, don’t get smart with me.”

“I’m not getting smart with you. I believe I was agreeing that you have had hard things to overcome in your life.”

“You see, there you fucking go with that smart mouth of yours. Am I right, Brenda? Is my brother being smart-mouthed with me?”

“Your sister could be in trouble,” Brenda said.

“Naomi can exaggerate. Where is this place anyway?”

“Ward’s Island. You can see it from the Triborough Bridge. These big buildings with tiny windows,” Luther said.

“Maybe I’ll go out there. Tomorrow, not tonight.”

“Not tonight?” Luther asked.

“Didn’t I just say that?” Luke said.

“Do you like my top? I just bought it,” Brenda asked Luther.

“Sure. Sure I like it,” Luther said, of the tight silver sleeveless blouse. She didn’t ask for his opinion about her jeans because they were the same old jeans she always wore, unless she had several pairs, which she probably did. Brenda and Marge, the jeans women.

“We’re going out tonight. We’re going to be doing some partying. You and Sarah like to party?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know what the word means,” Luther said.

“Get a load of him. He doesn’t know what the word means. Mr. Innocent here.”

“Luke,” Brenda cautioned, the way she would when he came near discussing their sexual activity.

“Say, how is Sarah. Is she out of that institution yet?” Luke asked.

Luther, usually close-mouthed about Sarah, had been led during his crying fit to tell just about everyone in the family about her difficulty.

“She’s doing fine,” Luther said.

“She likes me. All women like me. Right, Brenda.?”

“I’m not liking you. Not right now,” Brenda said.

Luke laughed.

Luke had made him feel dirty once again, dirtier than the subway car he rode downtown on. His own dirt was bad enough without having Luke’s added to it. And once

again he resolved to put some distance between himself and his brother. That boast by Luke that Sarah liked him was a reminder of how appropriating his brother could be. Was Brenda not an example? How close Luther had been to Luke claiming Sarah for his own that night he came to Roberto's apartment while Luther was in bed with Nora from Norway. How many reminders such as this awakening of a primal fear did he need that his family was a danger zone?

Luke had said not tonight, he wouldn't be going out to see Naomi that night, and Luther understood that he too was saying not tonight as he entered the SoHo bar. Not that it felt quite right to be sitting on the barstool drinking beer after beer before switching to scotch and listening to the amped sound of Carole King sing "I Feel the Earth Move" and Freddy Fender with his passionate rendition of "Till the Last Teardrop Falls." Some element of painful reality had tethered him to the earth and prevented him from the drift into bliss.

The thought of calling Gillian came and went as he left the bar and walked home along Canal Street. How gloomy and ugly a stretch of the city it seemed on this night, with its grubby, shuttered stores and the endless truck traffic to and from the Holland Tunnel. Lafayette, Baxter, Mulberry, Mott, he wandered past before coming to the tiny shops along Pell and winding Doyers Street. He was interested in beer, not miniature pagodas or other tourist enticements. At the Chinese grocery on East Broadway, he knelt at the cooler and extracted a six-pack of tallboys. Big bags of rice were stacked nearby and a strong smell he couldn't identify permeated the space. Some sort of food stuff,

possibly fermenting. Was it soy sauce? He had no idea. It would remain a mystery, like the life-affirming Chinese he lived among.

In the morning he was woken by the telephone.

“This is really fucked up. You won’t believe what happened,” Luke said, profanity being part of his dishevelment.

“So tell me,” Luther said, staring at the six empty white and red cans of Budweiser by the box spring.

“Naomi’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“A police boat found her floating in the East River near the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. I had to go down to the morgue to identify her. It was horrible. She was all bloated and her face was badly bruised, like she’d been beaten.”

“Beaten.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Beaten by the men of violence.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Chuck was holding forth when Luther arrived at his mother’s apartment.

“I am pressing for an immediate investigation by the district attorney’s office. There is no question but that my beloved Naomi was murdered.”

“Murdered, did you say?” Hannah came alive at the mention of the word.

“That is exactly what I am saying. It has been known to me, as well as to the authorities at that hellhole, that the wolves are placed in with the lambs. Those wolves tore into my Naomi and then dragged her down to the East River. They threw my wife into a river that is nothing but a cesspool.”

There was more such talk, but no investigation followed. No lawyer was retained. No attempt was made to refute the statement that suicide was the cause of Naomi’s death. The question was not asked how Naomi managed to get out of the facility and to the river in the first place or how she had come to receive the bruises Luke had witnessed on her face. Or if these questions were asked, they were asked only among themselves. Nor was the question asked why such passivity greeted what was a horrific event.

But Luther knew. He knew in the knowledge bank on which he drew. The family didn’t press forward because they were, well, the Garatdjians, and had the answer they needed. They had all conspired in Naomi’s death. Only with death came manageability for the Garatdjians, or at least some of them. Let the hole be dug. Let the casket be laid into it. Let the dirt be thrown to cover that casket.

I am very sick that I should think this way, it occurred to Luther in this time. But I am not ashamed, he also thought. Nothing must get in the way of order. Nothing.

Naomi’s daughter Jeanne had resurfaced. Though only eighteen, she had become a fallen woman living in houses of ill repute. Luther applied such dated terminology to his niece as a cover for the horror of where she had been, not houses of ill repute but cheerless rooms in seedy hotels where she lived under the command and control of pimps who became the father her own father could not be with their special brand of brutal

caring. She had seen girls beaten and raped and disciplined with broom handles. She had seen what the hatred of a man for a woman can be, and she now had eyes that told him boldly and penetratingly what she knew, brazen eyes that stripped him naked as to the sexual content of his nature and that boldly communicated her understanding of what he and every man wanted from her.

She came to him on the eve of Naomi's funeral as he sat in the renting office. They did not hug or kiss. There were no expressions of sorrow or grief from either of them or any attempt to comfort each other. A sullen butterball of a girl when she had run off back in 1967, she was now tall and thin. The heavy makeup and cheap, provocative attire and high heels were the accouterments of her trade.

"Can I come back there with you?" she said, as she stood at the window.

"No. You can't," he replied.

"What's the matter? You want it all for yourself?" She left him with that question, allowing no ambiguity, in his mind, as to what she meant by "it." She was not after him, but the money in his care. A thief as well as a whore. So her eyes told him. He was relieved when she left. No one should have the power to strip another person naked like that.

*Celeste, I was not a caring individual. Jeanne was not what she should have been to me. She was merely part of the horror I could not negotiate with but could only shun. She was just more evidence of the detritus that we were. In her did I see the hideousness of her father, that grotesque sullenness, that pilot light of peeve that was the only light in her., a light that burned, not shone. Go to hell, I thought. Just go to hell. Leave me alone*



*to squirrel away the money I need so I can jump away from this sinking ship and live apart from the work world and continue with White Line, Continue.*

*In this time, driven by fear, I visited a doctor at a downtown psychotherapy center. That he was not a true doctor with a medical degree but the kind who read paperback books en route to his PhD I tried not to hold against him. I needed to talk, to confess. My drinking had become a source of concern to me with Naomi's death, and I was in urgent need of reassurance that I was not following in the same path. But this doctor I spoke with had toughness in his bones and fortitude in his brow.*

*"Tell me a little about your family," the doctor said. He had the hush of books in floor to ceiling shelves all around him. He had the comfort of natural light coming in through the white-curtained windows.*

*"My family is my family," I said, seeing his small beard that purported to signify wisdom in his face.*

*"That's a beginning. Can you provide a little more?"*

*And so I told him about Hannah, who wouldn't or couldn't leave home, and about Naomi, who left home only to go to the Chinese restaurant for green pepper steak or the Whelan's Drugstore for prescription refills or to the bar with Chuck or to the institutions that would have her and finally to the one that had the cruel audacity to debase her. I told him about Rachel, who had been my guiding star when she enrolled at Vassar College, and of my dream of walking the railroad tracks starting in the tunnel of my childhood under Riverside Park up along the Hudson River so I could be with her. I told him too of her affliction first with the bottle and then with God. I told him about Luke and*

*get it on Brenda and the multiplicity of their amorousness in the night fueled by alcohol and drugs and the sheer call of hedonism.*

*“Whoa! Whoa!” he said, as if I were a horse and he were the owner of the bridle reins. Was I to whinny or neigh or snort? I did not understand this man or the contemplative shadow in which he existed.*

*“Meaning?” I asked.*

*“Why not tell me about your parents? But briefly, please.”*

*There is no brief with parents, Celeste. They go back in time and forward in time. You live inside and outside them simultaneously but never apart from them. I told this man, this stranger, whom I had made the arbiter of my fate that my parents were in God and God was in them and that their homes away from home were the different churches they regularly attended, my mother in particular having the conviction, at age thirty-two, of her own sinfulness and that the world had nothing that she wanted. Of my father I said he had been prepared for takeoff to the Big Show, like an airplane that had taxied into position on the runway.*

*This bearded man had discerning eyes. His whole face was made for appraisal. And when he spoke, it was with all the authority he had casually mustered.*

*“How far does the apple fall from the tree?” he asked.*

*“What?” I said.*

*“I believe you heard me,” he said.*

*And he was right. I had heard him. He was saying I could take my parents' path of hosannas to the Christ Jesus and of Pastor Cohn and all those pastors who slapped the*

*pages of their guilt-edged Bibles or I could pursue Naomi's path to my early demise. What I heard him saying was that I could go to God or I could go to the bars and an early death like Naomi. God had not come calling on me, as he had to my mother or father, or even to Rachel, who now walked and talked with God all hours of the day and watched for the return of the Christ Jesus in the night sky. But alcohol had come calling on me; I had the experience of alcohol and all it could do for me and no lasting evidence of what it could and was doing to me. And so I heeded its call and went back to the known.*

*After Naomi's funeral, after dirt had been thrown on her so order could prevail (yes, harsh, Celeste, yes even crazy and unfeeling to speak in such a manner), I traveled up to Camp on the Hudson River Line, needing the companionship of the railroad and all it signified, particularly on that route. Sarah had committed to meeting me in Poughkeepsie with the jeep, and it was with some anxiety that I awaited her arrival outside the train station. Bill Walton was big in my mind as I stared at the road leading down to the parking lot, as UCLA had defeated Memphis State in the NCAA championship game and Walton had been voted MVP for his record-breaking 21 field goals in 22 attempts. In my mind I was the California Golden Boy as I paced back and forth in full-blown fantasy about the total control of the basket area that Walton demonstrated with his agility, a girl approached, and dark beauty was her name.*

*"I can give you a lift," she said.*

*Tanned and black-haired and steadfast in her probing gaze she stood before me. Her eyes were pools of danger one could easily drown in. If that sounds dramatic and*

*even silly, so be it. That is how she appeared. Something else. The girl was in the image of Lane. Her eyes, her face, her stare—they were his.*

*“Do you have a brother, and does he live in Boston?” I asked.*

*“Should I have a brother who lives in Boston?”*

*“Everyone who looks like you should have a brother living in Boston.”*

*“So do you want a lift?”*

*At that moment rage became my name, or crushing despair, because even as we spoke there came Sarah down the incline in the jeep, and suspicion would be her name should my conversation with the girl continue. And truth to tell, I lacked the wits to gather her to me with a phone number.*

*“Thank you, but I’ll be all right. My ride is arriving now,” I said.*

*We must do something with our longings. We must note or analyze or surrender them or do whatever, but we must not let them destroy us. Let it be said that agony was my name for the rest of that day and that Sarah, canny as she could be, smelled my pain.*

*“Did you leave your heart back there, Dearie? And no, I am not thinking of San Francisco.”*

*“What do you mean?” I replied.*

*“What do I mean? What does Lenore mean? What does any black-haired girl mean but that she is the antithesis of blondness?”*

*A peculiar intensity was operating in her that I could not negotiate my way with through words, and so I fell silent, allowing her wave to break over me and trusting that*

*it would not pull me into a sea of guilt. In any case, another matter was pressing on me, that being my consultation with the therapist.*

*“I think I may have a drinking problem,” I said to her, as I stood in the living room by a shelf containing those old clothbound books from her mother’s lonely past. But she was not hearing me.*

*“Why don’t we do it in the road?” she said, and so my admission, rather than tethering me to the reality I had just confessed, vanished like a snowflake in the roaring fire of my illness, and it was to be many years before I could make such an admission again, or even contemplate such a thing. Because it was not subsequently hidden from her or anyone else; it was hidden from me. I would no longer be able to see the thing that was right there in front of me.*

*But beauty, the world, that I could see in front of me, and the beauty I had seen at the Poughkeepsie train station had tethered me to her reality, which I was as powerless against as my need for the bottle. I simply had to find her and continue our conversation. I had to drink of her. I had to be of her and in her. It is a cruelty of our life that every fiber of our being can be consumed with such longing, Celeste, and whether we pursue it into a bigger life or the bleak, barren space of non-requital or disaster, we must heed its siren call. .*

*And so every weekend I began riding the rails between Grand Central Station and Poughkeepsie. Oh, Celeste, do not believe for a second that lust has as its sole purpose pursuit of the flesh, for hidden in this raging carnality is the longing for a bigger life.*

*Once again the bounty of America was calling to me, and if I myself were not in*

*possession of that bounty, then I must find it elsewhere, and that elsewhere now was the girl like glittering obsidian I had glimpsed that painful day. But she was not waiting for me at the Poughkeepsie train station with the offer of a ride. Only emptiness awaited me, the forlorn stretches of town, not a person in sight, and the low tavern in which I drank beer in the presence of the sullen bartender to the modulated patter of broadcasters announcing the Mets game. In that stagnant atmosphere whatever vitality I possessed was being drawn from me. I began to feel sodden from the six beers I had consumed, and wandered down to the railroad tracks, seeking to invigorate myself with the mingled smell of muck and ordure that sometimes attaches to such sites. Lulled by the lapping waters of the Hudson, I lay down on its east bank and dozed off till woken by the highballing intensity of an Amtrak train scornful of the immediate localities and streaking into the greater beyond. I rose and wandered back to the station, all desire for the rails or the river gone in favor of a safe trip home.*

*But I was not done yet, Celeste. I was not done. The next weekend I once more rode the rails, with no sight of Beauty from one stop to the next. That all changed as the train pulled into Peekskill. There she was on the platform, in jeans and a black sleeveless top, surrounded by other young men and women who had claimed her for their own. When our eyes met, I quickly looked away. Previously I had seen her alone, and so my fantasy could thrive. But her entourage gave her a social context and cast me in the light of a lone and predatory wolf. Worse, I was a City College wolf and my prey and her pals were high board score gifted ones from elite Vassar College, to which I assumed they were all returning after an outing of some kind. Once again I asked how it was I had not*

*been given more in this life to work with as the cold reality of the disparity in our social standing was made clear to me.*

*The ordeal did not end there, as the group entered my coach car and took the facing seats immediately in front of mine. More than that, the girl sat with her back to me, one thin, tanned arm thrown over her seat. And so, for the next twenty minutes, I was left to stare at her small, perfectly formed wrist and hand and the red polish she had applied to her nails and the flawless texture of her black hair on the top of her perfectly shaped head.*

*Did she remember me? Was she seeking to tantalize? My mind searched for clues even as I sat in terror, fearing she would turn on me with prosecutorial zeal and enlist her comrades as jurors. We must be careful in the matter of fear. Animals smell it and come running, and we are creatures too with strong powers of detection.*

*I turned to the novel I had brought along, Edith Wharton's House of Mirth, wishing to give my eyes somewhere to go other than to the few visible physical offerings of my tormentor. Any novel that opened with the protagonist walking through Grand Central Station toward the beginning of the twentieth century had to have some interest for me, and yet that quote from Robert Louis Stevenson, "Books are a mighty bloodless substitute for life," was, at that moment, large in my mind.*

*Though my ears were pricked for their conversation, they spoke in low, well-modulated voices, as if choosing to be a self-contained unit, and so what I heard were murmurings and muffled snatches. They got up well in advance of the train's arrival in Poughkeepsie. If I was hoping for a look of recognition from Beauty as they filed past my*

*seat, it didn't happen. Whether that was an effort of will or a display of sincere indifference on her part, I will never know. The only clear thing was the choice of her chums over me. I trailed safely behind onto the platform, still alert for a sign, perhaps a provocative stare over her shoulder signifying our tenuous connection hadn't been dissolved, but even this crumb wasn't offered. The execution was complete.*

Luther was good at the funeral of his sister Naomi. He did not show up in velvet pants and a size too small Bally shoes, as he had for his father's service. He honored her death with silence, even while his mind was ridiculing of chipmunk-faced Pastor Nyquist, who could be counted on to deliver the same sort of drivel he had served up in reviewing Luther's father's life. But his mother understood what he, Luther, didn't, the power of form over content, the need for ritual, and for closure. She did not allow herself to wander the earth solely unto herself. And Luther, in his own way, took comfort in the order that his mother could bring to the occasion, with the sizable assistance of Vera, who took major responsibility for the arrangements.

Because by now it was apparent to Luther that Vera was becoming the son that his mother had always wanted but never had and that it was not for nothing that Vera had said, following their father's passing, that she felt compelled to carry on the family name. And yet, while she posed a mortal threat to his existence, as Soviet missiles did to the American homeland, he never in his mind asserted that dirt needed to be thrown on her for order to reign, as he did about Naomi. Because, for better or worse—and often it felt worse, much much worse—Vera was among the living and Naomi was not and had not



been since the days of her decline had begun. For Naomi to die was for him to still live; he could not say the same should Vera pass away. His history had been lived with her as it had not been with his older sister.

But he had lost the capacity to love his sister Vera. Now he could only fear her. Their coexistence was painful, not peaceful, as her power seemed to rise with each passing day. He suspected the spirit of revenge was the fuel for her progress. She had been slighted and ignored, a virtually invisible presence within the family.

Now and then he would run across her on the City College campus, generally in Finley cafeteria. These chance meetings made him uncomfortable. Her presence supported the notion that she was following him and summoned the old fear that they were in a race and that she would inevitably pull ahead. The confident expression she displayed on such occasions only confirmed the sense that she was right behind him and gaining.

“Susan and I studied together for the GRE,” Vera said one afternoon. He had come into the half-empty cafeteria for coffee to find her with her friend, an equally tall girl.

“I hear that’s a tough exam,” Luther said.

“Nothing is hard for my brother,” Vera said to her friend.

“Have you taken the GRE?” he asked, ignoring his sister’s sarcasm, if that’s what it was. And if it wasn’t, then her remark was even sadder.

“Of course we did. We’re both applying for admission to the doctoral program in English at Columbia. Right, Susan?”

“That’s right,” Susan said.

“No kidding,” Luther said.

“We both have a 4.0 grade point average, so maybe we can get in. But those standardized tests are my downfall. That’s not so for you, is it, Luther?”

Luther shook his head, cringing inwardly as he remembered the fabricated score he had given her when she asked him how he had done on the SAT some years before.

His sister was so in earnest, so determined to erase her depressing past as a bottom-dweller. Once again he was struck by the length she would go—the remedial program that had been required of her to enter college in the first place and now her night school attendance at CCNY. And he was struck by her humility, if in fact her candor about her limitation on standardized tests could be called that. How free she was as a result of her honesty, and how bound he was by the false image he had to maintain because of his lie. She had come clean and so she was clean, but he hadn’t come clean and so he was dirty inside.

Several months passed and he heard no more about Vera’s application. And then one evening, there she was, her face radiant with joy, at the renting office window.

“I got in. I got in,” she exclaimed, living in the wonder of the news she had received as he sat stiff and inwardly stricken at the roll-top desk.

“Got in where?” As if he didn’t know.

“Columbia, of course.”

“Great,” he managed to say, the weak gasp of a man who had been crushed, annihilated. Having seen the devastation she had wrought in his pained face, she tore off up the stairs to shout her glad tidings to his mother and Hannah and everyone else.

He stepped outside the office. Just a few feet beyond the brass mailbox was the alcove where he had hidden her books. It had a severely sloping ceiling, following the path of the stairway above, and narrowed to a small crawl space. Far back, somewhere, in that space, was her loose-leaf binder and the small stack of books, unless the space had been cleaned out. How had he known to fear her back then that he should take such an immoral action, and what had it gained him? Beyond that, what was it to be part of a family where one person’s success was another’s humiliation?

Luther stayed topside in his waking life, but in his dream world his sister Vera now appeared as a colossus bestriding Broadway, and so he had no choice but to take it on the lam down the hill in the lower level of Riverside Park at One Hundred Fifteenth Street and seek shelter in his beloved railroad tunnel from the boom of thunder and flashes of lightning like a jagged dagger ripping open the night sky. It was all right with him if a great swath of territory now had to be ceded so long as he had that one remaining refuge, where in isolation under the dim lights he could inhale the diesel fumes as the trains of power roared back and forth. It was there he wished to return more than anywhere, the world of childhood with its Breyer’s ice cream and Borden’s milk delivered to the door in bottles and Mickey Mantle swinging from both sides of the plate and the 1956 and 1957 Lionel trains catalog. Was that so much to ask for, a world gone by for him to retreat into?

And now the enemy was attacking on another flank. Marge on the line was now Marge on the loose. No longer was he the sole object of her ardor. She had found another student in the writing program to try to claim for her own and in fact to share her bed with, a young black man who radiated power and who wore an effervescent smile. His name was Carson Deal and he won the program's literary award two years in a row and already had a book contract, so it was understood that he was the real thing even as, in his mind, Luther tried to make him something less.

And yet, when Carson Deal planted his seed in Marge's womb, things changed. He accused her of setting a trap and said he would have nothing to do with a woman who connived in such a way. And when she went the abortion route, Carson Deal said he would also have nothing to do with a woman who killed his baby. And so Marge was left bereft, but she had strength her sadness sought to conceal, and so she had her time of pain and weeping and then moved on.

Dov Drosky had founded a literary magazine, *A Writher of Friction*, under the auspices of the college. His small office was piled high with copies of the magazine and unsolicited manuscripts. In temperament a child in search of mentors, he arranged for established authors to join the editorial board of the magazine. Excerpts from their work regularly appeared in the pages of the oversize magazine, as did excerpts of his own. Dov Drosky asserted that in order to get published, it was necessary for a writer to start his or her own magazine.

Possibly Dov Drosky's point of view was a rationale for his own wheeling and dealing. His prose did seem labored, as if written with a thesaurus at hand and displaying

the oppressive muscularity of his own physique. A jaundiced attitude toward his teacher's enterprise began to develop when several of Luther's writing efforts were returned with boilerplate rejections, as were those of a number of other students.

But one student didn't receive boilerplate rejections. In fact, she didn't even submit her work. Dov Drosky did that for her when she read material in front of the class. There was a quality to her writing that Dov Drosky recognized and admired, as did the other board members, and so she was in.

"I don't understand it. They should be taking your work. It's so much better," Marge said to Luther, as if she sensed his resentment. Her pity only worsened matters. If he understood one thing, it was that talent and intelligence were indispensable. All the effort and discipline in the world could not compensate for their lack. Once again it was made clear to him that no matter what head start or other advantage he might appear to have, others would sooner or later surpass him and then turn and place their laughing thing on him, as there was no place in the world for such shameful thinness of body and mind or for his grotesquely flat head. He saw everything in a flash: the preening boy, who with all evidence to the contrary, had written in his seventh grade textbooks, "Luther is great," only to be shown how less than great he was. When would he learn his place in life and simply accept that skinny was as a skinny could always be expected to be: skinny on the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, skinny on the SAT, skinny on the army intelligence test and physical exam. Get to the corner with your skinniness, Luther commanded himself.

But the corner could hold him only so long. Dov Drosky's writing class called him back as he had no other place to go. Now Marge wasn't looking at him helplessly, swivel-heading from across the conference table. She hardly glanced his way at all. If anything, he was the one looking at her, not with desire but with fear and resentment. How cruel that a woman so indifferent to fiction she wrote only briefly once or twice a week should now be published in Dov Drosky's literary magazine. Well, she would pay. She would die. A Broadway bus would flatten her. Illness would cripple her. She would have to suffer, and suffer severely, for such an assault.

But no punishment came, only increased popularity. She invited members of Dov Drosky's class and others to her apartment to read their work. At Marge's literary salon one evening, he met a young woman named Sonia. Afterward she went with him to the West End for drinks. He told her that he wanted to see more of her, and she said they could do that. The next evening he was in her apartment on One Hundred Fifty-fifth Street and Riverside Drive. From the window he could see the George Washington Bridge sparkling over the dark river and hear the mournful whistle of a northbound freight. He told her about the railroad and his connection to it going back in time. He said someday maybe they could go down to the tunnel together, but she said she didn't think so as she didn't care especially for tunnels or railroads. They were smoking grass and drinking beer. Her manner toward him was kind, not rebuffing, so he went on. He said since he was a boy in the lower grades he had wanted to go with a girl to the tunnel and from a hiding place watch the trains of power as they passed, just the two of them in a

crawl space drawing closer physically. In the smoke heaven they had entered he was powerless not to touch her.

“You’ve been wanting to do that all night. It’s what most men want to do. Some, like you, are jut shy about making their intentions clear.”

“Shy?”

“Ashamed.”

She was pretty, her features dark. He had a sudden vision of Naomi.

“Oh dear,” he said, and lay back on the sofa.

“Oh dear, what?” she inquired.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” he said.

She told him things about herself, not smoke haze stuff but things rooted in the specifics of her life. In a field outside Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where she had been born, two men had made love to her under the bright summer sun and she had not resisted. And Dov Drosky had been to her house, she also said, asking, “Do you know what I even mean when I say ‘my house’?”

He shook his head.

“It means I fucked Dov Drosky,” she replied.

“Oh dear,” he said once again, drawing her ire this time, as if she sensed he was putting up a wall of diffident and quaint objection to the bluntness of her language.

“What is it with your ‘oh dears’?” she demanded, even as a host of more oh dears ballooned in his mind.

“It is not me exactly speaking,” he could only say.

“Have we gone loco?”

The rough tenor of her investigation rendered him silent.

*Celeste, fear is a negative form of prayer. That which we are running from we are running toward. So someone was to say to me some years later. And yet, if I had no other lens through which to look than of envy and competitiveness, now was I being given the opportunity, through raw and unremitting pain, for a new perspective. Many times was I to ponder the divide between Vera and me, which only grew, and was asked, some years later, why it was that I could not meet her halfway. But who would build such a bridge or provide the new pair of glasses I was in need of? Not me. The infrastructure for change was missing, and until I could find and avail myself of it, the separation continued.*

Things were now happening at the building, Mrs. Garatdjian suggested, when she came to Luther in the renting office one night and said, “Mr. Weill claims that money is missing. We must be careful.” She left those words to hang out there while she studied Luther’s face.

“I see,” Luther said, speaking as she sometimes did.

“What is it you see?” his mother replied.

What he saw was her special powers, her ability to see into his mind as she had when he was a child, getting him to open his hand and show the quarter he had been hiding in his palm and confess that he had been in her pocketbook.



“Only what you tell me,” he said, awaiting the slow and relentless interrogation that would bend him to her will and cause him to divulge everything. Had he taken her for such a fool that she would not realize where he was getting the money to buy expensive cameras and live in a loft? Had he thought she would never grasp the monstrosity of his acquisitiveness?

“Do my words mean nothing, my son? Do they mean nothing?”

“Of course they do not mean nothing,” he replied.

“Do not seek to confuse me with your not and nothing, my son.”

“Of course your words mean something.”

“Then listen as you have never listened before. We must be careful. Have you heard me, my son? I must have a receipt for the words I have just spoken.”

“Yes, I have heard you,” Luther said.

“We are in the last days, my son. The last days. You are here for a reason. Do you understand this?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Do you truly understand?”

“I do,” he said.

He did not ask her what he was to understand and she did not ask him to state his understanding. It was there in her eyes and in what she said and didn't say that she had known all along.

She did not go to Luke with the same line of questioning. She had no need to, as Luke had no guile, no means whatsoever to countenance thievery. He could steal Brenda,

if taking a woman from her heroin-debilitated husband could be called stealing, but he could not steal money

And she would not go to Hannah, as Hannah would rise up strong and in her ferocity mode say, “Do you dare to deprive me and my son? Well, do you?” Besides, his mother would find Hannah entirely preoccupied with Watergate. Conflict galvanized Hannah, and this one was on a grand scale, a huge segment of the citizenry versus a stonewalling administration. What was not to like about a president whose lips were sealed? She herself was a repository of state secrets, a woman with a strong kinship with the Cosa Nostra and its code of omerta. In his foolishness, Luther would sometimes imagine his oldest sister singing doo wop on Mulberry Street with Vinnie and Sal and Angelina baby and doing vile things to shady outsiders who penetrated the neighborhood, like those said in horrific newspaper reports to have pitched blacks suspected of being holdup artists off the roofs of five-story buildings.

“They say the liberal media is out to get him, that they want to bring him down because he is so great and they can’t stand his greatness. Do you think that’s true?”

“Who are ‘they’?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

“But I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“The American people. The silent majority, just like President Nixon says.”

Lightning would have zapped her had she ever entered a voting booth and pulled a lever for anyone other than the Republican candidate, so fierce was the parental dictate she was programmed to embrace as the first born. But order of birth was not enough to

excuse her behavior. Why? Because that smile she sometimes wore was not reserved for delight in political chicanery. That smile was about the whole pattern of abuse she had continued through his growing-up years. It was a smile that said, "I can do anything I want to you, just as the president can do whatever he wants to the country, and there's not a thing you can do about it." It was the smile of the abuser toying with her victim. Was honesty too much to ask for?

Her boy, Moses, was now fourteen and handsome. But he was also fatherless and dependent on a woman who was herself still in a state of dependency, living as she did essentially at home. The boy was not provided food by her but by Luther's mother. She would not have been able to care for herself on her own, let alone for a child. About the boy's father she was closemouthed. From Mrs. Garatdjian Luther learned that Moses' father had been a Greek merchant seaman and that Hannah had only been with him briefly. "You must not tell Hannah I told you this. You must tell no one. Do I have your word that you will not breathe a word?" That fog of secrecy. Things hidden, unexplained. This isolating of one from another with bits of information. This fear, and of what? Of Hannah's wrath?

What his mother didn't say was that Hannah was not set up emotionally to leave home or that the price the family could expect to pay for that bondage was Hannah's anger because someone had to pay for making her as she was, and why not the people who had in fact done so? Nor did Hannah tell Moses that she was in the process of breaking his wings as hers had been broken, that he would be consigned to live in Mommy land, with only the briefest of visits to his absent father's terrain.

None of this was apparent at the time because Moses was tall and lean and crew-cut blond and filled his jeans so well and had been accepted to Stuyvesant High School (could you have gotten into such a school, Luther? Could you have?) and was the star quarterback of the junior varsity football team.

Luther wanted to like the boy. He bought him gifts, like those hardbound editions with four-color illustrations of classics such as *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*, books Luther had only read the Cliff notes for. Maybe Moses could approximate normalcy, and not simply as an impostor. But Luther wasn't sure. Too much was working against the boy. Hannah was working against him. Moses was her child, after all, and the suspicion lingered that he was her instrument, her weapon. Luther saw how she controlled him, how he had no resistance to her barked commands.

*Celeste, probing for the truth is not a crime. If I had a foreboding that Moses might inevitably be at cross-purposes with me and take action for my destruction, such an intimation was only in line with a certain event that did happen. He was, after all, Hannah's son for a reason. But that discussion is for another time. Yes, another time.*

Because Simon Weill spoke once did not mean he would not speak again. He was not one, like Mrs. Garatdjian, to simply exclaim, "Do my words mean nothing?" and then cultivate her attitude of weary acceptance of the willful children to whom she had given birth. Simon Weill did not have in his working vocabulary words like *acceptance* and *surrender* and *God's will*. Simon Weill had strategies to devise and levers of power to pull and people to deploy. He was in the world and of the world.

When Simon Weill came to Mrs. Garatdjian and what pressure or enticements he brought to bear she would not reveal, but come he did with a document for her to sign early in the following year. The document was an agreement that effectively terminated the lease that entitled the family to the management of the building as of June of that same year.

Initially Mrs. Garatdjian firmly defended her acquiescence to the agreement.

“If he gives me something to sign, what am I to do but sign it? Do you know who this man is? Let us bring reason to this situation,” she said.

“But we’ll have nothing, not a single thing,” Luke said.

And even Hannah said, “No one is going to deprive me and my son. No one. I’ll cut off the bastard’s nose.”

“Ushtah, Hannah, ushtah,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“Don’t ushtah me,” Hannah retorted.

“To be honest, I do not actually remember signing such an agreement,” Mrs. Garatdjian went on. “It is possible, but I cannot be sure.”

“But Mother, did Mr. Weill tell you that you were signing away our right to manage the building?” Vera asked.

Because they could not accept that she was tired and defeated and primed to let go of responsibility for the wretched building, they persuaded themselves that Simon Weill had tricked her into signing the document or possibly even forged her signature. Only as an afterthought did the question get asked that Luther was afraid would be asked.

“But why is he doing this?” Vera asked.

“Do not try to enter the mind of Simon Weill. It is not a place for a normal person to be,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“There must be a reason,” Hannah said.

“Money is the reason,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“Money? What about money?” Hannah asked.

“He wants more money than he is receiving,” Mrs. Garatdjian simply said.

Luther took deep breaths as his mother spoke, and in the silence that followed.

“The greedy bastard,” Hannah finally said.

Mrs. Garatdjian did not follow with an “ushtah” this time.

“We have some rights, don’t we? We don’t have to let him walk all over us, do we?” Luke asked.

*Celeste, I saw myself as I was, sly Jacob stealing his brother Esau’s birthright for a bowl of porridge. You will say that the comparison is inaccurate, and so it may be, but Luke, more than any of us, had the wherewithal to take over the management of the building. Perhaps the responsibility would have pulled him from his slovenly habits. True, he too had once dreamt of getting away, but he did seem like the most likely of the three younger children to succeed my mother. Vera was on her way to an academic career, and though I frankly could imagine no role for me in the workplace, so deteriorated had my self-esteem become, I did have a college degree and would soon have a graduate degree, regardless how flimsy they were. But my thievery had scuttled any chance Luke might have had. Only later, much later, did it occur to me that I may not have been the only one with his hand in the till. Or perhaps I should say his or her hand in the till.*

*We retained a lawyer. His name was Mr. Harry Ornoff, and he operated out of an old office building down at Columbus Circle. Mr. Ornoff was a tired man about my mother's age, and her loneliness informed the way that she responded to him. I could hear her thinking, here is a man with a fine mind, the way all Jews have fine minds. What would it be like to have someone like him to lean on instead of the willful, greedy, and feckless children I have brought into the world with one who was a feckless child in his own right? We can hear the thoughts of others when they are loud in their minds and shape the contours of their faces. You must not doubt this, Celeste. You must not.*

*Mr. Ornoff looked on warily, as the aggrieved party entered his dusty little office. And his apprehension was justified, given that Hannah smote him with her standard word blast when she was barely in the door.*

*"Nobody deprives me and my son. Nobody. No shyster is going to take us for a ride. We'll be watching you, Buster. You can count on that."*

*"Ushtah, Hannah," my mother said, and perhaps because they were in public Hannah refrained from breathing fire on her.*

*We presented the situation to Mr. Ornoff as best we could, producing the document with my mother's alleged signature that would end our tenure at the building, and gave him some history that we hoped would cause him to doubt the integrity of Simon Weill. There was the matter of the store rents, which for years Simon Weill had been collecting and keeping when they rightfully weren't his to appropriate. And we brought up the excessive sums, far above what were due him by terms of the lease, that we had been turning over to him. We characterized him as terrifying and manipulative, as a man who*

*could bend steel to his will with merely a glance. We said he had the cartilaginous suppleness and cunning intelligence of a rat. We told him we had been in the power of a great Satan for these many years and now we wanted not deliverance but a modus vivendi. We told him Satan might be Satan, but his power had to be respected as he owned the earth and we were left to bet on the afterlife because we did not know how to live in this one, where all we had was the old rugged cross and a bunch of ancient rocks from Samaria and Canaan and Judea and surrounding territories and the smell of the gilt-edged pages of our King James Bibles.*

*Celeste, Mr. Ornoff was a practical man. He balanced his checkbook. He provided for his wife. He had a daughter and a son who took the methodical steps toward a profession, one being a CPA and the other a physician. Framed photos of them stood on his desk, the key word being framed, as those of our family were mostly loose in piles in old suitcases stashed in the back of closets. We told him we had no way of organizing ourselves, that we ate out of fast food bags rather than cook and bathed irregularly and had bad teeth. We told him our souls were in mourning that we had not been born Jews, that we were missing the torque and the will to shape our existence rather than be shaped by it.*

*And though none of the above was expressly said to poor Mr. Ornoff, there are times when revulsion must have its way.*

Mr. Ornoff, being old himself, was in sympathetic accord with Mrs. Garatdjian, and understood the vortex of history that had ensnared her strange-looking offspring. And so he took their case. At the same time he was frank, in a gentle way, in his assessment of



the situation. The odds were not great of winning a case that had Mrs. Garatdjian's signature on a termination agreement. The family could accuse Mr. Weill of being skullduggery central or Oil Can Harry, but the law was the law.

*Celeste, a warning shot was fired across the bow of Simon Weill's pirate ship. We were now resisting him not simply with covert and possibly underhanded action—call it filching or playing the fiddle if you must—but in lawyerly language. Surprised and intimidated by our ire, Simon Weill's attorney called for a powwow that we might reason together. But it did not go as we had hoped or dreamed. For one thing, the attorney, Mr. Jonas Thrustener, had his office in a tower of power, a glass-and-steel structure on Park Avenue. For another, he was young and vigorous, with a gleaming head of hair and a face that killed you dead with its piercing smile and let you understand you were dealing with a man who possessed not only supreme intelligence but a mind with high craftiness content.*

*We sat at a large conference table of blond wood, and in the bright fluorescent lighting our shabbiness showed. Even Vera, who dressed well and was easily the most presentable, looked worn and out of place. We made the usual noises, Hannah piping up about her son and Luke asserting that Simon Weill had been taking more than his fair share and indulging in underhanded tactics in trying to browbeat our mother into signing a document that would put her out on the street. Impassioned as Luke was, his face betrayed vulnerability and when he had finished, he flinched, as if expecting a blow. Which he did receive, not from lawyer Thrustener in his pinstriped suit and glowing red tie but from Simon Weill himself who, paying no never mind to any environment that*

*temporarily held him, dominated the room with the pitch of his weary voice, saying, "Luke, it used to be that I thought you might be a bit naïve, but now, well, I will just say I am sad to see it could be something else." Because Simon Weill was a master strategist. He understood that Luke wanted his love as much as he wanted the building. You may say that God is God and Weill is Weill, but that distinction did not hold for us. Do not doubt that it was painful to hear Luke's fumbling response. Because Weill had been clever enough to perceive that Luke himself would supply the word or words Simon Weill hadn't, and what could they be but those he had been calling himself all his life: stupid, incompetent, etc.*

*At this point Lawyer Thrustener circulated the original of the agreement for the family's perusal (yes, that was the word he used, in accord with his expensive suit and the heft of his head). Meanwhile Simon Weill returned to his preternatural stillness. The more quiescent he grew, the more he seemed to dominate the room. There was my mother's signature in black fountain pen ink on the foolscap. And yet, rather than separating us from our senses, it had a depressingly sobering effect. Altogether, the brief meeting seemed to be our introduction to the real world. How shabby and out-of-touch we were, with our conspiracy theory. We were the liars, not Simon Weill. We thought we could run a business by being in the world but not of the world.*

*"Are we done now?" lawyer Thrustener asked, when the agreement had been returned to him.*

*"You haven't seen the last of me. I have friends," said Hannah, beaming her fury not at Simon Weill but lawyer Thrustener.*

*“You have friends?” In his tone was heard slight disbelief.*

*“Don’t be smart with me, you pinstriped bastard. I’ll tear your face off.”*

*“This meeting is now over,” Lawyer Thrustener said.*

*“Nothing is over. Nothing can be over,” Hannah went on, but got no response from either Lawyer Thrustener or Simon Weill.*

*Celeste, we went from the lawyer’s office to a nearby coffee shop, where we squeezed into a big booth. It was hard for me to sit with my family, as daylight was not kind to us, mercilessly revealing the sorry, tired state of our flesh.*

*“Do you serve normal food?” my mother asked, as the black-jacketed waiter handed us menus.*

*“Only the best for you, lady,” the waiter replied, not knowing how close to trouble he was with Hannah. Mother went for a small bowl of rice pudding. The rest of us settled for tea or coffee except for Luke, who ordered a burger.*

*“When I’m hungry, I’m hungry,” Luke said. “I need my strength. You know what I mean?”*

*“Of course we know what you mean,” Vera said, not unkindly.*

*I had not sat in a restaurant of any kind with my mother since my church days and our Sunday evenings at the Horn and Hardart automat on Thirty-third Street and Eighth Avenue, and I could not imagine many more from how tired she looked.*

*There was one last spasm of resistance in the several months before the termination went into effect. In that time we began to withhold all the rent income from Simon Weill, placing most of it in an account that Luke opened at a bank down the block.*

*But Simon Weill didn't play. He sent the men who buttoned their knit shirts at the very top and wore pants with sharp creases and sleek shoes of Italian leather; and these men threatened to break Luke's bones one by one in many different places and do the same to get it on Brenda and her boy Benjy. They were the men with the steel vaults in their heads where they could seal away their deeds involving blood and gore. And so Luke had no choice but to submit in the face of their power.*

*I had been naïve in the matter of Jewishness, having assumed that even the worst of the race lived through his intellect and not with his fists. That the Israelites had brandished swords and caused rivers of blood to flow seemed to have no bearing on my image of the contemporary Jew as entirely pacific except in terms of his own survival, as in the case of modern day Israel. Not that Simon Weill was personally capable of breaking bones in many places, but evidently he was capable of countenancing it should his interests be threatened.*

*Now Celeste, a man who has nothing must find a way to have something, and you must understand that at this point in my life, with the building taken away, I had zilch. Oh, I had money. I did have that. I was a thief. I had stolen. I had gotten my own back. I had given myself the rich parents the world had not given me and the scholarship it had not provided me with either. But I had not given myself the internal structure and fortitude to deal with life on my own. The task was too scary. How was I to write an epic novel on my own resources? How was I to write any novel on my own resources? And yes, you may say, why didn't I go and take a job? But I had a job by now and that job was to sit at my typewriter writing white line continue or not writing white line continue but*

*just to sit there. The world had not called to me. The world would never call to me. I was a Garatdjian, after all. What job would have me with my minuscule intelligence? I was not fit to work in an office. Surely I would find myself in disfavor and people would talk. And without a job I would daily erode my "savings" and someday, when the bank accounts had been drained, I would experience destitution, because I lacked the wherewithal to take care of myself.*

Luther rang the bell and waited on the sidewalk outside the ground floor office. The residential building stood on One Hundred Sixth Street, just east of Broadway.

"What is it you want?" the dark-haired woman asked, holding her crossness in check while letting him know it was there waiting for him should he get out of line.

"Joo," it sounded as if she had said, in pronouncing the second person pronoun.

"I need to see the doctor."

"Why you need to see the doctor? Are you sick? You do not look sick."

"It is not a sickness that you necessarily see," Luther said.

"What you mean, not necessarily see? Do you think I am here for mystery?"

Luther was not about to give up, in spite of the obstacle. His sister Naomi had come to the same doctor. She had said the doctor was in possession of gold, that this doctor had the gift of making her feel good when the whole world wanted her to feel bad. And so Luther could put up with some static from the human obstacle course with the faint mustache and the bulging body wrapped in a white nurse's uniform. No bedside manner for this lady. "I have been having dark thoughts," he finally said.

“You no talk English to me. You talk some other language. You come in now and talk normal to the doctor. You show him some respect so I no have to hurt you. You understand what I say, or you just stand there like a stupido?”

“No, no. I understand perfectly well what you are saying,” Luther said, as he stepped inside.

Misery had found a place to manifest in the waiting room. A young woman sat wheezing, helpless to get more air into her lungs. He could only imagine her terror. Not wishing to be in sight of suffering, and was relieved when she was called into the doctor’s office.

“What can I do for you?” the doctor said, when Luther’s turn came.

“As I was telling your assistant”—

“I am not assistant. I am a nurse. Show respect,” the nurse said.

“As I was telling the nurse, I have been feeling sad. I need something to make me feel better.”

“Why are you sad?” the doctor said.

“There has been death in my family. We lost our business. Things of this nature have been happening.”

“And what would you like me to do for you?”

“Can you give me something to make me feel good?”

“I can prescribe for you a diet pill, but you must understand. You are thin now and if you take this pill and don’t eat, you may be happy but you will dissolve into thin air.”

Dissolve into thin air. Though the phrase stayed in his mind, he struggled to keep his response simple. He did not want to deter the doctor from his largesse with a faux pas. For some reason “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm” now came loudly into his mind, and it was everything not to sing at least the title, which was the only part he truly remembered.

“That would be so welcome,” Luther said.

“What?” the doctor replied.

“I am saying that a prescription for those pills would make me happy,” Luther said.

“You are wrong,” the nurse said. “Prescription no make you happy. Pill make you happy, Mr. Thin Air Man.” Here she began to chuckle and the doctor quickly joined her for a chuckle duo. Luther did not mind the pugnacious nurse and set aside his reservations about the complaisant doctor. Happiness was no small thing, and he left with the doctor’s prescription as the assurance of it in his hand.

*Celeste, everything has its season, as we read in Ecclesiastes, and this applied, painful as it is to admit, to Bill Walton and the UCLA Bruins. Their seasons of unblemished excellence were coming to an end, an agent for this demise being an exceedingly tall center named Tom Burluson. It was he who, wearing the atrocious red and white colors of the North Carolina State Wolfpack, sought to drive Bill Walton down, to punish him exceedingly for his excellence. And let us not forget the stellar wingman David Thompson, he with the astronomical vertical leap, who attacked the basket with*

*methodical ferocity. Into triple overtime the NCAA semifinal game went before NC State went ahead to stay, and the question can be asked, naïve as it may be: did the ugliness of the red and white have the right to drive down the blue and gold on that afternoon in Greensboro, North Carolina?*

*And so, if Bill Walton had to be driven down and those on suicide prevention watch called upon to see me through as I writhed in agony at the crushing of my hero, should not the old bones of our regime have been broken, pulverized, dispersed to the air that the building might be freed from our administration? Should Simon Weill not have done for us what we could obviously not do for ourselves? Was not an unintended consequence of his Machiavellian method to supply us with the freedom banner? Yes, he smote us with his stick of evil, but it was only what my mother and all of us wanted, if only we could speak the truth.*

*And so, should it be surprising that Richard Milhous Nixon was too hit with a stick and that the particular stick he was struck with should be the stick of outrage, and that he should be ejected out onto the White House lawn, eighty-sixed like some drunk from a bar, his title broken in half and tossed out with him?*

*But my mother was not tossed out. Maybe the filthy one would have done so had he been able to. Maybe it was only the reality that the apartment was rent controlled and hers to stay in so long as she wished.*

It was quite right that the American standard “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm” should have entered his mind while he was in delicate negotiation with the doctor for the



pills he was seeking because warmth was his and joy as well when he took the first capsule. Now he was well fortified against the forces that would drive him down. He had his Fastin by day to power his white line, continue output and the soothing comfort of alcohol by night. Oh happy day. Oh happy night. Oh happy day and night.

He did not tell Sarah that he was taking the feel-good diet pills. He kept the small amber prescription bottle hidden in the back of his file cabinet, where she had too much integrity to go. He did not want the shame her discovery of the bottle would bring. He did not want her to see that it was not him but the pill whom she was dealing with.

He did not know where the bottle would take him. So much juice was flowing in him when he took a capsule that he sometimes felt he could wait to get down to white line, continue, which was the whole purpose of the prescription in the first place. Sometimes it seemed to him that he needed to clean and reorganize his desk. Sometimes it was the refrigerator that needed tending to. At other times *Time* magazine or *Newsweek* pulled him in. Hours would go by and he would not have written a word. By that time the effect of the capsule would begin to wear off. The great store of joy would have dissipated and a frightening soreness would take hold. If Sarah said something, he would have to snap at her, push her back and out of the space of dwindling love she was trying to invade.

In July he said it was time for him to go away. He said he could not breathe the air of New York City anymore. His destination was Key West, Florida. By this time he had seen *Key Largo*, with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall and sleazy, insinuating

Edward G. Robinson. Luther had known heartbreak that the innocent Osceola brothers, two Seminole Indians, should be shot dead for a crime they had not committed.

But he was not going for the Osceola brothers or Humphrey Bogart or the excellent quality of the film. He was going so he could clear his head of the building and better understand where he was as he continued with his writing project.

He had seen this film and many others from its time and before at a theater on East Eighth Street that had been lovingly restored by the owner, with stills of Greta Garbo and Katherine Hepburn and Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy and other giants of the cinema on the walls. The white-haired owner was of a mind to say that restoration was everything and that time was was better than time present, and he had many like him who didn't believe but had the experience that time was *was* better than time present, and not all of them were old like him but the young too were drawn to this house of venerable cinema.

Sarah was stronger by now. She was a restoration project herself and one that Dr. Frodkey, who belonged to time present and not time was, gladly undertook. He showed her photos of his country home and the gleaming appliances in his modern kitchen. He said his wife cooked only with the best utensils and that their primary reading matter were the catalogs from retailers they received in staggering quantities. He wanted her to think more in terms of consumption herself. He said it was important that she understand the bounty of the country she was living in, and that if she did not partake of the material feast, then the chances were good that she would deprive herself in the artistic and spiritual realm as well. If she wanted proof, she had only to look at Shakespeare. The

bard had a universal palette—it was a well known fact that he would eat a roasted canary as well as broiled snake—which resulted in universal art.

“What about Franz Kafka. He was a hunger artist,” she replied.

“He was confused, as is everyone who lives in Prague. You must understand that the city sits in a basin and is susceptible to air inversions that weaken the mind and lead one to absurd thoughts.”

The man clearly had an answer for everything, thought Luther, who remembered the lengthy chemical formula Dr. Frodkey had laid on him at the mental hospital in answer to the question as to what medication he had prescribed for Sarah. The doctor, with his defiantly cheerful demeanor, might be in possession of some strange power, Luther was beginning to sense.

Whether possessed or not, Dr. Frodkey was intent on mobilizing Sarah’s resources for living. The man wanted her to consolidate her independence from her parents by getting a job. About this proposal Sarah was diffident. She had no marketable skills and besides, viewed the workplace with some disdain, as she had expressed those years before when she stormed out of the design studio after one day. The world was a monolithic entity with no need for her active participation. But she had heard the Yardbirds sing “For Your Love,” and while she had never been a great fan of the British rockers, she now had a new appreciation for the sentiment of the tune if not the mod ones’ singing talent. For Dr. Frodkey’s love she would put aside her antipathy toward the work world and not be bounded by the fear that perhaps informed it.

Such was Luther’s understanding of the situation.

Sarah found employment at Hamburger Heaven, on Thirty-fourth Street and Third Avenue. Luther marveled at the new spirit of willingness she showed as she left the loft each morning. It seemed to give her great joy to have this newfound connection with the world, and though Luther understood he had to be careful about any identification, he was led to recall his own ecstasy as a child delivering flowers for the local florist as a way of earning money for a Christmas gift for his mother, but also that his joy was compromised by the accompanying self-righteous scorn that he should be doing what his lazy sister Naomi couldn't or wouldn't do. And in truth there was a little of that going on with Sarah.

“Dr. Frodkey says my parents do a little bit of work and then reward themselves with long, leisurely vacations,” she remarked, after one of her sessions. Luther did wonder about the doctor's right to sit in judgment of Lydia and Peter, as they were the ones who were footing the bill for their daughter's twice-weekly sessions, Sarah's application for Medicaid having been rejected. Luther understood Dr. Frodkey's advocacy of her employment as a bill of indictment against her parents.

At times, Luther saw Sarah's employment as a kind of degradation and would weep that she had to make up her face and wear a uniform and wait on unfeeling businessmen and women at some burger joint. While he had often been afraid of what her success might mean for them in her glory days at the Boston Museum School, such success, he was finding, was far preferable to having to witness her fall from grace.

And sometimes too, if he was to be honest, joy and sadness over Sarah's new adventure were swept aside by a feeling of arousal seeing her in her black skirt and black

tights and tight white blouse, which she wore with a red sash for a bit of panache. That arousal was heightened by her boss's admiration of her breasts in her interview with him.

“What a disgusting old goat,” Sarah had said.

Luther pictured the man with a slack mouth and a gleaming bald head and a grizzled face he wiped with a not very clean handkerchief. And it was not hard to imagine the executives who patronized the place thinking the same thing. A world that so far did not value her for her work but for her body.

“I must go away. I must go where it is warm,” Luther said to her as summer came.

“It's warm right here,” Sarah said, and in truth it was.

“No. I must go where it is really warm,” Luther said. “I must go to Florida, and to the very tip of it. I must go to Key West.”

“What is all this ‘I must’?” Sarah asked.

“A manner of speaking that asserts my earnestness,” he said.

“Are you OK?”

She was looking into him now. It was a dangerous time. No one must be allowed to destroy his diet pill bliss. No one. Minds must not penetrate that realm of secrecy. He had a right to his own happiness. And the pursuit of his own pleasure. Was that not guaranteed him in the Declaration of Independence? And if pleasure was not included, should it not have been?

“I am OK. I am just sad. I need the Florida sun and real Florida orange juice to bring me back.”

“You have been looking sad,” Sarah said.

“How do you mean, sad?”

“I don’t know. Sad, that’s all.”

Sometimes it was an act of courage to just leave a thing in the air and let it die or blow away or do whatever it was going to do rather than give it additional life with a response. He did not have that kind of courage, but he summoned it somehow as a way of informing Sarah Van Dine that she would never possess the power to reach into his mind and explore its contents at her whim as his mother, in the full power of her knowingness, had done. Opacity is a virtue, obfuscation not a vice, he heard that same mind tell him.

When Sarah accompanied him to Penn Station, all the angels of his past were gathered to rejoice at his freedom. In the arcade, over and above the noise of retail commerce, and in the waiting area did he hear those angels singing “Bringing in the Sheaves” and “Amazing Grace” and he saw his mother in her white linen gloves with the ribbed backs and he saw and smelled the gilt-edged pages of the King James Bible held by Pastor Cohn as he spoke his disappearing words. In the blaze of diet pill love, his life was rich with meaning and joy but also a sadness he could not put a name to. Oh, that such holiness should exist, the mix of the railroad in the locus of Pennsylvania Station with his mother and his family in transit to and from the tabernacle where the Christ Jesus was on the tongues and in the souls of one and all except for him. Because he was not going past the trains to the tabernacle, as he had done in all the Sundays of his childhood. He was going to his freedom.

While waiting at the gate to board the overnight to Miami, he had this thought. I must run on my long legs to the liquor store across the waiting area and buy two pints of Old Mr. Boston blackberry-flavored brandy. And so he did.

At Newark he placed a suitcase in the overhead rack for an elderly black woman who had just boarded.

“You are a fine young man. That I can tell,” she said, seeking to place the yoke of her approval on him.

Settled again into his seat, Luther began to read *Pale Fire*, by Vladimir Nabokov, but the novel, which began with a long poem, confused him. Footnotes were prominent as a device for carrying what seemed to be different story lines. The novel left him cold; it seemed the work of an icebound intellect.

In the dining car a group of teenagers had gathered. Printed on their red T-shirts were the words “Christians for Nixon.” Their adult supervisor, a big and wholesome-looking blond man, wore a T-shirt with the same messaging. Their shining faces suggested sunbeams for Jesus. He could see them holding their hymnals and doing their weeping and wailing thing and exploring the wasteland of Ezekiel and Obadiah. He too had an announcement to make deserving of a T-shirt of its own to the effect that goodness could be a form of captivity more punishing than sin. Oh, he didn’t know what exactly he wanted to say, but surely as RMN and the Christ Jesus were part of his experience he could establish a dialogue.

He began to drink as the train pulled out of Union Station in Washington, D.C., half-filling a waxed cup so he wouldn’t be seen with a pint bottle to his mouth.

Invigorated, he walked back to the lounge car, where *American Graffiti* was being projected on a big screen. Was that sadness Luther saw in the kids' faces as they watched this film about a high school prom in small-town America? Was it painful for them to be reminded that there was a real life out there beyond the rocks of ancient Judea, a life that included sex and drinking, that they were being excluded from by the preachers drunk on the Christ Jesus and their own disappearing words? Did they too have stirrings in their loins to abandon Christian virtue for the fleshpots of Egypt? And were they not wavering in their political faith—the affirmation on their T-shirts notwithstanding—in the villainous man with the five o'clock shadow blotto in the Oval Office well before noon? Well, he would have the night to pose these questions to the well-scrubbed ones guided in all their ways by holy scripture.

But now he had other work to be about. The slow, coaxing motion of the train had intensified. Now it was balling the jack and with the quickening of the pace came the need for physical expression of joy at the train's full-throttle rush into the realm of ecstasy. Down the aisle of one car after another he staggered, boosted by a pint and a half of brandy, till he came to the impediment of the baggage car, which proved no impediment at all. After pulling an axe from its clamps on the wall, he entered the car, packed with boxes and other cargo, and slid open the wide loading and unloading door. A full moon hovered over the red clay fields of North Carolina, into which he now flung the axe, having no thought of returning it to its rightful place because, in his hands, it had no rightful place but where he had tossed it. In this moment he saw not his drunken craziness but only a necessary expression of his freedom.



*Celeste, I could have struck and killed someone. How am I to know I didn't?*

*Celeste, I could have been arrested and thrown in a North Carolina jail. How is it I wasn't?*

When he came to, it was light out. The Florida sun had established its debilitating hegemony. The train sat in the Okeechobee station. The air conditioning had been shut off and the car was sweltering. His head felt like it had received a blow from a polo mallet, his skin was beaded with sweat, and he was suffering from cotton mouth. There was no mystery, no villain to apprehend, unless it was the two pint bottles that lay empty on the seat beside his.

The black woman who had sought to paralyze him with a goodness blessing the day before now showed him eyes wide with fright as she laid on him a sound denouncement, saying, "You got the devil in you, young man. You got him warring for your soul." And here she made a cross of her arms so as to drive him from her sight. And the young Christians for Nixon showed him some trembling fear, including a pretty teenage girl who cowered in her seat when he came up the aisle. He was not of a mind to search for clues as to his nocturnal enterprise following his visit to the baggage car. He could only assume, in a general way, that his communication with the young flock for Nixon had been intense and beyond their perceived bounds of decorum.

But soon the train was in motion again and the air conditioning revived for the last leg of the trip. From the slough of despond was his mind coaxed; now he could regard the sun not as an intimation of the hell to which he was bound but an invitation to the bright light of day. A song came to him, "It's a Big Wide Wonderful World," as it was

sung in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, a poignant song in the context of the film. Such sadness he had felt for Chance Wayne, broken and possibly destroyed by thugs making war on beauty there on the screen in that neighborhood theater when Luther was but a teenager, his square head exposed for all to see in the bare bones of his adolescence.

But what was that, *It's a Big Wide Wonderful World* but a song of the past, of a different America, a song that could only give him the face of beaten Chance Wayne (aka Paul Newman) in the summer heat of a sleepy southern town? Why should he be in that sorrow gulch for Chance when Dave Loggins could deliver him a good deal of pathos for his own life with his little tune "Please Come to Boston"? The world was full of surprises. You walked into a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet near the train station to get filled up and got to hear a song that meant more to you than *Pale Fire* ever could. All Dave Loggins wanted was for his girl to come join him, whether in Boston or Denver or Los Angeles, while he moved ahead with his singing career, but all she wanted was for him to return to Tennessee. I have found the song to have my vacation by, Luther thought, feeling it penetrate and claim ownership of him. The world may think it is a dippy song, but I must have it to live by, he also thought, while trying to find some meat content in the fare that had been served him in the prefab establishment. And he also thought this: no one must know how much this song means to me. No one must know the sweet sadness I live for.

Tears came to his bleary eyes as he thought of Sarah and the warmth of her body and her breath when he would wake next to her in the morning. He worried how she would cope without him and if he had told her often enough that he loved her. I am in the

same state of mind as when I was a child at camp and concerned for my mother, Luther thought. I must weather this storm.

*Celeste, the bus lacked air conditioning and made many stops along Route 1, and so it was three hours before we arrived in Key West. The midday sun was blazing, causing the road to shimmer in the intolerable heat. A rowdy, drunken man fell backward off the bus and struck his head on the pavement. He had been swigging bourbon out of a wide-mouth bottle that had no label, leading me to suspect he was getting bombed on moonshine. I thought of Lydia's journal entry some years before about how the beast came out in me when I drank, the same beast I had been seeing in that lanky, smelly yahoo. A sudden fear gripped me, in spite of the palm trees and the placidity of the water and the white boats upon it and the big hotels back in Miami Beach; I was in the South and the erotic call of the tropics notwithstanding, violence might have its place here.*

*I was given refuge at Mama Casals' boarding house, at the other end of Duval Street, away from the marina. Mama Casals, a woman in the thickness of middle age, was there herself to greet me on the front porch and show me to my room on the second floor. Her English was heavy-accented, as she was only here several years on the mainland after emigrating from Cuba with her uncle Pedro, a slight man with a trim gray beard and a manner as light as hers was stern.*

*"You are a reporter for the New York Times? You have important work you do? You write big story about Cayo Huesto?" she asked, having seen the Olivetti portable typewriter I had brought along for the trip in a carrying case.*

*“No. Nothing like that,” I said, as she bore down on me with her alertness. How was I to tell her that my interest was restricted to myself alone and so I had no abiding concern with the world beyond, whether it was the manatees or the palmetto bugs that horrifyingly covered the lawns at night or the history of the Keys? How was I to tell her that she was not the first, nor would she be the last, to ascribe to me a larger purpose than I possessed? It will not do to tell people that you are without the resources to cast a wider net than the one which you have cast over yourself. They will have to see that for themselves in time, as Mama Casals inevitably did.*

*And perhaps Pedro did as well, and right at the start, being possessed of more powers of perception than I initially credited him with. In his broken English, he spoke of standing in Grand Central Station next to an escalator on his one trip to New York City. At the bottom of the escalator sat a man with stumps for legs begging for change from passersby as they stepped off the escalator. Suddenly two policemen arrived and pulled him to his feet because yes, in fact he did have feet and legs as well that attached to those feet, which he had somehow concealed in his baggy trousers. After a warning from the police the man ran off with a sheepish grin to doubtless practice his scam at another underground site.*

*“This I seed in New York. In New York. Is what the city is, big big fakery.” Pedro laughed, as if life was one big scam and he was a witness to it.*

*In the room hung a watercolor of a small wooden house on the water's edge in a rural setting. The house was painted a triumphant forest green with red trim. I say 'triumphant' because it defeated my senses, brought me to my knees in longing for its*

*peace and perfection. The world may be full of color, but most structures do not signify at depth, as this house did in its utter simplicity. We all long to go home, Celeste. We all long to be in that place of peace and so I spoke to the house by day and was comforted by its presence at night.*

*I wrote two pages a day, on onion skin paper, as I had read somewhere that Hemingway's manuscripts were written on the same thin, delicate paper. I worked in the morning and early afternoon. Even then I was suspicious of the sun and its true intention, remembering what it had done to me in Puerto Rico and in the Coney Island days of my childhood. I set 3 pm as a time to appear on the beach, when the sun had spent some of its toxic viciousness.*

*To be honest, Celeste, when I say "work," I feel that I deserve repeated punches to the face by a big, strong, and remorseless man. I took my feel-good pill first thing in the morning and would sit imprisoned in sweet emotion at my little Olivetti 32 portable. A feeling of synthetically produced love would attach to the people who came into my mind—Sarah, her mother, her father. The spell was often impossible to break free from, and what writing I did was little more than a diary in manuscript form, my subject being mostly the events of the previous day.*

*The beach was mainly coral, with pockets of sand, facing the Atlantic, and often deserted. Each afternoon I would come to the same spot with half a ham hero, slathered with mustard, so I could feel substantial in my own sight and the sight of others, should they appear and witness me in my black bathing suit. I should say that the shadow I cast*

*on the sand was not as slight and meager as in previous years. I seemed to perceive a subtle hint of substance, and this was important to my confidence.*

*But such confidence was lacking to show myself as I was on the streets of Key West. Even in the extreme July heat I wore long pants and sneakers, lest those with bodies beautiful see the bulky apparatus of my knees and my irregular toes. We stand naked before God more easily than before our fellow creatures.*

*At night would my narcissism emerge. With some color added to my flesh and having showered, I could imagine myself as reasonably attractive in that lush darkness, the warm, soft air carrying the cadenced sound of crickets. The alcohol I consumed in the bars along Duval Street grew my appetite for sex. How unappealing that last phrase, and the image it conjures of a devouring creature of the night, a lustful raptor loose in the watering holes of Key West.*

*Now Celeste, the possibility of being closer to nature in a warm climate made a calling sound to many in the cities of America, with the result that some stayed beyond their scheduled time for departure. Such a one was Alice Glint, burned brown by the sun to a hideous degree. She had left Brooklyn and her marketing job for a one-week vacation twenty years ago never to return and was now living in a tent on a lagoon a short distance from the town. When I asked how she survived, she simply said she had her ways and no, she had not been in touch with family or friends. All of that was dead to her, she said, burned from her consciousness by the sun. "You have to understand that the sun makes you free, it makes you high. It's like a never-ending fuck." In just such a way did she speak, as if she had glimpsed the end of time and was frantic for a party before it*

*came. Celeste, perhaps there is the potential for a radical departure in all of us, and it only requires the right set of circumstances to be activated. And yet, whatever galvanized Alice Glint was not, in my eyes, entirely attractive. I saw sorrow. I saw escape. I saw annihilation. And yet, and yet, do we not all have the desire to rise up against the ties that would bind and walk away?*

*That same night I met a girl, though she was more than that, being solid in her credentials as an emergency room nurse. Let us say that her name was Margaret Whiting and that the smell of death was strong in her, as it was every night she performed her tour of duty. And let us say that, having been face to face with demise in that environment of blood, her ears ringing with the moans and shrieks of pain from those with ravaged bodies, she saw my invitation to go out on the pier by the strip of beach I daily visited as a call to life from a merciful stranger. Whatever, she decided to place an element of trust in me. The obvious is important to state here, Celeste. She had her own calculation to make and her own needs that had to be met. She too had a right to the freedom path that sex temporarily provided, and so, in the murmuring night, we set forth on that pier.*

*A young black boy, slight of frame, with a beautifully shaped head and eyes as luminous as the moon above, followed after us, his bare feet feathery on the wooden slats, as if he were on a laid-back mission to reconnoiter our substance. Only heaven and his mysterious heart can say what his relations were to this environs of white folk, or tally the reserves of strength and intelligence he needed to navigate his way. With us he spoke a concise language laden perhaps with hidden meaning.*

*“Barracudas in that water. Take out a chunk of your leg. Fuck with you halfway to death.”*

*We didn't dispute his cautionary words but just let him have his say. Sensing he had made his presence felt, he went off, and as he left I removed my clothes and sneakers and climbed down the ladder into the warm and welcoming water. Margaret followed after. Somehow, I had assumed she would. Even that close to shore the bottom was far below my feet, and I struggled to hide my fear as the minutes passed of large fish using me for a meal. Evidently, Margaret experienced no such sense of crisis but was one with the vast and terrifying ocean we had been called to. The butterfly, the crawl, the sidestroke, the backstroke, she put them all on display while, my strength and confidence fading, I was reduced to doggie paddle mode. I wondered, for a time, if she was mocking me with her aquatic prowess, but she was beyond such dinky stuff. It all went back to what I said earlier; having seen death, she chose life. That night, on the pier, she gave herself to me as she had given herself to the water. We made what bed we could of our clothes and lay there less than a minute following the end of our mating when a powerful and blinding light was shone on us, like those footlights that obscured the audience in the play, Major Barbara, I had a part in back in high school. We dressed hurriedly. I cannot speak for Margaret, but for myself I felt no shame, only apprehension. A trooper awaited us outside his patrol car. He did not linger but got back in and drove off slowly, and so I would have to believe he had received what he had been looking for, a glimpse of her naked beauty, and now he wanted to take that memory into the night and savor it. And yet, Celeste, I have to also believe he had a heart bigger than his uniform and understood*



*the gravitational force on the young pulling them to the earth, one on top of the other. I have to believe that he was saying sex in the Key West night was beyond his jurisdiction, and that he would only have to throw stones at himself for his hypocrisy if he had placed the cuffs on us, as he had likely done the same thing when he was young and unrestricted by the demands of time.*

*Celeste, the question on my mind is whether I will see this Margaret Whiting again and if she remembers me. Do you suppose I have a place in her consciousness or was our skinny dipping venture for her a common occurrence, one such experience blurring with another? We have to take stock of our time on this earth, and find significance where we can. We must reconnoiter the past for those pockets of warmth, and note that the fires we are seeking are mainly generated by connection, no matter how ephemeral. Is it possible that there are too many cold dark spots, Celeste? Is that possible? And then we must acknowledge the error we have just made and say firmly that the fires we are seeking are one fire and that fire is only generated by God.*

*Suppose we are all destined to meet again and remove our masks and acknowledge the part, if only minor, that we played in each other's lives? We cannot dismiss the possibility that the computer, with its data-synthesizing power, demonstrates, to a small degree, the supreme information-gathering power of God himself, down to the last infinitesimal detail, and that random encounters are not so random after all. And I am not sanguine that God's final tally will be in my favor. Yes, I have prayed daily to be taught how to love, but my judgments remain fierce and my disdain is easily summoned, especially when people crowd in on me. Some discipline is required to refrain from*

*speculating as to what or whom I may encounter on the other side, and sometimes, laughable as it may sound, my fear is that my father will be waiting to have at me for the slanders, big and small, I have uttered about him to those who would listen. As I have told you many times, Celeste, I cannot bear to have photos of my father on the wall. Back into the closet they must go. Why? Because he takes up so much space and I can think of nothing but his fierce countenance when his image is displayed. Even with a wall separating us, he manages to penetrate, as he did in the days of old.*

*Now Celeste, I understand that I am on the path of digression here, but we cannot hold ourselves to too high a standard. Things are going back and forth more and more and an appropriate dubiousness about the linearity of time is growing. Regardless, let me here recommit to disciplining my mind. Let this be so, dear God. Let this be so.*

*Celeste, there was another contact I made during my stay in Key West, Florida. A thin girl with anxiety showing in her pretty face entered my path and accompanied me back to my room. Though she forewarned me that she had entered her menstrual cycle, we moved forward with lovemaking. Afterward, she surprised me, not with a denouncement, but with an observation delivered with utter candor in a state of terror: "You are the remotest man I have ever met," Denise Blakely declared, after dressing hurriedly in the cutoff jeans and T-shirt she had quickly shed. She was holding a mirror up to me, but it was a mirror I could not look into after she fled out the door, leaving behind the stark image. Was it any different, Celeste, than that girl I picked up in Central Park some years before who said to me, without elaboration, "You should see yourself"? We all have our own way of processing information, and if Denise Blakely thought I*

*would take her words to heart and weep long into the night over the deformity of my being, the truth is something else. What did happen was that not so long into the night I began to laugh, a loud, uncontrollable crazy laugh that seemed to feed on itself. If I could attach any meaning to her words whatsoever, it was only that I was sufficiently powerful to draw her to me and cause her to flee, and what was wrong with that, a little power in the life of a flat-headed, low IQ thing like me?*

*Now Celeste, in all this time Mama Casals was watching. Like the woman from Newark on the Amtrak to Miami, she started with a rating of goodness in her estimation of me only so the pendulum could swing and she could have the satisfaction of later uttering a denouncement, as where there is good what else can there be but bad? Had she seen me come in with the girl that night? Had she seen the girl flee into the street after an hour in my room? Had she seen the evidence of menstrual flow I had tried to wash from the sheet with salt and warm water? No final determination of the nature of her fault-finding investigation has as yet been concluded. All we can safely say in the aftermath of the girl's visit is that her expression of disapproval came not as a verbal outburst but in a manner toward me that was decidedly cold. A landlady such as Mama Casals will always seek to place a young man such as myself in her custody, and a young man built along my lines will give the appearance of acquiescing to a surrender of self to her power. And what is that power, but the power of goodness, as I have just stated. And as I have also said, we must seek release from this tendency till it no longer rules us. If all this sounds extreme, we can only reply that freedom is worth the struggle to emerge into our individual self. We are not here to be the sum total of other people's aspirations for us, to*

*be a goodness slave, to live a life along lines laid out for us rather than the path we need to follow for our own full realization. I am not saying this well, Celeste. I recognize that this is so and that you may dismiss it as more of my hazy foolishness, but we have to persevere with the hunches that come to us and see where our intuition leads.*

*My mother's goodness was a blinding force, as blinding as the light that trooper shone on Margaret Whiting's nakedness. I couldn't see beyond her aura to who she had been before it imposed its hegemonic reign. But suppose God himself hadn't always been God? Suppose he had badness in him before goodness could follow? Because what is the light without the darkness? Does it even exist? Of this earlier life my mother would say that God had not been in her and she had not been in God, but while she freely acknowledged this phase, she presented it in a general way. Without the particulars, I had no real picture of my mother as she had been, and yet, is it possible such a picture might have been improper? Suppose she had given me, with marvelous brevity, all I needed to know? In fact, Celeste, let me accept that I have reached a dangerous dead end and abandon this line of thinking right now lest I forever be perceived as a creature given to total disrespect. Why dangerous? You ask. Because we also put ourselves at risk of a ferocious blow. Do you not hear my mother say, after a hard strike to my face that has sent me to the floor, "Let this be an end to your freshness. Let this be an end. Did you think you could treat me as dirt forever?" So yes, that is the humiliation that awaits us if we do not toe the line.*

*The sun over Key West midday in July is a punishing thing, as I have noted, Celeste, and summoned to mind the pastor's message of repentance. But by late afternoon*

*that same sun would lose some of its power and maybe there would be cloud cover, and I would stare from the second floor balcony of the rooming house down to the used-car lot across the street, row after row of Fords and Chevrolets and Buicks, and at the banner of brightly colored plastic pennants above them flapping in the gentle breeze and I would think, I have found where I want to be for the rest of my life. Even with my meager body did I want to be a child of the sun in a setting that commingles nature with artifact and the promise of the island warmth of Cuba only ninety miles away.*

*Now many things happened in this time, there being a tempest in the air. Babies born, people dying at their appointed time, whether young or old. There were the usual gruesome iniquities that made you question your place in this world and also unspeakable acts of kindness. People fell, intentionally or otherwise, on the subway tracks and practiced the sly trick of looking the other way as a train bore down on them and effected their demise. And while it is cruel to attach blame to such victims, the perverse streak still lives in me that would punish those injured or deceased in accidents, so-called. Perhaps it is that some residue of the god of punishment still lives in me along with a belief in individual responsibility and a special loathing for those who would make me bear witness to scenes of gruesome carnage. And yet in some way that I do not pretend to understand, we do consent to our own misfortune, and perhaps it is for that reason that I have always had some reservations about certain grief choruses, the question arising in my mind whether they were in the realm of the histrionic. In any case, like many others I washed my face in the newspapers so I could be abreast of the affairs*

*of the nation and emote with tears of joy and sadness as well, but I was, as that girl Denise Blakely perceived, wrapped in remoteness, wanting, as I did, only the sweetness of life, not its trials and tribulations.*

*Today, and this is something you may know, Celeste, I say to myself, "Would you like a cup of tea, Luther?" Only that is not me speaking. If I may say, the love of the universe is channeled into that voice. And so I reply, "Oh yes, I really, really would." And that is not me speaking either. Who is it, then, you say? It is the little boy in me, that is who, the little boy who must be comforted, educated, convinced, that he is loved. Because that little boy is used to a brittle tone of voice, a temperamental tone of voice, a voice that says, "Are you trying to aggravate me? Will you make me get up? Because if you make me, I just don't know what I might do." And as for those who would accuse me of the overuse of "really," I can only say the adverbial repetition is essential in order to convey the joy the child is feeling.*

She was different when he returned and he was as well. They were strangers to each other. There had been occasional letters back and forth but no phone contact. He couldn't say why. He was in a space that was precious to him and was afraid she would bring him down from his high. He had given himself the proper excuse for leaving in the first place—the termination of his family's management of the building. She had no cause to doubt his departure was for any other reason than to clear his head.

He could see in the weak smile she gave him as he stepped off the train that she hadn't missed him and that she was on the verge of saying their whole relationship had

been a mistake based on a preposterous need that was no more now that circumstances had changed.

Driven by fear, he searched for her diary. He found the composition book, the kind with a mottled cover and the multiplication table inside, under the cushion of a chair in her studio. He was a snoop. Disgusting, sneaky, cowardly, morally indefensible—he did not allow such words, even as they came, to shame him into inaction. He had made her his life's work, in a sense. She was his signature achievement, and there was a story to tell. He was living his novel, if that's what it was, as he wrote it, so why should he deprive himself of source material?

Her writing was as colorful as the paints on her palette and served to remind him that even in his chosen area of specialization she far exceeded him. And because he lacked the capacity to emulate the style of a superior mind, there was little for him to do in his account but offer a paltry summary of her days in his absence. His thin sentences lacked all capacity to convey the sexual charge of her chronicle.

A young waiter named Julio had taken to her and she to him. Julio was generously endowed. He had the staying power Luther lacked. He knew how to pleasure a woman. She admired his ambition—a waiter by day and an accounting student by night. But her doubts grew. He began to behave aggressively. He did a lot of drugs. He was fairly coarse and they really didn't have much in common. When another waitress came to Hamburger Heaven and he began to chase after her, she was relieved.

Lane entered the narrative. She flew to Boston to visit the school and be with him. Their time together was less than satisfying. His attitude was one of complaint. With

some money he had inherited, he had opened a gallery, but the artists he showcased were ungrateful for his help. Dissatisfaction was a way of life for Lane, she began to sense.

Luther experienced the voyeur's titillation as well as pain at his lover's betrayal. Not that betrayal was the right word, as his own wildness was no secret from her.

Grayness entered the picture as he read about Lane. Was opening a gallery the proper career path for a young man with his prodigious artistic gift? It seemed such a sad misuse of his ability, like a star baseball player suddenly retiring to the front office. Luther wondered if genius Lane might be tainted with the same problem as Sarah. Maybe he wasn't such a star after all. Suppose they could only hit minor league pitching? Suppose major league heat was too much for them? Still, it did not seem right that stars should fall before his own eyes. It did not seem right at all.

Reading in her diary had an aphrodisiacal effect; libidinal frenzy was now causing him inner turmoil. Once again he perceived sex as a competition, a race; he would have to get busy again if he was to gain a healthy distance on Sarah, given her recent activity.

He did not speak of his hurt. He had no right to, given all that he had done. Besides, her thing with Julio had run its course and her trip to Boston had been an unsuccessful attempt to return to the past. He understood that she was with him and he was with her.

But Sarah herself had something to say.

"You have been in my journal. You are a despicable and pathetic snoop. You would steal from me everything you can, but you can't steal my talent, you talentless fool. Do you understand?"



“Why do you talk to me this way?”

“Dr. Frodkey and I are on to you. You are nothing but a hound dog.”

“Yes,” Luther said.

“A drunken hound dog.”

“Of course,” Luther said.

“I am not your life. I am a part of your life.”

“Yes.”

“I am not your field of study. Try botany. Try learning something real.”

“Yes, flowers are nice, and I don’t know too many of them,” Luther said.

“How is it you haven’t asked me how I know you are a snoop?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Luther said.

“I am on to you. That’s how I knew. I have my strategies for detection.”

“Strategies for detection. That is a good one.”

“Don’t start with me, Luther. Don’t start.”

“Start. That is another good one.”

“I said don’t start, not start.”

“Yes.”

It was a new beginning.

Luke also had a new beginning. Simon Weill found a use for him in the new regime he installed at the building.

“I am making you part of the management team. You and I are one. Do you understand? One.” Simon Weill spoke in just this way to Luke, and Luke listened, absorbing every word. For emphasis, Simon Weill raised his right index finger, holding the digit straight before bending it toward Luke for the penetrating emphasis that he was seeking. Thus, Simon Weill was working on Luke with his mind and his words and his gestures, as he had need of healing the divide that mistrust had wrought in the termination fracas. Having knocked Luke down, he was now intent on raising him up.

“Sure. Sure I understand,” Luke said, and he did. He could feel Simon Weill entering through every pore and inflating him so he could assume a stature that had not been his own before. Because Simon Weill had given Luke no reason to hate him. He had not done a search and destroy on Mrs. Garatdjian. He had not bundled her possessions and thrown her and them onto the street. He had not treated her like the dirt she said she was sometimes treated like, the dirt beneath her shoes. No, no, Simon Weill said she could stay right where she was, and Hannah could stay right where she was in room 2C3. And Rachel could continue to look for Jesus from the window of room 7A6. The main thing, of course, was that Luke would be able to stay on in the penthouse with Brenda and Benjy. Never mind that the family’s apartment was rent-controlled and thus Simon Weill had no business proposing that Mrs. Garatdjian move in the first place, Simon Weill having had the notion to place her in a strip mall town in New Jersey where she knew no one so she could experience the ache of loneliness in unfamiliar surroundings connected with no one and die within a year. Because Simon Weill hadn’t known what it was for her to come to America to live in that squalid apartment and to feel in her bones that she

needed to die there, and he didn't care to know, nor had he known the aspiration of Hannah and what it meant when she said no one was to deprive her and her son, no one, that she might be camping out in a room on the same floor but that apartment was hers, it was owed her, and that one day she would live there alone with her son. And to take a first step toward making that a reality, she vacated her room and moved into the apartment so Simon Weill could not say she had no claim to it when Mrs. Garatdjian passed on. Because if she had been cheated by life, she wouldn't be cheated by Simon Weill anymore than she had to be.

*Celeste, we don't know what it is to be an eldest daughter. We don't know the storm signals in their minds and the caution flags and red and yellow lights they must face on their road of life. We don't know the factors they are weighing and even they may not know. Do you understand? We must not judge. We must not.*

So Simon Weill did not throw them out in the street, but now it was for Mrs. Garatdjian to pay Rachel's rent, as she no longer had it at her discretion to assign rooms to the Garatdjian children rent-free. They were simply tenants in the building their aunt had once owned and then managed for many years.

Simon Weill brought in a man named Stavros Stavigos and introduced him to Luke as one of a number of new investors in the property. He said Stavros Stavigos would be providing overall direction from that point on and Luke must work closely with him, as Mr. Stavigos had a proven business record.

"You want my philosophy? I am Greek, and we are big on philosophy. You know that about us, right? Plato? Aristotle?" Mr. Stavigos asked, when Simon Weill had left.

“Oh yes, I have heard about them,” Luke said.

“And would you like to learn about my philosophy?”

“Sure. Sure I would,” Luke said, trying to be respectful of Mr. Stavigros, whose aggressive manner might be a cover for gross insecurity. Mr. Stavigros tilted his head for a different angle of vision into Luke’s eyes, as if to better fathom Luke’s thinking.

“Brown. You understand?”

“I’m not sure,” Luke said.

“You’re not sure?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly.” Mr. Stavigros’s repetition suggested that he was building something, and he delivered right away. “What color is your elimination?”

“What?”

“Your matter.”

“I’m sorry. What is my matter?”

“We are talking philosophy here, are we not?”

“I guess so. Sure,” Luke said.

“Tell me what color is your elimination?”

“My what?”

“Your shit, if we must use such language.”

“Brown, mostly,” Luke replied.

“And that is what we are going to do here. We are going to brown the building.”

“Brown the building?”

“We are going to shit on the building, to use the language you understand, since you really don’t understand philosophy.”

“What kind of philosophy is that?”

“The philosophy of all living things, my friend. From the dung heap grows the rose. So we are going to do a giant shit on the building to make it grow.”

“You’re going to shit on the building?” In spite of himself, Luke began to laugh.

“You make fun of what you don’t understand, my friend, but do you see the clothes I am wearing?”

“Yes,” Luke said.

“Nice clothes, yes? High quality shoes and pants and jacket and shirt. What color are these clothes?”

“Brown,” Luke said.

“Exactly. And because they are brown I have been able to grow.”

Like the rose, Luke thought, but did not say.

“Because sometimes you have to shit on things to make them better. That is philosophy talking now.”

Harry Stavigros should have been named Harry Brown, Luke thought. Brown clothes. Brown skin. Only his hair was black. Still, he wasn’t as crazy as his words; he didn’t literally pull down his pants and poop on things, but he did call in a brigade of workers to coat the lobby walls and ceiling with light brown paint and go from floor to

floor applying his signature color to the landings and the hallways. The Rolling Stones could sing "Paint It Black" all they wanted. Harry Stavigros sang "Paint It Brown."

Luther, for his part, was reminded of his Hell's Kitchen apartment and how he had applied brown paint to those walls, though not led to that choice by philosophy, a field beyond the ability of his mind to grasp.

This was a hard time in the life of the country. Along with tears of joy, there were tears of sadness and even grief for the departed Richard Milhous Nixon, who had vacated not the premises of the earth but of the White House, where he would never again be blotto in the Oval Office. RMN would need years of isolation to understand his loss and the reasons for it, and never really acknowledge that it was due to anything more than the maliciousness of the running dogs of savagery.

Was it right to topple a man from the pinnacle of success? Was it not too far to fall? Was it not easier for a poor man to accept his poverty than for a once wealthy man to accept his reduced station in life? But one brake on Luther's sadness for RMN was the ex-president's face. It was, after all, not a visage that suggested greatness. And yet, Luther was more inclined to ascribe criminal intent and fascistic tendencies to messengers Haldeman and Ehrlichman than he was to RMN, for in them the appearance of high peeve content was more apparent than it was in their former boss, who after all had a mind that could inhabit the loftier regions of foreign policy planning, such as rapprochement with China. Haldeman as a boy would have delighted in giving Indian

burns while it did not seem a stretch to see Ehrlichman clad in the black leather of the Gestapo.

Hannah had a harder time with RMN's departure, as her love affair had been longer and deeper. "They will pay and pay and pay," Hannah said.

"Who are they?" Luther asked.

"Don't be fresh with me," Hannah replied.

"I'm not being fresh. I'm simply asking who 'they' are."

"Moses," Hannah screamed, there in the family apartment, where they were living now.

And in that moment that Hannah beckoned Moses to her with the command and control power she exercised over him, waves of fear washed through Luther, who was seeing his worst fear confirmed. Moses was indeed Hannah's instrument of revenge to whom she had assigned ultimate responsibility for Luther's demise.

Moses did not disappoint. He arrived from the interior in his full dimension, the word "strapping" having long since come to apply.

"You rang?" Moses asked, in a tone half-bored, half anticipating what the summons might signify, given the cold and ominous look he now gave his uncle.

"This is my son. You are welcome here so long as you don't disrespect me. Is that clear?" Hannah asked, directing herself to Luther.

"A lot is clear," Luther said, seeking to elevate, through ambiguity, above the humiliation his oldest sister would impose on him.

“That’s not showing respect. My mom asks you a question and you talk back to her like that. You know what I’m saying?”

“Do you know what you’re saying?” Luther asked.

“You’re not well, man. I can see into your mind and it’s messed up, it really is. You should get some help. And you’re all bones. If I was to punch you, my fist would go right through, so I’m going to cut you some slack. But don’t come in here disrespecting my mom again unless you want me to mess you up. You hear what I’m saying?”

“Do you hear what you’re saying?” The interrogatory had become his only defense against the onslaught.

“All right. That’s enough,” Hannah said. “Just remember that my son and I are watching you.”

“Of course,” Luther said.

“You see. There you go again with your smart mouth disrespect. Maybe I will just put a hole in your chest,” Moses said, taking a step toward Luther.

“No, Moses, no. We’ve made our point,” Hannah said.

*Celeste, some of us are meant only for a life of quiet, given the circumstances we were born into and the conduct of our lives in our earlier years. For some of us there is nothing to do but to sit on a park bench and talk to ourselves under our breath so no one else can overhear and bring harm to our being. Or in the privacy of a bathroom, we tap with one finger five times on a particular wall tile, or maybe on several such tiles, deciding first which one or ones are least likely to be identified by those who are on our*



*trail as the ones we selected, because if they guess right, then we are completely undone, our peaceful world has been invaded and ruined for all time. Or we sit on a public bus facing passengers across the aisle and dare them to notice that we have positioned our feet at an acute angle where the toes are facing inward toward each other or at an obtuse angle so our toes are facing away from each other, each angle unnatural and slightly uncomfortable but not necessarily noticeable as such in the eyes of others. And this too will be a measure of our freedom, that we can position our feet in these ways without consequence to our status as ghosts in witness to this world of pain.*

His sickness was with him. If he thought of a drink, he had to have a drink, and the same applied as well to sex. Should the impulse arise in him, he was soon en route to an X-rated movie theater, either in the Times Square area or on east 59<sup>th</sup> Street. There he would gorge on scenes of men with big things doing it to women who wanted to have it done to them, and the more beautiful and willing the woman seemed to be, the more aroused he would grow, as if the basic question whether women truly enjoyed sex had not been definitively answered for him. In spite of his own experience, there lingered the notion that sex was imposed on women by men and that men lured or coerced them into pornography. If penetration in the smaller orifice appeared to cause the woman pain, or if there was any hint of coercion, or if signs of drug addiction, such as track marks on the arms, were apparent, then he would be downcast. For his spirits to rise and his libido to rev, the porn had to be good. And yet, even when the belief that they enjoyed a large

penis in their mouth and between their legs and even in the third orifice grew in him as he sat in the dark theater, it would soon dissipate in daylight.

Gone were the names of award-winning films on the marquees of these theaters fallen from glory; in their place was “Debbie Does Dallas” or simply “X-rated films.” He would wait until pedestrian traffic was slight and have cash in hand to avoid having to linger at the ticket window.

*Celeste, I went where my mind took me, to these musty venues where men sat scattered in the mostly empty rows. The signs of degeneracy were not written large on their faces. Some were young, like me, and some were middle-aged and in suits and trench coats, and some were old and grizzled. An X-rated film will not put lewdness into the countenance of the viewer. We were men who had succumbed to a basic desire, and while I cannot speak for the others, for me the success of these films was not dependent solely on the quality of the female performers (there is no need to call them actors). It was also required that the man have a truly big thing, such as legendary Johnny Holmes, and if the male was small or only ordinary in that department, then sadness dispiritedness would reign in me.*

*We must allow for the possibility that these people in the course of their work were angels of a certain kind. How many of us were saved from AIDS in the next decade by such X-rated films being available for viewing in the privacy of our homes on cassette tapes? How many? Rather than lead us to an engagement with the opposite sex, they moved us farther from them, and so lessened the likelihood of risky encounters with women carrying the virus. Such was my understanding at the time.*

*Celeste, impropriety was my calling card for many years. I cannot tell you it wasn't. Under the influence of alcohol and other substances I ran naked through the streets of Manhattan, and you yourself were a direct victim of such excess, but we can offend by taking off our clothes on paper as well, and I do fear whether a scrupulous inventory of this kind is not a form of exhibitionism in its own right. Just this minute I hear the chorus of aye-aye sayers seeking to confirm my doubt, those who would meticulously weigh every word for public consumption. We must accept that there are those congenitally and by other circumstance opposed to us. Let us not fear them, let us proceed with the naked truth, as the truth is so aptly described.*

*There is an old joke, Celeste. A man says to his friend, "Hey, why don't you apply for a Fulbright?" And the friend replies, "A Fulbright for a half-bright?" And yet a mind, whatever its quality, is subject to influences, and mine was trending away from the world of men and deeper into that of women. What I mean is that manly vigor and assertiveness did not attach to me and a degree of cowardice was established early on as part of my makeup. I was the boy who hid, trembling, behind Momma from my father and big bad Simon Weill, the boy afraid to take a beating, afraid of so much in the realm of the real man.*

*But enough of digression, which in any case cannot explain why I should have placed an ad in the personals section of The Village Voice. Bisexual young man seeks bisexual woman for communication and adventure. Something of this kind was the gist of the ad, which ran for two months. The responses, for a time, were heavy. I had rented a box at the post office down on Canal Street, and several times a week I would enter the*

*pink art deco building and leave with letters from throughout the country written by women who described themselves as having a sexual orientation similar to mine. Some would enclose their photos along with their contact information. Here let me say I was shadowed by a sense that I had completely lost my moral bearings, if ever I had had them, and would, at these times, see my life as a series of subterfuges: the thievery from my mother's pocketbook and then Auntie Eve's apartment; the seeking out of adult men for sexual purposes in childhood; the increase in this sexual activity in my teen years with men while I was seeing Jane Thayer; the renting office chapter; and now this. I was not a psychopath, Celeste. At times I would shudder, thinking of unsuspecting Sarah back in the loft, at having gone so far off course. But then there was the laughing thing within me. Yes, great peals of laughter as if to mock my doubts and scruples away and challenge all those who would hold me within the bounds of their convention.*

*For a time I gorged on insanity sandwiches, eating them at all hours of the day. What do I mean by such ludicrousness, you say? What does any man mean who brings the filth of the world into his home while believing it is his salvation? I placed these pieces of correspondence at the back of the olive green file cabinet I had picked up for a couple of bucks down on Canal Street. Its color and vintage led me to believe the file cabinet dated from World War II. In my mind formed an association of it with the valorous men who sacrificed themselves for our country in that time. The things of war remind us of the unity fostered by a shared purpose. We all long for that connection, Celeste, and can only ultimately find it in God, who gathers together the disparate strands. Never mind any of this. Never mind, I hear you say, impatient to understand*

*what exactly those letters meant to me. Only this. They were an instance of America singing—Nebraska and Idaho and Kansas and Iowa, as well as hedonistic California, singing their song of love and telling me there was a world out there if only I could reach it, as clearly The Village Voice had?*

*But there was something other than song I was hearing, something more like shrieking. Did we want my mother all over again willing my hand open so she could shame me over the stolen quarter? More currently, did I need to hear Sarah adapt her statement about my alcohol consumption on seeing me open a pint bottle of Clan MacGregor scotch—“People in my family do not drink like that”—when she discovered the letters and the racy photos that accompanied some of them? Was my peace of mind to be sacrificed to their physical presence in our domicile? The answer was, over the course of two days, an increasingly loud no. This tangible proof of my desire to explore new territories had to go.*

Into tiny pieces did he shred these items for deposit not in one garbage can but many, and over a period of days, so not even the most obsessive detective could gather and piece together the paper trail. Further, he conditioned himself so that the drop-offs were performed in the most casual manner, as if he were simply discarding a candy wrapper. Because always the eyes of those ready to inflict a merciless beating were on him, should he step out of line. And what was all this purging but a recognition that he still needed the light of Sarah's love. Should that light go out, he would have to live in darkness.

Only one response contained a phone number, and that he did save, though he destroyed the letter; there had been no accompanying photo. He kept the number on his desk, the first three consecutive digits on one page of a manuscript and the other four on another page in faint pencil. Sarah, who was blessed with a higher character than his own, was not given to sleuthing and snooping, but on the chance that her suspicions were aroused by his behavior, she would have difficulty making headway with such an easily unnoticed lead. It pleased him that his secret was in plain view and yet virtually undetectable.

*Celeste, one item did share space in that file cabinet with my manuscripts, and that was the bottle of Fastin. If I had known shame over the Clan MacGregor scotch, how much more devastating would it be should Sarah learn that I was being powered by speed, call the drug what you will? Then would my somber mien and so much more be understandable to her.*

A man answered. He was not friendly or unfriendly but simply matter-of-fact.

“My girl and I would like to meet you. Come this Saturday afternoon,” he said, and gave Luther their address. “Don’t be late,” he added, and hung up the phone.

Luther had some concern. Was the man a murderer? Would he cleave Luther’s head with an axe? Did his wife weigh three hundred pounds? Did he weigh three hundred pounds?

That same day Luther found himself staring at Sarah as she stood at the kitchen sink.

“What are you looking at?” Sarah asked, when she turned around.

“Hopelessness,” he said.

“Are you calling me hopeless?”

“No.”

“Who are you calling hopeless, mister?”

“I don’t know. Nobody. Nothing.”

“Don’t call me that again,” Sarah said.

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“You were talking, right?”

“OK.”

“I don’t see anybody else in the loft.”

“OK. OK.”

“So who else could you be talking to?”

“Don’t ask me hard questions I have no answer to.”

“You’re acting a little strange. Are you OK?”

“Now you’re calling me names. Don’t do that.”

“I asked you a question. That’s not calling you names.”

“Strange isn’t a name?”

“‘Strange’ is an adjective. It’s just a word.”

“So is—oh, never mind.”

“Never mind what?”

“Just please, please, before I go crazy.”

“Don’t use that word around here, mister.”

It went on that way for a while.

Morningside Drive overlooks a park that divides Harlem from the Upper West Side. The small, modest apartment buildings along the drive are shone on by the rising sun; thus, its name. The park itself, though laid out by Frederick Law Olmstead, was more forbidding than beautiful. The incidents of crime gave it a reputation as a hazardous place to take a stroll in, even in daylight. Luther saw it as an arena where the deprived and discriminated against of Harlem could take revenge on the more prosperous and more white community to the west. He often wondered if the city would ever enter a period of calm and safety where he could walk by moonlight along those footpaths. He did not like the thought of a metropolis in which whole areas were off-limits. The longing for some sort of unity was within him, and the park was a painful reminder of a dream as yet unrealized.

Morningside Drive was also the site of the attempted abduction of Luke when he was still a toddler. Two men had tried to put him in their car and drive away. If not for the intercession of passersby, they would have succeeded. It was a strange and chilling story, one that gave him recurring pause about the fragility of life, as did the memory of speeding on Luke's motorcycle toward the retaining wall on the roof some years before. You didn't wake up expecting to die. It just suddenly claimed you.

The other memory, more benign, was of Mr. Gladwell, his seventh and eighth grade math teacher, out in the patch of grass between the hedges and the building with a trowel in hand as he tended to the flowerbed. "Mr. Shaky," the boys at the Claremont School had called Mr. Gladwell, as there were some days when he could barely hold the



chalk steady enough to write figures on the blackboard. Some claimed to have seen him drink from a flask. Such unkindness the boys and girls had shown their teacher, and Luther, while he had not participated in their mockery, had not been kind enough. Mr. Gladwell was an old, frail man those years ago, his face scaly and red and rendered stern by pain. Luther was struck, as he stood now outside his former teacher's building, that he was gone, not only from the building but from this life. Chapters began and chapters ended, and then all you had was the memory to draw on.

And where are you, Philip Gallagher, you with the sharp mouth and aggressive manner who stopped by Fatso Scully's stoop but did not linger, because your father owned a bar and grill and that placed you higher on the grid than Scully, whose father put his foot to the heavy pedal of a city bus? Where are you now, you with your madras jackets and penny loafers who aspired to enroll at Columbia University but wound up at Manhattan College, you who brazenly tried to take Jane Thayer away from me? But no answer came, or the answer was the silence that came from the still handsome building, the silence that says that vanishing comes with time passing. You look and you are alone, with only yourself for context.

Luther went inside and rang the bell of Francis Bedin. Such an ugly first name for a man, and as ugly for a woman with the second vowel changed to an "e." Francis. A name with the warmth of cold metal and rich only in Catholic drabness, with a black robe attached to it. And Bedin. A name that wasn't even a name, that screamed for the "ou" and Arab identity. As it was, it was nothing, just nothing, a name you spit out quickly in disgust.

*Celeste, he came to the door with an unsmiling face that spoke of internal fire. He had me sit at the kitchen table and had his "girl" serve me tea. When she was slower to respond than he would have liked, he became short with her. The anger that he struggled to hold in check was his means for maintaining control over her. At one point he bragged about writing term papers for her courses at Manhattan Community College. Rather than meet his assertion with shame or embarrassment or displeasure, she beamed and offered her own testimonial, saying those term papers always won her an A from her professors. We can't claim understanding of relationships other than our own, and even there we will fall short. Perhaps they were perfectly matched, abusive as his way of relating to her seemed to be, and a necessary part of each other's journey.*

*Indira was her name. Indira from India. It was not for me to inquire how a young woman from the subcontinent came to hook up with a man such as Francis Bedin. Such personal questions, given the task at hand, seemed for another time. And yet, her extreme and unhealthy thinness seemed a signal of distress long before I was to become familiar with the underlying causes of such emaciation through my involvement with you. Her words and her smile and her complaisant manner might suggest one thing, but her physical being was a brightly burning flare.*

*Do not ask me what went on that afternoon, Celeste Please do not. Do not send me to the international court of justice for crimes against humanity. Simply accept that, going forward, it is for me to bring no harm to any living creature, to the best of my ability.*

*There was a room. He told me to go to it with her and begin. We both understand what begin means, Celeste; it requires no explanation. The gravitational pull of sex never does. Within a half hour Francis Bedin—that name—joined us. He was aggressive. He took over. A wild man. He went where I could not, showed no understanding of her rail-like thinness. We need not talk of orifices. We need not.*

*I was gone before I was gone. Do you understand?*

“I don’t like it. Its size frightens me. It’s completely out of proportion with the rest of the buildings in the community,” Sarah said.

“It is big,” Luther said.

“Is that all you can say?” Sarah asked.

“Scary. It’s scary, too.”

“I just said both those things.”

“Yes. I’m agreeing with you.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m here. Right here.”

“Are you?”

They often took long walks. It relaxed them to wander the streets at night. There was peace in the desolate stretches of lower Manhattan. The old buildings, slowly converting from manufacturing to residential, and the remaining cobblestone streets were comforting, offering a retreat into a past they could imagine as simpler and more tranquil than their own. The World Trade Center had been a destination when it was only a giant

hole in the ground. Now, standing before the completed towers, their huge mass seemed like too much for the earth beneath to support. It wasn't merely the towers' star-grazing height but their width. If the Empire State Building was an elongated ballerina, the World Trade Center was a giant sumo wrestler.

"Maybe it will sink the whole island. Do you think it could?" Luther's question hung out there in the night air for a while.

"That doesn't sound quite right," Sarah said.

"There are parts of the world where the earth moves under people's feet. Why should we be different?"

"Earthquakes happen in California."

"That's all the way across the continent. I'm talking about here. And if it does happen, it will all be because of this fatso in front of us."

"I don't think we should be worrying about that," she said, having heard him talk this way before, ignorantly certain.

"We should go," he said. "I'm beginning to hear gunfire."

"Gunfire?"

"It starts about this time of night."

"I don't hear any gunfire."

"Trust me, it's there, wanting to make us an article in the *Daily News* and a statistic," he said.

"Why would we be any safer anywhere else?" Sarah asked.

“You ever hear that expression ‘sitting ducks’? That’s why we have to start moving.”

He did have her safety in mind, just as he had had Marge’s safety in mind back on the City College campus. He knew what he knew, that there were people who didn’t play out there and that the sudden sense of impending danger had to be acknowledged if he and she were to survive. She didn’t struggle with him, as she had at the door that night at the onset of her breakdown. She didn’t demand to stay out. But it did not make him happy that she walked at a decidedly slower pace.

“We really should walk a little faster,” he said, as they passed Chambers Street.

“What’s wrong with you?” she stopped to ask.

What he couldn’t tell her was that he was not a man who could defend her against the forces that were marshaling in the dark, and he was not eager for an incident where his cowardice would be exposed. Like a man in water too deep, his only thought was for the safety of the shore.

“We are one. One. That’s what Simon Weill said to me the other day. He and Harry Stavigros gave me a raise. And dig this. Weill has found an apartment for me and Brenda.”

Men and their need for a father. It was a puzzle to Luther. Maybe all it meant was that Luke was made of stronger stuff. Again it came to Luther that Luke had absorbed their father’s blows. Having not fled their father’s hand, having not seen it as an annihilating instrument, he was conditioned to receive the more subtle what for Simon

Weill dished out. There was no need for Luke to run and hide behind their mother's skirt, as Luther was wont to do.

All this was within Luther's capacity for understanding. But sadness was also within Luther's capacity, that Luke should be broken in this way, because while his family had been nobodies in the day and the night in terms of their business acumen, their bookkeeping done on shopping bags in pencil and the like, that did not mean Simon Weill had the right to drop his pants and take a giant poop on them. And now Luke was wallowing in that poop. Luke was not one with Weill. He was one with his excrement.

*Let me set the record straight, Celeste. We were not entirely nobodies in the day and the night. We had a degree of order at the building we managed. We did. Kindness and respect were shown by my mother and aunt. It was a building with God on the wall and God in its being. Who is this person calumniating my family? Shall we break his bones into little pieces? Shall we do that?*

And yet, not only had Simon Weill magically transported Luke out of the building but he had arranged for him to be on West End Avenue, and while that avenue existed far more in shadow than Riverside Drive, which the sun had only to shine down on over the trees of the park and not the greater obstacle of tall buildings in a narrow corridor, it had the status of professionals living in its many dwellings. You did not walk down West End Avenue and feel the pall of a moribund spirit in passing any of its buildings, as could be said of some of the streets in Manhattan. You did not have lives destroyed in any of those buildings. You had the children realizing their potential when they grew to adulthood.

Yes, you did. You had an avenue with the stamp of steady quality.

What is more, Luke's new dwelling place had a doorman standing vigil, and if the doorman corps paid no particular respect to Luke in their minds and cast lascivious glances at Brenda as she passed them by, this was not an issue for Luke, as he had a title now and a resource he could count on in Simon Weill. When the building owner asked Luke, as a prospective tenant, his annual salary, Luke could give him a number that more than satisfied the owner. And why had Luke so confidently presented that number? Because Simon Weill said he could. That was why. Luke had a father behind him who did not say, "Do not aggravate me. Do not make me get up."

*Celeste, the city offered no escape. You went from one block to another and it was still there.*

"You want a beer, Luther? Go get yourself one. There's plenty in the refrigerator," Luke said, when Luther dropped in on him and Brenda. It was evening, and Luke was heading into the shower for the start of a new day. The apartment was under-furnished. There was a sofa but no chairs and the walls were bare. It was as if they had just moved in, though they had been there for two months.

"We've got a thing going on tonight," Brenda said. "You know what a thing is?"

"A thing?"

"We're going to party. Luke likes to party. Do you like to party, Luther?"

"I don't know." He never knew how to answer that question from her.

"All men like to party. You're a man, right, Luther?"

"I don't like to think of myself in those terms."

“You don’t like to think of yourself as a man?”

“The word makes me sad.”

“Why sad?”

“It has dreariness attached to it.”

Benjy, Brenda’s boy, had come from his room and turned to Luther. “You’re funny-looking.”

“Benjy, don’t talk that way. It’s rude.”

“It’s true. He is funny-looking.”

“No, he isn’t. Luther is nice looking.”

“He’s all bones. He looks like he’s going to die.”

“Luther’s not going to die. He’s young and strong.”

“No, he isn’t. He’s all bones.”

Luther accepted the boy’s verdict on his appearance, if not on imminent death. Benjy wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses, far too big for his small, delicate face. His eyes were crossed, and it was hoped the glasses would be a corrective. The case could be made that Benjy was funny looking, but that was nothing for an adult to say to a child. Actually, without the glasses, he was a good-looking boy, though the crossed eyes were a noticeable and peculiar feature. He would grow up strong and fit, like his father, Lenny Cerone, before Lenny’s dissipation days set in. But the boy was wrapped in hardness and already established in an oppositional stance. He would never be a friend to Luther, and Luther would never be able to be a friend to him.



The Schaefer beer tasted good. Every cell in his body was screaming for the contents of the can. He opened another, and then a third and a fourth.

When Luke emerged from the shower, he was presented with a mystery he evidently had no faith he could solve on his own. “Hey, Honey,” he called from the kitchen. “Where’s all the beer?”

“It’s in the refrigerator, where you put it,” she called back. She too had gone off to put on her evening face.

“Holy shit.” Luke exclaimed, having discovered five empties in the trash bag. He returned to the living room to find Luther finishing up the sixth. “You drank all my beer?”

“I did,” Luther said. “I’ll go and get you some more.”

“What are you? Some kind of alcoholic? You drank six beers in less than an hour.” Luke’s mouth hung open.

*There was no disputing him, Celeste. The laughing thing came over me, seeing the stupefied expression on my brother’s face. I was laughing at his dawning awareness that I was not as I appeared. I had done something with his goods wholly unexpected. I had drained the six-pack as I had drained the building of income sufficient to raise a red flag in Simon Weill’s mind. I had grown into an immoderate man capable of reaching for more than was good for me.*

He headed that night toward the bar on Spring Street, drawn by the thirst still in him and the warm lights. He thought of those days and nights back in high school when the gathering place had been Fatso Scully’s stoop, on Amsterdam Avenue, and how

nothing could keep him away. “I love him, I love him, and where he leads I’ll follow, I’ll follow, he’ll always be my true love, my true love”—that song some would dare to call dippy played loud as he walked the dark streets, a choir of love the workings of his mind required him now and then to listen to.

*Celeste, once we find that place where belonging takes hold, then we must be faithful to it. We must.*

A pair of whores sat at the bar that night. The word was unkind and not in his lexicon, and yet he heard one of the patrons reference them as such. The wide-bodied one wore jeans that were no match for her bulk. The other was slender and drew your attention with her black lace see-through blouse and fishnet stockings. Honesty was their calling card. Men who bought them drinks and were reasonably nice could have them for the night. An oily film coated their made-up faces. They were too naked in their desire to be Luther’s kind, and he was too concealed to be theirs.

*Celeste, that night I too sat at the bar, and chatted with a sardonic creature named Gerard. I say sardonic but that may not be the word. Let us say his face showed an attitude of smiling disbelief, particularly when I spoke of my main writing project. He was a man of the earth, tethered to reality, that is, he had a job as a framer at the Castelli Gallery. That means he was an artisan, a man with the skill to make something, a man with the humility to accept his station in life, which is very hard to do in America. He had no calling; he had only his work. And so he could mock those who did have the calling but not the talent, the necessities, for achievement. Why do I say this, Celeste? Why? Because that very night he came out from behind his smile with these words.*

*“There are a lot of people like you floating around SoHo.”*

*“What does that mean?”*

*“What do you think it means?” he snicker-laughed.*

*Now Celeste, Gerard was not a man to look to his right or to his left. He did not stare at the door with hungry eyes, awaiting the newest arrival in the hope that she would be the one. I am telling you that he was not a swivel head. I am also telling you that no one ever sang to him “you must have been a beautiful baby.” Some of us have the integrity to keep our focus where it truly is, and Gerard was such a creature. He had his love right in front of him in that glass of scotch on the rocks and was fully guided by the understanding as to where his salvation truly lay. But he was not insulated and isolated from the world. He was in it sufficient to recognize the name Bill Walton, whom I gushed about, fighting to be heard over the increasing noise. But the things he had to say about Bill Walton were not kind things. He was like those wolves you hear about encircling their proud and defiant prey, darting in to tear at the poor creature’s flesh and then hanging back as they wait patiently for it to weaken from loss of blood. (Celeste, as an aside, suppose everything we deem important to achieve in life is not important at all? Suppose powering up so our light can shine so much brighter than the next person’s means nothing? Suppose the only important thing is that we love and that one such act of kindness means more than our entire resume? We must iron out our lives, seek to smooth every wrinkle, and if that sounds like an exercise in futility, let us say that we must examine every relationship, however fleeting, as there are no accidents. It is no matter that the review will be succeeded by the ultimate review. We must go forward with this*

*preliminary examination to convey our willingness to look, for who are we but approximations of God himself.*

*So our friend Gerard tore at the great Bill Walton, calling him a malingerer, a bust, another hopeless great white hope. It is ever this way with our gods who walk this earth that they should have to endure such belittlement. But I have to believe at the same time that it was my faith in Bill Walton that carried him through. Do not misunderstand. I was not alone. There were many such as I seeking to keep hope alive that he would meet and even supersede the superstar expectations of him following his college career at UCLA and his earlier feats at Helix High School. (Yes, I know his high school and the fact that he routinely called his mother and father by their first names, which suggests a certain coldness and even effrontery but also a high intelligence that affords one reasons unavailable to the average mind for doing as he did.)*

*Now Celeste, I suffered in silence these tearing words of Gerard. I tolerated his smallness as he sought to take a bigger man down. At the same time it is possible he was attacking not only Bill Walton but also me, having seen that my heart was with the great man. Let us surmise that while he had accepted his own station in life, he had not necessarily accepted the higher station of those such as Bill Walton. He was a wounded soul, but let me not do the dinky thing and seek to pretend that his smallness was not my own as well.*

*As for the so-called whores, let us acknowledge first that there is power, raw power, in that word. It pulls the clothes right off them. All concrete nouns are defining, but not all of them have that word's brutal force. Once again, there is unkindness in us*

*when we resort to such characterizations; such language inflicts a beating on these women for their honesty.*

If their road was too open and access too easy, there was another road more suitable for him to go down that night. She gave her name as Mardi Gras, and while Luther suspected it was an alias, he was content to meet her on her own terms, as what alternative did he have other than to be annoyingly inquisitive? A person had a right to be who she or he wanted to be under the soft lights even if he himself could not abdicate his responsibility to his patronymic. In that way, he was a whore too, leaving himself exposed to all the abuse and dismissal such a grotesque name could elicit in segments of the American populace. At the same time he held to the notion that someday there would be compensation, as certainly there must be for all those who showed themselves exactly as they were. Not knowing where to go with that line of thinking, he left it there.

Mardi Gras said she could hear her loneliness in the vast hollows of her bones and in the follicles of her short and frizzy hair.

“What is the sound of this loneliness you are hearing?” Luther asked, in full earnestness, which drew from her laughter bordering on hilarity. “Have I made a funny?” Luther was left to ask.

“You made a funny and you are funny,” Mardi Gras said.

“Where does energy come from, and why do we value it so greatly?” Luther said, sharing his newfound wonderment with her.

“How about the food we eat and the air we breathe and the water we drink, for starters?” Mardi Gras responded, with a challenging firmness that showed she might

appear, with that name and her sometime mode of speech, to be in orbit and yet be tethered to reality.

She took him home that night to her apartment in Westbeth, a former telephone company building that now offered subsidized housing for artists. Her hard response suggested a nature not generally tolerant of an ineffectual young man such as himself, a man who mumbled about the writing project he was launched on. Surely it was one of life's wonders that under the influence of alcohol people seemingly so far apart could connect. How magical its effect that it could transport him to an apartment overlooking the lower Hudson River. And now she offered him smoke heaven.

"Don't scratch my face," she said, as they lay on her bed.

"I'm sorry."

"I have to be beautiful in the morning."

"Do not mention the morning here in this darkness that offers us safety. Imagine a train whistle below even as we bounce on the lonely, wistful notes of the saxophone we are hearing." She had turned her radio to an FM jazz station.

"You don't know anything about jazz. Don't pretend that you do."

"I've been to Slug's, in the Far East, as it was called, and the Five Spot, up on Astor Place, where fatso Charlie Mingus played his bass."

"Don't be calling him fatso and don't be stepping on the black man's music with your white interpretation."

"I don't understand. Are you looking to be an enigma or just a modest mystery?"

“I’m looking for my loneliness to be vanquished, just for this one night. Is that too much to ask?”

In his pot haze Luther slotted Mardi Gras as a confusing sound with only the logic of her whims to guide her. It was best to understand that he was now in Westbeth, with all conventions left at the door.

“You are a wounded angel and the world is a dark place,” Luther said.

“Please stop talking,” Mardi Gras said.

And so he did.

*Celeste, you could say I was a thief with a conscience, a man who had stolen from the building and who was now stealing from Sarah and from life. There is no defense to be made. We do as we do. I was the beneficiary of a woman’s love. It is no small thing. Many times I would quietly observe her and marvel at this thing we call quality. Her calling card was not betrayal and violation. She had a genuine higher purpose, as I have noted many times, which kept her from roaming the bars at night.*

*When a man lacks a social context, it is hard for him to connect. He has no friends to recommend him to girls or later, to women. Let us consider the facts, Celeste. How was it I happened to meet Jane Thayer (Riverside 9-7400)? Was it not because she was an outsider in the neighborhood where she would come to visit her grandmother while I was integrated into the group of boys she saw me with there on Fatso Scully’s stoop? And did I not have the cachet of being a private school kid? Did she not come to see that? And is it not possible that these things gave me precertification in her eyes? And was the same not true in regard to Sarah? Were we not brought together through the*

*agency of my sister Vera and Pam Becker, a mutual friend of Sarah and Vera? And was not Luke himself in the mix, given that he and Pam's sister, Nancy Becker, had gone out all through high school before Nancy gave him the clobber all men preparing for the hobo path are destined to be dealt? But that context was lacking when I became a barfly. Did not Miss Broadway Central Bar Woman say to her friend, who was considering going off with me, "Don't go with him. He has only himself." I will get to this later, but could you and I have ever met except through the mediation of a mutual acquaintance, if not exactly a friend?*

*A poet lived at Westbeth. His name was Hugh Seidman. In this time he won the Yale Younger Poets Award for a volume titled *Collecting Evidence*. He had a creative gift that did not require him to hide; he had his self-love to keep him warm as well as all the women he wanted. I tried to love him but failed. He was all the rage and gave a reading at the Tin Palace on the Bowery and other more prestigious venues. There were many such as him, rising to the level of their own ability, but the comparisons I would make, inevitable as they were, did not defeat me. A calling is a calling, Celeste. Beckett himself gave us our marching orders: "I can't go on, I must go on, I will go on," or however he put it.*

*By this time I had terminated the ads in the Village Voice. Qualms of conscience and fear of exposure were the main factors, but there was one thing more. Doubtless it will seem absurd, but the fear grew that someone in my immediate circle would respond to the ad. Rather than ask you to guess who that person might be, I will simply tell you that it was none other than my sister Vera. Should that happen, an intimacy too terrible to*



*bear would be revived. Even if I never responded—and how could I?—and she never guessed that I was the one who had placed the ad, the lonely desperation of her life, beyond any pretense she might make to the contrary, would shout itself at me.*

*I have never told you—I have never told anyone, Celeste—but in my college years, before Vera was in the embrace of the Ivy League, I ran into her as she was leaving a party I was about to drop in on. Whose party it was I could not tell you, but my strong sense is that we had gotten wind of it through the neighborhood grapevine. I may have been with Roberto, in the time before he fully lost his mind. In any case, I was in the company of someone else, and so the appearance of loneliness did not attach to me as it did to my sister. The party had not received her. The women had not befriended her and the men had shown no interest either. Her rejection announced itself in her stricken face as she rushed past us on that Saturday night, proving once again that there is no aloneness like Garatdjian aloneness, whether it is Rachel sitting by herself in Chock Full O' Nuts eating the sugar doughnuts of that fine establishment or Hannah hunkered down in the dark in front of the TV set and working her way through a quart of Breyer's ice cream with a tablespoon or me on my solitary walks to nowhere. Finally must the Garatdjians say something, something, and not resign ourselves to hermetic silence in the face of the annihilating winds that blow. If it is for others to walk this earth, then let it be for us as well.*

*But the cancellation of the ad does not mean the seeds of destruction had ceased to grow in me. It occurred to me that perhaps the problem was that I had reached outside my relationship without first exploring what was within it, like a man who continuously*

*buys new clothes without first checking the contents of his closet. Suppose Sarah and I, as a team, were to explore new sexual opportunities? Suppose she were to become the context that was lacking in my solo ventures? Celeste, what are we talking about here but swinging, a word more hideous than I can express?*

*This bondage to the body was a tormenting thing. You must not imagine otherwise. I had been reading the very great Naipaul, and in one of his masterpieces a mentor counsels him to withdraw from the pastime of sexual pursuit and channel his energy into his work. To this day I picture the mentor standing in his book-lined study in his robe and slippers and say to you we must respect such counsel. We must. But we must also resolve not to ensnare ourselves in the world of ideas either, as the book-lined study can become a prison in itself; in the carnal world we are bound by the flesh, and in the intellectual realm our finite minds would find further restriction. Bondage is bondage, and yet our dictate is emancipation. There is altogether too much information coming in; we become hoarders of the irrelevant and the inconsequential. We must empty out rather than accumulate, that we may gain real understanding.*

*Now Celeste, we can only be where we are in time. We cannot lament the lack of more rapid progress in this journey. We are both familiar with the saying, "Nothing is lost in God's spiritual economy." If we have been in hell, then let us use that experience to win the confidence of others that there is deliverance to be had from it.*

*There was a Brentano's, on Eighth Street and University Place, when bookstores were still thriving. In a section for lavishly illustrated coffee-table books on beautiful homes and gardens and such was a work of erotica, with vintage sepia-tone photographs*

*in the Cuba of Fulgencio Batista, who reigned before Fidel Castro could chase him from the island and rid it of its whorehouses and gambling casinos and impose a more spartan, if egalitarian, rule. (The vanguard of the proletariat is not a meaningless phrase, Celeste. Far from it.) Men mating with women, women mating with other women, multiple configurations of men and women mating. Most strangely, the cashier was thrown into a state of agitation when I came to make my purchase, as I had decided that this was the book for me. He spoke with sharp conviction, decrying the work as inauthentic.*

*“Not only is it a fraud, but it is a vicious fraud,” he said, his words flying with razors attached. His whole being, starting at the top with his spiky hair, was honed to a cutting edge. Nothing was to be done, unless I wished to sound the battle cry, with someone prone to this degree of disputatiousness but to nod in tacit agreement and when his fixed stare grew more ominous to say, “Yes, I see,” in the hope that outright verbal capitulation would free me of his intense scrutiny and return him to a pacific state.*

*“See? See? You see nothing,” he said, finally breaking his frenzied silence and bagging my purchase.*

*The basis for the young man’s objection to the book remains a mystery, and I do have some regret that I lacked the courage to question him about its cause. Left to speculate about the force behind his animus and being without the spiritual instruction to do otherwise, my thinking led me to believe he could not bear to contemplate the act of creation that all heterosexual coitus ultimately brings about. Now you may say, why couldn’t you just allow the man to be? Why did you have to make note of him? To that I*

*have no answer, Celeste. I can only offer a respectful silence, as if there is anyone who should know by now that he doesn't have all the answers, it is I.*

*(Several years before, my CCNY friend Efram Ellsberg had worked at this very Brentano's before he was canned for boosting hundreds of those coffee table books. Stealing, Celeste, stealing. This after he was released on five years' probation following his conviction for defacing the United States mail by drawing the peace symbol on letters that passed through the General Post Office on Thirty-third Street. Efram, the rabbi's son, from Midwood, Brooklyn, whose older brothers were all doctors. So when I say Efram was of unimpeachable moral authority, on what basis do I speak? And yet that remains the image I have of him. I do see Efram as a moral and kind man who, through circumstance, sometimes went astray. We can often glean the essence of a person from sight alone. We have established that Efram had no liking for The Man (his intelligence directing him to the use of synecdoche) whether The Man was Mr. Ruggiero at the PO or the bearded and suited book dealer at the Strand who served as his fence. I had seen other Merit Scholarship winners brought to ruin by their intellectual fury—their resistance to the man, and in some cases, their surrender to the woe-man.”)*

*Let's not pretend we don't know what my motive was in buying this piece of erotica from the time of Fulgencio Batista. What else could it have been but to import his island decadence? Had I purchased Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing, by the very great Soren Kierkegaard, or the complete works of Thomas Merton? No, no, no. Prurience was doing its lewd victory dance. Even in a bookstore were my thoughts X-rated. But we must have compassion. We must laugh. Forces beyond our control are*

*operating on us. We must remember what Quentin Compson said: "Have you ever had a sister?" And we must accept that we were young and destined to be driven by our lower nature. We must not be dualistic, Celeste. We must not. All is holy, or a pathway to it. Enough with the whip of the flagellating perfectionist.*

*There was an art quality to the photographs that elevated them above pornography. I had only to place the books on the dinner table. Curious, she would flip through the pages and become aroused. Thereafter we could discuss the possibilities of a lifestyle beyond the conventional. But reality obliterated my vision. The photographs repelled her. The spreads brought a look of dismay to her face.*

*"If you don't mind, could you please put that book away, Luther?" Guided by a natural sense of propriety, she shamed me about my sexual interests as she had once shamed me about my drinking. And yet it wasn't for me to argue about the need for graphic displays of licentiousness as it had been about the importance of alcohol after she had seen me opening the pint bottle of Clan Macgregor scotch that first week in the loft. Such advocacy was not a road I could go down. Drinking was an activity unto myself; alcohol was my life's blood. But sex, as I was envisioning it, was a cooperative venture that required her approval. It was one thing for me to debilitate myself with alcohol, Celeste, but was it right for me to degrade her by luring her into arrangements she deemed, even in photographs, debasing? When the reality presented itself, I saw that this was a line I could not cross. Men are dogs, Celeste, and can never hope to uncover the mysteries of a woman's sexuality with such clumsy superimposing of their own crude fantasies.*

*I will tell you a story that illustrates the differences between men and women regarding sex. Sarah had a friend. Her name was Carola Aprile and her brilliance was housed in a petite body and behind an amiable smile. Let it be entered into the record of life that Carola Aprile passed up a full scholarship to Radcliffe to attend Carnegie-Mellon, which was renowned for its art department. Sarah and Carola met while at the High School of Music and Art, as it was then called, and then situated in that gorgeous pale blond building on Convent Avenue, just across the street from the main entrance to the south campus of the City College of New York. The building had an aura of goldenness to it, as befitted an institution that drew to it the musical and artistic excellence of the city, and many were the times I would pass that school and be reminded by the sadness in my bones of the consequence of being outside the circle of the chosen. It was the same aura of goldenness such as I would experience when walking that strip of Claremont Avenue between One Hundred Twentieth Street and One Hundred Sixteenth Street, where many of the men and women of Columbia and Barnard were known to live. Giftedness has a way of presenting itself. It shines through the buildings that would contain it and into the very streets beyond, whether the masonry of those structures itself has a golden hue or not. Do not for a minute believe that I am dwelling solely in the realm of disparagement when I speak this way when in fact I am driven by the simple need for recognition—of excellence, of everything. Things have to be seen, and yet they are not always seen. That is why we sit in meditation, so we may return over and over again to the quiet place, the still place, where the truth of our being can only be found among these ceaseless forms and never-ending tapes.*

*In the loneliness of her summers, when college was in recess and she was returned to the subtle sadness of family, would Carola Aprile call out to Sarah, as Carola too had an eye out for goldenness and saw it in Sarah and had a need to periodically check where in the ascendant Sarah's star now was. Summer after summer they spoke without meeting, Carola remembering Sarah as bruised and defiant and always initiating the contact because in her mind Sarah had what she wanted. They had more than art in common, however; they were both their fathers' daughters. A father's love for a daughter is all-encompassing, especially when the daughter bears his visage and disposition, and so it was with Mr. Van Dine and Sarah. As for Carola, even as a teenager she sat on her father's lap, and so we can assume that a strong connection existed there as well. But whereas Sarah adopted a moody loner stance, Carola gravitated toward connection and entered the full social life of the school. I heard the word orgies in relation to her, Celeste, all-night parties to which only the vanguard, that is, the socially adept, had been invited. Sarah was astonished that such activity took place without her being aware of it in the least. But that is the thing. There are those who partake fully of the life around them and those who don't, and these others are left with their mouths agape at what they have missed— or avoided. But let us say this as well. We must not assume that Carola Aprile had launched herself on the sybaritic path. It was simply that Carola Aprile, by virtue of her intelligence, had elevated above those love-addicted teenagers who get snagged on one another and do the 'go steady' thing. And yet she left her wildness behind and fell in love with the silkscreen printing star of the art department at Carnegie-Mellon. Hunger Longing was his name, and his orphan status and years in foster care set his pockmarked*

*face in a permanent cast of pain and deprived him of relaxed human interaction. Hunger Longing relied on his intelligence and the fruits of it to speak for him. Sometime after they moved in together, she found a rag he had been using to masturbate in and was shocked by the frequency of his confessed need to bop his bologna, as he put it. Carola could not easily absorb this experience. An image had formed in her mind; she now saw Hunger Longing as a Cro-Magnon specimen with dingus in hand frantically seeking sexual release. Even with her compassionate nature and the understanding that he was desperately seeking to leave behind the trauma that had been inflicted on him, she could not ameliorate this stark image. This reaction of Carola Aprile is what we must seize on, Celeste. A warning bell was now sounding loud in her ears. Who was this creature she had partnered with? Such shock as she registered serves as a reminder of the advantage women have over men. A woman is a house. Guests only are invited in, and they must meet a certain standard. Oh, the gratitude, if not joy, we should feel for mentors such as Carola Aprile who seek to elevate us to higher ground.*

*But what of Hunger Longing? What was to become of him? Was he to be cast from the only home he had ever known because of an impropriety? Was their love to become a legacy of pain and bitterness? We were to find out, Celeste. We were to find out.*

*Oh, that love should always be love, Celeste. And it can be. And it is.*

Carola Aprile came to them when they were in the loft less than a year and she was still living in Pittsburgh. A young woman with a pretty figure and an oval face that showed the scars of a teenage bout with acne. Time had evidently not frayed their bond, Luther



saw, as Sarah and Carola embraced. They talked as if he was not there, though now and then Sarah would remember his presence and try to include him in the conversation. Luther didn't mind that he was being ignored, as an extreme feeling of discomfort had come over him. Carola might have a genuine regard for Sarah, but she could only be feeling sorrow and pity for her friend seeing the old and dreary wicker sofa and chairs and the stove-less kitchen and the crude bathroom. Surely she was wondering what kind of man would offer such poor conditions for a woman to live in? Impaled on this feeling, he could think of nothing else, and prayed for her to be gone so he could be free of those all-seeing eyes.

There had been another who provided moral instruction, that one being a girl named Debbie, a nemesis of Sarah's during her time at the Boston Museum School. Debbie could converse easily and hold her own in groups. She moved to the center, not to the periphery, and Sarah was no match for her in the social arena. Mr. Edmonds, as befit a man in his forties with power over the young, had his annual love; Sarah, last year's infatuation, had been replaced by Debbie. Mr. Edmonds was doing nothing wrong. He did not act on his amour even if he did strain against the bars of his marital cage.

Debbie had found a man to live with, as Carola Aprile had done. Wilbur was big and hulking. He too had star qualities, commensurate with Debbie's gifts, which more than compensated for his lumbering gait and slovenly ways. Then came the discovery, as she was placing freshly laundered underwear in his dresser drawer, of a stash of magazines under his T-shirts. Women in erotic lingerie. Women wearing no lingerie. The

shock altered forever her perception of Wilbur and she soon asked him to leave. She could not live with a man who approached life as if was one big booty party.

In that time Luther had his own attachment to smut. He had picked up a copy of *The Pearl*, a fat Grove Press anthology of erotic tales from the Victorian era, at a convenience store in Harvard Square. The granny smith apples had been very green that day and the store had a smell of freshness to it. That is a Harvard smell, Luther thought, and that is Harvard air, he also thought, experiencing the fall crispness designed for the intelligent and the alert. And so he was introduced to Lady Pokingham and they all do it, to the comings and spendings and gamahuche gardens of those who would shed their corsets and straight-laced manner for the wildness of an unfettered carnal romp. The images sparked by the texts left him in no need of photos of bare-breasted women to get the job done. And what was that job but to gain temporary relief from the tormenting drive for sex that would send him out into the Boston night and onto trolley cars and the Harvard Bickford's and other sites looking for that one, because the SAT was a number but the women he had been with and *known* was a number too. Sarah might have her work at the easel but he had his work too, as he had had it as a child, wandering out of his family's apartment and into the smelly public bathrooms of Manhattan subway stations looking for the men with big things to make the night complete for him. Because to stay indoors was dangerous. To stay with what was was dangerous.

Luther had been cast out on his own. There would be no orgy teamwork in their future. He would have to represent himself in the multiple partner world. For a time he

went back to the *Village Voice* with his bisexual male ad, but there was only one response, and that from someone who wrote, "I'm a swapper. How's about youse. Lets do a deal."

*Swap*. The word had filth and fat attached to it. It was like getting hit in the face with a soaking wet towel. The man gave his name as Ed. It was a name to be suspicious of, summoning an image of an oaf masticating egg salad with an open mouth. Still, the phone number that was included called on Luther to call.

Ed answered on the first ring. He had a rough voice. Luther pictured him with an unshaven face and a dirty behind.

"I don't give away my wife cheap. Swaps is what I do. I know your type. You want a freebie, but I don't play that way. You got to ante up. Stop holding out on me. You got an old lady, you got to throw her in the ring. Like I say, a swap is a swap."

In the background could be heard the wail of a baby, probably being held by a woman as heavy as he pictured Ed to be and her hair in curlers, bringing home the horror of the pursuit even more than the experience with the young man with the frighteningly thin wife.

"A swap is a swap and a mop is a mop, except when it isn't," Luther said.

"What?" Ed roared.

"Swap your mop and mop your swap," Luther said.

"How about I punch you in the face? How about I skin your skinny dick and put it in a hot dog bun for your..."

Luther hung up, having the general idea where Ed was going with his retort.

He had bought a bike, a ten-speed, to avoid being at the mercy of traffic. Could a car go on sidewalks? Could a car be carried into one's home? Would a car owner care to compare his fuel bill with Luther's? The bike was an investment. What he had paid for it he would make up for in money saved on transit fares. And yet a bike was a responsibility, particularly one with so many gears. Deraillieur, that formidable French word for the ugly piece of metal hanging by the back wheel. Suppose the chain was too slack for the sprocket when he tried to change gears? Suppose he couldn't fix the grotesque deraillieur the way that real men could? He understood that it was waiting to call his manliness and intelligence into question should a repair be needed. Then he would be forced to destroy the bike and himself.

The bike's frame was white. Not albino white, but white all the same. He had his eye and his mind on its whiteness.

He rode up the Bowery and its continuation, Third Avenue, showing his mettle among the passing cars and buses by whizzing between them so they might grasp the true meaning of agility. He had found a place to go in the night far afield from the bar on Spring Street, and soon was chaining his bike and the detached front wheel to a lamppost just so the thieves of New York City could not ruin his life.

"Luther? Is that you?" Luther looked up, having attached the lock to the chain. Melvin was staring down at him, wide-eyed and innocent as a deer.

"It is I," Luther answered, in his mother's voice. How desolate the street was after dark, how bustling by day when the commerce of the city called to people.

“Are you here for sin, Luther? Is that why you have come? Do you not know the old rugged cross burns red in the night only a block away, seeking to purge the air of its very filth?” Melvin had no relation to the street, to the darkened stores, to the arrogant ascent of the sky-bound Empire State Building just down the block. He stood as a creature devoid of context except for the Christ Jesus.

“What makes you ask?”

“Is strong drink raging in you, Luther? Is that what has brought you here?”

“Melvin, please stop talking. Please go away.” Luther did not want to be unkind to the guileless man. Even drunk he couldn’t act in such a way toward a man so out of touch with the earth he only appeared to live on.

“Luther, are you afraid of your true self?”

“You are an affliction.”

“No, the devil is an affliction, and he is afflicting you, I am afraid.”

“Never mind who or what is afflicting me, Melvin. Leave me to my own devices and I will leave you to yours. You must understand that you are a frail man in a thin shirt in a cool breeze.”

“What are you saying, Luther? Are you saying that God will not provide for me, that I am not one of his lilies of the field?”

“Flowers do not grow in concrete, Melvin. They just don’t.”

“Do not take attack my faith. Do not do that, Luther.”

*Celeste, I left him there on that boulevard of retail commerce, the plate-glass windows laughing at the very notion of human kindness and the wind picking up in*

*intensity to let us know the forces that really ruled the earth. Melvin's face had spoken, not as it would over time, as he was not yet the howling wolf in the urban wild he became when he finally saw that the rocks of ancient Judea and Samaria were not making it for him and he reached a level of loneliness and desperation few do and survive to tell about it. I had attacked his lifeline. I had done that, Celeste. He was my brother and I had shunned the holy fool, as he had nothing that I wanted and everything I feared. I went where the world was, where the men paid to be received by the women who received them in a warren of sheet-rocked cubicles. For this pleasure romp you paid ten bucks to the hard and muscled men of the flesh who had broken the bones of many and who would break many more.*

*Now Celeste, my woman was young and dark and worn by the wanton way of the world. The light of this understanding was in her eyes and governed her tongue. It came as no surprise to her, that having paid, I should seek to assume power in a way I would not do with Sarah in requesting to place my thing where it may not be intended to go.*

*"It is human. It is part of life," she said afterward, dismissing my attempt to follow my selfishness with contrition. She was on the ground. It was where she lived.*

A squat metal cylinder on castors with a set of valves atop it sat on the landing outside the loft. The device was for exterminating cockroaches, and Luther's mother had insisted he take it when Simon Weill ended their management of the building. Luther had seen the

device in operation, clouds of toxic spray emitted through the valves, turning the room into a veritable gas chamber for the vermin.

“Why should it go to that man? He has gotten everything, has he not? I do not want that man to have one thing more. Does he not rule the earth? Has he not taken our life? What more is there? So take it. Take it, I say. And take these cans of spray should the tank need to be refilled. Because roaches are everywhere, everywhere, not only in this building.”

Indeed there was an insurgency, and it was growing. The little ones were becoming bold with their increasing numbers, and desperate as well. They feasted on the glue in the bindings of hardbound books and could be found swimming in your cereal bowl if you left it untended for a minute. Now they were incubating their offspring in the warmth of the grill at the back of the refrigerator and crawled over Sarah and him as they lay in bed at night. Had he not read recently of a cockroach penetrating the inner ear of a sleeping woman and entering her brain.

Yes, he was coming home late from his whorehouse experience, and yes, Sarah would be asleep, but what better time to strike at the marauding ones than in the dark? He could fumigate away from the bed, in the far reaches of her studio. He would even open the window to dissipate the fumes.

He swung into action, wheeling the device to the back of the loft, plugged it in by lamplight, and turned it on. A cloud quickly rose, faster than he would have thought, and the breeze blew it inward. Jesus, the fumes really were hard to take. The stuff stung his eyes, his nostrils, his throat. Jesus, he had no idea just a ten-second burst could do all that.

Just a little dab will do you, he had thought, like that old Brylcreem ad promised. What was he to do? He couldn't run out and leave Sarah but he couldn't wake her either.

But there was no dilemma, not anymore. Not with her standing there fully alert in her nightgown.

“Are you out of your mind? Are you?”

I am fumigating but she is fuming, he thought but did not say, as he ran to the windows at the opposite end of the loft to open them as well.

“Relief is on the way. Trust me. While the crisis passes, we can sit outside on the stairs.”

“This can't go on, Luther.”

“What can't go on? What is the ‘this’?” He heard the word elongated to this-ness, and spoken by the men of philosophy, those whose minds could reach far higher than his. This-ness. That-ness. What-ness.

Sarah had no response to make, other than to place her face in her hands and cry.

*Now Celeste, I imagine you thinking, as you visit that place of doubt and uncertainty even those most intimately connected must occasionally have about each other; how it is that I remain such a complete and faithful slave to my own experience. Why are there no forays into the remotest regions of the Andes Mountains by characters who bear no resemblance to me? What is this obsession with self? What ails you, I hear you ask, borrowing my mother's words? And what could my answer possibly be but this: a complete and utter lack of imagination. There. You have me. I am a dolt, a creature of abysmally low*



*aptitude, still the boy who had to copy his classmate's design in a third grade drawing class. You have me on the spot, Celeste. You most certainly do. No other answer comes to mind, and so I am left to drown in an ocean of shame, a poor enervated soul, lacking vigor in his body and his mind and his soul, a creature who passes his days staring blankly at the box scores of yesterday's baseball games. And yet, suppose there is something more? Suppose I am, even in a misguided way, committed to the truth and a strict accounting of myself on this earth lest I be severely punished? Can we not consider that a possibility as well?*

*Now only does it more fully come to me, Celeste, the meaning of that framed verse from Romans 6:23 hanging in the lobby of my family's building: "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What comes to me?" The anger. You will get yours, you willful, stiff-necked people. You will be brought low, the whole lousy, preening, intellectually haughty bunch of you. Auntie Eve was wagging a warning finger at the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. Hot, hot, hot the fires of hell, she herself on fire with self-righteous anger. When did God's wrath become my wrath? When did the infection set in?*

“Suppose we were to up and leave behind this loft living for something normal, like the way people should eat normal food, as my mother used to say. A full kitchen and bath, for example. Suppose we were to make normalcy our goal?” he said some days later, as if his betrayal had vanished with the night that had witnessed it.

“Please don’t talk that way. It just sounds odd.”

“Well, OK, but what do you think about changing things up?”

“I like it here.”

“It’s not a place of sadness for you?”

“I said I like it here.”

“Suppose I were to set up a search committee, an exploratory commission, something like that.”

“And who will be on this committee?”

“Me. I will canvass the area. I will scrutinize the possibilities.”

“I thought you weren’t going to talk that way.”

“Right.”

A modern kitchen. A modern bathroom, one in which you could actually soak in a tub. He continued to think of such amenities. But there was more to his desire for change. He saw that his money was running out, as he had known it would, and yet he couldn’t see beyond that eventuality. The future was not exactly a freight train bearing down on him; it was more of a question mark, an anxiety-inducing question mark. He had become convinced of his utter ineffectualness in the world, and a desultory experience at an employment agency seemed to confirm that there was no place for him out there. The secretary had looked at him like a bug when he handed her the completed form and he had not heard from them since. A person needed substance to make his way in the world. What would two flimsy degrees from CCNY, where he had majored in reading paperback

novels, gain him? And wasn't failure his identity anyway? Would he not be lost without it? Men in their vanity suck at the bitter weed of failure, or whatever the hell caustic D. H. Lawrence had written. Any threat to that identity could make him psychotic, he feared. After all, an investment *was* an investment. In any case, selling the loft fixtures would postpone the day of reckoning. He couldn't count on "White Line, Continue" saving him, not the shapeless thing he had created.

Sarah began to come around. Dr. Frodkey liked the idea of a modern kitchen and bathroom, too. "Go appoint your exploratory commission," she said.

"Yes, but logic must be the building block of our new life," Luther replied. "First we must test the waters and see what value the loft will bring us. An ad is called for."

"Do what you have to do," Sarah said, causing him to rejoice at her show of trust.

*Celeste, there was an agent in this time, a literary agent, not a secret agent. Her name was Agnes Clouthby. She was a Britisher who had made a name for herself but without developing a heart of stone in doing so, that is, she remained open to young writers who showed promise even after securing a stable of best-selling authors. I sent her a portion of White Line, Continue so I could name myself as a member of the reality-based community rather than forever be consigned to the ranks of those whose words disappeared as soon as they were written never to be seen again. I was afraid I was showing her merely my nakedness when I was at my skinniest, but she saw something different, and wrote me back a kind note that I must continue with "White Line, Continue" and resubmit the work to her when I had completed the novel. A year later, I*

*had not reached the end because that could only happen when I too had reached the end and so at this juncture I bundled my output and sent it to her with a manifesto that failure too should be represented in the marketplace and not only the sly winks at the gallery of those play-acting at failure when genetically or by virtue of their socioeconomic status they could never fail; those who indeed did fail must also be represented, and without the redeeming qualities that could make a reader love them. I wanted to write about those who suffered the affliction of being both unlovely and unlovable, as presented by a writer who perhaps felt the same way about himself. This time Agnes Clouthby gave me hard punch. She was a Britisher, after all, and they had broken the teeth of the formidable Germans after the Germans had tried to break their teeth. You must not imagine they are all cultivation and gentility and picture them solely among their teapots and flowerbeds. No, what I received was a form note with the boilerplate, "Thank you for your submission. We are sorry to say that it is not quite right for us but wish you the best of luck in finding representation with another agency." Agnes Clouthby was summarily dismissing me. A tree must be pruned, and pruned ruthlessly, if it is to grow and remain healthy. A fungus had appeared on mine. Those with a desultory spirit must not be permitted to infect and bring low those who live on a higher plane. Years before I had been repulsed by my roommate Roberto's world view, and now it was Agnes Clouthby's turn to be repulsed by mine. Let me be plain, Celeste. There was a reason Agnes Clouthby had achieved a place of prominence in the world, her life full of success and successful people, and she understood how to keep it that way by staying among her own kind.*

Luther returned to the *Village Voice* classifieds, led there not by his prurience, but with an ad for the loft, in which he set the fixture fee at three thousand dollars. Those drawn by the ad to the loft found it unsuitable either because it was too far from the galleries in SoHo or because it lacked certain amenities or because they didn't relish climbing three long flights of stairs each day. Prospective renters could afford to be selective, as each week an entire page of such ads appeared in the paper.

While the ad ran, Luther was out looking at apartments. Both he and Sarah agreed that they were by now downtown people, and set Fourteenth Street as the line they would not cross. As to why Fourteenth Street had been chosen as a demarcation line, he had some vague idea that people living farther north were more likely to have jobs. Not that people below Fourteenth Street didn't have jobs, though he suspected fewer did. It was more that even if they were employed, they were less likely to be afflicted with a frightening degree of maturity. Luther wanted his dream world to continue. He didn't want smelling salts under his nose or cold water in his face.

He had his eye on St. Mark's Place and one of those modest walk-up buildings along the south side of the street. The sounds of street life generated by the influx of weekend visitors would come muffled to their recessed, spacious apartment. Surely he would only have to inquire of the superintendent and an apartment would be his. But the buildings were rebuffing. They had sealed themselves from him. They only gave the appearance of being yielding. His fear grew as he took note of this subtle coldness; the world beyond the loft might not be as accommodating as he had hoped.

*At the same time I had my love to keep me warm, Celeste. You know what I am referring to.*

Brooklyn was no different. Though he came armed with the classifieds, the brownstones of Park Slope barked at him. The two apartments he visited cried out their squalor: tarnished wood floors, a grimy kitchen, a bathroom with a tub stained to the point of uselessness. How sad, dispiriting, to contemplate living in such places. They would give up their spacious loft for such rundown lodgings?

He retired to a Zum Zums by Borough Hall, seeking comfort in its white and antiseptic interior. The Germans, even in defeat, were too strong; they ran you over with their vigor, but he needed the stamp of quality they could guarantee. And he needed a Zum Zum special to invigorate him on this cold day, not one of those funny-looking white sausages but something brown and normal, like the steaming knockwurst he ordered and slathered with mustard. That taste sensation would change his sad rags to glad rags, though he was not approving of the metal plate it came on or the sound his silverware made when scraping against it.

Every stool was taken by weekday workers streaming in on their lunch hour. Near him sat two men with the dull thickness of the municipal buildings they had been discharged from in their faces. Men who had been worn down by the daily grind. He wanted to talk to these men, reach across the divide, and show himself as friendly as he felt on the Fastin. Accountants maybe, who had the patience to master tax laws and fill out complex forms, the kind who complained to their wives of thirty years of arthritic pains and gas. Men who had no illusions about the world but took it on its own terms;

free of the dictate to be exceptional, they could be as gray as their suits in the mass of humanity. He stared at them across the counter as if across a great divide. He had been unable to join them; he had run from the confinement that responsibility would bring when he dropped his law school dream. *You chicked out. You chicked out.* So the voice of Dr. Dressler came to him. Now all he was was a skinny man-child high on a prescription diet pill living vicariously through an injury-prone basketball superstar named Bill Walton.

A half-hour later, approaching Chatham Square, he began to cry. The tears seemed spontaneous, the sadness he had experienced at Zum Zum having lifted. The fishmongers had set out their fruits of the sea on beds of ice. Surely they were full of mercury and otherwise contaminated by the filthy waters that encircled the island. I too am a contaminated fish pulled from the waters of life, he thought, and brought his tears with him into the loft.

That afternoon he reached into his past, not knowing why, and called Jane Thayer. She had drifted out to Los Angeles with the idea of becoming famous as a singer, taking voice lessons at night and paying the bills with a day job as a legal secretary.

“Bingle, Ding, Criney, and Schiff,” she answered, and when he said nothing in reply, she stepped into the silence with a question mark hello.

“It is I,” he said.

“Luther?”

“You know who it is when I say it is I?”

“It’s just you trying to be fancy,” she replied. She wasn’t on the ropes the way

she had been when she came calling on him in her white go-go boots at his Hell's Kitchen apartment several years before.

“Yes?” he said, unable to affirm or deny. Was expressing yourself through the voice of another person being fancy? He began to cry again, noting the disconnect between the waterworks and any conscious feeling of emotional pain. They were like some heavy shower while the sun was still shining.

“Are you OK, Luther?”

“I am,” he said, before hanging up.

*Now Celeste, I wish to say a word about Jane Thayer and how we were in an earlier chapter of our lives. At some point back in high school, we began going to church together. Every Sunday morning, for a period of two months, we would sit in a pew of the Broadway Presbyterian Church, on One Hundred Fourteenth Street, the same block where Arnold knuckle-jabbed Johnny Donatelli in the spine till Johnny Donatelli crumpled to the pavement, causing Raymond Donatelli, Johnny's older brother, to call out the Negroes from the hotel where Arnold was staying down the block so he could break their faces and they could break his. And so much else from my childhood lives on that block. But we are not here for that. We are here for the church, and the order and respectability it brought to us, for to be a Presbyterian was to be an American of a certain kind. When you said the word Presbyterian no one could put the laughing thing on you. No one. Pastor Olmster spoke on the this-ness of love and the that-ness of love as a condition of the soul, which he called the repository of our highest good. And if not all his*



*words had sticking power, they did not have the disappearing quality of the words of Pastor Cohn, down at the tabernacle on Thirty-third Street, where now I longer went. (By the way, Pastor Olmer was not like one of the previous pastors of that church, who was fired for placing a monkey in the trunk of his car, or so I was told. Imagine!) Our attendance at this church came at a time when Jane Thayer and I were trying to save our love, or I was, driven by my anguished fear that I had tarnished Jane Thayer in sleeping with her and that Mary Marie O'Donnell and Cathy Cathleen O'Donnell would have nothing to do with her because she had passed through the gates of sin. As you may recall, this was a period when I was trying to restore Jane Thayer to a pristine state through abstinence from sex so we could be as we had been when we had first met.*

*This was in the time of Lenny Cerone and the Bonneville with which he ruled the block, but I had begun to look askance at him for being outside the mold of normalcy, given that he did not go to school or, except for odds and ends, hold a job. And there was another of his car kind, who could talk all day about transmissions and carburetors, and his name was Herbie, and he lived down on One Hundred Twelfth Street between Broadway and Riverside Drive in the Arvia House, another SRO. And Herbie too was outside the circle of ambition and order. When Jane and I would encounter them together, I would feel that they were laughing at us, and perhaps they were, for what they perceived as our square and serious ways. I could not follow in the path of Lenny and Herbie. I did not have their genius IQs that would allow me to discourse learnedly on four on the floor and camshafts. Hearing their anarchy calling and their sometimes suggestive remarks to Jane Thayer, I adopted an attitude of moral superiority. If I could not be smarter than*

*them, I could strive to be better, and the Sunday services were part of that plan for betterment and rectitude. And I believe Lenny and Herbie saw how we were trying to elevate above them, the image I was trying to maintain of building for the future, both with my education and the marital plan I had established with Jane. And so Jane and I put our piety on display, sharing a hymnal as we rose in our pew and lifted our voices to God. The grip of goodness claimed us, but it was goodness with a quality of thinness. And, of course, my lower nature had a grip as well, and would drive me in the night to the company of men for sexual release.*

*Why do I tell you these things, Celeste? Why? Have you heard the word thoroughness? Have you heard the town crier's shrill warning about the penalty for its lack? We must come clean, Celeste. We must.*

*Now, in the loft, I was seized with the conviction that I had wandered from the path of morality when Jane Thayer and I broke up and that the only possibility of reclaiming that path was to resume our relationship and take the marriage vow. To do so would mean canceling my existing relationship with Sarah, but what had to be done had to be done. For a week or more I held to this belief that salvation required of me this action. The mind takes us where it will. It has all manner of straitjackets custom-tailored for each of us. Let us be free, Celeste. Let us snap the bonds of our imprisoning judgments. Let this be so, dear God. Let this be so.*

A man named Danilo came calling. He may have been a count, as he had nobility in his face and bearing and a strong Italian accent that made each of his words go far. He was

blond and tall, as Luther assumed many Italians weren't, and had new teeth prominently white in his twenty-three-year-old face, having sustained injuries in a car accident in his native land. He presented himself as a student in the graduate program for architecture at Columbia University, a fact that compelled Luther to kneel down inwardly to him; Danilo was surely a young man riding the powerful wave of his family's lineage and manifesting understated power.

"I'm just curious. Why would you want to live here?" Sarah asked.

"I need space for my vision. And my girlfriend. She come from Switzerland soon. After the New Year." They were in December now.

"Your love is coming to keep you warm," Luther said.

But Danilo raised up on him. He had heard mockery, not playful spontaneity, in Luther's tone. "What do you say?"

"It's an old standard. I heard it recently on the radio," Luther said.

Danilo's ire was not assuaged. He was not Sicilian, but he had an appetite for revenge. He took it deftly, having heard disrespect. "Is possible your boyfriend a drug addict and drinks too much? Why I should think this?"

"Luther is fine," Sarah said.

But Luther was not fine. He was speechless.

Danilo raised his nose to the air with some noisy sniffing. "What is smell? Is gas?"

Sarah looked to Luther, but he was still out of commission. "It's nothing, really. When we came here, there was a garden hose attached to the gas pipe and the water

heater. Luther did a wonderful job replacing the hose with piping. He says the lingering odor is not dangerous.”

“Is very romantic, a drug addict and drinker and crazy too,” Danilo said, more in the way of observation than reproach.

It had been a while since a truth bomb had been dropped on Luther, and it took a few days to reassemble the bits and pieces into a viable whole, but come back together he did, as what was the truth against the power of alcohol but a balsa wood breakwater against a tidal wave? Anyway, the day would come that he would be able to put the laughing thing on Danilo. He just had that feeling.

But Luther had another feeling, one that came from his higher, not lower, self, and it was of urgency. Danilo had said his love was flying in to keep him warm, if not in those words, and he wanted very much to accommodate Danilo. Luther, after all, understood the physical need for consummation and how a man could not be himself without it, the dictate of the flesh being utterly dominant. Because she would be arriving right after the New Year, Luther agreed to vacate the premises by January 1. The fact that he and Sarah had not found an apartment was not a major concern, at least to him.

“It will all work out,” he said to Sarah. “You’ll see.”

But the New Year came and Luther’s search had turned up nothing. Sarah’s parents provided a safety net from the street with an offer for them to stay at their apartment. As for their possessions, they could store them in the barn up at Camp.

New Year’s Eve had been bad. A disco, somewhere near Times Square, had been his idea of a good time, as there had, as usual, been no invitations to parties. Strobe lights.

A revolving ball. Expensive drinks. He had imported a pint of blackberry-flavored brandy, which he downed in a stall of the unclean men's room. Thoughts as red as the lights licked at his brain. Orgy thoughts. In the morning he came to, amid the packed boxes, with Sarah giving him not an evil but an assessing eye.

In the U-Haul rental Sarah began to cry. "What have we done? We evicted ourselves from our lovely loft and now we have nothing."

"You'll see," he said.

"What I see is a big mess."

Luther struggled against the same feeling. 'Do you want to beat me? Do you want to beat me like a dog? Is that what you are saying?' The fever of self-destructiveness was coming over him.

"Stop it. Just stop it," Sarah said.

Luther might have let the surging mood carry him away. Instead he parked beside a pizzeria that was said to offer the best slice in New York City, though he would have placed it second to the old V & T on One Hundred Thirteenth Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

"I need some normal food. Do I have your permission?"

"Do you see me stopping you?" Sarah asked.

He had himself two thick, chewy slices, and washed them down with a jumbo cup of Coke, while keeping an eye on the truck.

"Great. Now you will be stopping to pee all the way up the Thruway," Sarah said.

She was saying that he was not like her father, who prided himself on traveling vast distances without any need to make a pit stop. And of course Peter would have some complex theory about his strong bladder that would elevate him into the pantheon of Wagnerian gods.

*Someday it will stop, Celeste, it surely will, this borrowing at the margins of the lives of others while ignoring the centrality of their existence, their goodness. And why borrow at all if love is truly to be our guide? Well, in the meantime, let us ask what it proves that a man doesn't need to empty his bladder between point A and point B? Evidently, a great deal, as this criterion for establishing superiority, while perhaps not universal, does cut across nationalities, or so my research reveals about none other than Josip Broz Tito.*

*Was he content to rest on his military laurels, his leadership of the partisans in WW II, or his preeminence as prime minister and later president of Yugoslavia? No. His manliness rested on his ability to survive a round of drinking without once excusing himself from his comrades to relieve himself. Is it not conceivable that the word dog, when hurled as an epithet, derives from the proclivity of the male of that species for hosing down his environs? And while we are heading east in our discussion, let us not discount the shaping and fortifying influence of Leon Trotsky during this period of displacement of Sarah and me from the loft we had called home for those three and half years. There was a time when I was a reader of biography, this before the great mad tumult of history came to seem an endless avalanche beneath which one would inevitably be buried unless he removed himself from its path, that is, before I slowly sought to withdraw from time the*

*stopped here* power of time. I had consumed the trilogy of the great Isaac Deutscher: The Prophet Armed, The Prophet Unarmed, The Prophet Outcast. I had been moved to tears on discovering that Leon got completely lost trying to find his way to the London Museum and that he should extend this humanization process with the endearingly self-deprecating description of himself as suffering from topographical cretinism. And add to this his lifelong love of the French novel. But what are these indices of softness without the requisite hardness to bring them into exquisite relief? What is the single great image of modern cinema but Strelnikov in Doctor Zhivago standing rigid with the Red star ablaze on his military cap. There he is on the platform of the end car of the Bolshevik express tearing across the frozen wastes of the motherland as those huddled by the tracks whisper his name in awe? And who is the model for this revolutionary in Dr. Zhivago but our Leon. Have I told you that for a week I tried and failed to subsist on Levy's rye bread, sprinkled with salt, in homage to this Bolshevik of towering intellect, for whom such meager rations were his daily fare through years of exile in Siberia? Celeste, let me note, on the subject of warmth and softness, that the Fastin delivered me to this place of melting love daily, and that I sought that love's increase in certain passages of a biography by Richard Elman of another great figure, James Joyce, whose life was more easily comprehensible to me than his later works, especially that stew of literary psychosis, Finnegans Wake. For example, Joyce's love of certain arias and his pleas, through emissaries, for Nora to return to him. And, of course, the photojournalistic coverage of the hasty evacuation of American personnel from Saigon drew my sad and

*drug-inspired compassion, as a bowl of dry cereal calls out for the pouring of milk upon it.*

“He’s checking on us,” Luther said, staring out the window the next morning. The trees, except for the pines, stood stark and exposed. Nature looked shabby without greenery.

“Who?” Sarah said. She lay on the living room sofa, the way her mother would.

“Everett. He’s sniffing.”

“He’s the caretaker. He’s supposed to sniff.”

“He’s an intelligence gathering network. He has long and powerful antennae.”

“He’s a good man,” Sarah said.

“Yes. He is that,” Luther said.

They went out to meet Everett. Even in winter he didn’t set foot in the house, at least not when they were home. Which meant what, that he went in when they were gone? Or did his caretaking not include the house?

“That’s a mighty big truck for a small bridge,” Everett said. He’d done a full walk around the vehicle, expecting blood or some other sign of carnage.

“It held pretty good. We didn’t hear any cracking,” Luther said.

“Your father had the bridge reinforced, after the last time.” Turning to Sarah was Everett’s way of saying he had given Luther all the time he was going to give him.

“We should be fine going back out. The truck will be empty,” Sarah said.

“Well now, I hear that city of yours is being burned to the ground. All kinds of talk on the TV. Bombings. Killings. People living in the street.”



“It’s our subway cars. We just need new ones. We get them every ten years or so. New rolling stock. That will do it,” Luther said. He loved Everett as much as he could love any man. For his purity. For being a way he could never be. A gentle man who could strike with deadly force. Ask the trout he pulled from the brook or the buck he dropped with one crack of rifle fire. A man who had his own compact with nature, killing only what he could consume. A man to be somewhat on guard with owing to his heightened, unspoken awareness.

“You take care now,” Everett said, heading back to his pickup. A big man with a slow walk. He had been in the war, World War II. On a ship somewhere in the Pacific. Returned to the states at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Hard to imagine Everett in Brooklyn or anywhere in the city. Hard to imagine him anywhere but where he was. Something of the eternal in him, fitting in right where he stood the way he did. They would have respected him, loved him just the way he was when he was in the navy. They would have seen what he could do with his hands, his mechanical aptitude, but also what he could do if riled to use them for a more destructive purpose. They would have respected his amiability and his silence. They would have seen he was different, but the kind of different they could embrace. They would have given him their hearts without checking that he had given them his. It would have made them proud, made them feel good, to extend themselves to him. And then they would want more of that good feeling that they got from being around him and having him there in their minds, even if he was a way they could not be.

All these things Luther thought on that day, the crusted snow giving way to his sneakered foot, as he melted down in love on the drug Fastin.

And thought something more. What he hadn't thought about. His stuff. Leaving it behind in the garage. His manuscripts there for everybody to see if they had a notion to examine the contents of the boxes. His stringy sentences. Stringy writing like stringy was. Naked. Naked. For all of them to see. Then where would he be? What corner would he have to hide in then? Not only seeing the horror of his emaciation but that he was a thief, that he was stealing from Sarah and from all of them, stealing their experiences and placing it on paper in his dreary, unimaginative way. And his books, those college texts he hadn't let go of—that thick hardbound volume on Roman law, for one. They would laugh and laugh. Because bones were bones and flesh was flesh.

It happened that Luther got into the Van Dines' bourbon, and having drunk several glasses, he went outside. A storm was coming in, but Luther didn't care. He raised up on the storm. He mocked the storm. He walked around the U-Haul, as Everett had done, only he addressed the truck, saying, "Where are your cojones, Mr. Truck? I am not seeing those cojones. Are you possibly hiding them from me?" He had a purpose in speaking to the truck so tauntingly, wanting only that it screw its courage to the sticking post while he did the same.

And he spoke to Sarah too, though in a very different tone. "Let's do it. Let's just do it. Let's fly. I won't be a prisoner of this damn storm." Even as he spoke, a voice told him he had no place to go but was in a hurry to get there. Sarah signed on. She was not of a mind to endure the desolation of the country in winter, not with his drinking.

The snow fell steadily. His bravado fled, and he drove along the Thruway as if on a sheet of slick glass, slowing to avoid having to hit the brakes. They were going to die. But they didn't.

In the loneliness of their empty nester days, the Van Dines took them in. The young, even the foolish and ugly, like Luther, could prove a welcome distraction. Jeffrey was now out of the house. He had gone off to study at an obscure college in England, having inexplicably become an anglophile. He wasn't entirely missed, having developed a sour and caustic manner; his perceived appendage status in the family had given him the right to a comfortable level of self-pity and bitterness. And Claire, too, had vacated the premises, though she had stayed local, renting an apartment several blocks away.

Lenore too, of course, remained the big absence. She was gone with *Fresh Cream* and "Sunshine of Your Love" and "I Feel Free" and the heartbreak world of "She's Leaving Home." She was gone with those years when she hadn't been gone. She too had vacated the premises, only to inhabit the apartment more than ever.

Peter had moved his office out of the bedroom and into Jeffrey's room, but he continued to sleep in the same room with Lydia and in the same bed with Lydia. He had navigated and negotiated all her changes. He was still part of her world; he had not been consigned to the damp chill of exile.

Peter bought walnut shelving on sale at Macy's for his studio. On these shelves he placed his hardbound volumes on American history so he could have time right in front of him and keep his eye on it. And he bought, also on sale at Macy's, a new tan raincoat

so he could look proper in the world when he went out walking. It was not for Luther to forget that Peter first came calling on him in the spring of 1967 wearing such a raincoat. And now he had a new one, making of time a thing of change and sameness, or something like that.

*Celeste, a Mexican man with a life of solitary situations came to dinner. His name was Juan Fuentes. He had shown great promise but could not get over the hurdle of his dissertation at Columbia and now was approaching middle age as a man on the skids. He passed out with his face in the salad but not before hurling the epithet cowardly borracho at me.*

*“Oh, for God’s sake, my life began with drunks and will end with drunks,” Lydia exclaimed.*

*I wondered if Juan Fuentes lived in a furnished room and peed in the sink. It occurred to me that he was a candidate for such a life given the lost quality of his days and it made me sad, and more, to be in his presence.*

Having explored lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, Luther headed north to Washington Heights on a hunch that an apartment to their liking awaited him. Instead, he found streets scorched even in the bleakness of winter by the heat of angry young Dominican toughs ready to break gringo bones and living in buildings in a state of disrepair. Fear was a corrosive. That much he understood. The still center could not be found amid such tumult.

*But then it happened, Celeste. A place presented itself to us. One bedroom. We told ourselves the price was right, and how could it not be, at one hundred fifty dollars a*

*month? The low rent gave us the incentive to try to accommodate ourselves to this smaller space. Did it not have a lovely living room with arched windows and a southern exposure? Did it not come with a full bathroom in which you could sit and soak in a tub as well as a modern kitchen in which to prepare real meals, not just ramen noodles? Was there not a small room with a door and a window where Sarah could set up her studio? Could we not sleep in the living room on a convertible sofa? Could I not have a corner in the kitchen in which to sit at my typewriter? Could this not be done, Celeste? Could it not? Sarah, it must be said, had her doubts that I could be content in such tight quarters, but I was in exhortation mode and rallied her spirits. Why such conviction, Celeste? Why? Because one knows when love has come and that we have found what we often don't even realize we were seeking. And there was the matter of our means to live within. High overhead brings the debilitating drumbeat of anxiety and ruins our days. In all ways must we live modestly and not try to be more than we are lest punishment of the severest kind be meted out to us. If the mighty are brought low, then what chance can those less generously endowed have, Celeste? And yet we both know that my pattern was to alternate between extreme frugality and fistfuls of dollars thrown onto the bar.*

*New insight was provided in an incident I have not mentioned at that disco I dragged Sarah to on New Year's Eve. It was simply this, Celeste. A creature from the nether region approached me in the way those in the abyss are compelled to, with words containing the signature sound of evil on them. Such a soul it was who whispered, "Good shit," going the terse oxymoronic route in making his pitch. It was a different time, Celeste. Zale, the Scale Master, was gone. A harder breed of peddler had arrived with no*

*flower power in his makeup and wearing I-can-see-you-but-you-can't-see-me wraparound sunglasses even in subterranean discos lit by strobe lights. The whisper had a hook attached to it that led me, snagged, into the men's room, where all was not glitter but the stink of feces and puke in stopped up toilets and on the floor. "Good shit. Good shit. Give you happy vibe. Make your thing strong for days. Strong like you wouldn't believe. Understand what I'm saying?" Holding in the palm of his hand a little foil-wrapped packet for which he asked twenty dollars. This was New Year's Eve, Celeste, and a thumping bass was threatening the bathroom walls. I was just a doofus white boy with his mouth hanging open. Driven by my own impulsiveness and perhaps his assurance that happiness and potency would be mine, I made the purchase and, though I had never used cocaine before, began to sniff the white powder. But the promised effect did not occur.*

*It's possible the whisperer dealt me Arm & Hammer baking soda, but if so, I was not in state of terrible umbrage. Why? Because I quickly saw that I couldn't afford to be hooked on cocaine. I had my love, and my love was alcohol. I needed to stay faithful to the bottles and stay away from the whisperers. If others wanted to powder their noses, that was their affair.*

*I had placed Sarah ahead of me. She was my shield. I could hide behind her art and not develop an identity of my own. My father had had his corner and now I had my own in the kitchen of our new digs. Soon I put up a wall shelf for my manuscripts, or some of them, so order could reign once more.*

*Some shift, hard to describe, had occurred, Celeste. Now there was a feeling of exposure, as if the covers had been pulled off and I was naked in the world. In Chinatown we had been under a spell. Perhaps it was the relative isolation of living in a community dominated by another race, as if we were exiles in a foreign country, or the fact that we were younger and just starting out. Now we had come out of hiding, or so it seemed, and the reality of life was plainer if not bleaker, more circumscribed. A peculiar, unsettling daylight had come.*

*Sarah adapted to our reduced circumstances. She offered no complaints. She was very good to me, very earnest in her love. Beyond my drunkenness and wandering and bouts of bad temper, perhaps she saw that my better nature was to be loving and kind and supportive, and no one should hit me with a stick for saying such a thing. Affirming our true identity is a universal right, is that not so, Celeste? In any case, Dr. Frodkey was the agent of change, offering her an alternative model for a relationship than the one her parents had, a model that required more involvement with the world. Sometimes I would wonder if she was more in relationship with her therapist than with me and if her domestic efforts—cooking and shopping for groceries—were really meant to satisfy him, but this couldn't have been so. The reality was that we had made a sort of life for ourselves, think of it what one might.*

*Now next door lived Heloise, a woman who appeared to be well into her thirties. When she happened to see Sarah and me together in the naturalness of our connection, a stricken look came over her that we could be a pair while she was on a solo path. I should say that the atmosphere engendered by this woman was charged. It is possible this*

woman Heloise orbited in my mental universe along the same path as my departed sister Naomi, for whom as yet no grieving had taken place. So if her vibe was negative toward me, so too was mine toward her. This state of affairs continued even when she took unto herself a man named Rex, whose air of conceit may have been fed by his regal name or simply summoned by forces unknown. In any case, Heloise and Rex became an item, and his arrival at her apartment would be heralded by the opening of the elevator door and the sound of footsteps in the hallway, noises well within the range of my hearing from my corner of the kitchen, as were bits and pieces of their conversation within her apartment.

Celeste, please do not cast me in the iniquitous role. I was not rooting for or against them as a pair, but I was sensing that when one is increasingly far afield from youth, matchmaking might encounter certain obstacles, especially should haughtiness infect the combatant in one corner of the ring and fire the combatant in the other. And while the words that sparked the ensuing conflagration went unheard by me and no fact-finding mission was ever launched to attain them, let us speculate that Rex did draw attention to the fact of Heloise's fading beauty and quickly move on to her response. "You think you're something? You think so? Did I tell you that your shit stinks so bad that it is everything not to flee the apartment after one of your craps? Did I tell you that you are going bald and that the shape of your head is grotesque? Did I tell you that your dick is skinny enough to fit in a keyhole?" And so it went, Heloise igniting the very air with her invective. We must learn from this, Celeste. We must learn that the primary purpose of the unhealed mind is to accumulate grievance and to wait for the opportune time to attack. The conditions are not always right for love, not always right.



*On another front, Dante the Italian was into the full swing of amore with his Swiss girlfriend, having taken her unto himself in the privacy of the Chinatown loft. But privacy was a relative thing to Dante the Italian and did not exist at all for him in that loft if I was to believe the report he gave me over the phone. "Bogs. All I see are filthy, filthy bogs," Dante exclaimed. "In my eyes, in my hair, in my food they come. What is this thing you have done that I should have such bogs?" All things have their purpose, Celeste, all things, even Dante's "bogs," and if the laughing thing was on me something fierce, now was not the time to surrender to it. A degree of empathy was called for, and that it wasn't there in a greater degree is a failing I must own up to.*

*"Bogs, Dante? What exactly are bogs? May I hear from you about this? I am eager to learn."*

*"You are to tell me you don't know what the bogs are when you gave them to me?"*

*"We need precise information before we can swing into action, Dante."*

*Celeste, relationships come to an end, or can seem to even though we are all destined to meet again. So it was with Dante. We had given him the loft and the privacy he craved so he could love his Swiss miss good, and not a word of gratitude had we received. Even so did this giving continue.*

*"I have two words for you," I said to Dante.*

*"And I have two words for you," he retorted, in clearer English than I would have expected.*

*"Bug besieger," I said, ignoring the words he had spoken without speaking them.*

*“What is your trick now, drug addict alcoholic man with your stupid face I want so much to slap?”*

*Dante’s Italian way was getting the better of him, but I did not perish from his fire, Celeste. I persevered with my constructive course, saying, “Go out now to the landing. You will find your salvation there.”*

*“What is that you say, Mr. Stink Breath?”*

*“The bug besieger. The exterminating machine. That’s your weapon against the insurgency. The Domino Theory needn’t become a reality. Hold the line, Dante. Hold the line. Do you get my drift?”*

*But the phone line, the line I had not been referring to, had gone dead. Dante was now in the hands of fate. Sometimes we have to let go, Celeste. Sometimes we just have no other choice.*

*And yet, let us be honest here, Celeste. Let us be just that, and not call on the police or other existing powers to defend us against the truth. In this very moment is a face presenting itself to me, that of a boy from my childhood I will simply call Nobody, because a nobody he was in my mind, in my reality. A boy with a foreign accent and a persevering face. A boy somewhat older than me scaling the wall of mica schist from the lower drive of Riverside Park to the top level, where I stood, leaning over and observing his ascent. Did I cheer him on, Celeste? Did I? Did I offer him those words of encouragement that can be a lifeline of sorts to the struggling? No, I did not. Into his straining face, as he sought a new toe- and finger-hold in his ascent, did I drop a blob of spit. Nor did I stop there but followed with another and one more. But as I say, his was a*

*persevering and a straining face full of immigrant determination, and my droppings only added to his resolve to complete the challenge. When finally topside he caught and knocked me to the ground and pummeled me with fists and feet till breathless, he could punch and kick no more. Some dogs need to be beaten, Celeste, and then need to be beaten again.*

He grew anxious when she was late arriving home. She would have had a session with Dr. Frodkey after her shift at Hamburger Heaven. Maybe there was a delay on the subway. Or maybe this was the day Dr. Frodkey leveled with her and said she should consider finding another place to live. Though Sarah no longer talked with him about his drinking, Luther suspected it was a topic of conversation in Dr. Frodkey's office.

But no, she hadn't left. The key was in the lock and there she was with a bag of groceries from PriceRite. But her presence alone wasn't enough to fully relieve his anxiety. He watched her while trying not to watch her as she unpacked the bag: the head of lettuce, the tomatoes and cucumbers, the jar of pasta sauce and the box of spaghetti, the milk. Finally, it came out, the six-pack of Miller. Equally important, she didn't slam it down on the counter and fix him with a stare and lay some stinging words on him.

She was a good woman. She was love itself. She was trying to make a go of it in the little life he had provided her with.

There were things he wanted to say, but how? Something was wrong with the quality of the light. It was too intense. It revealed too much. The light in Chinatown hadn't been like that. It had let him be. Down there he had been anonymous in a sea of Chinese. Without the loft he was small and visible in his smallness. And he was old. The

illusion had been shredded. But what illusion? That he had time and that he was caught up in something significant.

It was for a man to connect, and not with meaningless distractions like Dante the Italian or Heloise and Rex. The core of his being sat on the shelves and in the few stacked boxes in his corner of the kitchen. He must act. Ann Beattie acted. Robert Stone acted. Many, many writers were acting, and acting all the time. There was no stopping the actions they took. Just when you thought they had mercifully disappeared forever, there they were again, popping up with a short story in *The New Yorker* or a new novel that received a glowing review in the *New York Times*.

But his sentences. Jesus, the sentences. They were more malnourished than ever. They needed intravenous feeding. They needed something. And the novel, if that's what it was, was poorly organized. By this time the drafts had merged. Pink and yellow and green sheets were interleaved in a willy-nilly pattern. He lacked the courage to retype the pages with hand-written revisions; it was too hard to face his work by reading what was there. Three years of nothingness, of time frittered away with endless distractions or just staring into space while high on a couple of diet pills. And those parts of the book with the crazy prose, banged out while he was drunk. This from the man who thought he had a story to tell that needed telling.

Some writer, was it William Eastlake, saying writers wrote because they had no alternative to writing, only saying it more elegantly. That word. *Elegantly*. Jesus. Enough to give you nausea.

But he could not go down, even to suicidal despair, without coming back up. Within a day he had bundled up his misbegotten baby and mailed it off to Houghton Mifflin with a cover letter that read:

I am here. I am really really here. Do you know what that means? Read these pages and find out. Find out, I say. Find out.

*Now, Celeste, things had a way of coming clear when I drank. A powerful flare would illuminate the dark in which I had been stumbling around and great truths would be presented to me. That gift, or curse, of illumination manifested in the Sixth Street apartment one evening. Already I had finished off the six-pack Sarah had brought home and gone out for "a little something" while she was in her studio trying to work in what was left of the day. "Do you need anything?" I would call to her through the closed door, and be relieved when she called back that she didn't. Soon I would return with a couple of bottles of wine from the liquor store across the avenue. Because she had risen early to get to work, I could count on her to grow weary soon and retire for the night, and I was anxious until she did. A man needs his freedom, Celeste, and even as I speak I hear you saying a woman does too, and that is equally indisputable. When I was onto the second bottle the truth found me. It was only this. I was a homosexual and I had always been a homosexual.*

*A bath could be found only a few blocks away. For an admission fee, you were provided with a clean towel and a locker, and it was there I had taken to racing when the truth as to my identity would come calling. Because men were there and only men and they did sex in rooms lighted only by dim colored bulbs and they did sex in rooms with*

*hissing steam and they did sex that required one to lie down and the other to be on top in rooms on an upper floor set aside for such things. Because the men in that bath used their towels not to dry themselves after bathing but to cover their loins until they needed covering no more. So yes, Celeste, there I would run on my long legs, run with the revelation that had me in its grip, for the immediate release the bath promised, the absence of the preliminaries one had to engage in with a woman before she would lie down with you. And on this night, as on any night that I was so led, it did not concern me that Sarah, in her innocence, was sleeping the sleep of the just and that strains of nobility were absent in my mentality given the mask of duplicity I was wearing. As a homosexual I had to live in the truth of my being, at least in the nighttime hours.*

*(The one truth alcohol could not reveal was that I was a drunk, the mad ruler of my alcoholic realm. Because to be a drunk is to slap the hands of one and all from your person and to fly your freedom flag as you run naked through the streets of Manhattan.)*

The urge first came upon him at the bar on Spring Street some months before, when they were still living in Chinatown. There had been nothing happening in the woman department, and so the idea came to him to explore the alternative. And once the idea had come, he had to follow through. That first night the clerk behind the partition showed he had no play in him. He said no when Luther showed him his graduate student ID and Luther pushed back, but without the conviction of the clerk, and so the clerk came back with an even stronger sound, saying “No is no,” and when Luther weakly asked him to explain, the clerk said, “You’re not a student. This ID has expired. See it, mon, see it. Don’t be living in the past, mon. Don’t be younger than you are, mon.”

But on this night, Mr. Meaness was gone, part of the vanishing act of time. Luther did not have to run his gauntlet and had a clear shot at his own life.

*It pays to be free, Celeste. It pays. And we must take this freedom where it comes. And we pay to be free. We must not forget that.*

There was hissing, the very same hissing he had heard in the steam room at the indoor swimming pool at the St. George Hotel, down at Clark Street, in Brooklyn, only now he was not a child and the men appearing and disappearing in the mist were not the pot-bellied old men with pipe-stem legs and arthritic knees but the sleek, toned gays of lower Manhattan. And yet, if he had arrived determined to engage, the steam had other ideas, saying truth was not the truth because wine and beer said it was the truth or that it wasn't the only truth. Saying further that truth was the real truth or the higher truth. Luther's mind turning to Leroy, the presser, at the dry cleaners of his adolescence, and how back then it was for him to run on his long legs not for his own spirits but for Leroy's vodka at the liquor store across the street and how it was not his time but Leroy's time to drink the pint down and not his time but Leroy's time to have the vodka steamed out of him and how everyone had their time for doing something. And if truth was truth, in whatever shape or form, then he had to live with the dictate of this most recent one and accept that the scene before him was, for him, an empty one he was out of place in.

On that night he walked slowly back uptown. He did not call out to the cars to stop their vicious parade along the wide expanse of First Avenue or for the wailing siren of the speeding ambulance to cease its hysteria. He had his mind on only one thing, a hot dog, heavy with the sauerkraut, heavy with the onions, slathered with mustard. "Make

that two,” he said to the counterman at the deli on Second Avenue, confident that the rats could not be in the dogs and had not been on the dogs because the dogs were Hebrew National, and Hebrew National was brand-name goods, as everybody knew. He ate them right there at a table in the deli in the privacy of his thoughts, and when he was done he wiped his mouth with a paper napkin so the visible signs of having eaten would not be there and bused the table with another paper napkin and placed his dirty plate in a gray bin so the deli man would see he was dealing with a man committed to order and respect. He was ready to go home.

*Celeste, you ask about Sarah’s room and if she had the privacy and the space she needed. You make a special point of asking if she could close the door, and to this I can only answer yes, yes, though it was for me at times to call through the door to her as, for example, on those runs to the liquor store. Guilt and subterfuge as well as simple consideration would prompt me to ask if there was anything she might need. As for space, she could fit an easel and her printmaking press into the room, but not the canvas sculpture that had snaked along the floor of the loft. And while there was light, it was not the abundant light that poured into the living room. Sarah’s window looked out on the wall of a facing building where direct sunlight never came, but where the voices of the women living below were heard. Triumphant, tell-off voices they were, voices that said, “I just told her, don’t be bringing your big fat self here all liquored up and with your fresh-mouth attitude going. I set her straight right quick, talking her liquor shit to me. That shit*



*don't fly. Understand what I'm saying?" And where the gray pigeons of New York City came, cooing and layering the sill with their poop.*

Luther had not lost his faith in Bill Walton, and in appreciation of Luther's unyielding loyalty, Bill Walton made an appearance in his dream one night. There Bill Walton was, his red hair in a ponytail, standing perfectly still in the Whelan's Pharmacy on One Hundred Tenth Street and Broadway, where Naomi had gone to get her prescriptions filled. Bill Walton's presence in his dream only strengthened Luther's resolve to provide maximum assistance to the ailing superstar, because while the end came for everyone, it should not come for a god in the glory of his youth. To be committed, body and soul, was no small thing, nor was it a small thing to abide the filth that those with hearts to smallness bound sought to slime Bill Walton: Bill Walton the malingerer, a slothful countercultural hypochondriac faking his injuries so he did not have to compete at the professional level; Bill Walton the louse, sharing a house with radical activist and Patty Hearst/Cinque/Symbionese Liberation Army aider and abettor Jack Scott. Though it was painful, Luther felt compelled to read the commentary of the cynics, who displayed their degrading mentality in columns and articles that posed the question, in one way or another, "Is this guy ever going to do an honest day's work?"

Luther stayed informed by reading *The New York Times*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*. And every two days, to really keep his eye on things in WaltonWorld, he would head to the international newsstand in Times Square to purchase the *Portland Oregonian*. And when it wasn't enough to read, he would call. The reporters on the sports

beat for the *Oregonian* were respectful of Luther's dedication to Bill Walton. They recognized quality and sincerity in the voice of a caller when they heard it, even if, at first they were wary, fearing he might be a crank or God knows what?

Brad Neff, one of those sports reporters, came through for Luther with what information he had. Bill Walton remained day to day. Medical consultations were ongoing. Luther thanked Brad Neff profusely.

"There's always hope," he said to Brad Neff.

"Always," Brad Neff replied.

"Bill Walton is saving the best for last, for sure," Luther went on.

"Right," Brad Neff said, and because Luther had his sensitivity meter turned to high, he understood that Brad Neff had had enough of him for the night. Brad Neff was signaling that he had a life apart from Bill Walton. While Brad Neff could appreciate Luther's devotion, Brad Neff was more diversified in his interests. A glimmer of understanding came to Luther that what Brad Neff was showing him was health. That's right, health. Brad Neff was showing him what it meant to be a man and that to be a man meant not to give yourself to one thing only but to a range of things. Brad Neff was telling him to grow up, and the more Luther pondered the matter after his conversation with Brad Neff, the sadder and more pained he grew. He was still holding to his respect for Brad Neff, but Brad Neff had done something. Brad Neff had unleashed an unspoken torrent of judgment. Brad Neff had managed to administer hard slap without so much as raising his hand. Brad Neff had thrown him into the cold and lonely place, causing Luther

to feel that he and he alone was responsible for helping Walton assume his rightful place in the pantheon.

*Celeste, I was not entirely a fool. My support of Bill Walton showed fidelity of the highest order, if misplaced, but was also a manifestation of an extreme emptiness. This world that rules us, that will not allow us to ease free, that snags us with temptations and illusions. Bill Walton was a distraction, Celeste, but he was also a commitment to my own excellence. To breathe life into him was to breathe life into myself. If he could hit the comeback trail, then possibly I could as well, just as Prince Hal did centuries ago, so he, like Harry Hotspur, could be the theme of honor's tongue.*

Luther left Brad Neff alone for a few days. Not that Brad Neff wasn't on his mind. How could he not be with that word hook he had inserted? But Luther was determined not to call. Brad Neff had betrayed him. He had disrespected him. Now it was for Luther to show Brad Neff who he was dealing with by not calling him ever again. But his resolve only put Luther in a more tortured place. *Ever again*. That meant infinity, eternity, forever.

I am not a writer. I am not even a would-be writer. I am a man who sits at home reading newspapers all day long, Luther thought, after a morning spent devouring the sports section of the *New York Post* and the *Daily News*. In neither paper a word about Bill Walton. Not one word. I am a man who should tear himself to pieces for being such a bum de la bum. In such a way did he think of himself on that day.

That night he drank his two bottles of wine. Instead of running to the baths so one truth could be steamed out of him and replaced with another, he called *The Oregonian*.

He needed to speak with Brad Neff right that minute. The desire was burning within him to do just that.

“Sports department,” Brad Neff said, in his terse, all-American way.

“Luther Garatdjian, from New York City,” Luther said.

“What can I do for you, Luther?” Brad Neff said.

“You can start by acknowledging that Bill Walton is the truth and nothing but the truth. Can you do that, Brad Neff? Can you?”

“Sometimes we get calls from gamblers about the injury status of players so they can establish a betting line, but I don’t get that feeling about you,” Brad Neff said.

“Right on, Brad Neff. Right on. I don’t bet on anything,” Luther said, remembering the grocery money he had lost playing bingo at a neighborhood Catholic charity event when he was a kid and then Sean beating him silly after Luther lost all his money to him playing blackjack a few years later.

“But I do get the feeling that you are drunk and need to get some help,” Brad Neff continued.

“You watch your mouth, Brad Neff. You watch your mouth,” Luther shouted, but his words meant nothing, as Brad Neff had hung up, just like Marge on the line had done some years before. Still, the last word did not belong to Brad Neff. One way or another the last word would belong to him, Luther Garatdjian, because if he wasn’t the truth, he still knew where it was to be found.

The days and weeks passed with no word from Houghton Mifflin. Although he would wake in horror that he had sent out into the world his misbegotten baby, the Fastin would serve to ease his apprehension of impending humiliation. And when he turned to alcohol after dark, the fantasy of literary success would bloom in his mind. He too, like Bill Walton, would have his shining hour. Blotted from his consciousness was the anemic prose, as when he was a teenager and the memory of being reduced to wild guessing on the SAT faded with each passing week, in its place coming the conviction that he had guessed right and would receive an astonishingly high score.

But savagery still had its place in the world. His number had not changed. His percentile had not changed. Go to the corner and stare at the wall with your shamed face, the letter from Houghton Mifflin said, in boilerplate response to his opus. Go there now. And if you want more of what I'm giving you, dare to come out and try again.

*Celeste, the letter was saying we all have to learn our place in life. We all have to grow up. If we are a skinny bones and our prose is a skinny bones, then let us accept that skinny bones-ness is our fate. The letter was calling on me to call on God's love, as the world's love could not be mine. And was that my mother I heard saying, "Be grateful, foolish child, that you have bones at all"?*

A would-be murderer was afflicting the building. He had started at the top floor and was working his way down. The police had a profile of him: strangely quiet, internalized. Nothing more. They were working on it, they said. This information came to Luther in a dream.

In another dream, this one recurrent, a jet plane descended slowly toward the earth. No control tower guiding the giant aircraft toward a landing strip. As the plane lowered toward his family's building, Luther could see, inside the lighted windows, passengers staring out in terror as they braced for a fiery death. How slowly the plane lost altitude. Luther ran in terror, as he ran when the men of violence began their beatings to death of the innocent and unsuspecting. These planes of impending violence. These men of violence. How important it was to be aware of them at all times and to adjust yourself accordingly.

He parked the car curbside. Sarah's session would soon be over. It came to him as he waited that Sarah was like a car, that she too needed to be filled up just as a car did. Not that Dr. Frodkey was gas. That was the thing with analogies, as they came to him. They never quite worked. Besides, it was disrespectful, even creepy, to compare her to a vehicle having its tank filled with fuel. Dehumanizing. He didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.

The steering wheel had tan padding to improve the driver's grip. He now found himself squeezing that padding with both hands until they hurt. "No," he suddenly and loudly screamed, and in that instant released his hands from the wheel, shunning it as if it were a red hot object.

The tranquility of the afternoon was pleasantly broken by the chatter of children just down the block in their crested blue blazers, the girls wearing plaid skirts and knee socks. Private school kids in a private school neighborhood. Like the twitter of birds, the

sound was life affirming and brought a moment of joy. Several of the girls clustered around one boy with a beautifully rounded head. Pretty girls with a handsome boy. Luther stared in a state of wonder and pained admiration. Lingered. It took courage, a courage he hadn't had. Always he would run off after his last class at the Claremont School. They hadn't wanted him. Garbage. Filth. Armenian filth. *What's that, Armenian?*

Was that a knife he saw hovering horizontally on the other side of the windshield? A bowie knife? It couldn't be. And was that the same knife plunging into Sarah's chest to the hilt? And was that blood turning her white blouse crimson? No, no, this could not be, not on a pacific weekday afternoon. It was not right. It was not normal. His mother speaking now. Someone speaking now.

He got out of the car. That was all the situation required. A little breathing room. The car was small, after all. An economy car. Peter divested of his big black king of the road Chrysler station wagon by the oil embargo and resulting extreme hike in gas prices. The doorman was watching him now, the angry vigil of a thug, a pugilist, a man who spoke with his hands, as Marv Albert, the sportscaster, said of his companion in the radio booth, former Knick standout Richie Guerin. Luther gave the doorman the walk of goodness. He showed him moral probity by averting his eyes from the prettier schoolgirls. A mind was a mind and a thought was contained in the mind and need not always leak out onto the face. You're not my mother, he said to the doorman, without saying a word to him, not breathing a single word. You're not a mind reader. The doorman stared with a gaze of quiet menace, only relenting when a building resident

emerged from her car heavy laden with bags, and the doorman was obliged to assist, as he was being paid to be of service, not draw a bead on strangers.

“Arthur is great,” Sarah said, as she sat beside him in the car. The walk had done him some good. No more knife. No more image of a blouse stained red.

“I’m so glad,” Luther said. She had taken to calling Dr. Frodkey by his first name, though he couldn’t imagine she would do so when directly addressing the doctor. She was signaling the progress of their relationship, its growing intimacy. Luther well understood how the doctor’s chest must swell with pride at the evidence of his good work. After all, Sarah was no longer disoriented and paranoid in her ideation. She was back to her fresh-faced self again. And intimacy was a good thing. It was important to share secrets, he was sure. And there was a lot Luther shared with her. Not everything. Some things you didn’t want to say or need to say. And there were some things you couldn’t. The knife, for example. How could he tell her about that, when she had told him repeatedly his sole function in life was to someday kill her? Of course, she never would have made such a prediction if he hadn’t shown her that article about the poor boy who had stabbed to death his rich girlfriend and followed by telling her that he identified with the boy. Wasn’t that proof enough that not everything needed to be shared? He could only imagine her horror if he revealed what he had envisioned minutes before.

And yet, as he drove down Fifth Avenue the knife came back, reappearing just beyond the windshield. He tried to assure himself it would disappear when they approached the hansom cabs at the south end of Central Park and the Plaza Hotel. He couldn’t see the knife standing up to the scene of Cary Grant dashing from the hotel into



a taxi in *North by Northwest* and into the sunlight of America the film captured. And yet the stately hotel proved no defense. Even so Luther found reason for hope. When they had negotiated their way through midtown traffic and the confines of the Lincoln Tunnel and merged with the free flow of fast-moving cars on the New Jersey Turnpike, then surely they would be able to outpace the knife and leave its viciousness behind.

“Luther, are you OK?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Luther asked.

“You’re choking the steering wheel.”

“Sorry. Just a little tense. That’s all.”

“Tense about what?”

“Nothing really.”

“Are you worried about that basketball player? I keep forgetting his name.”

“No, no,” he said, vagueness in his voice. A feeling of shyness had come over him hearing her inquiry. Sarah was not sports-minded. She did not spend a portion of each day going through the box scores. She did not use sports heroes as a kind of life support system. Her heroes were artists and writers and singers and actors. She admired them but did not live vicariously through them. She was too intelligent for the event that they were going to this length to attend. She would see another instance of the poverty of his life.

The knife would come and the knife would go; no logic attached to its arrival or departure. The same with the gruesome image, which caused him to audibly groan and Sarah to express concern. And yet, his magical thinking endured.

“HoJo,” he shouted, and repeated the same several times.

“What?” There was befuddlement in Sarah’s query.

“We have to go where we belong. We have to get some normal food, and Howard Johnson, HoJo, can deliver the goods. Orange is everything. It is the color of America. It is the color of childhood. Why? Because it is sweet and completely edible, like the orange creamsicles of the Good Humor truck.”

Sarah let his utterances ride, consigning herself to the flow of his desperation. If the Howard Johnson just ahead on the turnpike was his beacon in whatever storm he was experiencing, so be it.

“I’ll have a hamburger, a normal one, and French fries, and a bottle of ketchup,” Luther said to the waitress, whose skin was as man tanned orange as the HoJo roof. “And a blaze of glory on the side. A Trailblazer of glory, make that.”

“What’s your problem, mister?”

“I’m sorry. I got carried away,” Luther said.

“We have real men here to deal with your kind,” she said.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said, hearing an echo of the past in the waitress’s threat.

He had been hoping for hope, not an incident.

The Philadelphia 76ers had an arsenal. They had Darryl Dawkins doing the monster mash. They had George “raise up and fire, all with one hand” McGinnis. They had Lloyd Free, from Canarsie, in Brooklyn, to throw out his legs as he delivered his long-range bombs. They had Doug “slick and quick” Collins. They had Billy “I can elevate off the floor like no one’s business” Cunningham, from Erasmus High, in

Brooklyn. They had red and white and blue uniforms to tell you they were America, but that was just a lie.

And who, who, did the Portland Trailblazers have? They had Lionel “up and coming” Hollins, a southpaw guard out of Arizona State who could take it to the hole. They had Sidney “swish” Wicks, from UCLA. They had Lloyd “I play to cool jazz” Neal. They had their black road uniforms with a red slash.

“Which one is Bill Walton?” Sarah asked, and so he told her what he hadn’t wanted to say, that probably his doctors had advised against the road trip.

“Oh, you had wanted so much to see him,” Sarah said. Her expression of regret only increased his sense of vulnerability, leaving him as exposed as the players in their shorts and jerseys taking the court for the start of the game. How aberrational his identification with the star suddenly seemed. Who was this gangly giant he had never met or spoken a word with, and with whom he would have nothing in common should they ever chance to meet? Even in Luther’s dream they had not spoken. In a way it was better that Walton hadn’t made the trip. If his hero were there in the flesh, Sarah might come to the same conclusion as to the nonexistence of the connection.

And yet Walton was his missing love, and so he watched with the pain of intolerable longing the spectacle of the big bodies from their center court seats. He was not a fan of the Portland Trailblazers, as such. They were not his blood, and the fine thin drizzle that cast a depressive pall over the city, what was that to embrace? He saw Train Hollins go up tempo with his left-handed dribble and athletic body and Lloyd Neal fill in for Walton in a workmanlike way. He saw Billy Cunningham show off his white man

spring and McGinnis turn on the power. But he also heard the Zombies sing, in their insistent, stunned way, “She’s not there. She’s not there,” only it was number 32, Big Red, who was not there.

And both he and Sarah heard something else, the painful coldness that comes when purity of heart is met with cynicism. “The guy can’t even show up to support the team, assuming he is really injured and not faking it,” a young man in the row behind them wearing a University of Pennsylvania slicker said to his male buddy. His buddy replying, “And never mind that he can’t even marry his girlfriend after getting her pregnant. The guy’s a complete jerk.”

“They have no right talking like that,” Sarah said, but Luther shushed her. The coward in him was revealed and active now, the coward who had hidden behind his mother from his father and from Simon Weill and who, in general, sought the protection of women from men who could do him harm. These were not the young men of physical violence, the kind who lived and breathed to break bones and cave in chests. He was among his intellectual betters, the young men of the high SAT scores and the science lab, not the endless subjectivity of the paperback novel, young men who had the fortitude to form relationships with male peers and forego the dinky route of male bondage to a woman. And so a respectful, if cowed, silence was called for lest they lay him waste right there with their cruel objectivity at the Philadelphia Spectrum.

A gray-haired father returned to his seat with refreshments for himself and his teenage son. The fact of their relationship was tormenting, though Luther couldn’t say why, or why the huge pretzel slathered with mustard that the father handed to his son

filled him with dread. Or why he wanted to shout, ‘Stop, stop,’ whenever the announcer said, over the public address system, Dawkins or Hollins or whoever “ at the line to shoot two,” his voice going basso profundo with the mention of the number. How was it someone could be a father? How was it anyone could live in a city as foreign to him as Philadelphia and eat jumbo-sized pretzels coated with mustard?

He had abandoned his inept American crawl after a few strokes in a swimming test as a kid. He had quit tenth grade biology because it was too demanding. He had quit or failed at so many things. If only he could stay the course here. But even with the fast-paced action on the court as a distraction, the images began to return shortly after halftime.

“We have to go,” Luther said.

“Why?” Sarah asked.

“It’s getting late and I’m feeling anxious about the drive back,” he said. As they headed for an exit he felt with his fingers the outline of the remaining Fastin in his shirt pocket and stopped in the men’s room and swallowed it.

He turned the car onto an endless bridge, and began to scream when it became clear from the signs that they were headed in the wrong direction. The universe was against him, and viciously so. Such was the gist of his outburst, the same emotional meltdown he had experienced when he couldn’t replicate the pattern the psychologist had shown him with the black and white blocks in the Stanford-Binet IQ test. And why not? Wasn’t driving a kind of intelligence test as well? Peter Van Dine would have visualized a map with all the coordinates, and driven from point A to point B effortlessly. “The

fucking bastards. Do you see the way they hide the road signs you need and give you all kinds of totally irrelevant shit just so you can get trapped on this fucking bridge and be unable to get off? Do you see the viciousness?” His anger that of a foulmouthed bitter child sent out into the world with inadequate gifts.

When, toward midnight, they arrived back in New York, he said what he hadn't wanted to say. “I need for you to go home.”

“Go home? I am home,” she said, as they parked in front of their building.

“No. I need for you to go home to your parents.”

“Why?”

“I can't explain.”

“But it's so late.”

“Just go upstairs and call your parents and pack a few things. It's just for tonight.”

*Celeste, she did not argue. If understanding is a facet of love, she gave me that without the preliminary of intense questioning. She must have sensed that words would not help with whatever had gone wrong at that hour. Now though you do not ask, I do see the condemnation chorus has gathered to ask what kind of man it is who sends his longtime girlfriend home to her parents as midnight nears rather than vacate the premises himself, but the word manliness has always been abhorrent to my senses and so I will not reply, guided by the wisdom of the one who wrote, “In my defenselessness my safety lies.” That night I secured the premises, removing all knives, including butter knives, from plain sight, by storing them in the cabinet under the kitchen sink. In that way I was less likely to do violence to myself or to others. After Sarah's departure I had*

*brought home the goods, my friends the tallboys and the bottles of red wine. I had some drinking to do, Celeste, being very, very thirsty.*

In the morning he drove the VW to the Triangle Garage on One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street, just west of Broadway. This is where it began and this is where it should end, if symbolism is to have any place in my life, Luther thought, as he turned over the keys to the attendant, remembering the drive from this same garage to Camp with Lydia in her Sunbeam Alpine in the spring of 1967. But I am devoid of neat, symbolic endings, Luther further thought. I am not about symbolism or irony or any of that. I cannot neatly package.

He headed further west, drawn once again to the railroad tracks, the memory strong of his childhood explorations of them with Jerry Jones-Nobleonian. The area remained holy. The cobblestone streets. The great steel arches supporting the viaduct. The old and soon to be abandoned meatpacking plants. The garages. The pier off which Luke dived into the sewage-saturated Hudson, reaching the midpoint of the gray river before turning back, Luther staring in terror all the while. The crawlers they would purchase at the bait and tackle store in Harlem and the eels Luke reeled in from the pier and deposited in the kitchen sink, to their mother's horror. The New York Central twin diesels, corporate gray, with the red decal below the headlamp. And yes, somewhere, dimly in his mind, the bus with the rounded front that ran to the river's edge and that he rode on, even if he didn't, in a time and place all his own in the bosom of that childhood. All of that needed preserving, if only in his mind. He must be faithful to something.

*Q: But Luther, there are millions of people with lives and memories. Is it not true that to go down the dinky road of remembering in this fashion is to stake a claim to your uniqueness and to forget that others exist?*

*A: Do not bother me with your meddling when I am busy. Do not bother me, I say.*

The tracks ran in both directions, as tracks must, but that didn't mean he was equally amenable to both. He was running in only one direction on this day, and it wasn't toward greenery and Vassar College and mountains and all that north meant in his mind. He was committed to taking up the challenge of the mouth, the orifice, the thing that would consume him. I have gone through it from the south, but the time has come to now approach from the north, Luther thought.

No gang committed to switchblade folly materialized out of the graffiti on the desecrated walls, nor did a train come to tremble the tracks and boast its stiff, unyielding ramrod power. He was the only thing trembling in that tunnel, in anticipation of all that was unseen but which could quickly manifest to extinguish his life, a wave of panic sweeping away the willed bravado. As when he was a child, he climbed in terror through the door-size space in the tunnel wall, scrambled up the silt-covered embankment, and squeezed through the space in the semicircular arch where one of the vertical bars was missing to daylight. They had not gotten him. They had not.

He saw what he saw, the park still in a bare bones state on the raw March day. The leafless plane trees, the balding turf, the broken benches. A park neglected, like the city itself. The life of the city receding, in decline. The vandals taking the handles, just as



Dylan said. And he had been one of them, a disenfranchised child, throwing snowballs at the lamp heads in the park to burst the heated bulbs and turn the park darker than it was. And now there he was at Dead Man's Hill, where he had gone to lie with Jane Thayer in the summer of 1962. A short distance ahead he came to the limestone fountain at the entrance to the lower level of the park at One Hundred Sixteenth Street. And there was the corner building on One Hundred Fourteenth Street where Johnny Lacy and his family had lived, and maybe still did. And now he was standing at the spot where Johnny Lacy, in fury, had run him down and threw him to the ground. And here, over here, was where Edward Macy, whose father walked with one hand in his pocket in the manner of all corporate executives, told him casually that he had lost the Rawlings baseball glove that Luther had just purchased at Davega's, down on Forty-second Street, after begging Luther to let him borrow it. Saying to Luther, with the smile of the mocker, the scerner, that he had left it in the park the day before. Luther not killing him, not making him die and die and die. Not offering a murmur of protest. Not knowing he had a right to. Just putting the smile of amiable stupidity on his face as Johnny Lacy looked on. The statue of the Polish patriot where he had sat and watched as Tall Tommy tapped tobacco from a pouch into thin paper, which he rolled tight and smoked. And the red-brick building on the corner of One Hundred Thirteenth Street and Riverside Drive, with its wrought iron awning, towering over the statue. A building where the people of quality lived, including the Manhattan District attorney, the one who had said Auntie Eve might look like Whistler's mother but she was indeed a crook, this after seeking a grand jury indictment. And the railroad that wasn't a railroad behind it but some kind of conveyance for garbage

but why was it he saw only the tracks and not the thing that rode on the tracks, because if he could see the thing then there would be hope, because where there was a railroad, of whatever size, there was always hope. And the building halfway up the hill, the tenement of the Negroes that was now the property of Columbia University so they could make all of Morningside Heights the land of argyle socks and penny loafers and khaki slacks. And there was more and more and more, the old man with the hand cart crying out to those in the other tenement of the Negroes, on the north side of the street and the very top of the hill, "I buy old gold." He hadn't come to the time yet when he would no longer be living in his history, hadn't yet shed the burden of telling what no one needed to hear. Like the graffiti artists at work in the tunnel he had just left behind, he was needing to remember and be remembered.

*Celeste, we must not become the slaves of time, given its illusory nature. One begins to stink of self-importance in documenting every minute of one's existence. Seeking to leave our scent, we are, like a dog with its spray. There are one billion Chinese, not so many fewer Indians. If you randomly group me with ten other people, seven will have superior writing skills to mine. What am I doing wandering around in a past that can have no existence if time itself doesn't? But enough. There is work to be done.*

From inside the apartment came the sound of her singing. "And he walks with me/and he talks with me/and he tells me I am his own," she sang, stopping only when he knocked.

“Is something ailing you, my son? I can see in your face that you are troubled and that you are searching? But do you know what it is that you are searching for?”

“I need to sit down,” he said.

“I will get you a glass of ginger ale,” she said.

“No. I am fine,” he said.

“Are you drinking, my son? Is that what ails you?”

The question stung him. “No,” he answered.

“Are you developing the thirst, my son?”

“Stop,” he said.

“Have I not told you about my father and the mission my mother gave to me, to go out in the snow and find him before the snow could take him for itself and to smash his bottle against the rocks? Have I not told you that story?”

“You’ve told me.”

“And have I not told you that there is only one who is the way, the truth, and the light?”

“Yes, yes,” he replied, hearing with more weariness than annoyance his mother’s words, and seeing her galvanized by his lostness.

“The world will beat you, my son. It will beat you into a state of senselessness. You must come to Jesus. You must come to the Lord. You must walk in the garden with him.”

“Yes, I hear you,” Luther said. He did not scream at her, as he had as a child, “You have had your life. Allow me to have mine.” She was older now, but not too old to put her

chuckle on him, and nothing summoned that chuckle more quickly than him losing his temper.

“Do you not know the story of Rachel, my son, how she was lost and now she is found? Did not her thirst for knowledge come to be replaced by a thirst for the bottle? Did the world give her anything she sought, or did she have to come to Jesus for the peace that passes understanding?”

“How is she?” Luther asked.

“She is fragile in her mind and peculiar in her ways, if you must know.”

“How do you mean?”

“Her intensity for Jesus is beyond the normal. She stands at her window and looks for him in the night sky, as it is written that he will come as a thief in the night.”

“Stands inside the window, not outside, like Naomi used to do?”

“Ushtah, son. Ushtah. Inside.”

“That’s all she does?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so. She takes walks in the park and comes to see me. But lately when she comes she leaves the water running in the bathroom sink. I do not know what is in her mind that she does such a thing, and she cannot be reasoned with.”

“She needs help,” Luther said.

“The doctors are of no use. They give her pills, which she does not take. She says they are trying to poison her.”

It would not do to say to his mother that Rachel belonged in an institution. He did not want his mother, with Naomi’s fate fresh in her mind, to raise up on him for

suggesting her third daughter be placed in among the men of violence, those who hit and hit with a sense of impunity. “That is not good,” he simply said.

“There is something else beyond the normal that she will do. She will sometimes from behind place her hands around my neck, and though she does not apply pressure, this is something I cannot have.” His mother spoke with vehemence here, that her daughter would treat her so.

“Have you spoken with her about these things?”

“She goes to a distant place when I try. And if I persist she simply leaves. And here she comes now, so let us hush ourselves.”

Surely his mother had on a special listening device that she could hear Rachel’s approach and he could not. She entered without knocking through the unlocked door in a shapeless floral print dress and green sneakers, with which she wore no socks or stockings to cover the blue veins that showed around her ankles. Consistent with this new religious chapter of her life, she kept her unsmiling face free of makeup and wore her plainness comfortably, as if the world and its opinions had no meaning for her.

“Why, hello, Rachel,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Luther has come to visit. Is that not nice?”

“Hello,” she said, and went on her way deeper into the apartment, as if she had some serious business to tend to and mustn’t dally.

“She will not stay. You will see what I mean,” Mrs. Garatdjian whispered, Rachel now dominating the apartment with her silent presence. And in fact it wasn’t long before

she reappeared, only now her gait had accelerated, as if she were a train roaring toward its destination.

“Goodbye, Rachel,” Luther said, seeing she had no intention of stopping.

“Bye,” she said, shortening the word to keep communication minimal.

“Your sister has time for God but not for people,” Mrs. Garatdjian said. “Could I ask you to check that the faucets are not running in the bathroom?”

The tap was turned on full force, both hot and cold. He closed the faucets and shuddered at the sight of the unclean sink and toilet before quickly returning. If anything, the apartment was worse than he remembered. His mother was old. It was not for her to scrub and clean. He wondered, not for the first time, that Hannah could live with such conditions.

*Celeste, I must stop here and ask what sort of man puts words in his mother's mouth? Furthermore, what is the point of chronicling the failure of her children? Sometimes I am afraid. Sometimes doubt enters in.*

“That apartment you lived in before you and Sarah began to live together. Did you tell me it is still yours?”

“A subtenant lives there now.”

“And you said the rent is very low.”

“Yes. But is there a reason you ask?” It was not the first time his mother had asked about the apartment.

“I was just curious,” she said.

Was she looking for someplace to be away from Rachel and all of them? Or was she thinking of more affordable housing for Rachel? Or was it just curiosity?

There had been some developments at that apartment. Roddy Rumble's ex, Luella, had shown up at the door, and after a few days sharing the same space he came close to braining her with the bar of the police lock before fleeing, and Luella had been there with their young daughter ever since.

"May I ask you something? It is about my father." He could no longer call him Daddy.

"Your father had a fine mind," she said.

"Yes, of course. But did he ever have trouble?"

"What kind of trouble do you mean?"

"Mental trouble?"

"I cannot say so, not of the kind that Rachel has experienced."

"He never told you of any dark thoughts?"

"The storm clouds would roll in on him and last for days, he would say. He had his struggles," she said, presenting him with a new dimension of his father.

"I see."

"Do you see, my son? I believe there is much about your father that you don't see. He loved you very much."

She was being unfair, throwing on him the weight of her father's alleged love. But he didn't protest. He just sat silent.

“Is something troubling you, my son? Have the storm clouds rolled in on you as well?”

“I’m OK,” he said.

“Those storm clouds are Jesus’s way of calling you to him. He is your port in the storm.”

“I have no doubt,” he said.

“When you have exhausted your mockery, you will come to him. That is my prayer of all my children, that we all be in heaven together. Have I not told you so?”

“Yes, yes,” he said, finding no energy or enthusiasm for telling her he had a more earthly concern.

*When Sarah called, I was no more specific. How could I be? Was I to tell her I was verging on becoming the murderer she had feared I would someday be? But I did say I needed to see someone, a therapist, that I had things going on in my mind that were troubling. Sarah did not hit me with a stick. Instead she took constructive action. Dr. Frodkey gave her the name of a therapist, a certain Nina Kallian, I might wish to see for a consultation. He said Dr. Kallian was a smelly Armenian and as I too was a smelly Armenian, perhaps the two of us would like to combine our smells in a real stink-fest. He added that as I was an effete male incapable of engaging with a therapist who possessed his manly vigor, it was best to consign me to a female. Now, Celeste, you will say that Dr. Frodkey said no such thing, that it would be a vileness beyond description for him to express such contempt, but there are times when truth must give way to TRUTH, and so,*



*if you will permit me, I will give right-of-way to the latter that we may engage on the plane of meaningfulness. Emotional reality means something in this world, Celeste. It means something.*

*Shortly afterward Lydia called to say I had been so supportive of Sarah through her difficulties and that I deserved a rest. I do believe goodness was Lydia's guide in this instance and throughout her life. In a way, it was sad. She was a woman who herself had not received an abundance of love—her father a suicide when Lydia was still an infant and her mother dying on an iron lung only a few years later—and yet she spent her life trying to give love, and often to those who rejected her offerings. We must bow down to the truth of another person's goodness, Celeste, and acknowledge their importance in our lives. We must honor the dead who are only partially dead, as we will all be among the fully dead soon enough, and only then, perhaps, will we see how it all comes together. Let it be said that she had kindness in her bones and in her heart, and generosity as well.*

*Dr. Kallian received me in her office. She had the off-white complexion of the Armenian, that dull, defeated skin that is a signature of the race, and the dolor in the eyes and face of all Armenians as well. A mousy woman half in life and half in death, as so many Armenians are, and more than likely pathetically grateful for any scraps, such as me, that Dr. Frodkey threw her way. It is hard being an Armenian in this world, invisible, a nobody. The fact of the Radcliffe degree prominently displayed on the wall did nothing to mitigate this assessment.*

*“So what has brought you here?”*

*“I need to know if I am a candidate for violence.”*

*“A candidate for violence? Can you explain?”*

*“Do I have the stabbing thing in me?”*

*“And whom would you stab?”*

*“My girlfriend.”*

*“And why would you stab her?”*

*“She said I would. She said I was a murderer in the making.”*

*“What would lead her to say such a thing?”*

*“A newspaper article gave her cause to define me for all time as such a person.”*

*“A newspaper article?”*

*“I read in some paper that a boy from the other side of the tracks stabbed his wealthy girlfriend to death when she gave him clobber, the way all women sooner or later give men clobber.”*

*“Clobber?”*

*“You know. I love you but I’m not in love with you. I have met someone else. That sort of thing. I showed her the article and said I identified with the boy. As soon as I said those words I realized I had made a terrible mistake. Ever since I have been trying to prove to her that I am not the second coming of Norman Bates.”*

*Now Celeste, I held one hand in the other as I spoke, to show Dr. Kallian that I meant no harm, to her or anyone, but there were those times when separation was needed and I would then allow my hands to hang, as any normal person would, and now and then, or so it seemed, the good doctor would steal a glance at those twin agents of*

*destruction, possibly fearing for her life even as she maintained the façade of professional composure.*

*“And has there ever been an instance in which she gave you this clobber?”*

*“Only this. She told me Bob Dylan was a genius and I was not a genius, that I was ordinary in every area but my sensitivity. Later she told me Lane, a student at her art school, was also a genius and her only love. She told me what I have been told through the centuries, that I do not have the necessities to command a woman’s love. Unless you have greatness or money, a woman will leave you lonely, and that is especially so if you have thinness in your bones and in your prose.”*

*“I see,” Dr. Kallian said. “But how can the two of you make love when there are these issues?”*

*“We have no one else. We either stay together or let our families kill us.”*

*“Your family would kill you?”*

*“My family is dead.”*

*“Your whole family is dead?”*

*“Not entirely. My father died five years ago. And then we threw dirt on my aunt, Auntie Eve. And then we threw dirt on Naomi, an older sister, the one who smiled while she smacked.”*

*“But have you not experienced grief over their passing?”*

*“Don’t go histrionic. We cannot permit that,” I said.*

*“What?”*

*“Look. My father was old and sick. He was a diabetic and had half of one leg amputated. He needed to have dirt thrown on him. And Naomi was out of control. For order to be restored, she too needed dirt thrown on her.”*

*“You felt no sense of loss?”*

*“I felt a sense of triumph at my father’s passing and scorn for those doing the weepy-weep. My sister’s death stunned me, its brutal nature. But there must be order. We order our life or life orders it for us. Something like that. As for Auntie Eve, she had lain dying for years, old and senile. I do what I can with what I’ve got.”*

*Dr. Kallian paused before speaking. “I will be frank. I think it might benefit you to work with a male therapist. Would you be open to that?”*

*“If he is like Carl Jung, definitely.”*

*“Give me a day to think about this and I will get back to you,” Dr. Kallian said.*

*Q: And now the time has come to inquire, with simplicity and directness, what gives with certain attitudes that you, Luther Garatdjian, have displayed. Do you not wish to touch down on the ground of sanity and be freed from that false sanctuary where you have sought to exist, in your drinking life and thereafter, treating all human emotion and experience as deserving of nothing more than your mocking dismissal? First, why are you so hard on Armenians? What compels you to speak of them in general in such a disrespectful manner?*

*A: Do not ask me to resurrect the dead. Do not ask me to forsake my life for the annihilated. Do not ask me to believe life is a vale of tears and that I must carry the old rugged cross. Is it for me to bring salvation to the deceased or the living?*

*Q: That is your answer?*

*A: Would you have me say that I am not only a coward but disloyal and even treacherous, rejecting of all that is mine and embracing that which is not—e.g., Bill Walton—and in so doing ensuring that I am utterly alone?*

*Q: Is it not for you to say what is true? Let us move on. Why such mockery of an innocent such as Dr. Kallian?*

*A: Hard slap is always merited where a pose of sorrow is adopted, whether that pose is conspicuously manifest or more subtle. Is that so hard to understand?"*

*Q: What sorrow?*

*A: Dr. Kallian's. She was in love with it. Have I not already noted her dolorous eyes and the total absence of mirth? Clearly a woman who had wrapped herself in the cloak of her tribe's tragic history.*

*Q: That is how you perceived her?*

*A: I want to be free, unfettered. I do not wish to be surrounded by smelliness.*

*Q: Excuse me?*

*A: Nix to clans, ethnic/racial identifications, the whole shebang. I want to be an American—can you dig it?*

*Q: What would such ethnic/racial identification mean?*

*A: My father's big nose. His big feet. His hairiness. The boiling water in which his insulin needle lay in the sterilizer.*

*Q: What else?*

*A: Does there need to be anything else?*

*Q: What else?*

*A: His hand.*

*Q: What about it?*

*A: Its annihilating power.*

*Q: Is your father not dead?*

*A: If you say so.*

Something new to be concerned about. Not only knives used on Sarah and himself but now the fear of hurling racial epithets and ethnic slurs—in the crowded, tense subway, on the street. The N word shouted in a surly black man's face. The S word offered to an angry-looking Puerto Rican. Prompting them to do for him what he could not do for himself. The fear too that he would jump off the platform as the train roared into the station or step in front of a speeding bus.

A white-brick high-rise at Second Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street, the kind he imagined the nouveau riche living in, those who could not afford Park or Madison or Fifth Avenue. The building set back from the street with a semicircular driveway. A doorman standing guard. In the waiting room one of those white noise machines on the floor. *The New Yorker. Scientific American. National Geographic. Ann Beattie*

everywhere, imposing her cool tyranny. How high were her board scores? How high was her perfection? A goddess of the plainly beautiful kind.

Dr. Kallian saying when she phoned, “Dr. Rosner is not bent and hooked, but I have a hunch you two will work just fine together.” He could call her all the names he wanted to, but he had never been so scared. She was his lifeline. He had anxiously waited to hear from her and expressed his gratitude.

A door opened. A woman emerged. Shortly a man came to stand in the door. He had short red hair and a trim beard and wore a beige mock turtleneck with his brown wool jacket. No introduction. Just a nod, signaling Luther to rise and follow him into his office.

“What’s going on?” Even when he spoke, Dr. Rosner did so from a place of hush.

“Did Dr. Kallian, the Armenian, not tell you? I asked her if I was a candidate for violence.”

“Why would you be a candidate for violence?”

“Because my mind is instigating me to take my girlfriend’s life or my life. That is why.”

“And how would you take her life or your life?”

“The stabbing thing is great in me. Great, I say. *Great.*”

“Are you on any medications?”

“Only what I need.”

“What is the name of this medication that you need?”

“Fastin. And just so you know, it is from one of the leading doctors in all of New York City.”

“And what is the purpose of this medication?”

“To take me high when I am low so happiness can be not only my birthright but my reality and I can continue with my novel of ultimate truth *White Line Continue*. Because bad winds blow against me when I approach the typewriter without it and life becomes a fearful, soul-destroying thing.”

“Give me the pills.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said give me the pills.”

For a reason he hadn't examined Luther had taken his bottle of Fastim on the road with him and now, for a reason he also did not examine, he reached inside his pocket and handed he prescription bottle to Dr. Rosner.

“How long have you been on these things?” Dr. Rosner asked, having read the label and put them aside on the small table near his chair.

“Since my sister Naomi went to swim with the fishes and the light flashed green for me to go down the same road and yet achieve a different destination.”

“How long would that be?”

“Coming on three years.”

“Are you working?”

“Did I not mention *White Line Continue*? The world does its work and I do my own.”



“How are you supporting yourself?”

“Ill-gotten gains, if you must know. I profoundly defeated Simon Weill, who had acquired the habit year after year of defeating my mother and Auntie Eve.

You must understand. I was born to a mother who taught me to look backward to a time when paradise was ours before a snake in human form maneuvered his way into our life, taking away the building that we had owned and placing us in virtual servitude to him. My dream from childhood on was to ride to my mother’s rescue and give that man the hard slap he deserved.”

“That’s a pretty big dream. Are you still involved with the building?”

“I would say not. My business expertise made our daily participation in the operation of the building unnecessary, as Simon Weill saw things. I said I gave Simon Weill hard slap, but I did not say I killed him, and if you don’t kill a snake, even if you have profoundly defeated him, then you get killed. Money that he was accustomed to receiving was no longer coming to him, and so he terminated us.”

“When was this?”

“The year was 1974, and if you believe in synchronicity, then you will note that in the same year the eject was performed on RMN from the Oval Office.”

“And you’re still living on the money that you took?”

“The street is calling louder and louder. I am filth of the first order, and so I cannot show myself in the workplace and have no idea what to do but to sit and wait for the wrecking ball.”

“Do you drink?”

“What is that, drink? Drink what?”

“I said, do you drink?”

“I drink when I can. When I need to.” Dr. Rosner left Luther to the silence and the redness that filled his face. “Sometimes I do.”

Dr. Rosner wrote on a small pad. “Spell your last name.”

“Garatdjian. G-a-r-a-t-d-j-i-a-n. Like Smith.” Dr. Rosner smiled. He had ethnic roots as well, even if he had trimmed them so he could be American in a full-fledged way. If a man could trim his beard and trim his nails, then he could trim his name, without the worry of it ever growing back.

“Here are two prescriptions. Take one of each in the morning and at night, and try not to drink.”

*Celeste, he spoke in this manner, shaming me with his words about my drinking. But he was strong and he had red hair as a warning that even though he did not bark and make the other noises of the men afflicted with loudness, a fire burned within. He took control of me that first session and made me his own. He let it be known that I wasn't under the parasol, as it were, and that a degree of urgency was the order of the day in getting me on my feet and functioning in the world. I did not assassinate him for his firm directness. I was only grateful to have him as my lifeline. Only because I asked did he tell me at a follow-up session that he had gone to Harvard, and when I fell on the floor and lay dying from regret that I lacked his mental apparatus, he allowed me to linger there a while and feel my pain.*

*He was a family man. He had that connecting capability. After a while I understood that the room where we sat was attached to the apartment in which he lived with his wife and young boy, who actually wandered in during one session holding a birthday balloon. This was warming and perplexing to me at the same time, to see such fruits of potency in so introspective a man. I asked him if he was a rabbi's son and if he had grown up in Brooklyn, and was of the same extraordinary gene pool as Norman Mailer and all those who torque up far beyond the station set for them early in life by virtue of their hidden but easily measurable endowment, but he merely laughed.*

*Celeste, I was dutiful. I ran on my long legs to have the prescriptions filled at the Estroff Pharmacy, on Second Avenue and Eighth Street. Haldol and Artane, the two medications were called, and together, they subdued me, sequestered me in blandness, so I sat in the very quiet spaces of the day alone in the apartment, my life force in seeming abeyance. At times I would cry over the loss of my Fastin, and yet overall I was in the process of making my peace with the possibility that it was an unhealthy relationship, to use the words Rod Steiger spoke to his kid brother, Marlon Brando, in the back of that death trip car in On the Waterfront.*

*One cold morning I went out to wash my face in the New York Post, and received a gift my mind wanted to savor unto death. There, in the sports section, was a full-page article in which the great Red Auerbach extolled the gifts of the surpassingly great Bill Walton. For the rest of the morning I feasted on the article, Celeste, munching on this or that word or phrase over and over: "dominating," "complete player," "sees the whole court," "unique set of skills." But I wasn't completely useless on that morning, as I also*

*purchased, on sale, a large tube of Colgate toothpaste and three bars of Palmolive soap. Nothing can promote joy more than the laying in of provisions such as these gaily wrapped products. We all need security, the assurance that we have enough and that the day will never come when supplies run out.*

*Though I was not drinking, my awareness of alcohol grew intense. Every second of every minute of every hour I seemed to note the fact that I was abstaining. That, of course, is the power that alcohol had over me, that the idea of it should live so strongly in my consciousness even when I wasn't downing the tallboys and draining bottles of cheap red wine.*

*In this time I was reading a biography of Babe Ruth, but even the Sultan of Swat could not take my mind off the alcohol I was not drinking. A friend is a friend, and you miss it when it is not around. That is only natural. As for the Babe, he was described as having "fallen out a tree," and while the image might be regarded as disrespectful, given his facial resemblance to simians, the real meaning of the phrase was that he was larger than life, a man with extraordinary appetites as well as abilities. And we must not assign to him a lack of human feeling, as he wept like a child on hearing that his first wife had perished in a fire. Wept, Celeste. Wept. And I wept too when I read this passage, brought to life by the great man's emotional display.*

The second night he couldn't sleep. The blanket was too heavy. Feeling buried alive under its weight, he threw it off. But the problem had shifted to his skin; now his skin was trying to smother him. How viciously tight it was around him, trapping heat

within his body so he felt like he was on fire. And now the air was in collusion with his skin. It was hot air, so the fire was both in him and outside.

He frantically dialed Dr. Rosner. “I am burning, Dr. Rosner. Burning. My skin is utterly vicious and crazy. You must help me if I am to live another day,” he shouted, having gotten Dr. Rosner’s answering machine. “Wake up, Dr. Rosner. Wake up to the calamity I am facing.”

For the next ten minutes he knocked about the apartment, making strange noises he hoped would have a talismanic effect. He was still going with his agitated dance when the phone finally rang.

“Dr. Rosner,” Dr. Rosner said, in his inimitable way, coming in at a frequency so low and, in this case, so pissed that you were compelled to hear it.

“Doctor, a while ago I thought I was burning up and that the flames would reach my highest level. Now I will only say that my skin continues to plot against me. Is your skin not supposed to be your friend?”

But Dr. Rosner did not go with Luther’s histrionic current. He had a current all his own, which bound him to the ground on which he lived. He did not embellish, embroider, or fabricate. Thus, he said, “Are you taking the medications as prescribed?”

“The equation is confounding me.”

Dr. Rosner was not thrown off by Luther’s failure to use the correct word, *ratio*. He was not a doctor of the mind for nothing, with his Harvard BA and a medical degree from the great if not as great Columbia University. Dr. Rosner was astute in his understanding of the excesses of his patient and that words, used rightly or wrongly, were

Luther's means for keeping himself alive, his meager currency. He saw the delirious junk stuff hanging out of his patient. "Take one Artane, and one only, now. In the morning resume taking two Artane and one Haldol every six hours."

"I am so sorry to have troubled you with my urgency and will do as you say," Luther said, allowing the dominant feelings of obsequiousness and gratitude to have their way. Already was Dr. Rosner volatile on his psyche, as these pills were on his body. He was in the ring with a better man, and would need all means at his disposal to survive.

Luther took the one Artane, as Dr. Rosner directed him, and within minutes, though night still held its claim to the city, he began to sing "Oh, Happy Day," the light of reason having returned to his skin, which no longer lay siege to his being. He bowed down to the power of the pill and acknowledged its mystery, that one could drive him crazy and the next could open the door to salvation. Oh yes, oh happy day. Like his departed sister Naomi, he did not know all the words, but that did not mean he could not live in the feeling.

*Now Celeste, I am feeling a failure of nerve. The quality of the light in my new environs is too exposing. As I have remarked before, I feel like a man who has been flushed out of his hiding place into a world strangely plain and intent on going about its business without any attention to me. Something is over. Something has died. I don't know what to do. I can't seem to add luster to this dreary prose nor can I contain it and make it go where I want it to, in the direction of honesty and truth. It is full of spin, of distortion, of excess. And yet I have to go forward; I don't have the time not to. To the outer edges of despair a man journeys and still remains committed to his mediocrity. "Go your own*

*way.” That is all we can say to those who question us. “Go your own way, and we will go on ours.”*

It made Luther uncomfortable that Dr. Rosner should show him any degree of respect. It didn't feel right that when Luther applied the laughing, disparaging thing to his alma mater, CCNY, Dr. Rosner should simply respond, “So what's wrong with CCNY?” Was Luther to ask how Dr. Rosner would feel if he were forced to attend a school with a long fall from grace since its days as the proletarian Harvard, including the more precipitous decline with the introduction of open admissions? No, no, that would be to descend into peeve, to highlight too painfully the difference between Luther's station in life and the doctor's. Such naked comparison would be dangerous, very, very dangerous. The beast of competitiveness would be exposed, and then Luther would have to kill Dr. Rosner for being all that he wasn't or kill himself for being the loser in that particular battle, as years before he had been driven to eliminate Tom Smits from the premises of his life with that note threatening suicide should Tom insist on continuing to make his presence known to him. No, no, he must cling to the notion of himself as a dog in need of severe and daily beating when he wasn't reveling in the fantasy of himself as the prophet armed and dangerous. It would not do to live in the middle, where he shouldn't have been born to be.

*Are you listening, God? Are you?*

*Celeste, may I speak plainly with you and say that to be a Jew is to live with both feet on the earth, wherever else the head is? That it is to read the fine print and not throw*

*up one's hands and say it is all too much to deal with? That it is to take care of business? Or have I maligned myself for all eternity for making such a generalization? Can it be disputed that Simon Weill held to such a sober philosophy and that Dr. Rosner did as well when he said to me, "Feed the face first"? Was he not challenging me to occupy the same ground of reality and to acknowledge that the earth on which I lived was where I had to live?*

He had been driving along the alternate road too long, the one free of potholes and toll booths and traffic tie-ups, and on which scantily clad women held up signs saying "Keep going! Pleasure pit five miles ahead." It was not an easy return to make, and one he doubted he could or even wanted to make. What was that to live in this world without a dream?

"We'll see what happens with your drinking after you stabilize on this medication and get a job," Dr. Rosner said.

"Why would anything happen to my drinking? Are you trying to murder it?" Luther was alarmed.

"Maybe it is trying to murder you?"

"We do not talk of friends in that way. I forbid it. Do you understand? Show some respect."

"What respect should I show?" Dr. Rosner asked, with mirth showing on his face.

"Alcohol is a lover as well as a friend. It flings open doors that would otherwise be closed and provides a never-ending hallelujah chorus to keep my spirits high. It



promises me a Harvard-caliber mind and prose with the tensile strength and durability of Ken Kesey, Thomas McGuane, and Heinrich Böll combined.”

“That’s a pretty big promise,” Dr. Rosner said, his words accompanied by the little sniffling sound he would sometimes make and which Luther had begun to copy when walking down the street or alone at home because, in his mind, it had the Harvard stamp of excellence on it. But he hadn’t taken to smoking the little brown cigars Dr. Rosner took a shine to. He didn’t have to do every little thing Dr. Rosner did for the doctor to be a living presence in his mind.

“Oh yes,” Luther replied.

“And has the promise been kept?”

Once more Luther rose up on Dr. Rosner. “Do you wish for me to spend the rest of my days in sadness? Do not apply your measuring stick to my life. I am ascending in my own dimensions.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning I live below Fourteenth Street.”

“And?”

“There is the continental divide and the New York City divide.”

“And what is that?”

“A state of mind and being. Below Fourteenth Street is where those not fit for society by virtue of their creative drive must live.”

“There are no artists above Fourteen Street?”

“Only the running dogs of capitalism.”

“And Wall Street? Isn’t that below Fourteenth Street?”

“Yes. You have me there. End of conversation.”

“Is it the end?”

“It’s the end for me.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’m a murderer, and endings are the business of murderers.”

“Have you murdered someone?”

“My family. I willed them unto death so order could be restored, and it happened for some of them. And it is a foregone conclusion that it will happen with Sarah, since that is what she has been telling me.”

“Sarah has been telling you that you will murder her?”

Luther told Dr. Rosner about the newspaper article he had showed Sarah, and his admission to her that he had identified with the boy who stabbed his wealthy girlfriend. But Dr. Rosner did not join the condemnation chorus. It came as a surprise to Luther to hear him say, “Maybe it reassures her about her value to you to believe that.”

*Celeste, I allowed Dr. Rosner to have his say. I made no effort to silence him. Nor did I attack him for having the effrontery to appear to be in my corner regarding Sarah’s charge that I was destined to become her murderer. One session after another did I allow him to be part of my life, including my admission of my failure to come out from behind my mother’s skirt and slay Simon Weill on the field of battle. Understanding Simon Weill to be a Jew, and being Jewish himself, Dr. Rosner asked me bluntly if this historical resentment of the building owner would adversely impact our therapy. But I said no, that*

*I accepted, as did my mother, that Jews had fine minds and conceded to them full superiority in all realms of life. I said there was nothing a Jew could not do, and that the only reason to hate a Jew was because the hate-filled person wasn't one himself, finely wrapped in their traditions and armored with the pedigree of their intelligence. I said l'chaim was the essence of being a Jew, and only those who were at odds with life harbored ill will in their hearts for them. I said I had no time to be an anti-Semite; couldn't he see how busy I was being an anti-Armenian quasi Armenian? Celeste, I was not reduced to saying some of my best friends were Jews, and Dr. Rosner, to his credit, did not place a cloud of suspicion above me. He no more made me prove that I was not the second coming of Heinrich Himmler than he had asked me to prove I was not a murderer. No, Dr. Rosner listened, absorbed every last word I said, and examined it in the light of his formidable powers of reasoning.*

*Some of this did not happen in the way that I have described. Not exactly. There was no inane repartee. There was only my corrosive, debilitating fear, bringing a great power to heel (there I go again). Abjectly defeated and cowering I sat in that office, having made cigar-smoking Dr. Rosner my god, the only god I could turn to. He was my Big Red now, not Bill Walton. And so, because the universe insists, I will ask the probing questions that are required to solve this small mystery.*

*Q: Why is it that I choose to mock and distort reality in this fashion? Why do I not stand on firm ground with facts at my command?*

*A: Because you are not as impressed with Dr. Rosner and his Harvard education and his trappings of success as you say you are.*

*Q: Why is that?*

*A: We have been over this terrain before, Luther. Have I not told you that a mind uncoupled from God is not a mind worth bothering yourself about?*

*Q: Your arrogance astonishes me that you would dismiss a man of such high quality.*

*A: Am I not here to astonish you, Luther? What other purpose could I have?*

*Q: How about helping me?*

*A: What greater help could a man hope for than a shift of perception that enables him to recognize he already has everything he needs?*

*Q: There you go again.*

*A: Always, Luther, always, will I go there again. And why wouldn't I? It is where I live, and it is where you live as well if only you will recognize it.*

*Celeste, I went against this power with words that do not bear repeating, words of the vilest kind, that only a Satan-seized soul would utter. But sometimes we must call God out. We must beat him severely as we believe, in our distorted minds, that he beats us or allows us to be beaten. We must spend that fury preliminary to melting down in surrender and in love. We have no power that is not his, and he has no power that is not ours. We are one, and vigilance must continue to soar if we are to dispel the illusions that would have us believe otherwise.*

One day in this time of Haldol and Artane (a Thorazine backup was available should he need complete sedation) Luther walked past a bar on a residential side street, and the bar called to him, saying it wanted to be his friend. So he went inside and sat on a stool and ordered a beer. After a while he saw that others were ordering their beers two at

a time, one light and one dark. Oh this was a happy day that such a discovery should be made. Taking instruction where it could be found, Luther followed their lead. He drank the light in its entirety before going to the dark so order could have its way. But on the next round it came to him that perhaps parity should hold sway so long as it wasn't an agent of anarchy. Guided by this thought, he first sipped from one and then the other. But it troubled him that he had possibly shown a preference by starting with the light, and so on the next round he sipped first from the dark. Though was that really the way of the world? Did the world not start in gladness and end in sadness, as had been written of poets? Of course Saul had gone from darkness to blinding light on the road to Damascus, but he was an exception. It was very confusing, and not for a mind such as his to dwell on.

Finn's was old. On the walls were signed photos of famous men who had come by for their pint through the years. In spite of the loudness and the laughter, the place had the feel of sadness, as if it were an enclave holding out against the present. Few women were to be seen, and those who came were older, and so the promise of sex was missing. The men were there for their pint and nothing more, at least in the daylight hours that Luther occupied a stool. He had found a home of a different sort.

Luther was not idle in the time he passed at Finn's. He welcomed the times when he was in urgent need of release and would hurry across the sawdust-strewn floor to the men's room, as he had found a job for himself. Standing over the giant urinal, he would direct the stream of warm urine directly onto the cubes of ice clustered at the bottom.

Now he could not only drink his beer but he could have the satisfaction of melting the ice cubes with his warm piss. Light and dark, warm and cold, it was all there for him.

*Q: Who were the ( mostly) men who went to Finn's?*

*A: He didn't know, as he spoke only to himself, but he thought of them as the Irish remnant, the men with the red noses and white socks, those bound by the Baltimore catechism and Sunday mass and shaped by the hard hands of the brothers and the nuns. Those whose understanding of God was mostly fear of his wrath more than the embrace of his love. Those who had built America and fought for America and loved America in a way they suspected (wrongly) he did not.*

Now there was another bar beyond the cube in the middle of Astor Place. On Waverly Place this bar was, and you did not find it by staying street level. As if iniquity were its calling card, you had to go down a flight of stairs for Spice of Life to be a reality, and you had to go at night, as it did not come alive for you in daylight hours. The men with the red noses and white socks did not go to this bar, as it was for the young'uns, those with the spice of life still in them. And while it did not have the double deal of light and dark or giant urinals with ice cubes you could look forward to melting, it did have stools on which he could sit and listen to the great Minnie Ripperton sing *Loving You* and the great Eagles sing *Best of My Love* and Elton John, whom he did not quite take to, sing *Someone Saved My Life Tonight* and many, many others while drinking the beer and hard liquor that Spice of Life had to offer. And though he was among his own kind now in

terms of age, he did not fully feel he was among his own kind in other ways and did not repudiate Finn's just because he was there. No, he could hold it in his mind that both could be in his life, just as day and night and light and dark beer and urinals with and without ice cubes could be in his life.

*Q: Was the light of reason not in his mind? Had he not been told to avoid alcohol while on these medications?*

*A: The light of reason was always in Luther's mind, even when he was not aware of its presence. But it was his light and his reason. Had Dr. Rosner specified how much alcohol he was not to drink or for how long he was not to drink alcohol? Did Dr. Rosner adopt a worrywart face each session and anxiously ask Luther if he had mixed alcohol with the medications? No. Not at all. Why? Because he had understood that Luther, being Luther, would drink. Dr. Rosner was merely cautioning Luther not to drink too much. And yes, Luther had heard the story about Karen Ann Quinlan, but while it was heartbreaking and cautionary, it had to be noted that she lived in New Jersey or had been born in New Jersey, and so, to his way of thinking, he needn't be overly concerned.*

*A thought occurred to me today, Celeste. It is only this. How many times have I interjected myself into a conversation, lacking the confidence and the restraint to stay on the plane of objectivity? For example, I stand before a painting by Van Gogh and instead of speaking from the point of view of the composition, the use of color, the brushstrokes, I*

*simply say, "I was there, in Arles." In noting this, I capture the entire story of my life, which has been to make everything about me, unable or unwilling to lose myself in others. But does the story end there? I think not.*

Luther did not lose touch with Sarah in his time of trouble. She was kind to him and showed him the love he needed. He had, surprisingly, a place in Lydia's mind as well. She called and made a proposal that would promote, or at least not adversely impact, his drive toward wellness and at the same time benefit Sarah. Was it not a fact that Sarah had been displaced from the apartment she and Luther had only recently moved into? Lydia did not speak in an accusatory tone but in the manner of someone only stating the obvious. Sarah had indeed been displaced. At the same time she could fully appreciate the suffering such incapacity could inflict on an individual, as she herself had lived through her own time of trouble, had she not? And had Lydia as well not had such trouble, and perhaps to an even greater extent than her daughter? Did she have to recount her several institutionalizations for post-partem psychosis? No, and to her everlasting credit, she did not impose on him or anyone with her instances of incapacity. She was only trying to help, and love was truly her guide. Lydia was calling him to her, saying he should come and stay with her and Peter for several days, during which time Sarah could return to their East Village apartment and reacquaint herself with her permanent abode. Ten days had passed since the trouble had visited him, and Sarah was longing to touch base again with her home and her art. Luther offered no resistance.



Let it be entered in the record of life that neither Sarah nor Lydia nor anyone other than Dr. Rosner and Dr. Kallian, she who stood proudly behind her Armenian heritage, knew the specific nature of Luther's thoughts. Having no frame of reference for his sufferings other than their own, they had no reason for alarm that he might become violent, and so Luther felt like an impostor, receiving as he did compassion from the mother of the woman he imagined himself murdering. If he had any doubts about the need for such secrecy, Sarah dispelled them.

"My God, Luther, all the knives are missing. What happened to them?" She had called him from their apartment her first day back. Her tone of alarmed bafflement led him to believe that within a minute she would fully connect the dots and shout, "Murderer. Murderer. Get out of my family's apartment right now before I call the police." And yet, in spite of the peril he was facing, he managed to suppress the likelihood of impending exposure and rally strong with the simple response, "They're under the sink."

"Under the sink?" Sarah said, faithful to her perplexity.

"Yes," Luther said.

"Why are they under the sink?"

"I put them there," he said, allowing truth, not guile, to be his guide.

"But why?"

"Because they were making noises in the day and in the night."

"Luther," she said. Her questions had come to an end. The mention of his name represented a concise statement of understanding.

“Yes, Luther,” he replied, before the line went dead.

The closed windows of the Van Dine residence were calling to him. They were windows without bars or gates, as where was the need? Only a lunatic rappelling down a rope from the roof or with suction-cup hands and feet would be able to gain entrance. Luther kept his eye on the windows, with their west view of the crowns of the trees of Riverside Park and of the river and the Jersey shore. He also kept his distance, the same alert attention he gave to the third rail when standing on a subway platform or to the treachery of his own mouth when in the vicinity of those he assumed to be men of violence. But what about unconscious time? Suppose he was to sleepwalk to his death? Had he not read in the paper of a man standing in Times Square in the middle of the night in only his underwear when the last he remembered he was lying in bed?

*Celeste, the chorus of condemnation has grown loud in my ears. The cruelty of universal dismissal is rampant in regard to Luther. “He is a fake. He is pathetic. We do not believe he is sick in his mind and he is too much of a coward to seriously contemplate jumping from the Van Dines’ window. He is just a neurotic, self-centered bore play-acting at psychosis to gain sympathy and attention. Ditch this loser and ditch him now.” They are right, of course, Celeste. I have no right to go on with this ragged, amorphous sad sack’s tale and the musings of his mediocre mind. But now is the time to screw our courage to the sticking post, to erect a firewall against those who would consign us to oblivion with one casual blast of their fiery breath, and in this moment to reaffirm our right to exist, whether as a hanging string or, indeed, the theme of honor’s tongue. Are you with me on this? Are you?”*

Lydia served dinner that evening. She was alive in her deadness, the deadness that comes with the death of a child. Her grief had calcified into a smiling hardness that came over her face as she enacted the ritual of deference to Peter's pronouncements. Death was not her domain, even if suicide had claimed her father and Lenore, but it was Peter's. Had he not confessed to her that he longed for eternal sleep? He was not built as she was to grieve the loss of a child. He had moved on. He had other things on his mind, and for this she could not forgive him.

"I feel like I am in the way," Luther said.

"You're not in the way at all. At all," Lydia replied, with utmost emphasis on those last two words, and he understood in that moment she was really talking to herself. Her whole life a kind of pep talk, an attempt to breathe life into her struggling children but also into herself. No wonder Peter called her a Spartan woman.

"Well, thank you," he said, having no defenses to say more.

"And how is your treatment going? Do you like your doctor?" Lydia asked.

"Oh, I do," Luther said. "He has a red beard and went to Harvard and lives inside himself. He has learned the value of *hush* the way some embrace the concept of pi."

"What is his name?"

"Rosner. Dr. Frederic Rosner. His first name cries out for a 'k' at the end of it, but he has left it open so he can have the freedom that he needs. And as for his last name, he has likely filed and honed it to a presentable length and acceptable sound."

“There is no need for the filing and honing of any name. All names are presentable. Take your name,” Lydia asserted, seeking to offer reassurance where none had been asked for.

“Thank you,” Luther said, remembering her diary entry in which Claire slotted him with Helja, their madcap Estonian maid.

“How is your family, if I may ask?” Lydia went on.

“You know that my sister Naomi died three years ago.”

“Yes, I heard. How awful.”

“My oldest sister, Hannah, is vigilant against anyone depriving her son and has applied the code of omerta to her life. My third sister, Rachel, walks with God and talks with God where once she drank straight from the bottle and ran naked down Broadway out of love for JFK. My brother Luke has a libertine lifestyle and works for a man who believes you sometimes have to poop on what you have to make it better. My youngest sister, Vera, is trying to kill me, brandishing the Ivy League as a weapon.”

“That is a harsh picture,” Lydia said. “What about your parents?”

“My father is gone. My mother is still here. ‘Have some chicken, my son.’ She says that a lot.”

*Enough. Enough. The reality was that I was tongue-tied whenever the Van Dines turned the spotlight onto my family. The burden of explanation was too great. Too little time to say too much, and so an internal logjam. And the often dismissive way I spoke of them. Ashamed of my own flesh and blood. A coward who could not stand up for his own.*

“I see,” Lydia said, as a way of placing a cap on the drift of the conversation.

So he needn't hang himself, Luther cleared the table and scraped the plates before placing them in the dishwasher. Dr. Rosner had encouraged him to make himself useful if he was to stay at the Van Dines, and Luther did find satisfaction in restoring order.

He then retired to his room, or Sarah's room, so he could be out of their way. It was not for him to know what they might be saying. Maybe they would say it simply with the looks they exchanged before settling down to an evening in front of the TV. Anyway, he did not need the TV, not then. He would have it later. Bill Walton would be on it, live from Portland, Oregon. WOR-TV, Channel 9, would be telecasting the Knicks in their road game against the Trailblazers. Walton was coming back. He was coming back. He would vanquish the Knicks and vanquish his detractors, all of them. Yes, Luther heard in his mind fat-lipped Mick Jagger singing "That's How Strong My Love Is" and was not ashamed to apply that very same sentiment to his hero who was only hours away from taking the court. Oh, happy, happy night. A night to be savored into eternity.

Sometime later, when he heard their footsteps as they retired to their bedroom, he filled with dread. Because if the thing that kept him alive was not real, then he was not real either. Like Christ on the cross, Luther was now having his moment of grave doubt but he did not call out to his father in heaven. In the pantry he filled his mug with Jack Daniels so his drinking would not be readily detected should either Lydia or Peter surprise him. He did not want them dropping the same sort of truth bomb on him as Sarah had done that first week in the Chinatown loft as he opened that pint bottle of Clan Macgregor scotch. He wanted to be able to drink his whiskey in peace.

The telecaster was properly respectful of Bill Walton during the pregame warmups or at least of his potential, but did use words like “controversial” and “injury prone” as well, and his sidekick went so far as question Walton’s “heart” for the professional game. But Luther did not hear the full sliming of Walton that had come from the more cynical types.

How radiant Big Red looked in the Blazers home white, with the red slash across the jersey. And how quickly he won the telecasters’ praise with his deft passing and control of the boards and shot-blocking. And yet it was hard work watching the game and having to worry that Walton would go down any minute and have to be helped off the court. And there were other things too, a feeling of letdown even as he watched his hero, or if it wasn’t exactly that, there was that question pushing at him as to whether such vicariousness was within the realm of sanity.

Before the first quarter had ended, Luther’s TV viewing was interrupted by the presence of Peter, in his bathrobe, looking haggard and troubled. Sleep had not taken him, in spite of the pill he swallowed nightly as an aid to slumber. He had been relatively subdued at the dinner table, offering low-energy denunciations of both political parties or their candidates in the upcoming election, Gerald “he played football too long without a helmet at Yale” Ford and Jimmy “Peanuts” Carter, from Plains, Georgia.

“Lydia is after me to teach again,” Peter said, as if resuming a conversation that had never begun. “But can you imagine a man of my age coming out of the shadows in which he has lived inviolate into the blinding light among the great unwashed?”

The question, in Luther's ears, was burdensome, not simply for its length and complexity, but for the responsibility it placed on him to respond.

"I have researched the world and found it wanting myself," Luther replied. "But my day of reckoning is coming. Dr. Rosner says feed the face first. He is not pithy by nature, but in this case he has gone and gotten so on me. It may be some sort of rabbinical wisdom passed down through the Hebrew ages. I keep meaning to ask him but our hour is short."

"And who is Dr. Rosner?"

"He is a therapist I am seeing who is structuring me for a landing so my plane doesn't crash. Like Joseph with that pharaoh of old in Egypt, he is an interpreter of dreams, not about kith and kine and famine in the land, but about the passenger aircraft in the skies of New York City that dominated my dream world, planes in imminent danger of crashing to earth in a fiery ball. He says I am in fear of a crash landing as well from the stratosphere I have inhabited these past few years."

"Why on earth would you see a therapist?"

Luther did not want to hear from Peter, as he had before, that therapists were committed to supporting the hegemony of the capitalists and were in fact themselves capitalists. All Luther wanted was to drink the Van Dines' whiskey and give his undivided attention to his idol on the TV screen. "The storm clouds have rolled in on me, and they continue to linger. My boat is unsteady in the water." He did not care that he had mixed his metaphors. He was just trying to get the job done of conveying what needed to be said in a reasonably truthful manner.

“I see no unsteadiness, no instability, in you,” Peter said.

“Really?” Luther replied, muting his astonishment.

Peter did not punish Luther’s night anymore than he had to with his resistance to the world beyond the confines of the Riverside Drive apartment and Camp. The pill, and the dreariness of Luther’s passion—*basketball?*—was enough to send him back into his own world.

*Celeste, not everyone is meant to be together. Not in this world. Later yes.*

*Forever and ever.*

At game’s end Luther sat, in a stupor, not sure what had been given and what had been taken away, but of one thing he was sure, Portland had prevailed. Clyde “heavy legs” Frazier couldn’t do it to them. Earl “the Pearl” Monroe couldn’t do it to them. Spencer “live and die with the jump shot” Haywood couldn’t do it to them. Freaky Phil Jackson couldn’t do it to them. But Walton could do it them, the Knicks. “He just makes everyone on the team better,” the sportscaster said. And maybe that was all Luther needed to hear for a post-midnight mental gnosh. Just lie in Sarah’s canopied bed and savor the miracle of his man on the court winning over the doubters. He had but one twofold question to ask of himself, and he asked it fearfully: “Was what I saw sufficiently nutritive and did it leave me hungry for more?” And the voice from on high answered: “Do not fear, Luther. Do not fear. Walton is like sex. When you think you are done, you are only at the beginning once again.” From this response Luther gained great comfort, as with Walton he wanted always to be able to sing with conviction, “That’s how strong my love is.”



*Celeste, the barriers to love must always be removed. Always. That is our work. But we must hold in mind the long-term so as not to be discouraged that further pathways of understanding failed to open up between Peter and me. He was a man depleted and at times invigorated by his own aloneness, a man who stood outside the time he lived in insofar as the confessional draw of psychotherapy. He did not want to fill vinyl notebooks with personal musings, as did Lydia. He saw no profit in dreams, let alone their interpretation. He wanted only facts and figures and mapped coordinates and the trail of crime and treachery and malfeasance and hypocrisy of those who held the levers of power. Was I shocked that he should find no signs of instability in me? Was not the fact that I was living in his home because Sarah and I, temporarily at least, could not cohabit, sufficient evidence that all was not right in my world? But it is possible as well that Peter had come to see me without seeing me. Having taken my measure and found me lacking in the dimensions he valued—a robust physique and a robust mind—he could just tune me out by and large, like Nixon and Kissinger, who had focused on rapprochement with China while leaving domestic affairs to lesser souls.*

Do not think that Dr. Rosner was a less than potent force in Luther's life simply because he smoked small cigars and snuffled and spoke with the volume turned down low. Please be aware that he was laying in lines of connection that defied facile reckoning. Do not make the same mistake Luther made. When Dr. Rosner informed Luther that he would be away for a week and asked how Luther felt about his imminent departure, Luther raised up on him, saying he had no feelings about the matter whatsoever, Dr. Rosner being a

man and so without a hook that could be sunk in Luther's heart. Luther tried to read Dr. Rosner's face for significant signs of hurt but none were visible. He was appreciative of Dr. Rosner and respectful, but if he had a song for Bill Walton, he also had one for Dr. Rosner, and that was "Heart of Stone," as sung by the fat-lipped one and his cronies.

While Dr. Rosner's absence was noted, it was not felt. Certainly Luther's monitoring devices could detect no signs of distress. But by the weekend Luther found himself in a state of anxiety as severe as any he could remember. The great ball of dread reduced him to the fetal position on Sarah's canopied bed, where he spent hours softly moaning. The intensity and duration and suddenness of the attack left him bewildered; so out of the blue had it come to strike him down.

The morning of his appointment with Dr. Rosner the anxiety went away. Dr. Rosner was not Dr. Rosner for nothing. Harvard had not called him to it for nothing. A Sherlock Holmes of the mind he was; there was no mystery regarding it he could not solve. Such a statement was fully earned when he said, "Your anxiety attack was brought on by the anticipation of my return." The offhand manner in which Dr. Rosner spoke was as startling as the assertion itself. Such matter-of-factness could only be an indicator of an intensely complex mind routinely producing amazing and audacious insights. Only now was Luther made aware of the elaborate infrastructure of connection Dr. Rosner had quietly been creating. Though Dr. Rosner's goal was doubtless to seek hegemony over Luther's mind and emotions, Luther did not show him an accusatory eye. Dr. Rosner read the *New York Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*, after all. He had risen from nothingness to the campus of Harvard University and a position of respect in the world.

Luther had faith in Dr. Rosner's nature. Surely Dr. Rosner meant well by him, and if the doctor did not wax emotional, maybe that was a good thing. Not everyone could or should emote. Not everyone could or should be talking about love let alone how it meant never having to say you were sorry.

Dr. Rosner had given Luther other reasons to like him. Dr. Rosner did not share his enthusiasm for Bill Walton, but he did come as close as someone of his nature could to gushing about number 42, Jackie Robinson, who had met the taunts and ridicule of jeering opposing players and racist fans with his bat and speed and base-path bravado and fiery spirit. Dr. Rosner was revealing the moral force and integrity of his race through the identification of Jews with blacks. *Celeste, when a man is childless, when there is no offspring from the fire in his loins, he is a child forever. Remember that when you note the key in which this is written.* He was speaking to the quotas, the exterminations, all of it. And if Luther had any doubt that Jackie Robinson's fire was Dr. Rosner's fire, the second story the doctor told only confirmed that he and Jackie had much in common. A Harvard professor of the doubting Thomas kind had chastised Dr. Rosner for not taking a rigorous organic chemistry course highly recommended for students seeking to gain acceptance to a top-flight medical school. He went so far as to openly question Dr. Rosner's commitment to excellence beyond the fantasy image in his own mind. Instantly was Dr. Rosner transformed, the fire burning within giving his pale skin a reddish hue and setting his red hair ablaze. Incendiary rays shot from his eyes as he raced off. No one was allowed to speak to him in such a manner. No one. An aptitude for murder was born in him at that moment, but was quickly channeled into sustained rage. He would show that

foppish, tweedy goy pacifying himself with his meerschaum pipe the kind of person he was dealing with. And he did, completing that organic chemistry course with full mastery of the subject matter.

Luther was prouder than he could say of Dr. Rosner after hearing these stories. Clearly his doctor had the heart of a champion and a great will to win. But Dr. Rosner's belief that Luther could fire up the same resolve and rise to dispatch with his own doubters and hecklers plunged Luther into sadness because those doubters and hecklers were the standardized tests he had taken and failed, unlike Dr. Rosner; that voice that told him he was nothing more than a hanging string had to be listened to if he didn't want to inhabit the realm of the truly crazy.

*Now Celeste, at this time there was a sportswriter for the Daily News named Dick Young. No one ever called him Richard. He did not play that way with his name. He saw to it that it was shaved close so he could have the freedom and the mobility of the monosyllabic. And he kept his prose compact and well-groomed, his trademark being succinctness and directness and a take-no-prisoners style. The knives he slashed with were double-edged and sharp, and seeing his photograph you understood what you were in for, as even his smile was infiltrated by malice. This was not sweet Milton Gross or earnest Maury Allen of the New York Post. He was out to bury a hatchet in the head of his victims. In any case, the idea took hold that Dick Young could provide the direction I lacked and that subjecting myself to his cruel lash could be an aid to my growth.*

*Sports had meaning in my life, Celeste. Yankee Stadium had been my true house of worship, and having been to see the Dodgers play in Brooklyn only once, Ebbets Field*

*was in my consciousness forever. I was having a recurring dream that I was on the platform of an elevated Brooklyn subway station straining to look beyond the façade of the ballpark (never mind that an elevated line was not nearby. Never mind.) to catch at least a glimpse of Duke patrolling centerfield and Don Newcombe coming strong from the right side, vanquishing one Cincinnati Redleg after another, but nothing, nothing, can convey the delirium I was experiencing that my dream within the dream and in waking life as well should be so close and yet so far because if there is a true nexus between man and woman and God, I was now so maddeningly in proximity to it. The light from the streetlamp shone on the trees, and the sight of their green leaves only increased my painful longing, as here once again were the beauty of what God and humankind had wrought in heartbreaking collaboration. Throughout the dream a ghostly silence reigned; if there were people about, they merely existed as shadows in the softly lighted night. This hunger for what was or should have been is but an intimation of what will be, Celeste, not in its detail but in the appeasing of the longing it inspires. Let us hold onto that.*

“What’s with the dipshit meekness? You have a master’s degree in composition,”

Dr. Rosner barked at Luther, when Luther shared the gist of the brief letter he had written to Dick Young. It troubled Luther that Dr. Rosner would adopt a tone of harsh dismissal. It seemed out of character for a therapist to chastise his patient, though Dr. Dressler had been famous for it. Dr. Rosner was revealing a glimpse of the bad temper he was capable of, and that Luther had only heard about through the anecdote about the Harvard professor who had drawn his ire. And that he should go vernacular on Luther with his use

of *dipshit*, a word that reeked of scorn in the context which the doctor had used it and which was not part of Luther's vocabulary. To have his dream exploded by a vulgarity, and one, moreover, which did not seem likely to be mouthed by a regular Joe. Luther imagined a bowl of fecal matter into which someone delicately dipped his cracker; thus the word unforgivably combined the scatological with the alimentary. Equally troublesome was to hear Dr. Rosner state that Luther had a master's degree in composition. Luther wanted to tear the words from his mind and scream out a cease and desist order barring any further assertions of his worthiness by Dr. Rosner.

And yet, these qualms notwithstanding, Luther also understood that Dr. Rosner meant his words as a kind of smelling salts. The doctor was only trying to tell Luther to come out of his stupor and show the vigor worthy of a man rather than languish in the realm of the defeated and half-dead.

*Let us tell the truth, Celeste. He was conditioning me for love, seeking, in his methodical, yet urgent, way to prepare me for the world at large. But I balked. I declared I could not participate in office life, that I was not fit for those I would find there; the fluorescent lighting would be mercilessly exposing of my inadequacy. I said I would not have rocks, real or figurative, thrown at my head. "Do you see me wearing a batting helmet? Is that how you would have me show up in the workplace? In a helmet? Do you see others in the workplace sitting at their desks with helmets on their head?"*

*Lies and exaggeration, all of it, Celeste. Even with you.*

"You wouldn't want to explore the possibilities of a job in publishing?" Dr. Rosner asked.

“I am not ready for that level of exposure. My bones are thin. You must understand.”

“What kind of work can you imagine for yourself?”

“I can drive a cab. I can assist people in getting where they need to go.”

“We need good cab drivers,” Dr. Rosner said.

*We need good cab drivers.* A simple declarative statement with blunt affirmative force, providing a foundation on which to build. We need good doctors. We need good psychiatrists. We need good firemen. We need good cab drivers. We need you, Luther. But who was this “we”? The city? Society? Something like that, Dr. Rosner had meant. Not “I need good cab drivers.” Such a construction would have been haughty. It would have suggested the master and the menial. Then would Luther have had to kill Dr. Rosner dead, in his mind, because the doctor would have laid bare the truth that he had won and Luther had lost.

A great fear came over Luther. Now would the laughing thing of all of Manhattan be directed at him. A cab driver? The lowest of the low? Being a hackie was not good enough, he heard his pride say. He heard it and he said back, “Let them see my bones. Let them laugh and laugh. It will be the test of fire I pass through. And then I will have the laughing thing to perform on them.” And if his conviction was not as strong as his words, he said them anyway.

The garage was the size of an airplane hangar, and housed a fleet of yellow cabs. It was over by the river, in the west fifties, not far from where he had lived. He stood on a desolation row of shiftless men waiting his turn to inquire at the depot.

“Part-time or full time?” the man at the desk asked.

“It may vary.”

“Not here it won’t.”

“Part-time then. It is all I can contemplate for now.”

“Contemplate?”

“That is what I said.”

“Have you ever been arrested?”

“Do I look like the face of crime?”

“Mister, I don’t know what you look like, and even if I did, I wouldn’t say.”

“I have been apprehended twice.”

“I asked if you have been arrested.”

“Yes, I have.”

“How many times?”

“I have been apprehended, that is, arrested, twice. But no blemish appears on my record, thanks to my innocence and expert legal representation.”

“You will need certification of the disposition of the two cases.”

“Certification? Disposition?”

“You heard me, mister. Go down to 100 Centre Street. Next,” he then called.

On Forty-ninth and Broadway, Luther ducked into a porn palace to see the men with the big things do it to the women who wanted to have it done to them, as he was asked to believe. The theater exerted a powerful hook. On the splotchy screen the sight of Johnny Holmes’s huge wand dispelled Luther’s uneasiness with the dingy interior. Soon,



unable to contain himself, he went off to the bathroom, where he quickly ejaculated into the smelly urinal, the poison of need gone for the time being.

At 100 Centre Street, wanted posters of fugitives from justice, including the Weather Underground members Bernardine Dohrn and Mark Rudd, hung from the walls. They appeared as strange creatures in the stark black and white photos. What would that mean to live without contact with family and friends? The Weather Underground's embrace of violence had never felt right. Now the two brilliant radicals, and others like them, would have to live on the run with no chance at real happiness. How long would they be able to take comfort in their stupid idea of revolution? The posters were cruel and powerful and effective forms of ostracism. That one word, *wanted*. The world would pass them by, and they would exist in the hell of intense regret over what they had lost.

"You here telling me you want information about a case that was dismissed? If that case was dismissed, then there won't be no certificate of disposition. Why you want to be telling someone you been arrested when the government don't have any such record? You know what the word *expunged* means?" the clerk asked, staring out at Luther through the grill, his hard, alert eyes magnified by the lenses of his gold-framed glasses.

"Yes. I believe I do," Luther said.

"Then you got to find a way to apply what you know to what you *do*. You don't be emptying your pockets for the po-lice if they don't ask you to, and you don't pretend like there is something in those pockets if there ain't. You dig?"

“Oh, I do, I do. I thank you for this. I really do,” Luther said, his heart genuinely opening in gratitude for the wise counsel he had just received. “You have told my whole life story, and so succinctly,” Luther went on.

“Don’t be giving out more than you need to. I be speaking now about your effusiveness. You need to be containing your shit more than you be doing,” the clerk said.

“OK. OK. I will. I will,” Luther said, now in full bondage to subservience.

His day felt done. He had made significant progress in his negotiation with the world. Now something else was calling him, and it was not Johnny Holmes or any of the men with big things on the X-rated movie screens of New York City. He had the thirst, and so he went to the bar on Spring Street for a beer. How easy it was to sit in that bar, with its warm brown walls and the light pouring through a large window bisected with a wooden beam. It really was a bar of quality, and at night those soft lights came on and he could take comfort in the amber glow.

At the other end a man who had been scribbling in his notebook engaged a woman seated two stools away in conversation and soon moved closer to her. It is in the nature of things, Luther thought. No man can resist a woman for long. Always, always are they calling us to them, and we have no power to resist.

Beginning to feel conspicuous in his aloneness, there being no other patrons at the time, he headed to Antelli’s, up on Prince Street, where Frankie the Croak was working the stick. Frankie had been an ‘icer.’ He had demised dozens of men and even some women and possibly children, but he didn’t do that sort of thing anymore. Now he was old and he was nice. Nice was important to Frankie the Croak. His nickname was

accurate in a second respect as well. He had lost his voice when he developed throat cancer and his larynx was removed. Now he spoke through a voice box and sounded like a man sounds when he speaks through a mechanical apparatus.

Luther had some of Antelli's beer, and Jesus, it was good beer, with an edge to it, not that soft and creamy stuff but beer that clarified and refreshed his insides. As he upgraded to scotch he heard a young man on the next stool define synergism to his girlfriend. "It's like one plus one equals two and a half. You know what I mean?" The girl's response was muted in the din, leaving Luther to ponder the economical profundity of the man, though when was truth really truth? Why two and half? Why not three or six and a half for that matter? The equation had to be interpreted liberally, he concluded. The man was making a point. That was all.

There was synergism in sex, too. That was the point of it. Each encounter led to the next and built to a great mass of experience, a numerical ranking, if one could be assigned, far in excess of the number of women he had been with. He understood in that moment that synergism was indeed the driving force behind sex. That need to augment was in everyone, and augmentation was the reason men and women came together. The ones who didn't were shriveled hoarders, diminishing their stock day by day by failing to merge it with the stock of others. His fixation on adding to the total of women he had been with, beginning in his college days, now came clear—he had been building for the future.

The things you could learn in a bar.

And the people you could find. The week before he had been at the bar on Spring Street. Near closing time he made eye contact with a woman as she entered. She turned and left soon after only to return and ask him if he would come home with her. He had been chatting with someone when she first arrived and could only wonder if the appearance of social integration had made him seem like a safe choice to her. He remembered the words of the young woman outside the bar on Broadway, up near Houston Street, some years before. "He has only himself," she had said to her girlfriend, in trying to persuade her not to go off with him.

The name of the woman who had come back for him was Constance Sutter. She lived nearby in a loft she shared with another woman. They made love, during which she startled him by bursting into tears, before he rushed home with a cock and bull story as to where he had been to offer Sarah. "I'm warning you. This won't go on," Sarah had said to him, roused from sleep by his clumsy entrance. Perhaps it was the scene following his night with Constance as well as the woman's tears, that caused his resolve to not call her again. But there in Antelli's, as he worked on his third scotch, synergism exerted its compelling force once more, moving him toward the phone. Constance was there to answer. Yes, of course he could come over. On the way he stopped off for a pint of Clan Macgregor scotch, as his thirst remained powerful. He remembered getting into bed with Constance and her sobbing, which ended his sexual interest. Sometime later he came to. The bottle rested on the night table. It was empty. "You drank the whole thing and passed out," Constance said. The clock next to the bottle showed that it had been less than two hours since his arrival. The sight of the drained bottle came as a shock. He was beyond

shame and beyond words. He left quickly and she didn't stop him, as she knew what she had on her hands.

He had time to get himself home before Sarah came back from Hamburger Heaven and her session with Dr. Frodkey. When she did arrive, she found him passed out on the bed.

"Sometimes it's hard to sleep next to you," she said, in the morning.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"The smell. It's not great."

The things he was learning.

And learning from Dr. Rosner as well.

"We did better when we were at the loft. All the trouble started when we took the apartment. There isn't enough space," Luther said.

"Space is a metaphor," Dr. Rosner said.

"A metaphor for what?"

"The distance you feel you need."

Luther told him about Constance and the pint bottle of scotch.

"You went out a little into the world, with your pursuit of work as a cab driver, and then you retreated to the bottle."

"And sex. Is sex a metaphor too?"

"Sex is a reality."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"It doesn't tell you anything that you went to another woman?"

“I was drunk.”

“Your drunkenness allowed you to do what you had wanted to do all along.”

“Someone should arrest you.”

“Arrest me for what?”

“For assault and battery.”

“The truth is assault and battery?”

“I will not have such freshness,” Luther said, speaking in his mother’s tongue.

“The truth is freshness?”

“I love Sarah. I will say that under oath.”

“You came to me some months ago with fantasies of murdering her.”

“And myself. Do not take me where I do not want to go.”

A therapeutic relationship with Dr. Rosner seemed hopeless. The money wasn’t there and Luther had no confidence it ever would be, even at the very reduced fee Dr. Rosner was charging him.

Claire came calling the following day, wanting to see Sarah and the apartment. Luther removed himself from the premises. He thought of his absence as a gift to Sarah and her sister lest Claire raise up on him for being in the way. He wanted to put his goodness on display by showing her what a hanging string he was. And so he went to a bar and drank to pass the time, and Dr. Rosner the next week tried to elicit the reason for his absence. “Because I am just a bum,” Luther said.

And so Dr. Rosner said in turn, “Why would you use such a term to describe yourself? What is this about?” And now the face of Dr. Rosner had reconfigured into a look of perplexed concern, as if he were confronting a mystery of unknown complexity. But Luther was unwilling to shed any further light. He did not tell him that the women, sooner or later, had to be on the hill together with their baked beans.

*Celeste, I had taken to expressing this line about the women on the hill with the baked beans in the privacy of my own mind. Only later would I give it to the air to carry to Sarah’s ears. Poor Dr. Rosner. He was simply trying to help, in the way that doctors do, but I could not go where he wanted me to go. I could not admit that issues of anger and self-esteem were causing me to expel the word “Bye,” not as Rachel, my sister with the vigil for Jesus did, but in my own fashion, and that drinking was the biggest “bye” of all.*

Though the instances were less frequent, Sarah was not without the element of surprise in her comportment as well. The next week, someone pounded loudly and aggressively on the door of the apartment as Luther was inside only having begun to drink scotch and tap water. Imagining an assailant or the grand annihilator himself, methodical and remorseless in the execution of his function, Luther could only tremble, but when the banging continued and the words “Open up, fucking fag skinny dick weasel” were shouted by an angry female voice, he was compelled to comply, whether death was nigh or not. Though the belligerent party should have been easily identifiable to him, as he had heard such words from her before, only terror reigned in his mind, and this state continued as Sarah pushed through and hurled her bag, clipping two leaves from

the giant rubber plant he had recently purchased, before plopping onto the bed for a deep snooze.

“Cowabunga,” Luther could only exclaim, and though it was a word in ironic counterpoint to the occasion, it came rushing forth as his mind struggled for full comprehension. Later he wondered whether the occasion might have been better served by the utterance “Holy shit,” but that was a minor matter. More important was the fact-finding mission that needed to be launched and the vengeful impulse unleashed by her epithets. “Fucking fag” he could live with, as that was the legacy of her father’s affect and the occasional driving on the other side of the road he himself experienced. But “skinny dick.” That was a well-placed knife to the heart, as surely she was personifying him as a less than robust penis. And, in truth, he had expressed his insecurity to her about this feature of his anatomy. Had he not more than once fretted that his thing was less than adequate, only to be vigorously reassured by her that it was far superior to her father’s mammoth appendage? But who was he to find fault with her for finding fault with him when he himself had taken inventory of her body, noting the absence of feminine curves?

Her story, when she came to it, had some degree of vagueness. She downed a few drinks at the Metropolitan Museum prior to seeing Dr. Frodkey and found herself too drunk at the session to communicate effectively. Dr. Frodkey suggested that perhaps he was placing too much pressure on her if she needed to show up inebriated. What pressure that might be Sarah didn’t say.



*Celeste, I have found an old notebook. Perhaps I am relying on it too much. Perhaps I am painting by numbers. Perhaps this, perhaps that. Do what you do, Mon. Just do what you do.*

*Celeste, our super was a crook. He was not a nice man. We left a long, low bookshelf in storage in the basement of the building, and within two days it disappeared. When I asked for an explanation, the super opened his mouth wide, not to show me the ruins within but to signify that he was a devourer of the first order and that what he took in was destined to vanish from sight. In that moment I saw him as a giant snake with a retractable jaw and kept my distance. The ways of a super are not mine to know. They may have some getting back to do. They may prompt us to a long meditation on the words subservience and menial and humble. But not today. Just not today. Not everything can be rushed under the microscope in the moment the need is felt to arise. Patience, I say. Patience.*

*Dissolution there may have been on my part, but that does not mean the need for order did not reign. When we fly apart and disperse our atoms into the universe, do we not have to call these same atoms to account once more? Some binding up was required, and it took the form of sanding the living room floor so sadness would not have to be ours for the rest of our days. And if you ask why it was that we did not tend to this matter before moving in, I can only tell you that we see what we see when we see it. Floors are like shoes. Nothing can be right unless they are right. We must pay attention to the foundation on which we stand.*

*Nothing will bring joy to the heart of a worthless man more than a job well done. Let me say that I handled the rented sanding machine with skill and then showed the patience to lay down one coat of polyurethane and allow it to fully dry before applying a second coat to ensure the longevity of the floor's beauty and increase its chances for the hall of fame.*

*Celeste, we had a standard to maintain. That is what I am trying to say.*

*Afterward we rewarded ourselves with a stroll over to the café on Broome Street. The place was thronged with tourists with their gallery guides in hand, as well as the neighborhood drunks resting up for another bout with the bottle. We were served by a bleary-eyed waitress grown puffy in her face and thick in her body. I had some idea she was part of a booze and cocaine crew from the café. Where is she today, Celeste? Has she gone into eternity? The menu board, which hung on the wall between the two restrooms, was written in pastel colors. Among its offerings were chili and burgers on pita bread, the only two items I ever ordered. I was still a carnivore, and on this day we both chowed down on the beef of the land.*

*Outside the casement window, by which we were seated, stood a man smoking his meerschaum pipe. His elegantly coiffed silver-gray hair and tanned, patrician face and custom-tailored tweed jacket gave him the look of someone who had stepped out of an ad for Rolls Royce or Rolex watches. He had half the café staring at him as he calmly puffed on his pipe, and I wondered, for all the time he stood out there, how such a man could be alone. My question was answered shortly when an equally elegant and significantly younger woman joined him and two walked off in a complicated embrace that suggested*

*the affectation of closeness more than the real thing, summoning within me the judgment word “phonies” and the desire that the man be punished severely for his pose of meditative aloneness. This judgment thing, Celeste. It had been building in me for a long time. Where did it start? With Pastor Cohn consigning most of the globe to the fiery depths? And does it matter in the least that I find out? Is it not for us to love phonies as well as to acknowledge that I am one as well, as who is phonier than a drunk with the two lives he attempts to lead?*

Though Marge was not on the line to him anymore in the way she had been, he did one day get on the line to her, suggesting that they meet at Finn’s, which he continued to patronize for its light and dark. Even as he spoke with her on the phone, fear gripped him that she had moved on and further, that she now saw that he needed her but she didn’t need him. If she had, she was still amenable to getting together.

“You’re smoking,” Marge noted, when she arrived.

“Yes,” he said.

“When did that happen?”

“I began mooching cigarettes while I was out drinking, and then the day came when I bought a pack of my own.” He did not tell her about Dr. Rosner and the snuffling sound he made as he drew on his thin cigar. He did not tell her that if smoking was OK for Harvard-educated Dr. Rosner, it was OK for him. There was no need to divulge his influences.

“We don’t know each other, do we?”

“Not in the biblical sense,” Luther said.

“I mean, we’re strangers to each other. I’ve moved on. You’re nobody to me now,” Marge said, articulating his fear.

“I’m proud of you,” Luther said.

“My therapist put me on to you. She said you sounded insecure and alcoholic. She said people like you often kill themselves, but you’re still alive.”

“Sort of,” Luther said.

“I really, really hate you,” Marge said.

“That is my impression,” Luther replied.

“You don’t make things easy for a woman.”

“Do you have a specific woman in mind?”

“Me, Luther, me. I’m talking about me.”

“Are you a woman?”

“This is exactly what I mean. This underlying hostility. This contempt.”

“Yes.”

“You can’t be happy unless you bring me down.”

“This is true,” Luther said.

“That’s why you don’t have any friends.”

“You are scoring point after point. You are definitely on a roll.”

He had his light and dark. He couldn’t be put off that by the “A” word she had called him, or that her therapist had called him, though it caused a burning shame. Marge stuck with her ginger ale.

“You’ve become a two-fisted drinker, Luther,” Marge said.

“Aye,” Luther replied. “Sometimes we get to deal with the polarities and bring them together as one.”

“The crap you talk.”

“Aye to that, too,” Luther said.

If he had his stuff, she had her own, as she did not dwell in the land of the humble and the innocent. “Have I told you that I have two, I said *two*, black lovers, not one, and that both are rising literary stars?”

“How many did you say?” he asked, trying to defend against her boastful assault.

“Go ahead and laugh, Luther, but I know you’re crying inside because I have what you want.”

“I want two black literary stars for lovers?”

“You want my connection to life. All you have is your stupid beer and the insanity it will bring you.”

“Don’t be calling my beer names. It’s very sensitive,” he said, trying to laugh over the wound she had inflicted.

“Did you read that piece in the *Village Voice* by a black female journalist named Akila Linsley?”

“No,” Luther said.

“She says in her article that black women should speak out about the fact that increasingly black women are having trouble finding black men to mate with because

black men are abandoning them to be with white women. Can you imagine, Luther?

Doesn't that sound ridiculous to you?"

"It sounds painful, if what she writes is true."

"Isn't that the point of living in America that we have freedom of choice?"

"I guess."

"Shouldn't a black man have the right to choose a white woman over a black woman?"

"You seem to think so," Luther said.

"Light and dark. It's what makes the world go around and around. Just like that beer you like so much," Marge said.

Why had he called her? Because he had a need to feel important to someone, he told himself. And yet, how desperately he wished, in the moment, to break free of the need for an exalted image of himself and to live free.

"Aye," he said.

And he had more evidence of the trap he had set for himself that weekend when the Van Dines took Sarah and him for dinner at a seafood restaurant on City Island, a spit of land near Pelham Bay that offered a world unto itself, with its marinas and bobbing boats and small-town atmosphere. To be clear, the trap was simply this: if a person says he is something, e.g., a writer, then sooner or later he may be called upon to show others the fruit of his labors. A friend of the family had a neighbor who was a literary agent and could easily arrange a meeting with her. Would Luther be interested? Lydia asked.

Luther's horror was such that he could barely stay at the table. He did not punch himself in the face or call himself the bad names that had claimed their position on his tongue for immediate takeoff, but he did look stricken as he mumbled a courteous thanks, but no, he couldn't possibly.

"Why on earth not? A door opens and you don't walk through it?" Peter asked, his voice amplified by the tone of incredulity he spoke in.

"Maybe he is not ready," Lydia said, coming to Luther's defense, and the exchange ended there, though the aftershocks continued through his night: the countless returns in the manila envelopes; the boilerplate rejection notes; the chaotic tome with sloppily handwritten corrections he had hastily shipped off to Houghton Mifflin and almost as quickly received back. How dare they, Peter and Lydia, take him seriously? How dare they ask him to expose his thin bones?

The conversation turned to films. Luther and Sarah had seen *Taxi Driver*, with Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel and Jodie Foster.

"I was an actress myself. I had an actor's equity card," the waitress said, overhearing them as she came with a tray of entrees. "A movie like that one you just mentioned is the reason I quit."

"Why? Because you didn't care for the film?" Lydia asked.

"That's right. I didn't care for the film. That film is indecent."

"But there are other films. And there is theater," Lydia said.

"*Calcutta? Hair?* The whole world is moving toward indecency," the waitress said. "It is sweeping the globe like a vicious influenza."

“I don’t see many dead bodies,” Lydia said.

“You’re not looking in the right place,” the waitress replied, evidently caring more for her message than a tip. “You have to check the eyes. Then you catch on to the deadness going around. That deadness in the eyes means deadness in the souls. Now check out my eyes. Check them out.” The waitress did some directional pointing with her index fingers toward her orbs after removing her glasses, this to visually support her didacticism. “Tell me what you see. Go on now, tell me.”

“You have very nice eyes,” Lydia said, in a placating voice.

“Damn straight I do. And I plan to keep them that way, and set an example for my daughter so she can keep her eyes alive too. And my husband? He fully supports me. He’s military. Special Forces. Tell me he hasn’t seen a lot of deadness, the lying down kind and also the walking around kind. We’re authorities on deadness. We’ve got PhDs in deadness.”

The outburst was a reminder to Luther of the world the Van Dines lived in and the one most others, like the assertive waitress, didn’t, and how that other world posed the continuing threat of anger and judgment. Polarity was rampant, and the only way to bridge the divide was through silence. Anything less resulted in a rancorous serenade, of the kind they had just heard, or something far worse.

On the ride back to Manhattan Lydia passed around a bag of jellybeans.

“The lower East Side is very Jewish,” Sarah said.

“Not so much anymore,” Luther replied.

“And I suppose Chinatown isn’t so very Chinese,” she shot back.



“I think what Luther means is that there has been some assimilation in the Jewish...” Lydia said.

“I know what he meant. I always know what he means,” Sarah said.

Seeing that it was an unprofitable vein of conversation to continue with, Lydia fell silent. From the confines of the car the lights of the city called to Luther. The night was still young and he had become hungry for freedom from the confines of family, even a family that was not his own.

That night he dreamt that Lydia was lecturing him about his drinking. She said she had his number. It wasn't a dream worth placing much significance on, as he also dreamt that Bill Walton had shaved his head and donned a saffron robe, and how realistic was that?

*Now Celeste, it must be understood. Lydia and Peter were guided by love, which they sought to give where it could be received. Instruction had come to them from higher sources that both Sarah and I needed help, and so no mystery or suspicion of an ulterior motive need be attached to their offer to gain me an introduction to a literary agent. And yet, I had spurned that offer. Their love had been in vain as administered to me. But then, in the car, Lydia employed her gift of listening with her inner ear when she heard Sarah abiding in the state of rancor toward me. What she really heard was the discordant sound of jealousy. Balance must be restored so equanimity can once more reign in the lives of Sarah and Luther, she said to herself the following morning, as Peter launched into a monologue. When next we met, she used her resolve to great effect, with Peter's support.*

*You see, Celeste, they came to visit and truly a shower of blessings they bestowed on the work she showed them—her paintings and her monoprints, greatly influenced by James Ensor and Chaim Soutine, with their embrace of distortion and the dreamscape. Their gift to Sarah she did not rebuff. They could see its workings within her, softening her face and her voice and causing her to talk wildly and extravagantly about her projects and her theories of art, of the difficulty of going on without material success but also her acceptance that the work had to get done regardless.*

*If all the happy talk and good feeling was making me ill, I did my best to hide it. A love-in can be an uncomfortable thing when one is more conditioned to hard slap and all the rest. But Sarah was parched for parental affection. She had felt deflated, passed by in favor of Claire, whose star had eclipsed her own and shone brighter year by year. Such displacement within the family is not easy to accept. She had been raised to believe she was the sun and the moon to her father, if not her mother, and the shift of attention to Claire, real or imagined, had stung. Sarah's euphoria on that night was compelling proof of the enormous importance of her parents in her life.*

*Once again, we must allow such displays to have their way and keep our squeamish unease to ourselves. There was grief, genuine heartache, in that family. Let us not be monsters of the deep and the shallow and deprive them of the acceptance we ourselves are in need of. Let us at least pretend to be human beings. Self-exhortation has its place, Celeste. It truly does. We must call on the power of the universe to make us bigger than we could otherwise be. We must be magnified in the Lord, if you will permit me to say. Magnified. Imagine that. In the aloneness places have I sat two and three times*

*daily seeking just such magnification and rejoicing when it came. Oh, that we have such a resource to make us more than we could otherwise hope to be.*

*Now on that visit with us, Celeste, Lydia was full of the Lord, though she would be aghast should she hear me describe her so. But how else can I explain her saying to me, “We’re very fond of you,” or Peter exclaiming, “We should organize a commune for talented people” as we saw them to their car? In that moment they saw me as giving them back their daughter and thus were full of gratitude, for hadn’t they lost enough? Hadn’t they? How much Lydia’s heart ached for her beloved, Lenore, we cannot pretend to fathom. We can only surmise that it was a wound with a life of its own that made her own life problematic to endure. Let us recognize the pain others carry and meet them with kindness and consideration. Let us do that.*

The visit with the Van Dines took its toll. Both Luther and Sarah napped the following afternoon, overwhelmed by the experience and the recognition of their isolation. Twice the phone rang and rang, but neither answered. Later he learned his brother had been calling from a pay phone just down the block. Luke and Brenda had been in the neighborhood. He had called hoping they could drop by. Luther was happy neither Sarah nor he answered. He had sensed something menacingly insistent in the prolonged ringing, causing each call to become a test of wills. The wolves were at the door and we did not answer, he thought but did not say. My brother wants something and it is not me, he also thought but did not say.

“Brenda and I wanted to take you and Sarah out for drinks,” Luke said, when Luther spoke with him later that day.

“Sorry we missed you,” Luther said.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll hook up another time. Maybe go out dancing.”

Luther was in fear when he got off the phone. Again his brother was coming too close, even if now he was calling from uptown. He didn’t want for his brother to speak Sarah’s name. If Luther had betrayed Sarah by going with Lenore, who was to say his brother would not betray him? Had not Luke gone with Nora from Norway when he said he wouldn’t and claimed her for his own, and could just as easily have gone with Sarah that night, and that was before Luther had gone with Lenore. His brother was an appropriator. What was Luther’s was his. His brother and his big thing. Luther said, to no one but himself, I will wait and this fear will pass. It has come before and it has gone before. The thing I must not do is make any sound that lets Luke know I am fearful. I will be all right if I can just do that.

“Get out of that goddamn chair. You have no business there,” the old woman screamed, as he sat for the photographer in the Atlas Building in Rockefeller Center. He needed the photos to renew his passport. But the photographer spoke up for him, saying he hadn’t cut in line. A memory of a childhood extraction over on Central Park South. The dentist telling him to count backward as the cool nozzle of the gas mask was applied. That rubber smell. Then imagining himself as a bottle from which someone was trying forcefully to remove the cap. Then the kidney-shaped steel receptacle into which he spit blood. On the bus ride home, woozy and nauseated, he had slumped on the horsehair seat.

“Doesn’t the child have the manners to give a lady his seat?” a woman had barked, but his mother had defended him.

“I’m sorry,” the woman in the passport photo line said.

“It’s all right,” Luther said, though it wasn’t. People gave themselves the right to take liberties with him. Outside he lingered. The small airline shops, the glorious marble interior of the Atlas Building, the large flowerbed on the inclined mall that led to the ice rink, with its perimeter of flapping flags—the name itself, *Rockefeller*, gave the area the stamp of quality and set off a yearning for a life bigger than the one he had. Among the tourists and the pretty office workers swarmed Moonies in ugly white uniforms, the kind you might see maintenance crews wearing on an airport tarmac as they serviced the planes.

“Are you planning to leave the country?” Dr. Rosner asked that afternoon, when Luther told him about the passport renewal.

“I do not want to pass the expiration date in my papers or in my life,” Luther said. He then told him about the visit by the Van Dines and Sarah’s testiness toward him on the car ride back from City Island.

“The question you’re asking is how much you need Sarah and her family.”

Was that the question he was asking? Dr. Rosner’s assertion frightened him. To Luther’s ears, it sounded like Dr. Rosner was trying to separate him from Sarah and the Van Dines. It wasn’t right to do him like that. It just wasn’t right. Did Dr. Rosner want him to fall dead on the floor from fear?

A door opened and a small boy appeared, holding a green balloon by a piece of string.

“Go back inside. I’ll be with you shortly,” Dr. Rosner said. The boy, who had mop-top black hair and big soft eyes, obeyed.

“You’re a family man,” Luther said.

Dr. Rosner nodded but otherwise didn’t respond.

“I feel I saw what I wasn’t supposed to see. Aren’t therapists supposed to keep their lives a mystery to their patients?”

“You, as a patient, are the mystery I am interested in.”

“I’m not much of a mystery, am I?”

“How much of a mystery would you wish to be?” Dr. Rosner asked.

“This verbal fencing. I feel I’m keeping you from something.”

“We have a few minutes.”

A few minutes. For his son Dr. Rosner would have eternity. He would be that kind of father. Or maybe not. His red hair, disappearing though it was, meant fire. A man in whom the thermostat was turned to high. But never the kind to say, “Will you make me get up? Will you?” Not that kind of fire.

“You usually have a way with words. You’ve gone quiet,” Dr. Rosner said.

Luther heard mockery in Dr. Rosner’s voice. He was laughing at him, humoring him. Dr. Rosner knew he was a nobody in the day and in the night, that if he struggled, he could make himself coherent, but that he had no natural articulateness. Dr. Rosner

shaming him into a deeper silence. Well, he could say goodbye. Dr. Rosner couldn't put the laughing thing on him for that.

That night Luther dreamt he had been caught down in the freight yards at the south end of Riverside Park and placed in a jail cell by himself. He expressed his anxiety to the red-haired jailer that the other inmates would rape him should they get the chance, but the jailer put the laughing thing on him, just as Dr. Rosner had been doing, and exposed himself. "How about I rape you myself?" the jailer said. Possibly the jailer had a change of heart. He only forced Luther, on threat of a savage beating, to masturbate him.

Luther woke with a happy, relieved heart that dreams were dreams and life was life and that they ran on separate tracks, sometimes parallel but never connecting, unless, of course, a switch got thrown, but Luther promised himself to stay on the lookout for any such thing.

He made love with Sarah that morning, his mind filling with images of other women. Even so, the connection was there. They were happy with each other after lovemaking. At peace. It was always a long way around and with its distractions, but he did come home, even if he did not stay.

That evening Sarah went to the movies at Theatre 80 St. Mark's. Some old Bette Davis film was playing. She adored Bette Davis. Luther stayed back at the apartment and drank and listened to Yankee baseball. The sportscasters were good company. Phil Rizzuto, Bill White, Frank Messer. Messer the only professional radio man among them. Luther had seen White play on the great Cardinal team with Lou Brock and Curt Flood and Curt Gibson. A deft first baseman with a short, powerful left-handed stroke. Rizzuto

referring to him curtly as “White,” the word itself so white when White was so very black. The Yankees not so white anymore. Elliot Maddox, not Mickey Mantle, in centerfield. Chris Chambliss, not Moose Skowron, at first base. Brooklyn Willie Randolph, not Bobby “I’m a Southern Christian boy” Richardson at second base. Bobby Bonds they had traded away after Luther had given him all his love, trying so very hard to overcome the doubters who whispered that Bobby was on the bottle and his career on the skids. Bobby Bonds played black. He played National League black, hitting with power and stealing bases to a degree no one else could. A thirty homer, thirty stolen bases guy more than once. And after a slow start, he did the same thing with the Bronx Bombers, Luther pulling for him as he did for Bill Walton. And then the Yankees went and did Bobby Bonds dirty, trading him to the Chisox. Who was Luther supposed to root for now, mean Graig Nettles (what kind of name was that, Graig) or unkempt Thurman Munson? The Yankees were as sad and decaying as the burning borough they played in.

*Q: Who was Bobby Bonds to you, Luther?*

*A: He was the cold lonely nights at Crosley Field, in Cincinnati, the George Crowe and Frank Robinson nights in that town; he was Ebbets Field and Candlestick Park; he was the quality that black added to whiteness.*

*Q: And who were the radio announcers Messer and White and Rizzuto?*

*A: They were tranquilizers for my troubled nerves. They were the ones who could help me forget, temporarily, what I was not and never would be because the blocks could not get put together, denying the possibility of order being brought to my writing.*



On her return, seeing that he was drunk, Sarah threw the newspapers she had bought at him. He picked them up and read, for the further escape that they could bring, but not before she screamed that she associated his drinking with violence.

The next morning Luther arrived at the taxi depot, where the manager told him to take a seat. He would call Luther when a cab was available for him.

“Hey, Vinnie, Vinnie,” a fat and unshaven middle-aged man called from his chair to the manager, who sat behind a Plexiglas window. Though the manager ignored him, a slight smile appeared on his haggard face. His pursuer gained from him a wider smile when he approached and rolled a crumpled cigarette pack through the opening in the Plexiglas.

“Stop breaking my balls,” the manager said, as he tossed away the gift.

“Balls? Balls? Ain’t none of us got no balls. We motherfucking taxi drivers, man. By the fucking way, where the fuck is my fucking taxi. Motherfucking Luis said he was just going around the block, not across the fucking country.”

Luther stared down at the cracked cement floor. When he looked up, the manager motioned to him. “We ain’t got nothing for you today. Come back next week.”

“But I was told to come back today.”

“Didn’t you just hear what I said?” the manager said.

As Luther was on his way out, the manager’s tormentor approached. “You got to play the game, Jim. You dig what I’m saying? You got to play the game. You a bum like me. You just don’t know it yet. You don’t get to make the rules. You got a lot of sitting in your own shit to do, man. I can tell. You fucked up, Jim. That’s why you here.”

The man had a face that had gone somewhere beyond shame. He was living in a place of freedom with his broken teeth and the broken blood vessels in his face. He was performing like a holy fool.

“I will take your wisdom out into the street with me,” Luther assured the man.

“‘I will take your wisdom out into the street with me.’ I like that. I really do,” the man said. “I could munch on those motherfucking words all motherfucking day. But now I want you to do some munching of your own. Ain’t right that I should be the only one here munching. You dig?”

“Oh yes,” Luther said, willing to say anything to be free of the man.

“Take your own motherfucking wisdom out into the street with you. You dig?” the man now had fire in his face.

“Yes, yes, I will,” Luther said, and began to run, lest the man have other, more dangerous truth bombs for him.

People shouting. People asserting. People declaiming. People orating. People denouncing. People seeking the final word that was never the final word.

Evidently, Dr. Frodkey took his turn at the podium that day as well. “He says ours is a neurotic relationship and that if you continue to drink, I should leave.” Sarah was in tears as she spoke.

Luther had heard the song “The Tracks of My Tears,” as sung by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, and he had shed his own, but it was not for him to be moved by Sarah’s emotional display when it originated in a pronouncement by her therapist that amounted to an attack on his security and his existence.

“I am a sovereign state,” he said.

“You are a jackass,” Sarah replied.

“I fly my own flag,” he went on, undeterred. “May I read you something?”

“What do you want to read me?”

“The truth, according to Albert Camus.”

“Go ahead.”

“‘I withdrew from the world not because I had enemies but because I had friends. Not because they did me an ill turn, as is customary, but because they thought me better than I am. It was a lie I could not endure.’ End of quote. What do you think?”

“It sounds more true than maybe it is,” Sarah said. “Maybe his reason for withdrawing from the world is more mysterious than he knew. And what does withdraw mean, anyway? He was pretty visible.”

“Exactement. More true than maybe it is. And what is more true than maybe you think it is?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That maybe Dr. Frodkey was a big fat hot air balloon today.”

“The way you talk. If you continue to drink the way you have been, I will have to leave.”

“And I will have to go to Guatemala.”

“Are you even trying to listen?” Again the tears.

He was listening, and with both ears. And what he was hearing not from her and pronouncement-oriented Dr. Frodkey but from within was that drinking wasn't the real problem. The real problem was life.

"You shouldn't have loaded his gun. If you hadn't given him the ammunition, he couldn't have fired," Luther said.

"So it's my fault for telling him the situation is intolerable?"

"We are going to find our way free of these concerns. You'll see," Luther said.

"I can't stand the distance drinking puts between us," Sarah said, but he understood that she was not speaking to him. She was really addressing Dr. Frodkey and complaining about his unavailability to her. However, he felt no need to set her straight. It was not for him to do such a thing.

*Celeste, though I say I am committed to the truth, I do not speak it. I am a small and petty and fearful man and omit from the record certain incidents. For example, in this time Sarah saw a woman on the street and chose to describe her with a precision beyond me to convey. In so doing was she saying that her tanks could easily roll through the feeble barriers I had erected. While she lived in the tower of the fine arts, she could just as easily exercise her option and excel in my domain, should she wish. "I have more word power than you. I have a better mind than you. I have better genes than you. You have nothing but your stringy, underweight sentences." All these things was she saying without saying, gloating in that moment at my meagerness. At certain moments we are laid bare. We see our vulnerability and the defenses we have erected to compensate for them. And that is why words will never hide the nakedness I have sought to use them as a*

*cover for. They are like snow that has no staying power against the pitiless sun. If I am to be beaten severely with a stick, it must be understood that there were reasons for this fear and antipathy her description of the woman summoned. We all have the need for that place that confers a sense of safety and specialness, but Sarah was saying she had not only found my refuge but was now occupying it.*

*Celeste, that song, "Walk Like a Man"—have you ever listened to it? For some reason it is playing loud in my mind, even if, being a true Garatdjian, all the lyrics don't come to me.*

The events of the next day served as confirmation of Luther's perception as to where Sarah's treasure lay. In the morning she was on the phone with Dr. Frodkey pleading for a special session, and gratitude shone in her face when he said he could squeeze her in for fifteen minutes.

Luther felt the call of the outdoors. Seeking inspiration in the streets, he headed west and came to the Bleecker Street Cinema, where a film called *Rosemary's Baby* was playing. Strange that John Cassavetes, with a face inclined to laughter, should be in a horror film. And Mia Farrow. Hadn't she been married to angry Frank Sinatra and given him clobber for trying to contain her? And that hair, as short as her eyes were big, so aphrodisiacal, like that of Jean Seberg in *Breathless* many years before, and the ceaseless longing the beauty of her perfectly shaped head induced. She was a danger zone, in radical ferment, more powerful than her frailty would suggest, neither masculine nor feminine but somewhere beyond both. A woman flying the flag of androgyny.

It wasn't right that people weren't who they appeared to be and that smiling John Cassavetes should lead Mia Farrow into sin and that a child should be born from iniquity and that she should then fall victim to an evil scheme. The world worked against innocence, and it wasn't lost on Luther that he had attempted to do the same with his now abandoned drive to lead Sarah into sexually forbidden territory.

The theater was desolate on that afternoon. One of the few patrons took a seat in uncomfortable and unnecessary proximity, virtually breathing on Luther's neck from the next row back. As the film grew creepier, Luther's fear as to the man's intentions led him to move to a seat behind him, but the man showed no evidence of malign intent. Still, Luther had to struggle to resist an urge to do the man in kind, that is, to direct some of his breath to the man's neck and then be able to say, "How does it feel, Mister Stealth Sleaze? How does it feel?"

Luther headed for the bar on Spring Street after the movie with the idea of having a beer or two.

"When are we going to trade T-shirts?" the bartender said to a woman speaking with a German accent. She too was drinking beer.

"When would you like to trade?" she asked.

"The time is coming soon. I will let you know," he said.

She had buck teeth and he had a ruined face. Luther did not begrudge them their incipient connection. He was ex-navy, a real juicer, divorced. "It cost me six hundred dollars to take my kids to the Caribbean," he grouched. A man who showed up day after day in jeans and a blue work shirt, both garments worn from use. A lean man with sad

puppy eyes that burned you with the truth of his existence, that he was going down without dreams having been met. You took him on his own terms, his drinking too big to hide. Sometimes Luther would see him late at night staggering toward home or another bar or just a doorway to sleep it off.

*I wondered about that man, Celeste, I wondered, but not in a way I could apply to myself.*

They didn't go to Camp that Memorial Day weekend. Instead they spent it at her parents' apartment. Hookers in hot pants were all over Broadway, where he had gone to pick up a pizza. The weekend was full of indolence, in an apartment with far more amenities than their own. *Hud*, with Paul Newman, was playing on the TV. He had never, as teenager, seen a sexier woman than Patricia Neal in a pair of jeans, unless it was Janet Leigh in a white bra in a hotel room in Phoenix in *Psycho*. And there was *Tokyo Destiny*, a flick about submarine warfare in World War II, with Cary Grant and John Garfield, and *Hell Is for Heroes*, with Steve McQueen and Bobby Darin. And the Boston Celtics and Phoenix Suns, with Jo Jo "I'm a cut man" White and John "I can eat a whole stick of butter" Havlicek and Dave "Wild Thing" Cowens doing it up right against Paul "I'm so tanned" Westphal and company so order could prevail until Bill Walton was fully healed. He had come east to join the Celtics and had been playing the last part of the season with a fractured wrist, it was discovered.

*Celeste, I snooped in Lydia's journal that weekend. She was still using three-hole punch loose-leaf binders and stood them up straight, with roman numerals on the spine, as if to continue to suggest that they were on a par with the bound volumes on the shelves*

*and didn't need the ritual of print, as Sylvia Plath called it, to make them so. She was rough on Peter, recalling his Austrian lover's advice that Peter should be teaching before the two had a falling out. Not in the journal but from Sarah did I learn that Peter had confessed to Lydia his affair with the German man. Celeste, that may have been a mistake. She was not equipped to handle the news of his love interest in someone else, whether a man or a woman, as Peter may have hoped. The problem was that he had nowhere to turn with his grief and sorrow but to her. By now they were man and wife and Claire and Sarah had already been born. We need to be careful, we do, not to place our desire for relief before consideration of others when the result of such a confession will cause harm. Once again I am reminded of my own indiscretion, or should I not go down that road?*

*She had something else to say about Peter. His books would never make any money because they explored subjects previously covered by others and with greater skill. Celeste, she was angry with Peter. She was giving Radcliffe clobber to his Rutgers self. She was saying that even Peter, who had survived on only a candy bar some days during the Great Depression and who had witnessed the insanity sandwiches eaten by those driving their primitive cars on dangerous country roads prior to surrendering themselves as carnage and who, as a result, had driven with precision and full vigilance soaring and who had taken a vow that he lived up to to never strike a woman after seeing his father beat his mother and who had bombed Nazi Germany and who had written books and scholarly articles and who had the big thing in his pants that she herself craved—with all this and much much more to attest to his worth did Lydia still render the judgment that he*



*did not walk like a man or talk like a man. These things was she saying as her muffled cry of pain into the void of eternity on the paper on which she wrote, as she was in the wasteland of her days, that time well into her forties when her body was no longer a draw, not to Peter or to most men, and her hunger had to go unsatisfied on many levels and consolation was not near. We must elevate, Celeste. We must put aside the paperback books and sit and focus on the breath several times each day so we may discover and rediscover that which is great within us. We must go where peace and understanding are to be found and where joy and vision have their source.*

They left early that Monday morning, so as not to be surprised by the Van Dines. He wondered if they hadn't exhausted their free access to the apartment, though it was not a concern shared by Sarah.

The men who had been to war were gathered on the terrace in front of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. Some wore their medals and caps and hats from their time of service. A brass band played for the small gathering. He thought of Maura, the girl he had been seeing before he met Sarah, and of the legionnaire's cap that fell from her father's head the night he stormed into Luther's room and tried to pound him into senselessness. A sad, forlorn bunch these men and their loved ones were. The world had gone shopping. It was at the beach. It didn't have time for memorializing. But they did. They were still back there in those war years, when they had been part of something bigger than themselves, which he could only experience vicariously through watching *Tokyo Destiny* and *Hell Is for Heroes*. 4-F, low IQ. This too he thought staring at these one-time men of strength. And yes, he recalled the photograph of Sarah posed in front of the marble

cylinder that had appeared in the *New York Times* some years before, his presence deleted by the photo editors, who had no use for drabness and boniness of that degree. The memorial service for himself as much as for them, as his mind would have it.

Later that day, like storm water, brackish, foul, pestilence-breeding, surging against the flimsy dam Luther had erected, Luke and “get it on” Brenda called from a pay phone down the block again. It was no way to talk of his brother or characterize Brenda, but he could feel that way. Minutes later they were at the door.

“Someone tried to call me filth. You know who that might be?” Luke asked. His shirt tail hung out of his loose-fitting jeans.

“I don’t,” Luther said.

“Our Bible-quoting sister, Rachel, that is who. ‘You stole some man’s wife and child. God will deal with you. You are living in sin and His judgment has been passed.’ So I tell her to take her Bible and go fuck herself. She’s ubazz,” Luke said, going Godfather on their sister.

“That’s too bad. She’s not well,” Luther said.

Brenda spoke up. “Your sister didn’t have her facts straight. That’s all it was. The aggravation Lenny put me through with his drug addiction and all-around smelliness. He was disintegrating right in front of me. Trying to take away my freedom. Trying to take away my natural high. I don’t let anyone play with me like that. I have the right to ask for respect.”

“Yes,” Luther said, hoping neither of them would discern that he had passed the same sort of judgment on Luke, in his mind if not with his mouth. But Brenda did not stay in outrage mode. She had more sensual delights to propose when Luther suggested they head for a nearby café.

“Why don’t we head for a topless bar instead? They have a fine one down on Canal Street. We could get our thing going watching the girls work the pole. You see what I’m saying?”

Neither Luther nor Sarah asked what this thing was.

“You’ve got to admit that she says what you both are thinking. Am I right?” Luke asked.

“Finn’s. We’re going to Finn’s for a little bit of light and a little bit of dark,” Luther said, decisively.

“What’s this crap about light and dark?” Luke asked.

“Sometimes it’s in people. Sometimes it’s in beer. Follow me and I will show you,” Luther said.

“My fucking brother with his light and dark. Don’t be weirder than you are. Tell me, Sarah, is he writing bad shit about us? Is that what he spends his days doing?”

“Luther writes bad shit about everyone,” Sarah said. “That’s all he knows how to do.”

“What the fuck you want to be doing that for?” Luke asked.

“First, I don’t write bad shit about everyone. Sarah is only joking. Second, you do what you do so white line can continue.”

“White line can continue? What that’s supposed to mean?”

“You’ve never been on one of those country roads where sometimes there’s a single white line so you don’t try to pass and then there are times when there’s a broken white line so you can pass at your own risk? That doesn’t mean something to you that there is a virtually endless succession of such roads? ‘Country Road, Take Me Home,’ that doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“Why do you have to be talking to me like I’m some sort of fucking moron in front of Brenda and Sarah when it’s you who’s maybe the fucking moron. It’s not like you went to some great college and got a great education. Just don’t be talking down,” Luke went on, moving in the direction of high dudgeon but not quite there yet.

“There’s this song I heard, ‘A Woman Can’t Find a Man Who Won’t Blow Her Brother.’ You ever hear that song?” Provocative and unnerving as the question was, there was cause for gratitude that Brenda was trying to change the subject.

“I haven’t heard the song but the title is a definite truth bomb,” Sarah said.

Hearing Sarah gave Luke a charge. “You hear that? My brother here, let me just say it this way. My mother was relieved when she learned he had a girlfriend back in high school.”

“That’s an old story, I believe,” Luther said.

“Some stories have staying power,” Luke replied.

The pungent smell of beer as they entered, the bits of overheard conversation, the energy of the burly bartender in his white apron working the stick, all of it was welcome

to Luther, meaning as it did freedom from the confines of the apartment. In the bigger space of Finn's, the sexual energy of Luke and Brenda became diffuse, less threatening.

"It's a nice place, isn't it?" Luther said, his light and dark before him and Luke having the same, while Brenda went for only the light and Sarah had a seltzer.

But the change of scene did not mean for Luke a shift of focus. "You know you're living with an alcoholic. Did he tell you about the time he came to visit and within half an hour had drunk the entire six-pack in the refrigerator?"

"He's trying," Sarah said.

"He hasn't learned how to drink like a man yet. When he learns that, he won't be alcoholic anymore," Luke said.

"Ic," Luther said.

"What?" Luke replied.

"Short for alcoholic. It saves you some breath."

"You'll see. It won't be so funny you keep this up," Luke said.

Luther couldn't tell if his brother was trying to save him or destroy him.

Albert Camus wrote: "Not doing is acceptance of the future—but with grief in regard to the past. It's a dead man's philosophy."

Luther had no idea what Albert Camus meant.

Dr. Rosner said, "You seem forlorn and apathetic." Luther understood every word that Dr. Rosner said.

Seeing Luther flat on his back, Sarah said, “I think you miss Dr. Rosner,” because Dr. Rosner had gone away for a week. This too he heard with comprehension, even if he did not like the sound of it.

Free of Luke and Brenda, Luther made an effort at moral probity while out drinking at the Waverly Place Watering Hole. He would stay focused on the Suns-Celtics game in the championship series and not do the swivel head thing. But three drinks later a woman took the stool next to him and ordered him to smile. She said that his eyes showed such pain and she was sorry she could not help him. He asked her where she lived. Would it really help him to know? She asked. Possibly it would, he said. Would he like her to show him where she lived? Oh yes, he would like that very much, he said.

Her place was nearby. A nice building with a locked front door. She offered him a joint, which they shared. When he was about to come he pulled out and put his penis in her mouth and she swallowed everything that tore from him, swallowed his *seed*, and said, as if she were a prophet, “I knew you were going to do that.” He took the image of her away with him back into the street—her frizzy hair, her wide mouth, her bleary eyes.

Two bums were huddled in a doorway, it being a cold night even if it was June. Luther didn’t ask them if they were bums. He said they were bums. He said it in his mind. One had a beard. One was clean shaven. Luther left them there and headed home, wondering what the city would look like to them in the morning and whether, if the street was truly their home, that constituted a kind of freedom.

“Where were you, Mr. Ic?” Sarah said, in the morning, having been asleep when he came through the door in the wee hours.

“Ambush. Deadly crossfire. Managed to crawl into the bush, where I lay for hours.”

“Where were you, I asked?”

“I was—you know where I was.”

“This has got to stop, Luther. It has to.” She turned away so he might feel the dark weight of his remorse.

Reservations were growing in him about the apartment. The cramped quarters. The lack of privacy. What kind of writing area was that, a corner of the kitchen and close enough to the refrigerator to touch it? How nice it might be to have a room of his own, with a door he could close, like Sarah had. But it wasn't only about him. The Chinatown loft had helped to alleviate his guilt; it had been his gift to Sarah, constituting proof that he was for her, not against her, and that he wanted her to succeed as an artist. Her room, however perfect it might be for him, was a real comedown from the space she had enjoyed previously. The loft had been the ideal environment; it drove them to work. It was built for work. The light manufacturing, the sweatshops, that were probably part of its history. The apartment, with its modern bathroom and kitchen, now seemed too domesticating; it was putting their dreams to sleep.

Dr. Rosner had one thing to say. “A larger place is a metaphor for distance from Sarah.”

Always with the troublemaking, that man. Always with the need to create anxiety Luther couldn't tolerate.

“Could you not comfort him? Are there not words of reassurance that you can offer that he will not lose his job?”

Luther's mother was on the line. Harry Stavigros, one of Simon Weill's partners, had brought in a college student to evaluate the building operation and placed him in charge while Harry was in the hospital for surgery.

“What can I say or do? I have no idea what Harry Stavigros has in mind.”

“He is your brother. I need you to talk to him. He is not a hanging string but neither is he a sturdy oak.”

“Of course he's not a hanging string. I'm the hanging string,” Luther said, only claiming the designation she had given him.

“You have moved away, while he is still here. Do you not remember that hymn, ‘Rescue the Perishing’? Must I sing it for you?”

He did, most certainly. It brought the cold mountain air of the Catskills to him and the cricket chorus in the night and the rough pine benches on which he had sat through the fiery sermons and of the young female counselor he worshiped who was soon sent away for reasons unspecified.

She was telling him to love his brother, something she didn't need to do. Luther only resented Luke when he came too close and where Sarah was involved, like just the other day when he showed up with get it on Brenda.



And so he went calling on Luke. “Are you all right? Is Harry Stavigros doing right by you?” as if he was the godfather and could make things right if they weren’t.

And Luke said, “Harry Stavigros is not right in his head. They should be operating on his fucking brain, not removing his gall bladder.”

“Is he dropping more poop? Is he conducting aerial bombardments with the fecal matter?” Luther asked, remembering the credo of Harry Stavigros that sometimes you had to shit on a business to improve it.

“I don’t know what he’s doing,” Luke said.

“Mother says he brought in a college student.”

“Not college. A PhD. Some kind of hotel management consultant. It’s all right. He won’t last a month.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because no one in his right mind wants to work in a shit hole like that.”

“You’re probably right. Anyway, I’m sure Stavigros needs you.” Luke was on a wine drunk. Luther’s own hadn’t yet begun.

“He’s an idiot. All those Greeks that invested in the building? Weill bamboozled them. They thought they were getting some great piece of real estate, like they were buying into the Plaza. What they got was roach-infested rooms and major headaches. The boiler needs to be replaced and the whole building needs new wiring.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Oh, they have tons of money, but I don’t see them sinking it endlessly in that place. But that’s enough about me. What about you?” Luke made a surprising turn.

“What about me?”

“Like what do you do? Do you do anything?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I know you breathe but what do you really do?”

“I told you before. I’m trying to write. White Line Continue.”

“You told us that before. But when are we going to see this White Line Continue shit?”

“It’s not shit. I mean, it’s not very good, but it’s not shit. It just needs some more meat on its bones. That’s all.”

“Meat on its bones. Let me tell you. Sometimes I think I have more brains in my pinky than you have in that big block head of yours.”

“Yes. I imagine you do,” Luther said.

“I’m just kidding with you,” Luke said.

“I know,” Luther replied.

The emotional temperature of the city had to be taken and the current reading was hot for early June. A man threatened to jump from the roof of a building as the onlookers below egged him on. When the fire engines and the police cars wailed their approach, the crowd was prepared with bottles and rocks to hurl at the uniformed would-be saviors who would rob them of the spectacle of death. And if perplexity squadrons were required to fathom the logic of such a hostile response, then they were also needed over by the Hudson River, where an old black man clad only in a bright blue bathing suit and one gray sock

dove into the scummy water. Soon people were calling for someone to rescue the swimmer, as he was visibly struggling, flailing his arms, and began to go under. But the swimmer had a companion, a younger man, who saw things differently and threatened violence against anyone who tried to offer assistance. When the police arrived and threw a line to the bather, the man fought fiercely with them, seeking to obstruct their attempt to give aid. Finally handcuffed, he filled the air with profanity, spewing his rage at the motherfucking white devils with their evil shit, always fucking with the black man and trying to hold him down.

Present at both events, Luther was left shaken, and could only wonder at a world in which people who were expected to show love didn't, and could only further wonder if he too, in his own way, was an advocate for death, that of others if not yet himself.

South from the commissary, he stared out at a vista of blighted buildings, the once brightly painted advertisements on the walls faded by the sun and the elements. The same picture of decline had presented itself in the short walk from the subway to the *Times* building. The theaters along Forty-second Street had been turned into porn palaces. Marquee titles like *Debbie Does Dallas* and *Young Sluts* where once feature films like *The Days of Wine and Roses* and *Lawrence of Arabia* had played. All industry on the West Side seemed to have fled and whitewashed windows were everywhere as decay set in and spread. Soon he would be left behind with the poor and people too old to run.

The commissary itself was like a geriatric ward. “I could die any minute, right on the street. The doctors took everything out. There’s nothing left in there. No veins, no nothing,” said a shriveled old man.

“I gave my doctor hell,” a peroxide blonde up in years replied.

They came in off the street, this brigade of the elderly, taking advantage of public access to the commissary and its low prices. A kind of Horn and Hardart’s crowd they were.

Luther had gotten his job through the *New York Times*, as the advertisement said, only it wasn’t the sort of job you would put on a resume. An unsalaried job. Working from a well used list, he made calls to apartment dwellers throughout the city hoping to interest them in a subscription to the paper and thus earn himself a small commission. The majority of people hung up quickly, a few expressing annoyance, having received such a call only days before. No one bit at the offer.

His one companion in the two weeks he lasted was a man named Bill Jones, who showed up each day in a suit and tie. Luther had some idea his life had become as plain as his name since his separation from his wife, who lived in Suffolk County with their two children. It was an idea he slowly became separated from as they began to talk.

“My friend, who is studying to be a psychiatrist, says nine- and ten-year-old boys are selling themselves on the street near here,” Bill Jones said, in the commissary during a break.

“Is that right” Luther asked. “How about 11- and 12-year-olds?”

“That my friend has collected no data on,” Bill Jones said.

“Your friend collects data?” Luther asked.

“Oh yes. He’s very scientific. Very thorough. Those scientists need to be. Our lives depend on that,” Bill Jones said.

“And how does he collect this data?” Luther asked.

“Oh, I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Why is that?”

“Because science is very competitive. Dog eat dog. And I would hate for anyone to steal my friend’s secret, as he has a unique methodology.”

“And has he told you what this methodology is?”

“Again, I am not at liberty to say,” Bill Jones said.

“What a strange business,” Luther said.

“What is a strange business?” said another member of the sales force, a woman named Ruth Solgar.

“Bill was saying that nine- and ten-year old boys are selling themselves on the street near here,” Luther said.

“Probably even younger. They’re ubiquitous,” Ruth Solgar said.

“What does that mean, ubiquitous? That they are evil?” Bill Jones asked.

“No. You’re thinking of *iniquitous*. *Ubiquitous* means they are everywhere,” Ruth Solgar explained. She did not get didactic on Bill Jones. She had too much of herself for that. She just was matter-of-fact in her tone.

Luther noted the fact that Bill Jones had sought him out of all the transients arriving and departing this unfruitful sales effort and wondered what that said about him

that Bill Jones would do that. But what he really began to wonder was if there was no scientist and that the trumpeted yet secret methodology was little more than the personal experience Bill Jones himself had accumulated cruising for little boys. And if so, then the word *iniquitous* would apply, though not to the little boys but to Bill Jones himself.

After their shift the following day, Bill Jones asked, "How do you get home?"

"I get home on the subway. Sometimes I take the bus or just walk," Luther said.

He did not ask Bill Jones why he had made the inquiry. He did not want to go toward Bill Jones in any way on this day, unless it was in answer to a question such as the one Bill Jones had just asked, and then he would tell him only as much as he had to. His responses would be as clean shaven as Bill Jones's name. He was not trying to be mean to Bill Jones, but fear had grown in him of the man since their talk with Ruth Solgar the previous day. Besides, Luther had the feeling Bill Jones would come toward him with a follow-up question whether he leaned in toward him with his response or not because Bill Jones wanted something from him and he wanted nothing from Bill Jones.

"I ask because I take a delicious walk each night to my apartment on Thirtieth Street just off Lexington Avenue and I would be happy to have you accompany me."

*Delicious.* Bill Jones had used the word as bait so Luther would lean in toward him, but he was not biting. "Sorry. I'm heading uptown," he said, refraining from adding that perhaps another time they could walk together.

"Then I will walk out with you. We can at least do that." Bill Jones's face shone with a smile of confidence in which Luther also saw aggression and even menace, as if it

were only a matter of time before Luther succumbed to his will, as a newspaper to which a match has been set must soon succumb to the flames.

Luther did not acquiesce verbally. He did want to slide down the surrender slope. He simply headed for the elevator, and the fact that Bill Jones followed after was nothing to do with him. Nor did he sing, when they reached the corner of Broadway, “Most Likely You Go Your Way and I’ll Go Mine.” He had no need of an avowal of dismissal of Bill Jones, though later he was struck by the thought that his silence might have been taken by Bill Jones as a tacit admission of the man’s inevitable hegemony over him.

*Celeste, it is for me to tell you what you already know, that in Times Square one must be alert with all his senses reporting to him, as I wasn’t when a child that time the man approached and led me into the subway phone booth and had me touch his thing and touch it some more until he splattered the black phone. Vigilance must soar, Celeste. It must soar.*

He dreamt of a little league ballpark on One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street and Broadway. The projects were gone. The elevated subway line was gone, but the field was there, neglected and unused. The discovery of it brought Luther to tears for all that had been lost and now had been found, if only in its dying form. He then found himself in the office of Dr. Frodkey, who now wore a beard and resembled Trotsky. Dr. Frodkey was surprisingly erudite, making allusions to people and things Luther knew nothing about. Luther informed him that Sarah had gone to a reading at CCNY and was, even as they spoke, making love with a woman.

Luther recorded the dream the next morning in his notebook, having some idea that it might hold clues to where he had been and where he was going and of what he could hope for in another world, with the elements rearranged.

In this world there was a big rearrangement. The Van Dines sold their magnificent apartment and moved to a smaller one on a lower floor in the same building. The logic of the change was apparent. The children were out of the nest and the smaller apartment would send the message that they couldn't return. Luther enjoyed helping them with the transfer of boxes. The small amount of manual assistance made his relationship with them more substantial and real. He saw, not for the first time, that the gifts they had lavished were so many as to lose their meaning.

Not that they were endlessly lavishing.

"Did you happen to see our pair of binoculars during the move?" Lydia called to ask, after they had settled in their new dwelling.

"Binoculars? No," Luther said.

"They were Canon binoculars," Lydia said, as if the brand name might refresh his memory.

"Canon binoculars. Are they on a par with Nikon binoculars? I know they have been trying very hard to be with their cameras. A brand name is very important. My mother always said as much. She always stressed that I was to get Crosse & Blackwell jam when she sent me to buy groceries."

"Have you seen them, Luther?" She was pressing in on him with the weight of her contained indignation.



“Am I trying your patience? Is that it?”

“You could say so.”

“May I note that of all the qualities a person might have, only one, patience, is used with the verb *to try*. Do you find that interesting?”

“I find nothing that you are saying very interesting, only borderline insolent. What is interesting is that in spite of all our efforts, Peter and I are left to feel that we must start all over again with you each time we meet or speak. There is this undercurrent of hostility. Why should such a thing be?”

“I have not taken your Canon binoculars,” Luther said. “I am not a thief of that order.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Luther. Did I say you had taken them?”

“Were you casting asparagus or aspersions at me?”

“Luther, what is wrong with you? I was asking you a question.”

“Yes, a question. With the full weight of the law behind you and a posse of thousands.”

“Are you not well, Luther? Should you be speaking with your doctor?”

“This conversation is making me very sad.”

“And me as well. We will do better the next time.”

“Will there be a next time?”

“Of course there will be a next time.”

“For your love.”

“What?”

“The Yardbirds. 1965. Would you care for me to sing it?”

“That won’t be necessary, Luther.”

“Just as well, as I don’t really know the lyrics. That’s part of being a Garatdjian, as I have thought or said many times.”

*Celeste, must I ask for forgiveness that a complete fiction unfolds where I command truth to hold sway? Does truth not have dominion where fiction wills to go? I am in over my head when I go down such a road. What can be said is that if I was trouble for the Van Dines in the year 1976, there was more to come.*

*Years before a girl small for her age came to me outside the school where we were sixth grade classmates. A child toad-like in appearance; already you could see her as an old and shriveled woman. As if she were a tugboat, she had in tow her huge and imposing father. The incongruity of a man so massive producing such tiny offspring presented itself strongly as they stood before me.*

*“My daughter tells me you have taken her pencil case. If that is so, I must ask that you return it.” The girl’s father had an English accent, and even as an eleven-year-old I had the sense that he must possess a formidable intellect to go with his great size. He was not a threatening man, Celeste. His voice suggested innate gentleness and a sense of fairness as well. The phrase if that is so told me as much. I replied emphatically that I had not taken his daughter’s pencil case, but she insisted that I had.*

*“That is not true. How can you say such a thing?” I said, with full astonishment, to this girl with whom I had had little prior contact.*

*“I say it because it is true. I say it because I know you,” the girl said.*

*I could only deny the accusation once again, and heatedly, as I was stung by the unfairness. But it was her unfairness, not her father's. He did not press the matter. He had a philosopher's mind and was governed by principles that his daughter had not yet embraced. I sensed that then and see it more clearly now, Celeste. It was a quality that my own father, with his summary judgments, lacked. We all want to be seen and heard. We all want the sense that justice has been done.*

*Because I know you. A girl I had hardly noticed had me pegged as a thief. While I stole from my mother and my aunt and stole, or attempted to steal, pens from stores, and was caught trying to clip a coin from a classmate's collection, which earned me eviction from his family's apartment, I had never stolen from my classmates at school.*

*I could only wonder, these years later, what it was that Lydia knew that led her to ask me, not Sarah, about the missing pair of binoculars. There had been that moment of decision, on first setting foot in the Van Dine apartment years before, when I held in my hand a first edition of one of Melville's early and lesser novels, Typee or Omoo, and with great effort resisted the impulse to filch it with the intention of selling the volume for a high price. As the years passed, I looked back with great relief that I had not succumbed to that impulse, and that it had not visited me again. If I had their love, Celeste, and in some measure I felt I did, then what need was there for such larceny? But perhaps it was a thief of a different kind that I had become and which Lydia sensed, a thief intent on appropriating their experience.*

Because love was in his heart for some of the places he had been, Luther continued to hold onto the Hell's Kitchen apartment. Four years had passed since he had given it to Roddy Rumble, in the hope that the low-priced rental would provide him with a basis for his life and stem his wandering ways and possibly even put him in the matrimonial mindset. Luther was thinking of that hellion also hailing from the Deep South, Luella the Late Night Caller and champion of the interrogative over the declarative in her oral communications, even when the latter was called for. But two into one didn't go, and three into one didn't go even more. When Luella, with her monitoring devices, learned that Roddy Rumble had a place of his own, she caught the first Greyhound out of Baton Rouge with Ambrosia, the seven-year-old Roddy had fathered, and showed up at his door the next day. If love was love, hate was also hate, and the two-room sublet soon became a cauldron of fury. Roddy Rumble had feelings for his daughter, but the prevailing feeling for Luella, after three days sharing the same space with her, was of homicidal rage, which led him to threaten to end her existence with the iron bar of the police lock he brandished in his hand, a threat he mercifully didn't follow through on. That same day he vanished and had not since returned.

Ever since Luella had lived alone in the apartment. Luther arranged with her to send him the rent money, which he then paid to the realtor. The subterfuge was, in his mind, a necessary one, as periodically in his time in the apartment a man would come to his door. He assumed the man to be an orthodox Jew, given his black suit and big black hat and the curls hanging down the sides of his face. The visitor would remind Luther that he was eligible for relocation money should he decide to move. How much money

the man couldn't say. There would have to be some discussion. In any case, Luther didn't want to jeopardize the possibility of a payout from the city by having Luella send the rent directly to the realtor. He didn't want her to become, de facto, the prime tenant, which could easily happen as he had never been issued a lease. While it occurred to Luther that the possibility was great the same man would, in the course of the four years since Luther had moved, knock on the door and find Luella living there, the likelihood did not deter him from wishing to maintain the charade. But there was something else. For a couple of years Luella remained grateful to Luther and cooperative with him. Then the change occurred. He no longer received the rent money directly from her, and when he called she would simply say, "I'm not here? Can you understand? Or do you always talk to people who are not present?" In such a manner would she address him. Luther came to suspect that Luella had built a case against him and perhaps all men. Her anger was transferable from Roddy Rumble to whomever. They were all fucking pricks, as Sarah might say in one of her vitriolic moments, thinking of the father who had not loved her enough to continue to protect her in the way a father should and who did not appreciate women in the way a father should. An insurrection was taking place. Luella was flying her freedom flag.

*Celeste, I stole a life when I extracted those sums from the renting office. Till then I had been a struggling, anxious, woefully insecure college student. The money provided a buffer from the world, as Lydia's money enabled Peter to keep his distance from the workplace. And I have little doubt that I was seeking to emulate Peter by gaining the means to have his lifestyle. This I have acknowledged previously. But what I also see is*

*that I lost the quality of empathy. With financial insecurity behind me, I had insufficient capacity or willingness to place myself in the shoes of those who were struggling, such as Luella. Otherwise I would have withdrawn my claim on the apartment and simply left her to try to hold onto it. Even now, when the nest egg I had built up was being fast depleted and I should been more understanding of this woman who was trying to make ends meet for her and her young daughter, there I was, returning to the scene, walking through the long corridor of the front building to the courtyard and on into the farther west of the two identical rear buildings. And yet, prepared as I was to speak with Luella, a sign on her front door gave me pause:*

Luther, whatever your last name is, you're not wanted here. You go on and git before I sic the dogs of my imagination on you, and you can trust me that they are more ferocious than any hounds in the flesh.

He lingered outside, staring at the curtained windows of the apartment where he had spent four years of his life. Memories, sounds, smells came to him. That stereo set Luke had given him, on which he had listened to Alison Steele, the night bird, on WNEW-FM. The smell of incense as he listened to *Nashville Skyline*. Some burning pain driven by promise unfulfilled rose in him. If he wondered why he didn't simply leave, the answer came in the image of Nadia that formed in his mind. That wounded face full of repression, the skin pulled tight as a drumhead. And soon there she was, emerging from the long corridor, as he had done only a while before, a brown-bagged bottle in hand.

"Stranger," she said, a smile forcing its way through the complex of emotions his presence aroused.

“Persona non grata is more like it,” he said.

“Why do you say that? Oh right, the note on Luella’s door. Don’t worry about it. She’s not too friendly with anyone. What are you doing here?”

“Good question.” He followed her up the stairs and into her apartment. It was darker than he had remembered.

“I am the same way,” he said.

“What?”

“The same way as you with your apartment. I don’t let much light in. I am wedded to the dark. My therapist says I am an enigma.”

“What does being an enigma have to do with liking the dark?”

“Actually, he hurt my feelings. He has been pressing me to get a job. When I told him I was having difficulty imagining myself as part of the workforce, he applied the word, and with some scorn, I have to believe.”

“How did you get by when you were living here? You always seemed able to buy whatever you pleased.”

“I was on a secret mission and still am, although now too much light is being applied to my life. There is more exposure, as if I have been flushed out of my hiding place.”

“Why did you want to hide?”

“I need the dark to complete my secret mission, which is not so secret anymore.”

“And what is that?”

“White Line Continue. It will contain the beginning and the end and all the points in between, so people can see where I have been and remember me when it comes time for the dirt to be thrown on me. It is my book of life but also of death.”

“You’re still sad,” she said.

“Yes, and so are you,” he said. “Are you still dancing?”

“Yes, but I don’t have the same energy or enthusiasm. There will have to be a change.”

“A change, yes. My old life won’t sustain itself. Things have happened that require me to go in another direction, only I don’t know how.”

“Why did you really come here?”

“Well, I felt the need to tie up this loose end with Luella. But then I saw her very public note to me and I realized I am done here if I know what is good for me. But then you came along, and just before you did I imagined your arrival. So maybe I came back to see you. I feel I wasn’t nice to you.”

“I didn’t feel you so how can it matter?”

“You didn’t feel me?”

“Didn’t I tell you that at the time? I felt nothing. Nothing.”

“Do you want to try again?”

“I don’t think so, Luther.”

Luther went to the window. “Are they new?” he said, seeing the ugly, crisp-crossing silver gates that had been placed on it.



“I don’t want any more unannounced visitors,” Nadia said “Sometimes I don’t even want announced visitors.”

“Yes,” Luther said. The wall she was putting up was making him anxious.

“I have a friend. She will be here in a few minutes, in fact. She would not approve.”

“Approve of what?”

“You and me.”

“Why is that?”

“She is my lady friend.”

“Your lady friend?”

“Yes, my lady friend.”

The repetition and the tone brought home the meaning. He wondered whom he was talking to. She was stronger, colder than he had remembered her. Maybe it was the bitterness of thwarted dreams and limited horizons and such prolonged exploitation. Her attic life back in the Midwest. She had been a refuge for him, and now she wasn’t. She had invited him, but really, she was barring the door.

A lady friend. He sat with the rejection for a while. She had gone over to the other side, leaving him alone with the ugly men. It was OK. She was releasing him, telling him he had no need to be concerned for her. She was doing quite well for herself in her small world. It wasn’t her fault if he was bent in a penitential bow.

“I see,” he said.

“You make yourself more important than you are. You are not alone in doing this.”

Now she was hitting him with the flat of her hand. In his mind's eye, she was doing this. The change was there in her emphatic declaration. Her coldness. She wanted no pity. wanted to be pitied. She had no need of a galoot on an unsolicited mission of mercy.

“Do you still smoke?” he asked.

“No,” she said,

On the table was a box of Parliament cigarettes. She had misunderstood. She had perhaps thought he was asking her to enter smoke heaven with him.

A key turned in the lock and a woman entered. She was massive and she was old, a lot older than Nadia, and offered bluntness with her bulk. “This is a small apartment and I am a large woman,” she said.

He felt himself to be in a court of justice, facing an angry prosecutor and an unsympathetic jury of one.

“You are having your day, and the only question is will I ever have mine?” Luther said.

“You've had your day,” the woman said, rising to a new level of bellicosity.

The words *just deserts* blazed forth in his mind. “I will see you, Nadia,” Luther said. She did not respond.

Downstairs, in the courtyard, he encountered Jackson Holyoke. Though he was not singing “Country Road,” he did show the same fidelity to his denim duds as the

bearded Cuban did to his army fatigues and seemed not to care that his tight apparel revealed a ballooning gut. A film of sweat caused Jackson Holyoke's moon face to shine and Luther noted that baldness was making steady progress on his former neighbor's dome.

"I haven't forgotten your name or what you did. You cost me my best friend and opened the door to the she-devil herself," Jackson Holyoke said.

"Say again," Luther said.

"Don't give me your say again shit. You know exactly what you did with your do-good crap."

"So you *are saying* I am a do-right man?"

"I'm saying you're a piece of shit. You cost me my best friend. Roddy Rumble will not come within fifty miles of this place with lunatic Luella ensconced in the apartment you gave her."

*Enskonced* was not a word that was supposed to come from the rat hole of Jackson Holyoke, and diverted Luther from giving his nemesis some fire of his own. All he could think to do was hew to the line of the factual. "As I remember, I sublet the apartment to my friend Roddy Rumble," he said, resisting the impulse to say more.

"Let me tell you something, dick up your ass. First, Roddy Rumble was not your friend. The best he could say about you was that you were peculiar and that you bought expensive books you never read. You don't want to know the worst he had to say. Second, there are those committed to the single path not from weakness but from

strength. They have a higher calling than the marriage bed. And yet there you went trying to make Roddy Rumble something he is not.”

“And this higher calling. It is to sing the great ‘Country Road’ in the confines of your apartment over and over?”

“You listen to me, you ugly shit, with the snideness all over your face that you try to conceal. Just get out of here and take all your troublemaking shit with you.”

As Luther and Jackson Holyoke were reasoning together, a woman entered the building carrying a sketchpad under her arm. This is a woman who can receive a man well, Luther couldn’t help but think, seeing the look of love on her, before he turned his attention back to the matter at hand. But now here she was again, exiting the very building she had entered only a minute before, creating a sense of mystery and summoning in Luther a desire to help her in any way that he could. As she walked on by, he wanted to sing not the hideous “Country Road” but “Pretty Woman” with all the octave power and earnestness of Roy Orbison. He wanted to lay it on the line to this woman with her blond hair in a ponytail and her pert, troubled face that in that moment she was his everything, the very balm for the wounds of rebuff he had been receiving. The realm of art was the realm of childhood, and he was good at the latter, if not the former, and so there was the potential for affinity.

“Can I help you?” Jackson Holyoke called to the woman, having seen the same look of disappointment, even distress, on her face. He himself wore an expression of smiling treachery worthy of a snake.

“I was looking for my friend Edie. We were supposed to meet.”

“Hey, look, you can stay with me until she comes. Edie and I are neighbors,” Jackson Holyoke said.

“Great.” The woman smiled. Just like that Jackson Holyoke had managed to change her sad rags to glad rags.

“You and I are done,” Jackson Holyoke said to Luther, then whisked the woman upstairs before she could change her mind.

The long, narrow corridor should have been easy to traverse. It was a thoroughfare not of pleasure but of expectation, promising at the other end the freedom of the street where he could perhaps begin to treat his pain. But he was not several steps into that corridor when from the street side a girl of perhaps no more than eight entered and fixed him with her dark eyes. Behind her came a pear-shaped woman with a more malignant gaze carrying an A & P bag.

“It’s him, our torturer, Abigail Sue. Just let him walk on through and out of our life. Just let him pass on by. He got our message and he got it good. Ain’t no man messes with Luella who don’t pay a price. A man who thinks he has answers for others when he don’t even have answers for himself. Let’s just step aside so he can ease his filth out of here.”

The passing was not an easy one, and in proximity to basilisk Luella, he found no words to speak in reply. He was willing to let her verdict stand in the courtroom she had fashioned, and to take guidance from the name of the signature song of the very great Dionne Warwick. Walk on by, he said to himself. Just walk on by.

*Now Celeste, I won't go so far as to say that monitoring devices had been installed in my mind, but the experience with Nadia and Jackson Holyoke and Luella were sufficiently jarring as to leave me in a state of acute self-consciousness. At some point we must allow the principle of full candor to be our guide and acknowledge the role of inanimate objects in our lives, calling them what they are, our enduring and faithful friends. Quickly I metamorphosed into a train, a New York Central switcher, and ever so softly whispered "Who! Who!" that alert stragglers might not find themselves in harm's way. At the Chase Manhattan Bank I stopped to pay my respects to an old and dying institution, remembering my mother's instruction about the importance of brand-name goods. While the bank was certainly not edible, it existed within the realm of quality and so I subtly paid homage, not daring to risk so much as one spoken word but held my index finger out in the otherwise closed fist I had made with my hand. I then gave a nod of my head to the cloud formation above.*

*Is it not true, Celeste, that often we must be beaten with the stick reserved for savaging if we are ever to learn where we should not go and where we must if salvation is to be ours?*

On the next corner a bar, painted bright green, called to him. The lone patron was a stout woman of middle age packing away a burger with French fries. A piece of onion dropped from the seeded bun but she had no mercy on it. After devouring her platter she gave her mouth a good long wipe before applying lipstick to restore it to its previous luster.

“Give me a smoke,” she said to Luther. “And don’t tell me you don’t have any, because I see the outline of the pack in your shirt pocket and can estimate the contents of the rest of you sight unseen. A woman has her way of knowing by the size of a man’s thumb and the thickness of his neck, if you catch my drift.”

“Yes, your drift,” he said, offering her a Marlboro and a light. Her innuendo was worrisome and hurtful, but somehow acceding to her command did not feel like a capitulation. He told himself she was just another lonely voyager blowing smoke.

“Bill, give me a rob roy, will you?” she called to the bartender. He was not a pretty young thing bartender going with his hands to his long hair like a girl. He was in his mid-forties, like the woman, and combed his thinning locks back in a power sweep and had the red, scarred face and mashed nose of a man who fought with people as well as the bottle. He put down the cloth with which he had been drying the washed glasses to tend to her. “And he’ll have one, too.”

“No, I...”

“It’s on me,” she said, putting her hand on his as if to claim him for her own.

“Well, thank you,” Luther said, checking the distance between himself and the door.

The drinks came in stemmed glasses. Fancy drinks, like martinis, but without the olive.

“You don’t even know what’s in a rob roy, do you?” she asked.

Though the idea was fully formed in his mind that she was intent on crushing him with her mental as well as physical bulk, the smell of the drink alone placed him in its

power. “No, I really don’t,” Luther said. “Is Rob Roy someone famous, like Roy Rogers? Only I can’t imagine anyone naming a drink after Roy Rogers. He was too clean for that.”

“No one’s too clean for a good drink, and if they are, that’s their problem,” the woman said. “You need to improve your mind, study a bit. A rob roy is scotch and vermouth and a touch of bitters. And you don’t have to tell me. I can see you don’t know what bitters are either.”

“This is true,” Luther said, “but I do have a dictionary, and I will be making use of it to incorporate these two things into my working vocabulary.”

“It must be hard for you to look the way you do.”

“How is that?” he asked.

“More intelligent than you are. People thinking you’re having deep thoughts because you’re quiet when nothing is going on.”

“Things are going on,” Luther said, taking a big swallow of the drink and hoping to regain his bearings.

“What’s going on?” she challenged.

“White Line, Continue,” Luther said. “In fact, I may incorporate those two terms, rob roy and bitters. I may even incorporate you. Of course, that would be a job, as you do take up a bit of space. But while a novel is not a warehouse, we will see.”

“You’ve got a mouth on you, don’t you? You some kind of writer?”

“Writher, not writer.”

“What?”



“Writher.”

“You’re a writher? What’s that? You writhe instead of write?”

“A writher of friction.”

“Shut up and drink,” the woman said. “Bill, another round,” she called to the bartender.

More drinks followed.

Sometime later he woke. He was in a bed and naked. Someone was snoring loudly. His head hurt. He found the edge of the bed and stood up. There was a smell, of vomit. He felt for a lamp and turned it on. The woman was face down and naked. The cellulite horror of her legs. On the floor lay his clothes and his sneakers. The ticking clock said 3:30. From the window he saw far down streetlights compromising the darkness.

At home he talked crazy talk, relying on extravagant bullshit. Bullets had been flying. He had lain face down in the gutter for hours to avoid death.

Sarah said she was leaving but she didn’t.

Things came back to him. The woman giving him her name but not her identity. Ida. As in Idaho potato, he had said, trying to resist her continuing effort at hegemony and three-hundred pound omniscience. He remembered speculating drunkenly about West Fifty-seventh Street and how it sloped gently toward the river, the Hudson River, and how that connection to the river and the old Swedish-American line gave him hope because all roads, all bodies of water, led to his mother and how farther to the west the Holiday Inn gave him added hope because it represented the bounty of America.

Something about aspiration. Yearning for new and exotic things, a life bigger than the one he had. His aching love for America, the orange in the HoJO sign, and how he thought this feeling could drive him mad, as he had almost been driven mad by the Chevrolet sign up near One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street above the West Side Highway he had seen back in childhood. Then saying neither an ocean liner nor a Holiday Inn nor a billboard would satisfy him, just as the biggest male apparatus would not save her. The pain of remembering.

He tried to convince himself it didn't matter what he did or didn't do. Sarah's therapy with Dr. Frodkey was only intensifying. She was having to face the other part of the incest tangle—her attraction to her father and the possibility that Peter found his children more attractive than his wife: Lenore, the pagan (so-called by Lydia); Sarah, the true Van Dine (so said by Peter); and Claire, the intellectual soul mate (so said by Lydia).

“I need to go back to Boston, just for a visit. I need to see Mr. Edmonds. Can you live with that if I do?” They had gone to the Museum of Modern Art for the afternoon.

She still called her former teacher Mr. Edmonds. That meant he was old to her, that she saw Mr. Edmonds in a different way than he could ever see her. A quasi parent, a mentor. The sexual line could not be crossed in such a case without consequence.

“Would you prefer to go alone?” Luther heard himself speaking to her as to a friend seeking to claim her independence, and sensed she was seeing him the same way. They were trying out a new way of being, and it brought a feeling of shyness, at least in him.

A man seated nearby suddenly brought his clenched fists down on the table, rattling the cups and plates. Only seconds later two women with trays, oblivious of what had happened, asked if they could join his table in the crowded café.

“They don’t know what they’re getting into anymore than I did when I met you,” Sarah said.

“Are you calling me Vesuvius? Is that it?”

“I’m not calling you anything. I’m just saying,” she said.

“Right,” he said.

The unbalanced man pulled out a book, not a gun, and began reading. Every minute he would look up from the printed page, called back to life by his loneliness.

I’m a bum, Luther thought, staring out the window. I have been drawn to the museum by Sarah to see works by Monet and Manet and Degas and Pissaro and Van Gogh and Matisse and Picasso, but I am a bum. Still, as long as she only calls me Vesuvius, I will be all right.

Because the sun was hot that day and called for lighter clothes than the jeans he wore, he thought, when alone, I want to be on Fire Island in only a bathing suit. I do not want to be a skinny bones.

And also thought, when alone, seeing pretty girls on the street, I am like a dog in heat here in the heat.

There were more drunken nights, as there had to be, and the fragments he took away, everything else lost to him. “Why are you so disparaging?” a woman at a nearby bar had said, all context lost for the question she had posed, as well as the answer. He

wouldn't have had one. She had been the voice of reason, of equanimity, of moderate, intelligent responses to life that allowed her to negotiate her way into an existence with depth and meaning. Fueled by alcohol, he was a crazy man spewing darkness. A man with answers formed in isolation.

But he had his dreams, and he was worthy of them and they of him. Bill Walton had taken the court in a small gym where only Luther could have eyes for him. Great fear gripped Luther as he watched his hero run laps and shoot turnaround jumpers that he would injure himself again. Luther's mother came and sat by his side and listened as Luther lavished praise on Walton and spoke rhapsodically of the superstar's great gifts and the greater things he would do if only he could stay healthy.

"Yes, my son. I think you are right," his mother said.

Her response seemed earnest. It pleased Luther that he had gotten through to her. They walked together down a slate path bordered by hedges on the grounds of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Then Luther was once more at the Claremont School. He was beginning his senior year. How clear the dream made things. Instead of holding out, he would play basketball and please the coach, Mr. Sadowski. Some weight had lifted. His problems with Jane Thayer had been resolved. He no longer felt compelled to give up athletics because of anxiety about his relationship. He could be fully present for school activities. In his dream he was getting a do-over, as in real life he was pulling for Bill Walton to get his do-over. That's why it was so important that he stay focused on Bill Walton. Luther was sure Bill Walton needed his attention on him if he was ever to move forward on the comeback trail.

He grew more attentive to Sarah and slept with her twice in one afternoon. For a time there was peace in the valley. But Sarah did not have the things on her mind that he had on his. She went afterward to Theater 80 St. Marks to see two Joan Crawford movies while he stayed back to pore over the *Times* classifieds and circled a possibility for the next morning as he listened to a radio program on American musicals. Something about the host's voice grated. A know-it-all. This musical, that musical. This song. That song. This singer. That singer. Describing the quality of their voices and pausing for just the right word. A phony. Just a total goddamn phony. Another one of those with a malicious format and the ability to schmooze and fall in with the right crowd so doors would open for him easily. How was it others didn't see the malice informing the smiles or hear it in their voices? All these goddam phonies manning their positions in life and leaving him with not one, not one, and why? Because he didn't play their games. Because he was a hanging string. Because he was a skinny bones. Because he was a flat head. Because he was beset with the filthy condition of being partly Armenian. All of the above? Some of the above?

He started on the six-pack of tallboys. It would be a couple of hours before Sarah returned. Plenty of time to finish them off. Yankee baseball. That was more like it. Earnest Frank Messer and antic Phil Rizzuto and buttoned-down but mirthful Bill White in the broadcast booth. Enough of classifieds. Enough of all that crap. Men hitting, men running, men catching. Nice. Everything nice. Order maintained. Bases a luminous white, at least at the start of the game. The infield turned a rich brown by the groundskeepers' hosing.

*Doubts are assailing me, Celeste. I have been calling myself names: lazy, slothful, Mr. Easy-Way-Out, Mr. Disregarder of the Reader. And I am remembering the counselor who said, "We've got your number, Buster. And don't think we don't." We've got your number. Imagine that. I didn't have to ask her what number that was. Luke and I were at a camp for Jesus where the summer air was filled with penitential sighs. Somewhere in the distance a Buick cruised down a two-lane road. Somewhere closer a static-filled radio broadcast of a Brooklyn Dodgers game. Somewhere nearby a screen on a window seen from below on a curving path. Somewhere nearby the basis for laughing at injustice was being bred in my bones. I had fallen in love with badminton and whiffle ball and could not get enough. Luke had tried to pierce me with an arrow from his mighty bow on the archery range. Crazy was in the air when I smashed him in the face with my two fists. The delirium of brotherhood was intense at close quarters. Nothing can get ironed out without a master plan. All is the bedlam of scurrying roaches without such. I want you to know this. I need you to know this.*

*She had my number? She had my number? Suppose I were to say hah to that and start up my laughing thing and declare I had her number and could snatch from the air the words with malice aforethought and stamp them on her fretted brow?*

Jesus, the beer was good. It was more than good. Having a cold can in hand was needed to check the ads. Looking for a decent job, one that Dr. Rosner would not sneer at, wasn't easy. Seeking to be a part of a world you did not want and that did not want you wasn't easy. You needed flesh on your bones for these positions. On his second can he put the paper away. He would come back to it fresh in the morning. Right now he

needed a clear space. He needed to concentrate on keeping the walls, everything, at bay. The days were all right. It was the evening that brought trouble. Suddenly everything, his ugly manuscripts, just everything, crowding in on him so he couldn't breathe. Drinking gave him the space that he needed and otherwise couldn't find. It made things nice again, the way they were supposed to be.

At 9 pm he took a Sleep-Eze, an over-the-counter sleep aid. Sometimes now he would use them to knock himself out when the alcohol wasn't doing the job fast enough. The two horse pills just gave him the added assurance he needed that he could have the peace, the quiet place, that he was seeking.

"I would like to be a customer service representative for the company you yourself are employed by. I am responding to your ad in the *New York Times*," Luther said to the woman at the desk in the small office the next morning. He had traveled to midtown buoyed by the freshness in the air and trying to believe he was worthy of hire, in spite of the prominence his mind was giving to the initials *CCNY*. "At the same time I have to tell you, in all honesty, that in my heart of hearts I remain faithful to the railroads. Love is love, and the kind I practice cannot be easily shaken."

Given the big engagement ring she wore, it seemed fair to assume the woman had herself been claimed by love. "Take a seat and fill this out," she said, handing him a form the size of an index card.

"I will do that, and with dispatch." He noted that the woman had regarded him first with discomfort and then with annoyance. People had their affinities. They may have been born with them, for all he knew. Whatever the case, you couldn't win over people

who didn't want to be won over. And yet the song "For Your Love" came bursting into his consciousness, and the admonition from E. M. Forster, "Only connect."

He tried to apply himself to the challenge before him, that being to write in a legible and attractive hand. He decided that block letters were the way to go, and he remained faithful to his intention through the spelling of his first and last name. But when he came to his address, he slipped into lowercase in spelling "east" and a similar inconsistency showed in listing his previous employment as executive manager with full financial management responsibilities for Hedberg Inc., the family rooming house operation. As he wrote his hunger for the job seemed to grow, as it promised travel benefits to the big and waiting world. He would not have to go back to cold calling people who didn't want to hear from him for the *New York Times*.

"Can you type?" the interviewer said, when he was finally called in. His nameplate read "Carl Finano." His tie was on the skinny side, his suit was made of meager fabric, and his white shirt was wrinkled.

"I have been typing for at least a few years, and have two typewriters, as a matter of fact," Luther said. "One is an old L.C. Smith office machine with elite type to save space. Then I have a portable, which produces pica type. It is a little like having 'O' gauge and '027' track, if you get my drift. Compatibility is lacking, but this will be rectified. There will come the day when unity is achieved. Its absence is the source of my current pain; its resolution is my goal."



Mr. Finano stared at Luther. Luther stared at Mr. Finano. After an uncomfortable passage of time, in which the makings of a judgment appeared to be forming in Mr. Finano's redoubt of a head, he said, "We have nothing for you."

"But what about the airlines position you advertised?"

"That drew more than five thousand applicants, many with doctorates from the finest universities in the country and the world, including several hundred in astrophysics."

"Astrophysics? Do you know what you are saying?" Luther asked.

"Other applicants included chemists and Rhodes scholars and the top ten percent of the most recent graduating classes of Harvard and Yale Law Schools."

"Stop. This is preposterous."

"Do you wish to save your life?" Mr. Finano said.

"Only if I am in danger of losing it. Are you threatening me, Mr. Finano?" Luther cried out.

"Rather do I wish to enlighten you."

"*Rather do I?* What kind of words are you speaking at me, Mr. Finano?"

"Speaking of words, here is what you must do. You used the word *preposterous*. Imagine it as a small block of wood as you leave here, and in the privacy of your home meditate on it."

"Meditate on what, Mr. Finano. The word? The block of wood? What are you talking about?"

“Exactly. What am I talking about and what are you talking about and what are we both talking about?”

“I don’t understand you, Mr. Finano.”

“And I don’t understand you, Mr. whatever your last name is. And that in itself is an understanding. Now you must leave, Mr. whateve. You must leave or I will have no choice but to call the police. Is that clear?”

The conversation having turned into a cul-de-sac, Luther put aside his defiance and walked out of the office.

An obese woman sat alone at a downtown bar sipping red wine. She had come in to beat the summer heat. Her sweaty face shouted her vulnerability. Soon she disappeared from Luther’s life forever.

That day the Cincinnati Reds beat the Dodgers 3-1. George Foster hit a home run with his big black bat. Ken Griffey hit a home run with his big black bat.

When it was too much, Luther called on dreams and entered, with Sarah, a house associated with their youth and wept, but then moved on to feel a black-haired woman’s bottom through the flimsy fabric of her black panties.

Marge had not been on the line to him since dropping those truth bombs on him in Finn’s several months before.. It had been for him to get on the line to her, but his pride wouldn’t allow him to go there, as it would have been like running for a train that has already begun to leave the station. Now there she was on the front steps of the Met,

slimmed down and wearing a loose white blouse and the jeans she was wedded to, even in the high heat of early summer. She showed him, in the first few minutes of their time together, that context was not lacking in her life with her mention of the writing class she was part of. In a flash of insight he understood that he was not and never would be Quentin Compson but only his evil older brother Jason, seeking to drive down all those around him because he had no power to raise himself beyond what he was. It was a meanness in his heart toward her that he had possessed toward his deceased sister Naomi for contributing to the defacement of his life before it could really begin.

Marge said silly things, but she said them with an air of serenity and self-possession she had not previously shown. "I want to sleep with Susan Sontag," she said, giving her writing instructor a name. Her stated aspiration caused no spark of titillation in Luther, only a tremor of horror. He did not care to contemplate Marge in the sexual act, whether with a man or a woman, given not only her age or the even older age of her heart's desire but something about the quality of her being. The desire sounded, from her lips (again a shiver of revulsion) immature and insincere.

"Good luck with that," Luther said.

"She is a light-giver. She has such power to do good, and she is doing good. She gave my lover's manuscript to Ned Molatoff, over at Viking, and now Viking is going to publish it and has already sold the paperback rights. Can you believe it? Do you know what that must feel like to have such power and influence and to use it for good?"

Luther saw the light in Marge's hero, Susan Sontag, and he saw the light in Marge herself, saw, that is, that she was a vessel for her mentor's light. But he saw also that it

was an intolerable light, a light that destroyed the likes of him and once again raised the question who the filthy one might be who had put him on the planet to endure such indignities.

He suggested they skip the Met and so he led her to a bar farther east.

“We always start off happy to see each other and then something happens. You’ve changed. You’re not eccentric and funny the way you used to be. Now you’re as dark as this bar we’re sitting in,” she said.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“It’s only what I told you the last time we met. I don’t feel comfortable with you. That is why. Something is wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“I see hatred and envy all over your face. I didn’t tell you about my lover’s breakthrough to incite jealousy. I told you so you could have a sense of hope about your own work. And now we’re in this dingy place where you’re trying to drink away your pain.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I’ve got to go, Luther. Good-bye. Please don’t call me anymore.”

Marge left efficiently and with resolution, and though instinct cautioned him not to look around, he reflexively turned in the direction of the waiter, who was ready for him, all the scorn of the universe beaming from his eyes. Let it be what it is, I have been here before, Luther told himself, leaving a bill larger than the one he owed to avoid any further communication with the witness to his shame.

On Eighth Avenue, en route to the Times Building, he was diverted into a Blarney Stone, drawn by the commingled smell of food and booze and piss. No warm amber glow. The place was as brightly lit as a Chock Full o' Nuts, and dispelled any illusion that women were the draw. The few perched on stools at the long bar were older, like most of the men, and focused on the glass in front of them.

Marge had landed a heavy blow. There could be no question about that, Luther thought, as one drink followed another. Her revelation about her lover's success had been like a shrapnel bomb, making his meaningless telephone sales job unbearable.

You have no friends, only yourself, and you've just been left by a woman you don't even want who has all the power and all the connections. You will go berserk, and if you do, the police will shoot you like a dog. So his thoughts continued. He remembered that time that was no more when Marge looked at him with helpless, hopelessly hungry eyes. He saw with sharper awareness what he had seen before, that the only way for him to stay on top was to stay apart, unless he wanted to be wrestled to the ground, even by the likes of Marge.

*Now Celeste, why document a man's decline? Sots are dime a dozen Louies, whether young or in middle or advanced age. And a fleshless and mindless lost soul infected with lust and envy and ill will and with a likability quotient of zero—this is anyone to spend time on or with? Should we not cudgel him well into death? I am leaving that question out there.*

Outside the Blarney Stone an animated man with a Jamaican accent was on fire for the Lord. "Jesus saves, brother. Have you received the word? Have you felt his living,

loving presence? Has he delivered you from the fleshpots all around and brought you to the place of peace through tears of joy? Tell me you hear my ministry of love, brother. Tell me.”

“How about I tell you to get out of my motherfucking face?” replied the black man he was calling to Jesus. The black man’s bark was vanquishing. The messenger of God ran off down the street, casting a glance over his shoulder in fear that baleful darkness might be following him.

Luther arrived at work and entered his cubicle and got down to business.

“Why you want that I should have the *New York Times*. I no read the *New York Times*. I no even read English. I no want to read English.”

“Did I say you should read English?”

“Who you talking to, mister? Do you know who you are talking to?”

“You are Isabel Santiago. That is who you are.”

“Is not the correct answer to my question. I ask you again, mister. Do you know who you are talking to?”

“Maybe you will tell me who I am talking to,” Luther said.

“Is not me, mister. Is not me. So if it is not me, then who can it be?”

“You’ve got me. Who is it?”

“Why you want to make mystery where no mystery exist? Why you want to do that, mister?”

“As I said, I’m stumped.”

“What is that, stumped? That is your English you be speaking to me? I am Spanish woman. I am proud. And you? You are loco. Now ask me why you are loco and I tell you why.”

“Why am I loco?”

“Because you be talking to yourself and don’t even know it.”

“I’m talking to myself?”

“Who else you be talking to, mister? You no talking to me. You telling yourself you need your *New York Times*. Why you no buy what you need, mister? Why you come bothering me when you better to be bothering yourself. I have no more time for you, mister. Vaminos.”

He was not sorry when she hung up, though he had been left in a state of puzzlement. Was she merely saying fuck you, or was there some deeper meaning to her rejecting words?

In the next cubicle sat old Mr. Onifieri. “What do you mean, you don’t want a subscription? How about I sell you two or three or four? Would that make you happy Or do you plan to go through life as a malcontent?”

On the other side sat Mr. Califras, who more gently inquired of those on the other end of the line whether they might be interested in a home delivery *suscription*.

I am where I am supposed to be, Luther thought, in a moment of sweet surrender. He felt a measure of relief from the beating that Marge had given him. “It is OK with me if my number is never called, my exceedingly low number,” he heard himself say, with sufficient emphasis on his words that Bill Jones was drawn to his space.

“Is your ship going down? Is that what I just heard you to say?” Bill Jones inquired. “I was a speech major, and so I should know a thing or two about cries for help.”

“I thought therapists and psychiatrists and social workers and such were attuned to cries for help.”

“Yes, but I am a master of the word and all the emotions that drive them forth, and I think from what I hear you are in need of assistance.”

“Bill, leave me to my devices and I will leave you to yours.”

“As a speech master, I like what you just said. It came out clear and strong.”

“Am I supposed to say thank you?”

“That too, Luther. You are allowing yourself to show.”

“Thank you, I guess.” Not that Bill Jones was one to talk about people letting themselves show, given his own hidden way.

“That, too. You see. You’re blossoming. You’re beginning to maximize your potential.”

“Enough. Please. You’re killing me with this shit.”

“That’s it. That’s it. You’re home free now,” but shit Bill Jones said. “I feel the urge coming on to celebrate by really tying one on. Frankly, Luther, you smell like you know a thing or two about drinking. Does the urge come over you to tie one on regularly?”

“I don’t know what to say,” Luther said.

“You just said it, Luther. You just said it. Tell me. Would you care to join me?”



“I don’t think so, Bill. I need to go directly home.”

“That is very sensible, Luther. Very sensible. My girlfriend will have my head if I am a minute late.”

“You don’t want that to happen, I imagine,” Luther said. For some reason it had not entered Luther’s mind that Bill Jones might have a girlfriend.

“Has the element of surprise been mine?” Bill Jones asked, smiling as if he had the answer.

*Now Celeste, all was not right in Dr. Rosner’s world, or it was in the process of being set right. Who were once one were soon to be two. Cloven. How did I learn this? His office was at a different location. When I remarked on the change, he explained that he and his wife had separated. It must be noted that my response was bland, as all I could think to say was “Oh.” It did not occur to me to say “I am sorry” or “That must be hard” or in some other way commiserate with him. I came prepared to talk about myself and was unable to make the adjustment. This would be an insignificant matter were it not for his response. “That is all you have to say?” Let us make no mistake. Can there be any doubt he was channeling the reproach of the universe with those words? Was he not seeking to castigate me to death for what he perceived as my indifference to his pain? Was he not raising up on me with loathing for such a blatant display of self-centeredness? Oh do get out the stick and beat me so very good for this shortcoming. Punish me until the ends of death and then extend its boundaries so more beating can be administered. Dr. Rosner was a perceptive man. In that moment he discerned my incapacity to feel his sorrow or*

*pain. Or maybe not. After all, he did not ask me directly why my reaction was so cool. If instead of “That is all you have to say?” with the implied judgment that the question rendered, he had posed a question or series of questions to draw me out, I might have been able to respond with the truth rather than an exclamation. And what would that truth have been? That it was difficult for me to accept that someone blessed to have been born a Jew and with the genes of brilliance that went with being a Jew and the Harvard education to prove his brilliance and a thriving practice and East Side luxury high-rise residence/office neither needed nor merited my sympathy and, if anything, it served him right to have any pain he might be experiencing for having dared to succeed to the degree that he had. He would have been made to see that the laughing thing was alive and well in me and that he was not exactly dealing with a human being and that the whole universe deserved my laughing thing upon it. Do you know what it means to have a mother who says, “We are living in the last days” or that “He will come as a thief in the night” or that “I came to the conviction that the world has nothing that I want”? Do you understand, Celeste, that it is in my bones that this world and all those who embrace it must be repudiated and punished and that I must be the agent of its and their pain?*

*And this. You know who your mother is supposed to be, but that doesn't mean you know who she is.*

In the dream Sarah had returned to Boston. Luther did not care for her rundown apartment but Sarah did not care for him and suggested he consider returning to New York. They would both be better off, she said. Luther was not fully comprehending, but

as the minutes passed, he realized a significant moment in his life had arrived. Sensing the merit in her proposal, he wondered if he would have the strength to follow through.

“Claire says Anais Nin is a nincompoop, that all she can write about is herself. She says Anais Nin lacks the intelligence and creativity to develop a fictional world and so has to be content to record her every feeling and thought and incident in her small and narrow life,” Sarah said that morning.

“Your sister sounds like a vicious male critic,” Luther said, withholding from her his dream of the night before.

“Why male?” Sarah asked.

“Didn’t Gore Vidal mockingly characterize Anais Nin’s writing as ‘the flow, the flow’? Didn’t I read that somewhere?”

“I think Anais Nin is a great writer. I love her diaries,” Sarah said.

“Claire pees on anything subjective. She’s a prisoner of her muscle-bound intellect. She should eat garbanzo beans or rich fruit or both.”

“Are you saying she’s constipated?”

“I’m saying she has a license to kill. She’s an agent of death with that overly critical faculty of hers. She is always measuring and assessing and weighing. I know about that sort of thing. Many, many times has she tried to kill me with her assassin’s bullets.”

“Stop. Why do you have to go overboard?”

He did not tell Sarah that Claire was talking about him as well in calling Anais Nin a nincompoop. Nor did he tell her that Claire had leveled him previously by grouping him with the Van Dines' Estonian maid.

That morning he stared through the south-exposure window at the complex across the street. The modern high-rise buildings dwarfed his own. All those tenants, many old and materially well off, possibly looking down at him and Sarah in their cramped apartment. Once again he yearned for some privacy, a room of his own.

On a city bus he heard the driver say, "You don't own me. You don't own me," in a squabble over the fare with the father of a teenage girl, who looked on, embarrassed. But that was the point, wasn't it? The passenger did own him. All the passengers did. And the route. The route owned him as well. The bus and all who came on to it had claimed ownership of him. The driver was their beast of burden. He has given me a window into his life, Luther thought.

And that afternoon he heard Bill Jones say, "Are you thirty? Tell me you are thirty. Or tell me you aren't. But tell me."

"Why would you want to know?" Luther asked.

"I am trying to determine your eligibility for my life."

"I don't reveal my age to strangers, unless there is a compelling reason."

"Haven't I given you one?"

"No, you haven't."

"Well, how is this for a compelling reason? I am so depressed after visiting with my wife and children."

“Why would that be depressing?”

“Because my wife won’t tell me why she asked me to leave, just as you won’t give me your age. What is the matter with this world that people are so little forthcoming?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s the questions you ask.”

“Well, let me ask another then,” Bill Jones said, putting aside perplexity for anger. “How about coming over tonight?”

“I can’t,” Luther said.

“Well, let me ask another. Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“There you go again, stonewalling me,” Bill Jones said. “You and the entire world.”

Stalling me, Luther would have said, remembering his battles with his mother. *You’re stalling me. Quit stalling me.*

*Celeste, what is this that my dialogue turns in on itself and results in little more than a mincing of words? Why can my characters not speak from the heart with sincerity abounding? Why can they not show respect for themselves and each other?*

Luther and Sarah frequented a restaurant on the Bowery that served food normal enough that Luther needn’t cast a suspicious eye on the hamburger and French fries that he generally ordered. Some places made him happy, and some brought him down, and

Robin's was decidedly the former, with a cool, modern décor and cool young waiters and waitresses. Whatever cool was, he could only admire the staff's trendsetting style. And if they were cool, then the food would have to be cool, because their coolness would not permit for dirty hands or bad meat or vermin running free.

The only thing that was not cool on this night was Luther himself. Sarah mentioned her diminutive friend Carola Aprile, who had visited with them at the East Broadway loft and with whom Sarah went back as far as high school. Since that visit, Carola Aprile had vacated the premises of Pittsburgh, the city she had lived in since her college days. That visit to Sarah had lit Carola's fire. She had returned to the City of Steel wanting to light the night on fire and knowing she never could, that a city of steel could not burn incandescent in the dark. She had to come to New York. She had to step up if she did not wish to be consigned forever to a city with a past but no future. Pittsburgh was dying, and she was dying, too. Sarah was ahead of her, and she could not let that be. She clamped the fat cheeks of her boyfriend, Hunger Longing, between her small hands and gave him with full intensity the imperative that she had given herself. They must to the Big Apple. *Avanti, avanti*, she said, English proving inadequate to express her sense of urgency. In this manner did she galvanize them both into action, and soon they had rented a loft in the tough Fort Greene section of Brooklyn, near Pratt University. "I Will Follow Her," not him, was Hunger Longing's theme song, as he had no self to stay home alone with. (This was not his fault. Do not begin to think that it was. Do you know what it is to be an orphan, with no direction home? Well, do you?)

“How is Carola?” Luther asked, on this night, as he had some concern that Sarah was adrift, with only Hamburger Heaven and Dr. Frodkey and the loneliness of her artist’s calling. Suddenly Carola Aprile was the bright light who would add radiance to her life. No longer was she mired on the banks of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers, and even when she had been, there had been the luster of her fine mind visible far beyond the borders of that state.

“I haven’t spoken to her recently,” Sarah said.

“How long ago is recently?” Luther asked.

“I don’t know. A few months. She said I was more advanced with my painting than she was.”

“Don’t you want to keep tabs on her? Don’t you want to be sure you continue to beat her?”

“What kind of talk is that?”

“Lonely talk, I guess,” Luther said.

“Well, cut it out.”

“What I really mean is that you should be going toward the sun, not away from it. But the trick is not to get your wings burned off so then you have to fall dead to the earth.”

“Luther, just tell me what you are trying to say.”

“Some feeling of coldness came over me. That’s all. Like we’re not anywhere near the sun but on a desolate plain and the wind is whipping and the fire has gone out.

Maybe the kind of feeling you have on a Sunday night and none of your homework has gotten done.”

“My homework never got done.”

“That’s because you didn’t know anything about order.”

“I know a lot more about it than you, Mr. Crazy Man.”

“The way you talk,” Luther said, the anger throttle beginning to turn. “I just thought you might like to connect with her. That’s all. Maybe expand a little. Have a friend.”

“Where are your friends? In some bar?”

“So don’t see her. Do whatever you want to do.”

“Did I say I wouldn’t see her?”

“I don’t know what you said.”

“Why don’t you ask Doctor Rosner what I said? He could be my interpreter.”

“I’m tired of Dr. Rosner. I want to be rid of him. There’s something wrong with such a relationship, even if I can’t articulate it.”

“But you were having so much trouble. That’s why you went to him in the first place.”

“That was then. These shrinks. All they ever do is talk.”

“And you don’t?”

“Sure. Sure I do.”

“Isn’t that the point?”



“I don’t know. It’s money. Always with the money. They should have a meter running, like taxi drivers, while you sit there with them.”

“What else would you do with the money? Drink?”

“Hey.”

“Dr. Frodkey says you could become dangerous.”

“Don’t be using Dr. Frodkey against me. I don’t need that kind of talk.”

“What’s happening with your *Times* job?”

“Shit. Shit is happening. It’s a mental ward. All the misfits of Manhattan calling people to ask if they would like a suscription.”

“A what?”

“Never mind.”

“Well, I’ll call Carola. She has been on my mind,” Sarah said.

Luther did not clap his hands, Sarah having mauled him pretty good, practically calling him, not for the first time, a drunk and a potential murderer. And he particularly didn’t like that crack about his friends being in the bars. He didn’t want her there, in his place of freedom, with her words or in any way. A man needed a place he could escape to without someone’s hand reaching in for him, as if his world was nothing more than a doll’s house for her to do with as she would.

The next day Sarah swung into action and spoke with Carola Aprile. Evidently, Carola’s situation with Hunger Longing was not as Luther had established it in his mind. Carola Aprile did not live in a loft with Hunger Longing and she did not live with Hunger Longing anywhere. What they had was two separate apartments in the same building, and

each day Carola Aprile went off to the loft where she painted but did not live. Sarah set Luther straight about the arrangement Carola Aprile and Hunger Longing had worked out.

How? Because when she called Carola Aprile at her apartment, she did not get her friend. Instead she got Hunger Longing, who told her Carola Aprile was at the loft doing her painting. Sarah then called Carola Aprile at the loft and mentioned Hunger Longing's presence in her apartment, at which point Carola Aprile did not raise up on Hunger Longing; however, she did remark that she wished Hunger Longing could stay in his own apartment when she was not in hers but she had come to accept that Hunger Longing had needs and restraint was more than he could be expected to summon. And in that moment did Luther fall down on the floor in his mind's eye, brought to that place by the realization that he and Hunger Longing were alike in their fundamental neediness.

Carola Aprile lunged at the chance to be with Sarah. It did not matter that Carola Aprile was now the one with the loft while Sarah was consigned to an East Village apartment and a cramped studio with a windowsill caked with pigeon poop. Beacons of hope exist where they are, and Carola Aprile had a honing device on high alert for them.

"You don't have to worry. I'm not going to talk about anything personal. I'm going to keep it to my work," Sarah said to Luther before her meeting with Carola Aprile.

"What things personal are you talking about?" Luther asked.

"I'm not going to spill the beans. Is that clearer?"

Luther had no answer for Sarah, not one, given the crushing weight of anxiety that her words had suddenly summoned. He had only wanted for Sarah and Carola Aprile to

get together on a friendly and mutually supportive basis, regardless of the silly way he had expressed himself in the restaurant. He had heard the Young Rascals' song, "I've Been Lonely Too Long," and he did not want for Sarah to perish of that loneliness in their East Village apartment. She was his personal Bill Walton. He wanted her among the living so he too could live. He needed now to vacate the premises so Sarah could be alone with Carola Aprile so they could have their powwow, their heart-to-heart, with everything on the table. They would bond and Carola Aprile would tell Sarah to get out while she could. And so the city, even as he wandered through it, became his detention center, like the schoolroom he had been quarantined in back in sixth grade after tossing the rolls of toilet paper from the second floor bathroom at the nuns as they walked double file down the street. Only now his mother wouldn't be coming to take him home after her consultation with the reverend mother, having been informed that the school had no choice but to expel him. Now he would be all on his own.

And that word *beans*. She would spill the beans. That was it. Female power equaled the women on the hills with the baked beans.

"So?" he said, when he returned that night, relieved that Carola Aprile had not overdone her stay.

"So what?" Sarah replied, as she washed some dishes and placed them in the rack.

"So how was the powwow? Did the beans get spilled?"

"What beans are you talking about, Luther? She came over for a nice visit and went back home to Brooklyn."

“What beans? The beans you were talking about to me. That’s what beans I’m talking about.”

“We had a nice time. That’s all that happened. OK?”

“We’ll see,” Luther said. “We’ll see if it’s OK. I’m stepping out. Is that OK? Or are you going to have me arrested?”

“You just got here,” Sarah said.

“I just need some air. Don’t be policing me. Don’t be doing that.”

“Do what you have to do,” Sarah said.

*Now Celeste, Courvoisier is a four-syllable word that reeks of false elegance, and yet I called its name several times that night, after prepping myself with beer and scotch and so spent money I no longer had the deep pockets to throw around in that bar on Waverly Place. But freedom requires effort, and if we cannot race to the ends of the earth, we can at least descend to the bottom of the bottle, and if we are contained within it in the process, so be it, as it feels like we are flying the flag of liberation. And that freedom is what our country has always been about. The unexplored wilderness. Don’t fence me in. All of which, I hear you and countless others saying, is nothing more than a lot of blather in defense of drunkenness. But I was not done with alcohol, and alcohol was not done with me.*

*On this night in which I cast myself to the winds of oblivion, a story idea came to me in which a man tries to make a prostitute respond to him while her pimp sits in the next room. No, it has not been written, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be. Freedom cannot be a finite thing, and death cannot be love.*

*Now Celeste, I understand that the above does not cut the mustard. I hear the universe's reproach. I hear the angry, demanding voice it raises to me. "What is this fuss about Courvoisier? Why not let things and people be? Why not tend to your own business, cultivate your own garden, you hyperbolic, self-pitying wretch? Why must you molest everything and everyone, including yourself?" And hear it further say, "What's that you say? You were born as you were born, and must go in the direction your nature takes you? Is your defense of calumny, of lies, that you are merely a flower bending toward the sun? Spare us your heliotrope bullshit, mister." But hear me out, Celeste. Hear me out. I let neither man nor universe raise up on me, nor those mysterious presences that take up residence within my being. I do what I do and go where I go, and let that be the final word, or let me say that it is, even if it isn't.*

*Now Celeste, we spent that weekend at Camp. Maggio Capici and his wife, Sally, also came up from the city. Though they were welcome to stay over, they rented a room in town. Claire was also there for the weekend, and the attraction Maggio and she had for each other remained palpable. Maggio, as was noted at the time of Lenore's death, was a man who enjoyed earthly pleasures. He was a man of much natural power whose role in life as a penal guard was less than his aptitudes qualified him for and, as discussed, a man with great insecurities. Though by this time he had revealed how he made his living, he still came to the Van Dines as a child seeking their approval. Conflict will always exist between our higher and lower natures, and there was a fair amount of break-your-bones violence in Maggio's world. In the confines of Riker's Island he was sometimes called*

*upon to beat and beat on what he perceived as a criminal underclass. He operated far from the ivory tower .*

*We have noted before that Claire was, like mainland China, a rising power, and that she was seeking hegemony over Maggio Capici with the full capture of his sybaritic heart. She was warmed by his satyr's gleam and wanted his full and sensual lips and the hidden apparatus that she intuited was commensurate with his bulk and brawn. She also saw that Sally was a woman with the look of the downtrodden in her sad, cocaine-blitzed eyes—the orgies, the serial husbands, the teenage son she shared responsibility for with her ex. Sally's sense of herself as a potential discard only worsened in the presence of radiant and much younger Claire.*

*And yet something happened that weekend. The subject of rape came up in an evening discussion. A young man had been alleged to have violated a woman on a first date. After dinner at a restaurant, he had walked her home and asked if he could come in to use her bathroom. Having gained access with this subterfuge, he then made advances that she resisted and forcibly had his way, according to the testimony of the woman in the trial that followed. The man professed his innocence and suggested that the plaintiff was either delusional or simply lying. He added that in fact it was she who had shown herself to be of lascivious intent and to possess an insatiable sexual appetite. If anyone had been attacked, it had been him—not that he was complaining, mind you, he said, with a smile on his face. But the smile did not remain when the jury delivered a verdict of guilty. A cry of protest and of outrage was now his offering to the courtroom as officers of the court led him away.*

*“Frankly, I’m glad the jury socked it to the creep,” Claire declared. Perhaps it was the adamancy of her expression that raised the hackles of Maggio Capici and dimmed the love light in his eyes.*

*“Hold on. Just hold on,” Maggio Capici said, but as further words were slow to come, it was not entirely clear to the gathered what they were holding on for. All that could be perceived was that a drastic alteration in Maggio Capici’s demeanor had occurred. But Celeste, my listening devices were keenly tuned in. Claire had hit him in his vitals and the beast in him was rising. The thing to note about Maggio Capici is that he was a he-man, not a she-man. Now listen, Celeste, listen. At the same time Maggio Capici was no fool. Maggio Capici did not wear his hair like heaven; in fact, by his early twenties, he was balding. But he understood that times had changed. He had a finger to put to the wind and knew, like all who weren’t Cro-Magnon in their persuasion, that sensitivity was in and brute force was out. But some things hadn’t changed. The fine line between consensual sex and forced sex was one of them. The truth was that he identified with the convicted man. Sex being his domain, what he heard were the jury and Claire rendering a verdict on his whole way of life. “I’ve been in a similar situation dozens, maybe hundreds, of times. Why should that jury have believed one person and not the other? Where were the witnesses?”*

*“Rape is not generally a public act. It’s not like stealing off with a woman’s handbag in public,” Claire replied.*

*“What about other evidence? Where were the bruise marks or other signs of coercion?”*

*It was too late for Maggio Capici to pull back. His fear and anger had gained momentum and compelled him forward. He had tried so hard to be suave and charming and subtly flirtatious with Claire. Still, being sensitive didn't mean he had to cut off his balls, did it?*

*"There was medical testimony by the doctor who examined her in the emergency room that night," Claire said coolly.*

*Sometimes we lose face, Celeste. Sometimes it happens. Maggio Capici was not a lout. He was trying to grow. But he became defensive and reacted as if he were on trial himself. Resentment took him over. Who were the Van Dines, with their cushy lives, to judge a man like him, on the front lines doing their dirty work to keep the criminals from murdering them in their beds? Because they weren't sitting back in silent judgment of him for the rape thing only but for his whole life. They were connecting the dots. A man of physical force and persuasion was in their midst.*

*Now we must go elsewhere, Celeste, with our listening devices. We must return to Manhattan, where Luke was in a state of distress. More, he was exceeding wrath. He had put in for a raise with Harry Stavigros, who now oversaw the management of the building, but my mother told him to stop his foolishness and to be grateful for what he was being given. She told him Harry Stavigros could have him out on the street just like that, and snapped her fingers to drive home the point. It didn't sit right with Luke that she should speak in such a manner. All his life she had sought to infect him with a meekness that would take him nowhere in a world she might not want but in which he had to live. That he should have a father involved with God but not with him and a mother who too*



*had her eyes on heaven rather than earth, that neither of them had commanded him to embrace this life and take what he wanted and what he needed. He saw in that moment that he had been conditioned to remain a boy with no clear means of becoming a man.*

*Men wanting to be more than they were. Is that in itself so bad, Celeste? Is it?*

“The sun was killing me,” the woman on the bus said, explaining her move to the man she now sat next to.

“In that case I’m sorry you didn’t remain,” the man said.

“Aren’t you something?” she replied.

A heavysset man boarded the bus and stood over the irascible passenger.

“You after my seat, Fatso?” the man asked.

“Don’t call me Fatso.”

“You are a fat Fatso,” the man said. “What should I call you, Slim?”

“You’re lucky I don’t punch you in the face,” the man who was standing said as he moved away.

A man carrying a big manila envelope boarded at the next stop and sat next to the insulting man. His pants were soiled and he had liquor on his breath.

The man with the mouth started sniffing the air in an ostentatious way.

“What is that stink?” he asked, with feigned perplexity. “Could it be the rose of Sharon?” He cast a sideways glance. “Oh, surprise. It’s El Blotto, the town drunk, himself.”

“What’s up, Pops? You got yourself one of those death wishes or something? Least you could do, if you gonna shit out your mouth, is wipe it afterward.”

“Is that so?” the mouth asked.

“It’s so if I say it’s so. Now why you don’t just shut it down while I catch me some serious winks unless you want me to check you out on the express line?”

Either the mouth was going to get off or Luther was going to get off, as he could not deal with bearing witness to slashing and gashing. When the mouth showed no sign of relocating, Luther bolted, and walked the last ten blocks to Dr. Rosner’s office, his ears alert for the wail of police and ambulance sirens.

Minutes later he was in the tiny waiting room of Dr. Rosner’s office. A feeling of comfort, even happiness, came over him, as when he was a child he would cross the street and enter the building of order and sit flip through the *National Geographic*’s in Dr. Edelbaum’s office waiting for the French doors to open and the doctor, stethoscope dangling from his neck, to invite him in. The Jews were who you turned to for care and protection in a threatening and violent world. They did not sit on buses making rude, provocative remarks, nor did they threaten to carve you like a turkey. Once again it struck him what a gift intelligence was in its power to elevate the mind to a higher purpose.

A woman emerged, carrying a Capezio bag. The previous week it had been a Bloomingdale’s bag.

“She has shopping prowess,” Luther said, to begin the session.

“What does that mean?” Dr. Rosner said.

“It means she has money to walk around with big bags.”

“How is your money situation?”

“Not good.”

“What are you doing about it?”

“I’m trying to sell the New York *Times* to people who don’t want it,” Luther said.

“Are you looking for work?”

“Didn’t I just say that I have a job?”

“I believe you know what I mean by a job. What’s behind this feigned obtuseness?”

“Are you saying the *Times* is mendacious in offering me a job that is not really a job?”

““Look, what’s really going on here?” Dr. Rosner queried. Steam was coming from his ears.

“You tell me. You’re the doctor.”

“Do you want help or not?”

“Do I want help or not.” Luther repeated the words as if he was actually considering them.

“You’re not an enigma.”

“Haven’t you told me that previously?”

“It bears repeating.”

“Do you want to beat me? Is that it? Do you wish to break my bones in different places?”

“What is it with this peculiar speech? What is driving it?”

“I’m waiting.”

“Waiting?”

“Waiting for you to tell me.”

Dr. Rosner held his silence. So too did Luther. Finally, Dr. Rosner said, “Do you want me to tell you that you are beyond human help? Is that it?”

“It hadn’t occurred to me,” Luther replied.

“You have a master’s degree. You have your ticket. Why don’t you apply for a job in publishing?” Dr. Rosner asked, not for the first time.

“I don’t know,” Luther said.

“Is it fear?”

“I suppose it is. How would I possibly fit in? Who would want me?”

“How can you find out unless you ask?”

“Power. It’s associated in my mind with power.”

“How so?”

“They beat me down. They hit me with their stick. Hit my ‘White Line, Continue’ manuscript. Threw it out on the street. Wiped their butts with its pages. How can I go to such people?”

“Maybe by looking at things a different way.”

“A different way?”

“What do you have to lose?”

“Something.”

“Something?”

“Right. Maybe that something is your isolation?”

“Don’t call my domain my isolation. Don’t do that.”

“Domain?”

“I. Me. I am my domain. I exist where I am.”

“Not if you don’t have the means to feed yourself.”

“Yes, yes, feed the face first. So you have instructed me.”

“Are you afraid? Is that it?”

“What would I be afraid of?”

“People?”

“The way you talk.”

*Now Celeste, I was more compliant than this account would lead you to believe. It was not my way to belch fire, even a short burst of flame, at Dr. Rosner. I was far too timid and scared. He was, at this point, my lifeline, and so I could not afford to alienate him. If there was volatility beneath the surface and even murderous intent, such feelings had to be suppressed. Do not ask me why I exaggerate. We all have a need to feel good, to see ourselves as we are not. Is this a sufficiently candid explanation to ward off the mendacity police?*

He called home after the session. Sarah was in tears. She was losing her hair. Her doctor had said as much.

“It’s just as you dreamt. Why did you have to go and have that dream?” Sarah asked.

“What dream?”

“You dreamt I was bald. You said that in the dream you woke and I was sitting up in bed and my head was completely bald and luminous.”

It was true. There had been such a dream, and it had unnerved him. In fact her hair had changed. It had become stiffer, more coarse, dull, like straw, in the way it looked if not felt. And so a sense of prophecy attached to the dream. Not that he presented the dream in prophetic terms when he shared it with her on waking but just as an image she might find interesting.

“Oh, that,” he said. “A dream is a dream. You have your hair.”

“Not for long I won’t.” She continued to cry.

“Please, Sarah. Don’t.” It was hard for him to hear her cry. It sent him back to a place he didn’t want to be. His mother weeping, asking through her tears what she had done to deserve such children as she had tried to raise. Feelings that made him want to die and then die some more came over him. The crushing weight of the responsibility for Sarah’s happiness. The same weight he had felt applied to him when he saw his mother so sad and hurt. He loved Sarah. He really did, with his better self. No, with his whole self he loved her. Her unhappiness wouldn’t affect him so deeply were it otherwise.

“I need you to pick up a vitamin he recommended. Can you do that? And we need a quart of milk. I ran out of money.”

That too sounded sad. The idea of Sarah with empty pockets. “What kind of vitamin?” he asked.

“He wants me to take a B-complex vitamin, but be sure it has biotin.”

Biotin. He would get her her vitamins and her milk. He would get her the things she needed. He had to. He couldn't allow a dream to become a reality—that word again.

He got her the things she needed, but if she needed him for anything more, he was, as the Zombies had sung, not there. He went to the bar on Spring Street, where he drank with abandon and walked out with a woman more beautiful than any he had a right to engage with, even as her female companion shrieked in protest and offered a warning about his kind, the kind of reaction he had, of course, heard before.

They wandered down toward the river and climbed the grade to an abandoned and elevated stretch of weedy, garbage-strewn highway. Nesting on the cobblestones with their bundled possessions, hobos stared up at them. Even drunk, the nostalgic tug of the old and forsaken lifted. A rising sense of panic gripped him. He saw that he had placed himself and the girl, beautiful but even more drunk and drugged than he was, in danger, and visualized them as a page four item in the *Daily News*. The men, some of them, might have lost their way in the world, but not their libidos.

Luther took her arm and led her down the first exit ramp, even as looking back, he saw two of the men following after. They weren't hot-footing it, at least not yet. At street level a cab with its light on happened by. From the back seat he looked out the rear window. "I'm sorry. I placed you in harm's way," he said.

"Don't talk to me in clichés," she said, and gave the driver directions, showing a capacity for clarity in the fog of her own making.

"Sorry," Luther said.

The ride was a short one, to the West Village. “You can come up. I feel safe with you.”

“But I placed you in danger,” Luther said.

“Please,” she said.

The apartment was lined with shelves holding books arranged in alphabetical order.

“Are these books yours?”

“They’re his.”

“His? Where is this his?”

“He’s away. That’s where he is. A place where he can’t get back here from tonight.”

“Who are you in relation to him?”

“I’m his lover until I say I’m not.”

He should have known she lived with a man. She was too beautiful and irresponsible not to.

“What do you do?”

“Whatever I please.”

“No. I mean, what do you do do?”

“Is that English?”

She had been busying herself with some white powder, separating it into two thin lines on a hand mirror. She snorted a line up her nostril.

“Here you go,” she said, lifting the mirror to him.



“What is this?”

“Where have you been? What do you think it is?”

“Is it heroin?”

“It’s cocaine.”

“Will it do me death to do it?”

“Has it done me death?”

“No, no. You are very much among the living.”

He remembered getting burned at the disco and being relieved that the powder was nothing more than baking soda. “I’d better not,” he said.

She took the mirror back from him and snorted the line herself. But there were other aids for his comfort. There was bourbon and there was grass, and if he had been unable to touch the cocaine, after a time he was unable not to touch her.

She showed no resistance to his hands. How silky her hair, how smooth and responsive her body. On one side of the bed hung a garter belt, on the other a whip. And yet, the feast was too much for him.

He wandered, stoned and drunk, to the window, drawn by the fire escape.

“Are you crazy? This is a Mafia-controlled block. They’ll kill you if you go out there naked.” She brought him back to earth, made him see he would be disrespecting the men of the Mafia and their families if he showed himself in the buff. Sal and Vinnie and Guido and all those who had only the hardness of their Italian ways would drag him to a rooftop and throw him off or slowly drain him of his life’s blood. In one way or another would they bring him to a painful end. Twice in one night he had gone toward death and

been spared. It was something to ponder, even if he was now in smoke and bourbon heaven and such musing might bring him down.

But Diane De Angelo—that was her name—had darkness of her own. Her brother was no more, lost to heroin. She could not forgive herself for not saving him on the night it happened, or forgive Albertini, Frankie’s supposedly best friend, for hitting on her that same night and she to her horror, letting him have his wanton way, Albertini saying to her over and over that he loved her and would take care of her.

Diane De Angelo had fallen weeping to the floor, and now Luther felt himself becoming the repugnant Albertini as he stood over her, saying he wanted to save her and that they were meant to be together because he had a sister of his own who had been deceased from the earth and others who were not long for it. He did not say that he loved her because she wore sunglasses in the dark or had a head-to-toe tan or that the curve of her hips and the round firmness of her butt and the small red heart-shaped tattoo on it that served as a beacon were riveting. He would prove his love and that he was not exploitative Albertini. A door had opened into a new life, and he didn’t want it to close, even as he understood that it would, because a woman with her endowment, how was he to hold on to her, even in the best of times?

The lights were on, the clock said 3:30 am, and Sarah was sitting up in bed when he returned home that night.

“Where have you been, bastard? Who’d you screw tonight, skinny dick?”

Bastard. Skinny dick. He had no energy to take issue with her words. But there were eggs, six of them, which he took from the refrigerator in their cardboard carton. One

by one, he lobbed the eggs against the wall, as her interrogation continued, until the eggs were gone and so were her words and only tears remained.

*Now Celeste, you may say all was lost and I really deserved to be dismissed for such wanton betrayal, but sometimes we have to descend to the bottom to arrive at the top and so, from that perspective, the work I was engaged in was totally meaningful and part of the master plan to get me to the place of peace. It happened in this year that America was going crazy in the sunlight of its own spirit and called on the nations of the world to order its tall ships to set sail and enter our waterways in acknowledgment and admiration of all that we have achieved in our two centuries of existence. And so that Fourth of July by the thousands did people come to greet and marvel at these ships of old with masts and in celebrating them celebrate themselves, and no one was more eager to be part of this landmark event than Peter Van Dine, having it in his awareness as he did that history was in the making in the present moment and that it was imperative he be on the lookout for this history at all times so it didn't slip past him and he be drowned in the currents of his own forgetfulness.*

But Luther was not drawn to Op Sail. He did not much care about the waters of the earth or the ships that sailed on them. He had his personal history to tend to, and that day he woke feeling sullen and sorry for himself. The Van Dines had called to Sarah and him to join them for the spectacle of the vessels with their many masts, but he wanted to meet their good cheer with withdrawal, as when he holed up in the renovated barn at Camp that first summer. Besides, after the holiday Sarah would tell Dr. Frodkey about his disappearance and tossing the eggs and he would put his foot down and virtually order

her to leave. The committee of the righteous would have their say and justice would be served, as truly it needed to be, as there was only one way to deal with his type, Luther understood.

As the morning progressed Luther rallied and stepped with Sarah into the bright light of day and met with the Van Dines, but the cars of America were too many and the tourists on foot were too many for Peter to remain in Manhattan. He declared the hulls of modern vessels rather prosaic as he drove up the river to Tarrytown, in flight from the mob. *Prosaic*. What an amazing word to apply to the hull of a ship. How literary. Not the sort of word Luther could ever summon.

Beastly heat, endless driving, tall ships arriving in a new world that seemed to be ending, not beginning, and pangs of hunger and an urgent need for a bathroom as Peter tried for an hour to find a restaurant he had his heart set on. No, no, better for Luther to stay home than venture where he had no true desire to go.

Over a late lunch, Peter took them into his personal history. “When I was a boy there were two things I wanted: a lamb and a pair of overalls. Parents don’t know what psychological effect the failure to deliver on gifts promised has on their children.”

“You should tell all, everything,” Luther said. “You should let us know.”

“What? The things you say, Luther.” Peter cried out.

“No, no, it’s true. Where you’ve been, what happened, and where you are now.”

“Writing is as much about leaving out than putting in if it is to be effective,” Peter said, “and facts must rule the day.”

“Must you be so dogmatic, dear? Luther is offering something thoughtful and you come down with a sledgehammer,” Lydia said.

“I would like to build a wall of facts around anarchy, so the worms can’t get out, but then, worms have a purpose too,” Luther said.

“How is your own writing going, dear?” Lydia asked.

“All of this will be in my book. You can be sure of that.”

“The naked transcription of event?” Lydia asked.

“We have to go where death cannot find us,” Luther said.

“What a strange thing to say,” Lydia replied, with more surprise than judgment.

“All my life I have wanted to go north. I have felt an almost physical pull,” Luther said. “Not that I have gotten very far. But when my journey begins, it will take me through these parts, and then I hope I will have the courage to lay my head down next to but not on the railroad tracks that run along the river.”

In an obvious attempt to change the subject, Lydia said, “Claire has a new boyfriend. He’s very bright as well as combative, but that is to be expected, I suppose, as he is a lawyer.”

“He definitely embraces the system,” Peter said.

“What does that mean?” Sarah asked.

“He’s a federal prosecutor,” Lydia said.

“He should prosecute Maggio for his bad behavior last weekend,” Sarah said.

“What bad behavior?” Lydia asked.

“His dumb comments about rape not being rape. The man was just horny for Claire. Don’t you see the way he moons over her whenever he and Sally come to visit.”

“Maggio and Sally are good friends of ours. He has a sensitive side and took what Claire said personally. He wants to be seen in a good light by us. We represent something to him,” Lydia said.

How confident she was of her power, Luther thought, seeing, as she did, guests trying to win the favor of the Van Dines. And yet, with her heated observation, Sarah had entered a sensitive area. Lydia had a secret that wasn’t so secret. The marriage bed had become a place of frustration, not pleasure. It could not be easy for her to hear that Maggio, a contemporary, was forsaking her for a younger woman, especially when that younger woman was her daughter. Not that she didn’t know. She knew everything. But to be reminded in such a bald, crude way. Was it not just like Sarah to crash into her world with the same emphatic tone that Peter employed when he was in denunciation of the world he could not be a part of? What was it to have a child, Jung’s shadow self, so irrevocably turned against her?

The next evening Peter was calling them out for more, and so they came with blankets and binoculars to the landfill near the World Trade Center to witness the fireworks extravaganza. But again the overwhelming crowd, and with it, the fear of violence. Luther could only hope that the rockets bursting overhead into multicolored showers would serve as a pacifier, not a goad to mayhem. Peter was not used to the give and take of a jostling crowd. Already he had shown annoyance that a Puerto Rican family had been wanting to share the loud Latin sounds pouring from their portable radio.

By the end of the spectacle, Luther had begun to experience some internal agitation, a stirring in his bowels he was desperate to repress, unless he wished to go potty in front of the multitudes. In desperation, he burst forward in a broken field run into a thronged restaurant. Seeing the viciousness of the universe on display in the form of a maliciously dawdling occupier of the only stall, he had no choice but to drop his drawers and treat the two men coming in behind him to a fireworks display of his own. A real stink bomb he let loose into the garbage can before the astonished witnesses and ran out, holding his unclasped pants as he went, but not before shouting, “That’s all I’ve got. I give what I can.”

On the streets of Little Italy ash cans, rockets, cherry bombs, Roman candles—more modest eruptions of color and sound, the community having its own private celebration in competition with the bigger show and unwilling, like the Mafia, to blend into the larger entity. In his mind’s eye he walked like a little girl so all those inclined toward savagery would place their instinct for brutality on hold as he passed them by.

“What happened to you? You just ran off,” Sarah said, when he arrived home.

‘I went where my bowels took me. Your father had his bombing runs over Germany and I had mine over a garbage can in the crowded bathroom of a crowded restaurant.’

“Speak to me, Luther.”

“There was a high degree of maliciousness in the occupant of the one stall, who had installed *himself*. There are consequences for such dawdling viciousness, and so I let loose. Sometimes we must let the other end speak for us.”

“Good thinking, Luther. Good thinking.”

That night he dreamt that Bill Walton was wearing pancake makeup and little red and orange stars on his face. The stars and the state of California they represented evoked sadness. Luther's spirits rallied when he became part of a basketball team. However, Mr. Sadowski, his high school coach, had been replaced by a woman. When Luther got to the locker room he found that his uniform had been confiscated. He went to the new coach, who told him he was being penalized for unspecified infractions. As they spoke, she had a change of heart. And so he suited up, only to realize that he had left his sneakers at home. Still, all was not lost. The woman presented him with a pair of high-top black sneakers, saying the color would keep it clear in everyone's mind who he was.

It happened that the following day he got to meet Claire's new beau at the apartment of the Van Dines. Cedric Shoalton was his name, and Luther saw that he was strong in body as well as mind, with muscular arms and legs that bent the fabric of his clothes to their will and a handshake capable of breaking bones. Luther also saw that the two kept themselves apart from the others and were sick with the sickness of love, though to his eye Cedric appeared to be the more seriously ailing. He wanted to warn Cedric that Claire would put the hurt on him. Already it had been established in her mind that he needed her more than she needed him. She would never, ever, take the marriage vow, as she was not built to surrender to a man but to swing him over her head like a towel.

Luther could say these things because by now, Claire had a history he could use for reference. He had seen how she had put the clobber on Brian, her longtime boyfriend, moving him out of the way in order to give herself to someone named Dolph, who



complimented her frequently on *her* bush (this according to Sarah). She downgraded Brian to standby status, kept him close, made him her lapdog. Without a father present in his life, he had no power source.

After a few days Luther called to Diane De Angelo because he had to see more clearly what it was he had found and whether it was still there. He could not let go of a woman with a golden tan and a cherry red tattoo on her butt who had done all the things she had done for him that night, biting his ear lobes and sucking on his nipples and his meager apparatus, not letting go until the job was done. Her resolute way stayed in his mind and fueled a burning desire.

I am drowning in sex, Luther thought. I have grown even softer and more sentimental. I sing along with Jackson Browne and Linda Ronstadt. All meanness exorcised, sucked from my bones. I want to live and die for this woman who goes without underwear through the streets of Manhattan and lives with a man who is never home.

She answered his call. She did not dodge him or present herself behind a wall of indifference. But she did warn him that complexity was building. The woman friend of hers who had cried out that Luther was, essentially, nothing more than a hanging string turned out to have her own designs on Diane's body.

“How do you mean?” Luther asked.

“She came over the day after I saw you, and as I was taking a bath she took off her clothes and joined me, and it didn't stop there. She says she loves me and I mustn't

see you anymore, that whatever affliction of the spirit grips you I will catch as well if we continue to see each other. She says you are insufferable and insulting.”

“But I can help you. I am more than my face. I am worlds unknown even to myself.”

“I don’t know, Luther. You talk so much, like you are trying to lasso me with your words. Besides, I am going out to the Hamptons with Gwen to stay at her weekend home. You are very pale. You should think of the sun as well.”

“Gwen? Gwen? The name itself raises serious concern. It has the sound of cold porridge on it.”

“She works with Andy Warhol and says she wants to photograph you. She says your gaunt face would fit in nicely in the album of maniacs she is putting together.”

“Mlle. Gamahuche says that, does she?”

“Mlle. who?”

“Never mind. What is this place of viciousness from which she speaks?”

“She’s not being vicious. She has a vision.”

“When are you going? How can I save you if you are not here?”

But his talk availed him nothing. His lasso missed the mark. And to think that he had stroked her hair and been tender with her in his way. Still, he could not find fault. Her beauty was the ticket she had been born with. If the number of rides on that ticket had their limit, it had not been reached yet.

*Celeste, it is not overnight that we become bodhisattvas. Pain must have its way before we see that we are not a body and we are free.*

The apartment was no longer tolerable. It was imperative that they elevate above the station they now occupied. This ordinariness is too much abounding, Luther said to himself. It is in me and around me. I am being flattened to the dimensions of death, with no hope for revival. In this he took to heart the soulful sound of the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Loving Feeling." He had lost that loving feeling for *himself*, the sense that he was involved in a mystery with new doors opening all the time, or was he only idealizing his time with Sarah at the Chinatown loft?

I will go where I can go, and do what I can do. I will let money be my agent of magic, the little I have left, and buy myself back to the place of happiness I have regretfully forsaken. I will be a prosperous nation in my own estimation once again. I will be America with its manifest destiny intact. I will not be broken down to a backwater status. I will not lie down in this coffin posing as an apartment any longer, nor will Sarah, my beloved Sarah. This too Luther thought, with the power available to his struggling mind.

On a sun-filled day he headed west onto the Bowery and bought a loft, that is, for three thousand dollars he bought the fixtures and with them, the right to rent the space. Love was love. It needed no other name, he understood, standing in the 1500-foot square space on the second floor of a small walkup building with a peaked roof just half a block north of Houston Street. The loft was sectioned into three main areas: fully one-third was a studio, with an east light pouring in through two large windows; a carpeted living area, and toward the rear, a dining and kitchen area, where a loft bed had been built. The best

of both worlds would be available to Sarah: ample studio space plus domestic amenities, such as a stove and a bathroom with a door. As for Luther, he could set up a little office for himself right under the loft bed. Oh boy, he could not wait.

The man selling the loft was Marc Gitall, and he had clearly powered up for his life. One year after divesting himself of his lucrative Wall Street investment firm to heed the call of art, he was showing simultaneously in three prestigious galleries around town while also exhibiting in London, Rome, and Paris. Marc Gitall, by his own admission, was flying. That was the very word he used. He had already committed to a loft in SoHo three times the size of the one he was now leaving so he could bring in assistants to help him process his work, citing the need to move things along and get pieces out. “Got to move that freight. Got to move it,” Marc Gitall said.

“That is so wonderful.”

“How about you, Luther? Are you off-loading your cargo, too?” When Luther stared at him blankly, Marc Gitall said, “What kind of art do you do, anyway?” To this point he had chosen to regard Luther as an equal, but now doubt was casting a sudden shadow.

“I do white line continue art, only it is not art as such,” Luther said. “It is more the transcription of event each day till I don’t have to do it anymore and can walk around in peace and with a studied air of innocence so a beating is not inflicted on my person.”

“Who would want to beat you?”

“That is the question, is it not? Who indeed? Perhaps these monsters will show their faces within the timeframe of eternity.”

“Well, look, Luther, you seem like an aboveboard chap. I think we should be able to do a deal. Will you be living here by yourself?”

“Not at all. There is one whose art has been calling her forward since long before art began to call to me. In fact, the calling of her art to her was what called my art to me when we met, if I am making myself clear.”

Luther returned with Sarah the next day.

“The bounty of America, Sarah. The bounty of America,” he said en route, and when she saw the loft for herself she did not disagree. It was something for him to make her happy, when he had made her so sad.

Next it was for them to meet with the owner of the building, a Mr. Ben Leponowitz, so he could give them his seal of approval. They had only to head three blocks south on the Bowery, to a restaurant supply store that Mr. Leponowitz had been the owner of for over thirty years.

“The Bowery really does remind me of Paris,” Sarah said, en route.

“What part of Paris would that be?” Luther asked. “Are the sozzled in great numbers to be found sprawled and caked in their own filth on the Champs Elysee and under the Arc de Triomphe?” Because the fallen were all about, not only those who were slumped to the hot pavement but those stumbling about. And then there were the cleaned up drunks standing idle in ill-fitting clothes outside the Salvation Army building.

“I meant the wideness of the boulevard reminds me of Paris,” Sarah said.

Industrial size cooking ranges and food storage units, double urns such as you saw behind the counters of restaurants, giant pots and pans, durable dinnerware—there was

nothing Ben Leponiwitz didn't know about the business to which he had given his life. But he was old now and tired. The winter months he was spending in Florida he was looking to extend. God's waiting room, Mr. Leponowitz called it, a startling term new to Luther's ears. Who would want to live in the anteroom of death? Or was the question, who wouldn't? Wasn't the Bowery the anteroom of death as well?

"Mark Rothko lived down here in one of my buildings. Can you believe it? I have a big room full of his discards, paintings he would throw out the window and into the backyard," Ben Leponowitz said.

"They could be valuable," Luther said. "You could have a room full of gold," Luther said.

"The art world don't work that way," Ben Leponowitz replied. "You either hit the ball into the seats or you head back to the dugout."

Luther heard Ben Leponowitz to be saying that he knew a lot and that he had come by his knowledge the hard way, without the benefit of school or any of that, with his insertion of a plural contraction where the singular was supposed to go, and by complementing his war on the grammatical with a gruffness of tone to signify the harsh reality of the world.

"But he was his severest critic. Maybe the art world will be more generous in its assessment than he was," Sarah said.

"You never know," Ben Leponowitz said, taking a softer tone with Sarah than he had with Luther.

“I like his bands of color,” Luther said. “They nurture me. I feel like I receive them or they receive me, or something like that. They change. I see that there is more to them than I first thought. They open doors of possibility in a cloud of mystery. As they change, I change too, moving inward as well as outward. A feeling of great joy overcomes me, despite the muted, somber quality of the paintings.”

If Ben Leponowitz heard him, it was with severity showing in his thin, birdlike face.

“You must be the artist,” Ben Leponowitz said, turning to Sarah. ”I can tell by your hands.”

“We are both artists,” Sarah said, allowing unity to be her guide.

“What she means is that—” Luther began but was stopped by the look of disapproval from Sarah. He had wanted to say a few more words about “White Line Continue” but deferred to her unspoken wisdom.

Diane De Angelo was not finished with him, or he was not finished with her. In the bar on Spring Street he joined her at the table where she was seated with her woman friend.

“If I knew your name, I’ve forgotten it,” Luther said to the other woman. “I can only think of you as She-Who-Likes-To-Take-Baths-Together.”

“Luther, don’t.” Diane said.

“Didn’t I tell you he is obnoxious and insulting? He’s also drunk,” the woman said. Her hair was blond and cut short. She had fire in her face and Andy Warhol in her resume.

He allowed himself to be driven off, and yet the next day there was Diane De Angelo again, entering a deli on University Place as he was leaving.

“Funny seeing each other in daylight hours,” Luther said. “Guess it proves we are not vampires.”

“That wasn’t very nice what you said to Ellen last night. You got me in a whole lot of trouble with her. She said I had no business telling you her business with me, and I guess she is right.”

“Maybe you told me because you needed to tell me.”

“Ellen is fine. She’s just Ellen. But she can be a bit bossy and mean.”

“Is that what you want? A mean boss?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” she said.

“You have a beautiful mouth,” he said.

“I’ve got to go.”

“Where are you off to now?”

“Ellen wants me to go to Key West with her. She has a home down there.”

“How will that help your life?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You run around a lot. Why not stay in one place for a while. Besides, Key West in summer is brutal.”

A car horn honked. Lady Love sat glaring at the wheel of a red convertible with the hood down.

“I’ve got to go,” Diane De Angelo said.



And yet, when Luther called two days later, expecting only a recording, she answered. She hadn't gone to Florida after all. It came as a surprise to hear her say that she had listened to him and decided to stay in the city. His hope rose that he had value in her life even if she couldn't see him that night.

That night he was into his second scotch when he heard a voice behind him say, "I never thought you'd be here." There stood Diana with Lady Love and a third person, a black man whom Diana said was Lady Love's real lover after Lady Love and her friend went off to a table. No, Lady Love hadn't gone to Key West either, but not because Diana had decided to stay put. "She has affairs to attend to. Hang around for forty-five minutes and then you can come home with me. But don't come to the table. Karen has not one good word to say about you to him, and so he is likely to punch you in the face or do something more serious. Are you listening?"

"Oh yes I am, and with both ears," Luther said.

"Save that talk for later, if you must speak it at all," Diane said.

For the next forty-five minutes Luther's vigilance was soaring, both in monitoring himself and his environs. If Lady Love's main man had aggressive intentions, he did not show them, not that Luther stared directly at him. The mirror behind that bar was all he needed to be assured no movement had been detected and all was quiet on the northern front. And though it pained him that his isolation and friendless existence were on full view, he thought, let her see me as I am, let her see me in my nakedness. Let her do just that. In this way did he speak to himself in defense against the laughing thing that might be going on in Lady Love and her amour as they and Diane sat at a table with a

full view of his aloneness. *Because, Celeste, when we accept ourselves as we are and put on no airs, then do we give others the freedom to accept themselves as well, as the seeing that goes on is not only with the eyes but is felt as a vibration in the air.*

*Now Celeste, Diane was as good as her word. She left that table and came to me, and Lady Love did not hiss and spit nor did her amour say that now he was going to have to hurt me good. There were no obstructions to our progress but the ball and chain of self-doubt and insecurity and of my own life, the one I had with Sarah. I will tell you something. I must tell you something. Diane De Angelo came to me that night not only in that bar restaurant but in the privacy of the apartment she stayed in with the mystery man of the many books, volumes that ranged from Rabelais to Donald Barthelme. She came to me shed of her blue-tinted sunglasses. More able to sustain eye contact, she told me that the man of the house wrote for a Long Island newspaper and spent much of his time in the Hamptons.*

“Do you ever dream that the dead are alive” Diane De Angelo asked as they lay in bed.

“I have a friend who was killed in Vietnam. Not a friend, exactly, but someone I spent a lot of time with. I dreamt that I lived on an island with no one else on it and one day in the distance saw him rowing toward me. The sight of him brought fear, not happiness. A tropical island, with serenity in the air, but his appearance was menacing.”

“You thought he was going to kill you because you hadn’t died, too.”

“I was always afraid he was going to kill me, and came to believe the only reason he didn’t was that he died before he could.”

“Did you want him to kill you? Was that why you were with him in the first place?”

“Don’t get alarm bells ringing in my mind,” Luther said.

“You’re funny.”

“How is that?”

“You look like a man who lives on an island, and you take that island wherever you go.”

“It’s pretty shameful.”

“I think it’s kind of interesting.”

“There’s a word.”

“Interesting? What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s what is said of people who don’t have the talent or the power to be dangerous. It’s a word reserved for the feeble, the innocuous.” He had had this discussion before. The word, as applied to him, still served as a red flag.

“Well, I think it’s an interesting word,” Diane said.

“Exactly,” Luther said, and they both laughed.

“You didn’t ask me why I wondered if you ever dreamed that the dead are alive.”

“This is true,” Luther said.

“Why not?”

“Because I sensed what you would say. You would become upset again about your brother.”

“I’m always upset about my brother. Didn’t you say you had a sister who died?”

“That’s different.”

“Why is it different?”

“Because she was meant to die.”

“What does that mean?”

“Not everybody is meant to stay above ground. Some people are meant to have dirt thrown on them. That’s just the way it is for most of my family.”

“You’re sick, aren’t you?”

“I feel pretty OK,” Luther said.

“I mean you’re sick in your emotions. You’re all twisted up. Things don’t come out right. They come out distorted. Talking like that.”

“Talking like what?”

“‘Have dirt thrown on them.’ What kind of talk is that? It’s so disrespectful. This is someone’s life you’re talking about.”

He had underestimated Diane De Angelo, and she was informing him of his mistake. She had a brain to go with her beauty. “It’s just talk,” he said.

“It’s not just talk. It’s the way a murderer thinks. People have no consequence. Just throw some dirt on them. Bury them alive or dead.”

“I would never bury someone alive.”

“Nor would you bury them if they were dead. You wouldn’t care.”

“Where are we going with this?” He was going out. That was where he was going.

He had flipped her switch.

“You men. All you want to be are women. And then you are neither men nor women.”

*Celeste, the world was calling to her, in spite of her drinking and her drugs, in a way it would never call to me, and I lacked the power to hold her to me. Thus she was a transient in my life whom I was trying to give a bigger role than she played as a way of letting the world know that women of beauty and I crossed paths from time to time. However, needing to bring me into sharper focus, she began to ask questions. I lacked definition and substance, as any man must who has foregone finding a legitimate place in life, whether humble or exalted, for that of a nonparticipant existing at the margins of society while indulging his fantasy of becoming a great writer. The crime was that I was not really real. I did not tell her I was living on dwindling funds with a woman in a problematic relationship. I sought protection within the drug- and alcohol-induced fog she existed in. A real man would have claimed her for his own. A real man would have placed a foundation under her as she struggled to get a grip on things. Essentially, she began to ask that I be honest, and yet I continued to withhold and evade. Thus her condemnatory comment about men who want to be women—men who cannot be men. The man who could keep her was the journalist, who got paid for the words he wrote and who drove a car and had the means to keep a Greenwich Village flat and also rent a place in the Hamptons and give her the security she needed. What she didn't need was a barfly.*

Both Luther and Sarah had heard the song “It’s Crying Time Again” many times, but romantic love was not the cause of the tears they shed that day in their East Village

apartment. Luther wept while listening to a reading of *Notes from the Underground* on WBAI. "I am a sick man...I am a spiteful man..." How shameful that with the writing scholarship he had given himself, Luther had not been able to write a single thing that approximated the truth and power in those opening lines alone and that he should be instead a man with a flagging commitment to the one thing he loved.

Sarah cried not because of a slow leak in her dream of artistic success but because of the distressing condition of her hair. Childhood memories of his mother's tears came to Luther's consciousness as he watched Sarah break down after long hours in her studio. Yes, yes, it was crying time again, and there was nothing he could do.

"So where is this loft?" Dr. Rosner asked.

"It would do you little good to know," Luther said.

"Why is that?"

"Because it's my guess that you never venture below Fifty-Ninth Street and Bloomingdale's, unless you are headed for Wall Street to confer about your millions, but for that you would employ your helicopter."

Dr. Rosner was kind enough to laugh. "You're having a hard time getting untracked."

"Now you're talking my language," Luther said.

"What language is that?"

"The language of trains and the tracks they run on."

"Actually, I was talking about a job. How are you doing with your search?"

“Oh, the things you do to me,” Luther replied.

*Celeste, this thing of shame. What man is there, other than those wedded to evil, who doesn't want to be a do right man? But whiskey was speaking loud and clear and wanted to enter me in its ring of fire. (If I sometimes speak in the language of the songs in my head, then so be it. I am of my time and I am in my time until the time when nothing of the kind can be said of me. Are we clear about this? Are we?) And where it called me on a Friday night was to the bar at Waverly Place, where I could sit in the warmth of my dreams. Diane De Angelo did not come for me on this night. She had closed the door, and if truth be told, my heart was aching for her, but no amount of aching could exert a persuasive power on her. She was not there, she was not there. And yet it was impossible for me to believe the door was locked, even if had been closed. And as I drank, the world once again became a place of infinite possibility and I went to the phone as a man desperate and determined will and called out to the universe, Womb, will you have me? Will you take me unto you? But a woman, even a woman with kindness in her genes, will know how to put the hurt on you by substituting the sweetness of her pleasure palace with its absence. She will know to sing “Oh it's crying time again” and she will mean it, for you must pay and pay and pay for not making right what is not right in a woman's life.*

*Now Celeste, a man should not be an impediment in any woman's life. That night I fell into bed and whether I slept the sleep of the just or the unjust I will leave it for others to say, but when morning came I was still copping some serious z's. It availed Sarah nothing to try to rouse me as her High School of Music and Art girlfriend Carola*

*Aprile was buzzing on the intercom, having showed up for a planned visit. Sarah had no choice but to vacate the premises and go off with Carola to a neighborhood coffee shop. Fearing they would make a quick return, I performed a hasty ablution and dressed and ran into the street. But a mind in disarray that feeds on its own flawed premises will always lead us into the ditch of discomfort. What we're running from we're running toward, I was to hear years later. What I was running from was the laughing thing, the thing of Harvardian irony, the weapon of those who inhabit the domain of high intelligence and feel free to bestow belittlement on us. That Sarah had a friend of Carola's quality was comforting, as I didn't want to see Sarah isolated and alone, but we cannot forget that Carola had been accepted to Radcliffe and thus had the numbers of the high board score people. Fear was written on my face and would encourage her to new heights of scorn behind that seemingly permanent smile. And so savagery had its way that morning. I sped from the building right into their path. My mind being so full of Carola Aprile, hers could only be full of me, and so she was in a state of high alert and braced for my appearance, like a cat in high vigilance mode next to a rat hole. But her eye were not claws, were not a sharp-toothed mouth with which to tear and secure my flesh. I broke free, ran helter-skelter through traffic to avoid the full defeat she wished to lay on me. The company of our betters can be intolerable, Celeste. We must at all cost and by any means protect ourselves from reproaches to our existence. This is, of course, the illness speaking, not the god of love, but sometimes it strikes full force and crashes over breakwaters to flood our very being. At such times we must simply endure until the filthy waters recede and then continue our journey onto higher ground.*



Luther had a lot on his plate. There were things he had to monitor, beyond the movements of Carola Aprile and her kind. Luke's empire of lust love had expanded. Fortified by the confidence shown in him by Simon Weill and Harry Stavigros, as well as his increased earning power, he allowed a young and beautiful woman named Maeve not only into his life but into his apartment. If get-it-on Brenda was upset by this threat to her hegemony, she soon adapted. It felt good to be dominant, coming as Luke did from a family in which women had dominated him. But eighteen-year-old Maeve did not come from a family indifferent to its own. She did not have sisters who pulled out each other's hair and raked each other's flesh with their long nails. She had sisters who looked out one for the other, and these sisters were not the unloved and unwanted of the earth, not those who, afflicted by narcissism or religiosity or a sense of entitlement or other manifestations of a distorted and deformed self, were unable to be part of the world around them because the world, either in its wisdom or cruelty or simply indifference, had not called to them. They were sisters to whom the world beckoned. They were sisters who could live life on its own terms, and when they were knocked down get back up again. They did not have a mother who would assign them rooms in which to be warehoused for the rest of their lives. They understood that there was no womb to return to.

One of those sisters was named Rita, and though she and all her siblings had come from nothing, growing up in a tiny apartment on One Hundred Eleventh Street just west of Broadway, she had made her presence strong upon the earth. She did not stay on One Hundred Eleventh Street. She did not go to the mental institutions of New York City as

her second home. She was called to the bright sun of Southern California and with little training powered up as a real estate magnate of the first order. Rita was thirty-one, while Maeve was the baby of the family. Because of Maeve's beauty, the fashion industry had called her to it, but she lacked the navigational power of Rita. It did not sit right with Rita that Luke, a man of her own age, should exert appropriating power over a girl so much younger, and it doubly offended her that he should lead her into a den of lewdness, given his ongoing relationship with get-it-on Brenda. Rita did not do the fancy thing. She did not call it a ménage a trois. She called it depravity.

Rita also called on her cousin, an FBI agent stationed in New York City, to pay a visit to Luke so Luke could see first-hand not only the beauty in her family but the power of it in a rugged masculine frame. And so it was that Donegal Fitz showed up at Luke's door, identified himself, and said he would like to ask a few questions. Question number one was this: "How are things swinging? Are they swinging good?" Question number two followed: "How is your thing swinging? Is it swinging good?" And question three, predictably, was "Would you like things in general, and your thing in particular, to continue swinging good?" Now each question Donegal Fitz punctuated with his right fist gently jabbing the palm of his left hand so as to impress Luke with the seriousness of the visit. To each question Luke said, through his fear, "I don't know. I really don't," because he had taken note of the hardness of Donegal Fitz's fists and the power with which he could apply them to his face and other parts.

*Celeste, I report the facts as I see them and when I see them.*

Now more will be said about this matter later, as tragedy of a certain kind was to unfold, including murder most desperate if not most foul.

The Democratic Party had a presidential candidate that year, Jimmy Carter, who many believed would match up strong against Gerald Ford, the Republican occupant of the Oval Office, who had played football too long without a helmet in his Yale days, according to the former and totally disgraced president Richard Milhous Nixon. Mysteries appear and sometimes linger and such was the case with Mr. Carter, of Plains, Georgia, and the former governor of the state. That mystery was not in his career path from naval officer to peanut farmer to politician, but in his first name. It was perplexing that someone with his conspicuously manly way should dwell in the land of the diminutive, as he did not appear to have the boyish appearance of little Bobby Kennedy. Luther left open the possibility that the name was attributable to the peculiarities of the South, such as hominy grits and soda pop for breakfast.

If this matter was alive in the mind of Luther, he attributed it to the fact that in the July heat the Democratic horde had come to New York City for its convention and to sing “Happy Days Are Here Again” in acoustics-challenged Madison Square Garden when the peanut farmer from Plains accepted the nomination.

He was not deriding of Jimmy Carter, and no one should say he was. In fact, he had great faith in his executive as well as intellectual capability; there could be no doubt of the virile quality of his mind, given his background in science and his service on

nuclear-powered submarines; it took such a mentality to know where the electrons go and the difference between a neutron and a proton and what is fissionable and what is not.

But he did have his question and he did have his feelings, and both were present on the bright sunny afternoon he got behind the wheel of a Checker cab and drove it out of the garage of the Flann Taxi Service, on West Fifty-Seventh Street.

(And yes, it was crying time once again. Before placing his hackie license, with photo ID, in the slot on the dashboard and turning the ignition, he had broken into tears that this should be his life just two months shy of his twenty-ninth birthday. But a sweet peace came to him, as it often did when he wept, and he heard a voice whisper, "It's all right, Luther. It's all all right," even as he experienced at depth the sad waywardness of his journey.)

His first fare was a woman in a black evening gown and wearing a gold necklace.

"Take me to the 21 Club, and step on it," she said. "And while we're on the way, think of something witty for me to say. I'm dining with the big boys."

Luther took his passenger seriously, as she was imperious in her tone and gave evidence that rage could easily dominate her well-made-up face. This is not a humble servant of the Lord but a woman fully engaged in the world's wars, he concluded. But his thought was a critique, not a witticism to offer the men of power with whom she would be dining. These would be men who could only hope that their postprandial snack would be the carefully coiffed, manicured, pedicured, and scented woman they had called to be with them.

“I have put my mind to the task,” he finally said, in the hope of gaining more time, because he heard a clock ticking and he feared it might be her time bomb self.

“How about you put your mind to your driving? Where are you going?”

“I am going to Twenty-first Street, where any sensible person would, and then I will head east to the area of the city known for its exclusiveness.”

“How about you not do that? How about you go to 21 West Fifty-second Street? And how about I not ask what kind of cab driver you are, because I already know?”

“We will get you there.”

“Who is we? Am I being chauffeured by a schizo?”

“It is just a manner of speaking, and you have not struck a nerve with the use of that word. There are things to make my foundation tremble, but that is not one of them. The fissure in my mind has been healing for some months, and like a bone that has been broken, my mind has come together and is stronger than ever.”

“Glad to hear,” she said, as if she wasn’t.

“And may I suggest that your witticism might be that a New York City cab driver thought the 21 Club was on Twenty-First Street? That should be good for some knee-slapping heehaws and yuck yucks and down-home chuckling.”

“Yes, thank you for the material,” she said drily.

“You are welcome,” Luther said, trying to hold his own.

“These are important people I am meeting, members of the Democratic Party in Texas. Drop me off at the entrance so I can be seen stepping out of the taxi. I do not want them thinking I walked in off the street.”

“You are in a chariot that will do you proud in the eyes of the Texas contingent,” Luther said, as he pulled to the curb. The timing was excellent, as tanned, long-legged gentlemen in dark, expensive-looking suits, each with his left hand in his front pocket, were strolling toward the restaurant.

There was much for Luther to note and ponder on this memorable day, and not only the electric buzz in the air now that the world was coming to New York City to do right by the Democratic Party after the attempted criminal hegemony of Richard Milhous Nixon; even with him gone and his more benign successor in the White House, new life was needed in Washington, D.C. No, no, what was astonishing was the feeling that had been unleashed in him. All he could hear in his head for a while was the filthy Young Rascals singing “I’ve Been Lonely Too Long,” not as an accurate description of where he was but of where he had been. He had been lonely. He had been sequestered. He had been the prisoner of a life he wasn’t even sure was suited to him, and now he was in the bright light of day, engaged with the world and its people, difficult as some of them might be. Oh happy day. Oh happy happy day. But it was more than that. It was the capacity of his mind to deceive him. That the prospect of doing the hackie thing should have overwhelmed him with shame and made him weep when in fact it boosted his spirits. Something was going on he needed to know. His mind was capable of gross deceptions. It told him happiness could be found on one path and one path only when possibly it was to be found somewhere else.

That evening he took his cigar box, filled with coins and bills, and his hackie license, and stopped off at his own 21 Club for one regular Mac and one with cheese, an

order of fries, and a container of Coke, then sat alone at a table for two eating his utensil-less meal. The world was feeding him and Jimmy Carter (he would never call a man with his gravitas “little”) and the Democratic National Convention and McDonald’s were feeding him. Something big was going on. He was picking up the thread of his life. Not since his days at the audiotapes booth at the Met had he felt useful in America, and now here he was with that feeling again. Connections farther back, to childhood and adolescence, were being restored. All that, and he was committing experience at the same time.

“People exist for a reason. They don’t just come out of nowhere. There is a plan, diabolical or benign, in all of this, and yet, should you insist that we are merely shadows passing through, you might not be mistaken.” So a man on the street declared to passersby as Luther accompanied Sarah uptown the next day. Whether he was referencing Plato or his own madness Luther couldn’t say, but he was impressed with the man’s authoritative tone and manner.

“The sound of conviction is distinct, is it not?” Luther said, pausing to take in the message of the soapbox stranger.

“Stop with the is it not. I’m going to be late,” Sarah said, and so they entered the kiosk at Astor Place and descended to the subway.

After his brilliant debut Luther had been turned away when he showed up at the depot. The manager had dismissed him with rough stuff talk, but Luther hadn’t minded.

He was being initiated into the world of men, and maybe such gruffness was part of the ritual.

“I cannot tell a lie,” Luther said. “I am very happy to be on this subway, knowing our two destinations, as both of them are about the light.”

“What light is that?” Sarah asked. The subway car was not thronged. They had managed to get a seat together.

“The light of Dr. Frodkey and the light of Central Park. You are headed to the one and I am headed to the other. Isn’t that something?”

“I guess it is,” Sarah said.

Since selling their apartment and moving to a smaller one in the same building, the Van Dines had shown less concern about financing Sarah’s therapy. Luther no longer had to worry that her parents would become destitute in supporting Sarah’s quest for mental health. As for his own, with Diane De Angelo out of the picture, his mind could return to a degree of normalcy and a welcome peace could reign. It was not of him James was speaking when he wrote, “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.” He was not an unstable element but rooted in his love, at least for the time being, though he was two-faced and deserving of being beaten for putting Sarah and her family, not to mention his own family, in his White Line Continue opus.

“Oh, it is a sunny day. Just let it be. Just let it be,” he cried out.

“Let what be?” Sarah asked.

“I was in dialogue with myself,” Luther said.

“Is Dr. Rosner helping you?” Sarah asked.



“Why would you think he isn’t?” Luther replied.

“No reason. I just want us to be happy.”

“Aren’t we happy? Aren’t we?” Luther asked.

The train had come to his station, Eighty-sixth Street. She would continue on one more stop. Anxious as he had been for an answer, they would have to leave the question hanging. He couldn’t say if there were worse things to have pending.

Because nature was calling to him in an urgent way, he mounted the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, made a dollar contribution for admission, and hurried himself to the nearest men’s room, where the air was strong with the smell of human waste. But instead of the much needed relief that he was seeking, he found instead an impediment of a kind to make alarm bells ring in his mind. The sight he saw was instantly recognizable, even with his back turned, a walking work of art himself, none other than Lane Halderman, the Boston genius of Sarah’s dreams, waiting patiently on line for his turn at the urinal. I must run from what is not my own. I must not wait so that he turns and, seeing me, initiates my destruction. I must vacate this space of fear and sheer admiration all in one. Out he fled to another restroom, where in a stall he talked to himself in a whisper while emptying his bladder. Good job, he heard himself say. Good job, sonny boy, the appellation delivered with a degree of tartness and scorn. Then he pressed his forehead against the cool metal and moaned more loudly than he had intended to.

“It’s not the wailing wall in there. Let’s move it,” he heard a voice call out, and so he exited the premises before further remonstrance could be made.

*Celeste, Genius had grown a mustache. This I could see when he turned his head slightly to profile. A modest mustache that did not suit him. The dark patch just stood out, as if he was growing hair where it did not belong. That is not to say he was Ron Doug material. He did not have the insensitivity component to be of that kind.*

*The next morning the phone rang. The Genius was on the line, asking to speak with Sarah. Was he displaying the imperiousness of the wealthy in his manner? Possibly, but my job was not to be a barrier to his desire, and so I handed Sarah the receiver. And if truth, free of exaggeration, is to be my guide, with love as its accompaniment, I could do so because a newfound confidence was growing in me vis a vis the Genius. Yes, you may say I did the vaminoso from the smelly restroom on sighting him the previous day, and I will not stand in the way of this fact. But his rise had not been meteoric. He was not on the cover of any of the big art magazines. If he had started fast, his progress had since stalled. According to Sarah, he had even become discouraged and opened a gallery in Boston to help promote the careers of his artist friends. Was it possible that his father's business skills were now becoming his own as well? As for that chop of mustache, some close monitoring of this development would have been desirable to determine if he was relying on facial hair to boost his manliness quotient.*

*Celeste, ardor that wanes in one may rise in another. No research is needed to verify this reality.*

*It happens that you and I had a mutual friend in Hermione Grunfelt, the woman I had met a few years before at a free-form writing class at the New School. The muse visited her most strongly, she said, when she was listening to raspy-voiced Rod Stewart*

*sing "Maggie," and I could easily understand why, as the song brought me to powerful attention whenever I heard it being played, whether I was sitting in a bar or dallying in a pizza parlor.*

*The day following my encounter with The Genius, I was again told to take it on the lam by the taxi depot manager, and as I lowered my eyes from the towers of the Jefferson Market Courthouse, down in Greenwich Village, there Hermione was, in outsized pants such as a clown might wear, a loose-fitting blouse, and a floppy hat. There is a moment in which one person will see another in a different light and realize she has made a mistake in accepting this other person into her life. She will see that this other person is not cut from the same cloth as her and lacks her pedigree. She will see that his looks and quiet manner fooled her into believing he was more intelligent and thoughtful than he really is. But having established, over drinks, a degree of connection with this person, she cannot bear to correct the error by fully removing him from her life. Should she run into him on the street, she will give him an effusive greeting and a great big hug as a cover for her estrangement from him. Such was the case on that afternoon.*

*"How good it is to see you," she repeated three times.*

*I had no appointments and no plans other than eventually to drift home, and so when she invited me to the Lion's Head, that Village bar reputed to draw literary types, I accepted.*

*Is there any question more tiresome and shaming than to ask a virtually unpublished writer how his writing is going? And is there anything more tiresome and shameful than for him to fall for the seduction and prattle on about his meaningless*

*projects that stand no chance of meeting with worldly success? In this instance I was able to resist the opening, my restraint deriving from the clear memory of the instructor, Bill Gofner, reading the run-on sentences of my sloppy story in that writing class where I first met Hermione because I was too ashamed to read the text myself.*

*“How is your mythical girlfriend? What is her name again?”*

*“Sarah. And she’s not so very mythical,” I said.*

*“Of course she’s mythical,” Hermione said. “She would have to be to be with you.”*

*In this way did she speak, relentless with the hype machine, having intuited that I as well as she was a prisoner of unwarranted and uninvited narcissism.*

Hermione had another invitation to make. It was not to her bed, as she understood that he could not think of her in terms of sex. There was another mythical artist she wanted him to meet. In fact, there were two such mythical artists, married to each other, living in a glorious West Village townhouse. They were rare and exquisite birds. They were Paul and Jane Bowles, she said. Luther had read *The Sheltering Sky*. He had read about people needing to die, but that did not give him the common ground he was seeking.

“This is not a good fit. I’m a hackie. I’m not in the townhouse league,” Luther said, pulling from his small backpack his cigar box and hackie license. But Hermione overran him with her assurance that he was fully in their league. In that moment he saw that she wished to use him as cover to hide her aloneness. He would be her paltry equalizer with this mythical couple, even if he wasn’t, and while he had every

opportunity to turn away as they walked the narrow maze of Greenwich Village, streets, he continued to match her step for step. I have run too much. Let me not run anymore, he said to himself.

*Celeste, have I abandoned you by turning away from direct address? You must not think so. It just suddenly seemed too much, that perhaps impropriety had entered the house, or maybe only shyness, and it would be revealed to me too clearly and baldly what I was doing. Only this can I know for certain: that I must finish what I start. White Line, Continue must continue. It must. And love must express itself in the open spaces. It must. It must.*

That late afternoon he met the mythical couple. Celeste was lovely, her beauty mesmerizing and on another level from anything he had previously seen or experienced. His attraction to her, he was sure, was visible on his skin, his face, his whole being, so strong was the current of desire shooting through him. She was elegantly thin without being delicate. The cutoff blouse she wore showed off the full length of her graceful arms. And that black, curly hair so provocatively and severely short to place her in the tradition of Jean Seberg and Mia Farrow. But it was more. Her gaze, that smile, hinting as it did that her door was not fully locked. He read the smile as almost a taunt. Did he dare to invite himself in? And what were these strange connections entering his mind as he stared at her? Was that his sister Naomi, with her mocking darkness he was seeing in her face? And was that the man from his childhood who appeared in the doorway of the used magazine store in the Times Square subway station and whose coal-black and glittering eyes were only for him that he was also seeing?

Luther could appreciate Hermione's difficulty in staying on the ground. In his own way, his life testified to a similar problem. But her hype machine was in overdrive that afternoon. "As you know, my father passed away recently. I will spare you, Celeste, the iniquities of my surpassingly wicked stepmother. But do you know what my sister and I found in his wallet? A love letter from my mother written thirty-five years ago, long before she died and this wretch of a woman maneuvered her way into his life."

"How touching," Celeste said.

"But my point is really this. The love you and Peter share has the chance to surpass even their love. In the realm of art and beauty and now matrimony the two of you truly excel."

"But..."

"No buts. True is true and false is false."

"Come sit down and I'll get you both drinks," Celeste said, seeking escape from Hermione's effusion of gas.

*Am I betraying you, Celeste? Am I being less than perfect? Is the stick needed to bring me into line? Must I fall down and die? But we will not ask if I am betraying myself should I not move forward.*

*A space had opened up. Hermione had gone off to the garden out back to say hello to your husband and your baby girl was being tended to by the sitter you had hired. Perhaps it was the intensity of the connection I was quickly forming with you that drove her away, but about this we needn't speculate. We don't have time for such diversions but must get to the heart of the matter, however hard that may be to find.*

*“What is it that you do?” I heard you say, in a gentle, fearful voice.*

*“I am a taxi driver,” I said.*

*“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” you replied, as if you heard something in my voice that suggested it might be.*

*“Some of your best friends are taxi drivers.” My reply was not kind, to either you or myself. My class consciousness and my envy manifested. At this point you should have shown me to the door. You might have been better served if you had understood not only the gulf between the rich and the less well off but also the gulf between those who, on the basis of their gifts, had been chosen and those who had not. How much heartache you might have been spared had you stayed within the circle of your own kind.*

*But I was not to be the only interloper in your life, Celeste. Savagery speaks from the place where it exists. Your husband, Peter, was of this aggrandizing, imposing ilk. As I was to learn some years later, he had you pegged as a finish line when he whisked you away from your first husband only the year before and made you big with child to secure the deal.*

*We went to the garden, where we had drinks. The earth was still wet from an earlier rain, and the metal chairs sank into the soil. Peter, a small and compact man who wore cuffed wool pants though we were in July, said Hermione and I should join them for dinner at a nearby restaurant, but Hermione begged off, claiming she was committed to seeing a friend that evening. I could have, and perhaps should have, left with Hermione, but Peter insisted that I come along, which offered some protection against the feeling I might otherwise have had that I was an opportunistic tagalong. Along the way Peter*

*showed an impish side. As we passed a produce stand, he took a large, thick squash and confronted me with a representation of priapic power by holding it against his zippered fly. A manic, knowing smile worthy of a lewd mime accompanied the sudden gesture. Was he saying, Celeste, that he, like Luke, had a larger endowment than me? Had he invited me along to establish his superiority?*

*Peter proved to be more generous than he was friendly. We weren't seated long at the restaurant before he said, "I'll bet you have big red pimples on your ass."*

*Taken by surprise again, I could only say, "I really haven't noticed." But the mean smile on his face let me know, as if I didn't, that he had scored once more. To this point, I had the impression that I was in the company of a beautiful woman unfortunately married to an unpleasant man, and that, in any case, I could have no real place in your lives. But soon there occurred the following exchange, which added a new dimension to the evening.*

*"I feel I need to die," you said. Your smile was gone. You suddenly appeared weary, as if you were fighting off sleep.*

*"It wouldn't be long before I did so too, in that case," Peter replied, with a smile to match his smarmy words. His fake empathy stood in contrast to your genuine suffering.*

*He excused himself to sit at the bar, which I thought odd, but you explained that Peter was friends with the owner, and in fact was working on a mural for the restaurant.*

*"He can be rude and unpredictable, but he doesn't mean anything by it," you said, and assured me of his brilliance as an artist.*

*"Do you really want to die?" I asked.*



*“Sometimes,” you replied, in a tone that told me the subject was no longer open for discussion.*

*And yet I disregarded the stop sign and told you of Naomi, and how she had come to sleep with the fishes of the East River.*

*Celeste, because you were clever, you placed yourself in position to discover that I had chosen sound over substance. “How awful. Was she mixed up with the mob? Did they outfit her with cement boots?”*

*“Not exactly,” I said.*

*“Well then, strive for exactness. What really happened?”*

*And so I told her about the mental hospital and the wolves placed with the lambs and the police patrol boat that had found her floating in the foul water down by the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge.*

*“Are you sad about her passing?”*

*“Not in any way that I can understand,” I said.*

*Several times I said I would leave, as I didn't wish to overdo my stay, but then I would order another gin and tonic. On the third such drink the shadow of your disapproval fell over me, something perceptible in your eyes but impossible for me to describe. Many years later you would confirm the message I believed I was receiving on that night. As your husband's guest more than your own, was it proper for me to run up the bill with more drinks than propriety called for?*

*But Celeste, if the door closed for the night, it hadn't closed on the future. I had let it be known that I was doggedly pursuing “White Line, Continue” and perhaps it was*

*on the basis of my involvement with words and also to assist me in finding work closer to my heart that you mentioned your father was a publisher and that you were often called upon to read and offer commentary on manuscripts being considered for publication. Should I be interested, you would be happy to effect a contact and, with that, you wrote your number in an elegant script on a scrap of paper.*

Luther did not leave the restaurant unscathed, as no person can who has been briefly exposed to a higher realm only to be dispatched back to his own drab existence. On returning home he wrote Celeste's number in pencil on the wall by his desk. He did not attach Celeste's name to the number and sought to disguise the fact that it was a phone number at all by writing the last four digits first and the first three on a separate line minus the dash. While he also placed the number in his journal, he wanted it right out in the open so he would not forget where it was when the time came for him to use it. Not that he would use it. The woman was wealthy. She occupied the genius realm. She was married. If ever there was a no, no, tell her no situation, this was it, but at the same time he had to keep hope alive so he did not die. A man needed air and a man needed light, and Celeste's light was just as her name promised; it came from above while reserving the right, with the glint of the other in her eyes, of coming from below.

In his dream that night, Peter Handke was wearing dark glasses, as anyone who had written a book with the title *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* deserved to do. While Peter Handke was dealing aboveground with his celebrity, Luke and Luther had returned to the railroad tunnel of their childhood. No train came for Luther to bash with rocks nor did the men with knives come to relieve him and Luke of their lives. The scene

shifted to Riverside Church, where the Van Dines were arranging an exhibit of her artwork for Sarah.

Luther woke in the morning with no sense of wonder as to the power of dreams and seriously doubted if they were any match for the reality of what was going on on the ground where his life was being lived.

A crazed young black man on the Bowery said, “Don’t fuck with me. I won’t take your money. I will take your life.” His voice was strong and emphatic as he addressed himself to the universe.

A woman sitting alone on the bus headed up Third Avenue said, “Sometimes people are so inconsiderate. Sometimes I feel like screaming. I envy those women who talk to themselves right there on the street, where everyone can see and hear them. I’d like to do that for five minutes. I really would.”

Through all these experiences Luther commanded his innocence to maintain itself, so he could remain as a simple witness to human suffering and not inject himself or be injected into engagement with the manifestations of self before him.

*Celeste, something else. You let it be known that The Great Gatsby was your favorite book, but I don’t recall that you said why. You made no mention of the opening: “The rich are not like you and me.”*

He took his taxi driving seriously, showing up at the depot with good intentions. When a passenger gave him a destination, he got him there, and without the benefit of liquid fire, as he understood where that could lead. He learned the names Van Wyck Expressway and

Grand Central Parkway, and how they were connected. It was information he needed for when he hit the jackpot with a fare to JFK. And even if a hysterical and large hackie wanted to part Luther from his senses when he entered ahead of others in the taxi waiting line, his show of contrition brought the irate one within proximity of normalcy.

“One more time and it will be death. This is my livelihood. This is food on the table for my wife and children. I am out here being a man for my family. Do I look like I’m here for some pleasure party or something?”

“No, of course not. It was an accident. I’m very sorry.” Luther did not go smart mouth. He did not say it would be impossible to imagine the aggrieved one in pleasure party mode.

Another driver, with a more pacific message, came to him. “Are you driving high or straight? Because I’ve got some dynamite black chunky.”

“No, no,” Luther said. “Straight I must be so I don’t see patterns where there are none with lines of progress intersecting and continually changing. You see the trouble I have brought without being under the influence of your black chunky, though I do like the name, and it does put me in mind of that little piece of chocolate with the tin foil wrapper.”

“Do what you gotta do, my brother,” the driver said, warming Luther’s heart with the fraternity he had expressed.

Luther got a lesson in living on that day, and even if he quickly forgot it, he had it for the day that he was in. Though he had been too terrified to put the laughing thing on the irate hackie, he recognized that it was still there somewhere in his being and that it

was his way to sometimes be amused by those who showed themselves in a state of high dudgeon. Possibly it was familial. Had his mother not put the laughing thing on him when, as a child, he reacted with full outrage to her assertion that they were living in the last days? Had he not screamed at her, “You have had your life. Could you not let me have mine?” And had this outburst not brought on more laughter from his mother? And what of Auntie Eve? Had she not laughed herself onto the floor when the men of the building rose up against her for having them lug heavy mattresses from one floor to another only for her to change her mind and send them back where they had come from with their huge and floppy cargo?

While he liked the normal food that McDonalds offered—the color red could make him very happy and they had a cleanliness thing going, just like Chock Full O’Nuts—he also thought it might not hurt to have a little variety, and so, back in the city, he parked and locked his vehicle and took his accessories into a pizza parlor, where he gave himself the treat of a veal parmigiana hero, because these too were offered at this establishment. Luther sensed right away from his desire to please that the counterman was giving him the respect that as a customer he deserved. This genial attitude was confirmed by the steaming hot sandwich overflowing with red sauce that the counterman soon served up to him. It was a happy evening indeed, as Luther’s insides were screaming for a hot meal. I will devour this huge sandwich slowly, Luther thought, and in a way that maintains order and does not bring disgrace to my face. First I will be sure that the two halves are completely separated, performing that task with my plastic knife. And now I will gently lick the excess sauce so it does not become an adornment around my mouth

and then I will begin in nibble mode, a little bite here and a little bite there. And though he stayed faithful to his plan, the veal did slide about and more sauce oozed as he pressed down on the bread to get a grip. Though he had hoped to employ a limit of two napkins, more were called for to eliminate the glaze that appeared and reappeared on his chin as he continued with his consumption.

Luther turned to see staring at him a man neatly turned out in a tan poplin suit, which he wore with a French blue shirt. But it was not the man's summer-weight attire that stood out so much as the adamancy of hate on his handsome face. Luther had the sense that the man had been studying him for a while, his disgust building with every gesture Luther made. The man was saying that Luther was beneath him, that he was a slob of all slobs.

"Are you an exterminating angel? Is that who you presume to be?" Luther heard himself say, if only in his mind, as he met the man's stare. In that moment he was reminded of the lowliness of his status, sitting there with his cigar box. The man was looking down at him as the whole world had been looking down at him since he was a child, and the man thought he was free to do just that. But now he was finding that he wasn't free, the fucking coward. He thought he had picked on a patsy, like all the others had thought they were picking on a patsy, but he wasn't a patsy. He saw himself cutting the man's throat from ear to ear. He saw himself bashing the man's skull. He saw all the things he saw in the man of violence at the airport and in all the men of violence and saw that they were in him, too. And the man saw them as well. He saw them in Luther's eyes and turned away.

Luther did not stay until the man received his order to watch him *polish off* his meal. He did not stay to watch the man apply napkins to his face to eliminate any glaze or do a count of the napkins the man applied to his face to bring it under control. And he did not do a Travis Bickle walk out of the pizza parlor because it was only later that he thought of Travis Bickle and how he might have said, “Are you talking to me? Are you talking to *me*?” And that would have been something to see an escalation of the man’s fear when the man heard his words as well as saw his face.

A black woman hailed his cab and he drove her to a brownstone-lined street in Harlem, where she paid her fare but left him no tip. It hurt him that she would do such a thing, but also frightened him to sense the level of antipathy she must feel to be withholding of a gratuity for his service. And then to see young black men, the children of her hate, sitting listless and yet poised for mayhem on a nearby stoop. Like crows, they sit. So he thought, whether he should or not. He was but a white boy on dangerous streets. So he thought too, remembering a time in childhood when the black boys of Harlem swarmed over him as he rode his bicycle in this same neighborhood, taking his bicycle from him in daylight hours and with adults all around, as if the law had fled and anarchy had come and it was the due of the deprivation driven to take what they wanted when they were in greater numbers and even when they weren’t.

That evening he turned in at the East Side Airlines Terminal, hoping for a fare to JFK, but once again he met with disapproval, the dispatcher charging out of his booth and with flailing arms and gruffness in his voice ordering him out of the taxi queue. What was it about the righteous that they should assault the senses with their righteousness, Luther

was left to wonder, as if he was a transgressor in the first degree, an unworthy whose only just desert was the opprobrium of the universe.

Luther had been about to step out and stretch his legs when the dispatcher appeared, and left the driver-side door partially open, his left hand between the door and the frame, when he placed the Checker in reverse. Suddenly, and with great authority, only a split second before he pulled his hand inside, did the door slam closed. In backing out, the Checker's door had grazed a pylon, which forced it shut. A shudder went through him as he held his thin hand to his eyes and then imagined a metal claw as a substitute. Oh my God, Luther thought. Oh my God. Vigilance must always soar. Always.

As the night progressed, he took the thought further. A close call. A dodged bullet. Whatever the metaphor, it would apply. Malignity was out there, waiting to crush him in part or in whole, with sudden ferocity. That malignity could be in objects or it could be in people. And he had no doubt that, whether a thing or a person, the force for his destruction would have patience and cunning on its side.

He walked home after his shift, unable to catch a bus at that late hour. At the deli on Fifth Street and Second Avenue, he stopped off for two hot dogs and a six-pack of beer, so he could get filled up and take happy thoughts into sleep. These were not any kind of hot dogs. They were Hebrew National, and so he would be safe. Before entering the apartment, he pulled the tabs on all six cans, not wanting to wake Sarah with any unnecessary noise.

Life was going on apart from him as well.



Two bums were collapsed on top of each other, sleeping off a drunk over on Third Avenue. A street cleaner turned the corner, the bristles of its roller seeming to mash dirt into the road and leaving a putrid smell in its wake.

A man moaned about Schopenhauer in a supermarket aisle, saying the German philosopher had taken away his will to live. “So much despair. So much horror. Existence is intolerable, knowing what is in store.”

I must read Schopenhauer, Luther thought, vaguely recalling that he had seen one of the philosopher’s works in a Penguin classic edition, which could only mean that history had judged him to be very fine indeed. How fine the Germans altogether had been before they became something else.

And on a cable channel he witnessed a woman whose nakedness was hidden by the fruits and vegetables that covered her body. The word “Remember?” was superimposed over her mouth. Were indolence and anarchy the twin beasts rising in the West? And where was Schopenhauer to answer such a question?

And life continued to go on in which he took part even when he wasn’t there, in the dreamland he entered when he was fast asleep. In a dark courtyard he found himself vying for Sarah with her genius boyfriend, Lane. Luther had the inside track, but whether he could keep it was the question, given his competitor’s bounty. Then he was back at Roberto’s apartment on the Upper West Side, where Sarah and he watched as cats climbed down the fire escape and mixed with dangerous-looking dogs.

And there were those dreams in which he had no visible role even though the dreams were his, such as one in which a bearded young man sat on the steps of the Yale

University library. When a sweet-looking blond girl offered him a lift to New York, he opened fire. “Do you think I would just go off with an idiot like you? Get lost,” he shouted.

In this last dream Luther could only surmise that he was in fact disguised as the bearded man. The beard gave him a manliness he didn't in his waking life possess or consciously desire. There was something vaginal about beards, and of course, they were also disgusting food traps. But clearly he had achieved a kind of Ron Doug status, albeit not with a mustache. Not only had his testosterone level increased but now he was in the mold of the those prophets of old, those on the path of self-flagellation and repudiation of flesh-driven ways. More than any of that, he was at Yale and thus a certified high board score man whose womb was the library behind him. His value had been established and was intact; he did not need a woman to confer that value on him. And so he could tell her to go away from his window. He could tell her to leave at her own chosen speed. He could do the Bob Dylan thing all over her, just splatter her with the singer's hatefulness.

I do not like this dream, Luther said. I repudiate this dream as forcefully as Mr. Bearded One repudiated the lovely woman who offered him the pleasure of herself and her car and the city to which she would be driving. And I repudiate Yale. I repudiate its measuring coldness. I must go where it is warm.

“I don't envy the rich. I had years to do as I pleased. I believe I am driving a cab for reasons I don't fully understand,” Luther said.

“You're driving because you need a job,” Dr. Rosner said.

“I guess,” Luther said.

“You seem tense.”

“I wish I could do away with you,” Luther said.

“Do away with me?”

“Get rid of you, I mean.”

“Get rid of me how?”

“Not that way. I didn’t mean that at all.”

“What did you mean?”

“I’m worried about money. That’s all. The end is near.”

“The end of what?”

“Just the end.”

*Celeste, Dr. Rosner was reading me. He was saying that I might have the killing thing in me, but being in the business of healing, he was committed to my health and assigned to himself the power to effect that healing. The problem is that some of us are not entirely amenable to the influence of good government. Some of us declare our own sovereign nation and resist the impulse toward hegemony of foreign powers. I did not truly want to hurt Dr. Rosner or abolish him from this earth, but there was a directional curve to my development, or lack of it, that placed me in opposition to some I perceived to be in a position of power.*

*It was not for me to reveal to Dr. Rosner my dreams. We didn’t have time for such indulgence. We were not under the parasol. It was about building a life. For this and*

*other reasons I did not tell him about the woman masturbating violently or of my run through a maze of pornographic images or of my abiding fantasy of copulating contests in the Houston Astrodome and other ballparks and sports arenas in the country, that it was only a matter of time before such public displays superseded all other forms of entertainment. How was I to tell a man of his substance that my mind was filled with orgiastic fantasies?*

*I did confess to my longing for Diane DeAngelo, she who wore tinted glasses and went panty-less through the streets of New York City, and of being consistently rebuffed by her answering machine. And I entered it into the record that I saw a young woman with riveting physical attributes on York Avenue but could not swing into action and call out to her because I was tethered to my identity as a hackie by the battered Checker I was sitting behind the wheel of. "That sounds a bit dramatic. You have more important concerns than sexual flings at this point," he replied, seeking to bring me back down to the earth on which he lives so well. He then went on to light one of his small cigars and do his snuffling thing. One must bow down to excellence, Celeste, and Dr. Rosner clearly possessed it.*

Prostitutes in hot pants were all about the intersection on the Queens side of the bridge. Luther watched one spit as she got out of her John's car and then wipe her mouth on her sleeve, trying to make herself clean after being dirtied by the man. He stopped at a diner on Northern Boulevard, where he ordered a grilled cheese sandwich, and called Diane

once again from a pay phone and hung up after three rings. He tried a second time, again hanging up on the third ring. The third time she picked up.

“Was that you who just called and hung up?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, as if a lie was not an option. He felt as drab as the blue work shirt he wore, the kind that often had a worker’s name stitched on it.

“I was expecting a call from someone,” she said.

“I guess that’s why you answered.”

“Look, you’re beginning to bother me.”

“I can’t help it.”

“I’ve got to go,” Diane said, and hung up before he could reply

I love Sarah. Sarah is formidable. I disappoint her. I disappoint myself. I am a dog running loose in the street, Luther thought, as he got filled up on his grilled cheese sandwich and side order of French fries so he could be strong for his further hours of driving.

This longing for the loins of Diane DeAngelo. Maybe he could do better now that she had thrown cold water on him.

At LaGuardia he stared from the rolled down window of his cab at the jets lowering toward the runway and others beginning their ascent. Arrivals. Departures. The freedom some had to come and go wherever they pleased.

An hour later he was back in Harlem. A black man had entered the cab at the airport and directed him to One Hundred Twenty-third Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues.

“You don’t have some kind of problem with that, do you? You don’t have nothing against the black man, do you?” the passenger inquired.

“No. Of course not,” Luther said, trying to stay focused on the road.

“All you motherfucking white boys got something going on in your heads about the black man. Afraid he going to take your momma or your girlfriend. That’s the reason why you try to keep the black man down. Tell me you haven’t been afraid of just that kind of shit.”

“I’m afraid everybody’s going to take my girlfriend from me, white or black,” Luther said, so his words, in spite of his fear, could have some relationship to the truth. And evidently they dissipated his passenger’s onslaught.

“You all right for a motherfucking white boy. But let me tell you something, white boy. You ever want to be a man and not some white pussy thing, you got to get yourself a piece and do yourself some killing. You got to be able to fuck people up so bad they praying for their own death. ’Cause the only way you get respect is to give respect to the power you got in you to do the shit you need to do. Understand what I’m saying, motherfucking white boy?”

Luther tried to understand where his passenger had gone with the words he had spoken. “That’s deep. You’ve given me much to ponder,” he finally said.

“Ponder? Ponder? You crack me up, motherfucking white boy. You surely do.”

As he crossed the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge back into Manhattan and turned up Third Avenue, Luther thought of jumping out of the cab at a stoplight and running away, but that would just show him in a racist light. And if he were to level with his passenger

and tell him he was afraid, then the man might pistol-whip or shoot him dead with the piece he was surely carrying, given the fondness he expressed for such weaponry, or simply break his face with his powerful fist. And so he stayed the course, wishing he could be any of the anonymous strangers he saw walking about on the avenue.

“I’m sorry. You wanted to go between what and what on One Hundred Twenty-third Street?”

“You fucking with me, white boy?”

“No, no,” Luther said.

“You going to make me hurt you, white boy?”

“I’m trying to do the right thing,” Luther said.

“Trying. Trying. That’s all you motherfucking white boys is good for is trying. You need to be doing a little more doing instead of all this trying bullshit all the time.”

The man should have been a lawyer, Luther thought, seeing the way he could bend language, Luther’s, to his will, and if he was in control of Luther’s words, then he was in control of him, too.

“Hang a left here, motherfucking white boy, and bow down to my blackness while you at it. You in my motherfucking kingdom now.”

A kingdom of squalor, or at least dilapidation, the rows of brownstone buildings turned to a purpose they had not been intended for, and young black agents of enterprise arriving. From the rolled down window, the passenger parceled out the goods.

“This block be getting well now, man. I be the medicine man for its motherfucking needs,” the passenger said.

Luther kept his eyes straight ahead. The corner had been blocked off, a car parked sideways to deny access or exit by another vehicle. Probably the same thing had been done at the other end after he turned into the corner.

“That’s right, motherfucking white boy. You keep your motherfucking eyes where they belong. This be my block, my country. No motherfucking po-lice need be doing their po-lice thing while I be doing my business.”

And yet he couldn’t help but notice those young runners who approached from the front of the cab: the brilliant white teeth of one, the gold medallion dangling from the neck of another, the implacable look of hatred in the eyes of a third. It didn’t occur to him until later that Loud Sound in the back seat might not want to go potty where he ate and that his run and gun and sleep in the streets crew might feel the same, that is, not wish to have the site of their drug bazaar turned into a crime scene. Perhaps they were high in the golden palace of God and shining down their beneficence and had not yet begun their descent into the domain of the devil. For whatever reason, Loud Sound exited the cab, but not before saying, “Later for you, my white brother.” That Loud Sound had stiffed him for the fare Luther could only ponder with indignation when he was rolling down Park Avenue and well free of the danger zone.

But it was not only Loud Sound. There was also the phenomenon of Spread Them Wide appropriating extra space in the subway cars of New York City and defying man, woman, or child to tell them to close those legs and sit within the bounds of their seat. In this way they were calling attention to the quality and size of their apparatus, for sure, and also saying it was for them to take what they needed. If all that might be was an extra



subway seat, then that was cool, because they knew, and you knew, that they had gotten into your head, and once there, you couldn't get them out.

And then there were also the space appropriators who stood by the door, cousins of the wide spreads and sometimes the same in the subway cars of New York City.

These were some of the things that occupied the mind of Luther Garatdjian in the summer of 1976, when Jimmy ("don't call me little") Carter, was trying to do right by the country and be rid of Republican rule. And if they weren't big thoughts and concerns, they were his thoughts and concerns, and you were welcome to your own.

In the bar on Spring Street he waited for Diane DeAngelo to appear. Not that she had said she would, but that didn't mean she wouldn't. They did have that night of intimacy to build on, and if he was thinking so much of her, why couldn't he hope that she was doing the same about him? As he struggled to nurse his beer, concern about Sarah began to weigh on him. He felt like a man being carried away by a riptide from the dry land he needed to get back to. And writing. That was the dry land he needed to return to as well. Even without talent it was his only hope.

The urge rose in him to throw the beer stein at the mirror behind the bar and to shout obscenities, but he was distracted by a woman passing him on the way out. Her loose-fitting white blouse offered a glimpse of her black lace bra, turning his anger into an intolerable burst of lust. I am dominated by sexual urges. I am dominated by women. I am alone, alone in a bar. So his thoughts went.

He went to the pay phone. He would tell Diane De Angelo that he was waiting and that he couldn't wait much longer. Instead of a recorded message he got a voice. It was not hers but that of her friend. "He's really turned on by your body," she said. And then it was Diane DeAngelo saying, "Do you think we should call him?"

He had no technical explanation for how he had managed to eavesdrop on a conversation his intended party was having with her girlfriend, and he wasn't seeking one. It had happened once before, only then, the woman had been talking about him with a girlfriend, describing him as sensitive and serious. In that instance he had gotten off the line because he was uncomfortable hearing himself discussed in such sickly sweet terms. Now he got off because he saw that he was a fool. A woman with Diane's appeal would meet a better version of him every day, so what chance could he possibly stand?

He was free to go home, free to make love to Sarah, free to have the best sexual experience ever with her and feel centered once again. Until, that is, the urge to wander returned.

"I had a dream that you liked earthy sex," she said to him that day.

"Earthy sex? What is that?" Luther asked.

"What we just did," Sarah said.

Through the wall came the angry voice of their neighbor.

"You got me back from Alex and think you can take me for granted. You struck me on my temple. I didn't strike myself, did I? You're a lunatic. You should be locked up. I would press charges if I didn't have to go through all the court trouble. I never want to

see you again. Is that clear? Get out and don't you fucking touch me, you goddamn bastard."

Luther and Sarah heard the neighbor's door slam shut. The man must have beaten a retreat because quite now reigned.

"I had thought they were through with each other," Luther said, shamed by the neighbor's accusation about physical violence. Hadn't he fought with Sarah, as the neighbor did with her beau? Hadn't he as well been an unmanly man?

"They may never be through with each other."

It was a surprising thing to hear her say.

Marc Gitall had not yet vacated the Bowery space, but Luther had no doubt that he was a man of his word. Soon a new chapter in Luther's life with Sarah would begin. They would elevate above the hoi polloi of the East Village and regain their status as loft dwellers.

Sarah went to see *Gone with the Wind* at Theater 80 St. Mark's.

"Why do you see the old when you could see the new?" Luther asked.

"Because I like the old and the new," Sarah said, as if it should be obvious.

The old and the new. She could be in both worlds, like her historian father. She would sit through a long movie with just a box of Milk Duds and a small box of popcorn, Now, when he tried to do the same, he would get restless. The thirst would come upon him. She brought her focus to bear not only on movies but books and, of course, her work, managing to maintain a purity of purpose amid the chaos he imposed. He lacked

her discipline and center of gravity. Instead, he had his father's waywardness. If his mother had not been there for his father to return to, it would have been bad for him. And Luther saw that it would be bad for him if Sarah were not there to return to.

While Sarah was at the movie theater, Luther made the long walk to the bar on Spring Street. The song "But She's Not There" did not play loud in his head when Diane DeAngelo did not show and he didn't feel his anger coming, not when he had another he could chat with. She said her name was Wendy and she was having a video show at the Whitney, she said.

"A video show. Is that something new? And is what is new necessarily better than what is old? Do you think the new and the old can be friends?"

Wendy held him in a puzzled stare and then began to laugh. "Oh my God, you're serious," she said, after a while, seeing that he hadn't been able to match her laugh storm with one of his own.

"It was just a question. The new and the old have been on my mind. That's all."

"You're either droll or dumb. I can't decide which," she said.

"Would one be worse than the other?"

"I would think so, Wendy said.

"I am shadowed by a fear of dumbness, I must confess," Luther said.

"Shadowed?"

"My life is darkened by it. Maybe I'm not the only one."

"Do you come here a lot?" Wendy asked.

“I do. Too much. It used to cheer me up but now it’s making me sad. From glad rags to sad rags and all that.”

“Why does it make you sad?”

“Because the one I profess to love is not here, and I am half glad and half sad that she isn’t.”

“Why isn’t she here?”

“Because she has beauty in her face and everywhere else and I am not the only one who has noticed.”

“I would take you home but I have recently undergone an abortion so I am not in the game for a while,” Wendy said.

“The game?” Luther asked.

“Where are you, mister? This whole thing is a game,” Wendy said.

“Can there be more than one winner in this game?”

“You bet. Now you take care,” she said, and disappeared.

Though he had not expected her to accelerate into sharpness, at least not that quickly, he could understand why she might. A man had done her wrong or maybe she had done herself wrong as well, the two of them not being careful. There really was much to ponder about the sometime gravity of sex.

Luther went into his dream life that night. He had a journey to make to Havana, home of an “I get the ball for the ball go the street” friend of his from childhood who had left the island with his family. But he was not with that boy now, whose older brother had slammed the boy’s head against a brick wall to maintain his power. Luther was with a

high Cuban official, a commissar of revolutionary probity who took him to the cathedral. They went on foot through the bustling streets, and Luther was struck by the gravitas of the official, who proved himself well informed about the cathedral when they arrived. Pointing upward at the ceiling of the massive structure, he explained that the design enabled a minimum of light to reach its remotest recesses. In the presence of the commissar, who wore the same conical cap with the red star Luther had seen atop Trotsky's head in a photograph, Luther was speechless. His seriousness was simply overwhelming. Even on this island paradise, he seemed to be saying that life was hard and work was the order of the day. Then Luther was closer to home. The commissar, with his absurd sternness, had had his day. It was time to visit with Peter and Sarah, both of whom were smoking Tareytos as they faced each other at close quarters. First one would take a drag and then the other, leading Luther to believe it was a synchronized ritual requiring words to be dispensed with so that they might more truly express the essence of their father-daughter relationship. As he watched, Luther noticed that Peter would suck hard on the cigarette and then pull it aggressively away from his mouth, and then Sarah would do the same, as if imitating him. Their smiles showed amusement, as if they understood each other well. Luther couldn't say he liked their manner. He couldn't say he liked it at all.

Luther could only hope that his dreams would shed a heap of understanding about the nature and course of his life.

In the morning Sarah spoke of her love of Bette Davis and of the noisy patrons who almost ruined the movie for her, and Luther spoke of his dream, including the

Tareyton cigarettes, but left out that both she and her father had annoyed him with their cigarette -to-and-from-mouth-action and also omitted his real-life conversation with the woman who had received an abortion and made a video showing at the Whitney Museum.

And they spoke with their neighbor, whose temple had been allegedly struck, though wouldn't such a blow cause injury or even death? It gave Luther some pleasure to tell her that they would be vacating the premises and stepping up to a loft life, as he didn't care for her, given the meanness that she had shown in her voice and in her face.

"That's a stroke of good fortune," she said, lightning flying from her mouth.

"Well, it's on the Bowery," Luther said.

"I said it's a stroke of good fortune," Vivian replied, her temperature rising. "I'm thinking of moving later in the year."

"Why would you think of moving?" Luther asked. "Does the building not suit you?"

"Why am I thinking of moving, you jackass? Because I don't want that miserable apartment to be my grave. All I'm doing is growing old in it."

"Sometimes failure has a smell to it. I'm sure I'm right about this," Luther said.

"Did I say anything about failure? You're a failure, mister. You smell of failure. You stink of it. I know your type. Everyone thinks you're intelligent until they find out you're not."

"I wasn't suggesting you're..."

“Never mind what you were suggesting,” Vivian said, and retreated inside her apartment and slammed the door.

The time had come for Luther to take stock. It had been reestablished in his mind that Sarah was beautiful, and now she was beginning to come into her own sexually. That was important. No matter how beautiful the woman, a man would not fully respond to her unless he sensed that she was willing to let go. Luther wanted a pure life, one built around Sarah physically as well as emotionally. He was willing; so was she, he sensed.

If Sarah would agree, he would cancel their telephone service. After all, was the telephone not an intrusion, a downright invasion?

Sarah’s sister was a rock. In fact, she was a boulder. Her Barnard achievement was a crushing weight on Luther. It left him nowhere to turn but into the mirror of self-hate. And he had every reason to believe Claire’s hard, dark eyes had recognized his defeat. And if her eyes did not reveal as much, her words certainly did.

“One psychologist asserts, in a study of creativity, that some extremely talented artists have IQs of 120 or even less. I find it very hard to believe that someone with an IQ that low could contribute anything meaningful in any field. What do you think, Luther?”

“‘Killing Me Softly.’ That’s what I think,” Luther said. He had come calling on Claire with Sarah at Claire’s apartment, some blocks down from where her parents lived.

“No, seriously. What do you think?” Claire continued.

“Killing me softly,” Luther persisted.



“What does that even mean?”

“He means that you’re killing him softly,” Brian said.

“Killing him how?” Claire asked.

“With the truth?” Brian laughed.

“What truth?” Claire asked.

“The truth that he’s not very bright. You just took away his last vestige of hope that he can have a meaningful life.”

“Stop it, Brian. That’s so evil.”

“It’s not evil. It’s apparent. Have you ever heard him say an intelligent thing?”

“Luther’s very intelligent,” Claire said. “He got through college in four years.”

“Four and a half years,” Luther corrected.

“Well, I never could have done that,” Claire said. “It took me six years to get my degree. And you didn’t get through college at all, Mr. Smarty Pants.”

“Gee, Luther, I guess you are intelligent after all,” Brian said.

“But that’s what you meant, Luther, that I was killing you softly?” Claire persisted.

“‘Killing Me Softly’ is a song, sung by Roberta Flack,” Sarah said.

“Well, even if Luther meant that I was hurting him, and I really didn’t mean to, that showed real intelligence and creativity to make reference to a song. He was demonstrating a capacity for complex thinking with that cultural allusion, and I was showing my ignorance by not picking up on it,” Claire said.

“That make you feel better, Luther?” Brian said, and did his little laugh thing.

“Sure. A bunch.” Luther said, too rattled to add anything more.

“No, I meant it,” Claire went on. “You are very intelligent and very creative, too.”

“And very hidden. When are we going to see some of this creativity of yours, Luther?”

“Stop with the needling, Brian. Just stop it,” Claire said.

“I feel like we’re in a Yugoslavian movie by Ridzak Ridzko,” Brian said.

“Pick on the Yugoslavs. Go right ahead,” Claire said.

Brian was single and alone, Claire having divested herself of him sexually. He had settled into a kind of whimsical sadness that could turn caustic. He was content to work as a salesperson in a store that sold gear and clothing for the outdoors.

Luther wished he could just go home. He wanted to take off his clothes and go to bed. They seemed like strangers to each other. And Brian’s lacerating comments. What was the point of such a get-together? Soon it wasn’t him or the Yugoslavs, but Peter and Lydia, Claire remarking that Peter’s homosexuality had been apparent to her high school friends.

That night Luther put himself to sleep with a lot of scotch, and when he came to in the morning he focused on baseball statistics to chase the intruders Claire and Tom from his ravaged mind.

“I have to have some place to live,” he suddenly screamed, waking Sarah.

“What is wrong?” Sarah asked.

“Should I kill him for talking to me like that? Should I?”

“It’s OK, Luther. It’s OK. He’s just unhappy with himself.”

“Unhappy? He’s malignant. I must have a place to myself, where no one can find me. I must,” he said.

“You do. You have that place.”

But he didn’t. Brian Little Laugh had blown off the door and rushed right in, and brought Claire and Sarah with him, where they shone a spotlight on his number and saw its smallness.

Marc Gitall finally made his move, and so Luther and Sarah were free to make theirs.

“You’ll probably want to make some changes. Give it your own personal stamp,” Marc Gitall said, surveying the loft, which had been emptied of his possessions.

“I don’t know, Marc,” Luther said. “We sort of like to live within existing structures. No, I should say that of myself. I don’t much care to break the mold, because chances are, unless you are very resourceful, and handy with your hands, then you have brought anarchy on yourself. With the sea wall gone, what is left but for the sea to come rushing in?”

Marc Gitall’s unshaven face and tousled black hair spoke of his restless energy. His face was now saying that he didn’t have time for the patter produced by another person’s mind, especially when that patter was of the feeble sort. He wanted vigor and resoluteness of the kind that had made his Wall Street career grow great and now his art career to blossom.

“Sometimes we have to launch ourselves into the new,” Marc Gitall finally said, though the avuncular role clearly did not suit him.

“We will take that under advisement,” Luther said. “I mean, I will. I speak for no one but myself.”

“Look, you two. How about if my people and your people all get together for a party when we’re settled into our new places. What do you think?” Marc Gitall asked.

“That sounds really nice,” Sarah said, as Marc Gitall wrote out his new address and phone number and handed it to her.

My people. Your people. For the rest of the day Luther could not free himself of Marc Gitall’s words. What people was Marc Gitall talking about? Marc Gitall had people, for sure. And Sarah. Sarah had some people. But Luther? Luther had no people. An image came to him of a man driven by conflict and fear to withdraw further and further within himself. Once again he saw his aloneness illuminated, as he had some years before, when he contemplated marriage to Sarah during a session with Dr. Dressler only to blurt out, “But who would come?”

He went back to his dreams for more information as to where he was and where he might be going. This time he was in Boston, standing by a red-brick wall, of the kind he had seen, to his delight, in a picture book as a child, only the organ grinder and his monkey were missing. But Genius Lane was there, at least for the minute it took him to write a letter to Elvis Presley before he vanished. Then Luther found himself in a room on an upper floor in his family’s building, where he was living with Sarah, both of them miserable in their compromised situation, the promise of youth gone and their death march into old age commenced. The odor of failure, of the kind that his sister Naomi and

her husband Chuck had experienced, attached to the dream. Then the elevator had to go and crash through the roof and make a big ruckus on Broadway when it finally smashed to the pavement.

I am in this life, and this life is in me, Luther thought, when he was woken by the morning sun. Marc Gitall does not have to beat me anymore than he has. My life will be full of movement today.

One move he made was to see Dr. Rosner.

“I have done away with the need for you. Is that OK?” Luther said, as Dr. Rosner was lighting one of his little smokes and then doing his snuffle thing.

“Done away with?” Dr. Rosner queried. He wore a white shirt with his seersucker jacket.

“Don’t be suggesting I am a murderer when I am not.”

“What is this strange talk?”

“I will tell you what it is. When I was a child the element of surprise was everything to me. If I had the advantage of a sneak attack on my brother, then I felt confident and powerful. But if I met resistance, then I fell apart. I must do the same thing with words. I use them to feel powerful, because otherwise I am just a hanging string. So my question is this: will you allow me to be a man and leave?”

“Why would you want to leave now?”

“Because I am out of the East Village and no longer obliged to listen to stinky, smelly WBAI now that I am reestablished in loft living. And though I have a job, it is as part of the hackie corps of New York City, and so I have to be concerned about money.”

“You can’t see hacking as something temporary while you seek out other kinds of employment?”

“I think I have to live in the world to which I have been delivered, like that amateur entomologist in *Woman in the Dunes*. I can’t escape my fate. Maybe I can develop a relationship with my Checker as he did with the widow. Maybe I can be intimate with something.”

“What we do here isn’t intimacy?”

“Do not frighten me with your maleness,” Luther said, his voice rising.

He returned to his new home on the Bowery to see Sarah flicking her lit cigarette butt out the window onto the short tiled roof of the lumber store below.

“Are you crazy? You could start a fire,” he said.

“There’s not going to be any fire,” she replied.

“It’s not a good idea to throw anything out the window. We’re not kids here.”

“Aren’t we?” she asked.

Maybe it was her unapologetic tone. Maybe he was more undone by the abrupt end to his therapy with Dr. Rosner than he knew. Whatever, they fought that afternoon. Did she want to see them out on the street? He got steadily drunker on vodka and orange juice and passed out in the alcove near the door on two giant pillows left behind by Marc Gitall.

He had signed up for a double shift and drove all the next day and night, blistered and resentful. On a break, he called Sarah because the pain was too much.

“You’re a drunk. That’s what you are. An insane drunk. You ruin everything. Lane was right about you. Your only contribution to me and everyone is destruction.”

He couldn’t say where the idea for vodka and orange juice had come from, but there would be no more screwdrivers, that was for sure. He staggered home in the wee hours and sipped from a six-pack of tallboys while Sarah slept. Oh Jesus, the beer tasted good, as did the slices of salami he had taken from the refrigerator. That was all a man could ask for. A little beer to sort out his thoughts and give him the breathing room everyone could use so he could enjoy the psychic rest he needed to move forward. He hid his empties in a bag so Sarah wouldn’t see the next morning and call him that name again.

With the daylight came love. He was loving her and she was loving him. He crying and she crying, just crying and crying. But they were good and cleansing tears, and they even made love again before he went out on his afternoon shift. He could drive with a clear mind and heart, feeling he was a part of her and she was a part of him.

There was order in driving the streets and taking people where they needed to go. Dr. Rosner had been right. The city did need good cab drivers. And he got to hear certain things, things he might be able to use even if some of it was frightening, like the two veteran hackies talking about the twenty-four-year-old found dead in an alleyway up on One Hundred Fifty-fifth Street, half his head blown off by a gunshot and his cab nearby. Or the Magnum held to the head of another young cabbie. Or the hackie who sped off when a black kid approached with a knife in his hand.

“Drive alert, my young friend. Drive alert,” one of the hackies said to him as he was heading out on his shift.

“Maybe don’t drive at all,” the other said, but Luther saw what he and the other hackie were doing, trying to infect him with their fear so he couldn’t live at all. Not that he wouldn’t be careful. He would. He definitely would. Eyes wide open.

Travis Bickle, the hackie in *Taxi Driver*, was on his mind again. While he could not emulate his crazy toughness, maybe he could stay within a zone of safety through niceness. Altogether the film had been instructive. He had seen the gaucheness of Travis taking his heart’s desire to an X-rated film on the assumption that she would experience the same viewing pleasure, only to be disabused of that notion when she demanded to leave. There on the screen Luther could also witness the sad loneliness and lowness of Travis’s life in coming to such a deluded place in his thinking. Even so, Luther had to admit that he too had felt the pull of licentiousness and remember that he had similarly, if, only obliquely, sought to involve Sarah.

And on his shift that evening he felt once again the pull of that licentiousness. In the flower district, on Sixth Avenue in the twenties, the potted plants that abounded on the sidewalks during daylight hours had been removed and the shops closed and gated. Outside Club Sensa, next to one such shop, he parked his cab. He had read that the club’s patrons were married couples and others with partners who gave full throttle to their lewdness by pairing off with likeminded couples. The club was there in plain sight for you to see, but the sign announcing it was small and an opaque window spoke to its



concealed nature. Oh, if only he could have such a life, and if he couldn't, if he could only see those who did.

Soon a couple emerged, as if to satisfy his curiosity. In their early thirties, Luther estimated, as they entered the cab. On the man's instructions, he drove north half a mile, turning east onto Park Avenue.

"I definitely think the guy was into me," the woman said.

"The woman seemed uptight," the man quickly added.

"She was just nervous, Joe. Trust me, she's up for the game."

Their voices were pitched low and intense. They would go home and talk dirty to each other, tell each other what they wanted to do with their prospective partners.

Up the ramp on the south side of Grand Central Luther drove and around the terminal to the garage in the Pan Am Building, where he turned off the meter and watched as the couple walked a short distance to the car they had parked far from the scene of the crime so as not to incriminate themselves.

The night offered him more. Always in New York City there was more and more, the spectacle of pleasure on one street and of pain on another. There, in front of Maxwell's Plum, over on First Avenue farther uptown, a black girl, her teeth dazzlingly white in the sultry night, spoke ostentatiously with a cool white guy, his tight black shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest as he stood next to his little red Corvette. Its hood was down. Its leather passenger seat awaited her. Yes, he has got his chariot of fire, Luther could only think, and knows which way the wind blows in this world, and it is blowing in his direction. But he is riding the waves of his own delusion if he imagines

this will end well. Danger, danger, Luther wanted to call out, but was stifled by fear, as in a dream. But what was the point? Foolishness does not listen. When does it ever heed the warning call? An angry black man made his appearance, karate-kicking a dent in the driver's side door of white boy's love machine before stinging her cheek with a hard slap.

“You ain't white. Do you hear me? You ain't white, no matter how much shit you put in your hair. You hear me?”

White boy tore off in his dimpled chariot. Coward or not, he needed to live another day and not be fodder for page 3 of the *Daily News*.

Maxwell's Plum. What kind of name was that? Something esoteric and pot-induced, an image summoned at the moment the stoned creator understood *everything* while understanding *nothing*.

A fare took him back down to the Bowery.

“I'm going down to see the fat man. Do you know who the fat man is?”

“No. I am afraid I don't. I mean, I know many fat men, but I can't say I know your fat man,” Luther replied. “Can you tell me something more about him than his girth?”

“I like that. Girth. You're all right. There is the fat man and now there is the skinny man. That's you. That way we have the polarity the world needs. There's no creativity without it. You dig?”

“I guess,” Luther said.

“He wears a construction hat. Now do you know who I mean?”

“I can't say I do,” Luther said.

“Then your ignorance has dominion over you,” the passenger bellowed.

It was not for Luther to remonstrate with the passenger, lest a tidal wave of bellicosity be directed at him. I would only be confusing things to think that my peace is the source of his agitation, and it would be a double mistake to imagine that a protesting manner would quell his riotous tongue, as he is guided by his drug du jour, not his reason. Such was Luther’s assessment of the situation.

While the passenger did not have mystical powers, he did have knowledge. Just south of the flophouse a bar had opened, owned and operated by a fat man named Jilly. Middle-aged and pasty-faced, he did indeed crown his head with a construction helmet, perhaps to cover his fully bald pate. He stood sentry style at the entrance as kids flowed past, and with them the difficult passenger.

By the curb the punk rocker Jerry Filone leaned against a parked car. Even slouched, he was a vertical wonder, a spindly high rise in tight black rocker garb. And yet the word *underweight* or *emaciated* could not be applied. Even in duds designed to show him at his skinniest, he had no reason to fear that people would put the laughing thing on him and consign him to the skin and bones hall of fame. Maintaining his languid pose, he indulged the attentions of a blond young woman in her own denim duds whose body language suggested she wanted nothing more than to kneel at his phallic shrine.

I will explore. I will go where I have not been. I will take leave of my cab and enter the kingdom of Mr. Helmet Head. So Luther decided, exposing himself to the amped band holler-heading on the stage. The lyrics had no chance of finding their way

through the instrumental tumult, but that was the point, was it not? Words didn't matter here.

Filone had brought his slouch indoors. Now he did his leaning thing against the bar. It was his night off, but his laurels were good laurels, good for another girl to put her body next to his. Not the blonde. She had departed. A dark-haired girl with sullen majesty.

A young Israeli, the star of David painted in blue upon his forehead, leaned against his car, his arms folded.

"I conquer the Arabs. I dominate them on the ground and in the air. But her, her. She does not listen to the word *submission*. Her will is like steel, her tongue like acid. I have been dispersed by her to the winds. To Toronto will I go, where my brother lives. There will I start my new life."

A girl looked down from a second floor window, her chest covered only by a black bra. Her hair was the red of fire.

"That is her," the Israeli said, speaking as if his throat was clogged.

"The Bible says, 'Whom God has joined, let no man rend asunder.' Do you believe that is so?"

"Do not quote to me the ancient texts. I am in New York City now, not Jerusalem," the Israeli said.

Another stranger, this one summoned from the dark, sought to shed light on unseen doings. "I will tell it to you like this," he said, from the back seat of the Checker.

"The Mafia, like death itself, put in an appearance at a newly opened bar-restaurant. A

dialogue like the following ensued: ‘How much do you take in?’ ‘Lots and lots.’ ‘What’s that, lots and lots?’ ‘Loads.’ ‘What are your gross and net?’ ‘Gross and net? Aren’t they the same thing?’ They threw a blanket over him and shot him over fifty times. Tell me what this means? the stranger asked. I really need to know.”

“I couldn’t say,” Luther replied. “Could it be that everyone has his number, and we have to hope that ours isn’t called?”

“You are a better driver than you are a philosopher,” the stranger said.

“Yes. I can see why you would say so.”

“Silence. Not a word more.”

“OK.”

“You’re not listening to me. Did I not say not a word more?”

This time Luther merely nodded in assent.

“You are learning, my friend. You are learning how to keep your number from being called, having your ticket punched, and all the rest.”

The night was more than fatso Jilly and displaced Israelis and quietly menacing passengers. His sex life with Sarah, in spite of his resolutions, was not enough to hold him. He could not say why exactly. It just seemed other doors needed to be knocked on, and not to knock on them was to deprive himself of life itself, as where did you find life more fully than in the act of sex?

Free of his Checker and spurned at the bars and loaded with booze, he was visited once again with the great truth that social machinations were not necessary for sexual release. All he need do was zip over to the steam bath on the lower East Side for the

gratification he was seeking. Once again the blinding illumination came to him that male sex was the answer and had always been the answer. And yet, the impulse acted upon, he was left regretful. He had regressed. He had been seeking a substitute for Dr. Rosner. Was it possible that his sexual urges were merely an expression, an inadequate one, for his loneliness and the desire for human contact?

His desperation took him to a brothel in midtown where, for the modest fee of ten dollars, he was offered a South American woman as a vessel for his pain who told him that tipping was permitted. While in the act, he was imagining how he might make her a permanent part of his life, but in the aftermath he wanted only to flee.

During daylight hours he tried for a reset to wipe clean the excesses of the night before with the thought that more maturity, and with it, more staidness, was in his future, even if the progress was slow. In the meantime he tore up a number of old manuscripts as evidence of his ability to let go of some things. Hadn't Isaac Bashevis Singer said, "The wastebasket is a writer's best friend"?

And he tried to put his sadness at his parting from Dr. Rosner in perspective. Therapy promised what, after all? So many people led productive lives without it, and so many remained hopelessly neurotic and unproductive with it. A person had the right to say, "Yes, all very good, but I don't *want* you." Why couldn't therapists stop reducing their patients' desire to leave to resistance? And what was wrong with resistance in the first place? Evil was resisted. Why shouldn't high fees be resisted as well? There was something pompous and exploitative about those people. They learned from technical books how to relate to human beings. Granted they possessed intelligence, but not

necessarily empathy and sensitivity. Those were qualities they could only try to acquire, and the effort was often as ludicrous as a thug trying to practice gentility. Not that that was the case with Dr. Rosner. No, there was no question but that he was solid, rock solid. Still, he wasn't Freud or Jung. Those two were artists—their sons were mere technicians.

The poor man had tried to seduce Luther with the human touch at the end of the last session and weaken his resolve. And yes, he had gotten Luther to commit to a September appointment, but then Luther's common sense had won out. No way was Dr. Rosner going to control him. The proof was that Luther called that very night to cancel, and in that fashion disposed of the good doctor.

Because, as his mother would say, "Do my words mean nothing?" How was a man to live in this world if the doctors and everybody else could just take his words and dispose of them and replace them with their own?

In the days that followed Luther returned in his Checker to the bar of lewdness in the twenties on Sixth Avenue and saw a leather-jacketed man, his face an obscenity of self-hatred, fake several slaps at his female companion before he drove off with her in his big car. The man's gesture was not in good fun but an indicator of things to come when the pain increased and his hand had to find flesh to strike and then strike and strike again. There are men of violence in this city, and I will not allow myself to be one of them, Luther said to himself on this night.

There was the violence of the hand but there was the violence of omission as well, and this too Luther noted in his book of life. There was the drunk who refused to tip him

after a drive from one end of Manhattan to the other because in the summer heat the wind had caused a roaring in his ears as it came through the rolled down windows.

“I am withholding my love from you because you withheld your love from me in failing to give me your ear. How else are we to learn except through punishment?” the man said.

While Luther was waiting for the bus that night, having returned the Checker to the depot, a man approached on his bicycle. The hand grips had been turned upside down either to make them more accessible or to give his ten-speed some added distinction, or both. He paused in the bus stop.

“I want to rape you. I’m into that. Not tonight, but some other night. I get into it with some big dudes. They make me fight for what I want. But their heart really isn’t in it after a while, so I usually get what I want. Power will get you where you want to go. I used to teach martial arts and all kinds of shit. But power has to be linked to communication, letting people know where you’re coming from, whatever the consequence. My name is Casper and I can tell you dig what I am saying. You wouldn’t be dressed the way you are if you didn’t want my attention. Understand what I am saying?”

The man was black and wore a porkpie hat and looked out from behind a pair of goggles. He had the physical robustness to make his words credible that he was a force of inevitability you could surrender to now or go through the motions of resisting. The big bulge in his khaki pants suggested lust was not only in his words but in his being.



The bus was coming, but Casper did not yield his space even when the driver tried to honk him free of the space.

“Now I asked you a question,” Casper went on. “Are you going to disrespect me by making me repeat myself?”

“I understand,” Luther said.

“Just so you do,” Casper said, before slowly pedaling away.

He did not get on the bus but waited instead for a cab, which would be harder to follow. Because it was in his mind that Casper, like the ghost for whom he had perhaps been named, might reappear. It was in his mind too that he had allowed Casper to enter his life by wearing the clothes he did. He saw that his narcissism, like Casper, was relentless. He could apply all kinds of words and phrases to his person. He could call himself a hanging string. He could call himself the bag of bones to top all bags of bones. He could call himself His Skinniness and He Who Does Not Fill His Jeans Too Tough and all the rest. But there was also conceit, the desire to be other than he had been for his whole life. If he could not have a head that was round and beautiful, maybe he could add some pounds to his bones. And for this day, he had done just that. His body was more presentable than it had been at any earlier time, and so much so that he could go about in a tight turquoise T-shirt with short, short sleeves that showed off his long arms. Casper had seen his foolish vanity on this night. Luther had allowed him to see it. No one else had given him the attention that Casper had showed him, no one at all. And what was he wearing such a shirt for if he did not want attention? And so, what right did he have to be surprised, let alone outraged, that Casper had come calling? Most importantly, what cause

did he have to be surprised that Casper's words of molestation had brought not only fear and horror but also titillation? Because it was something to be wanted in this world. It truly, truly was.

*Now Celeste, doubt has been creeping in. On the horizon are the men with big things beginning to gather. And justice do they have on their side, these who finely calibrate their speech with slide rule precision, for I have transgressed, prevailing currents of propriety are absent from my speech. I have dared to give include a black man as part of my narrative, and now are there those who would punish me unto death.*

He came as a child to Sarah. He came with his excitement and his fear. Hearing the former but not the latter, she smacked him and smacked him hard, saying, "Stop showing off. It's nothing to be proud of that a depraved man would want you."

He allowed her rebuke to penetrate into all his hidden places. The world of homosexuality was for her to own, being her domain by virtue of her father. It was thus for her to interpret Luther's experience for him and put an end to his silly clamoring for attention. And yet it hurt to be spoken to in such a manner. It felt like the hard slap that Hannah would mete out to him when he was a child and he wondered that even the meekest of women likely had that secret place from which to draw the strength and the audacity to go strong against men in the fullness of their folly and relieve them of it.

In a way it did not matter. He had Camus, the Algerian Frenchman, to turn to. How timely that Camus should note the subtle relationship between experience and knowledge of it. Though Camus always had some sort of mystery going on, Luther heard

what he was saying. Luther had offered his experience to Sarah the night before, but it had been for her to provide an interpretation, a corrective, mean though it was.

He also had his dreams. He had a whole treasure trove of things. He just had to put all the things together so they would form a presentable pattern.

In dreamland a policeman kicked down a drunken loner's flimsy balsa wood door and slapped him around, demanding that the tenant pay up the money he owed. In an attempt to preserve some dignity, the man put up some feeble resistance. This response did not go over well with the policeman, who emerged from the tenant's dwelling with a bloody butcher knife.

In horror did Luther scream, "Does my life mean nothing?" when he awoke, but Sarah had already gone off to work.

And there were other dreams to reveal him to himself. Carola Aprile and her boyfriend Hunger Longing came for dinner at his family's apartment, where Luther was alone with them. The apartment as gloomy and shabby as ever. Rendered silent by his shame, he left them to converse with each other. While they baked bread in the unclean oven, a thousand cockroaches kept watch, with battalions more in reserve.

In his journal he wrote (if Albert Camus could write and keep a journal, he could too): "I think about writing to Dr. Rosner. In therapy I feel pressure to be upwardly mobile. A part of me resists this pressure. Is it merely fear of taking on responsibility? I'm not that sure of all that much anymore. One thing, though—driving a cab full-time is no truly sensible way of making a living. What are the options?"

An incident occurred. His Checker broke down in the middle on an exit ramp from the East River Drive. His fare was accepting of the reality and got out. Rather than berate Luther, he paid the amount showing on the meter, proving himself exceptional with his agreeable nature. But the driver of the vehicle behind him was less amiable, hitting her horn repeatedly. Soon others were doing the same. Perplexity was the order of the day. Why would the irate ones queue up behind him? There was space to pass him. Beckoned by the noise, Luther swung into action. He did not remonstrate with the woman behind the wheel but he did inquire as to the need for her insistent noise.

“What ails you?” he asked, as if his mother was speaking through him.

“What ails me? What do you think ails me? Get a move on. I have places to be and things to do. I am important in my life.”

“Do you not see that my taxi is also ailing?”

“This is America, mister. Learn to take care of yourself and the things that belong to you.”

“But it doesn’t belong to me. It belongs to the taxi service. And I am right now on my way to call for assistance.”

“I don’t need to hear your problems, mister. I’ve got problems of my own.”

A police officer arrived. “What seems to be the problem here?” he asked.

Sunglasses hid his eyes.

“My taxi has broken down and I need to get to a phone so the taxi service’s emergency services unit can be dispatched. I drive for a company that takes care of its own. So I have been told.”

After a pause the officer said, “Go find a phone booth and call it in. Your hazard lights are on. You should be all right.”

“The woman behind me is full of complaint. She acts as if I stopped my taxi to read my newspaper in the middle of the road. All the other motorists have driven around me, but not her. She is wedded to her pain.”

“You got shit clogging your ears? I said go and make your call.”

So Luther did, and it remained an unsolved mystery as to the cause of the woman’s lack of reason.

Some hours later, he chowed down at a McDonald’s in the east Thirties, a sweet and clean franchise with the normal food he had come to expect as a child of the Automat. He sat with one burger with cheese and one without and an order of fries, seeking to maintain his strength now that he had been supplied with a healthy and *cooperative* Checker. A man of competence had come to its aid and applied the healing touch. *Feed the face first*. Had not Dr. Dressler thundered this, to Luther’s ears, Biblical sounding commandment? And there it was. The food was proving to be not only a nourishment to his body but to his mind. Why? Because a revelation came to him. *Marge on the line had been in the car behind him*. OK, not her exactly, but the spirit of her, accusing Luther of holding women back, whether they were seeking to climb fences or arrive by vehicle at their destinations. What he was to make of this revelation he was at a loss to say, but where one had come, another was sure, eventually, to follow. Or maybe not.

Sarah went away that weekend. She took the bus up to Camp. She was in good spirits when she left and cast no aspersions at him, and so he did not have to be weighed down with pain and sorrow. Absent Sarah, the loft would not allow him to be alone in it. In fact, it expressly asked him to get out, and so he did, but not before showering and putting on a clean shirt. A more truthful statement, as that is the goal, would have been that he could not abide being alone, and the two beers he drank before leaving had brought on the call of the night.

The bar on Spring Street was waiting for him. He started with two more beers and then switched to rum and coke, three in quick succession. A man on the next stool asked him his sign. Luther said he did not know. Astrology was not something he could retain. The man said he was deep and must be a Cancer. Cancer. That didn't sound like any sign Luther wanted to be. The man had a girlfriend with whom Luther chatted long enough that she offered him her phone number while the man was using the restroom but neither of them had a pen. Luther said he would commit both her and her number to memory as the man returned and thanked him for a meaningful conversation before leaving with the woman.

The bartender bought Luther the next drink. Luther took the gesture as a sign that he should leave. It was possible the bartender had overheard some of Luther's interaction with the woman and deemed it untoward or unmanly or any of the judgments his mind might manufacture to place Luther in a shabby light. The bartender was not a Ron Doug. He did have the requisite mustache of a Ron Doug and his hair was longer than that of a Ron Doug and he had the feminine manner of going to his hair lightly with his hand as

well, so Luther did not think the bartender would punch him in the face if he didn't leave. But the complimentary drink had established an intimacy, and it would cause Luther unbearable discomfort should he transgress on the bartender's kindness by not reading correctly what the gesture signified. Luther couldn't very well order another drink after a free one had been placed in front of him. That would be a violation of barroom etiquette. Luther showed his respect by leaving a two-dollar tip.

He went to the bar down the way on Broome Street, the one that had the kitchen just to the side of the door as you entered where the wonderful hamburgers served on pita bread and the out of this world chili were made. A kitchen with the integrity to shun closed doors so you could see what was going on. Luther ordered a cup of coffee and talked with the waitress. He did not ask for her phone number and she did not give it to him either. His sense of decorum, however, was not enough to keep ominous behavior in check. Not far off, the busboy was pointing in his direction as he spoke with the bartender, who then turned and looked Luther's way. This was all right. It was in keeping with the ordering process of the universe, Luther decided. Besides, a title popped into his mind, like an amount in the window of a cash register after depressing the keys. *A Spy in the House of Love*. For his money, Luther was betting on himself as the latter. No matter that he was in their bar; it was less likely than he himself to be an ambience for love; as for the bartender and busboy, they had left no doubt in Luther's mind as to where the espionage was coming from.

I have no place to go, and yet my path is being illuminated, he said out loud, as he made his way through the desolate cobblestone streets of SoHo back to the loft. Down to

pocket change, he took some bills from where he had hidden them in the underwear drawer and headed out again, this time east to the baths.

“This ID has expired,” the cashier said, when Luther tried to get in at the reduced student rate. Embarrassed by the man’s incredulous tone and self-conscious to be entering a gay bath to begin with, Luther paid the full amount without argument. He lasted ten minutes in the steam bath before realizing his mistake, yet again the steam rendering him too sober to continue.

He returned home and sat wearing only his glasses and saw a light burning in the window of a room across the yard. He waited for someone to appear but no one came and as the minutes passed he regarded it as a vicious obstinacy that the universe should be so withholding of people when he needed them.

Sarah returned home from Camp with disturbing news. Her parents had removed the college texts Luther had stored in boxes in the barn when he and Sarah moved from the Chinatown loft and given them a place on bookshelves in that same space. They had brought them out of their hiding place for human eyes to see. And though she said no more, he imagined her parents having a good laugh at the shallowness of his education, based on the thinness of the texts, and once again pressing her hard to relinquish her tie to him, as what future could she have with a young man whose learning was as meager as his physical endowment? Pieces of string did he imagine them tossing to the wind to show his lack of substance in the world.



And for that day and many days thereafter Luther had no shelter from the laughing thing that the universe had unleashed, as it could find him in even the darkest corner. Fraud, phony. Words such as these were applied to his person, and more than ever, wine and whiskey and the train tracks of America were calling to him as the only refuge from the incessant taunts.

And yet, as one day after another passed, the universe sought to show a gentler nature. The men of the taxi depot, those who sat behind partitions and spoke gruffly to those who sat behind the steering wheel of the Checkers, said to him thusly (yes, thusly): “We’re giving you your breakdown pay because you’ve been doing good for us. And tell you what, we’re also placing you on the regular schedule.” Now the man who spoke these words had a cigar he had just taken from his mouth and all manner of cynical wisdom embedded in his puffy face, being a man of the coffee shops and food carts who knew something of the way of the world and the people in it. The man saw how the power of acceptance lit up Luther’s being, just turned on all the lights in his previously dark house, in spite of Luther’s best attempts to hide his happiness at the news. As if to sober Luther up, the taxi depot man went on: “Just so you know. It’s not on us if you catch a bullet in the head or someplace else on your person. You got to drive smart. One bullet to the brain will render you human garbage to the rest of the world. You understand what I’m saying?” The taxi depot man tapped the side of his head with his index finger.

“Thank you. Your wisdom is most appreciated,” Luther was reduced to saying.

“You hear the way he talks to me, Bert?” the taxi depot man said to another. “Like he can create elegance where none exists. But that’s America for you. It takes all types.”

Oh Jesus, was the taxi depot man a spreading thing of joy in his being, as if he were God himself, or the father Luther's father had not been. He has made me into a little boy, and he must pay for that. He must pay royally, Luther resolved, as he moved in on his first fare of the day, a woman with her arm raised at the corner of Twenty-third and Sixth.

"Start driving," the woman said, on settling into the back seat.

"Where to?" Luther asked.

"South at the light for ten blocks and then make a left and go in that direction for the next ten blocks."

"Thank you. I will do just that. And if I may say, a fare like you is a once-in-a-lifetime event. You will be one for the book I continue to write."

"I'm happy to hear," the woman said, as she stared out the window.

Some minutes later he pulled to the curb. "Precision driving is my goal. Ten blocks in one direction and ten blocks in another has brought us to a dreary stretch." Indeed they were near the entrance to the Queens Midtown Tunnel.

"You are a good little boy trying to learn how to be bad," the woman said. She handed him a ten and did not wait for her change.

Luther stayed in place for a while. "I will file her words for future reference," he resolved, uncertain that her pronouncement would stand the punishment of time.

When she could, a girl in the dark slashed her wrists on a Greenwich Village street. As she bled and bled, the men and women of violence formed a cordon around her, protecting her right to leave this world and hurling bottles at the police and the

emergency medical team rushing to her aid. “Die! Die! Do your thing!” they chanted, even as they engaged the authorities with fierce resistance. Clubs were wielded to beat them and then beat them some more, and even then they continued to struggle. More strangely, no amount of physical subjugation could take the smiles from their faces.

Luther failed to find words for what he had witnessed. Pockets of darkness were spreading, and he wouldn't be able to avoid their reach.

He took time out of his busy schedule for a dream. There was always time for those. He introduced Marge to Luke in a bar. How uncomfortable their ease with each other made him. And there was something more than discomfort when Marge laughed harshly and said to Luke, “I don't need to tell you that your brother has a cock the size of a thimble.” And yet Luke surprised him. Out of earshot of Marge, he said, “You shouldn't let her get away with that,” seeking to inflame every cell in Luther's being against her.

Sarah had a dream of her own. And while it was not his right to share his Marge dream with her, lest he upset her, she was free to share hers with him, as it did not contain a nemesis he could identify, unless that nemesis was squalor. In the dream they were living in a blighted neighborhood on Amsterdam Avenue, but their financial straits did not keep Luther from arriving home with two expensive steaks. The sight of the extravagance brought Sarah to tears. “Have you no sense? Do you not see we cannot afford them?”

Luther had heard the tone of such sadness as Sarah's dream conveyed before, and he had heard the laughing thing placed on him for his lack of endowment as well, as his

own dream conveyed, but the fact was that the sun was shining bright and strong on the morning following these dreams and so he said to Sarah, as she was preparing to get to work in her studio, "I want to be in that sun outside. I do not want the shadows on a day such as this."

"What are you trying to tell me, Luther?"

He could hear her rising impatience, the time for coffee and bagels now over and the morning chatter that went with it.

"I'm thinking I would go to the beach, as this is my day off. There is a package fare for the Long Island Railroad to Freeport and then a bus to the ocean. I would like nothing more than to eat a hot dog and lie in the sun, if the truth be known."

"If the truth be known," she repeated.

"The sun will deal with my lazy tongue," Luther said. "It will sear it into propriety."

"Have a nice time," Sarah said.

"I love you," Luther said.

"I love you, too," Sarah said right back.

Because his day off came on a Tuesday, there was not the throng that the weekend would bring. For a couple of hours he lay on a towel and allowed the sun to have its way with him, but he was not at peace. The lewdness of the indolent had come to afflict him. Oh, the humanity, the distressed witness to the *Hindenberg's* destruction had cried. Oh, the carnality, Luther could only groan, at the mercy of the red-light district his head had become.

But he did have his hot dog, and it was a good one, a Nathan's all-beef frank. He bought it at a stand back from the beach, which he had walked to in his flip-flops. It was so good that he had another and then he had a third as well, and treated himself to a portion of French fries to which he added a generous covering of ketchup squeezed from four packets. French's mustard for his hot dogs and Heinz 57 varieties ketchup for his French fries. Could he ask for anything more than love in the sun with a gorgeous woman? His shadow was not the meager thing the sun normally cast on the sand; it had a subtle substance that gave him the measure of confidence he had lacked before his fast food meal.

That afternoon he kept his eye on the gulls as they came on the scene. Scary birds with a big wing span who had their mind on only one thing as they circled in graceful gliding motions. The ocean was their hot dog stand and they swooped down to it.

I am a wingless gull. My mind is on one thing, too, Luther thought that day.

He rinsed the sand and lotion from his body before dressing and returned home with the heat of the sun still in his skin to find Sarah standing at the long counter opposite the sink in the kitchen area.

"What is it?" he asked, seeing her frozen to the spot in an atmosphere of eerie stillness. Pieces of broken plates lay on the floor.

"I had just woken from a nap when I saw someone come in through the window. I threw some plates at him. It was enough to drive him away."

The window looking out on the Bowery was fully open. The fire escape ladder was hanging down close to the pavement. The intruder had jumped up and unhinged the

ladder from its hook. The ladder was weighted at the bottom and swung down toward the street. The intruder climbed up and in while it was still daylight. A brazen entry. And yet Sarah's resistance had driven him off. If she had been cowed, if she had frozen...

There had been the man who tried to rape her in Boston, and now this. And Luther had not been there to protect her. He had been having his X-rated fantasies while lying under the sun at Jones Beach on a day when she could have been murdered.

"What did he look like?" Luther asked.

"He was young and muscular and black," Sarah said.

"We must call the police," Luther said.

"Why?"

"Someone broke in. That is why. And he may do it again, if not here, somewhere else."

Two officers of the law came. They were weighed down with gear that hung about their waists, not merely guns but flashlights and thick notepads and handcuffs.

"What do you got for us?" the larger of the two asked. The small nameplate by the breast pocket of his shirt said "Hanratty." The phrase "a fine Irish name" came to Luther's mind but he said nothing. The other one bore the identifier "Cruz." The phrase "a surging minority" came to Luther's mind on seeing this other name, but again he said nothing.

"We had a break in. A man came through the window," Luther said.

"Which window?" Officer Hanratty asked.

"The front window." Sarah pointed to it.

The officers went to the window.

“A crime of opportunity,” Officer Hanratty said. “They see low-hanging fruit, they’re going to try to pick it. Know what I’m saying?”

“Maybe you could explain,” Luther said.

“The ladder tempts them. They see they can unhook it by jumping up and so they give it a go,” Officer Hanratty said.

“You got a description for us?” Officer Cruz asked.

Sarah told the officers what she had told Luther, throwing in his height and weight and the roundness of his face.

“He could be one of the bindle stiffs from the municipal men’s shelter up on Third Street. They’re coming down here younger and stronger these days,” Officer Hanratty said.

“What’s a bindle stiff?” Sarah asked. Luther didn’t know either.

“A bum,” Officer Hanratty said.

“How you get him out?” Officer Cruz asked.

“I threw plates at him when I saw him come through the window,” Sarah said.

“What about you? You do something, too?” Officer Cruz, asked of Luther.

“I wasn’t here. I came home minutes after it happened.”

“Minutes after it happened. I like that,” officer Cruz said.

“What do you like about it?” Luther asked.

“Never mind that,” Officer Hanratty said. “How many minutes?”

“Five or ten,” Sarah said.

“That’s convenient,” Officer Cruz said. “Lucky for your lady she has the cojones to frighten the perp away.”

“Yes,” Luther said, offended now.

“The question is, what are you going to do about it?” Officer Hanratty asked.

“We called you. That is what we did about it,” Luther said.

“You know how many of these calls we get each day? The second-story man. He is part of your life now. You not going to kill him and we not going to catch him maybe, so what you going to do, like my partner Officer Hanratty ask you? Because maybe he come back and steal your furniture. Maybe he come back and steal your life. One thing for sure. He already stole your mind.” So Officer Cruz said.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” Luther said.

“You’re going to do what everybody else does,” Officer Hanratty said.

“What is that exactly?” Luther asked.

“You going to do the ugly. That’s what you’re going to do,” Officer Cruz said.

“The ugly?” Luther asked.

“Look, I’m going to cut you some slack and explain some things your mommas should have taught you. When you been uglified you got to ugly back. No other way to go. What I’m saying is you got to get with the ugly bars, that silver metal shit you see in people’s windows. That the only way to keep a cat like that away. Because that cat. He has marked you. He be saying you disrespected him with those plates you threw. That be the way his mind work. He be thinking you threw the plates just so he would come back. You understand what I just said?” Officer Cruz seemed to be speaking directly to Luther.



“Yes. My mind is working on it,” Luther said.

“That is my partner’s point. You have to get out of your mind and into action,” Officer Hanratty said. “Your mind isn’t going to put up those window gates.”

“Cojones, my friend. Remember that. Cojones,” Officer Cruz said.

If Luther had a problem with the tone and manner of the presentation by the officers of the law, he could still accept the content. Anxiously he recalled the advertising jingle and let his fingers do the walking through the yellow pages that same day and within hours a man came in a van with gates that he installed, labor and parts amounting to several hundred dollars. Sarah had not pressed for the gates. In fact, she maintained a somewhat defiant attitude toward the intruder. But Luther could not live with the idea of someone with a criminal intent entering the loft by day or by night.

Murder could come calling. It had almost done so at his Hell’s Kitchen apartment, where the police lock supporting the flimsy door could not keep the banditos from his goods. And now it had almost done so at the Bowery loft. He would have to raise his mind to a new level of vigilance, only he didn’t know how he was going to do that.

He had disposed of Dr. Rosner, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t find someone else to speak his words of wisdom at a cheaper price. Not everything had to be paid full value for. Canal Jeans was proof of that, with all the discounted attire it offered. Just because he had shopped at Bloomingdales didn’t mean he had to continue shopping at Bloomingdales. He would find a downtown Dr. Rosner.

A mental health clinic referred him to a head doctor, a real one with a medical degree just like Dr. Rosner and a Fifth Avenue address in lower Manhattan. And only fifteen dollars a session. The building was old and had no doorman. Luther pressed the buzzer for Dr. Carlton Grimle and then waited and waited before getting a response. Dr. Grimle showed the same dilatory tendency when Luther rang his doorbell on the third floor. I have come to the dawdle doctor, Luther was thinking, when Dr. Grimle turned the lock. He looked disheveled and as if he had just been roused from sleep, looking only half awake in his old robe and with his gray hair wild upon his head and his double-chinned face unshaven.

“I’ll be with you in a minute. Go have a seat,” Dr. Grimle said, with a flick of the wrist motioning Luther toward the living room.

A giant rubber tree with yellowed leaves. Dust-covered furniture. White curtains turned a dull gray. Windows virtually opaque from neglect. I am sitting in the apartment of a dead man, Luther thought, as from the bathroom came the sound of Dr. Grimle gargling.

Some minutes later the doctor called him into his office. Luther watched as he reached for a decanter of water, but his hand trembled so violently that he had to put it down. In that moment did Luther see that Dr. Grimle was a drunk, a bad drunk, like the one Jack Lemmon played in *The Days of Wine and Roses*, writhing on the floor of the greenhouse after destroying it in his frantic search for the bottle he had hidden.

“What has brought you here?” the doctor asked.

It was a delicate matter to extricate yourself from a doctor's office after you had only just arrived. The doctor was sick, but he was a human being and it was not for Luther to hurt his feelings more than he had to.

"That is an excellent question. I hope to let you know when I find out," Luther said. Unable to hold regard for the doctor's feelings uppermost in his mind any longer, Luther jumped from his chair and ran out the door.

It is not my job to take care of the world, Luther told himself that day. If a doctor comes to the door in a robe and with his feet bare and with his yellowed toenails on full display and his face has not seen a razor in at least a day, then he must expect that a prospective patient might feel compelled to flee the premises. But still...

The leather interior of his Checker smelled good. He was glad to be behind the wheel, as he often was at the start of a shift, before the day used him up. His first fare he left by the elevated subway station at One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street. In another lifetime he had climbed out a window on the uptown staircase and continued his ascent along the roofing to the tracks themselves, where he squeezed through the railroad ties and boosted himself onto the platform. He wondered who that child had been. He would come back, not to the subway. No, he would not settle for that. At its farthest extension it would leave him within the confines of the city. No, no, he would head west, over by the Hudson River. He would sleep on the grass and even in the trees of Riverside Park, heartened by the traffic flowing north in the night to the bounty of America. He would feel the same wild excitement he felt as a child imagining the great beyond, all that lay in wait out there past the dimensions of his own world. His whole being would sparkle like

the George Washington Bridge in the dark. He would lie down by the railroad tracks, the real ones, not the bogus subway lines. Magic and beauty would be his in an endless unfolding of Chevrolet summer days and nights. On a flatbed rail car slowly moving past the cornfields of Kansas with the delirium-triggering smell of firewood burning in the air, a hayseed in rolled-up jeans would appear and say, "Hey, do you want to play?" opening to him a wonderland of the intense joy that a friend could bring while taking him far from the bounds of Mama land.

I am trying to make meaning where none is to be found. I am trying to go back to something that no longer exists. I am haywire in my own mind. These thoughts too came to Luther on that night.

"When Simon Weill said to me, 'You and I are one. We are one,' he was not fooling. You understand what I am saying?" Luke was on the line.

"Sure I understand. One is one," Luther said.

"That's not it. He said we are one, not one is one."

"But if you are one, then one has to be one. Ipso facto, or something like that."

"Don't give me your ipso facto shit. Just try to listen."

"I am listening."

"Do you know what I just got?"

"Tell me what you just got. My ears and mind are open."

"What's wrong with you, anyway?"

"I said I'm ready to hear. Really."

“Mr. Weill arranged another salary increase for me and guess what I’m buying?”

“A new stereo set?”

“No. A Corvette Stingray. Eight thousand bucks. What do you think of that?”

“That it’s a lot of money.”

“I’m coming up in the world, so why shouldn’t I have good things? Look, I gave up my motorcycle now that I’m living with Brenda and Benjy. I can’t be entirely without wheels.”

“But does three evenly divide into two?”

“What are you talking about?”

“There are three of you but a Stingray has only two seats. That’s all I’m saying.”

“What’s the big deal? Benjy can sit on Brenda’s lap.”

“Benjy’s not an infant,” Luther said.

“There you go again with your don’t do this and don’t do that crap.”

“I’m just suggesting you might be happier in the long run with a more practical car.”

“I’m not in this life to wear a hair shirt and be a martyr. I’m here to have fun.”

“I’ve never seen anyone wear a hair shirt. Actually, I’ve never even seen a hair shirt. They must look disgusting.”

“I’ve got to go,” Luke said.

Luther felt bad that he had offended his brother and sat with this bad feeling until he could sit no more. It was not right to hurt his brother and be the cause of him dying, and so he called him back.

“I’m sorry,” Luther said. “Do what you have to do. It’s your life, just as The Animals sang.”

“You’ve got to think better,” Luke said.

Luther went to the dream world and let it do his thinking for him with the images it provided. He was on the roof of the family building. A large timer rested on the parapet and Luke stood alongside it facing Broadway far below. It came to Luther that his brother was going to jump and that he, Luther, would not be able to rush and grab hold of him because the seconds were ticking off the timer hopelessly fast. And yes, it also occurred to him that should he even be able to grab hold of Luke that his brother would take him over the edge as well. And so the timer alarm rang and Luke did as Luther had feared he would, casually stepping over the edge. But Luther did not see Luke plummet. He would not allow himself to bear further witness than he had or to hear the horrified cries of the passersby below. He held his ears and screamed and screamed so that he screamed himself awake in the loft where Sarah continued to sleep and it was not right that the dream world should be as frightening, or more frightening, than this world that he had to be a part of, as it left him nowhere to go.

Of his schadenfreude tendency he was in full acceptance. But he could not say the term applied in the case of Carola Aprile and Hunger Longing, Sarah’s two artist friends.

Carola Aprile was thinking more and more of breaking up with her beau, saying hasta la vista in many different ways, so her meaning would be clear. He had returned to Pittsburgh for three weeks and his absence was a source of relief. Once again she

complained to Sarah about Hunger's tendency to go through her things. He read her mail not because he was jealous but because he had no life. More and more he just sat around the loft. Carola found his apathy frightening.

Luther felt for Hunger Longing. Studies had shown it was only a matter of time before women gained the upper hand and applied the clobber.

Not that he could say things were trending that way between him and Sarah. True, she made noises about his drinking, aided and abetted by Dr. Frodkey, but he did not live in fear of her going her own way so much anymore, at least consciously.

In truth he had his own thoughts about possibly separating. That phone call from her back when he was living in Hell's Kitchen stayed in his mind, the one in which she demanded to know if he still was committed to their living together when she finished her schooling in Boston. Like he was a piece of standby equipment, her second and not very desirable option if Lane didn't work out. He had lacked the courage to be truthful. He had not said that he didn't know, as if indecision was a crime. She had never been less appealing to him than she had been in that moment of expressed neediness; she had not been looking for him so much to be in her life as to organize her life, as her father had done for her mother.

This line of thinking might not have revived, at least that night, if not for the phone call he received from Gillian Brower, the Gertrude Stein protégé he had met in the bar on Spring Street some years before.

"Can you come over?"

"When?"

“Now.” She gave him the address. It was not the building on Broome Street near the Holland Tunnel where the old Italian women kept tabs on her, telling her with their eyes that she was living in sin for being with the young men of New York City.

Now it happened on this night that Sarah was out with Carola Aprile, and so in no time Luther was at the Chelsea apartment of Gillian Brower.

“All men are bastards, but at least you’re a reasonably nice bastard,” Gillian said.

“Thank you.”

“What exactly are you doing with yourself? You were always sort of vague about that.”

“I was the assistant manager of a family enterprise and now I have upgraded to Checker hackie.”

“You can do better than that.”

“Ouch. I could do worse.”

“It wasn’t love that caused me to pick up the phone and call you.”

“I’m disappointed.”

“I called you here for revenge.”

“You’re going to avenge yourself on me?”

“I’ve been seeing someone.”

“And...”

“And the more I want him, the less available he seems to be. Tonight he canceled on me again for some bullshit reason. And so I called you. I thought I wanted you to



come over here and fuck my brains out, not that you were ever very good at that, but now I'm not sure."

"I get that way too sometimes."

"Get what way? Do you even know what I'm talking about?"

"For some reason I think of Quentin Compson, but I can't say why.

"Who?"

"*The Sound and the Fury.*"

"You go through life saying strange, irrelevant things." Gillian Brower began to laugh, in spite of herself.

"If you say so."

"Now I've hurt your feelings."

"Maybe."

"All I meant is that my boyfriend is my age and he's already making six figures."

"You must be very proud of him."

"But he can be a real bastard. Sometimes I feel like he really does have a heart of stone."

"Has he been listening to the Rolling Stones?"

"What?"

"The Rolling Stones. They're big on hearts of stone. Mick Jagger's face, even when he's smiling, is a heart of stone, and his words and music were produced by Heart of Stone, Inc."

“All right. Enough of this,” Gillian said, moving to the sofa and sitting alongside Luther with drinks for each of them.

“Enough of what?”

“Enough of your talk that never leads anywhere.”

The scotch led them on. He was now hungry. So was she. He was able to perform.

He held up his empty glass and Gillian returned with a refill.

“You’re an alcoholic, you know.”

The phone rang. “Hello...Now? You want me to come now?...Give me forty minutes. I was just stepping into the shower.”

Luther drank his drink. “Everything OK?” Luther asked, when Gillian got off the phone.

“I’ve got to shower. Just let yourself out, will you?” she said, as she headed for the bathroom, her twitching bottom in full view. A woman running to the future that had called her.

Then it was his mother on the line. She sounded scared. It became clear that she was only on the line so she could place Hannah on the line. Luther could hear in his mother’s voice what she was not saying, that she was being held hostage by Hannah and Hannah’s anger. And now he would have to pretend he wasn’t full of revulsion and outrage at the monstrous threat that Hannah since the beginning had represented.

“Hi, Luther. How are you?” Her voice big, as she was big, a voice that did not take consideration of the space of others. A voice with a certain kind of laughter in it too. Not jovial laughter, but the laughter of someone sporting, or about to sport, with you.

“I’m doing OK. How are you?”

“That’s what I want to speak with you about,” she said, her voice dropping and turning serious. “It’s about my son. It’s about Moses.”

“How is Moses?”

“That is what I want to get to, if you will let me. I’m concerned about him.”

“Concerned how?” Luther asked.

“I know you’ve been sick in the head because you told me so and don’t tell me you didn’t. You told me you were seeing a psychoanalyst for three years at some clinic. Or are you going to tell me you didn’t say that?”

“I didn’t say all of that.”

“What part didn’t you say?”

“Never mind.”

“The thing is that I don’t want my son to be sick in the head like you have been. That’s why I won’t have him going to see a psychiatrist or a psychoanalyst. I’ve read their entire purpose is to make you sick. I don’t want them getting personal with my son with their questions. That’s why I’m sending him to a psychologist, but the psychologist has to understand the ground rules, and the primary one is to not get personal. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I’m trying.”

“Remember that I have a son who is big in all his parts. Now tell me you understand.”

“I understand.”

“So what is it you understand?”

“You have a son who is big in all his parts and you want him to see a psychologist.”

“Right.”

“Have you ever thought of seeking help for yourself?”

“There you go, getting personal about my son’s business and my business. Stay out of it.”

“Yes, of course.”

Moses had put his fist to another boy’s face at school. There was no contrition in his manner or his speech when called upon to account for himself by the school authorities. And then he went and gave an old man with whom he bumped shoulders on the street socko plenty, to the shock of witnesses. The man had been trying to hurt him, Moses said, when the police arrived.

“You just hit an old man,” a witness screamed.

“Old. Young. I did what I had to do,” Moses replied.

The man, though bleeding from the mouth, did not press charges. He did not want to see any young man get in trouble with the law. But should such an incident occur again, he would certainly file a complaint, he said.

Moses was now fifteen, and he did have the power to take down not only old men but younger men with size and strength. Once again it seemed that Luther's worst fear was coming true. Moses was growing up to be the war machine that Hannah had been grooming him to be. If he struck a classmate and an old man who had jostled him on the street, then why would he not also take after his mother and put his hands on Luther, not the hard smacks with tongue clamped between thick lips that his mother had dealt but more potent pummeling? Why should Luther doubt that Moses had been brought into the world to ensure his exit from it?

*"She is your sister. Why do you depict her this way?"*

*"We have to get to the source of the burden she placed on us, the crushing weight of demand, spoken and unspoken, and of threat. We have to see where our need for extinction came from."*

*"What more in the way of understanding can you say about your sister?"*

*"She had no love for herself."*

*"Where is your compassion?"*

*"Is that a life, to be bent into a posture of placating the beast?"*

*"There you go again."*

*"What would you have me do?"*

*"Stand in her shoes."*

*"Later, for all of this."*

Some nights, while drinking his Rhine wine or May wine, he would take an over-the-counter sleep aid to ensure that he was not deprived of the world of dreams and deliverance from the mess of papers around him. But then a strange thing would happen. The need to communicate would take hold, and he would bolt from the loft and across the street to Helmet Head's so he might find his own kind. And even if they were not his own kind, seeing that they were younger and in the power of the holler heads the combo of alcohol and pill brought him to a place of love where he could reach out across the divide. Such a thing happened on a cold fall night. A woman of the leather kind, including a studded belt, appeared. Her pale and ample flesh and unnaturally blond hair were in contrast to her black raiment. She was not one to find a man so easily, and so when Luther offered himself to her, she took him to her. Outside the holler hall the smell came to them of burning wood from the fire in a metal barrel the street bums without a flop huddled around for warmth. The bums had no love to keep them warm on this frigid night, but Luther could not concern himself with that, as on the side street he and the woman had turned down Morpheus called him to the world of dreams. Very strongly did Luther feel himself being pulled down under, but he managed to stay upright until the woman unlocked her apartment door. He remembered lying down and nothing more, until the morning when he came to in the same position, while the woman snored in her bed. Creaky from his night on the wood floor, he slipped from the woman's apartment without waking her.

“I think some nights when you don't show up of calling the police,” Sarah said.  
“But then I say why bother because I know you're out whoring.”

“I wasn’t whoring,” Luther said. “I was sleeping. I passed out.”

“Oh shut up,” Sarah said, putting her hurt where he could not find it.

In this time, chastened by his experience with the drunken doctor, Luther went back to Dr. Rosner.

“Sometimes when you bargain-hunt, you get quality. Sometimes you get shoddy goods,” Dr. Rosner said, showing off his pith. Luther didn’t care. He was just glad to be back in the ambience of success. There was no doubt about Dr. Rosner’s quality. Those four years at Harvard and his Ivy League medical degree and his office in an East Side doorman building. And there was no doubt that he, Luther, needed him to have any hope. He is my ticket to success, Luther thought. No man cometh to the father but through me, the Christ Jesus had said. And Luther could not remove himself from the premises of his Checker without the aid of Dr. Rosner. He did not say to Dr. Rosner that Dr. Rosner was God, but all the currents flowing in the direction of Dr. Rosner told Luther so.

And yet Luther didn’t do right by Dr. Rosner, at least in his dream, in which Dr. Rosner invited him to his apartment for dinner. To Luther’s amazement, Dr. Rosner’s wife was no svelte beauty and the apartment was poorly furnished and dirty and Dr. Rosner himself had the affect of an imbecile.

Come the morning Luther thought, I have not visited with Dr. Rosner but with myself and my life.

Dr. Rosner was working from an understanding that Luther wished to elevate above his station as a New York City hackie even if Luther couldn’t fully embrace the

notion of advancement himself. And not because Luther had read and been unduly influenced by *Ramparts* magazine. It was only this: he was too good for the work world and not good enough at the same time. Regarding the second part, he did not want to be castigated for his unfitnes.

“That is a formulation for paralysis, not success,” Dr. Rosner said, when Luther aired his thought . Dr. Rosner was a model of economy. He had it down.

*“Who was Dr. Rosner, dear God?”*

*“He was the version of yourself you could not be. He was the man who could do the math and apply it to the science of the mind to effect healing.”*

*“You always talk as if you know something.”*

*“That surprises you?”*

*“I don’t really know.”*

Needing an additional life line to the respectable, Luther registered for a course with a famous writer. A *New Yorker* writer. A Farrar, Straus and Giroux writer. A writer with a complex, modern surface in which no signs of him could be seen, like an apartment with no visible personal effects. A writer who drew on Joseph Campbell and Soren Kierkegaard, naming one of his characters Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing. Luther did not have a good feeling about this writer. He would not be of his mind or kind, he feared, but he went toward him anyway, as Marge on the Line had placed the writer on Luther’s must-do list.

“He’s brilliant. Absolutely brilliant,” Marge had said.



And Gillian Brower, formerly of the Chicago Art Institute, concurred. She too had heard about this writer, and while he was not in a league with Gertrude Stein, she could see that he was ahead of his time. “But you must be careful,” she warned. “He will determine the most talented male in the class and seek to assassinate him. And, trust me, his aim is deadly.” She would not elaborate. She said Luther must have his own experience. It was just that she did not want him to be a babe in the woods.

Luther looked for signs of the assassin in the writer, whose name was Hinckner Thor, but he could not. A tall man with a bulging gut, he had in his hand not a gun but a coffee mug during the class he held once a week at his West Village townhouse. The mug contained not coffee but vodka, it was understood. Whatever else Hinckner Thor might be, he was most definitely a bottle man and closed out each day absorbing the jazz on offer at Omar’s Palace of Sounds. Because he had wealth as well as fame, he had drawn a twenty-something girl into his life. He was not a man who could any longer take care of himself or his home. Papers, books, clothes lay scattered out of order throughout the house. Clearly, the young woman was having trouble containing his chaos.

“You must learn to write better sentences. You must stop replicating your body with the thinness of your prose. Am I the first to have told you this?” Hinckner Thor asked, at their first and only one-to-one meeting, after Luther had exposed his White Line Continue document to him.

“I have told myself as much. I will see what I can do to bulk up my body and my prose. Wheat germ may have a role to play here, and kielbasa, which I have taken a liking to so long as it is heavy with the mustard.”

Hinckner Thor placed an assessing stare on Luther but gave no indication where he might be going with his thoughts, and Luther was further laid low when he read several pages, starting with “Sarah liked to pee in an open field with only the crab apple tree for company, this at a time in her life when sex was as natural as a daily glass of water.” A chasm seemed to divide him from the small group as he read and his tongue grew heavy and tired long before he finished. I have been on a forced march in the desert trudging through sand before an indifferent audience, he thought, and their reticent comments seemed to bear him out. Suddenly he felt like a crazy man let out of a closet after a long sequester to see that the world had moved on and his small life, as reflected in the sample pages, held no appeal for anyone but himself.

But then Hinckner Thor rose Luther out of his funk by pairing him with Augusta Flowers, saying of the match, “You are the two most advanced students in the class. Of course you may also be the oldest.”

If Hinckner Thor sought to bring him back from the dead only so he could assassinate him again, that was his business, but Luther was determined to accentuate the positive. He clung to the words “most advanced” as if they were a life raft.

Hinckner Thor did other matchmaking as well, seeing that each member of the class had a mate. The idea was that each pair could work together and support each other in their work. Luther liked the general idea, but was disappointed with Hickner’s choice of partner for him. There was a beauty in the class with whom he had been hoping to be matched, and her name was not Augusta Flowers. Whatever physical luster Augusta once

possessed had faded with her years, and the strange hats she showed a fondness for wearing over her dull blond hair might be a warning sign of mental instability, or worse.

Luther had once heard a writer say he was in search of an honest critic, and he hoped that Augusta wasn't the one. "Your novel is terrible," Augusta Flowers said, at their first meeting. "It has no structure and the writing is weak."

Luther, while knocked back, managed to say, "There is a long-range gunner for the Philadelphia 76ers, and his name is World B. Free. Do not imagine that he took that name randomly. No, World B. Free was born Lloyd Free, down in Brooklyn. It wasn't enough for him to be free. He wanted the world to be free. My character has a more modest goal. He himself wants to be free."

"Well, I wish you well with that," Augusta said. "But you need to tidy up and tighten up."

"Tidy up and tighten up. That is something I can commit to memory. By the way, do you want to see a photograph of the real Sarah on whom my heroine is modeled?" Without waiting for an answer, Luther pulled a head shot of Sarah from his wallet.

Augusta gave Sarah a studying look while keeping the photo at arm's length. It had not occurred to Luther that she might be striking an aversion pose until she said, "Well, she looks dramatic, anyway."

"Yes, well, there is drama in her life and in my own as well, and a record, tidy and tight or not, must be kept so posterity will know Gilhooley and his lady love were here."

They had met at Augusta's apartment in the West Village, and when he left, he found a bar where he could drink, as the thirst was on him. On the way he cried and cried.

They were hot tears, but not as hot as the burns he had received from Augusta's lashing. Assassins were all around, and not all of them were named Thor Hinckner. He drank late into the night in search of a place where he could live with what he had heard from Augusta's toad-filled mouth. And when he came to in the morning, if he did not hear trumpets blaring summoning him to charge forward with White Line, Continue, he at least was still breathing.

Augusta had given him a story to read. It was one she had been working on for six months. As he read it in preparation for their next meeting, he did so with an eye to finding its flaws more than its virtues, but even in those moments when he was able to raise himself onto the plane of objectivity, he had reason to wonder whether she might not wish to apply her admonition to tidy up and tighten up to herself. But when he raised this point with her at the bar where next they met, she was ready with an iron-fisted response.

"Do you know who I am?" Augusta Flowers asked, as if calling him to heel.

"Is there something that I should know?" Luther asked.

"I work in publishing as an editor. I know good writing."

"Writing can be good in places and ailing in others. With your background, you should be in a position to bring your healing touch to those portions that are unwell. You can be your own physician."

"You stink, mister."

"Literally?"

"In every way. You are an obtuse fool."

“I feel a door is opening, only I don’t know where it is leading,” Luther said.

It led nowhere. It was not for him to plumb the mysteries of Augusta Flowers. She was not a soft field in which to lay himself down but a bed of thorns.

He sought his freedom in the Checker cab and drove the city streets. Then loneliness found him after dropping off a fare on a block of brownstones in Brooklyn Heights. But the answer for his pain was only blocks away on Joralemon Street, where an attractive woman flagged him down. Luther did not say to her that she had revived his spirit and that he would like nothing more than to fathom her depth. There were some things you didn’t say to a woman even if you felt it. But he could say, because she was mercifully lower Manhattan-bound and not intent on delivering him deeper into the deadness of Brooklyn—its churches of the presumably dead and graveyards of the presumably dead and streets of the quietly dead—that maybe, if it was all right with her, he would join her at the bar on Duane Street, where she had directed him to go.

“I guess so. But aren’t you supposed to be working?”

“I choose my own break time. There are bars, like baseball stadiums, where I have never been. To see light doing battle with the darkness on this desolate street does my soul good.”

The bar had a pool table and the soft patrons of SoHo. It was not a fist in the face and a knee in the groin sort of joint. The woman had no one to meet. She was there for a drink because she needed a drink. And Luther, once he started, was there for the same reason. She was an artist and said he could come home with her, but first he had to buy a bottle of Scotch, which he was happy to do. She lived over on John Street, in an office

building that was now renting its suites to residential tenants, mainly artists. The building shouted its desolation as much as the streets flooded with workers by day and abandoned at night. Their footsteps were loud in his ears as they walked through the halls of the old building. The front door to her living space had a panel of frosted glass, like the office door of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Or the same kind of door he would walk through high up in the Atlas Building in Rockefeller Center on his visits to the loquacious torture artist of a dentist his mother would send him to as a child.

The woman was the assessing kind. While she had allowed him into her home, she would not let him love her. Not even the shared consumption of the bottle of scotch could lead her down that path. She had glimpsed in him a lack. This he understood only afterward, when he could review the night's events. Of signal importance in coming to this determination was the fact that at some point, being in urgent need of relieving himself, Luther was directed by her to the public bathroom down the hall. The bathroom was built for multiple use, having several stalls and four giant urinals, one of which he stationed himself at. To his surprise, the woman entered just as he had turned to zip himself. And while he couldn't say with full certainty, it did seem to him that she had seen, with her sharp eye, his apparatus. Furthermore, it came to him, her mission had been only that, to determine the size and thickness of his equipment. Why would he think such a thing? Because his offer to love her, even though she quickly rejected it, had planted the seed in her mind of what such love could be on a lonely night, and the alcohol had watered that seed and made it grow. And so she had rushed into the bathroom to glimpse his thing only to be brought back to reality by its substandard dimensions.

But life was coming from all directions, and his was not dependent on the opinion of a troubled woman who, like him, counted the bottle as her friend.

The following night another passenger agreed to have a drink with him. She was from an old and distinguished Montreal family. The words meant less to him than the unassuming way she spoke them. She had an air about her of generalized amusement, as if the world could only be explained through drollery. Luther wondered if she was home within herself. It was a spooky notion, but one he needed to pose.

“Many people are at home within me. I would think the same holds true for you.” she said.

“The devil is at home in me,” he said, emboldened by his third glass of Scotch.

“What does your devil want?”

“He wants you, of course.”

“Who else is in there?”

“Someone I have no name for who makes me put words on paper.”

“You’re a writer?”

“I try, but I am being beaten half to death in the workshop I am taking.”

“It’s all part of the process. You are finding your voice. So am I.”

“You write as well?”

“Plays. I want my world to be a stage.”

“What is that strange glow in your face and that intensity in your eyes? Would it be visible in the dark?”

“We will have to find out,” she said.

They took a room at the Chelsea Hotel the following night, where it was found that her face was no exception to the power of darkness.

“In truth I prefer the light. Would you mind?” she asked.

“No,” he said, turning on a lamp. She was only giving him what he wanted as well.

She expressed another preference, that they make love in front of a mirror, as she wanted to be a full witness to the act. He offered no resistance. In that room did he see that she had a strength beyond his own.

“You have a beautiful body. You should share it with others,” she said, unsolicited.

He did not tell her that the universe had rendered another opinion.

“I’m growing anxious. This is terrible, but I should go,” he said, when they were done, unable to live with his pain and last the night. The woman was forgiving. She seemed to understand his nature. And so he ran back to Sarah with alcohol on his breath and the scent of the woman on his body.

“You’re looking for something,” Dr. Rosner said, when Luther told him about his partial night with the woman at the Chelsea Hotel.

“Looking for what?”

“You tell me.”

“I hate to think of myself as a predatory male, but maybe that is all it is. Maybe I am lost to the ways of the flesh.”



“Or maybe you are looking for a new life. Maybe alarm bells are ringing warning your house is on fire and you must get out.”

“I am the house on fire and I try to put it out with more fire,” Luther replied. He did not like it when Dr. Rosner tried to push him into the place of coldness and heartlessness. Did Dr. Rosner not understand that the Chelsea woman was the way of loneliness and death? Did he need to sing “That’s How Strong My Love Is?” for Dr. Rosner to cast himself as other than a skeptical jury where his relationship with Sarah was concerned? He sees me as a man child living in the realm of illusion while he hawks his one commodity, reality, Luther thought.

But Dr. Rosner wasn’t done. He force-fed Luther another reality sandwich, pressing him once again about his job search.

“I am doing what I can, but my resume has a gap that shouts I have been missing from my own life and into which I fall whenever I look at it. Like everything else about me, it has thin bones.”

“Well, we’ll have to thicken those bones with the weight of responsibility,” Dr. Rosner said.

“Or crush me with that weight.”

“I have a sense you are getting ready for change.”

“Do not frighten me unto death.”

“How about frightening you unto life?”

“Must you have an answer for everything?” Luther asked, but Dr. Rosner was lost to him, having gone into his smoke and snuffle routine.

Luther was not the only one to take refuge in dreams. Sarah had her own. She dreamt that her brother, Jeffrey was an alcoholic and that Jeffrey told Luther to his face that he was distressing the whole family with his outbursts and antics and to apply a measuring stick to his life to see the gap between where he was and where he might like to be. Sarah gave her brother what for and then turned her animus on Claire, telling her to stick it up her ass. Shocking as the words were, she did not say what the “it” was and Luther was too astonished by her imperative to inquire. Realizing in the dream that Luther was missing, Sarah issued an all points bulletin, which led to his discovery in the woods, where he lay passed out far from the uncivil family discourse.

While the tiny pronoun was not for him to ponder, the bigger word she applied to her brother, with all its devastating implications, had taken up unpleasant residence in his mind. *Alcoholic*. The word lacked all forgiveness and was equivalent with *leper* in days of old.

He had a dream of his own to share. A young and handsome Richard Burton was courting Elizabeth Taylor on the set of *Cleopatra*. But Elizabeth Taylor was too much for him in her beautiful white robe and put the mighty Richard Burton in his place, as if he were a mere plebe. To give him final clobber, she ordered her valet to make love to her instantly. Such was her queenly command of the situation.

“Wow. Do you suppose Elizabeth Taylor was your sister in disguise?”

“Why would you say a thing like that?” Sarah replied.

“They do both have the same physical stature, do they not? And Claire did apply clobber to Frank, did she not, and dismiss him from her royal palace.” Luther remembered the cold wind that blew through him when Sarah some years before said Claire had taken on a new lover, an African American man who celebrated what he called the quality of her bush. The change in Claire’s love life had caused Luther to worry that Sarah would follow her sister with a revolution of her own and get rid of him. This was all before Claire moved onto the Ivy League lawyer Cedric Shoalton.

“Don’t talk about my sister that way,” Sarah said.

Though Luther was stung, he did not retort that she herself had spoken in a worse way, telling Claire to stick it up her rear in her dream.

“I was just saying...”

“What were you just saying? You were saying that Claire is mainland China on the rise. That’s what you were saying. Do you think I don’t know that? Do you think I don’t know that I have been thoroughly overtaken by her in the eyes of my parents?”

“But the dream wasn’t about you.”

“All dreams are about me,” Sarah said.

“I see,” Luther said, hearing the voice of an assessing therapist. Not that Dr. Rosner would say such a thing. Luther would have to add her reply to his lengthening ponder list.

They headed for Chinatown, where they were to meet Jeffrey and his wife, Edna, for dinner.

Bayard Street. Pell Street. Moo goo gai pan. General Tso's famous chicken. The peaceful aura of Charlie Chan and his number one son. All this Luther had to look forward to at Happy Palace, where the Bowery met Chatham Square.

"How are they doing?"

"She hangs out with the townies in Phoenicia and behaves contemptuously toward Mommy. She's like a wild filly set out in too small a pasture. I mean, Jeffrey is my brother, but he is sort of dull. Who would want to look at his stupid, worried face all day?"

"But she married him," Luther said.

"Mommy and Daddy suspect it was more about American citizenship than love."

Another woman giving out the clobber. How was it Sarah wasn't doing the same? But she already had. She had already said he could only hope to be second best, if that.

*Celeste, there were scant pickings here for us. Yes, we were reunited with the old waiter who padded about and yes I devoured the Joy Palace steak glistening in its sauce and dutifully consumed the broccoli and white rice that accompanied it. Because it was a time in my life that I trusted the Chinese. Their kitchen was open for all to see and the lighting was bright; thus was the message sent that they were not using darkness to hide dirt. This was important. Food must be eaten if we are to be nourished and have some substance on our bones and bring to an end hanging string days. Now Celeste, Edna is not a name one associates with eroticism; in fact, it is a name drenched in Victorian propriety and reserve. But her name was insufficient to bind her to the mores of a straitlaced time gone by. A fire was burning in Edna. Sparks of hatred flew from her*

*glittering eyes and barbed wire attached to the words that flew from her mouth. She mocked Jeffrey to his face, saying the only thing he could talk about informatively was auto racing. I have told you many times that similar sparks flew when I was brought into the Van Dine fold, how that first summer when I vacated the premises of the post office to spend a month at Camp—this in the summer of love—I too drew deep from the bottomless well of hostility as a cover for my powerlessness. But I never denigrated Sarah to others or when we were alone together for that matter; that is, I never attacked the quality of her mind or demeaned her intelligence or her appearance. I had only the utmost respect for her ability and originality. What I did question harshly in the early years was her fidelity and later her attitude toward work. Lately, in my communications, I have perceived the old slyness operating in me that would seek to foster an image better than the one I have earned, as honesty is required for my salvation. An attitude of appropriating lust informed my affect. This arousal Edna noted with a subtle nod and complicit smile, and so it was for me to avoid, to the extent possible, making eye contact with Jeffrey, lest he too read my intention toward his hussy wife, in whom the fire grew to bonfire proportions even as we sat, fueling her openness to l'amour with anyone but him. But let us be clear. I was not her object of desire; I was her implement for revenge. This is something we cannot know when we are young and afflicted with carnality, and our main criterion for success is whether we have lingered between the loins of the lovely on any given day. There is nothing further for me here. We must go elsewhere. I cannot be compelled to cover every part of the terrain of my wretched life. However, one thing more, this about England. I referred to it as insignificant, a characterization that made*

*Jeffrey nearly choke on his fortune cookie. I had not been thinking. His years abroad had turned him into an Anglophile, or maybe it was love that led him to spend a year at some obscure London college. I cannot account for my own passions; how am I to do so for those of others? Let me conclude with this. I did not that day or at any time thereafter explore Edna's forbidden fruit. I swear to you and all concerned that her orchard I did not enter with my physical presence though my mind imagined the contents many times.*

*And yes, Celeste, this manner of speaking. I will try to effect a change.*

Now Luther, despite saying he was stretched thin, was monitoring other situations as well. His life was not devoid of people. They came into it in the way they could. Carola Aprile, for example. Luther could see that troop movements were underway for the breaking of her union with Hunger Longing. Luther was not there to witness this development, but he did not have to be when he had Sarah for a source. Sarah came calling at a time when Carola, who was not given to complaint, simply needed to ventilate, and so she did. The breeze that blew was not a kind one toward Hunger Longing. Dark content rode on that wind. Carola Aprile was full of grievance profound, leading Sarah to suggest a solution. Perhaps she and Hunger needed to spend more time together than apart. Why not set aside a day that they could be with each other? But friend or no friend, Carola Aprile rose up strong on Sarah.

“A day? A day? I do not want to be with that wretch for one hour,” Carola Aprile snapped.

And there was still another development. Hermione Grunfelt, who continued to write her poems to the rock and roll music of Rod Stewart, called to say that she had been forced to borrow two hundred dollars to meet the month's rent on her apartment.

"That stepmother of mine. Her name should surely be Viciousness," Hermione said, because all the financial difficulties that followed her had one source, her scheming stepmother, who had managed to close Hermione's father's heart against his own daughter.

"That's sad," Luther said.

"Do you know what that witch goes around calling me?" Hermione asked.

"I'm afraid I don't," Luther replied.

"Sponge-Worthy."

"Sponge-Worthy?"

"Sponge-Worthy. Can you imagine?"

"Why would she say that?" Luther asked.

"Why indeed. She has no respect for my artistry. All she cares about is binding my father to her and securing the family's assets for herself."

Her father was a party to her neglect. He had left Hermione to her own devices. He had a new wife to keep him warm and tell him the things he wanted to hear. The old lost interest in the young, particularly when they were needy and put on airs and were feckless in the ways of the world. Hermione was a woman child and Luther was a man child, and so she had his ear.

“That’s not a nice word to call anybody,” Luther said. He did not want to be reckless with his tongue. There was enough of that when he was drinking. And so he tried to hide from her his mild pleasure at her torment.

“And I will tell you something equally astonishing. Those who are supposed to be committed to caring about me do little more than betray my trust in them. Such is the case with my therapist, Dr. Alcigeros. I have a friend who attended Harvard, from which he graduated with highest honors. His mind is on fire, I tell you. On fire. So many awards and prizes he has won he does not know where to put them. And yet he said to me that often he feels like a failure. His confession astonished me so I brought it to Dr. Alcigeros. And do you know what the man says to me? He says that sometimes he himself feels like a failure. And what conclusion does he draw from that? He goes on, ‘You see. Even bright people can feel like failures.’”

“But isn’t that true?” Luther asked.

“Isn’t what true? That I am not bright?”

“How did you get involved in this? Your doctor wasn’t saying you are not bright.”

“He wasn’t?”

“He was reassuring you that a feeling of failure is something many people share.”

Luther felt good that he hadn’t further added to Hermione’s anguish by putting the laughing thing on her, but it was different the following week when they met in a bar. Sullen and moody and drunk, he referred to her as Alice B. Toklas and might have said more but she walked out on him.



*In this time, Celeste, I remembered how I would find my mother in the laundry room down in the basement and she would ask after Sarah's family and I would offer her some unhappy aspect of their family life, most notably the suicide of Lenore, to ease the sorrow that she could not easily admit to about her own circumstances. Celeste, I was giving her something to schadenfreude over. And why did I do this, Celeste? Why? Because she would ask me, in her way, for this solace. "Is the family doing well?" she would inquire, with a worried look on her face as she posed the question. If I answered in the affirmative she would appear stricken, and so I learned not to abuse my mother with glad tidings, for life was the old rugged cross, and all was suffering and pain, and it was essential to understand that this was so. A Garatdjian has no capacity to live without schadenfreude in either the daylight or the night. It would have been heartless to deprive my mother of her required sustenance. Because how firm was her conviction that the world had nothing that she wanted? Was it possible that the world had nothing she could have?*

*Now Celeste, we both know there are posses riding hard in the night to apprehend me for these family explorations, and we can only pray for their release from the bondage of fear that drives them and then go about our business. Why? Because we must honor the good, the bad, and the indifferent in ourselves. That is why. Or maybe there is some other reason I am not able to understand. But we must go on. We must. Did Christ not say, to one who balked, because of family obligation, at becoming a fisher of men, 'Let the dead bury their dead?' And yet now I hear another voice saying, 'And let the dead exhume their dead.' Oh, I don't know, Celeste. I just don't know.*

Gillian Brower continued to maintain a periodic presence in his mind. He had no basis for thinking of her as Alice B. Toklas. Not then but years later did it occur to him that if Gillian Brower was decidedly not Alice, her admiration for Gertrude Stein might be owing to the possibility that she bore some resemblance to a young Gertrude.

So it was that desire led Luther to call Gillian, but a blizzard of fear and self-consciousness hit him on hearing her voice. She might be an artist but she was also a woman with high board scores numbers and a Bronx Science background. In the face of her solidity, the blather thing got going in him. Having presented himself as the hanging string he was, she could easily dispense with him, which she did. No, she could not see him that night.

*There is a center, Celeste, we must find and stay within, so that our words are in accord with our beliefs and our actions hew to that same line as a result.*

He found a bar on St. Mark's Place to drink in that night, a long narrow space down a few steps from the street. Across from it was the building that had housed the Electric Circus. The bar was not clean, nor were some of the patrons, aging hippies from the long gone disco finding refuge in the cheap drinks.

The next morning Sarah rebuked him. "Please don't call and say that kind of thing ever again. Please," she said.

"What kind of thing is that?" he asked.

"You don't remember?"

"I don't."

"You don't remember saying, 'Do you think I should kill myself?'"

“That doesn’t sound like me.”

“How about coming home drunk and throwing up in the toilet and saying, ‘I need help’?”

“No. That is not the kind of thing I do.”

“What is not the kind of thing you do?”

“Let’s be positive for a change,” Luther said.

“How about positively insane,” Sarah snapped.

“Don’t be talking to me that way,” Luther said.

“How should I talk to you?”

“I don’t know. Don’t ask me complicated questions. I will prepare a statement for the press when I can.”

He had left the world of cab driving, loneliness having begun to overcome him on those eight-hour shifts. For months he had seen himself as an interesting young man who happened to also be a hackie. But then the day came when he realized his passengers were seeing him no differently than he saw hackies when he was a passenger. He wasn’t an interesting young man. He was just a driver. In fact, he was virtually invisible. Their only concern was that he get them to their destination without delay. And with that awareness came not only loneliness but horror. To not be seen was to die. He was too young to be a ghost.

And he was too young to have his future behind him. Out there on the Van Wyck, heading for JFK to await a delayed flight rumored to be arriving from the Caribbean past midnight, he had the sudden sense of doors closing, of being left out altogether. And with

this new awareness came a feeling of urgency, even panic. Time, which had seemed endless, was now running out. His twenties had flown; thirty was drawing near. He remembered the old cabbie bursting the young surfer's notion that hacking was just a temporary gig while he prepared for bigger and better things. In a further moment of clarity, he further saw the attitude that was keeping him behind the wheel of his Checker cab: he had considered himself too good and at the same time not good enough for the mainstream work world.

That night he pulled into the vast lot at the airport where cabs were sequestered and watched as the drivers stood and relieved themselves, seeking privacy behind the partially open doors of their vehicles and turning the tarmac into a giant urinal. Soon a cry was heard as a jet lowered for landing, but he was not among the celebrants. Long before the passengers debarked, he was heading back to Manhattan in his fare-less Checker to turn in his keys.

But that was then. Now he had a firestorm to quell, and in his own home, and he had only himself to blame, being the incendiary agent.

“You have no doubt heard that hideous song, *Bridge over Troubled Waters?*”  
Luther asked Sarah the day following her outburst.

“What about it?” she asked warily.

“If my waters are troubled, I have found the remedy, through the providence of Dr. Rosner.”

“So what is this remedy?”

“Valium. Two milligrams. I took one this morning. It takes life from me so I can have life. Imagine that. My feelings for the time being have no report to make. Though I walk about I have been as if buried alive.”

“Stop being so dramatic.”

She cast him into the pit of shame the pill could not protect him from, if only temporarily. Seeking refuge in *the New York Post*, he read that Bill Walton had been injured again. What pill could protect him from the pain of that?

Luther sought the solace of wine, which he drank into the evening, when the need for phone action presented itself.

“I have but three words for you. Make him well. Do you hear me?” he said, to the familiar voice at the *Oregonian* who identified himself only as “Sports Department.”

“Is this the nut again?” Sports Department inquired, because Luther too was by now a familiar voice.

“I am the voice of the believer, and you must be too. You have an angel of enthusiasm and giftedness blessing your city, and all you can do is shower him with your weary, middle-aged cynicism. You should be ashamed.”

“Mister, are you drunk or stoned or both?”

“Sir, I am struggling to be alive.”

“Well, good luck with that,” Sports Department said, and hung up.

Luther headed for the uncharted territory of dreamland, to better understand where he was and could hope to go. A large spider with an eye only for him lowered from the ceiling as he lay on his back in bed. Luther tried to call out in his dream to Sarah but

fear blocked his cry from leaving his throat. Then the spider was no more and the bed was no more and he was dozing in a class and woke to find a woman copulating with him. When he protested, she warned him not to make a scene. And then he was back in the loft and someone was trying to get in through the window. In the final scene, he and Sarah were on a bus on Broadway near where his mother lived when it plunged into a huge excavation site. Luther managed to carry Sarah from the hole, with each of them showing only minor bruises.

Luther offered Sarah his dream. He had to tell her where he had been in sleep, even if he couldn't give the same accounting of his waking state. But he left out the woman who had forced herself on him. He had no need to add dreamland pain to what he was already giving her in the real world.

"You have it all wrong," Sarah said. "I'm the one you're counting on to pull you from the hole you're digging."

"Yes, you could be right. You could be right," Luther said, calling on justice to be present in his response.

He was free now of the cab and the cigar box and of relieving himself, like a dog, in public. An agency found him temp work typing labels or filing papers with different organizations. I can do this, Luther thought, sitting among other young people during daylight hours and stealing glances at attractive young women. At the lunch hour he would go to a nearby Burger King or McDonalds, where he would get filled up and read the *New York Post* and smoke his Marlboros and be strong for the afternoon, when weariness tended to claim him and he wanted only to sleep. He particularly liked working

for an international exchange organization up at the UN Plaza and seeing the glittering green skin of the headquarters building, where Cary Grant had gone in desperate flight from those who would take him from this life before boarding the New York Central limited for its run to Chicago. On board Eve Marie Sainte welcomed him to her dining table before welcoming him to her room in the magical ambience of rail and river, the Hudson maintaining its omniscient eye on everything.

I am a creature, as we all purport to be creatures, and responsive to where I stand, Luther further thought. True, he had only a limited understanding of what this organization did, how it placed gorgeous young people from blue chip colleges in faraway places to shine their goodness on darkness, but the smell of their sweetness and bright chatter rode on the air and took him to a place of delirium, a pocket of bliss, he could savor but not quite analyze, some easing of his separation, if only by proximity, now occurring.

Then the darkness came again. He was told his services would no longer be needed, though there was a chance he might be called back in several weeks. He felt severed from a life that had only just begun and the next day found himself in the custody of Mr. Economo, the office manager at Sankyo Seiki. Mr. Economo was the real Japan. He was no bucktoothed and irate soul like Mr. Yuniوشي in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, He did not say "I must protest" or in other ways elicit laughter with formal English spoken in an impotently angry key. He demonstrated remoteness and tight control in his speech and his manner.

“Need work faster. Type more. Not paying drink coffee,” Mr. Economo said, at the end of the first day.

Luther did not say to Mr. Economo that if he hadn't been born with a cup in his hand, he had nonetheless come to need a cup or a glass to keep him company through his life. On his second day he tried to make his morning container of joe last until noon, but then the words “I must protest, Mr. Economo, I must protest,” came loud to his mind, because he was in New York City, where servitude had no place, not the Far East. And so, with defiance as his guide, he dropped his coins into the machine and now had a second cup to fortify him, and if the spears hurled from the eyes of Mr. Economo were the consequence, so be it. Still, the message Mr. Economo sent was clear and chilling. Mr. Economo was the future. He was payback for the tomfoolery of the West. He was Sparta to America's Athens and would impose a monochrome drudgery on Luther's days that would wipe out even the tiniest spark of individuality.

But there was light he could go to at the end of the day, the bottles of May wine and Rhine wine on sale he bought at the alcohol supermarket down on Astor Place. Oh, the happiness and hope he felt on his way home past the Public Theater with those bottles of May wine and Rhine wine. How great the promise of those bottles he held tight in their plastic bag that soon he would have the relief he needed and his universe would expand and grant him the breathing room he required. Because now winter was being beaten back and his mind and heart sought to open to the coming spring heralded by the softer air and longer days.



And there was White Line, Continue to turn to. Confined by the day but freed by the wine, he would get to it in prose that would sing as he sat all alone at the typewriter in his studio under the loft bed, Sarah having gone down to Brooklyn for an art powwow with Carola Aprile. And yes, the juice was flowing, but then the phone rang, and while someone was definitely on the other end of the line—he could hear breathing and feel a presence—the caller held his silence. When Luther’s repeated query brought no response, he hung up, not wishing to subject himself any further to the creepy void. As it was, the virus of fear now gripped him.

But suppose it was a woman, not a man? Suppose it was Gillian Brower, driven by revenge-fueled lust? Suppose she was signaling to him silently even now? Halfway through his second bottle of wine, he could wait no more, his whole being ablaze with the possibilities of the night and primed for action.

“Was that you? Because I am here as you are there, so let’s close the divide. Shall we?” As the answering machine recorded his message, he felt no self-consciousness. Now it was only a matter of waiting for her to return the call. That is what people did. They called you, and if they were too jammed up to leave a message, then you called them. And if they were still too jammed up and possibly embarrassed to acknowledge the desire their call had expressed, then it was up to you to take the lead, for you had stepped forward into the region of the really real, where lust clothed in innuendo was starkly exposed.

The third bottle, the Liebfraumilch, was the coup de grace. It offered a sweeter taste than the Rhine wine, but put him on the floor, where Sarah found him.

“We can’t do this much longer. I come home and find you passed out in your own vomit,” Sarah said the next morning. “I mean, it was even in your hair.”

“You don’t know what it is like having to deal with Mr. Economo. The Japanese are the coming master race. They can do science and mathematics. When I go in there, I am a faceless servant even more than when I drove a cab. They and the Chinese will make us pay and pay for our hegemony. I have become the first American coolie.”

“Stop exaggerating.”

“I am making history in a way I don’t very much care to.”

“Please stop.”

“The ignominy of it,” Luther said, and having said, rallied strong for the day.

If he had been foolish the night before with his call to Gillian Brower to a degree beyond reckoning, well, so be it. He went through the morning chastened and subdued, mumbling an occasional nonsense word as protection against the waves of shame breaking over him. As for the coffee machine, it called to him for a second after his first cup of joe, and then for a third and fourth, prompting action from Mr. Economo.

“You must go now. Go,” Mr. Economo seethed, as he signed the form from the temp agency. “You no come back. Ever. Too much coffee breath. Too much coffee mind. You very strange man. Irregular man. Pah.”

“Pah to you too,” Luther said.

“No talk to me that way, coffee breath man.”

Luther was more present for Sarah that evening. He came home with a six-pack but the thirst was not in him as it had been the night before. He gave her his ear and in exchange she did not dwell on the drunkenness she had witnessed the night before.

Her evening with Carola Aprile had been intense. Carola had organized a drawing session, to which Hunger Longing had invited himself, and it was everything for Sarah not to get caught in the cross-fire between the two of them. But it wasn't only the disintegration of a relationship that she had been forced to see. Carola was moving forward in bold leaps.

*Bold leaps.* Another thing to ponder, that. Imagine. Carola Aprile leaping from one rooftop to another separated from the first by a wide and deep chasm. Though it wasn't like Sarah to dwell in the land of pomposity, the egotism that committed one to the artist's way was visible in flashes. But never mind. He was the one with the gas leak that evening. On hearing her refer to her own work as stale, he suggested experimentation and openness to new forms. And so, when morning came, he found himself standing against the wall of shame, a man who could not draw anything more than a stick figure holding forth about the way forward in art.

*Now Celeste, consciousness is forever, a voyage of love unencumbered by the body—the bad teeth, the disintegrating spine, the tumors that our mind would have us believe herald our extinction as doomed subjects in the realm of time. As for this harshness, this one note self-mockery, perhaps it serves to keep us faithful to our ordinary lives. Perhaps it is our companion—is disparaging attention not better than no attention at all?*

It happened in this time that Luke had a friend. His name was Chinese Johnny, and he continued to be the bad boy that he had been back in Hong Kong, firing guns in the night and in the day and in crowded as well as desolate places. So far as Luther knew, no inquiries had been made as to whether Chinese Johnny had ever once entered the ponder space to consider the effect bullets from high-powered guns could have on human beings, because for Chinese Johnny the gun was the thing itself and everything else—every person—was far from that reality. Chinese Johnny liked the falling down that a gun could cause a person to do, like the three who fell down on a platform as the train Chinese Johnny was on left the station with him firing away through the window.

Luther had never met Chinese Johnny Hong. He had only heard about him from Luke, who had the capacity to draw people to him so he wouldn't have to be alone. And what those who came to Luke had in common, whether it was Lenny Cerone or Chinese Johnny, was the world of things and the clear understanding that the word was not a thing. They had no dislike of words sufficient to cause them not to use them so long as those words were spoken in the service of the thing itself that held them.

One thing Luke could not be without was his motorcycle. So he discovered after giving it up so he could more fully be a family man with Brenda and her boy Benjy. Within a month he had a new machine, and proudly rode downtown to Twosies with Chinese Johnny, who had his own steed. They weren't out to party; they were simply reconnoitering. But they never got to the discotheque to show off their moves. A car ran a light and knocked them both from their bikes. The bikes were damaged more than they

were. Chinese Johnny was not packing his gun on this occasion, and that was a good thing, as he talked of wanting to pop the driver. Luke had no desire to be a party to such violence and so was grateful that Chinese Johnny had not brought his gun to town.

Mrs. Garatdjian reported on the incident to Luther, saying, “What is it about the night that calls him to it? What is this foolishness that afflicts him and all of you that you do not come to Jesus this instant?” Because she did know foolishness to call it by its name.

Luke raised up verbally against this driver who had struck at him and Chinese Johnny with his vehicle, saying he would sue him into perpetuity. But his heart was not where his mouth was. He did not have the litigious instinct that possessed Hannah to fall down on the sidewalks of New York City and call for a lawyer.

Though Luther saw the night not as his mother did but as the call to adventure that Luke also heard, he did hear himself say, not once but several times, “Tsk, tsk,” to register disapproval of the chaos he associated with his brother and to protest the mirror that Luke held up to him with the hold of lust upon him.

There was in this time another matter that required Luther’s attention, and again it involved Carola Aprile, who, in spite of her calling as an artist, paid homage to the gods for food and clothing and shelter by being one of the workplace people. She had her Radcliffe-worthy intelligence to integrate her into the life of the planet and power her into the graphics department of the premier furniture design company in the world. Kroll was a name as sturdy and elegant as the products it manufactured. Carola, having a mind and

a heart to goodness born and seeing that serving the beef of America to the men and women of America at Hamburger Heaven should not be the final destiny for someone of Sarah's gifts, called her to Kroll, because in a short time Carola had become known throughout the organization for her ability. And so Carola Aprile did for Sarah what Lydia had been unable to do. Carola Aprile brought her into an office setting and Sarah did not bolt after the first day with rage in her face and her words. Though the work was the same paste-ups and mechanicals assigned to her by the family friend back when, she was not driven away by the men with hunger in their eyes. Luther could feel good about her in this new endeavor. Now when she came home she brought the light of the world with her because Carola Aprile was not negligible and Kroll was not negligible either, in its name or its products. What she brought home was hope that they could have a new beginning because Carola Aprile was art and Kroll was almost art in what it manufactured and Sarah would no longer have to shower from her body the smell of grease from the cooked beef of America. Yes, the word was *light* and yes too the word was *hope*. Sarah was no longer alone in the universe. She had others who could help her where he could not.

Then one night she went and turned gladness into sadness. She put on once again the face of anger and spit out the words of anger, saying she was sick of Kroll and sick of Carola Aprile and sick of the whole bunch of them in that crummy graphics department. She was an artist, not some nine to five drone. She filled the loft with her fury, as he could often do. And so he told her that he did not like her attitude, and she replied that he was no one to be talking about attitude, but that assertion did not sound right in his ears, as he had no trouble trying to relate himself to the work world now that money was tight.

Sarah worked in her studio that night, while Luther sat at the other end of the loft with the Liebfraumilch he had purchased on special sale at the liquor supermarket. Was the wine dry? Was it sweet? Though the wine could not fully make up its mind which way it wanted to go, Luther was up for the challenge of the shocking tartness that alternated with sweetness. He did not remember climbing up into the loft bed but he did remember the dream world he entered.

Lane was present, that is, he was felt but not seen, like an invading army just to the other side of the mountain. Word was that he was working hard on his paintings and fighting discouragement over a lack of enthusiasm from the galleries. And yet the fear was there that even a diminished Lane had the power to claim Sarah for his own.

Luther did not discuss this dream with Sarah. He did not want to keep Lane alive in her mind anymore than he already was.

The international exchange organization called him back. They wanted him even if filthy Mr. Economo didn't. But not even a sun-splashed day and the sophisticated environment of the United Nations Plaza could lift Luther's spirits. He had done Sarah wrong again with his drunkenness and now Dr. Frodkey would surely tell her to write him off as hopeless and vacate the premises. But Luther would make it up to her. She was his one love even if the veil of illusion led him elsewhere, in his mind and in his actions. He would bring her flowers, a dazzling bouquet. The fat-lipped one could grunt-sing "That's How Strong My Love is" but Luther would prove it by stretching his goodness to places it had not been before. How he would do that he couldn't say, but he would.

Unable to make the hours pass faster than they did, and knowing Dr. Frodkey, whom

Sarah would be seeing that day, might try to wreck his life, Luther beamed this thought: Sarah, I may have been sexually unfaithful but I have never given anyone else my love and loyalty since knowing you.

When he arrived home that night, she was not there, just as the Zombies declared, in their hysterical, repetitive way. But the phone rang and it was Sarah on the line, saying she didn't want to make dinner and would he meet her up the Bowery at Robin's and he said Robin's was a fine choice because it was. It served up burgers he had the confidence to eat and at an affordable price. There was no hint of reproach in her voice and no suggestion when he sat down with her that Dr. Frodkey was priming her for departure. And if the fact was that he had forgotten the flowers, he would make it up to her and make it up to her for everything else he had done wrong. She would see, and so would the world. In the meantime he was just so happy to see her and to know she was still there.

"Women hold power over you. You seek their approval and at the same time resent them for this need you have," Dr. Rosner said the next day.

"I was afraid that Dr. Frodkey would disappear her," Luther said.

"Disappear her?"

"Make her vanish from my life."

"You make him sound like some rogue government unaccountable to no one."

"Is he accountable to anyone but his own mind?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"I don't know."



“How is the work thing going?”

Luther told him that a position might be available in the international exchange organization, this according to one of the staff people. “Of course it is probably just the maliciousness of people who like to tease and who have no intention of following through.”

“I have a feeling things will open up for you, and fairly soon,” Dr. Rosner said, dismissing what he perhaps considered the paranoid doubt Luther had expressed.

Luther went into dreamland again that night. He was in a cold storage room adjoining the loft, to which he was trying fruitlessly to return. He called and called to Sarah but received no response. Finally he got through, only to find that his perseverance was rewarded with an attack by strangers intent on taking his life. Still in the dream, he awoke and told Sarah about the men and the relentless viciousness of their attacks. Sarah got Sigmund Freud-ish on him with her interpretation. She said his dream suggested fear about his next session with Dr. Rosner and also revealed his job insecurities. More strangers rushed at him, full-strength battalions. Among them were fierce women whose big breasts he grabbed at. One took time off to perform fellatio on George C. Scott, whose face glowed brighter than a thousand megawatt bulb. Luther had had enough. He ran to a pavilion in his pajamas, where he encountered three Italian men. Hearing his request that they help him to a hospital, they entered into consultation with each other and decided not to shoot him because he appeared innocuous. But they had a question for him. “Are you a switchblade Freddy? Are you the stabbing and slashing kind? On your response your life will depend.” The question filled him with great fear that Sarah would

answer for him in the affirmative, but a hospital aide appeared and led him to the street with a firm grip. Perhaps the Italian men would not be free to do what Luther had come to sense they did best, the appropriation of human life. Toward a giant machine tearing up the street with sharp metal claws and dropping tar into the holes the machine created the man took him. A hospital aide he might have been, but he was not a man of kindness. Into the tar the aide forced Luther, causing extreme pain.

Though the ponder space called to him about this dream, he didn't have time to give to it, as a busy temp day wore him out.

For dinner, Sarah made the usual, pasta, featuring Ragu marinara sauce and Romano's parmesan cheese, and a salad to go with it, before retiring to her studio for her evening's work. Luther had his own work to do, his White Line Continue work, but first he had to prime himself by drinking from a half gallon bottle of Almaden Chablis. An hour later he climbed into bed fully clothed. Sarah found him passed out on her side and had to nudge him back to his own.

*Celeste, my problem was that I was stupid. Let this admission serve as the summit of my candor. If you can't put the blocks together on the IQ test, then you can't put them together in life either. And if you can't put them together in life, then what choice do you have but to raise your voice in hateful, blaming rage as you did when the IQ test thwarted your ambition for success? Tell me what a person into do. Tell me, tell me, tell me. Because someone must pay and pay and pay.*

*And yet, I was not to be defeated. No one defeats me. No one, no one, no one. I swung into action. As I did not have temp work that day, I would do the manly thing. A do*

*right man is a man who does right. I bought some wood from the lumber man downstairs. He was as hard as the lumber he sold, a man who stayed alive on hate. There are those who munch on barbed wire for breakfast and go about with bleeding insides, as I may have said before. This lumber man had the big teeth and the big fists with which to bite and hit very hard and the son in his employ whom he had claimed for himself also had the big teeth and the big fists with which to bite and hit very hard. Into their domain of hardness did I go with gentleness as my guide, whatever bonfire of rage might be burning far below. To them I came as a little girl with an olive branch dangling from my hand, and if you did not see it in my hand then you heard it in my speech and the volume at which it was pitched. And why had I come? Was it so that I could make a purchase on their hardness as well as their blocks of wood or was it to model an alternative to their rough way?*

*For the rest of the day I sawed and I planed and sought to do without the benefit of knowledge or skill the things a man is set on this earth to do, but the misshapen thing I fashioned was unable to bear much stress and it came crashing down in the middle of the night, brought low by the weight of Sarah's press. A tiger on the back of a giraffe will bring that giraffe low, so it never walks again. To anticipate your question, no, the table was denied new legs. We do not revive a broken dream. We gave it the burial it deserved.*

If Marvin Gaye could joyously sing that there was no mountain high enough or valley low enough to keep him from securing his lady love to him, so too was it with Sarah in regard to Dr. Frodkey, who directed her to take a design class to augment her workplace

skills and rise far above Hamburger Heaven to the level of her innate ability. A father's love, even that of a surrogate, is a powerful thing. Dr. Frodkey was as integrated into the life of the world as Peter was apart from it. Do not make a religion of your art, he was saying to Sarah. Do not cloister yourself in your studio and deny yourself the earning power you will need for long-term happiness and security. Build for your future.

What Luther saw was that Sarah was powering up while he was powering down, or at best idling. Perhaps Dr. Rosner was mistaken. Perhaps nothing would open up for him in the job world. While Sarah was out at her class he drank his Rhine wine and was led to pick up the phone and call Marge because the days of Marge on the line to him were over. If she were to be on the line, he would have to initiate the contact.

"Marge, I have a request for you," Luther said, on this night. "If I apply for a position, would you possibly be willing to write a recommendation for me?"

"I don't think I can do that, Luther. I can't do anything that will ruin my good name."

"You have such a good name?"

"I don't want to be mixed up with you, Luther. You are nothing but trouble. My therapist told me so."

"Well then, there is nothing more to say."

"Yes there is, Luther. Yes there is. Goodbye. How is that for something more to say?" With that Marge hung up the phone. No one in the whole world could get off the line like Marge could. No one. But while Marge had knocked him on his keister, he had his wine to keep him strong, and so he got back up and got on the line once again. Not to

Marge. He had had enough of her neurotic socko power. He turned to the source, as his mind illuminated them to be at that moment. He called the Van Dines and Lydia came on the line.

“Lydia, this is me, Luther Garatdjian. I am calling about employment. I may need your name as a reference if that world is not to be denied me. Is this something you and Peter can do?”

“We would be pleased to help, but we are not your employer, Luther. How meaningful would such a reference be?”

“You could say you knew me when, or in different contexts, as when I was eating a salad or a ham sandwich.”

“Let’s talk about that in the morning, Luther.”

“The morning?”

“Yes, the morning,” Lydia said. “Goodnight.”

And so Lydia too got off the line, but with none of Marge’s signature rancor, and he was amazed at her firmness with him until he realized she had seen, or heard, his drunkenness, and so, as long ago, had perceived the “the beast” in him.

When Sarah returned home from her class, Luther stood before her in his nakedness. He did not attempt to hide his drinking or deny the hold of the bottle on him, the remains of the Rhine wine right before him on the table. He took her back to the Prince Street loft with an expurgated report from the past. Though he came forward about his drinking, he withheld the full story of his connection to was the woman with the misshapen face, excluding the fact that he had spent the night with her or that the locale

was a Prince Street loft. He merely said there was a woman in the long ago. She may have been an artist. It was also possible she had been a court stenographer or one of the legions who serve in an *advisory capacity*. Important to hold onto was this: she had a husband. This husband lived in Indiana, from whence she had come to New York. “But bah to the details. Let’s cut to the chase,” he suddenly exclaimed. “She had left him because he was a drunk. An alcoholic. She dared to use that word. Can you imagine anything more vicious?”

“So what are you saying?” Sarah asked. Spring freshness was on her cheeks. She was showing the health that comes from constructive action.

“I am saying that right there she told me my future. I was her husband and her husband was me.” In spite of his verbal histrionics and the status he had assigned himself of a horseshit desperado, Luther cried and cried. He did not like that inhuman word *alcoholic* and all it did to his person.

“You’re worried about work. That’s all it is. You’re overreacting.” When she tried to touch him, he recoiled.

“We don’t do that here. Do you understand? We don’t do that. You must beat me with a stick. All the women on the hills with the baked beans must come down and beat me with a stick,” he said.

“That’s crazy talk.”

The women had all fled, or if they hadn’t, they were in the process of exiting. And so he too would flee. He would sleep in a part of the loft where Sarah could not so easily

find him. She would wake in the night and see that he was missing from bed. He heard his self-pity but could not stop. It was all he had.

But he didn't flee in the night. He climbed the ladder to the bed and passed out, with Sarah beside him.

On the street the next morning the face police apprehended him.

"Smile for me," the bum said. And he was a bum, a true bum de la bum, with slits for eyes and the filth of the city upon him and a scar-marred face as a visual record of his many broken bottle bouts with the other bums de la bums..

Luther smiled. Because even a bum could seize control of your face. Even a bum could join the ranks of the monitors.

"That's more like it. Isn't it a beautiful day?"

"It sure is," Luther said.

"How about a cigarette? Aren't you even going to give a bum a cigarette?"

Luther did as he was asked.

"No light? You're not going to give a bum a light?"

Luther struck a match.

"Say, you're a bum too, aren't you? A bum in the making."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Luther said.

"Give me another cigarette," the bum said. Aggressiveness had come into his voice.

Luther met the bum's demand, and left the bum there on the corner of Bleecker and the Bowery. But in his mind he carried him around for the rest of the day sufficient

that he bypassed the liquor supermarket that night and visited the bodega down on Second Avenue, near the men's shelter, where he purchased a six-pack of Bud. He could look forward to an evening slowly savoring the smooth as cream contents of each pull-top can. Beer wouldn't perform an injustice on him the way the wine sometimes could. He wouldn't have to call himself names, as he had the night before, and others, like the bum de la bum, wouldn't call him names either.

The dream world provided no comfort that night. An apartment on the Upper West Side was being offered to him and Sarah. The apartment had high ceilings and plenty of space. There was also a file cabinet, but the current tenant would be taking it with him. Attractive as the apartment was, Luther was reluctant to leave the beauty of the loft.

"But what is more beautiful than a beautiful rent?" the tenant asked. "It's only eighty dollars a month. Why, you'd only have to make five dollars an hour to make ends meet."

When the morning came, Luther was glad a dream was a dream and that he hadn't vacated the premises of the loft, as he knew where his specialness lay and it was not in the retirement colony the Upper West Side was becoming. He swung once more into action. He called Dr. Rosner, who had prescribed for him two-milligram Valium, and had him phone the pharmacy for a refill. And though the dullness that the pills brought to his mind and being didn't sit well with him, he kept taking them, seeking a placid place so his mind was not a misfiring thing and he could focus on that which was in front of him.



He then called his friend Efram Ellsberg, who said he would be only too happy to serve as a reference as Luther continued his job search.

“Just be sure they contact me personally,” Efram said. How relieved Luther was to hear that Efram would always be Efram and that Luther would never have to confuse him with Marge on the line.

Then Luther took on Career Makers, the preeminent employment agency for the publishing industry. He showed up with his resume and filled out a form and was given an interview with Miss Abigail Redondero. And though she could not see him, he had at his side Dr. Rosner to provide the necessary fortification.

“I see you worked for a rooming house as an assistant manager.”

“Yes, that is so,” Luther said.

“And what exactly did you do?”

“I collected rents and engaged one-to-one with the tenants. I recorded their complaints and gave them their mail, which many of them called the ‘post,’ being Indian. And wouldn’t you know but that they called a refrigerator a ‘fridge.’ Isn’t that something?”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I would think a modest awareness of language would be useful in publishing, which has no foundation without words. Like your name. Just to say it makes you feel like you are being sprung high in the air on a trampoline. Don’t you feel that giddy feeling in your stomach when you say it? The kind of feeling you experience when you are on a rollercoaster?”

“And it says here you were an executive driver with a cab company. What exactly is an executive driver?”

“An executive driver is a driver who executes, who gets from point A to point B without fuss and minus the delusion that driving is anything more than getting from one point to the next in the safest, most time-sensitive manner.”

“And for several years you were a freelance writer. What kind of freelance writing was it that you were doing?”

“White Line Continue writing, for the most part, and that writing goes on, even as we speak.”

“Excuse me?”

“What I mean to say is that even as we are here speaking new words are forming for discharge onto paper in my mind. When I think of it writing is a little like sex that way. When the urge comes, we must find an outlet or allow misery to rule our day.”

“Well, really. I don’t quite know what to say.”

“But you do know what to say. You just said it,” Luther replied.

“This is, I must say, quite strange.”

“Yes, quite,” Luther agreed.

“Can you at least type?”

“Pica and elite. Not only that. I can maintain an attitude of neutrality regarding the two.”

“Let me explain. I meant can you type accurately and fast?”

“White Out is my best friend. I use it expeditiously and I also like the smell.”

“Well, we will see what we can do,” Miss Redondero said.

That word “we.” It echoed in his mind as he departed. It raised many questions, but judiciousness counseled him to reserve any queries he might have.

*Celeste, are you listening? Are you? Lies. All lies have I been telling. I came to Miss Redondero as a frightened mendicant, the image and smell of fecal matter coming to me as she struggled to pronounce my name. The sense that I was nothing more than the filth of the world. I will try to do better. I will try to stay to the course of reality.*

Because he had been good, drinking little the night before and swinging into such forceful action on this day, he rewarded himself with a pint of Clan MacGregor scotch. But drinking at home did not give him the evening he had envisioned. Once again did he abandon White Line Continue and find cause to berate Sarah. Miss Redondero could witness his meekness but his rage he reserved for the confines of the loft. Something in the way she talked about Kroll and her design class. Her upper middle class sense of entitlement. What did she know about work? He had always worked. Since childhood. Sweeping the alleyway for his mother. Working as a delivery boy at the neighborhood florist shop. What was she but a bourgeois slob? What? She cried out, forcing him to repeat himself. Forgetting for the moment that she was fragile, that words could hurt her more than others, that she wasn't strong enough to stand up to him when he was this way. He crumpled her ramparts. Overran her defenses. Anyway you wanted to put it, he did it. And if honesty was his pledge, why not tell it as it was, that he behaved like the coward that he was. He could not stand up to men. From them he ran. But a woman he could beat, if not with his fists, then with his mouth. It came as no surprise, as it came as no

surprise that once he started he could not stop, had no control over his emotions after giving vent to the first angry word.

By the morning he was drowning in remorse. *Beat me with a stick. Please, please, beat me with a stick. Call down all the women from the hills and have them beat me when your arms grow tired. Beat me unto death.* So he said, over and over again, frantically seeking to dig himself free of the mountain of guilt he had brought down on himself. He cried and said he must die and die immediately and she tried to console him and that led to making love, after which he told her that appearances were deceiving and that a great change was coming, she would see. He was on the verge of rallying strong. They would both see. Really.

Hermione Grunfelt came on the line to say she was busy writing her poems and expanding her circle. “You and mythical Sarah are now part of my history even as I expand my circle.” To drive home the point, she sang the Girl Scout song: Make new friends and keep the old, one is silver and the other gold. “Isn’t that beautiful? Isn’t that a poem in itself?” she asked, and Luther could only agree.

Hermione was eager to get together that evening, and so Luther and Sarah met her at Robin’s Restaurant, though Sarah had been reluctant, feeling as she did that Hermione was up in the air somewhere.

“But that’s what poets do. They fly about in the air. Like Shelley and that bird that never wert,” Luther said.

“The things you know,” Sarah replied.

Now, when Luther thought of Hermione, it was not only of her poems written to Rod Stewart's "Maggie" but even more of that woman Celeste and that West Village building she lived in with her erratic husband and their infant daughter. And now she was creating a link, at least in his mind, with another woman. Hermione did not come alone but brought with her a friend named Edie and a man named Gordon who had the fire of lewdness in his face to go with his red hair. Edie was, as Hermione described her, an up and coming artist and Gordon was an academic possessed of legendary gifts. A pointless evening of food and wine, from which Gordon excused himself when it was decided that Hermione and Edie would come back to the loft to see some of Sarah's work. An evening spent with people with whom they had no real future, it seemed to Sarah. She didn't dislike Hermione, but felt no real connection, and the same applied to Hermione's friend Edie.

Luther could have said the same about Hermione and her friend Gordon, but not about Edie. He could not say that about her at all. Her firm, slender body, her big, inviting eyes. Committing her last name, Alsbury, and her address, Minetta Lane, to memory even as they all sat together. And what Hermione said, when Edie left before her, that Edie had gone through a difficult divorce and was now finding her bearings. The minute after Sarah climbed into the loft bed, he took the White Pages and prayed that he would find her name in it, and there she was. E Alsbury, 10 Minetta Lane, and it was everything not to burst through the door and across town to her that night.

But the next night there was no such restraint.

"This is a surprise," she said, when he presented himself on the line.

“I wanted to call you last night,” he said.

“I’m not surprised you didn’t.”

“Why is that?”

“You have a situation.”

“My situation is you.”

“Well, I’m flattered, I guess.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” he said.

They made love. She allowed him to do that with her. But she kept her blouse on. That meant something. A reservation, perhaps. Or was it meant as an erotic touch?

“Slow, slow. You’re going too fast,” she said, and rubbed herself while he was in her.

“In your married life was monogamy difficult for you?” he asked afterward.

“Yes,” she said.

“Why?”

“I suppose I felt the same confinement you are experiencing.”

He went to the bathroom. When he returned she was cooking rice. Friends would be coming for dinner. She did not invite him to stay, and seemed miles away. On leaving it occurred to him that her artwork was nowhere to be seen. Did she have her own studio?

The following day Luther revised his resume and made copies. Truly was he building toward a new life. Truly was he rallying strong.

“No, I don’t think so,” Edie Alsbury said, when he called that afternoon, as she knew he he would.

“Why is that?”

“Because we are vastly different,” she said.

Luther did not try to fight his way in. He understood when a door had been solidly closed.

The next morning Sarah offered Luther her dream, in which her sister Claire handed him a manuscript. He commented favorably on the title, which had the word “strawberries” in it, but had nothing to say about the work itself.

“Claire was crestfallen in the dream and became solicitous of you. It’s even possible she was available sexually.”

“Dreams are something,” Luther could only say.

“That woman Edie reminded me of Claire. Did she remind you of Claire, too?”

“I can’t say she did,” Luther replied.

“You’re sure about that?” Sarah asked.

“I am,” Luther said.

Sarah didn’t come at him with anything more.

Luther gave the dream his attention, though not until he was reasonably sure that Sarah’s listening devices had been turned down, if not off. Carefulness was warranted, as clearly Sarah had shown she had access to his world in sleep. The manuscript Claire had handed him was not a manuscript at all, and it was not Claire who gave it to him. The manuscript was Edie’s artwork, which Edie had made available to him only to find that he was not interested. Thus was her cold rebuff of him born. He had only been interested in her body, not her art. Never mind that, in reality, she had not offered to show him her

art. Never mind that no artwork had been in sight in her apartment. The point was he had not inquired, and so she would meet his indifference with indifference of her own.

He must rectify the situation. He must.

“I am open to your business,” he said in response to the prompt from her answering machine the following day. “I will call back until I can have the opportunity to correct the situation,” he said.

And so he did. And on the fourth try, she responded. “Are you harassing me? What’s with the crazy messages?”

“Not crazy. Not crazy at all. I am on the trail of truth, as it is revealed to me in dreams, mine or others does not matter. I failed to inquire about your work. I am sorry that I offended you, but I thought to come through the door of your being into the realm of your art, and not the other way around. It can happen that way sometimes.”

“How about I come to you with the police? How about bastards like you don’t come within a mile of me? How about that?”

“So now I am in your kitchen. Now it is I see where you cook.”

“You are insane. Leave me alone. And if you don’t, I can always call that poor woman who has to put up with you.”

Yes, the nuclear deterrent. If it was a mystery to him how attraction could turn to hate so quickly, the mystery seemed as obdurate as stone, and one that no amount of time in the ponder place could cause to yield its secret.

She has given a violent thrashing to my proposed amend, Luther thought, as a strange thought gripped him. Let me go to my go father. I will find safety there from the



pit where Edie lives and to which she would bind me with this pain. I will write about him in a way that can be read in my White Line Continue opus. I will tell all the stories and tell them better—the smell of his saliva as he cleaned my face, the smacking hand he raised so high. All of it. But the beer called to him, four tallboys, and the half pint of Clan MacGregor called to him. And from there he took flight to Jilly's, across the street, shouting to Sarah in her studio that he would be right back and not waiting for her response.

In the morning he had no words about rallying strong. He had only incomprehension.

“If you were alcoholic, I would send you to Rooms of Recovery,” Dr. Rosner said that evening. He was curious to see what effect full-time employment would have on his drinking. He also suggested that Luther and Edie had been too compatible. Luther did not remonstrate with Dr. Rosner for using the word “alcoholic” in his presence, but he did not like it, and he did not like hearing any mention of RoR either. He had heard of this RoR. Yes he had. In the movie *The Days of Wine and Roses* had he heard about it, from solemn-faced Jack Klugman, who had come to Jack Lemmon's aid so Jack Lemmon would no longer have to writhe in that hideously frightening way on the floor of Mr. Arneson's greenhouse. But Dr. Rosner must not think that he was going to take away Luther's life. He must not do that. Because May wine and Rhine wine and Liebfraumilch and Pouilly-Fuisse and Clan MacGregor scotch and Old Mr. Boston blackberry-flavored brandy and all the beers of America and abroad were his life. He must not think he was going to place Luther in the dungeon of pain unending.

And something else Dr. Rosner must not do. He must not consign Luther to the dungeon of pain unending by offering a glimmer of hope of any future connection with Edie Alsbury. Luther would not be disloyal to Sarah in his heart, wherever his body might lead him. He would only have to die and die and then die some more should such a thing occur.

“Do you understand?” he screamed at Dr. Rosner.

“What I understand is your fear of getting well,” Dr. Rosner replied.

“What does that even mean?”

“That is what you are coming here to find out.”

Luther did not call the police on Dr. Rosner, but that didn't mean Dr. Rosner was not dangerous all the same. He fled from him into the bottle and into dreamland, where he was a student at Hunter College and trying out for the baseball team. He had some good cuts in the batting cage, lining ropes to all parts of the field. Down toward the Manhattan Bridge he later walked. A rat appeared. A talking rat, no less, and speaking perfect English. “You're not an undergraduate and so you are ineligible for the varsity baseball team,” the rat said, biting with his truth but not with his teeth. Luther and Sarah then traveled out of state. On the lawn outside the hotel where they were staying, a man afflicted with the need to confess said, “I'm a drinker.” Luther lay down on the grass and heard the man releasing a powerful stream of piss quite near him and so he returned to the safety of the loft that he might be free from recklessly pissing men. And yet he was not free. A seedy man in a trench coat came through the door. The man too was a drinker and quite drunk. But he had come not to do the pissing thing but to jump on Luther and

knock him to the floor that he might administer a fatal offering of violence. Luther called out to Sarah in a panic. But Sarah was not in a caring mood. She had found his application to a swingers' club on which he had provided information about her as well. She tied this application to a string and dangled it in front of him. Then she threw off Luther's attacker that she might attack Luther herself.

He woke chastened but not defeated by forces at large in a world opposed to his well-being and reported that morning to Pilgore Press, on Madison Avenue and Thirty-sixth Street, for a full day of temping. The lobby had marble floors and flashes of gold leaf on the walls, and the company was equally impressive, if more modern. The elevator opened on the fourth floor and he stepped directly into a carpeted waiting area with subdued lighting. In a glass display case were hardcover books, both fiction and nonfiction, on the company's current list. So this is where they are, the people who make the books I see in the stores, he thought, filling with fear. The receptionist took his name and soon a young and correct woman led him to an office with only a desk and a typewriter and a phone. Some minutes later she returned with a pile of forms and instructions for filling them out.

On the way he had passed a succession of young men and women at gray metal desks. Across from these desks were offices with windows. The woman did not introduce him. He wasn't dressed well, not as well as her or anyone else at the company. The men he saw were all in suits or jackets and ties and the women wore dresses or skirts. He had skipped shaving in his rush to get out the door that morning and had pulled on an old and

pilling rust-colored sweater. Well, it was all right. What did he have to do with these people anyway?

Outside the office where the woman had situated him sat one of those young men, and as the morning passed Luther became more and more aware of him. A young man full of himself, who knew he was not only smart but good-looking. Self-satisfied. Confident. His face spoke those words to Luther. And then there were the words that came from the young man's mouth. "Man, this guy goes on and on...Man, this guy needs a lot of help...Man, this requires a total rewrite. Amazing." The young man had on his desk not forms to be filled in but a thick manuscript he was going through page by page, with his red pencil, chuckling and grinning as he went. His body language spoke the same language, of confidence and superiority, seeing as how he sat with his feet on the desk and how when he walked it was on the balls of his feet so as to elevate himself physically. There was something else Luther came to notice: he could look at the young man, but the young man could not or would not look at him. OK. Luther understood. The young man was going to hell for his pride and his arrogance and he couldn't go soon enough. And yet, though he burned with resentment, he also recognized that the young man had something that he wanted.

*Now Celeste, this was not an end but a beginning. The young man who walked on the balls of his feet could not contain me, nor could anyone else, in that room to which I had been consigned. And maybe that was the reason for my call to Gillian Brower, the Gertrude Stein devotee, and the arrangement I made to meet with her at the end of that very first day of what was to be a new chapter of my life. Maybe she was a symbol of the*

*further change that I was seeking but which I could not admit to while in the depths of the guilt into which my actions had plunged me. Is it not something that we are free to work out our lives, messy as they may be, free from the straitjacket of a severe morality, which would restrict us to the straight and narrow into perpetuity? Because yes, change requires preparation, no matter how long that can take.*

*Now it is true the day was not a victory march but merely a start, as I was a lowly and disregarded temp. Even so was a test, a probe, initiated in the afternoon. An emissary from the real world with a radiant smile and luster lips and the high shine of success emanating from her being entered, filling the air with apologies for her sudden presence, for she was the kind alert to her good fortune and equally aware of my low status, and so her apology was as much for the disparity in our stations as it was for the tissue she had come to take from the box of them that had been left behind by the previous occupant. Only afterward did I think of the smart things I could have said, like 'Oh gee, and I thought you were coming bearing more gifts for me,' because what could a man in my position offer but self-deprecation?*

That young man. He stood contained in his tailored suit at the bank of elevators at the end of the day as if Luther was not there, and maintained his aura of detachment on the ride down to the lobby so that he would not be brought close and catch Luther's lowly status. It was all right. I am an insurgency unto myself, Luther thought. I have made my presence felt.

He had an hour to kill, and because the thirst was on him, he found a bar nearby. In fact it was part of a spacious Chinese restaurant called Lucky Garden.

“What you want, mister? You want beer? I give you beer? Scotch? You tell me now. I make you feel real good.” The shrewd-eyed woman behind the bar was old and probably the owner’s wife. A woman who had spent her adult life counting dollars; it was in her blood. She needed them the way he needed a drink.

I will be orderly in my progression. I will let my thirst take me where it will, but I will build to the finale, as the best must always be yet to come if I am to live, Luther thought. “Yes,” I will have a beer,” he said.

“One dollar. You want two beers, two dollars.”

“Understood,” he said, and soon took her up on her offer, and then added a third and fourth before sending himself off with a scotch and water.

“Three dollars,” the woman said. “You feeling very good now, yes?” She was looking at him through a veil of mockery, but he did not care.

*Happy birthday, America*, the sticker on the men’s room door, said. He had made it none to soon to P.J. Clarke’s, in the basement of Macy’s. The booze came out in a powerful stream, dissolving some of the ice cubes in the urinal. He expected that Gillian would be arriving soon, if she wasn’t here already. He felt sodden, depressed. Once again he had reached out to someone who had no real place in his life and now he was to spend an evening with her while Sarah waited at home for him to return. At what point did lying become intolerable and fracture him right down the middle?

How big Gillian’s head had grown, almost disproportionate with her small squat body. She had come from her job at a nearby OTB center and was not in good spirits

either. "There has to be a better life than this," she said. Luther understood her to mean that he was part of the "this," but he had no reason to expect otherwise.

A fit-looking older man stopped by their table. There were flecks of gray in his black hair. "How are you, Gillian? It's been a while," he said.

"I guess it has," she said, not introducing Luther.

"Well, look, I don't want to interrupt. I'm on my way out. I'll give you a call. We'll talk," he said, and took off.

The story had been told right there. The man had wanted her once but no longer, the way Luther did not so much want her after first wanting her. She was a woman who could be wanted initially but not later. She had a father, but he had gone away. She had a stepfather, but he was distant. Even Gertrude Stein, from Paris, France, was growing distant. But thirty was not so distant. Thirty was looming, and she had woken to the reality that she was stuck in the dull repetition of her days and that Luther was a reflection of that dullness.

"I met him when I was working at OTB. He's a big gambler. He promised to take me to the Bahamas but never followed up."

Like a child Luther heard her now speaking. *You promised. Daddy, you promised.*

"I am invisible. You see past me to the life you want," he said.

"No more invisible than I am to you," she replied.

They had the hamburgers of P.J. Clarke's and the French fries of P.J. Clarke's, and Luther had some of the scotch whiskey of P.J. Clarke's, taking comfort from the name it had made for itself on Third Avenue in the fifties.

“We should always buy the brand-name goods of America and we should always eat the brand-name food of America, and P.J. Clarke’s is brand name goods, wouldn’t you say?”

“What I would say is that you’re already drunk,” Gillian said.

“Don’t call me names,” he said.

“I’m not calling you a name. I’m speaking of your condition.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“I think I should go home. I’m not feeling well,” she said.

The rejected was now the rejecter. Or was it the ejector?

He did not fight to hold on. She had agreed to go to the game with him, but the evening was meant for him alone at Madison Square Garden, where he watched Maurice Lucas, formerly of Marquette, power up, and speed demon Johnny Davis, out of Dayton, run the break and fleet Bobby Gross, from Long Beach State, on the wing, and Herm Gilliam, from Purdue, and Larry “I am a Kentucky Wildcat forever,” Steele and Lionel “I can bring it” Hollins from Arizona State and Lloyd “I am chunky good” Neal from Tennessee State but he did not watch Bill Walton, who was out of action because of an ankle injury and not traveling with the team. The arena, with its pastel-colored seats and gleaming hardwood court, was pretty. There was an air of electricity; the new coach, Jack “Professor” Ramsay, had brought the surging Blazers to a level of play that was shaking up the Western Conference. Even so, he grew restless and left after the third quarter for the bar on Spring Street, where he stayed for a short while before following a woman out the door. She was walking fast and when he called to her, she turned and said, “Get lost.



Creeps like you belong on Forty-second Street,” before moving on. And so he went home, where he yelled at Sarah before passing out.

In dreamland, he was informed by Pilgore Press that he would be required to take a typing test but he woke with no clear memory of the outcome or if there even had been one.

But rallying strong was not a thing of the past. Gillian Brower could try to lay him low with her fog of depression and another woman whose beauty was no answer for her rage could tag him as a man of seedy character, and Bill Walton could be absent with leave and so deprive Gotham of his supremacy at the outlet pass and the reject and his dominating and opponent-demoralizing D, but he would be back and now Luther would be back too as seeds of life were sprouting in him as well. “I have a toehold on respectability. They must not defeat me as they have before,” he heard himself say that morning, as he exited the subway at Thirty-third and Park Avenue. In his hand he held his resume, to which he had added “White Line Continue,” so people would be clear or mystified, as the case might be, because he wanted to bring specificity to his game, whatever others might make of it.

What he meant was that the kids at the Claremont School from whom he had fled were the young men and women at Pilgore Press, and now he had been given a second chance and he must capitalize on it so he could have more than a toehold on respectability and direction.

*Celeste, I am trying to stay under control here, but something keeps pushing, seeking to elevate me to the highest reaches. I become like an engine with its idle too high and then I zoom into the land of hyperbole.*

“I am a writer trying to find a place in the world of work,” Luther said that afternoon in the office of Sandra Sotheby. He had been warned she was English and so to pronounce her given name with a long first *a* and never mind with flatness.

“Go on,” she said.

“I need a deck from which I can look at the water. I must not wind up in the water.”

“Please explain.”

“In the building where I grew up one Sunday morning a man came to my family’s door. He was tall and had a narrow head and eyes that suggested his mind was filled with haunting memories. He was in constant motion, his anxiety causing him to shift his weight from one foot to the other and his desperation requiring him to forego any pleasantries in favor of directness. He was married at the time to a woman equally slender but considerably more stable and they had a young daughter.”

“I am sorry, but is there a point to this story?”

“Only this. His wife was a future citizen of Lesbian Nation and perhaps some foreboding of her coming abandonment of him or his state of indigence, or both, was the cause of his shocking mental state, but in any case he had only one thing to say to me. Foregoing all pleasantries, he said, in an eerily quiet voice, ‘A bottle of ink. May I have one?’ And so I ran and found a bottle of blue-black ink that I kept in my room, inhaling

its bracing smell frequently. I returned to him with the bottle and he went on his way.

Whatever his fate, I am certain he was on the water's edge that morning and that he also served as a warning of my own future condition. Because the water is rising or I am being drawn down to its level. I am in need of the higher ground that regular employment can provide me."

"Is it possible you lack understanding of where you are? Pilgore is a publisher, not a social services agency. You must have marketable skills if you are to be a successful applicant. What skills, in your estimation, do you possess?"

"I can take a page, any page, and read it from top to bottom. The words may escape my memory but not my sight. And then I go to the next page and do the same thing..."

"I think you are a big faker, Mr. Garatdjian. I think you are trying to be stranger than you are as a means of getting ahead precisely because you have no marketable skills. This interview is over." Ms. Sotheby was showing her English steel. She had hit him with a hard stick, and now it was for him to go and nurse his wound.

*Celeste, I was in truth a mendicant. I did not strike an oddball stance and ramble. Rather, I showed an attitude of fearful meekness, of humility forced on me by my lowly status in life and my mediocre educational background. I will try to be more truthful going forward.*

*In fact, let me start right here. Hermione, of Rod Stewart fame, called me with a request for a powwow. Her distress was acute, she said, and required that we meet. That man whose face and red hair were inflamed with lust who had been present the night*

*Sarah and I met with Hermione and Edie? That man who went by the name Gordon and who will later reappear in a more prominent way? That man who begged off returning to our loft with Sarah and Hermione and Edie and me? That man, Celeste, that man. Evidently he had lust in all the parts of his being that night. But his lust was not for Hermione, who had hoped to claim him for his own. He wanted, it turned out, to explore Edie Alsbury's more alluring garden. "Can you believe it? He had the nerve to ask me for her number. This after I had seen him several times. What is it that men think they can walk right over me?" The question was not one to be asking of me, or perhaps it was, as I too had taken liberties with Hermione, though I had never led her to believe we could be anything but friends, with the possible exception of some drunken improprieties. (Celeste, let me state the following before the thought is lost to me for all time: All writers feel unworthy of love because in the end they betray even the ones they purport to love. No, let me amend that to me personally, as few show the lack of imagination I exhibit in their work. But is imagination often at the expense of truth, and can imagination set you free, as truth claims to do? Maybe you can help me with this later.)*

*"It wasn't tactful of him, it is true, but have you ever allowed hunger to be your guide?" I asked.*

*"He is a man of unspeakable appetite," Hermione responded. "As for my own appetites, I will not have you making inquiries about them."*

*"I have taken internal steps to rein in any further tactlessness."*

*"You are a silly man," Hermione said, in dismissing my assurance.*

*"What are you going to do about his request?"*

*“I will deny him access. That is what I will do. I am neither a pimp nor a madam. And I will not match her with a man of such low integrity.”*

*Yet you will match him with yourself, I thought, but did not say. “This must be hard for you.”*

*“The loneliness of days must be met with resolution. Therein does heroism lie, but I will say he has landed a direct hit on my joie de vivre and my amour propre. My trademark effervescence is sadly fading.”*

*Celeste, she was drawing on some afflatus less contemporary than Victorian, but no mocking thing was unleashed in me for her not being of a mindset of our time. “I am sorry for that,” I said.*

*“Most painful of all is that not even Rod Stewart can revive me. Should I hear ‘Maggie’ at any time of the day, I must run out of the room.”*

*So here it is, Celeste, a woman determined not to be a matchmaker matched me with Edie but far more significantly, matched me with you that summer day the year before.*

Crossing the intersection to the double decker McDonald’s down at Herald Square at Fifth Avenue was dangerous; vehicular traffic rampaged down the wide and sloping boulevard under the indifferent gaze of the Empire State Building. The landmark lacked the heart to remember that Coward Shoes had once occupied a large storefront space within its dimensions, or that his mother had taken him and Luke and Vera for the normal shoes it sold. Nor could it be bothered to remember that Luther’s mother had taken him to

B. Altman, on the northeast Corner of Thirty-fourth and Fifth, where she had bought him the white Oxford shirts and gray uniform pants and blue blazer he would need for the coming school year. The building showed complete indifference to the haughty manner of the saleswoman, so clearly looking down at his mother, in her man's shoes, and at him, saying with her face of false refinement, *These clothes are too good for you, as is the school at which you will wear them. You are not private school material. You are nothing but a skin and bones flathead.* But Luther remembered, saying, I am east of the old rugged cross and east of the brown pots of baked beans and the green oval dishes of baked macaroni at the Horn and Hardart and east of the Greyhound Bus Station that was an escalator ride above Penn Station and north of Polk's diminishing hobby store where the Lionel trains of my childhood ran and ran.

*Weep for your mother, Luther. Weep for her goodness. Weep that she should seek to outfit you in the clothes and the shoes of America that you might grow tall like the soaring building above you.*

The food at McDonald's was not normal in the way that the Horn and Hardart food had been, but it was good food all the same. He had himself a regular burger and treated himself to a burger with cheese as well and an order of French fries but steered clear of the Big Mac because the meat was too thick for the bun and shone in its coating of grease. (And he never went anywhere near Burger King and its whopper, with its big slab of meat completely and unappetizingly ostentatious.) And yes, he had given himself a cherry tart so he could have some sweetness to go with his salt.

The men and women of Pilgore Press had gone where they had gone to dine with authors and agents and do their deals at the 21 Club and Odeon and other posh eateries, where they would have their martinis shaken but not stirred. They could have whatever they wanted because he had the one thing that mattered, that is, in addition to compliance with Dr. Rosner's edict that he feed the face first. He had his copy of the *New York Post*, and the sweetly emoting prose of the sports columnists Milton Gross and Maury Allen. He had had enough of Dick "I will punch you in the face with my prose and you will like it" Young of the *Daily News*.

And then there was the daily news he saw with his own eyes: Dave Cowens crashing the boards in his wild man way for the Boston Celtics that night or his teammate John "I once ate a whole stick of butter" Havlicek running the parquet floor of the Boston Garden or Paul "Am I not golden?" Westphal lighting up the scoreboard for the Phoenix Suns. And there was the bar in which he watched the game and got steadily drunker.

And there was the birthday dinner for Sarah at her parents' new apartment and his understanding that they were honoring her because he couldn't and the sudden awareness that Lydia struggled to hide her disappointment with Sarah as she continued to give to her.

And there was the clock with the hands showing 4 am and he was still up, having drunk half a gallon of red wine, his thoughts not of Bill Walton but the handwritten note added to the *New Yorker* boilerplate rejection he had received for his "White Line Continue" excerpt. "Sorry. Good work."

And there was dreamland, Lydia waiting for him with an old electric typewriter that she no longer used, an Olympia office model of the kind he typed on at Pilgore Press, the dream confirming what he had previously seen, that Lydia would wither and die if she did not give. Then it was time to head overseas, to the Philippines, where an attractive tour guide led him along a tree-lined path. She did not identify herself as Imelda, the girl of his dreams in the go-go outfit back in the Broadway bar in his lonely freshman year of college, but she could have been, giving hope to Luther that he might yet meet up with her again. A man came down the path carrying an enormous ladder. Seeing the man's burden, Luther assisted in lowering the ladder into a deep hole, but the man paid him no mind other than to turn and give him an oblivion stare. Things got a bit rougher. One man stabbed another in the leg with a long knife to teach him a lesson. Luther ran from the scene, seeing the big blade and the blood, and in so doing caught the attention of another man, this one old but surprisingly spry and still of a mind to stab and stab, and so he gave chase, pursuing Luther with single-minded zeal, driven on by his unabated desire to inflict fatality. But the police were there to help, holding up signs in an incomprehensible language and shouting that the subway was closed. Luther was attracted to the female tour guide, but had to be careful one of them wasn't Joe Symborzka, the Polish brute, in disguise. In the meantime Sarah had gone off to a church ceremony with a male tour guide. Luther pleaded for someone to help find her, fearing as he did that she would go to bed with the man, for the tropical air was filled with licentiousness. But a dilemma arose when he spotted the attractive tour guide entering a porno theater. Should he follow her in, though the admission price was ten dollars? Oh, what to do? And then something



more. Someone had penetrated the loft. In the dark Luther could hear him moving about. In spite of his fear he shone a flashlight and caught Moses in the beam. “Were you expecting dirt or God or something in between?” Moses laughed as he spoke, as if to signal he meant no harm.

Dr. Rosner was a man in forward motion. To further his cause, he used the resources available to him and expected Luther to do the same.

“That writer whose class you took. Why not have him write you a recommendation?”

*Celeste, Dr. Rosner did not understand that Hinckner Thor was a killer, the oedipal man who must slay not only fathers but sons as well that he might be cherished by his daughters and have no rival for their affections. But I did as I was told because he was my doctor and committed to leading me out of the wilderness. The letter Hinckner Thor composed offered not effusion but the subtle yet hard smacks of neutrality, as in the following: ‘He puts his sentences together with admirable consistency, never deviating from the limited form his mind has laid out for him.’ Now Celeste, it is something to note that the short paragraph standing lonely on the page with the greeting To Whom It May Concern Dr. Rosner held farther and farther from his face, and scrunched up his nose as if it smelled bad. In that moment I saw that Dr. Rosner took me more seriously than I could possibly take myself, and that a writing class was a means to an end, not an end in itself. His vigor, his manliness, his amour propre were all in evidence. By contrast, I had*

*regarded the letter as fine, a testament to my fidelity to White Line, Continue. That Dr. Rosner was interested in substance, not the vapors, became even clearer to me.*

*Something else. Let us here rejoice that always, always, there is something else, that human life is not that of an inanimate thing, a square of bathroom tissue or a statue. Consciousness must never die. It moves, slowly but inevitably, in the direction of refinement. How can I say such a thing with so many instances of crime and other abominations? Because these manifestations of our lower nature are but a prelude to the higher ground they inevitably lead us toward. A great correction is underway, Celeste. A great one. Humanity is being bent in the direction of its own goodness, which we can rest assured will ultimately prevail.*

*But we must go back and live in the land of darkness for a while longer, and in so doing pave the way for the brightness to come, as what would heaven mean without hell to compare it with? Abominations indeed. This word, in all its variations, must be applied to us personally should it be warranted, and clearly something untoward occurred in the year 1977 that led me to write in my notebook. "Abominable evening with E. Alsbury." Only that, Celeste. Only that. As if to flesh out her first name and provide other details would expose me to discovery by Sarah and inevitable retribution. My living situation had reduced me to the level of a sneak, though in truth sneakiness had been a lifelong trait. Did I barge in while Edie Alsbury had guests over and humiliate myself in front of them? Did she slam the door in my face? Whatever, I was drunk to the point of little memory of the evening but had gone where I did not belong, which we must not do. Is that not in part the ongoing instruction I have been receiving from you?*

*I suspect the reason Edie saw me at all was that I lived in a loft and had a girlfriend who happened to be a talented artist. Other than these two assets, there was nothing to commend me to her. I suspect too that she had a therapist who was encouraging her to be more open to new possibilities, and so, though every instinct in Edie cried out against me, she forced herself to receive me in order to gain the acceptance of her therapist. All of this is speculation, as I say, and in any case, what does it matter if she saw that I didn't have the necessities? Ultimately, we must go to the place of aloneness, as it is only there, with a sense of complete abandonment, that we can recognize and embrace our relationship with the eternal and gain the wholeness that had previously eluded us.*

Luther was not without resources at Pilgore Press. The confident young man in the tailored suits who sat outside the office where Luther typed up labels and filed papers did not hold total sway. Pilgore Press had a personnel director named Midge Haller, and she made clear to Luther that she loved him, not with the words she spoke but the actions that she took. She was an older woman whose tight blouses and skirts did not hide her zaftig figure. And she did not hide that internally she was built to first and foremost please men, especially men of power but also those who were young and through whom she herself could be young. This is a woman who has been handled by the men who inhabit offices and have big titles, Luther thought. This is a woman who lacks a center.

“We will find you something, and something good. You’re in good hands with me,” Midge said.

In fact, Midge swung immediately into action. An interview was arranged for Luther with Edward Harkin, a senior editor in the adult trade division. He was a round little man with pasty skin whose sorrowful expression spoke to the disappointments in his life.

“My girl is leaving on vacation for two weeks. I need someone to fill in while she is gone. Frankly, I wouldn’t mind if she stayed away forever. She has been here for some time and shows no desire to move on. I’m hoping that when she goes back to Virginia to see her family, she will decide to stay.”

It was not lost on Luther that Mr. Harkin had referred to his assistant as “my girl,” and not in the spirit of Mary Wells singing the pop song of the same name. All ardor had been lacking. The weight of the years was on Mr. Harkin. He saw with sour, Philip Larkin eyes, even sunny days being overcast and cold and drizzling. But if Luther was shocked by Mr. Harkin’s assessment of and disloyalty to his editorial assistant, he was not entirely displeased. Was it possible that Mr. Harkin was opening a door for him?

The editorial assistant’s name was Hedley Frason, and when Luther inquired as to the origin of such a first name, Hedley said, “I am of English stock on both sides of my family. We go back in this country to colonial times.”

“Yes, I can see that you are a woman who does not run from your history but instead embraces it.”

“And why wouldn’t I?”

“Yes, of course,” Luther said, seeing that she was full of proud self-affirmation in the words she spoke and also in the proper English tone she took. And yet a hint of

asperity attached to her speech, or was it haughtiness, as if she had been affronted and now had cause to reclaim her dignity. Clearly, she was a mystery unfolding.

“We need to get down to brass tacks now. This is a demanding position and I do not wish to be greeted by bedlam on my return. That being said, this is a check requisition form. It is one of the most important items in the workday and the procedure for filling it out and all the follow-through must be carried out perfectly,” Hedley began. Then it was on to contracts, and an hour later she was still going.

As Hedley spoke, Luther heard the Supremes belting out the thunderously amped “My World Is Empty Without You,” only it was not cool, elegant Diana Ross in the lead but Hedley Frazon, wearing her thick glasses and modeling her dowdy dress, singing for all she was worth to Mr. Harkin. She is in the land of the fathers. She is a patriarchal woman, such as Sarah can never be, Luther thought.

Hedley then swung into further action, introducing Luther to the other editorial assistants on the floor: Lucy Haller and Ned Clingner and Aubrey Sutton and Paul Cold and others who met him with smiles on their young faces. From Luther’s standpoint, they had much to smile about, as they were all from elite colleges and universities and newly entered into the workplace. Hedley even introduced him to Efram Bloch, the young man with the confident manner and the tailored suits.

*Celeste, there was nothing for me to denigrate about Hedley Frazon or anyone at Pilgore Press. I had lost my way. The alternately murderous and suicidal impulses that had led me to Dr. Rosner were the admission of the failure of my way of life with Sarah. The young men and women Hedley introduced me to were the same types I had run from*

*at the Claremont School. These young editorial assistants hadn't stolen from their families. They weren't seeking to hide from life on life's terms in the womb of art. They were doing what needed to be done to build their lives on a solid foundation. I must, when I can, be tethered to the truth, and I am certain you will continue to assist me in this endeavor.*

There is a woman. She will go nameless. The qualities instilled in her as a child are being eroded. For some time she has been living with a man who drinks to excess and who is given to verbal abuse. He is not a bad man but he is a sick man, a man born with a glass or cup in his hand. At regular intervals he must go to the stove and heat water for the instant coffee he drinks throughout the day. Without that cup of steaming joe he is unnerved and at a loss. The woman has no such need, or hadn't. She was a woman sustained by the vigor that has been hers from birth. But do not underestimate the pernicious effect of vacillating men, those who must go to the trains of New York City and stand close as the trains rush past to experience the power that they lack. A woman of power cannot transmit that power to a man who dwells in the land of enervation. She will drift into his world sooner than he will be drawn into hers. So it is that by turns we see her too losing the ability to sustain her focus on the task at hand and standing at the stove waiting for the water for her cup of joe to heat. But this is about more than the injection of caffeine into her system. It is about the deterioration of her moral sense. One evening the man comes home with his bottle, planning to go directly to the narrow little room off the woman's studio and take a few nips from the bottle he has brought home before

joining her for dinner at the other end of the loft. But she is there, occupying the little room.

“Is there something you are looking for in here?” he asks.

“Is there something in here I should be looking for?” she replies.

“What would that be?”

“I have no idea. Why don’t you tell me?”

Strangeness and insinuation are having their way, and so he suggests that they vacate the premises of the loft and have dinner at a local restaurant. A change of scene may result in a change of thinking, he hopes. Fortified by the wine he has guzzled in the bathroom before leaving the loft, he explains the woman to herself. He is good at this, he believes. He mentions that recently she has been unusually insecure about her work and that she has shown excessive sensitivity to things he says, even taking some of his words out of context. For example, a while back he noted that a certain critic was full of false sophistication, and yet the next week the woman was accusing him of saying she was a phony sophisticate.

“Don’t you see? Don’t you see that when you are off balance in your world, then you begin to get unhealthily preoccupied with mine?”

“What I see is that you have been drinking on the sly again,” she replies, giving him pause as he is about to bite into his burger on a seeded bun.

And there was this too, a brief article in the *Village Voice* about an on-site sex club right in Manhattan. Had Luther not prophesied that public fornication would come to rival

football and baseball in the stadiums of America? Beautiful celebrities would be paid to show their bedroom stuff to a paying audience. And now here it was, in another form. He held his prurience in check as he spoke with Sarah about this new club so she would not strip him and name his tune and cast him in the lake of shame forever.

But the lake of shame was not far off. He traveled in dreamland to Coney Island, where the waves of the Atlantic Ocean broke over him. In its dirty waters did he see that the ocean and the blighted amusement park, the thing of God and the thing of man, were joined in their decline. Because a blighted building can only lead to a blighted soul, the atmosphere was electric with the threat of violence, and so Luther's listening devices were on high alert. Instantly the warning bells were sounding. A man snatched a bag on the boardwalk and the victim pursued him onto the beach, where he pulled out a knife and slew the thief. Luther shielded his eyes so as not to bear witness to the acts of the men of violence, even as he noted that such men were all around him. Did they not know that it was taboo to kill and kill with such casual wantonness? Did they not understand the bonds of humanity, that they would snap them over and over again? Did they have no sense of proportion? Were they not burdened by a contemplation of eternity?

But dreamland had its change of scenery, too. Genius Lane was back. He reassured Luther that although he had claimed Sarah for his own and they were living together, the relationship was platonic and would remain so. He would no more invade her than Germany would invade the Soviet Union with its panzers and its Luftwaffe and its infantry. Lane went so far as to put his arm around Luther and kiss him on the cheek, and not once did Luther denounce him as a Judas.



Then Thor Hinckner, the famous writer, came on the scene. He was asking questions of his printer, questions so technical and that spoke of such learning that Luther could not hold them in his mind. Thor's printer was an old man named Hans. Luther understood at once that he was in the realm of sturdy excellence, the kind that can fashion generators and jet engines and nuclear power plants as well as works of art, the kind that can hold spatial relationships and block-long equations in their minds, the kind whose structures are not of sand but of the highest grade steel.

"Are you writing a children's book?" Luther had summoned the courage to pose the question to Thor, but Thor ignored his query.

Thor had a question of his own, but not for Luther. "What does your name mean in German?" he asked Hans.

"Billboard." The terse response by the printer was as shockingly emphatic as the slap of a beaver's tail and in that moment Luther understood everything, even if he really didn't.

Then Mr. Emotion over Intellect himself, Pete Hamill, showed up, wanting to know if there was a dramatist in the area.

"That's a joke if ever I heard one. Who's a bigger dramatist than you?" Luther asked, as he was quite familiar by this time with the emotional rants of Mr. PH in his *New York Post* columns.

"You I don't like. You have a nose that needs fixing," PH said.

"Your mother needs fixing," Luther shot back, knowing that nothing would get the goat of an Irishman from Brooklyn more than sounding on his mother.

“Do you want to step outside?” Pete Hamill asked.

“Exactly,” Luther replied. “Exactly.” He spoke these words with such vehemence as to startle Pete Hamill, the words as they had been spoken seeming to seize upon the essence of Pete Hamill and hold it up to complete mockery. Thug. Brute. Ruffian. Man with only a veneer of intellectualism but whose real language was to talk with his fists.

“All I’m asking is for someone to read the sentence I have written with dramatic emphasis,” Pete Hamill said, in a more plaintive key.

“Is it a skinny sentence or does it have meat on its bones?” Luther asked.

“What?” Pete Hamill replied.

“Can it show its calves without plunging into the lake of shame?” Luther asked.

“What?”

Luther had had enough of Pete Hamill. “I have your number, Pete Hamill. I know exactly who you are, Pete Hamill. You are me, Pete Hamill. You are me,” Luther shouted at the perplexed man. What Luther was saying was that Pete Hamill drew on emotion because he had nothing else. He did not have the structured mind of Hinckner Thor or the printer Hans. Pete Hamill was outside the gates of paradise. Columbia University had not wanted him, as it had not wanted Luther. Pete Hamill had confessed as much in one of his columns. Because he had no intelligence Pete Hamill had to rely upon word gush, and Luther was not having his excess. He was not having it at all.

So fed up was Luther that he turned his attention exclusively to Thor Hinckner, having realized it was more intolerable to be among his own kind than those who were not his own kind.

“You drink a lot,” Luther said to Thor Hincker, who responded as if he had been thwacked with a paddle.

“What’s wrong with a glass of wine at night? You’d get a lot further if you dropped this literary stuff and dealt with your feelings.”

“My feelings?” The statement seemed incredulous to Luther, coming as it did from intellect over emotion Thor Hinckner.

“You heard me, Buster,” Thor Hinckner said.

Dr. Rosner was not far away. In fact Luther spied him in the lobby, peering out from behind a slightly ajar door, from where the laughter of children could also be heard. In that moment was Dr. Rosner revealing himself to Luther, saying in effect that there were many rooms in his mansion.

“I have had enough of all of you,” Luther said. “I am going home. Do you hear me?”

Home to Sarah, who lay in bed. She had prepared herself for him. Black stockings. A garter belt. A different, eroticized Sarah.

The day came when Hedley Frazon vacated the premises of Pilgore, if only temporarily. In anticipation, Luther had called on his college acquaintance, Scale Master Zach Zeckler, for some of his pharmaceutical goodies, but Zach was tight with him. A newfound respect for life, if not always for his own, had grown in him, and so he limited Luther to five capsules of speed, one of which Luther swallowed the morning of his new assignment.

Mr. Harkin was an editor who did very little editing. Rather, he imported coffee table books first published in Great Britain for the American market. Rights to a book on bats and another on caves around the world were his two most recent acquisitions. Small changes, such as to the name of the publisher and copyright notice and perhaps the jacket copy would be made, but the text would remain the same, including English spellings, such as *colour* for *color*. What directions Luther needed for tasks such as check requests and cables to London and filing and Mr. Harkin's mail were clearly presented in Hedley Hazon's notes. And so Luther sat in a buzz of pill-induced contentment that first day, and when Mr. Harkin left at 4:30 pm, Luther saw no reason not to follow suit a half hour later. He was, after all, a temp, and a temp with a calling, and so, if the midnight oil were to be burned, it would have to be for projects closer to his heart.

I have rendered unto Caesar, Luther thought, as he stepped from the elevator into the gold-leafed lobby, and now I am free, and therein came a great revelation to him. All that day he had gone about with circumspection, lest the laughing thing be unleashed by others on him. But now, as he headed down the street to the subway, he was among the anonymous mass and unfettered. From the chains of propriety had he been released.

As he walked to the subway a woman smiled and he smiled back at her, tentatively, for the speed had brought him joy but had also assigned him the mask of solemnity. He continued down the block. When he turned, she was looking his way, and once again understanding came to him. Within the bounds of Pilgore Press, circumspection must reign if shame wasn't to be meted out to him, but on the streets of Manhattan he was free to be himself.

But there was something that didn't come clear to him, at least right away, that same evening. A man who had called no attention to himself as he sat across from Luther on the subway became the keen focus of Luther's attention as they both exited the train. Why? Because the man was of a mind with Bob Dylan. He went his way while silently telling Luther to go his. He did not show a measure of respect for conformity by moving toward the exit but instead walked toward the end of the platform. A savage rage came over Luther. He imagined doing violence of an extreme kind to the man, the kind that had bloomed like ungodly flowers in his mind only the year before. No one had the right to inflict such a confounding and at the same time menacing mystery, for one thing was clear—the man might appear to be without a malevolent bent, but such perversity could lead in only one direction, and that was sudden and fatal violence.

“Don't you menace me with your trickery,” Luther screamed, but the man did not turn. And so Luther waited, from a safe distance, for more light to be shed. No one was going to impose this perversity on him. No one. “I am calling you on your evil strangeness. Come out now. Come out. Let there be no more of this darkness.” In such a way did Luther address the man, who by now had disappeared behind a column.

And so once again understanding came to Luther, in this instance provided by the man himself, who stepped from behind the column with his thing in hand, from which whizzed a powerful stream of urine. Aesthetically inclined, the man raised his dingus so the emission would gracefully rise and fall in an arc.

“Thank you. Thank you,” Luther said, bringing his hands together and bowing before fleeing.

As he emerged onto Lafayette Street, the thirst came over him. He should have gotten off at Astor Place and gone to the Liebfraumilch store. But no matter. This was an evening for something more. He bought a pint of Clan MacGregor scotch at the corner liquor store so he could have a party in his own body and mind, with no one else invited. He had gotten through a big day and was counting on the booze to take him far away so he could be ready for what tomorrow would bring.

“Tell me about yourself,” Edward Harkin said, dabbing at his brow with a folded handkerchief as he spoke.

“There is not much to say. I am a writer as opposed to an author, that is, my words disappear into a pile or a drawer after the world has determined that it does not want what I have to say, at least in the way I say it.”

“But you aspire to be an author.”

“Oh yes. I am on loan to the world. That is the way I feel. I can, with some effort, go into the world, but I must go away from it, too.”

“When I was a young man I would write two thousand words every weekend. I even published a novel, long since out of print.”

“What happened?”

“I just stopped. There seemed no point.” Grayness and hard rainfall accompanied his response. It was evidence of what Luther had long suspected.

“And those who are chosen are not called,” Luther said.

“Excuse me?”

“You opened my eyes to something. That is all,” Luther said.

Mr. Harkin, as if for the first time, focused his full powers of perception on Luther. The appraising gaze lasted only several seconds, in which time he saw all that he needed to see. And yet the insight he had gained did not pass through his small mouth, as he was in his wisdom space and not the province of fools.

“I have a stack of manuscripts. Could I ask you to read them for me in my girl’s absence and write me a brief report? I should tell you that they are dead on arrival, but I need to incorporate some comments in my response that suggest I have at least read the manuscripts. I have made the same request of Hedley, but she says she is far too busy. What on earth she is busy with remains a mystery, but so be it.”

“I will hop to it,” Luther said, going American on Mr. Harkin, who was caused once more to draw on his heightened powers of perception.

Luther resolved to scrutinize every word of the texts he had been assigned, and if necessary, to read and reread every page to gain the meaning and full flavor of the work. I will hogtie the words so they are secure in the premises of my mind, he thought, but no matter how much vigilance he applied, his attention flew off like a bird on the wing. This is not good, he further thought, in a panic. Why is it I cannot seal the exits? But the answer came to him immediately. He could not seal the exits now because he had never been able to seal the exits. His mind existed for one thing only, and that was to exist in its own haphazard wanderings, and he saw at that moment all its doors flapping crazily.

And he saw something else as well, that should have taken him to the ponder place but didn’t. I have but one mission, and that is to find what is wrong with the work,

not what is right. For this purpose he made a list of words for possible use in his critique: sensibility, didactic, narrative digression, ball-and-chain prose, refractory, and phrases that fluttered into his consciousness like “fugitive from injustice.” And so, of one work on Estonian railway thieves in the nineteen twenties, he wrote, “The author’s refractory sensibility compels him to go backward when he should be moving forward and vice versa, posing a real and constant danger to those who get too near his folly.” And of a convict who had metamorphosed into a Canada goose, he wrote, “A new length has been gone to as a means of thwarting justice, and molt creates its own trail of obscurity. Still, criminals, whether they be on land or sea or air, must be apprehended.”

*Celeste, I must not elevate above the truth. In doing so I validate the judgment of all those who labeled me destructive when I was a child. And yet it is a current that would take me where it will, and the times are too many when I have no strength to resist. To lie is to give way to the pleasure of drinking, even if it does end us on the rocks.*

Mr. Harkin received Luther’s reports with professed gratitude, and Luther heard nothing more. Nor did Mr. Harkin take him into his confidence again. But angels are not always your immediate neighbors. This lesson was powerfully received by Luther when Midge Haller, the personnel director, just happened to drop by, and whispered, “Entre nous, Edward says you are very bright and also very nice. Good work, sonny boy.”

Luther was at a loss what to do with the praise he had received. He had heard the term *hype machine*, but never had he personally experienced its use to such deadly effect,



as now sharp objects were ricocheting with brutal force in his head. They have set me up for a slow or quick death, one or the other, he said, in the privacy of a bathroom stall.

And the next morning there was more in the way of utterance. "I pray to Bill Walton, not to God. I am wounded beyond measure," he cried out, upon awakening, and wrote the very same in his journal so he could have a record of his days and possess material of substance for White Line, Continue.

And the morning after that, he expressed his relief, in code, to the bathroom tiles that the drink had not led him the night before to call Edie Alsbury and propose to her that they explore the sex clubs of New York City, and then wrote, not in code but for Sarah and any other interested parties, to see:

Morning brings the lifting of the fog, remorse, and full awareness that I love you. We will have a productive weekend, yes? I promise a quiet one.

And in his dream that same night took aim with a small pistol and shot a murderer in the head only to have Thor Hinckner come messing with him, saying how he was going to be filmed entering Yankee Stadium and would meet Peter Van Dine there in the box seats. Thus did great fear come over Luther that bone-crushing Thor Hinckner would tell Peter that he, Luther Garatdjian, was no good. After all that Thor Hinckner had the nerve to ask if Luther would like to go out carousing the next night, to which Luther could only answer yes.

*Thor Hinckner was a bad drunk, Celeste. He lived for the release that alcohol could give him. But his stories had a smooth surface, like glass. And he had read his*

*Kierkegaard. He understood at depth the meaning of Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing, even in the smoky bar on University Place he frequented, and where he listened to cool jazz.*

When he returned to real life, He went to Edie Alsbury bearing the gift of a bottle of wine and the memory of the store clerk saying to him, “She comes in one more time, Slim, it’s all over. She’s mines. I gots eyes for what the womens likes.” Luther had no idea who the man could be talking about, as he had seen no one enter and leave, and he was not inclined to ask, as he had read somewhere that delusion is driven by the need for hope. Besides, he and the little man in the gray smock might have something in common where these matters were concerned.

*Q: What drove you to Edie Alsbury, Luther?*

*A: Am I not a human being? She filled her jeans so well, and could wear a sweater with nothing underneath and hold her own.*

*Q: What else?*

*A: She had the new life I needed, but could not admit to wanting.*

She came to the door in a terrycloth robe and changed behind a louvered screen into shorts and a T-shirt.

“Make yourself useful and give me a massage,” she said, as she lay down on the floor. He had seen masseuses kneading the flesh of their toweled clients, but he had never touched a woman in this way. As he worked his hand down her back he was fearful that any second she might tell him to stop. The more real problem was his burning need to pee. By now she had removed her top and loosened her shorts and as she lay on her back,

the massage turned into fondling, his hand feeling the wetness between her legs even as the demand of his bladder grew.

“Time out, I’m afraid,” he said, and tried to console himself that the pleasure of urination was not far behind that of sex, if it came to that. When he returned, she was buttoned up and wearing her top and sitting cross-legged.

“Did everything go all right?”

“Relief came to me quickly.”

“You go to the bathroom a lot.”

“I do, I’m ashamed to admit.”

“It means you have bad plumbing and won’t live to be fifty.”

“Josep Broz Tito I am not. That is for sure.”

“Josep Broz Tito?”

“Yugoslav strongman. Champion of federalism. Knocks heads together so all ethnic groups get along.”

“I know who he is. But what does he have to do with you?”

“Only this. He could sit at a table with his pals through the night and drink a gallon of Yugoslav brandy and never once get up to relieve himself. Why? Because like you he embraced the idea that a man is not a man if he has to pee more than twice in one day.”

“That’s a bit more than I wanted to say on the subject. Must you be so extreme? I didn’t say you weren’t a man.”

“This is true,” Luther said.

“I think what I have been saying is what I have been saying all along.”

“Which is?”

“That you make me think, but that I’m not attracted to you.”

“I see,” he said.

“That’s all you have to say? Not, ‘I’m not attracted to you either?’”

“How can I say I am not when I am? Why else would I be here but that I am attracted to you?”

“You get knocked down so easily and don’t recover quickly. Your defenses are inadequate for living and so is your body.”

“Then what am I doing here if that is the way you feel?”

“Yes, what are you doing here? Just because you don’t belong with her doesn’t mean you necessarily belong with me.”

“You’re so sure of yourself.”

“I’m not sure of anything but a moment-to-moment existence.”

“I used to have a five-year plan, like the Soviets. Now I don’t think I have any plan at all.”

“Sure you do. Your plan is to be free.”

“What is that, to be free? It’s the anarchy of the women on the hill with the steaming pots of baked beans.”

“That makes a lot of sense.”

A lot of things make sense that don’t appear to make sense. Sometimes you have to say silly things to get to the sense.”

“If you don’t mind humiliating yourself, as you are doing now.”

“That is a problem.”

“What is?”

“The laughing thing.”

“The laughing thing?”

“There are people walking about who look human but truly aren’t. They are the ones who possess the laughing thing.”

“You still haven’t told me what the laughing thing is.”

“It’s when people put their laughter on you like it is hard and metallic rain that breaks your skin and threatens your bones.”

“Maybe you need thicker skin.”

“If you haven’t had sisters, you can’t know. They put their laughing thing on me when I was naked.”

“How do you know I don’t have sisters?”

“Even if you do a sister isn’t to a sister what she is to a brother.”

“You have an answer for everything, but your answers don’t lead you anywhere.”

“They led me here, to me and you. To this moment.”

He looked at her as he hadn’t looked at her, and she did the same, receiving each other at the place where words ended and communication began.

She unbuttoned her shorts and removed her top.

What a difference a day, or days, made, just as the song said. Mr. Harkin had not imposed the death sentence on Luther with his look of knowingness at their previous meeting, or if he had, he was quite the actor. Once more he affirmed, in even stronger terms, his deep desire to be done with Hedley Frason.

“You are someone I can talk to. You are a human being, and I am a lonely man living close to the grave. Surely you see that in my face and my appearance. But if she should cling like a barnacle to my sinking ship, I shall do my utmost to find a place for you with the company.”

The ponder place was not big enough to contemplate the absurdity of Mr. Harkin endorsing him to others in the company, and had the effect of driving Luther further into obsequiousness.

If Luther, however tentatively, was finding a new family within Pilgore, he maintained an attitude of extreme reticence regarding his family of origin, his mother being the sole exception. The buzzer on the downstairs door rang that evening. Luther, already half-drunk, went to the window to see who it might be, as he did not want to go down the steps and allow death in the door. He arrived in time to see his brother, Luke, and his nephew, Moses, walking back to Luke's red Corvette Stingray. With disgust he watched as they drove off in what, for him, was a symbol of his brother's self-indulgence and total foolishness.

“A shit in the pants family is all that we are,” he screamed, unable to hold his contempt inside. Then, in ostentatious mode of his own, he hurled an empty plastic salad bowl, which landed near Sarah, who then threw the bowl right back at him.

“You want more, I’ll give you more,” she said, and so he quieted down, as what was he to do when faced with a woman full of surprises.

An hour later, Luther was alone, Sarah having left for her design class, and in her absence, truth came in the door. “Now will I screw my courage to the sticking place,” he said out loud, and called Edie Alsbury.

“I must come over. I have something to say.”

“I have something to say, too. You can’t. I’m busy. But what is it you want to say?”

And so he communicated the full flower of his lewdness, that is, his sex club fantasy.

“You are a man who won’t be happy until you fuck me in the ass, and even that won’t bring you the joy that you are seeking,” Edie Alsbury said, and hung up.

Dreamland came to him that night. His family were tolerable and more than tolerable. Luke and Vera had joined him to bear witness to the greatness of Bill Walton. There he was on the free throw line with only seconds remaining. If he made one of his two free throws, then the game would go into overtime. But the first bounced off the front of the rim and the second off the back of the rim and so Bill Walton was gone and Luther was left with an ache that brought him to his knees. “Too soon. He is gone too soon,” Luther cried.

The next day Luther learned from Midge Haller that she had swung into intense action on his behalf.

“I want you to take over as director of personnel. Entre nous, I will be leaving the company.” Even in the privacy of her small office, Midge spoke in a whisper. Seeing that Luther had been rendered speechless, she went on. “I have been studying your resume. That is an incredible responsibility you took on as manager of that rooming house. For days and nights I have been astonished by the range of understanding that you bring to situations and to handling people, as you are handling me now with your silence. You are a storehouse of wisdom and I bow down to it.”

Midge Haller’s word storm continued for several minutes more, giving Luther a chance to recover from the shock she had delivered.

“Of course, you would have to pass muster with Bad, but I’m sure it would be just a pro forma interview. After all, great minds connect.”

“Bad? Who or what is Bad?”

“Mr. Badminton, of course. The president of the company,” Midge said, as if Luther should know.

“His name is Mr. Badminton?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“And what is his first name?”

“I just told you. His name is Mr. Bad Minton. His first name is Bad and his second name is Minton.”

“Shouldn’t he have a third name, like racket? Did he name one of his offspring Birdie?”



“Do not, I pray you, be disrespectful,” Midge said, in an intense whisper as she leaned forward. “Trust me. He can listen from afar. From afar.”

Luther nodded in assent and gave her the OK, understood sign, making a circle with his thumb and index finger and holding his other fingers upright. And Midge gave it right back to him with a wink.

*All these words, Celeste, and what do they amount to? Writing to be free is like drinking to be free. Sooner or later we have to come out with our hands up and entirely naked, in an attitude of surrender to the grave. What is more deprived than a life of “he said” and “she said”? Does any of this bear a remote resemblance to the truth, which is so vastly beyond our understanding? Nevertheless, once in motion we must continue. We must sweep that floor. We must align the cans and bottles on the shelves and bring order where there has been none. And we must, we must, have the last word.*

In dreamland the men of violence were out once more, hidden and yet there. A plot had been discovered to destroy the New York City subway system, and so the trains had been idled with the intention of keeping them from harm. Because he was in need of witnessing trains in motion to receive the full vibration of their power, Luther set out for the rail yard for freight trains in Riverside Park. The insidious malefactors, by some logic of their own, were only after passenger trains, their thirst for human blood being unquenchable. Oh happy day, Luther began to sing on his entry into the tree-filled park, blithely ignoring the very visible sign, “Do not count your chicks before the eggs are

hatched.” There in the park a Chinese man with an aggressive manner tried to pick him up, but Luther pushed him away, his new song being “No, no, I tell you no,” and woke before others with a more menacing intent could do their work.

Who were the men and women of Pilgore? There was the editor in chief, Ellen Gruen, with her mesomorphic sturdiness. She had one foot in the world of publishing and the other in family life and managed to be fully present for both.

There was Houghton Marks, who always came from his office tall and strong and bearded, and with his sleeves rolled up.

There was, of course, Edward Harkin, senior editor, who said to Luther, “I didn’t have a bad relationship with my father. He just never spoke to me,” and said as much only because Luther had gone into the ditch of the past, needing Mr. Harkin to know that his father had held his smacking hand so high. Mr. Harkin was telling him with his tone more than his words that he would not be joining Luther in the sadness *cum* recrimination gulch into which Luther had strayed. Because a man has to set aside certain discontents to ensure a purposeful life in the world. Mr. Harkin saying, without saying, “You have a sickness I don’t possess.”

And a woman who couldn’t be content with two names when she could have three, who called herself Pamela Hollows Diviny, and expected those about her to make the same effort to receive her full identity as she had in presenting it.

And a dark-eyed young woman named Marion Rheingold, who walked on the wild side with her lips primed for kissing and a smile that did not seek to hide her affinity

with darkness but challenged you to deal with it. *No sentence is complete, Celeste. Never. You only have the feeling of godliness in the moment you write it, and not even then, because is hunger for more ever an approximation of godliness and not the illness itself?* And he would have additional things to say later, given how big she became in his mind, because she was the Claremont kind that he had run from and was now seeking to screw his courage to the sticking place so he wouldn't run from again.

And there was, from the mailroom, Charlie Blow, whose slack mouth formed a formidable arc in a face shaped for derision, his blond hair and fair skin having gained him nothing that approaching age thirty he wore a gray smock.

And Gene B. Goode, who held sway over Charlie Blow and all others in the mailroom with a calm and omniscient eye augmented by formidable blackness.

And there was dreamland too, his whole family showing up at Pilgore Press, as they were proud of him even if he could not be proud of them. *Celeste, I have lied, lied. There were some in my family who wanted me to succeed. There were. Even Hannah in her blackness, and Vera, but it went against my grain and worldview to credit them with goodness. One must weep over his failure to love. One must fall to his knees and beg the forgiveness of the one God for such life-denying refusal.*

Manana he would stop drinking. *Manana.*

The slush pile, it was called. A term of disparagement. Manuscripts as appealing as dirty snow, unworthy of agenting and not warranting a timely response, gathered in a teetering

pile for a year or more, and for consideration not by the editors but their underlings. The cover letter of one Luther pulled from the top read:

Dear Mr. Harkin:

I have published one novel, *Quake Boots*, which met with limited success. Since then my editor has moved on and my agent will not represent this second effort, as she says it sacrifices all elements of literary art for plainspoken truth, and that the truth it delivers is of a dreary nature that will immediately alienate the reader. It is true that I have left the fictional realm for this personal account, and in so doing have eschewed the ladder of success my agent insisted I climb. She is seeking commercially viable properties, and why shouldn't she, but that is a path I cannot any longer be a slave to. All I am asking for is an honest evaluation of the work...

A woman watched in wonder as passengers on the bus spoke with each other. Later, at the office, she looked on with amazement as her coworkers interacted with each other and performed their tasks when all she wanted to do was to hide under her desk. At the lunch hour great fears visited her. She would be fired. She would be prosecuted for failure to meet the tax deadline. She was in the grip of anxiety such as she had not known and which would surely break her into pieces. And then that word, alcoholic. The woman applied it to herself in describing her first few days without a drink. It was too soon. She was not ready for this new and painful chapter of her life. She wanted her friend, her only friend, back.

Alcoholic. Alcoholism. I must not go where the painful bleakness of days reside, Luther thought. Ushtah. The word his mother would utter to convey revulsion came strong to him. The writer was simply confirming what he already knew, that alcohol was the only thing that made life worth living. To try to get by without it could only be excruciating. He placed the manuscript back in the pile. I am done with you, he said emphatically. What I do not see I do not know.

And now there was another shock to his system. Sarah was pregnant. She told him so. Yes, she was pregnant by him. She did not go around whoring, as some people she wouldn't name, and would be undergoing a procedure, something called an extraction.

"I do not like the sound of that word," Luther screamed.

"What word are you talking about?"

"That word with the sound of machinery on it. That word that starts with an 'e.'"

"Extraction?"

"That is the one."

"How about abortion? Do you like that one any better?"

"Let us not use language at all if we must speak this way. I am already at the ends of the earth, so filled am I with emotion commotion."

Sarah seized control, seeing that she must. "I discussed the matter thoroughly with Dr. Frodkey. We both agreed it was the only course of action to take."

Dr. Frodkey. Course of action. All Luther knew was that there was an unwanted fetus growing in Sarah's womb and there would be pain she would have to endure to ensure its removal.

He had given no thought to having a child. Two of his older sisters had given a bad name to motherhood, and Luke's idea of being a father had been to divorce his teenage wife soon after their baby was born. Bringing children into the world had driven love further away. Order was lacking when infants were summoned to life. Only firm structures could prevent chaos.

Still, a child. A child.

Now it was for Sarah, driven by a sense of urgency, to swing into action. The next morning a cab took them over the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. He had brought harm to Sarah and now he had to protect her from all harm, stories lingering from years before of quack doctors terminating pregnancies with coat hangers. When the girls began to bleed uncontrollably they would wrap them in blankets and dump them on rain-soaked and desolate streets such as the ones in Queens the cab was now passing through and leave them there to die in agony. So the stories went. His beautiful Sarah. He could not allow that to happen to her.

The cab left them at Kwality Kare, a low-slung stand-alone brick building on a forlorn street. Outside stood a gauntlet of two middle-aged men in black suits and ties.

"It is against God and nature to murder a newborn," one said.

“You will have to answer for this on Judgment Day. Are you ready for that?” the other demanded. Luther refused his pamphlet, as did Sarah, assuming he was handing him more of the poison he and his colleague had just spoken.

Pastel-colored chairs and walls painted yellow brought fake cheer to the lounge, where they sat listening to Muzak before Sarah was called. The instrumentals soothed him as he flipped through issue after issue of *Cosmopolitan*, the pages filled with women in alluring outfits and articles in which some of these same women shared their “peak sexual experiences.” An undercurrent of emotion gripped him as the hours passed, the elevator music adding a sense of pathos about his life. Something was happening. The two men outside in the rain, secure in their grim reality beyond the saccharine influence of Muzak, would have asserted that confection was being poured on something grisly and immoral. They would have stripped his life with Sarah of the drama and made of it something sordid. What did these crusader types want, and did they even really know? Why couldn’t they just mind their own business and go away?

One issue contained a small article of interest to men as well as women, or some men and women, those who had fibbed their way into jobs and so were unworthy of employment. “Watch out, liars. We’re on to you. The companies you have lied to will expose you. We will come to your desk and lead you out of the office in handcuffs. Liars of America, we have private detectives checking the veracity of your resumes.” So the article declared, prompting tremors of anxiety in Luther that such a check was underway at that very moment, having been initiated by Midge Haller and Mr. Bad Minton.

Suddenly Luther saw it all. Sarah was being butchered and his future was being terminated as he sat there listening to piped-in fluff music. An unsheltered existence exposed to the cold rain and unkind streets were the most that they could hope for. I must stop this, Luther thought. I must rally strong.

Other things came to his attention, not the pretty women of *Cosmopolitan* magazine striking joyful, sexy poses but women of flesh and blood walking stiff-legged and haltingly from the recovery room, some stopping to lean on the wall for support before continuing. One went to the front desk. Had a man been there for her, a man named Vinnie Del Batado?

The voice of the receptionist came back strong and with a killing intent. “Ain’t nobody been here for you. You’re all alone is what you are,” is what she said, as friendliness was not in her nature. The patient groaned, proving once more that a wound to the heart could be as serious as one to the body. Some minutes later he heard her at the pay phone. “Will you meet me?” she asked, in a plaintive voice. What kind of inhumanity was afflicting Vinnie Del Batado that he was not there to comfort her and assist her home, Luther could only wonder?

Five hours passed with no sign of Sarah. Luther was drawn to the reception desk and asked if Sarah would be leaving soon. It was on his mind once again that in spite of the Muzak and the pastel chairs and the many copies of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, something had gone terribly wrong and Sarah might even be lying in her own blood.

“Do I look like a mind reader to you?” she asked, as it was her right to breathe her fire on him as on everyone else.



“I really can’t say,” Luther replied.

“And I can’t really say either. You dig?”

“It seemed like a reasonable question to ask.”

“Did you answer my question?”

“What question was that?”

“Don’t be disrespecting me when I speak to you. I asked you did you think I was a mind reader.”

“And I said I really can’t say.”

“And I said the same thing to you. So what is the problem?”

Luther returned to his seat. His words meant nothing. They were simply grist for the receptionist’s tortured logic. Not that his own was any better, he conceded. My God, I have come here as if this is a holiday, he thought. I have been seeking to wallow in Muzak-induced pathos. I am a poor witness to my own life.

Now it was Sarah’s turn to emerge from behind the door in the same halting gait as the women before her.

“Get me out of here. Just get me out,” she whispered, as if even speech could summon pain, but not so much that when they saw, on leaving the cab, a pile of dog shit and a bag of garbage by the front door, she couldn’t also say, “Did you leave that there, Luther? Be honest now. Did you?”

*Now Celeste, Dr. Rosner beat on me hard and with both fists. He hit me in the eye and all parts. In that session he revealed everything to me, not in the phony baloney manner of*

*those who say they were changed forever by one flimsy apercu, as great strides forward are often met with brutal reactionary forces, but just for that moment he had me stand in the light that he was shining. Dr. Rosner saying, apropos the report I delivered to him of the day Sarah spent at Kwaliti Kare, "And where were you in all this?" Now Celeste, it was not only what he said but how, for you must remember that he was, in spite of his introversion, a man of substance and red-haired fire, and was registering as much astonishment as a man of his restrained kind can summon.*

*"I don't understand."*

*"An extraction is an abortion. Was she in fact pregnant?"*

*"I wasn't part of the discussion. She made her decision in consultation with Dr. Frodkey."*

*"And you couldn't call him and ask for an explanation?"*

*"But he is not my doctor. He met me with the buzz saw of formulae the last time I tried to speak with him, back when Sarah was in the mental hospital."*

*"You have no sense that you are a partner with her in her pregnancy, if in fact she was pregnant?"*

*"What I have is the sense of harm and violation I did to her. What is more brutal, more monstrous, than the act of creation? Is it not then that we see the true horror of the world, women screaming to die? And why is this? Because of the misery men have inflicted on them. That is why. Look at the suffering I brought to her. Look at it."*

*"That is the way you see pregnancy and childbirth? There is no sense of shared responsibility and shared joy at the miracle of birth?"*

*“There is a penalty for breaking the mold. This you must understand.”*

*“What mold is that?”*

*“The mold of order and certainty.”*

*Celeste, my time with Dr. Rosner ran out. What I see now is that he was miffed. St. Francis did say that it was better to understand than to be understood, and if Dr. Rosner did not have it within his means to summon understanding of his patient, that did not absolve me of the responsibility of shedding the light of understanding on him, and here is what I came up with. Dr. Rosner’s primary source of income was as a hospital administrator. His therapy practice was a sideline--an important one, of course, but not central to his life. Or maybe it was central, more central than he cared to admit. Perhaps he had some insecurity about making a go of it as a full-time therapist and found himself in a competitive relationship with Dr. Frodkey. Perhaps he felt that Dr. Frodkey, in disrespecting me, had disrespected him as well. Perhaps it was Dr. Rosner who wished to pick up the phone and say to Dr. Frodkey, “What gives, Dr. Fucko Fucking Frodkey, running roughshod over my patient like that? Who the fucky fuck do you think you are?”*

*As I say, Celeste, this was with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, all I could say, as I stood to leave, was, “Are you putting your laughing thing on me? Is that what you are doing?” And here it was me showing a trace of my ire and my fire, scenting the room with it. And how did Dr. Rosner respond? Did he match my subtle fire with a little of his own? You be the judge, Celeste. I leave it to you.*

*“To be continued. Close the door behind you, please,” Dr. Rosner said.*

Pilgore did not do extractions. It did not perform abortions either. If it used those words, it was only in the pages of its books. Pilgore maintained clean lines of efficiency. It had the future to carry him forward to a place he had not been.

He had his head down when Mr. Bad Minton walked by his desk, and a good thing he did. Luther followed him with his eyes, taking in his measured, confident gait, as if Mr. Bad Minton were out inspecting the troops. The confidence of generations of successful forebears was stored in his long-distance runner's frame. Luther saw a man who could not love him for who he was but whom he could love for his flinty excellence.

Then his future came to him in another guise. Mr. Harkin stood before him with a question. "Do you proofread?" he asked, causing a great tumult in Luther's mind, the song that said there wasn't a mountain high enough a complete lie at that point, because proofreading, with its esoteric symbols, was just such a mountain.

"No, but I will find out how," Luther replied, once again giving Mr. Harkin cause to pause and cast an assessing eye upon him with all the powers of observation he could bring to bear. If Mr. Harkin was illuminating for Luther what he, Luther, didn't know, Luther had a desperate need to tell himself what he could know.

At the lunch hour he saw a woman on the street who did not belong out in daylight, not if one was to remember her as she had been only several years before in the time of Chinatown. Her beauty was as faded as her name from his consciousness. He could only recall her as the woman he had shouted down to in a nighttime moment of mad and irresistible impulse as she strode up East Broadway in her slinky garb. And if he remembered her, her eyes said she had equal recall of him. A sickly and disturbing yellow

they shone in her wan face. She seemed lost amid the purposeful workday crowd streaming from their offices, a nocturnal denizen of the art world who had strayed above Fourteenth Street. Though she embodied a kind of lost and dissolute quality too close to his own for comfort, he stopped to chat and then went with her for lunch, where he watched her put away two cheeseburgers and a side of French fries and onion rings, which she washed down with glasses of beer, a display of voraciousness that led him to wonder if she had eaten in the past week.

“You think you are on the way up and I’m on the way down, but you’re nobody, remember that,” she said, after running a napkin roughly over her grease-glistened lips.

“Is that what I think?”

“It’s written all over your face. You are like all men who fuck me in their drunken nights and then run out the door before dawn. You have a new mistress, only now it is a company, and you can be assured that it will fuck you, and most painfully, right in the ass, by stealing your life, as mine is being stolen from me by the trashy firm I work for.”

“I suppose.”

“Do not give me your suppose and other tired locutions that only suggest you are too feeble to contemplate your prospects.”

Truth bombs were in vogue, and he had to accept that he had laid some terribly stinky ones himself. If she wanted to be the queen of rant and curse him and all men, so be it, and if she wanted to dally over the remains of her meal, so be it, but order and civilization were calling him, and so he settled the bill and left her there.

Another member of the Truth Squad, though one with a higher station in life than the bedraggled woman, had a go at him that afternoon. Mr. Bad Minton summoned him to his office.

“I have decided to put you on the company payroll. Do not flatter yourself. The only test you passed was to fool an old and lonely man, Mr. Harkin, who is grateful for any bit of warmth whenever he receives it. But I am impressed that you did not look up when I walked past your desk on my reconnoitering mission. Trust me, you would have been out of here fast if you had. Your resume, of course, is total garbage and not worth wiping my ass with. It has holes in it bigger than the ones in your ugly head.”

*“When will it end, Luther? When will you discard the beat me stick for love?”*

*“When will you kiss my ass?”*

*“Juvenile. Totally juvenile in your defiance. Continue with your story.”*

“I understand, but trust me. I am here to put my best foot forward.”

“Do you understand? I have my doubts. You are an internalized creature, useless in the world because of your inability to interact with it on any basis other than grotesque subjectivism. You and your type cannot rise above the level of personal hurt and injury, which leads you to cut off more and more people until you are utterly alone with your bottles of wine. You totally lack the human dimension of love as it translates into usefulness. You are attempting to crawl out of the hole delusion has led you into but don't expect to make much progress. You will live on the edges of this experience but you will never be a full participant. You won't give it your all because you are incapable of giving it your all. You will tell yourself that you are saving yourself for your real work, but that

is false, because you are not able to give yourself to your so-called real work either. And even if you were able to give your all and fully engage, the all within you is completely worthless anyway.”

“Then why have me stay here if this is how you feel?” Luther asked.

“This is the first sign of intelligence you have shown, and so I will reward you with a fully honest answer. The editor I have assigned you to is even more worthless than you are. The difference is that his ego exists in a locked box impervious to penetration and so he is incapable of contemplating his uselessness. He lives in the world of objects and expects them to save him. Right now he is working on a bloated and utterly fatuous autobiography that he expects will make him immortal but will in fact be remaindered within weeks of its publication.”

“I’m sorry, but who is this editor? I thought I was being interviewed for Midge Haller’s position.”

“I have no intention of replacing Lucille Ball with Harpo Marx, for that is all you are under that serious affect, a clown intent on destructive mischief.”

“But Mr. Bad Minton, why are you telling me all this?”

“Because you are the kind of abject soul who promotes candor in those he meets. Why? Because anyone can see you have been beaten by life and so you pose no threat. In fact, that is your sole purpose in life to elicit such candor. This meeting is now over, and so I must ask you to get out immediately.”

Luther had taken a happy pill on learning of his summons to the office of Mr. Bad Minton. I am being buffeted by a storm of pleasure pain, he said to himself on emerging

from the interview, though what kind of interview was that when the interviewer asked him nothing and told him everything?

“He roughs up everyone,” said a young woman with blond hair and a round and pleasantly amused face. Fluffy Baxter, Mr. Bad Minton’s secretary, smiled, inviting Luther into her warmth.

“It helps me to know that. Thank you,” Luther said, with genuine gratitude.

As he left, Fluffy called to him. “One question, please.”

“Yes?”

“What on earth happened to your ass? You have no ass in those pants you are wearing.”

“That is because it fell off and Mr. Bad Minton handed it to me and I have placed it in my pocket for reinstallation in a private space. We live in a strange world, Fluffy,” Luther replied.

“A very strange world. All the more reason to try to make sense of it, wouldn’t you say?”

“I will take what you say under advisement,” Luther said.

“Advisement? I like that,” Fluffy said.

His resume had come across her desk before its delivery into the hands of Mr. Bad Minton. She had seen its pathetic quality, notably the degree from a lackluster college, and the ludicrous embellishment. She herself had worn the green of Dartmouth College, in keeping with a long lineage of excellence. A high board score woman with formidable intelligence waited for him behind that smile.



“Fluffy, the idea is to emerge. This strikes me strongly in the moment. What do you think?”

“I think you should go back to your desk, Luther,” she said, not unkindly.

“What I mean, Fluffy, is why are you, with your smarts, not applying it to the manuscripts under contract to Pilgore Press or submitted for possible inclusion in the Pilgore family of books? Are you hiding your light or loaning it to others so that it can make them look shinier than they possibly could in their own light? To whom or what are you in bondage that you display such smiling servitude?”

“I said go back to your desk, Luther.”

“Well, I will do just that,” Luther said, in a voice not quite his own.

For his edification Luther read *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, by the great Joan Didion; *Humboldt's Gift*, by the still greater Saul Bellow; *The Berlin Stories*, by Christopher Isherwood, whose Englishness knew no bounds; and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig, whose wisdom ran deeper than his need for the hidden passageways of life.

In dreamland he entered the apartment of Sol Reisner, his CCNY writing teacher. He came to the apartment like an unholy thief in the night. The break-in was a bold one, as he had forced his way into the domain of masculinity. Waves of terror passed through him at the prospect of discovery. He could only imagine the shock and revulsion, never mind the retribution, Sol Reisner would mete out for his unwelcome intrusion.

In the ponder place the next morning Luther asked himself why Sol Reisner and not Hinckner Thor? The answer came to him immediately. Hincker Thor was not a man. Hinckner Thor was Hinckner Thor. But Sol Reisner was a man. Sol Reisner had flown B-52s during World War II in bombing raids over Nazi Germany. Sol Reisner had gone places through his aptitudes and his courage that Luther would never go, and yet it was imperative that Luther enter Sol Reisner's world in whatever way he could. Whether this was love or not is not the point, as necessity always has its reasons.

In the real world his mother prayed that he would get a job so he could rise above the failure gulch others in the family had fallen into and reunite himself with normalcy, as she did see, with her canny eyes, that irregularity had been a feature of his daily life for some years now. There was food that was normal and there was a way of life that was normal, she was saying, and she would know it when she felt it about her second son. And here Luther could have wept at the shaming realization that his mother did not want him to suck in his vanity at the bitter weed of failure, that she was not asking him to renounce the world, but to rise in it. Because his mother was not his mother in one way only. She had her ambiguity and ambivalence too, her highways and byways not all leading in the same direction. Whatever he might think, when she said, "The world has nothing that I want," she might have been speaking for herself but not for him, and maybe not even for herself but only for a part of herself.

“Do you pray, my son? Have you begun to feel the presence of the Lord? Are your searching days almost over?” These questions his mother addressed to him, and if he could not consider them anymore than he did, then so be it.

*Celeste, I was not ready to take responsibility for my actions, let alone my thoughts. For this can I be forgiven? And yes, I hear you saying I sometimes come to you too often. Do not doubt that I hear everything. Everything.*

Luther had heard it said that women were attracted to the men of power and would likely get down with them in a heartbeat, whether such men had attractiveness on their side or not. The statement was one he embraced as a general truth, though he was not certain a woman could ever disregard a man's appearance anymore than a man could disregard a woman's appearance.

Home after his session with Mr. Bad Minton and his exchange with Fluffy Baxter, he had an urgent need to escape to less taxing territories. Normally, while he was attempting to drink himself free, he did not give himself to other activities, as he did not want to be distracted from the effect of the alcohol as it was going down. But on this evening he noticed wrappers on the kitchen counter and because they became an affront to his eye, he swung into action and disposed of them. As he reached into the garbage can, he suddenly jerked his hand back and yowled in pain, having cut himself on a piece of glass. The wound was between the index and middle fingers of his right hand.

Hermione had waxed profound about the deliberate malice of inanimate objects, and

while here was a blatant example, he took no direct action against it. Waste belongs with waste, he declared, and so left it to its own malevolence.

But now something more was calling him from a full focus on the glass of red wine in his tissue-wrapped hand. The phone rang with an insistence he could not ignore. It was Claire on the line, and so he had to bring full attention to bear, as it was long ago established that she was not just anyone in his mind. Gerhard Kleiner, the Austrian-American photojournalist and friend of the Van Dines whom Luther remembered most for his lascivious intent and sex wife, Sandra, had called Claire to him. Gerhard did not call to Claire with the express purpose of lying down with her, but he was in need of someone with an Ivy League-caliber mind to manage his business affairs in the office he had built in his home in Riverdale. By Gerhard's reasoning, the American government had plenty of money, so what did it need with his? Furthermore, what did it need with a chunk of the well-earned salary of his employee, Claire Van Dine?

"He has me working off the books, and now that it is tax season I am worried that I can get in serious trouble with the IRS. I don't mean to impose, but do you have an accountant you could recommend, now that you are in the job world and drawing a salary?"

"H & R Block. They're my tax accountant. I make a pittance, but even so, the simplest tax form intimidates me, and so I pay for their services."

"Well, thank you, Luther. I feel I shouldn't be burdening you with my problem."

"It's not a burden at all," Luther said, making an effort to stay on track. He understood the caliber of the mind he was engaging with, and was determined not to be

lulled by her diffident manner into the swirl of subjectivity, as he sometimes could. Always with Claire he strained to be at his best, even knowing that she had placed him on the same plane as the family's Estonian maid. But now he sensed that she was regarding him differently. It could only be the fact that he was working for a publishing company. He was somebody in her eyes. At the same time, his newfound status came with added pressure. If he wasn't careful to avoid lurching into dumbness, she would lower him as quickly as she had raised him. One deviation from the fine line she was forcing him to walk was all it would take to ruin things because Claire had Barnard power, as Susan Sontag had Barnard power.

“The problem is that Gerhard is something of a slave driver and only see things from his point of view.”

“Then maybe Gerhard is your problem, not the IRS.”

“That's what others say, too. But what can I do?”

“You can consider leaving.”

“But I don't know where I would go or who would have me. We don't have a strong relationship to the work world in my family, as you may have seen.”

“You're a phi beta kappa graduate of Hunter College. All kinds of doors are open for you to walk through.” The things that came out of his mouth that he should speak from such a lofty, assured plane. Was it not just like him to pretend to a wisdom he did not possess? So his thoughts went.

“Phi Beta Kappa doesn’t mean anything. I ran away from Barnard and took six years to graduate. But that’s enough about me. How about you, Luther? Are you happy with your job?”

“I haven’t really started yet. I will know more next week when I meet with the editor I will be working for. He is away this week. In fact, he may decide he doesn’t like my face and tell me to get out.”

“That won’t happen,” Claire assured him.

“It’s strange.”

“What is strange?”

“My hand. I cut it on a piece of glass and a half hour later it is still bleeding. The bleeding has taken on a life of its own.”

“Luther, you need to go to the emergency room. I know someone who passed out because of loss of blood.”

“I am feeling a little lightheaded. I will see what I can do.”

“That doesn’t sound very decisive for a budding publishing executive,” Claire chided.

“No, I don’t suppose so,” Luther acknowledged, even as he made a face at her.

“You have to believe that you are worthy of medical attention. If I may say so, you have spent a lot of time hiding.”

“Hiding how?” Something was shifting. Was Claire about to lay a smelly truth bomb on him?

“Well, year after year you say you are a writer, for example, but we never see any of your writing. Now, at least, you can say you are doing something and we can be reasonably certain you are actually doing it.”

“I guess so.”

“Now go to the hospital before you lose consciousness. It would be a shame if you were to die just as you were beginning to blossom and take your rightful place in society.”

The light of reason was clearly within Claire, and yet was it right that he should have to leave the bottle behind and step into the dark of night? How the wine was calling to him, and yet he made his way crosstown. A doctor was there for him at St. Vincent’s Hospital to stanch the flow of blood with needle and thread.

Luther rushed home happy to find that Sarah had not yet returned. Now he could finish the job he had started and also drain the second bottle he had brought in. She had some words for him when she did arrive.

“This drunkenness, Luther. I can’t take it.”

He showed her his sewn-up hand but it was of no avail, and so he gave her some of his own stuff, saying, “The women on the hill draw ever closer.”

“That’s right. We have your number,” she replied.

What stood out, initially, in the Perigree interview, were Mr. Samuel Dorf’s red suspenders and red socks, so much so that Mr. Dorf, seeing Luther’s attention to them, was called to explain.

“Imagine that you are a sprinter. Your first priority is to get out of the box. And that is what we are trying to do at the beginning of the work week. Have no illusions about it. We are in a race, and can a sprinter hope to beat everyone to the finish line without an abundance of energy? And so, what is color but energy? These suspenders and socks are enabling me to cross the finish line. Marc Chagall, were he alive today, would say the same. Energy is what makes the world go around. Energy is God. And so my question to you, you young yet old man, and I say both because you have both within you, is this—do you have energy? I will be frank. What I am primarily sensing are lassitude and passivity and a cloud of un-American darkness. Speak to me.”

Mr. Dorf was intimidating. Luther felt like easy prey before a ravenous and yet amused lion. “I have the energy of my intentions,” he replied.

“The energy of your intentions.” Mr. Dorf said, as if he were sampling a morsel of food before delivering a verdict. “Is that a made-up phrase? A literary reference?”

“It is only the truth. That is all I can say.”

“Well, I like it,” Mr. Dorf declared, slapping his knee, having convinced himself long ago that his opinion mattered. “As you may have noticed, I am alive to language. Speaking of language, but also of music, which is a language in its own right, there is something less than mellifluous about your last name. It’s a hard one, all right. How would you feel about giving it a shave?”

“A shave?”

“That’s right, or a trim, if you prefer. You’re in America. The idea is to blend in, not stick out. People will remember instances, going back to grade school, of being



unable to spell or even pronounce certain difficult names. They will feel humiliated and that sense of humiliation will turn to anger, and they will seek to punish you in a myriad of ways. I live comfortably in the realm of the paranormal and strongly intuit that you have had this animosity directed your way since childhood, whether you are aware of it or not. Tell me the truth now. Don't you want to be free of that burden?"

Mr. Dorf was not young. According to Midge Haller, he was a septuagenarian. Luther saw before him a man who raged against the dying of the light not only with his red suspenders and red socks but the cool plastic frames for his glasses and a watch with a bright yellow face surely luminous in the dark. Luther saw too the nips and tucks and lifts that gave his countenance a taut smoothness unmatched by his wrinkled and veiny and liver-spotted hands.

"Well, now that you say so, it has felt hard," Luther replied, thinking of the countless times attention had been called to his name by new acquaintances and the shame he would feel on being identified with a father and his tribe. "But what are you proposing?"

"I will be away on business for several days, but between now and then we'll come up with a satisfactory alternative and go from there. What do you say?"

The weight of Mr. Dorf was upon him, the pressure coming from the fixed, intent expression he beamed through the lenses of his bifocals.

"I, I don't..."

"Say no more. I hear the hesitation in your voice. Just so you know. I was born Dorfovich, to Russian Jewish parents. Do you see this corner office and the books by

internationally famous authors I have published? None of this would likely have happened had I retained my patronymic. The freedom is given you to reinvent yourself in America, but it is for you to unchain yourself from ancient sorrows and avail yourself of this freedom so you may become the American you want to be.”

How strange, Luther thought, that all Mr. Dorf’s boasting should gain him so little stature. And yet, he was powerful, and Luther did not want to incur his displeasure by seeming recalcitrant. “I will give the matter my full consideration.”

Mr. Dorf ignored the seeming pompousness of Luther’s reply.

“You have passed muster with me on condition that you practice habits of good grooming on your surname, but you must also now pass through my one-person security apparatus, that being my assistant these past two years whom you will be replacing. He goes by the name Jack de Goines and the iciness of his blue eyes is more than offset by the incandescence of his mind.”

“Did I hear you say Jack de Goines?”

“You certainly did,” Mr. Dorf replied, with decided emphasis.

“Well, I will meet with whatever is on my path,” Luther said.

“You certainly will,” Mr. Dorf said, staying true to the firmness he had established and ushering Luther from his office.

*Celeste, love will always be the answer. You will say I state the obvious apropos of nothing, and that may be, but I had the great urge to declare my love for Mr. Dorf just now. A false emotion surely, as at the time, in truth, I could only fear him. I am trying, Celeste. I am truly trying, but sometimes I have my doubts about this attention to the*

*minutiae of my own existence, as surely there are more heroic endeavors one could contemplate undertaking.*

Luther returned to dreamland that night. Hinckner Thor was waiting for him with a story printed on slick yellow paper. A brilliant story, Luther was sure. Hinckner Thor was not present, but his story was, right there on the floor as Luther stared down from the loft bed. Once again enraged that he could not stop the wheel of success from turning for the despicable one, he climbed from the loft bed with the intention of pulling down his pajama bottom and fecal bombing the story. Qualms about a bombing run having surfaced, he found himself precariously balanced on an elevator with a floor but no walls or ceiling, a space he shared with his high school rival Tom Smits and a black man he had not seen before. A slight shift in Luther's position led to the black man falling off the platform, to which he now clung by his fingertips. Paralyzed by fear for his own safety, Luther was unable to extend a hand to the man, who soon plunged down the deep shaft to his death.

Luther was awakened early by a cough he had developed. I am full of malice toward the world. I curse it as the Pentecostal pastors of my childhood did. And I do not help my fellow man. These things Luther confessed, whispering to the bathroom wall so Sarah might not hear.

As he waited for the light the further thought came to him that he would soon receive a call that his mother was dead. A family member, Luke or Hannah, would give

him the news. And in fact the phone did ring, and Luke was on the line, but he had no family demise to report.

“Did you know our father’s father knew Tolstoy and that Tolstoy stopped by our house quite often and even gave our grandfather a book with his signature?”

“Where was this?” Luther asked.

“Somewhere. Wherever Armenia was. In Turkey someplace. Constantinople. Where they lived.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Why? Because you’re a writer. At least you say you are. And Tolstoy was a writer too. You see. We do have greatness in our family.”

“Luke?”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?”

“I don’t know,” Luther said, and hung up.

Luther’s lunch date with Jack de Goines was even more painful than he had anticipated. Throughout their time together in the noisy restaurant the conviction only grew that he was with his better. The young man, possessed with a powerful mesomorphic body and equally powerful mind, seemed to stare at him with cold blue eyes devoid of warmth and kindness. Jack was only two years out of the University of Chicago, and Luther, understanding the high board score action required to matriculate at such a prestigious

school, could only, as their time together progressed, feel more and more worn down. Jack's words came at him with forceful clarity, expelled past his strong white teeth and full lips. Methodically, Jack briefed Luther on the ins and outs of Dorfdom, as he scornfully referred to the world of his now former boss and offered him meticulously detailed notes.

About his anxiety Luther freely confessed.

“How is it that my feet are so much bigger than yours and yet I feel certain I will not be able to fill your shoes?” Luther exclaimed, as they headed back to the office. Uproarious laughter erupted from Jack de Goines, shattering the mask of stern stolidity that had gripped his noble face. Whether the laughter was benign or mocking, Luther was left to judge, as not another word was spoken by Jack deGoines to him on that day.

Luther was at the gray steel desk vacated by formidable Jack de Goines on Monday of the following week. The desk was situated at one end of the floor, given that Mr. Dorf was the most senior of editors and thus worthy of a corner office. The location gave Luther the advantage of sitting with his back turned as he applied himself at the monstrous Olympia electric typewriter he had inherited. He would have to see only the wall and not a face before him, and could talk to that wall under his breath and in code, should listening devices be within the vicinity. That morning, before showing his face, he had taken a vow of stringency, committing himself to speaking only the highest quality words to those he was obliged to interact with in the course of the workday. There would be

nothing extraneous to summon riotous laughter at his expense, except for those that called for expression.

Mr. Dorf arrived in a navy blue suit and a luminous red tie. All Luther's systems were on high alert as to a judicious time to make his presence known in the doorway of Mr. Dorf's office that they might have a tete a tete about the issue raised some days before. By 11 am, Luther could wait no more.

"Sir, may I have a moment of your time?" Luther asked, in a halting voice.

"What is it?" Mr. Dorf said, in blunt executive mode.

"It is only this. I have come to the office this morning better groomed than I have been in years, and perhaps ever," Luther said.

"I'm not catching your drift," Mr. Dorf replied.

"My name is Luther Hedberg, from this day forward," Luther announced. "That is 'Hed' without an 'a,' if you please," he went on.

"Hedberg. Hedberg." Mr. Dorf put his nose to the air, as if names had a scent test they must pass. "What kind of name is that?"

"It is my mother's maiden name, and lighter on the tongue and brighter in the colors that it conjures than this other."

"I suggested that you shave your name, not replace it with another," Mr. Dorf said.

"This is true," Luther said, "but I have seen the way forward, the path I must take."

For the first time Mr. Dorf gave him the Edward Harkin look, that is, one of severe assessment, as if seeking signs of disturbance in his new editorial assistant, before relenting. “Very well,” he said.

But the matter did not end there. Exercising his executive capacity, Mr. Dorf said, “Here is what we do. I want you to write a memo as to your name change and circulate it throughout the company so your new life can begin. And oh, yes, congratulations. Now get to it.”

To All Who May Be Concerned:

My journey has been made lighter by the name change I have instituted at the behest of Mr. Dorf. From now on I will answer to Luther Hedberg, not Luther Garatdjian, to facilitate the operation of Pilgore Press. A surname should not be a challenge; it should be a joy, and manifest American efficiency.

I could say more, but this is a memo, and so brevity is called for.

Luther Hedberg

The memo having been circulated, the men and women of Pilgore began appearing at his desk. For some, the pilgrimage was lengthy, from one end of the floor to the other. Others came from just down the hall. Whether strangers or acquaintances, all arrived with looks ranging from puzzlement to incredulity.

“Surely this is a joke,” the men and women of Pilgore said, “the product of your bizarre imagination.”

Their presence summoned his own confusion, as it had not occurred to him to consider that the memo would elicit such a strong and virtually universal reaction. In fact, he had expected no reaction whatsoever. And why should he?

“No, it’s not a joke at all,” Luther said. “Mr. Dorf had my best interest in mind when he asked me to give my name, which is difficult to spell, a shave. I did Mr. Dorf one better by coming up with an entirely different name, belonging to my mother. In that way the name stays in the family.”

“Now you are joking,” these members of the Pilgore family said.

“Trust me, please,” Luther said. “I do not have the imagination or the inclination for such a joke.”

“But your name is your name. It has been yours from birth. It is not for anyone to make such an outrageous request of you. Besides, we are literate. We are all capable of learning to spell even a difficult name. And your name is not so difficult. Besides, it is a beautiful name.”

In such a way did they speak to him, so free with their health and their amour propre, leaving him no choice but to fill the void created by their departure with dislike that only grew in intensity that they should try to unsettle him by injecting their vicious brand of ambiguity, their nuanced thinking, whatever they could do to promote anxiety and conflict and dare to raise the prospect that he had been violated by Mr. Dorf, against whom no insurrection could be raised lest he, Luther, die and die and die. No, no, it was for people to make nice and be nice. He did not need for people to divert him from the road he had chosen. He did not need the children of chaos at his door.



Then one came, not as part of a delegation, but on her own. Her journey was not a long one, as she occupied the tiny office just a few steps from Luther's desk. A windowless office it was, with barely room for a second chair, but her vitality enabled Luther to understand that it was but a steppingstone to bigger things, that the sheer cliff of her ample forehead housed a brain with torquing power propelling her to higher ground. Like the Wife of Bath, she was gap-toothed, a feature that suggested to him, for some reason, sexual appetite. She spoke sotto voce and seductively, wired for intensity. She was one of the bright young stars of Pilgore. Her name was Judith Everholt.

It was not an exaggeration to say she froze him in the space he inhabited for the simple reason that she conveyed he was better than he knew he ever could be.

"You don't have to be this way," she said.

"I don't have to be what way?"

"You don't have to give yourself away."

She had a face that had elongated past beauty. It was her wound, the thing that had driven her into the domain of literature. In that moment he intuited how it would be to be with her, the responses and even the sounds she would make as they touched.

"And how have I done that?"

"This," she said, holding between two fingers a copy of his now infamous memo, summoning an image of stinky drawers held up by the camp counselor for the Christ Jesus as damning evidence with which to confront the stink-making boy himself.

"Perhaps I have simply returned me to myself," he said.

“You haven’t,” she said, with finality and fire sufficient to bring a blaze to her eyes.

“You don’t know what it’s like.”

“I don’t know what what is like? I sit in editorial meetings with that man once a week. I could tell you plenty as to what it is like. The man is arrogance personified.”

The memo fell to his desk as she released her grip, as if she needed to be free of its contaminating presence. She left him with it and closed her office door tight.

He saw immediately. She had come seeking an alliance against the patriarch, the very cause that Sarah had enlisted him in back when. And yet here he was an apologist for the patriarch, little more than the patriarch’s handmaiden. This woman Everholt would drive him deep into the waters of shame, as would they all, but did they not see that his rejection of his father’s name *was* his anti-patriarchal stance, even if it didn’t feel like it? He sensed he was not on solid ground. Something was wrong, very wrong. Or maybe something was different, that was all. Maybe he was different. Maybe my train has gotten switched to a different track, he thought. Maybe it is only that.

That night, in dreamland, the men and women of Pilgore lifted him on their shoulders time and again, against his will, and in the morning he woke with his resistance solidified. He would stay the course. Hedberg he would remain. And though, in the course of the workday that followed he heard the laughing thing put on him by two fellow editorial assistants regarding his name change he remained undeterred.

Mr. Dorf showed Luther a different face that afternoon, the face of drunken rage, when he came back from his lunch date in the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel. He was

peaceable enough until he saw on his desk the blues of a biography of Billy Wilder. The copyediting department had checked the proofs and now it was for Mr. Dorf to give them his blessing before they were returned to the printer. But how was he to approve such proofs when the English publisher, not Pilgore, appeared on the full title page as well as the copyright page? Questions such as these he fired at Luther, who stared in bewilderment at what appeared to be two sets of proofs.

“Have I hired a complete ignoramus? You leave this pile of crap on my desk for me to deal with?” Mr. Dorf drew savage lines with a magic marker across the offending pages and threw the whole thing on the carpeted floor. “Get them out of here and get them out of here now,” he said.

Luther retrieved the proofs from the floor and hurried with them into the office of the managing editor, Houghton Marks.

“There’s some kind of problem with the proofs, according to Mr. Dorf. Could I ask you to take a look?” Luther asked, wild-eyed with panic.

Houghton Marks had a trim beard. He also had a degree from Williams College and wore pants with cuffs. He could be counted on to make sense where none had been. “There’s nothing wrong with these proofs,” he said, after inspecting them for a minute. “We’re doing a joint press run with the British publisher. That’s all this is.”

“Mr. Dorf is pretty upset,” Luther said.

“I’ll speak with him,” Houghton said.

He is bringing order as well as sense where none has been, Luther thought. He stared at Houghton Marks in amazement and followed the huge man, who strode into the

office of Mr. Dorf, where he gave Luther's boss the same lucid and calming explanation he had offered to Luther.

"I have a novice on my hands," Mr. Dorf said to Houghton Marks. Turning to Luther, he said, "You have a lot to learn if you want to stay here. Now let's carry on."

Out of earshot of Mr. Dorf, Houghton Marks said, "Sometimes, not often, he has one too many and comes back from lunch in a state. Let it roll right off you."

"But he's right. I'm completely ignorant."

Houghton Marks pulled from his shelf a book with an orange cover. "This is an extra copy of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Read it from cover to cover and you'll know as much as anyone here. It's an extra copy I had lying around. I won't need it back."

"Thank you," Luther said. In that moment he had found another older brother he could love from a distance, even if Houghton Marks was likely younger than him.

Now this was a time of transition at Pilgore. The company had been sold to a West Coast entertainment corporation, MBI. Many in the industry feared MBI would want to put sunglasses on the hardcover books that Pilgore published and in other ways give their product a Hollywood stamp. But MBI said it had no such intentions and allayed any fear that Mr. Bad Minton might have that it would oust him from his presidency and put an end to the family leadership of the company, which had been founded by his great-grandfather.

And yet there were rumblings of change, mainly in the hiring of Ellen Gruen, formerly with Simon & Shuster, as the editor-in-chief. She was forward-moving,

unsentimental, pragmatic. She was also commercial. She wanted big books, blockbuster books. Never mind the mid-list author whose readership would grow as his talent was nurtured by a supportive editor. Ellen Gruen wasn't interested in a farm system. She was willing to shell out for proven talent, the free agent slugger with the fences clearing swing. The backlist meant nothing to her, and never would. It was all front list action. She disposed of old books as she did old clothes. Into the Goodwill bag with all of that.

Ellen Gruen was married to a doctor, and not just a doctor but a surgeon, and they were on water as well as on land. "My husband has just left the marina with our boat," she shouted, in the way of a general announcement, as she power-walked her way into her office one afternoon. The vibration of her strong voice could be felt on your skin.

There were those Ellen Gruen, who shone with Barnard brightness, loved, and then there were those she did not see, and Luther considered himself decidedly among the latter should he be unfortunate enough to cross paths with her and experience her annihilating gaze. She was a woman of dark beauty, but she was a woman of power and ferocious will first, which she wore with demanding authority.

"How are you, Harry. Is the new maid all right? Do you need anything, Harry?" This too was a voice, tender and solicitous, but not one that traveled more than a few feet from Edward Harkin's office. A voice of the old, and soon to be discarded.

And soon there was another voice, accompanied by a smile, overheard in the common area, that of Mr. Bad Minton, saying, in response to a query by Ellen Gruen, "Go to hell." And then there was the voice of Ellen Gruen, saying, "Oh, Bad, that's not nice," more in sadness than in reproach, because she knew what he had come to know,

that she was on the way up and he was on the way down, and there was no need to expend anger and energy on one who was soon to be discarded, even if he had gone against her with such disrespectful and damning words.

A woman of clobber had arrived, and Luther was in her ambivalent thrall.

“That man, he got some idea in his head he at his home, coming to me with his Con Ed and telephone bills. That don’t sit right with me. This a company, you dig? This ain’t no personal bill-paying service. And what the hell is this big-ass thing?” Gene B. Goode said, rising up in theatrical protest against the jumbo-sized jiffy bag heavy with books that Mr. Dorf had dispatched Luther with to the mailroom. Gene B. Goode, being the mailroom manager, didn’t want to say too much and he didn’t want to say too little. He had put a knowing look on Luther, seeking to discern his essence, and was quickly sure that Luther would lend him his ear and, in the unlikely event that Luther did not lend him his ear, could bend him to his will so he would.

“Mr. Dorf is a collector of rare books, I have learned, since I began to work for him. His main occupation is to study manuscripts to ensure they are fit for publication, but he does have this sideline activity and it may very well be his passion. He needs a clear mind for his primary work during the day, and so he is asking for your services so he can give his full attention to Pilgore. Is this something you can do?”

“Is something I have been doing. Don’t mean I like it. Why don’t he bring me his dirty laundry while he at it?”

“Yes, I understand.” Luther said, because he did. Mr. Dorf was taking a liberty and it went against his, Luther’s, grain as well that this should be so. At the same time, Mr. Dorf was his boss, and so some allegiance was owed. It would not do to be caught talking bad about him with the gray-smocked men of the mailroom.

“Why you let that man fuck with you?”

“How do you mean?”

“Why you let that man take your name away from you? A name is something to be proud of.”

“You know about that?”

“How I not know about that when you tell everyone yourself.”

Marion Rheingold entered. Black-haired. Pretty. His lustful veneration elicited.

“Hey, there, Gene. This has to go out for next day delivery. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, I can. I was just telling this young man what I can’t so easily do, but never mind. You don’t need to know all that,” Gene B. Goode said.

Miriam put a steady gaze on Luther. “You’re the one who changed his name.”

“Yes,” Luther said.

“Why would you do that?” Marion asked.

“It wasn’t fully my idea.”

“So I’ve heard. But it’s your name. Do you understand that?”

He couldn’t tell if her question was a scornful or compassionate inquiry.

“I do, but...”

“You need to respect yourself, and you’re not doing it,” Marion said.

“How do you get to say such a thing?”

“How do I get to say what? The truth?”

Luther started to leave.

“Don’t be running off just because the truth be present. The truth be good for you,” Gene B. Goode said.

Luther had it neither in his heart nor his cojones to go against Gene B. Goode with harsh words to the effect that the czar of the mailroom should mind his own business, and he lacked the same to deal with sober-eyed, heartbreakingly beautiful Marion Rheingold. “Is it? Is it so good for me?” he replied, before going on his way.

“OK to ask that question,” Gene B. Goode called after him, “so long as you can answer it.”

Luther, despite all the name change consternation, had it in his mind to love Marion Rheingold, and to love her good, in the carnal and the heart to heart sense. She was his new Edie Alsbury, a woman with full hips, a lift to her round buttocks, and lips that promised a soft landing for his own. And she had something else, a dark side that was waiting to be tapped. Of this he was certain when, from across the floor, he saw her skipping rope in some complicated pattern in front of her desk, staring at him brazenly as she did. She had given him a mountain to climb after knocking him into the hole of shame, but life was now calling him to the challenge.

*Marion, my mind is fully on you. I have a ponder place reserved entirely for*



*you. You are my answer and my problem, all in one. I won't rest until I see you dancing in the fires of the night, because where timidity ends success begins and I must cross that line again and again so I may live. This is my declaration of intent.*

*Celeste, I need the canvas of eternity on which to draw. This came to me the other day, too.*

Mr. Dorf was not someone to go against with words, or even thoughts, let alone deeds. He was of a piece with his own acquisitive and driven self. There were no cracks in the surface he presented. He met you as a ferocious, if smiling, package of will.

“Stay sober,” were Mr. Dorf’s farewell words to Luther at the end of each workday as he sailed out of his office. Mr. Dorf lived in the language, as editors must, Luther was certain; he was just displaying his flair for originality. The possibility that Mr. Dorf might be giving a piece of advice never entered Luther’s mind, and why should it? Did Luther not brush his teeth every morning, and did not Colgate toothpaste purge any smell related to alcohol?

Sarah too told him to stay sober, but she didn’t tell him in just that way.

“You come home and break out the beer and the wine, night after night, week after week. It doesn’t end.” Talking to him that way because she had been with the women on the hill with the baked beans. Because she had been at a drawing session down in Brooklyn at Carola Aprile’s. Going where she didn’t belong in talking about his drinking. Not supposed to do that. Not supposed to do that at all.

The next night he came home with his bag of tallboys and his wine and drank and drank, and when his fury could not contain itself, went against Sarah with words, saying, “Don’t ever criticize me for my drinking again. Do you hear me?”

But Sarah had words of her own, and she had an action of her own. “One day you’re going to go too far with me, and then we’ll both be sorry,” she said, her face livid. Some deadly earnestness in her voice made Luther recalibrate his emotions and go belly up where moments before there had been only fire. Because Sarah’s fire was proving bigger than his fire and had right and moral outrage to fuel it, while his had only fear, the fear that the only thing that made his life worthwhile would be taken away.

A line had come close to being crossed. Even drunk, he sensed as much. And so he pulled back within his own borders and a measure of harmony reigned for the next few days. The Memorial Day weekend came and Sarah joined her family at Camp, with the understanding that Luther would be there the following day.

Work let out early, and so his drinking began early, and with every hour his longing for Marion Rheingold grew. Images came to him of her skipping rope in only her bra and panties. In a moment of seeming clarity, he saw his job as a new chapter, a turning, a reclamation of normalcy after the aberrational period that began with his adventure in the renting office and the Chinatown years up through his homicidal/suicidal ideation and the advent of Dr. Rosner and now Pilgore. Sarah and he were not suitable for each other anymore, if they ever had been. He needed someone more adaptable in the world and yet someone who could take him into her darkness. More bluntly, he needed someone with a round, exquisitely shaped bottom, such as Marion Rheingold.

The next afternoon he entered a bar on Eighth Avenue, across from the Port Authority Bus Terminal, where the drinks were cheaper and the patrons older and the lights were not turned down low and the toilet smelled. He hoped to sober up on the three-hour bus ride to Camp, but when he arrived every cell in his body was screaming for a drink. And yet the need wasn't only physical. How was he to talk with Sarah about separating without such fortification? How would he deal with the guilt, the horror of betraying the one he professed to love and did in fact, in his destructive fashion, love more than anyone on the planet? Better to be left, for all the pain that brought, than to leave.

The Van Dines were up at the lean-to that evening with Maggio Capici and his wife, Sally, for drinks and steaks cooked on the grill. The warm night was perfect for staying on the mountain. But their plans suddenly changed when the loud, insistent sound of gunfire, four booming reports of a rifle coming from the direction of the main house, roused them from their sleeping bags. The initial plan was for Peter and Maggio to hurry down in the jeep, but Lydia and Sally were too concerned and frightened to stay behind.

Their worst fear, that they would find their daughter dead of multiple gunshot wounds, was not realized. She was alive and unharmed, though dazed and shaken. Luther had taken a single-shot rifle from the gun rack and loaded it with a cartridge several times out on the front porch and fired up at the stars. He was now in the bathroom, passed out on the floor, having had too much to drink, Sarah said.

“I will not lose another daughter. Do you hear me? I will not,” Lydia said, with more emotion than Sarah had ever heard from her, except for her stage appearances. The tears in her mother’s eyes shook Sarah and summoned her own and they both hugged.

“We must think about this. Do you understand? We must,” Lydia continued, with the same urgency and insistence.

Sarah was stunned by her mother’s expression of love. She had been brought to a strange land, emotionally speaking. She was no more her mother’s daughter than Luther was his father’s son. She could come to visit, but she could not stay.

Luther came to with the morning light. They had left him to his drunkenness on the bathroom floor, though Sarah had covered him with a light blanket and placed a pillow under his head. He could recall taking the rifle from the rack and the cartridges from the drawer and the power of the boom-boom rifle as he targeted the stars, but he had no memory of leaving the porch to seek the comfort of the bathroom floor.

A committee of the righteous awaited him. Though generally drawn from holier than thou religious communities, potential recruits were to be found in secular circles as well. Luther drifted through the day as if a gray barrier had come down between him and the family. They seemed to go where he was not and when he came toward them they dispersed. All the while their silence grew loud, deafening, and the judgment masks they wore rendered their faces uniform. They had seen a monster and were afraid, and more than afraid, repulsed. Countless dinners, an open invitation to their home, the provision of bail money when he had nowhere else to turn. And this was what he gave them in return, along with the sense that the next time it could be worse.

Maggio came to him that afternoon, his oiled head gleaming in the sun as if a herald of his priapic power. He had misbehavior in his past as well, some hard and boozy nights. Life wasn't always easy. He was trying to be kind, but they were not each other's kind. There was no language they could speak to bring ease to their exchanges.

An attitude of grievance began to grow in Luther. The phony baloney brigade, the tsk tsk brigade, conceptions such as these entered his thought stream. Wasn't it just like them to kick a person when he was down? And now they would try to turn Sarah against him, as people of their kind did, so she could remain in the house of incest forever and her father would have full access to her ear as now he had to her mother's. He put a chuckle on the whole thing while staring into the blackness outside the window of the Pine Hill Trailways bus bound for New York City.

He had, at some cost, accomplished his mission. He had left Sarah without leaving her. If anyone had left, it was she by staying with her family. Not that there was any risk she would stay away forever. The family offered her nothing but a stable sterility. She was as terrified of being sucked back into that patriarchal orbit as he had been of being stashed in some room of the building back in the days when his family still managed it.

Without her monitoring presence, he was free to drink in the morning. He began with beer for breakfast and was onto the wine two hours later and fed his mind with *Screw* magazine. Soon the time had come for action. He reached for the phone book and found an M. Rheingold. Her phone number was listed but not her address. Luther could understand. She did not want admiration choirs outside her door.

And there she was on the line. It was as simple as that.

“How are you? I love your voice. When do you want to come over and fuck me? I’m so high. My pussy is so wet. Can you make it soon?”

Whatever darkness Luther had been living in was instantly dispelled by a brilliant inner sunlight. All he had been looking for was a little acceptance, and now he had received it in a big and stunning way. Anxiously he applied a razor to his face to remove the shadow that had formed. Soon, his lady love had said, and so he must hurry. There was no time for a shower, and so he washed under his arms at the sink and applied deodorant. Wearing a clean shirt, he raced out the door and into a cab—a bus or subway would not do given the proclivity toward vicious dawdling some drivers and motormen were infected with. The address Marion had supplied was on Park Avenue and Forty-first Street. The driver let him out on the northeast corner. Luther followed the downward slope of the block toward Grand Central Terminal. Marion lived here, on this block? He saw nothing resembling a residential building.

He came to a red door with the number she had given him. It was a private entrance on the street level. How strange, and yet fitting, that Marion should live behind a door of that color, making of it her passion statement.

He knocked and soon a woman, dark-skinned and thick in body and middle-aged, appeared. “What I can do for you? Are you here for the business?” she asked. A look of lasciviousness came to her face, as if to convey exactly the business she had in mind, but what Luther mainly saw was her two gold front teeth and the thin mustache above her

upper lip. His gaze then was directed past her to the murky, cave-like dwelling dimly lit with a red bulb burning in the ceiling fixture.

“I, I don’t know,” he said, backing away slowly, as if the forces of malignancy would grab him were he to make a dash for it.

How can such a mistake be? He asked himself, unwilling to believe he could have substituted a number in *Screw* magazine for the one he had found in the white pages. There are mysteries abounding and by their nature confounding, he could only think, as he tried to race free of his despair.

In dreamland Marion Rheingold forsook her elusiveness and appeared to him, but quickly was joined by a young man from the company who filled his jeans so well and showed an attitude of reservation about Luther, as if to say that Luther was not of Marion’s kind and so she should not be alone with him. Now the man had come from behind a white picket fence, where he had lived through childhood and adolescence, leaving only for Harvard College, and had a handsome face and wavy blond hair and a New England pedigree that Luther could not withstand.

Luther told Dr. Rosner about the gunfire in the night and of passing out on the bathroom floor and of the shunning devices that the Van Dines employed against him.

“Was alcohol involved?”

“I drank some.”

“Some?”

“Yes, some.”

Dr. Rosner rose to his full stature without leaving his chair. He told Luther of a colleague at the hospital who had developed a problem with alcohol but was now sober in Room of Recovery.

“Do not be speaking to me in that language,” Luther said, all but making a cross with his arms to ward off the very idea.

“What language is that?”

“The language of disgustingness. Why don’t you throw me into a pit of poisonous snakes instead?”

“There are meetings all throughout the city, and at different times of the day. Call this number. It’s RoR’s central office. They will direct you to a meeting.” Dr. Rosner stood and handed Luther a slip of paper.

“Do you want to destroy me? Is that your intention?”

“I think you’ve given alcohol that assignment,” Dr. Rosner said.

“Do not speak ill of my only friend. I will not have it.”

Dr. Rosner did not feed that fire. He simply said, to conclude the session, “Give me your report next week.”

Luther was answerable to Dr. Rosner. Dr. Rosner had put his power on him to make him so. In the night Luther called the number, when he was drunk and when he could. He left a message, as the recording instructed. “I am told I am in need of help. Please call me at a respectable hour, as I am not doing with you. Do you understand?”



In the morning he was woken by the ringing phone. On the other end was a man who spoke in a gruff and passionate voice. “My name is Bud and I’m an alcoholic. I have a flattop haircut and bulging biceps and can break a two by four with my head and grind nails to a fine powder with my teeth. You may think that I am different from you but we are the same. Why? Because alcohol almost killed me, and it is likely killing you. Otherwise you wouldn’t be calling this outfit. We do this thing one day at a time, and sometimes one hour at a time or five minutes at a time...”

The man’s conviction had no seeming impact on Luther other than embarrassment that one could display such earnestness to a stranger. It could seem that the man was trying to come through the line to apprehend him. He is speaking more to himself than to me, and with considerable desperation, Luther sensed. It was as if a great wave had flooded over Luther and yet he remained dry. He waited until the man had spent himself before asking for a meeting place and time.

That evening he came to a school complex on Hudson Street, in the West Village. A blue and white sign with the letters RoR in a triangle enclosed by a circle hung from the gate. The sign was a shaming thing. It might as well have been hanging from his neck. Just his nearness to it implicated him as an alcoholic. He looked back over his shoulder self-consciously before passing quickly through the gate.

The meeting was held in a large, one-room structure in the complex. Men and women, young and old, filled the folding chairs. A chairperson opened the meeting. A statement was read, then another. The meeting was then turned over to a speaker. Luther sat far in the back. He could hardly hear, though the din in the room had quickly subsided

when the meeting began. A while later there was a secretary's break. A basket was passed. People threw money into it—change, dollar bills. Was it to pay the speaker? Then the speaker called on people who raised their hands. They spoke for two or three minutes, while remaining seated. Though some were close to him, Luther couldn't really hear or retain what they were saying.

He didn't drink that night. It had been a long while since he had gone through a day without alcohol. The next day was hard. It was too hard. He headed for the meeting but wound up in a bar instead. There had been too much grayness in the day. He could not live with that kind of bleakness.

The following day Marion came to his desk to borrow a French dictionary.

"I thought you were fluent in French," Luther said, in a state of nervousness brought on by his attraction to her.

"Would you understand a contract in French, let alone in English?" Her retort burned, as she meant it to, and Luther could only laugh in embarrassment and acknowledgment of the stupidity of his question.

But all was not lost. Mr. Dorf had given him two tickets for a preview showing of a film opening on Broadway the next evening. Would she go?

"Sure. I can do that. Great," she said, and walked away.

The next day he sought her out at her desk to be sure they were on.

"Did you hear me say to you it wasn't on? Did you?"

"No," Luther said, stepping back from her fire.

"I'll see you there. Now I have to get back to work."

“Yes,” Luther said. “I will see you there.”

He maintained a vigil for her while standing under the movie theater marquee to avoid the rain that had begun to fall. As show time approached, it seemed less and less likely that she would appear, and even if she did, what could he expect from a woman for whom verbal sharpness seemed to be the norm? He had begun to enter the sadness place when there she was, crossing the wide boulevard. Only she was not alone. She was with the young man who filled his jeans so well and who also worked at Pilgore and had appeared in Luther’s dream. The same young man who had claimed Marion for his own and said in the dream that she shouldn’t be alone with Luther.

Marion did a walk on by with hardly a glance at Luther, and in so doing was putting her full hardness on him. She was telling him that he was going where he did not belong in messing with someone with her pedigree and her fire. But while his listening devices were in service, he had a voice of his own to consider, and that voice was saying to him, loud and strong, if she has punched you in both eyes and bashed your jaw, that does not mean you have to show it by tossing away your ticket and leaving the vicinity. Go and take your rightful place. Furthermore, you don’t have to sit apart from her and Mr. Jeans Man and expose yourself to her jeering laughter at your isolation. Go and sit right next to her, because did she ever say to you that you couldn’t? And so he did, finding them in the middle of the orchestra in the mostly empty theater.

But Marion was not having it. In the daylight and in the dark was she capable of heat. “Will you get away from me? Will you finally leave me alone?” she hissed.

“Yes. I will do that,” he whispered back, as even now he had to try to save face with politeness.

The walk out of the theater was a long one. The rain awaited him. But he had the bottle to turn to that night for shelter from the emotional storm.

*Now Celeste, something you should know is that He Who Filled His Jeans So Well had a name, as all of us do and deserve to be called by. His given name was Craig, and if it has the entanglement of worms in it, the individual letters writhing toward a freedom they can never achieve, it still passes as an American name and goes with the blond hair and quietly confident manner of a young Williams College graduate.*

*The next morning I put my eyes where they needed to go so I could live. I ascertained the territory of my desk and tried to keep my vision within its confining spaces, an impossible task for sure. Where direct contact with others was needed, I tried to keep my eyes from falling down to the ground and at all times my sensors were on high alert for the laugh brigade.*

*And yet we must understand the value of humiliation, Celeste. How else are we to discover the very ground of our being and that state of joy unending surrender eventually leads us to?*

*And is it not true that one thing will lead to another and that all the portals through which we pass have an ultimate destination, the surcease of this body so we may truly live?*

*Celeste, it happened that a woman came calling on me. I did not have to go calling on her. No reconnaissance flights in her airspace or foot patrols on her terrain. Her name was Holly Jones and she was buried deep in the copyediting domain of sourpuss Fred Moyer, who walked with the cautious alertness of a cat. I suspect she was yearning to be free of the limited and tedious world of fact-checking and correct word usage and correct grammar for what she perceived as the more glamorous world of an editor. I had come in contact with her through the copyediting she did on a biography of Marc Chagall that Mr. Dorf had placed under contract. She would come to my desk with a self-effacing smile and questions about the project, and this was the extent of our connection.*

*But in fact, Celeste, Holly was not a woman I would have gone calling on, as the power of attraction was not there. The fact that her gums showed so prominently when she smiled served as a deterrent and in other ways did she appear to my eye as homely. Yes, I hear the judgment chorus demanding an explanation as to why a man missing the back of his head should ever, ever pass judgment on the appearance of another, but we must live in the realm of honesty, with all the consequences that it summons, if we are to be free.*

*And hope is essential if we are to live. Is that not true, Celeste? And is not delusion an often necessary ingredient for hope to bloom? What led Holly Jones to leave that query on my desk, not about the great Marc Chagall, but about l'amour as it might relate to me and her? I think about you all the time as I serve this galley servitude? What say we step out together and do something? Holly. These exact words she wrote on, yes, a*

*yellow query tag. She was living in the hope that I would find her beautiful, as I had lived in the hope that Marion Rheingold would find me attractive and intelligent, the very qualities all the necessary evidence showed I had not been blessed with.*

In this time of Sarah's absence Luther made room for Holly Jones. She was not without a boyfriend, but she said he had no poetry in his bearing and that his extravagant beard kept her from loving him more than she did. Luther said she should come calling. He gave her the address but the Saturday afternoon she made her stop by she followed quickly with a back off down the stairs and out the door when she saw that he was drunk and wearing only his red bikini underpants. In reviewing her hasty disappearance, he could only conclude that he did not have the goods that she was seeking and that the alcohol had allowed him to believe he possessed.

Though a missile from Marion Rheingold had struck him and now he had been struck by a Holly Jones missile, he had a job to do, a lifeline to maintain, and so he came to work on Monday determined more than ever to keep his eyes where they belonged.

It should be said that there were others at Pilgore worthy of note, and some he assigned to its hall of fame. There was Irene Strep, who handled rights and had the fierce temperament to deal in the money arena. The gaze she turned on him could be frightening; at such times her aloneness and her hunger broke through her professional persona as she gave a clear signal that she could be with him if he would be with her, at least at that moment in time, but there was no way he could get next to someone of her power and fleshly amplitude, attractive as she was, given the smolder he saw at other

times in her big, dark eyes. And so it was for him to say something with his eyes as well, and it was this: I have a sister named Hannah. Have you met her? Because if you haven't, you definitely should.

And there was Phyllis Baum, with her head of red hair surrounding and overwhelming her little fox's face. She was an editor with Quest, the company's paperback imprint, and walked leaning forward, as if bearing a heavy tale as she trudged into the office of Judith Everholt, who had the power to draw the women and the men of the org. to her by virtue of the indefinable something that others saw in her. Irene Strep too could be seen in the tiny office of Judith Everholt, at times with Phyllis Baum and other women of the org, and when they were in this powwow mode, Luther would have to step away from his desk in fear that they would turn and put their laughing thing upon him as his sisters would in a time gone by and shame him to the edge of extinction. Because by now Luther had it in his mind that Judith and her circle were young women of power fighting the power of the likes of Mr. Dorf but not fighting Luther's power as he had not shown himself to have any. And he saw further that the echelon to which Judith Everholt and the others had elevated excluded him from their circle, Judith having determined, with her assessing mind, that she could give Luther a passing smile and nothing more, having perceived his slow and ineffectual way of being.

And there was Myrna Felt, who did not go to the office of Judith Everholt, as she was in sub rights and had a mind turned not to literature but to contracts and numbers, and when she passed on by his desk, she took his eyes with her, in spite of his resolve to keep them within his immediate vicinity, owing to the magnitude of the bosom she

carried on her small frame and the tight blouses she wore to display their grandeur and, in addition, the small waist and tight bottom that her skirts and slacks could not hide. And if he was not to speak in such a carnally appraising manner, he spoke in such a way regardless, as he had no choice but to say what he felt. But he did not have a thing for Myrna Felt. He could not imagine any dark place in her that would give him access to her treasure and so, her gifts notwithstanding, Marion Rheingold continued prominent in his consciousness.

And there were others, and would be still others, by and by, as this was the book of his life as he must write it. And it was not for anyone to tell him the spaces his book could occupy in his writing of it, the dimensions of the pages or the characters therein. It was not for them to say at all, or if they said it, for him not to countenance, as they had their world and he had his.

Edith Conrad was also present on that floor in this time. It was she whom Irene Felt reported to, as Edith was the head of sub rights. The prefix told the story. Edith was below Irene Strep, because you could not have sub rights if you didn't have rights to begin with, and this was all the explanation needed for why Edith Conrad came from behind a beaded curtain in her small windowless office behind the desk of Myrna Felt onto the main thoroughfare of the company while Irene Strep stepped directly from her windowed office with a door designed for closing onto the main thoroughfare. Edith Conrad lived in the realm of quietude and pleasantness and wore smocks as the signature accouterment of the middle age she had come to and had humility and purposefulness in the face and manner that she showed. She did not have the expensive short hair of Irene



Strep nor the war paint of Irene Strep. There was no blaze in her eyes or face, no turbocharged warrior mien as one saw in Irene. Both Edith Conrad and Irene Felt Luther assigned to the borough of Queens, apart from Irene Strep and the downtrodden glamour of the city.

Like Mr. Dorf, Clyde Baylor was corner office worthy, but his staying power with contracts, not manuscripts, gave him the status he had won. He had the telltale brain bulge in his forehead and was bulldog tough and had whiskey evenings in his ruddy face and husky voice, but he also had the sun upon him even in the darkest places, as if in smiling recognition that he was of life and of this earth in his appetites and his pleasures. He worked with phones in both ears and his suit jacket off and his extra white shirts on full display.

Pilgore had empire not in its name but in its reach, Pento being one of its imprints. An acquisitions editor named Page Luddy was its star and a frequent visitor to the office of Clyde Baylor in long and flowing dresses that fell to her ankles. Her slow gait spoke of a regal disposition, as if leading a procession through thronged streets on her way back to the castle.

The liaison of Clyde Baylor and Page Luddy—the mating of a king with his queen—gave further understanding to Luther that echelons existed and that the phrase “not in their league” had meaning and that “White Line Continue” must in fact continue if he was not to be lost in the perilous flux of daily life, as there had to be more to life than a regal strut on the premises of Pilgore or anywhere else for that matter.

Let it further be noted that the office of Clyde Baylor was not at the dead end of a corridor, as was Mr. Dorf's, but at the intersection of one corridor with another, both of which were lined with the offices of the powerful, and that Clyde Baylor had for an editorial assistant a diminutive and internalized Harvard graduate named Hayden Bilkens, who in spite of the loud and incessant chatter in his head dealt with the complex contracts and other paperwork that his boss turned over to him for processing. Hayden Bilkens worked fast and walked fast, driven forward by the mad energy that owned him, and it was for Jack de Goines to speculate that Hayden Bilkens was hearing the voices of those who were not there.

Now there were two Armenians on the premises as well, whom Luther would continually see out of the corner of his eye, and they were full Armenians, as their hair was black and their eyes big and dark and their surnames, while trimmed, had not been shorn of the signifying suffix "ian." Impediments to the tongue and to memory such as excessively consecutive consonants, had been deemed verboten, but not ethnic identity. Thus did they not have to go about in heavy wool in summer but could be adorned in the finest seersucker and could be American in all their ways. One was named Curtis Sarian and he had a handsome face and strong and athletic body and quiet and gently humorous manner and a Cornell University degree as well, all of which drew the women of every age and description to him, and he was one Luther could only see out of the corner of his eye and never full on because his presence stripped from Luther every lie he had told himself and others about Armenia being a land of rats and fathers who slept in coffins and made their appearance only in nocturnal hours. So solid in his body and his mind and

able to rise on a cloud of gentle humor above the sordid earth was Curtis Sarian that he existed as shining proof of the wrongness of Luther's life and not only the lies he told but the excuses that he made. And so it was for Luther to see Curtis Sarian only on the sly and pass him by at angles that did not result in a head-on collision, as that would surely lead to Luther's demise, and this was the policy strategy worked out in the corner of his mind devoted to his preservation.

Now the other was named Damian Tuissian, and he had haughtiness in his face and chest out bearing. A young man with brilliant black hair and skin that shone and teeth that surely were luminous in the dark, he wore silk suits and shoes of the finest leather and had a mind capable of manipulating legions of numbers all at once, and so held the title of chief financial officer. Now if Hayden Bilkens was a short stuff dynamo, Damian Tuissian was a power-packed locomotive who rattled floors and walls and office furniture in range of his passing and his almond eyes had a slicing action that could leave deep wounds in those who were susceptible. The scorn that was primed to replace the smile on Irene Strep's face was there in Damian Tuissian's countenance when Luther had the misfortune to encounter him. It was a face that said to Luther, don't touch me or breathe on me or so much as stand in my vicinity, lest I be identified with the likes of you. Because Damian Tuissian had made himself as impervious as obsidian glass in the American identity that he maintained and would allow nothing, *nothing*, to pull at and fray the fabric of his American mind.

And on the premises was Sam Rutnick, who had been brought in to oversee the trade paperback division, where books of solid and enduring value were to be found. His

elongated torso and short legs gave him the waddle of a duck, and his bug eyes bulged from their sockets with acquisitive, not lascivious, intent. It was this, his eyes, that led Mr. Dorf to rise up and make a denouncement of him, saying, "That man, if such he can be called, is not fit to do business with," Sam Rutnick having come to him with the language of commerce, not aesthetics, in saying, "Let's do a deal." The severity of the judgment was frightening, especially the phrase "if such he can be called," as to Luther's ears Mr. Dorf could have been heard to be dismissing Sam Rutnick for the homosexual orientation he was open about, which would have been to sell Mr. Dorf short, as while he was manly in his features and sometimes rugged in his disposition, he was not afflicted with smallness in his mind.

And there was the editorial assistant Abigail Forensic, who came from Oberlin College and slept with her manuscripts and so would go far, and her boss, Ned Hunt, whose office was a pandemonium of paper but who got the job done in terms of income for the company and who had a son regularly featured on network TV, which created another angle of vision from which you looked at the young man's father, seeing that he had brought such a star-dusted son into the world.

And there was mesomorphic Joseph Gunn, whom Harvard had summoned from the coal country of Pennsylvania before New York called to him. Volatility he barely contained behind a mask of scorn, and because, like Judith Everholt, he was a fast-rising editor, it was only right that they do lunch together, as Luther ascertained, seeing them on Madison Avenue as he headed down to Thirty-Fourth and Fifth for his two big Macs and his order of Fries.

And there was Richard Simone, who was not fast-rising but at the very summit of his power, maintaining his imprint within the Pilgore family so as to avail himself of its infrastructure in order to send out into the world, one after the other, the *New York Times* bestsellers he routinely published. Tall and gray-haired and stoop-shouldered, he lacked the bellicosity of those of lesser height and wrapped himself in solitude even in the company of others.

Into that silence Luther one day entered, saying to Richard Simone by the elevator where they stood, “Your authors have gold-plated typewriters.”

Richard Simone did not smite him, but did offer a correction, as it was not his way to let stand an error of fact in regard to his domain and had the personal integrity to treat even the bottom-rung at Pilgore as worthy of a serious response. Why? Because to be grounded in reality meant to have real discussions with real people so he was not engaged with the air. And it did not matter that he called his domain fiction, because he understood that fact was where he lived so that fiction could have its place. This was the understanding Luther came to about Richard Simone.

“Solid gold, not gold-plated,” Richard Simone said.

“Oh yes,” Luther replied, “Oh yes,” as where was he to go but to a double affirmation of Richard Simone’s truth?

Now let it be noted that Richard Simone wore navy blue blazers and plain charcoal gray wool trousers and mock turtlenecks on many of his days at Pilgore, as if to say his mind was not on garments to clothe his body so much as the manuscripts his vision was calling into a higher existence as books.

And if Richard Simone had barbered his name, it was not for him to reveal, as here fact and fiction merged as one into something as hard and impenetrable as the floors that Luther walked upon and the walls and ceilings that sought to contain him.

Richard Simone had an executive editor, a woman corpulent and brassy, a true trumpet sound you often heard before you saw her, a woman who could fully occupy the space that she was in, and though she was opposite to Richard Simone in body and in manner, they yet had a complexity of understanding that led them to be together. Her name was Marigold Coulter and she overwhelmed you with the life force operating within and through her. She had had her wild romp through the fields of fiction. She had heard her literary voice echo through canyons of stone, but there had been no one beyond to hear her shouts and cries and whoops of delirium. In seeking connection, I have stranded myself, she saw. And so, after three novels with steadily declining sales, she came out into the world without regret, no voice calling her back into the silence she had known, as she had the ability to write publishable words but not the desperation.

And so she too was part of Luther Hedberg Garatdjian's learning experience at the company.

Now Richard Simone and Marigold Coulter had a girl working for them that summer as a paid intern. Her name was Shauna Reisley, and when Luther saw her, he was instantly blinded by the radiance of her beauty, which eclipsed even that of Marion Rheingold. She was the new life he needed to have. And so he asked her to lunch, where, as she worked her way through an egg salad sandwich, she told him that she would be starting her third year at Barnard College in the fall, and suddenly an avalanche of stones,

jagged and mercilessly heavy, crashed down on him, leaving him broken and bleeding, and there is no need to conceal that those stones were the high board numbers associated with a school of such quality, against which he had no defense, as low was low and high was high, and the two were not to meet.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“No,” he answered. “I am very, very battered. I must go away from you now. I am sorry.” He placed money on the table for the two of them and left, and in a men’s room stall at Pilgore had a long talk with himself, in a voice that no one could hear, so he could get through the rest of his day.

These were also among the men and women with whom he walked if barely talked while in the limiting shadow of his own understanding.

In this time Holly Jones left on Luther’s desk another one of her query tag notes. “I am sorry I ran away. Could we try again? I really don’t wish to drown in my own obscurity.” Her words, especially those last, lit Luther up, as she was articulating something he had come to believe about her, which was that he was her lifeline, pathetic as that might be. The poor woman has been laid in a coffin with semicolons and series commas and is yearning to breathe free, and that is the sound of America to me, Luther heard himself say.

*Now connections were being made, Celeste, and I can offer as proof that one morning Him Who Walks on the Balls of His Feet entered the office of Judith Everholt. Never*

*before had I seen him arrive or depart from her premises. They were discussing an applicant for a position as editorial assistant, or at least Balls was. Was the applicant's report any good? That was his question to her. Evidently Judith had asked the applicant to give a written report on a manuscript as part of the interview/evaluation process.*

*"More than good. It was really, really excellent," Judith replied.*

*"So Pinhead has talent," Balls said, rattled by this affirmation of the applicant's ability and driven by his insecurity to assign the applicant a mocking name, as I had done with Balls himself. But my perception of him altered when, after gathering himself, he said, in a moment of blazing honesty, "Pinhead went to a better college than you and I. He went to Princeton. You went to a state university. I almost didn't go to college at all." Why was I so impressed, Celeste? Because Balls was introducing me to a way of being that had not been my own. Yes, he walked on the balls of his feet and slightly leaning forward, as some are inclined to do (no, the pun was unintentional), but I was wrong to see him as a native of the land of inveterate pomposity. He had dodged the death trap, in a way that I never could. Yes, he had tried to put the laughing thing on Pinhead, but when Judith confronted him with the reality of Pinhead's intelligence, he did not fly from the room. And how did he summon this staying power, Celeste? How? By acknowledging Pinhead's elite status in terms of his high board score numbers and the great university it gave him access to. Balls acted justly. He gave Pinhead his due. Some things need to be seen to be believed, Celeste. Some things need to be heard. In combination the two can be revolutionary. But tidal waves also abound, Celeste, washing away all that we would*



*possess, and so I could not stay with what I had seen and heard and build upon it. Instead I had to drown some more before salvation could be mine to have and hold.*

*And now I can practice my own form of justice and tell you that Balls had a name, a real name, and that it was Adrian Zecker, so that he may not live on disfigured by ridicule, and that Pinhead had a name as well, and that it was John Cotswold III, and yes, Celeste, the roman numerals must remain.*

It was soon brought to Luther's attention that he did not have the gift of full understanding, and, of all people, Judith Everholt served as the messenger the day she came to him and said, "This word *premises* that you use, as in 'Mr. Dorf is not on the premises.' Is that what I hear you say when you answer the phone?"

"It is," Luther said, not yet aware of the angle from which Judith Everholt was arriving.

"Does the word ever give you pause?"

"Pause?"

"Not paws, p-a-w-s. Pause. As in hesitation."

"No. No hesitation. No pause. P-a-u-s-e. Although maybe, since you mention it, there is a tad of discomfort that I have possibly strayed down the path of peculiarity."

"Good that you are saying that, Luther. The word suggests, to my ears, a prowler. May I offer instead 'He is in a meeting' or 'He is out of the office'?"

"You may offer both, and I will keep them in my active file," Luther said, too cast down to say anything more.

He was wrong. Her dialogue with him was not over, Luther was made to see. But that didn't mean he didn't wish it hadn't been.

In dreamland, a black bather at a swimming pool singled out a white bather for having done him wrong and punched him hard in the face. The white bather staggered backward through an open door leading to an elevator shaft and plunged to a painful death.

Luther awoke trembling in the night and called out, I must not live in this world. I must not. I cannot have such retribution administered to me for my alleged crimes.

Dreamland called him back. He was riding his ten-speed Peugeot up near Grant's Tomb. As he approached a black neighborhood, his fear grew that his bike would be stolen from him, but some young blacks took it upon themselves to lead him to safety.

I am at a crossroads, Luther declared, when he woke a second time, this time to morning light. Young black men are with me in my dreams, as I fear they are not in my life. What can any of this mean? he called out.

"How are you doing with those meetings?" Dr. Rosner asked.

"I stopped going."

"And?"

"I began to drink again."

"How's that going?"

"I'm OK," Luther said.

“From what little I know of RoR, they have a saying, ‘Meeting makers make it.’”

He returned to the meetings over on Hudson Street and saw a man outside the meeting place and said of him, he could be the brother that my own brother cannot be, and saw another and thought the same thing, feeling like a child when he saw these men. And the red brick structure in which they gathered had meaning for him too because he had seen such bricks in a wall in an illustration in a children’s book in the long ago, and an organ grinder with his monkey had been near the wall and there had been a tree rising over the wall, and a similar tree rose over the little building where the RoR group was gathered, and the tree was full of green leaves, just as in the illustration, and though the organ grinder and his monkey were missing, that did not matter, he had made a connection between time present and time past, and a feeling of brightness was being transmitted through that channel.

Inside sat a black man on a panel who showed no desire to punch Luther in the face and knock him down an elevator shaft. The black man’s face was as long as a horse’s, and his teeth as big as a horse’s, and he had the wisdom and gentle sadness of a horse in his face, and he said how the white world could collectively kiss his big black ass back when he was drinking and how he became a pissy, shitty drunk and then there was a woman who looked like Luther’s mother—looked, that is, like she had God in her face and her mind—and she spoke of the jelly doughnuts she ate whenever she wanted to drink.

And so Luther did not drink that night, and he didn’t drink the day or the night following, and for many days and nights thereafter. Hearing the difference in his voice

Sarah came back to him, as it was painful to be away from her art and her life at her parents' apartment and a new life away from Luther was not hers to have, the truth being she had remained able to love him through his right and his wrong and had become wedded to him in her body and her mind.

He was more frightened now that she was back than when she was away. He saw the tentativeness in her face and manner and better understood that the rifle incident had shaken her and caused a displacement and so it was not just a matter of quickly returning to their normal rhythm. He felt like a man on probation; one harsh word or drunken outburst might cause her to leave again. He did not like seeing the damage he had done to someone he professed to love.

Sarah left for Camp on Friday, the beginning of the Fourth of July weekend. Most of the city left as well. Though he was invited, Luther said that a little of him might be better than a lot, and so he would come up on Sunday. On Saturday Holly Jones came calling. He was not hung over and he did not meet her at the door in his bikini underpants this time, and so she did not flee. He did lie down with her for five minutes, but there was no spark to lead him forward—she reminded him of scrambled eggs—and so they got up and took a walk over to SoHo and the Broome Street Café, where he would often go with Sarah, and sat at a table looking out at West Broadway through the casement window. Their time together was not well spent. The contents of his mind were not a good match for her own.

He saw Marge that same night for dinner, and that was not a good match either. Her hair had turned increasingly gray and it stood short and cropped atop her thickening

and increasingly masculine face. She was making a film about men painting a billboard. Something like that. She was having an affair with a marketer of frozen yogurt. He was not there. The connection was gone, as it had never been with Holly Jones.

I must knock on new doors, or knock on none at all, Luther thought that night, and then thought, I have been good with two women today. I have not joined with them in body or in mind. I will now go where my freedom is to be found. The image of a cold glass of beer led him to the bar on Spring Street where he was met by a haze of smoke and the loud sound of the jukebox and he saw the promise of the night in the bottles behind the bar and the abundance of doors on which to knock.

He was not so hung over the next morning that he could not catch the Pine Hill Trailways bus from gate 37 at Port Authority and Sarah was there to greet him at the bottom of the road several hours later.

“Have they prepared a firing squad for me?” he asked, after getting into the jeep.

“No. They’ve forgotten all about it,” Sarah said.

“You haven’t forgotten about it. Why should they?”

“We’ve all forgotten about it,” Sarah replied.

“I’m a bum. I know I’m a bum.”

“Don’t talk that way, Luther. You’re doing fine.”

“A posse of the righteous hasn’t formed to ride hard and meet us up the road and beat me with their filthy sticks?”

“That’s not going to happen and you know it.”

“OK,” he said, though it wasn’t OK. The fever of debasement was on him.

The family was welcoming. He did not know what to do with their kindness, especially Lydia's. It came too easily from her.

They played a game of Scrabble out on the terrace. Luther thought he had broken the game open, landing the "q" on a triple letter square, but Claire challenged. 'Aren't there three 'i's' in the word 'daiquiri'? Didn't you leave off the first one?'

"What kind of drunk are you, not knowing how to spell the name of a summer drink? For that matter, what kind of editor are you?" Brian put his heh heh laugh on Luther.

"I didn't say I was an editor. I didn't say I was anything," Luther replied. "I believe it was you who said you were something, Mr. Folksinger Jimmy Hendrix man."

"Cool out, man. Cool out," Brian said.

"Are you saying I burned you with a bit of your own fire?"

"You do go over the line sometimes, Brian. It's something you shouldn't do," Claire said.

Luther walked away from the game. He didn't want to die and he didn't want Heh Heh to die either. He just wanted to be free of him for a while. But yes, to talk that way.

Maggio Capici and his wife Sally had come bearing gifts to fit the occasion. They had roman candles and sparklers and rockets that broke out in a great fan of color so that the bombs were bursting in air when nightfall came. But there was no American flag on the lawn or anywhere else. They did not need a flag to tell them they were American or to torment them with its not entirely fulfilled promise, because the red, white, and blue could do that to you. Luther had seen the great film *Nashville*, directed by the great

Robert Altman. He had seen and heard the very great Ronee Blakely sing “My Idaho Home” against the backdrop of that greatest of American flags gently rippling in the wind. So he understood the potency and the poignancy of the red, white, and blue and the Hessians and Redcoats could easily be summoned to his mind, but he was not a party to the commotion that Maggio Capici had engendered in the sky.

Luther rose before dawn the next day and wandered out to the kitchen, where Lydia sat humming nervously at the table.

“I had a dream about the president,” she said.

“Our president? Jimmy Carter?”

“Yes, of course. He was a giant rabbit and making a pest of himself in the garden.”

“He had those big rabbit teeth?”

“Yes, big rabbit teeth.”

“A president with big rabbit teeth. That sounds like Jimmy Carter. We think of him as friendly, easygoing, but he does have noticeable chompers. Personally, I think rabbits should be classified with rats.”

“Their teeth are different. Rabbits have double incisors.”

“But if you look at them long enough, what you see is a big rat. The same with squirrels. They try to fool you with those furry tails, just like rabbits do with those bushy tails, but they don’t fool me. A rat is a rat. But Jimmy Carter’s not a rat. He loves his wife. Still, that diminutive. You have to be suspicious of grown men who hold onto them. Little Bobby Kennedy. Little Jimmy Carter.”

“Are you a grown man, Luther?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think about that sort of thing too much.”

“But you think about it in regard to others, like the president of the United States.”

“This is true.”

“Why do you think about it in regard to them but not about yourself?”

“Maybe I can’t.”

“Maybe you can’t today, Luther. But tomorrow may be another story.”

“Yes, tomorrow,” Luther said, perturbed by the direction she was taking him. He had gotten up too early and now was feeling the call of sleep and so excused himself.

Lydia’s dream was Luther’s dream. Jimmy Carter came to him too in the guise of a rabbit, not to invade any garden and chomp on his carrots but in his bed, and bit him on his face and neck and arms with his big double incisors, and though he didn’t say the bites were for mocking him over his first name, Luther understood that it was an act of retaliation for the initial trespass of holding the president’s name up for inspection.

Luther did not stay through to Monday. Though the pull of Camp was strong, he said he must get back to the city, that he had urgent business, though to Sarah he confided that he needed to go slow in rebuilding his relationship with her family. He did have dinner with them in the river town of Rhinecliff, before they dropped him off at the railroad station of the same name. There he waited as the night threatened to suffocate him with its endless possibility. I am by the water and the water is by me. Under the dim platform lights, he said these words with some savagery, as if words could get him free of



the prison of his own making. It was not right for the nights on this holiday weekend, or for any night, to torment him with the need for greatness.

In the distance could be seen the head beam of the train as it followed the curve of the river, and soon there it was, an Amtrak engine pulling into the station with a string of silver coach cars. A train was not an experience to be shared, and when a train ran along the Hudson River, then that was doubly so. It was not for him to bring Sarah too close to his childhood world. At whatever age the railroad and the river had to be experienced alone.

But the bottle was waiting for him at the end of the line, at Grand Central Terminal. The bottle had the answer for that night, and for every night.

“He calls her during the night and leaves hateful messages. It’s very upsetting, Carola says.”

“So she finally swung into action and gave him her clobber,” Luther said.

“Why do you have to speak in this exaggerated way? Relationships run their course. He didn’t have a life apart from her and she couldn’t breathe with him hanging onto her.”

“Right. With a name like Hunger Longing, she might have expected something else. Is that what we are supposed to believe? Or did she discern his weakness at the outset—what’s in a name and all that—so she could live for the day when she would have the chance to decree his banishment?”

“Of course not.”

He did feel threatened by their breakup. Sarah was right to suggest as much without quite saying so. But it was more than that. Though the drawing class that Carola had organized was continuing, Sarah hadn't gone and showed no eagerness to call Carola and apologize for missing the session. Luther could deal with Carola savaging Hunger Longing, even if he gave the impression that he couldn't, but he saw Carola Aprile not only as a lifeline for her departed beau but also for Sarah, as Carola was the High School of Music and Art but also Radcliffe, even if she had spurned it. More than her manifest excellence in the eyes of the world, she was Sarah's conduit to the world. Without Carola Aprile Sarah had no job and no drawing class. She had only him, Luther Garatdjian, and if that became the case, he, like Carola Aprile, would not be able to breathe. Maybe it wasn't a national security issue, but it was his.

And there was something else, if he was to be more honest than he could be with Sarah. Carola Aprile was alone in that loft without Hunger Longing, and a void had to be filled. There was a crying need for it to be filled. And if Sarah couldn't fill it, maybe he could. Because excellence in a woman could be a magnet, and she was a door he hadn't knocked on yet and what was life unless he found out who would appear from within her to answer that knock?

That night prurience had its day in the dreamland he entered. As he sat around a swimming pool, he was informed that prostitutes were known to bathe in its chlorinated water. But Fred Moyer, sourpuss head of Pilgore copyediting, appeared in the dream, displaying the catlike manner of Miss Schnell, from the building Luther's family had managed.

“I am warning you,” Fred Moyer said, in his quiet way.

“Warning me about what?” Luther asked, but Fred Moyer wouldn’t say.

Then Albert Camus had to show his face. He had become Sarah’s lover, loving her in his French Algerian way. There he was walking by the water, a solitary figure, provoking envy in Luther that he could exist alone and show no need to neurotically lean on others. Luther could only feel distress hearing a voice speak of Camus’ sexual experience and skill with women. Not only had Albert Camus killed him dead in the literary ring; now he was king of the bedroom as well.

Luther allowed himself to believe that Marion Rheingold had intuited his dream about Albert Camus and the deflation it caused him and agreed to have lunch with him to revive his spirits. But doubt quickly returned. She would probably not show her face at Shanghai Palace, or if she did, bring anything more than additional rain upon his life, and so beforehand he had himself a nutted cheese sandwich at Chock Full O’ Nuts, on Thirty-fourth and Fifth, where the food could still be counted on to be normal, to use his mother’s word.

“‘It Takes a Worried Man to Sing a Worried Song.’ Do you know that one, by the Kingston Trio? It is a very stupid song, but it is loud in my mind at this time,” Luther said, at a booth in the dark and spacious restaurant, elated that she had showed up, and alone, as a great fear had seized him that she would bring her All-American beau if she came at all and that they would talk with each other and leave him to himself during the dismal meal.

“I know the song. Why is it loud in your mind?”

“Because it crystallizes a great fear I have been having that there is turmoil in my home life and that it will get worse.”

“What kind of turmoil?”

“The turmoil brought on by ambivalence on the part of the two individuals involved. And now Albert Camus has entered the picture.”

“Albert Camus? Albert Camus is dead.”

“You would think. But in my dream last night he was back on that damn beach where Mersault murdered the Arab man and it was announced in no uncertain terms that he had become my girlfriend’s lover and that his sexual prowess was unsurpassed.”

“We don’t know each other for you to be telling me these things,” Marion said. The freckles so alive on her face belied her toughness. This was not Mary Jane Swift, off the farm and bringing her sunshine with her.

“I understand.” Thinking, there are no side entrances with Marion. Her clarity of mind dictates that you walk through the front door, not enter through the basement.

“That’s all you’re having?” she asked, seeing his order of egg rolls and bowl of wonton soup. She herself had ordered the hodgepodge of moo goo gai pan.

“I am boycotting General Tso’s chicken until someone tells me exactly who he is or was and what he does or did that we should have to be reminded of him on every Chinese restaurant menu.”

“There are other things to choose from.”

“Yes, of course. Bon appétit.” What he wanted to say was how much he was in love with her that she had come to him, but she would only blacken his eye if he did.

“Did you sign away your right to unionize as you did your right to your own name?” Marion asked. The effort to unionize at Pilgore had been going on for some time.

“No, I haven’t. I’m not a Bolshevik, even if I do have some lingering admiration for Leon Trotsky, but when I received the disavowal form and read it, I heard a voice say no, no, tell them no, and so my name, current or past, will not be on it. Still, I don’t wish to make waves and be beaten with a stick.”

“Make waves? Nine thousand dollars a year is not a salary to live on. These wages go back to the bluestocking days of book publishing.”

“What’s that, bluestocking?”

“Wealthy literary women who didn’t bother to cash their paychecks.”

“You have fire that I lack.”

“That is for sure,” Marion Rheingold said.

That word “fire.” He had meant it one way, but it ricocheted in his mind, reverting to a bedroom meaning as it applied to her. Fire? Fire? He would show her fire. In the ponder place once more, he took to wondering how it could be that the more cold water she threw on him, the more he burned for her.

He was no better with her, Sarah, when she came back than before she left. Soreness reigned in him as he didn’t dare to express in the presence of beauty such as Marion Rheingold possessed.

“You sound like a crabby old man,” Sarah said that weekend, as they trudged over the hot sands seeking a spot to bake in the sun. They had taken the Long Island Railroad

and then a bus to Jones Beach. But he did not slap Sarah, as he had Jane Thayer, on a different beach, back in high school, the ninety-seven pound weakling hitting a girl in front of a crowd of bathers.

(Sarah could ride with him on the Long Island Railroad because it lacked the imagination to be a real railroad, running as it did only to the tip of the island. It had no greater vistas to promise, as had such lines as the New York Central or the Pennsylvania Railroad before they disappeared. Because Long Island was just an island, and not even that. It headed you only in the direction of the ocean, and that was no place for a train to go. This was according to Luther's understanding, and had been since childhood.)

Once again he was put in mind of the end of days and an eternity burning in hell. His life was a lie and he must tear himself to pieces before it did. But I am in pieces already, he then thought, like my manuscripts. Scraps of paper containing his hard-to-read handwriting. Cryptic notes written while drunk. The same wretched territory of family gone over endlessly. No cohesiveness on which to build.

They took a dip in the ocean, the water still cold though it was July, and for a brief while he forgot himself in the surf, rising with the swell of the waves and surging with them toward the shore. But back on the beach his shadow met him. He saw his unacceptable thinness there in the sands and so tried to get filled up on a Nathan's hot dog, and then a second, and an order of French fries and a container of Coke, and found himself staring at the beautiful and bronzed young men with broad shoulders and tapering waists and abdomens that rippled with muscle. They had no need to examine their shadows in the sands. They had no need of a life of reinvention, of White Line Continue.

They had no need of the past, of narrative built on faulty memory. They simply consumed and were consumed by each passing moment while looking neither forward nor backward.

“I’m sorry,” Luther said.

“For what?”

“For everything,” he said.

By which he meant to say, but couldn’t, sorry for Gillian Brower, who had called just the day before and asked if he would see a movie with her. Because she, like Marion Rheingold, was sensing something in the air. No, he couldn’t go to the movie; however, there was a publishing event, a launch of one of Mr. Dorf’s books, at the Gotham Book Mart, in mid-Manhattan, on Monday evening. Maybe Gillian could accompany him to that, since he figured she would confer on him respectability and social status. He would be seen by the men and women of Pilgore as someone not always alone but connected to the world. And Gillian would see that he had a world beyond the bar where she had met him and so would be more willing to share her treasure with him and not keep him in the neutralized place that she did, although more and more he saw the manlike solidity of Gertrude Stein emerging in her face and body, and that in truth mitigated against his desire for her.

That weekend Luke got on the line with him. Brenda and he had moved to Brooklyn to escape the steep rent increase on their West End Avenue apartment, but they were in their new place less than a month when he came home one night from the renting office and Brenda was not there, and Benjy was not there either. And then he saw that her

clothes and the few personal items she owned were missing. She did leave behind a note.

It read:

Am starting a new life with Fredo. For the best. Brenda.

Not even the word “love” as part of the note.

“Fredo?” Luther asked.

“He does deliveries for the pizzeria in the neighborhood. He delivered to us a couple of times.”

“I guess he did,” Luther said.

“What the fuck does that mean, ‘I guess he did?’”

“She put the clobber on you, using Fredo to do it.”

“The clobber? What kind of sick fucking way is that to talk?”

“Clobber is clobber, Luke, and truth is truth. Women lie low, smarting from injustice, real or imagined, and then pow bam boom.”

“Oh fuck you with your truth.”

Luther was frightened for his brother. He remembered how Luke would crumple, suck on one wine bottle after another to ease the pain when, after a fight, Brenda would take off and disappear for days. And now she would be gone for more than a few days. She had called from Texas, where Fredo had driven her and Benjy. She would not be coming back.

Sarah cheered when Luther mentioned the breakup and the circumstances of it. Her reaction angered him, as it showed whose side she was on. Luke was his brother, after all. It was not right that she should be happy for his pain.



“I’m not happy for his pain. I’m happy for her freedom,” she said, allowing succinctness to be her guide and increasing the possibility that she had clobber on her mind, too.

Luke and Brenda had continued down the get it on path with other couples and were paying the price in unseen ways, because Brenda had not sat idle in her mind through all her years with him. Luke had given her shelter from Lenny Cerone but that did not mean he had given her a home. Still, she was a party to their lifestyle. That she could not deny.

Brenda had a childhood friend from One Hundred Eleventh Street named Rose Malone. Rose had beauty and recognizable talent and as a teenager had a promising career in dance and theater when she met Billy, from One Hundred Ninth Street, and so they married and moved to Brooklyn. Luke and Brenda would visit with Billy and Rose and their twin boys, Jimmy and Joey. Billy was a good guy and smart, Luke said. They both had a head for numbers, Billy and Rose, and Billy made a nice living with his ice cream truck, enough to support a family when he stayed away from gambling.

Rose’s sister Meghan was considerably older than Rose and had a daughter named Erin, who at age twenty was beginning to draw attention for her work in theater and in television. Erin was visiting with her aunt Rose when Luke and Brenda came calling one evening, and it happened that Luke fell instantly in love with her and maybe it could be said that she did the same in response to the attention he paid and the signals of interest he sent her way. Erin was fragile in her mind and reliant on drugs and fragile in her body as well, given the diabetes she suffered from. Luther didn’t mean to say that these

conditions were prerequisites for loving Luke, but only that they may have leaned her in his direction. She quickly saw him as the father she was lacking as well as a potential lover.

Luke had a powwow with Brenda about Erin, wanting honesty to be his guide. He told her that he had a thing for Erin and that Erin had a thing for him. It was not the kind of thing that meant he would have to leave Brenda but maybe he could share Erin with her. Brenda did not blacken his eyes or punch out his teeth or vanish into the street to do her wild thing. She simply said sure, and so Erin stayed with them on her trips to New York and they had the opportunity to see if three into two could go.

More will be said about this later. Suffice it that groundwork must be laid for pain.

Because Luke was a part of him and he could not build a wall big or strong enough to ensure against the tainted waters of his brother's life flowing into his own, Luther was called upon to take the emergency measure of cancelling his get-together with Gillian Brower at the book launch at the Gotham Book Mart. Given that the center could not hold and that anarchy was loose in the land, it was necessary to stay perfectly still and well within his own borders. Seeing Gillian Brower had the potential to burst his life apart. If his brother had been bad, then he must be good.

Now Luther showed up at the Gotham Book Mart because all of Pilgore would know if he didn't, and if they didn't know, then he would. His running away days had to be over if he was to live and go forward in this life, his mind taking him back to the high

school prom he could not show his face at in anticipation of the laughing thing that would erupt and the many other occasions on which he had absented himself for his own well-being. Once again he reminded himself that Pilgore represented a second chance at life. What he couldn't do right at the Claremont School he must do right here, because who was he among if not the Claremont kind at Pilgore?

Mr. Dorf had formed alliances far and wide that would secure him manuscripts. His heavyweight brilliance and the concentrated force of his will had summoned to him a woman savvy in the same field, though as a literary agent. She was there at the Gotham Book Mart that night wearing a floppy straw hat, hats being a signature feature of her dress. Luther saw her in his mind from that night on as Madam Big Hat, but if the name had an element of mockery to it, that was not for him to show, as she was a woman he perceived to have sharp edges and an even sharper tongue. As he watched her work the room, he sensed the acquisitive drive that powered her and was indifferent to the fact that he did not have the same.

Mr. Dorf said his wife made him feel young and put a spring in his step. Youngness was important to him, and he had gone to the length necessary to have it in his lifted face. You could see where the skin had been pinned tight near his eyes, like a rumpled sheet that had been straightened, but the plastic surgeon had done nothing for his neck and hands, which retained the quality of oldness common to a septuagenarian.

Luther drew no one to him at the affair, and he could find nothing to say to those who were present. He was relieved that Gillian Brower was not there to see him in his

timorous, cowering state, not knowing where to direct his eyes. She would have seen him for the isolated nobody that he was.

He found a bar on St. Mark's Place down a few steps from the sidewalk and a step or two down from the bar on Spring Street where he often drank. It offered no SoHo chic, no muted earth tone colors and soft amber lights. Like the aging hippies he sat among, the space was dirty and lacked grooming.

Some hours later he headed home but his legs gave way and he fell down on the sidewalk near the main building of Cooper Union. A stranger offered to help him but backed off when he saw that Luther was drunk. At first Luther was embarrassed that strollers should see him in his fallen state, but that feeling passed. There was something freeing to just lie there as others rushed about, with the sidewalk as a bed. He gave himself the time he needed to get on his feet and continue his journey home, but first stopped off at a corner bodega down on Second Avenue, not far from the Men's Shelter, for a six-pack of tallboys to see him through the night.

Sarah had begun to talk of spending the fall months in the country. She took an attitude of coldness toward Luther now. He felt her withdrawal from him acutely and told himself it was in reaction to Dr. Frodkey's planned absence from the office for a period of time in October. She was in love with Dr. Frodkey, there could be no doubt. If Dr. Frodkey was spurning her, then she must turn and spurn him.

"You seem to be anticipating something—a breakup—in your own relationship," Dr. Rosner suggested, at their next session.

“Why wouldn’t I? Is not filthy clobber everywhere?”

“Clobber?”

“A woman hits with a harder fist than any man ever could when she has that intention. You want clobber, you’ll feel it when a woman gives it to you,” Luther said.

“First Carola Aprile gives Hunger Longing the business. Then get it on Brenda gives the same to my hapless brother. She runs off with the pizza delivery boy. Can you believe it?”

“Falling dominoes?”

“The revolution will not come to my home. I do not tolerate revolution. I will launch all the state forces of repression if need be.”

“What state forces would those be?” Dr. Rosner said.

“I don’t know. I’m just talking.”

“Is it possible you are trying to hold onto the very thing you want to let go of?”

“I don’t need to hear this kind of talk. I will call for the police if it continues.”

“What is this wild and histrionic talk?”

“It is the kind of talk that comes when fear overflows the borders of reason.”

“So you are afraid.”

“On high alert am I.”

“How are things at work?”

“I am a nobody, a bum de la bum.”

“As opposed to what? The crème de la crème?” Dr. Rosner allowed himself a small smile.

“Marion Rheingold doesn’t want me.”

“Refresh my memory. Who is Marion Rheingold?”

“She is an editorial scrubeenie, just like me, and skips rope in front of her desk and is the type to whom the term ‘the bad seed’ is applied. She goes out with Him Who Fills His Jeans So Well, another editorial scrubeenie. Such they may be, but they both graduated from elite colleges, and so their ability to apply the torque is quite high.”

“You’re speaking in an exaggerated way today.”

“Language is the realm in which the impotent live.”

“Why are you interested in this woman Marion if she has a boyfriend?”

“I guess it should be a deterrent. But she did have lunch with me recently.”

“And?”

“I don’t know. This talk is beginning to make me anxious. I feel I’m being pulled in a direction I shouldn’t be going in, that perversely, I am working against my best interest.”

“OK. As good a place as any to stop,” Dr. Rosner said, and reached for his appointment book. In that moment Luther thought of Coney Island days and the cogwheels on the roller coaster ride pulling the cars to the summit before the reckless plunge. Dr. Rosner was a cogwheel. This whole therapy thing was a cogwheel, only it didn’t seem likely to deliver him back to where he had started.

*Celeste, we were on the path to freedom. Always, always remember that.*

With desperation as his guide, Luther took a further action to move his life along. While Sarah was out at a movie, he called Marion Rheingold and communicated his passion for her. To his amazement she was only too happy to hear from him. Afterward, even in his drunken state, it occurred to him that he might have dialed the wrong Marion, as there was another woman with the same first name at Pilgore with whom he had become friendly and whose number he had taken. With the morning came the conviction that he had erred and so he went to the other Marion and inquired of her if she had received a call from him in the night and he could see from the discomfort on her face that she had even before she quietly answered yes. He offered an apology and asked for her forgiveness. He had been confused. He got that way sometimes, he said. It wouldn't happen again. The other Marion stiffened. She did not give him hard smack, but she did say "It's OK, please," because by now she had come to see that his apology was not merely an amend but a way of saying he had no interest in her of the kind he had in Marion Rheingold and could never have such an interest. A sense of her own loneliness came to him. And so, while she did not spread the word of his folly throughout the company so it could put the laughing thing on him, when she passed him in the halls of Pilgore frostiness showed where warmth had once been.

Now Hunger Longing was back in the city. If Carola Aprile thought she had banished him back to Pittsburgh forever, she was mistaken, as he had the steel for which that city is famous in his bones. Though his heart was broken and he still would call her to pour out his midnight bile, he also was on his feet financially, as he had aptitudes that were not taken lightly by the New York-based printing company that hired him.

“Hunger will be coming for dinner tomorrow, if that is OK,” Sarah said, the same day that Luther apologized to the other Marion.

“Will he be true to his name? Will he be hungry?” Luther asked.

“Oh, come on,” Sarah said.

“Come on what?” Luther said.

“Just come on,” she said.

In this way did they communicate about the following evening, and Luther had no need to inquire what Sarah was planning to serve, as the main meal would be Sarah herself so far as Hunger Longing was concerned, and surely he would come with his own utensils with which to consume her. Luther did not keep a dossier on Hunger Longing; all he needed was the image of his semen-saturated rag, whose discovery Carol Aprile had reported to Sarah in shock after discovering it to gauge the man’s carnal appetite.

Suddenly did Hunger Longing become a locomotive at full throttle bearing down on Luther’s driftwood home. I must not go where I do not belong, Luther thought, or if I do, let me arrive late and find beforehand a distraction to ease the pain of his assault. And so he met with Gillian Brower at the bar on Spring Street after work. He could not go to her in the way that he had anymore, with drunken visits late at night. She had consigned him to the neutered place, but did so without saying she was doing so.

“I’d like to come home with you,” he said.

“I have plans for later this evening,” she said, planking him with that one word “plans,” as if it were a board swung hard against his face.

“OK,” he said, from a place out of alignment with himself.



“You need to take a look at your drinking,” she said quietly, as he ordered another glass of scotch.

“Hey,” he cried.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed about,” she said, seeing just that in his face.

Finishing his next drink was hard, with her having said what she did and staring at him as if he were an invalid in need of a crutch.

He left her and headed east along Houston Street, stopping in at a dive where a rough-looking bartender served broken-down men quart bottles of beer. No music, no women, no TV. Just a hovel where he could drink the way he wanted to, without the eyes of a one-person jury on him. One after another, he downed five doubles of scotch.

When he arrived Sarah and Hunger Longing were seated at the dining table at the far end of the loft. Something needed to be done, something big and more than words could express. He stopped at the kitchen area, opened the refrigerator, and scooped food from the shelves onto the floor.

He came to in bed after midnight. The loft was dark. He rushed down the ladder to answer the ringing phone. A man was on the line. He was calling from a hotel, a seedy hotel, Luther was sure, where he was holding Sarah hostage. Luther had one hour to deliver the ransom. Without a pen or paper handy, Luther had to try to commit the name and address of the hotel to memory. Then the line went dead.

Sarah had been abducted. It was the middle of the night. He was all alone. Panicked, he reached for the yellow pages but already the name of the hotel was beyond his ability to recall. Unable to stay alone with the problem, he called Camp, where

Sarah's parents were staying. Frank, Claire's beau, or displaced beau, answered. Once again Luther was surprised by the overpowering need to express himself, but now he could not throw food out of the refrigerator or rely on other physical acts. Now he had only words, and the words that flew from his mouth were these: "Tell her parents that Sarah is dead. Do you hear me? Sarah is dead."

End of message. Finito. Because when the last word was spoken, the last word was spoken.

Now he had set things in motion. Now he had alerted one and all as to the great danger that surrounded them. Now he was not all alone. A sense of peace came to him there in the loft, where only minutes ago he had known emotional turmoil, and this peace followed him into the street, which too had fallen quiet in the night. Even the holler heads over at Jilly's had turned down the volume on their sound.

He returned from the deli down Second Avenue to the loft with two six-packs of tallboys and a big bag of potato chips. An ambulance was parked at the curb just up from the building. The driver sat at the wheel with the engine and lights turned off. Luther thought to question him. The presence of the idle ambulance seemed an unnecessary mystery and was it right to impose such a thing on his sight and his mind? But he did not wish to make trouble, not on a night where the interregnum of peace had come.

Only the evening before had Sarah and Hunger Longing been having dinner at the table where he now sat with his tallboys. Why should anything that occurred have led to such a diabolical outcome? Well, he might be a poor detective but light would inevitably be shed now that he had launched his communication.

Some hours later he was startled by loud pounding on the door. Had the men of violence come for him? Should he jump out the back window and race to his freedom?

“Who is there?” he called.

“It is Peter Van Dine,” the voice answered, with the firmness of steel.

“Can I trust that it is you?” Luther called back.

“Please open the door, for God’s sake, Luther,” a voice, unmistakably Lydia’s, responded.

He did as he was asked, and Peter and Lydia swept past him, followed by Maggio Capici and his wife, Sally, as if they were soldiers or officers of the law deploying so as to secure the premises. To all corners of the loft did they go before returning to circle around him.

“Where is she, you skinny, drunken, failed, miserable bastard? Where is my daughter?” Peter demanded, speaking from the red face of mayhem pending.

“Peter, please, give him a chance. Tell us, Luther, please,” Lydia said, in a softer, pleading voice.

“You have one minute to explain,” Peter said.

The embarrassment, the shame, that they should see him this way, with empty beer cans all around and, further, see the skinniness of the loft, the poor home he had made for their daughter.

“I was woken by a call in the night. Some man saying he had taken Sarah hostage. He demanded a ransom and said I must deliver it to a certain hotel and then hung up. In my panic I forgot the name of the hotel. We must find this man. We must. And when we

do, we must deal with him.” As Luther was speaking, the phone rang. “I will get it. That must be him.” He picked up the receiver. “Yes?”

“This is Claire. Are my mother and father there?”

Luther handed the receiver to Lydia. “Yes, dear. I see. Of course. Thank God. All right, we will see you soon.” Lydia placed the receiver back in the cradle. “Sarah is at our place. She was fast asleep. She had disconnected the phone.”

Peter wagged a finger in Luther’s face. “You are that man in the hotel room. You are the abductor. You are absolutely psychotic and destructive of me and my family. You must let my daughter go. You must let her go. One more incident. One more, and I will deal with you.”

Luther knew not to give Peter any words or move an inch but just to receive his warning with a solemn and attentive face. He understood that he had brought a pacific man to the breaking point.

“How long must we continue to take care of you, Luther? How long?” Lydia said, the contempt he sensed added to by the quiet, reflective voice in which she spoke, as if she were genuinely curious to learn how an adult male approaching thirty could be in such a state of abject dependency. He expected savage judgment from Peter, but from her he had received a Joe Frazier left hook. And yet he also saw that he shouldn’t have been surprised. Wasn’t her question entirely consistent with her reference to him and Frank as parasites following the death of Lenore? There was much to analyze about the mentality she was showing him, but now wasn’t the time or place.

Seeing that they were leaving, he offered to come with them, but Peter gave him more what for. “No. You won’t come with us. You will never come with us again,” he said, barring any further discussion, but then continued, unable to stop, to impress upon himself as much as Luther what finality meant. “Your time, is over. Over.”

Maggio was slightly more comforting. “You’ve got to get hold of yourself,” he said, but he was hard rock, obsidian glass. Luther could find no way to enter the black and shiny surface of him.

Luther did not enter the ponder place that morning as he sat at his desk. No orderly thought process could be found. There was only shock and pain and grievance that they had not understood and chose instead to ride into the loft on the high horse of outrage and to bury him alive under the weight of their dismissal. At that very hour Sarah would be powwowing with the enemy, who would be seeking to take advantage of this opportunity to exert power and control over her.

“I mean, I got this call that my girlfriend had been kidnapped. What was I to do?” The day had been slow. Mr. Dorf was out of the office, as he often was on Fridays, and so too were many other staff. Desperate to talk, he had asked Hedley Frazon, Mr. Harkin’s assistant, if she would join him for a drink at the Shanghai Palace.

“Your girlfriend was kidnapped? Who made this call?”

“The abductor. He was completely slimy. Maybe that’s not the word, but who holds another person hostage and then tries to put a price on her freedom?”

“And what did you say to him?”

“Nothing. I couldn’t. I was in shock. He did all the talking. He told me the name of the hotel where he was holding her, but in my panic I forgot as I reached for the yellow pages.”

“Um, so Luther, it’s many hours later. Is your girlfriend still missing?”

“No, thank God, she isn’t.”

“And was she kidnapped?”

“Well, that’s just it. She’s with her parents and I haven’t had a chance to talk with her. But even if she wasn’t, that doesn’t mean this man didn’t call me.”

“It doesn’t mean he did, either,” Hedley Frazon said, giving him the best of herself she could. In that moment Luther saw that he had drawn a stranger into his life, a stranger whose aloneness was a match for his own. He saw too that he did not like this woman and never had and that she didn’t like him and never had either. He saw what he didn’t want to see, the eyes behind the big, thick lenses of her glasses, saw that she had the same eyes as his mother, knowing eyes that would leave him naked before himself as well as her in the well of deep truth she sought to plunge him into.

He drank as much as he could and then some more, and was unsteady on his feet when he tried to stand, and so it was for Hedley Frazon to help him out the door and to the corner, brushing off his slurred apologies, and the question he held in reserve for his mind on the cab ride home was whether Hedley Frazon would ring the crazy bell to alert one and all at Pilgore or keep his drunken disclosure to herself. Either way, going forward, he would have to keep his eyes where they belonged and his mouth from leaking what shouldn’t be told when on or around the Pilgore premises.

“I don’t know if I can do this anymore, Luther,” she said, when finally she called after a week of silence.

“Do what? What is the this?” he asked.

“You know what the this is.”

“You’re saying that this is this.”

“I’m saying you come home drunk and act like a crazy person and then you scare my parents and Claire and Frank and Maggio and Sally half to death.”

“I received a phone call...”

“Please, Luther. Please. Mommy told me about the phone call.”

He heard fragility in her voice and felt it in her mind. “OK. OK,” he said.

“I just need some peace.”

“I understand. But I have to ask. Are they trying to turn you against me? Have they formed a chorus of the self-righteous? Are they singing in the key of judgment?”

“Luther, stop.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“I love you,” he said, but got no response.

And he did love her, even if he could not fulfill the obligations, as she deserved, that came with love. There could be no doubt. So he told himself in the days of her absence even as he heard a voice saying maybe it would be for the best if they stayed apart, a voice that put him in the cold place and where he could not stay because of the

pain. His problem was that he was not a man. He was not manly in regard to Sarah. So he had heard Lydia say. He was not taking care of himself, let alone her daughter, in any way that a man should. She had discerned, as had Miss Schnell, cat lady extraordinaire, and so many others, the hanging stringiness essence of him. But even so, she was mistaken if she thought their grade A ordnance with its penetrating power could eradicate him from their lives if not from this earth. They could bend, fold, or mutilate him, but he would survive because he could live with who he was and had been living with it for a long time and had not yet perished himself.

After ten days away she did come back. Their dominion over her was not real or not even wanted, insofar as having her under the same roof with them for any length of time. But she wasn't at the loft for an hour before she burst into tears and said she couldn't stay. Several days later she tried again. She and Luther walked west and then south through the cobblestone streets of SoHo to the café on Broome Street for brunch and then headed to the A & P at LaGuardia Place for groceries. At first it was touch and go as she felt her way back into the rhythm of their life together, but his fear that she would leave again diminished with the passing days. He could not say the same for his anger at her parents for their lack of regard for him and his relationship with their daughter.

There was one who did have regard for him, even if he did not know his or her identity.

“You have a fan on this floor. Would you be open to the idea of working for this person?” Judith Everholt said to him.



“Keep me in mind,” Luther said.

“You are in mind,” Judith shot back.

A fan. This person. It was worrisome. Was it one of Judith Everholt’s friends who visited with her in her office? Would he find himself in bondage to this person, should she hire him, as surely it would turn out to be a woman? Was he some kind of pawn, that he should be talked about this way? And wasn’t it really a setup for disappointment all around, an opportunity for this person to see his thinness as she reviewed his resume, see all his bones showing, and take the measure of his lacking mind and say no, no, I cannot have this humorless, witless person working in proximity with me. Or would he not, if she hired him, become a topic of gossip, his new boss and Judith Everholt and the other women of rising power collectively holding up his meagerness for ridicule. No, no, he had to admit he was better off in the bastion of maleness Mr. Dorf represented. His bad temper and his arrogance notwithstanding, Mr. Dorf had the strength required of a man sufficient that women of a certain kind saw him as a threat and sought to pull him low.

This business of patriarchy and where Luther stood in the fight against it was confusing. Septuagenarian and wearer of outrageous suspenders though he was, Mr. Dorf was a model of ruggedness in a civilized format, with his thinning hair combed straight back in the manly way. And yet here Luther was taking comfort from the supposed enemy. Some subtle thing was going on. His train was being switched to another track. Oh, he really couldn’t say, but was it possible that Dr. Rosner was the real engineer of this rerouting?

And yet the ban on his presence at Van Dine family events served as a reminder that he must not put away his armor just yet.

“‘You think I am a homosexual. You think I am a dirty old man,’ my father shouted at me, over dinner,” Sarah said. She had gone alone to the family apartment.

“Context is lacking and must be provided if we are to get to the bottom of this,” Luther said.

“He thinks you have turned me against him.”

“I’m responsible for your believing your father is homosexual and a dirty old man?”

“Not exactly. But he does see you as working against family unity, and he is big on that.”

“And you see the same thing?”

“No, of course not. But these drunken incidents don’t help.”

“What is family unity, anyway? Family can be a death trap, if you’re not careful. I mean, look at mine. Something went wrong there. Isn’t that why you and I are together, to help each other gain some distance from family?”

“I’m not disagreeing,” Sarah said.

“They want to get rid of me, like I’m the vanguard of a revolution they don’t want to witness.”

“A bit grandiose, but there could be some truth.”

It was his fault. He hardly earned enough to support himself, let alone her. They would always own Sarah so long as she was dependent on their money.

In dreamland that night a woman ascended higher and higher over gigantic, snow-covered mountains in a single-person airplane. Luther and Sarah had taken to the air as well, flying a hundred feet above tropical waters, the sky above turned a light purple. They landed gently on a strip of beach. Judith Everholt and Adrian Zecker, Mr. Balls on His Feet, were bathing nearby. Peace and tranquility were everywhere to be found on this island paradise.

Luther could only live in wonder of the places he had witnessed in dreamland, the huge, snow-capped mountains and then the sun and sand, and that his mind could soar him above the dreck that was his to experience in the daily round. That dreck included the return of thoughts of violence, not to the degree that had led him to Dr. Rosner the year before, but sufficient to cause him to voice his concerns to the doctor.

“You’re afraid Sarah is going to leave you. You are furious at the thought of it.”

“Can that be right? I don’t feel this fury. I don’t. I really don’t.”

“Coming home roaring drunk and sweeping food from the refrigerator onto the floor is not an act of love.”

“I guess not,” Luther conceded. “But what do I do?”

“You continue to come here,” Dr. Rosner said.

How good Dr. Rosner was to him. How safe Luther felt in his Harvard hands. That he should have a doctor with his level of understanding.

Luke’s life didn’t stop when Brenda ran off with Fredo. And when Erin died of a drug overdose, in California, a week later, that caused him to mourn but didn’t sink him either.

He began to draw near to Rose, Erin's aunt, offering her his comfort and counsel, as she was in her own time of need. Not only was there the shock of losing her beautiful and talented niece Erin, but her husband, Billy, was out of control. Mr. Softee he might be by day, operating out of his ice cream truck, but at home he spoke with his fists. Gambling losses were becoming a major problem and then there were the drugs and alcohol. One night he beat Rose so bad her boys had to call for an ambulance after their father fled into the night. An order of protection was issued, but Rose had no faith that Billy would abide by it.

Rose was not a child, as Erin had been. Rose was full-grown with large capacities and a receiving manner. She put food on the table for Luke when he came to visit. And the twins, Jimmy and Joey, deer-like with their big eyes and their skittishness, responded to him. He was warm and giving in the way that their beset father could not be. Her marriage was over, Rose said. Billy had beaten her for the last time, unless he meant to come back and kill her, and it wouldn't surprise her if he did. She had it in mind to retain a lawyer and file for divorce. Catholic or not, she didn't see that she had any choice. Maybe she couldn't do it that day or that week, but it would happen because it had to happen. She cried as she spoke, her left eye blackened and her whole face a big bruise where he had struck her.

She remembered Luke from her One Hundred Eleventh Street days, and Luke remembered her, as did Luther, how it was she brought him to attention the evening she walked up Broadway in her summer dress and turned his head and all the boys' heads, a teenage girl already a woman with the power of her beauty commanding your attention.

Rose not being a woman who was meant to be alone, Luke began to stay with her more and more, and in his mind came to be with her even when he was not, and as a way forward with his life.

But in Luther's mind alarm bells were sounding, and he shared his concern with Luke. Was it wise to move into a home marked by domestic violence and where more was surely planned. Billy might be loving in his normal state, but that state was long gone, and like a hyena, he had marked his prey. Did Luke want to be in the general vicinity when Billy came calling with his mayhem madness? Did he not see that his presence would only incite Billy to greater retribution? But Luke rose up on Luther for his cautionary ways. He punched him in his face *and* his chest with his words of derision, calling him timid and feeble and always with the excuses for not taking action. In such a dismissing way did Luke speak to Luther.

And so it was left to Luther to fall into silence and live in fear of a wrecking ball coming in on his brother's life on those hot summer days. Luther didn't want to be Cassandra. He didn't want to have to sing to his brother the I told you so song when the phone rang one weekend morning and it was Luke on the line saying, "Did you see the headline in the *Daily News*? Did you see it?" in a tone already aggrieved at the possibility that Luther hadn't.

Luke's badgering manner grated, but Luther refrained from saying that he did not read the *Daily News*, at least on a daily basis, anymore, lest Luke see Luther as making a feeble attempt to suggest his superiority. Still, he did offer a forceful and self-protective no, sensing Luke was up to something. He was either coming with foolishness or chaos,

but either way it was not good. Luther's no was meant to say, I am not your keeper, now or ever, and have built my dam solid against your contaminated waters.

But Luke would not accept containment, not where his life was concerned. "You didn't read that Rose was shot in the head in Prospect Park and that her son Jimmy was shot in the neck and that her husband Billy is dead after shooting himself in the head? You didn't read any of that?" his outrage now unfettered that Luther could be so distracted or thoughtless not to shine the spotlight on Luke's life all the time.

"No," Luther said once more, shocked but unwilling to make the tragedy of Rose and Billy Malone and their son's Luke's own, because not everything was his brother's to appropriate, Luther seeing more clearly now where Luke was coming from. His brother's one moment in the headlines and Luther had to be oblivious to it, or feign obliviousness just to deny him the shower of sympathy that was his due.

"You piece of shit. You total fucking piece of shit. My girlfriend has a bullet in her brain and her son a bullet-pierced neck and it's screaming from the front page of the *Daily News* and you can't even see it." Luke's escalated commotion state saying what Luther had only suspected, that the shootings were about him, not Rose and Billy and Jimmy, and to confirm once again that the Garatdjian sickness was to make everything about them.

Luther continued to monitor dreamland for any light activities in that world could shed on situations occurring in his waking state. He relied on them more than he cared to admit to add interest to his life, which had its numbingly repetitive aspect.

A madman had moved into the basement of his mother's building. The room had been scary enough without him, as it housed circuit breakers and wiring for the elevator. Blue flashes of electrical light would chase the darkness for seconds at a time, affording Luther a terrifying, if blurred, glimpse of the madman, who had made it known that his only purpose in taking up residence was to follow through on a sinister plan. And what could be the meaning of the giant TV screen that had replaced the stained glass window up at the Broadway Presbyterian Church on the next corner?

"Maybe I am the madman, but what is my sinister plan?" Luther asked, when next he saw Dr. Rosner.

"What you have to understand is that you identify with Billy. You see what he did and you fear that could be you."

"But I don't own a gun and besides, you told me I wasn't a candidate for violence when I came to you with my knife fantasies."

"Everyone is a candidate for violence given certain conditions."

"What conditions are you talking about?"

"You're afraid of the same thing Billy was afraid of, that a woman would leave you."

"I do not raise my fists to Sarah. I do not beat her senseless, the way Billy did to Rose. I haven't slapped her since that trip we took to Europe seven years ago. Do not reduce me to an essence that is not there and put me in the hall of shame."

"As for the big TV replacing the stained glass window, I believe you are trying to live more comfortably in the secular world. You have said many times that TV was

denied you as a child. You are looking for a window into a different world than the one you grew up in, one that is less restrictive.”

“The things you say,” Luther could only reply.

He came home with his bottle and found Sarah in tears.

“What is it? What happened?”

“I quit my job. That’s what happened. Now you can take care of me on your big salary. Aren’t you happy? Aren’t you the big man?”

“Why did you quit?” he said, pushing past her sarcasm.

“Because I had no choice. All they do is stare at me and whisper about me behind my back.”

“Who are they and why would they do that?”

“All of them. Why does anyone do anything? Because it gives them pleasure. Oh, look at her, the little sicko.”

“I can’t imagine anyone talking about you like that.”

“Can’t you? You talk to me like that all the time when you are drunk, Mr. Drunko, as I’m sure you will tonight after you’ve drained your bottle.”

“You shouldn’t talk that way,” he said.

“Talk what way? That I’m hopeless and you’re hopeless?”

“You’ll feel different tomorrow.”

“There are no tomorrows, don’t you see? My tomorrow is today.”



She began to cry again, giving herself to her tears, as if from a depth he had not seen before. True, she had said cruel and hurtful things, but it was hard to be angry, seeing her in such distress. It was more like disappointment that she would squander an opportunity to secure an income. A quality design studio had employed her. She wasn't serving greasy hamburgers to leering businessmen on their lunch break. And the environment was surely friendly and supportive. After all, she had a friend and admirer in Carola Aprile.

"Maybe you'd like to take a walk," he said, as the crying subsided.

"Something you need to know, Luther. Make of it what you will. I was attracted to my father as a child. I *wanted* to sleep with him."

"Why do I need to know that?"

"Because you just do, that's why. And we can't take a walk. You need to get to your bottle."

"No, I can. Let's do it," Luther said.

They browsed in the St. Mark's bookstore. His mind was elsewhere than on the paperbacks with their bright covers that filled the shelves and racks. She had been right. The walk was hard, but the bottle would be there for him on his return.

"She was talking about me?" Sarah said, as they left.

"Who was talking about you?"

"The woman at the cash register. The man handed her a book and she said that would be \$7.95."

"So?"

“Don’t you get it? They arranged their little exchange so it would take place just as we were passing by them. They wanted me to hear that I am worth \$7.95. It made their day to tell me so.”

“I do think the man was just trying to buy a book.”

“Yes, you do think, don’t you, Luther?”

“You’re anxious because you’re afraid she may not be able to have a full relationship,” Dr. Rosner said.

“What is that, a full relationship?” Luther asked.

“A partnership of equals.”

“We’re equals. We’re more than equals. She can put the IQ blocks together faster and better than I can. She told me so and I know it’s so.”

“Equals in terms of accepting the responsibilities that adults inevitably have to assume.”

“It does feel like a blow that she quit her job, but she says now that she will be going back.”

“You’re also afraid that you may not be able to achieve closeness with another woman.”

“What other woman? There is no other woman.”

“I’m saying...”

“What are you saying?”

“That you have a great deal of fear about the future. We need to end soon.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“How would I be threatening you?”

“Saying we have to end. Are you throwing me out?”

“You understand I was referring to the session.”

“Never mind what you were referring to. Don’t be talking about the end—of anything.”

“To be continued,” Dr. Rosner said.

*Now, Celeste, many things happen on the long road to freedom. Marion Rheingold left Pilgore to study acting and Jack de Goines resigned as personnel director to attend the Harvard Business School. No one was more proud of him than Mr. Bad Minton, who in fact wrote a sterling recommendation. “My boy Jack has the necessities,” Mr. Bad Minton was heard to say, recognizing excellence when he saw it. Then came the day when MBI buried the hatchet deep in the head of Mr. Bad Minton, after promising him they wouldn’t. Yes, Celeste, they threw him out the door and his title with him, but you must understand, you must, that Mr. Bad Minton, in spite of all his sophistication, was a man who into a family had been born and, on his own unaided will, could not leave. The operation that his forebears had founded took all of him. True, it was his glory but even more, it was his prison. Now, with his release, and the torquing power of Jack de Goines to inspire him, he too moved on to academe, enrolling at age fifty-five—fifty-five, mind you—in the Columbia University School of Law, proving that once a high board score man, always a high board score man. And so he could finally be free to follow his heart.*

*Many times have I seen the burden of the family business written on the faces and in the stooped shoulders of the children who feel obliged to follow that same path and I call to them, 'Come out of your laundry service, Jimmy Woo,' or the same to Mr. Rocco Franco as he toils in the family's pizzeria. But now, the family business behind me, I was in a new rut, unable to leave not only my position with Mr. Dorf but my life with Sarah. I was a windup toy, which, set on a path, goes in one direction only. One day I came to see that a little torque of our own was needed for Mona and me to solve our relationship difficulty, that the answer was to take things to the next level. Marriage would bring the stability and harmony that had eluded us. If a man is in a hole, what is the solution but to dig a deeper hole?*

Once every few weeks Luther would visit the Strand Bookstore with a load of review copies he had taken from Pilgore. The bearded man behind the counter would give him a small sum in exchange. There was no bargaining with the man. It was take it or leave it, and so Luther took what was offered. One day the man held up a volume of poetry that Mr. Dorf had recently published. "She used to work here," the man said, of the young poet with the narrow face on the back cover.

"Is that right?" Luther said. He had met the poet. Mr. Dorf had him deliver the galleys of her book to the fancy hotel where she was staying on Eighth Street and Fifth Avenue. Mr. Dorf had discovered her poems in slender small-press chapbooks at a bookstore in the West Village and thought to combine them in a hardcover edition. The poet was young and known to hang out with Andy Warhol. There was an aura of coolness

about her. Maybe it was the tight black pants and the oversize white shirt and the extremely short hair, or maybe it was her name—Peggy Fame. Luther couldn't say. She was a rock musician as well as a poet, a holler head who did her holler head thing at Jilly's now and then. Luther thought of her as derivative, a woman trying to be a female Bob Dylan, and what was that? He felt patronized by the poet when he knocked on her hotel door and she invited him in and he handed her the galleys. He felt like a lackey, a delivery boy delivering take-out chop suey or General Tso's chicken. He didn't like for people to remind him of the life he didn't have, the life of freedom where they could rent expensive hotel rooms and receive hand-delivered packages by the underlings of big-name editors.

The man's name at the bookstore was Holt. He had a polished face and the gray in his beard was a standout gray and he spoke his words with a quiet but bullet-firm authority. That his hair was mostly all on his face and not on his head did not matter. He made it not matter through the single-minded force of who he was. And who was he, you ask? He was the man in the suit who, whatever time you came to him during normal business hours, was either appraising the seller's load of books or writing the price in a calligraphic hand on the inside of the books he had just acquired before they were put on the shelves for sale.

Calligraphic hand. That was a term Mr. Dorf used. Mr. Dorf could command words to stand up and spin.

Saturday morning was a happy time. It had the hope of the weekend in it. With the money from the review copies he had sold, he bought first editions of contemporary

novels: *Lancelot*, by Walker Percy, and *The Moviegoer*, by Walker Percy. And he would add others, because Walker Percy was a quality author with a quality mind and a quality publisher, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, and someday his books would be worth even more than they already were. Someday contemporaneity would eventually become antiquity, or, if that was too long to wait, at least it would become a past worth remembering, and when was the past not worth remembering and valuing? The power of Mr. Dorf, with his antiquarian book dealing, was radiating out of his office and into Luther.

With the books he had purchased he walked down to the A & P and LaGuardia Place and bought Ragu tomato sauce and a box of Ragu ziti and peanut butter and a loaf of Wonder Bread and a twelve-pack of Piel's beer. It was not the quality beer that Budweiser was. It did not have the Anhauser-Busch creaminess. No, it had the taste of metal in it. But he could have the bottles by his side while he worked under the loft bed on White Line, Continue and whatever else he was able to turn his attention to before he went up to Astor Place for the wines he would need by evening.

Sandra Bullman was another of Mr. Dorf's authors. He knew how to like her and make her like him. He had that power of liking so he could be liked, to dance around the problem and into the merry light of day. But Luther did not like Sandra Bullman. She was loud and pushy and made of her face a canvas to be worked on continually with powders and brushes and creams, a cry for someone to rescue her from the oblivion into which her middle age was sinking her. And he did not like her name-dropping book. Here comes

Miss Bulk. Here comes Ms, Loudmouth Pompous Ass, he thought, when she came to meet with Mr. Dorf at Pilgore, and so she had no reason to like him either.

“What’s the matter, Sunshine? Can’t find a better job?” Sandra Bullman said, out of earshot of Mr. Dorf. She had arrived for one of her visits. Her voice a razor blade slicing through his vocal cords. Talking to him that way. Seeing him as the flunky that he was, a big fool in cheap clothes flopping about for a suave and savvy old man.

Those first edition books Luther bought. He wrapped them in plastic bags so they would be safe from the air and preserved for posterity. But they did not give him any peace. If he bought one, then he would have to buy another, and then another. The accumulation seemed to go against that in him which wanted to be unburdened. It seemed to add to his soreness.

Pilgore had manuscripts placed under contract by editors who had since left. These manuscripts were often assigned to editors still on staff. *How to Get Out of a Lousy Marriage: Do Not Let Your Spouse Drop the Atom Bomb of Suicide on Your Freedom-Seeking Head*, by Dr. Orestes Coulter, was one such work, and it had been assigned to Mr. Dorf. Luther didn’t know about any atom bomb, but the manuscript was a real stink bomb if the look of distaste on Mr. Dorf’s face meant anything when he called Luther into his office to discuss the manuscript.

“I am placing this project in your capable hands. I want you to see it through all the stages of production. Do you feel up to the task?” Mr. Dorf asked.

“Yes, I do,” Luther said.

The truth was that Luther had been set loose to do some hacking and whacking on one of Mr. Dorf’s previous projects, a coffee table collection of movie reviews, accompanied by stills, by the esteemed critic J. Augustine Simone of the *New York Times*. Mr. Dorf had cautioned Luther that Mr. Simone was from the South and had fallen under the spell of William Faulkner, thus feeling obliged to write long and convoluted and altogether taxing sentences.

“If you could just shorten them, pluck the weeds that obscure and in some instances strangle the flowers that seek to grow in their midst,” Mr. Dorf had instructed.

I will be the good soldier. I will follow through, Luther thought. Never mind a garden. I do not know one flower from another, though someday I hope to so I can be fully armed with the facts of them, but I do know about the preservation of order. I was born with a broom in my hands. I had a childhood of sweeping my room and the rooms of the apartment and the alleyway as well for the restoration and preservation of order, and I will do just that with the manuscript in my care. A philosophy of editing had come to him.

Some weeks later, Mr. Dorf sent the manuscript to Mr. Simone for review, though Mr. Dorf was careful to omit Luther’s name from the cover letter. One morning some days later, the phone on Luther’s desk rang and it was Mr. Simone on the line speaking in a tone of incredulity-tinged sadness, saying, “What on earth has been done to my manuscript? I am crushed almost to the point of speechlessness.” These exact words did Mr. Simone speak into the ear of Luther, and in that moment did the word *desecration*



come to Luther's mind, as if he were a vandal who had been set loose to smash tombstones in an immaculately ordered graveyard. He saw in that moment the trespass he had committed, the violation he had done.

"I will transfer your call to Mr. Dorf." Luther did not go down the road of callousness. He did not say, with defensive coldness, "I only work here." No. He was deep into shame sufficient that he must run from the whole matter, as when Simon Weill came on the line, he would ring frantically for his mother. Once upon a time I hid behind Mommy. Now I am hiding behind Daddy, if for a different reason. But it is OK with me that this should be so. So Luther spoke to himself.

Mr. Dorf did not come out and give Luther a beating. He handled Mr. Simone deftly, drawing on the psychology it was his to possess and once again proving he was a man of the world.

Luther took counsel with himself so he could live, in some fashion, with what he had and had not, saying, So what if I am not a man of the world? So what if I don't dine in the Oak Room and glad-hand authors? So what if I don't place manuscripts under contract? So what if I am not involved with the money side of life? I am White Line Continue. I am the written word, wherever that may go, and can make of that my lifeline in this world of turbulence.

Luther also saying, I aggressed on poor Mr. J. Augustine Simone. I took pleasure in savaging his garden and triumphing over him. I must not fool myself as to what I was about. And in the moment of acknowledgment, he saw himself as who he was, a young man of meagerness presuming to know better than a man who *was* his better.

And there were other episodes that sent him dangerously low, such as the call he received from Frank de Falooza, horror writer extraordinaire, only Frank de Falooza's voice was filled with outrage, not the incredulity-tinged sadness of J. Augustine Simone. "Who, I said who, has degraded my master work with this positively lurid jacket copy that has been sent to me?" The question posed, it was once again for Luther to feign ignorance and summon Mr. Dorf to the line. Because once again Mr. Dorf had directed Luther to do what he evidently could not do. Whether it was line editing or writing flap copy, Luther was not up to the task, and yet Mr. Dorf brought his suaveness into play, assuaging the fired up Frank de Falooza and, in the end, making only modest changes to the copy that Luther had drafted. Once again, Mr. Dorf did not come from his office and beat Luther, savagely or otherwise. Mr. Dorf, to Luther's amazement, worked with him.

And so now Luther had in his care *How to Get Out of a Lousy Marriage: Do Not Let Your Spouse Drop the Atom Bomb of Suicide on Your Freedom-Seeking Head*, by Dr. Orestes Coulter, and he would try to find the meaning behind the words the author wrote when such meaning was not entirely apparent on the page.

In spite of his drinking, the good life called to Luther, and with the winter months approaching, his thoughts turned to the sun. He and Sarah flew down to Miami, rented a car, and made the drive to Key West that same day. Though Sloppy Joe's, down toward the Gulf side of Duval Street, called strongly to him, he resisted by reading Graham Greene novels in their rented room and then fell off to sleep for the night. He had found the answer.

But the next night he was drinking bourbon out of a wide-mouth bottle under a willow tree near the harbor when his eyes began to sting. Tear gas had been released into the air by the well-supplied state police to disperse the crowd that had gathered. Why the police had to lob tear gas canisters was beyond him, but they had their idea of order and how to impose it. What the full nature of the ruckus was Luther never learned. Sometimes violence was mysterious, sudden, like a thunderstorm, with no other purpose than to relieve the tension in a portion of the universe. Still, he didn't much like the weight of the police and their willingness to break bones because they had the power to do it, not down in the tropical keys. Why couldn't they just leave him alone to drink in peace? He had just been settling under the tree and marveling at his financial prudence, buying that bottle instead of blowing his money in Sloppy Joe's. Now noxious, manmade fumes were driving him from the heaven he had found.

And there were his own noxious fumes, Graham Greene and bourbon from a bottle gone from his mind as a solution, he sat at a bar with Sarah one evening. A woman came along and said to Sarah, "You look too good for this place."

Taken aback, Sarah said nothing.

Luther rushed in to fill the unbearable silence. "That's because she's affected," he said.

"Affected? Affected? What a thing to say. Are you affected?" the woman asked.

"I don't think of myself as being that way," Sarah said. "I don't think of myself that way at all."

“And I don’t either. Whatever could you have meant saying such a thing about your girlfriend?” the woman asked, addressing herself to Luther.

“I couldn’t say,” Luther said.

“Are you drunk? You don’t look drunk. Or is it possible you don’t even know what the word *affected* means? That’s closer to the truth, isn’t it?”

“Maybe you should go away,” Luther said, stung beyond recovery by her assault.

“Oh, I’ll go away, all right,” the woman said. “And you will too, if you know what’s good for you,” she added, turning to Sarah. “Vanish from him. Vanish, I tell you.”

Sarah did not vanish from him, but she did continue the inquiry once the woman had left. “Why did you say such a thing of me?” she asked.

“Was it that bad? It was only one word.”

“Murderer is one word.”

“And haven’t you called me that?”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“I have an answer for nothing,” Luther said.

“Tell me why you said it,” Sarah continued.

“The woman made me nervous. She just busted in on us. I became self-conscious and to deflect attention away from myself I directed it toward you. That was stupid and wrong, of course.”

“She wasn’t even talking to you.”

“I know.”

“You just said you know nothing.”

“I know.”

“I could kill you.”

“Then I could get to call you murderer.”

“Stop it. You’re driving me crazy.”

There was nothing to say to that.

*Celeste, who that woman was I have no idea. I do not have her name or address or contact information. Nothing of her history, her siblings, if any, nothing. But I do know her all the same. I do. She is the what for woman in a what for world, and you, of course, are familiar with what for, as you have been called upon to dispense it yourself at times. To be spoken to in the language of what for, to be administered to in that particular language, is to feel fully alive in the place the universe has assigned to one.*

Things were in motion, even if he could not place them fully in their proper order. Times Square on a Saturday night was alive, with the threat or promise of violence only a wrong look away. The stilettos in the store windows called for takers, and word had it that farther east, in the depths of Grand Central Terminal, hoboes had made their home, monks in the brotherhood of filth. Most inexplicably, the mother of Mr. Dorf’s physician showed up, in Mr. Dorf’s absence, and recited her own poetry in the face of Luther before getting to what she believed was the heart of the matter.

“Are you cynical, Luther? Is that it?” she said, trying to crush him once and for all with a final burst of knowingness.

And he, Luther, thinking but not saying, You are a bad movie, a very bad movie.

*Celeste, I have never told you the whole truth. Never. Not once. I have been afraid to.*

Sarah said she would marry Luther, and that no contract was needed. Luther took his confusion to Dr. Edelbaum, who took a sample of his blood as a prerequisite to a health certificate and eligibility for the marriage vow. Sarah would come to him separately for the same procedure.

“You have some bums in your family, Luther. Are you a bum, too?” Dr. Edelbaum asked.

“I’m trying not to be,” Luther said.

“We all have a calling in this life,” Dr. Edelbaum said. “And that calling is hard to resist.”

Dr. Edelbaum talked from a place of serenity, his face cast in an expression of gentle amusement, the world and its people an ongoing source of entertainment. His fourth wife had come and gone. The golden retriever, the cats, the issues of the *National Geographic*, his maid Molly with her Scottish accent, were buffers against a loneliness he wouldn’t or couldn’t feel. How Dr. Edelbaum could dwell in the domain of equanimity in the midst of such turnover was the question. Luther could only guess that his giant intelligence had delivered him onto the plane of peace.

“I am being called to marriage,” Luther said.

“So it appears. I will tell you a story.”

A young man named Hugo showed up at a party, at which there was a woman to whom he was attracted. Her name was Esmerelda. When he approached, she casually but firmly brushed him off. Dismayed by her lack of receptivity, Hugo left the party only to open his front door the next morning and find her sitting outside. They had been living together, unwed, ever since.

“Is there a message in your story?” Luther asked.

“There is a message in every story,” Dr. Edelbaum replied.

“I suppose,” Luther said, wondering as he crossed the street to visit the building of disorder what the good doctor might be suggesting. But such thoughts were dispelled by the gloom of the lobby, which had been painted a dark brown. A couple of plastic chairs had replaced the upholstered ones Auntie Eve had set out and her antique furnishings were gone, as were the framed verses of scripture from the now bare walls.

“What you want?” a sour-looking man inquired.

“What I want?” Luther answered back.

“You hear my question. Why you not give answer?”

“I am here to see my mother and my brother.”

“Who your mother? Who your brother?”

“Mrs. Garatdjian. My brother’s name is Luke.”

“Why you not say so?”

“I just did say so.”

“Do not fuck with me, Mr. Wise Guy. I am Harry Brown. I am like my name. I shit all over this lobby to make it grow.”

Luther left Harry Brown to his devices and found his brother dozing in a chair in a darkened room behind the office. A feeling of dread came over him seeing Luke so conspicuously in the failure gulch in the deadness of the afternoon.

“Hey,” Luther said, as Luke shifted and opened his eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just stopped by to say hello. How are things?”

“Good.”

“And Rose and the kids?”

“They’re doing fine.” Rose and Jimmy had survived being shot. Afraid to remove it, the doctors had left a fragment of the bullet in her brain. She would have to live with the aneurysm or die because of it.

“Anything new?”

“Does it look like there’s anything new?”

“I just saw your boss, Harry Brown.”

“Fuck him.”

“Right. Fuck him,” Luther said.

“And fuck you, too,” Luke said, his voice rising.

“What’s that mean, fuck me too?”

“Just get lost.” Luke brought his forearm to his nose. He sat like that as Luther backed out the door.



He doesn't want me, Luther thought. I am to him what Tom Smits was to me when he showed up in the lobby that summer following my graduation from high school. My presence is a reminder that perhaps he shouldn't be here anymore.

Luther brought his sadness upstairs to his mother's apartment. The presence of Hannah and her son Moses was a disappointment to him. He had wanted to be alone with his mother.

"I'm doing good in school. I have the mind for it. I'm a big thing at Stuyvesant. I'll bet you couldn't get into a school like that," Moses said.

The word *strapping* came to mind seeing Moses in jeans and a T-shirt. "You're probably right about that," Luther said, stung to have to admit it.

"Were you doing calculus in the eleventh grade and doing advanced placement chemistry? Don't tell me you were. I saw one of your old report cards lying around. You were doing Latin and some of that sissy shit. Next year I'll be going off to the University of Michigan or USC, where before long I'll be the starting quarterback. You'll see."

"Be respectful, Moses. Luther is your uncle," Hannah said. Once again it struck Luther that Moses was not and would never be a fully autonomous person and that he mustn't be seduced by any seeming evidence to the contrary, such as Hannah's mild chastisement of her son. Moses existed for the furtherance of her will, which was informed by resentment and envy and revenge. Luther couldn't help the direction of darkness his mind took him in regard to oldest sister. It was a darkness that came through walls and closed doors.

"So Luther, I hear you were in Florida," Hannah now said.

“I was.”

“Where in Florida?”

“Key West.”

“Is that near Key Biscayne. Did you drop in on President Nixon?”

“Ghosts scare me,” Luther said.

“You should show him some respect. He did great things for the country.”

“There was that little thing called Watergate.”

“That was just a liberal lie.”

“If you say so.”

“Are you being fresh with me?”

“Don’t be fresh to my mother. Don’t be fresh to anyone, but especially my mom.”

“Disagreeing isn’t being fresh,” Luther said.

“Don’t be arguing with me. I don’t play that way.”

“Which way do you play, Moses?”

“Don’t be disrespecting me is all I’m saying. And if you do, then you have to take what you get and take it like a man, because a man is who you’re talking to.”

“Come on, Moses. Let’s get away from his poison,” Hannah said, and led Moses away as Mrs. Garatdjian entered the room.

“How are things here? I mean, with Hannah and Moses,” Luther asked, when his sister and her son were out of earshot.

“Things are fine, Luther, just fine.”

“They treat you well?”

“Of course they do. Why would you ask such a thing?”

“I just did.”

“Hannah is very good to me. She just has a condition. All my children have a condition, all but Vera. You know she is doing so well in her studies at Columbia.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You should talk to her more often, Luther. She has such drive and determination. She is like Auntie Eve in that way.”

“Auntie Eve said Vera was a lesbian. Did you know that?”

“Ushtah, Luther, ushtah. The things you say.”

“I didn’t say it. Auntie Eve said it. Vera told me so.”

“Auntie Eve was a godly woman. She would never speak in such a way.”

“Ingmar Bergman said she would.”

“Ingmar Bergman? What kind of foolishness is it that you are speaking now?”

“The Swedish film director. His characters speak from a place of vileness when the spirit moves them. They suddenly speak the language of bitter and lacerating truth.”

“Ushtah, I say again.”

He was taking her where she didn’t belong, to the gates of the forbidden, as Hannah and Naomi had done in the long ago when they tried to get her to have some of the wine they had brought into the apartment, Hannah saying, both of them saying, “Come on, Mother. Have a little wine. Stop being such a saint.” Trying to smash her with their laughing viciousness, he had sensed, as a child, to knock her off her sainthood pedestal. And now here he came, not with alcohol but with celluloid. Did he not know

that for her the movies were ungodly? Did he not know not to try to tempt her from the garden of virtue she occupied?

“I’m getting married. That’s really why I came to see you.”

“No.”

“Yes. It’s true.”

“Who will you marry?”

*Married.* The word had sounded compromising to his ear as he spoke it. And *marry.* It sounded no better coming from his mother.

“Sarah, of course.”

“I see. But is that wisdom?”

“Wisdom?”

“You must be prepared for what marriage means.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means forever. It means eternity. Your father is still with me. I feel his presence even as we speak.”

He was glad he didn’t feel his father’s presence, he thought to say but didn’t, remembering his mother’s pain over his father’s death, how it sent her to bed in tears of grief, how she cried that she hadn’t even had the chance to say goodbye. His mother’s love was her own to fathom, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t his to try to gauge as well. He remembered too his cavalier attitude toward his father’s death and the tears family members shed, remembered the look of cold rage when he took his mother’s arm with some impatience to lead her away after the workers had lowered the coffin with the

support of canvas straps into the grave. That look that said, Don't touch me, you insolent filth. Don't touch me. He would take that look to his own grave.

"That is something," Luther said.

"But why would you marry her now when you have had your willful way with her? Is it the growing awareness that you have been living in sin?"

"I don't think so," Luther said.

"The consequences of sin are severe, my son."

"Do you believe everything you have just said?"

"Do my words mean nothing, my son? Do they?"

"No. But do they mean everything you say they do?"

"It is not a matter of what I or my words mean. It is a matter of what the word of God means."

"Is that right?" His irritation was beginning to show.

"Eternity is forever. This life is but a blink of the eye."

"I'm a bit young to be thinking about eternity," Luther said.

"You're never too young to begin thinking about eternity and the state of your soul. I have been praying for you, my son. I have been praying for all my children. How else can I keep you close? If you're not with me in my mind, how can you be with me in my heart? And if I am with you, then you must be with me as well, forever and ever."

"What I wanted to ask was whether you would come to the wedding." It wasn't what he wanted to ask, and yet it was what he needed to ask. Filthy he might be, but filth had to have its limits. He could not leave himself in the death-dealing desert. He had to

show her to the Van Dines. He remembered what he had said to Dr. Dressler back when: if he got married, there would be no one to invite. And now there was. He had invited his mother.

“Of course I would come, my son. Of course.”

“It won’t be much. It will be at City Hall.”

“And her parents? They will be there?”

“Yes,” Luther said.

“I see. And others of the family, too?”

“No. I don’t believe so. It will be a really small and plain ceremony. Would it be all right if you were to come by yourself?”

“I understand, my son. I will not breathe a word. It will be our secret.”

“At least until the ceremony is over.”

“You have my word.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Mr. Dorf said.

“Do what?” Luther asked. He had come to Mr. Dorf to ask if the following day he could leave at noon in order to get married.

“You don’t have to tie the knot. Some knots are very hard to untie.”

“I understand,” Luther said.

“Do you? I wonder. Signs and portents are everywhere. Do you suppose it is an accident that I have given you editorial responsibility for *How to Get Out of a Failing Marriage?*?”

“I can’t say that I did.”

“Signs and portents are only of value if we recognize them. You must ask yourself this question: am I digging a deeper hole as a solution for getting out of the hole I am now in.”

“Well, that is something to ponder. Thank you,” Luther replied.

For whatever reason, Mr. Dorf’s words, while they resonated, did not amount to a crushing weight. In his bag, the next day, he carried one of Dr. Dorf’s signs and portents, the galley proofs of the marriage book, meaning, he supposed, that the word *irony* should have a place in the conversation. In truth there was a battle in his mind; he was feeling it. But if he wasn’t as full of resolve as the East Side subway headed to City Hall, he had enough to stay the course.

His mother was already there, huddled under the archway of the municipal building. He had insisted she take a cab and he would reimburse her for the fare. He took her arm and walked with her into the vaulted lobby. There Sarah waited. It was not her way to go heavy with makeup, and so it sent a shock wave through him to see her rouged cheeks and lips turned a bright and glossy red.

As he and his mother approached, a man passed Sarah. He was young and dark and dapper in a tailored suit and reminded Luther of Lane, Sarah’s genius friend in Boston. Simultaneously he and Sarah flashed smiles revelatory of their mutual interest as the man sped on. When Luther drew close, he smelled the liquor on her breath. What a strange business that she should be lit and he be dry for their nuptials. This is not easy for her, he could only conclude.

Luther was shocked by the sterility, the austere and depressing plainness, of the wedding ceremony room and the bland, perfunctory manner of the clerk who performed the service, as if civil service life had turned him into an automaton on an assembly line. When the clerk asked Luther to place a ring on Sarah's finger, it was Lydia's turn to be shocked. An audible gasp escaped from her as Luther confessed that he had no ring. It had not occurred to him that one would be needed. He had never been to a wedding. How was he to know what people did at them?

"Here. Take mine." Exasperation could be heard in Lydia's voice as she slipped the wedding band from her finger. Bad enough that her daughter was marrying an insane drunk in a dreary setting, but to show such stunning ignorance of the protocol. It was a wonder the lunatic hadn't shown up in his underwear. Luther heard the revulsion that informed the exasperation in his now mother-in-law and felt the justness of it. She would have much disgust to record in her journal.

The Van Dines had made a reservation at a nearby restaurant, where the maitre d' crammed them into a booth. A lack of respect seemed to be shown in so doing, but Luther did not speak up, as he perceived in the maitre d' a mortician's bearing and, with it, a disturbing familiarity with death.

"My oh my, such a menu," Mrs. Garatdjian said.

"Do you like to cook?" Lydia asked.

"Not as I once did. It is different when you are older. The energy is not there, and in truth, my appetite is not what it was."

"You are from Sweden, Luther says."



“Yes, that is true. A long time ago.”

“Do you ever think to go back?”

“I would be a stranger to my own people, I am afraid. The building where I live is my world now, and has been for many years. I do not know the world, or the city, anymore. It has been that way for many years.”

“Why is that, do you suppose?” Lydia asked.

“When you are young you run to the world. You cannot get enough of it. But then it whips you. It stings your flesh and makes it to bleed. And so you learn that what you prized brings only pain, and one day you recognize a voice within and recognize further that this voice has been with you all along, and that it is calling to you, and so now you hear that voice, which is the voice of the Lord, and you give yourself to it, to Him, and you are changed forever. You cannot go back and do not wish to go back. You have been filled from within by His presence.”

“So you have had a religious experience?”

“I was called to Jesus, and there I must try to remain. To be filled with the Lord we must continue with the Lord. It was my hope for Luther that he would be less with the world and attend bible college, but he was not interested.”

“At one point I wanted to be a village priest. I thought, and still think, to some degree, that it would be a wonderful life,” Peter said.

“You are a historian, Luther tells me.”

“Yes,” Peter said.

“You must have a fine mind. I have always wanted to read history,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“History is the soil in which we grow. The dead nurture the living,” Peter replied.

“There is no death. There are only the cool breezes of heaven and the eternal flames of hell. May we all be in heaven together.”

*It is not right to reduce one's own mother, Celeste. Not right at all. She had the light of love for America in her. Was she not heard to say, "Look at what they have done," of the Jews, and "Look what they have done," of the Irish, marveling at their achievements? Where is the renunciation of the world in that, Celeste? Can one hope to find it?*

*I did not do enough for her, Celeste. I did not do enough. Even as I acknowledge my failure, I recognize that once you are in the land of Mother, it is all over. The tide of sorrow is too much. In it you must drown.*

After the wedding Sarah took to bed. “Now I’m really dead,” she said.

“You don’t look so dead to me,” Luther replied.

“You should be dead, you bum, you loser, you hideous man.”

“The way you talk.”

“Who did I learn it from? Who?”

“This is true,” he could only acknowledge.

“You infect me with your shit. You’re like a disease. You should be in some medical journal.”

“I guess then I would see my name in print.”

“All you care about is stealing from my life and putting it on paper.”

“The horse shit desperado.”

“Stop with your stupid talk. Just stop.”

The following day he found the genius’s phone number in her bag. That 617 area code. She wanted to go back to quality. This Luther understood. But there was no going back. This he sort of understood. Still, he had reason to be afraid.

At Pilgore that day Mr. Dorf had another truth bomb for Luther.

“You’re a very feeling person, but you’re not tough enough, and it’s hurting you.”

The truth was the truth, and Mr. Dorf had spoken it, and there was no call to respond with a maligning tongue to that truth.

He had dinner with Sarah that evening at Robin’s, on the Bowery, where he ordered one of their chunky hamburgers on a seeded bun, along with French fries, which were in every way normal. He had been eating hamburgers in the restaurants of New York City for the longest time, and he didn’t want it ever to stop, because when you came down to it, there was nothing better than a burger with fries. And once more he appreciated the cool, modern décor of Robin’s, the way it said it was on the Bowery without necessarily being of the Bowery. And that it should have the name of a bird with a red breast and black plumage.

To eat out meant that life was going on.

He had dinner with Sarah but he did not leave with Sarah. Reliving the night before, he left her to pay the bill. He did not need her to tell him what he was or what he

wasn't. He did not have to hold himself in check with her as he did with Mr. Dorf. With her he had the freedom to emote, and it was a freedom he chose to exercise.

But then she did him wrong. She did not come home, nor did she call. And so the Ray Charles song played loud in his head. It *was* crying time. She *was* going to leave. How vicious to reduce him to a helpless child and fill him with terror again at the prospect of such a terrifying void. But as he was dialing Dr. Rosner, he heard the key in the lock, and so he did not have to call on the doctor's low-key manliness to see him through.

As a step forward on the matrimonial journey, he and Sarah opened a joint checking account at the Bowery Savings Bank, down at its domed location on Grand Street. He wanted his money to be her money, too. A marriage should be on one track, at least with finances, modest though they were. And so their names appeared on the checks that were issued, his above hers, and she kept her own name, so she could know who she was. Marriage was marriage, but that did not mean he had the right to desecrate a lineage by supplanting an elegant name, Van Dine, with one that was hair-covered and foreign-sounding. He understood his place in a matter such as that.

At work he struggled. He did not know how to write the jacket copy Mr. Dorf expected of him. The words did not come. The ones he put on the page showed their ribs and bony joints. Others wrote elegantly embroidered and succinct copy that could only pique a reader's interest. He took a diet pill to call the necessary words into being, as he could not produce them on his own.

Luther and Sarah had dinner with the Van Dines that evening. Peter had sometime ago lifted the banishment of Luther from the premises, but that did not mean Peter did not look at him with distaste and the suspicion that Luther remained formatted for his destruction. Still, Peter lifted up and out of where he was long enough to say of Luther's mother, "Her face shows such character." He spoke those words with genuine feeling, summoning the warmth it was in him to produce, Mr. Van Dine being a man of complexity and depth, should Luther need a reminder of these qualities in his now father-in-law. Luther was surprised and touched to hear this recognition of his mother, but also dismayed that another should have to tell him how authentic and worthy she was. And even though he had finally showed her, he hadn't fully stood behind her, and for this he would need to be severely beaten, as what was worse than the diminishment of your own kin who had sacrificed so much for you.

Marriage was not enough to banish the genius from Luther's mind. That night he dreamt that Sarah had gone off to Boston to be with him. That smile she had given the young politico in the image of the genius down at the municipal building and then finding the genius's number in her bag—all the signs were there for her to bolt.

Sarah knew not to mention the genius to Luther, but she did not know to not mention Hunger Longing, as when she said, "Guess what. Hunger is back in town."

"Did he come back for more of Carol Aprile's pain? Is that what he is about? Pain and more pain?"

"Stop it. He got a big job with a printing company and has his own place not far from here. He called to me from his car as I was crossing the street."

“Did he call to you hungrily? Is that what he did? Did he take you for a ride?”

“Stop it, Luther. Just stop it.”

“Why stop at one when he could have two. Hunger is hunger,” Luther said.

“I’m not listening to you,” she said.

“Isn’t that how it is with all the women on the hill with the baked beans? Isn’t it? Not listening to anything men have to say?”

“First I’m in the car with Hunger. Now I’m on some hill eating baked beans with a bunch of women. You make a lot of sense, Luther.”

“Truth lies in excess more than in lack.”

“Now you sound like one of those sayings found in a fortune cookie.”

Sarah had returned to the design studio, where she had made a new friend. Her name was Erica Reisling. They had the Boston Museum School in common, Erica being a graduate as well. Some nights Sarah went out with Erica after work and would return home late. Then one night she stayed out without telling him beforehand, nor did she call as the hours passed. His fear grew and grew until it filled the loft. He had no way of knowing if she had run off or come to harm. He sat at his desk under the loft bed drinking his Rhine wine. It would be another night of not moving forward with White Line, Continue, but some things couldn’t be helped. He had to put his attention on his pain, where it was needed.

Hours passed before she returned. Again she had been with Erica, she said, as she prepared to make dinner. But that wouldn’t do. It just wouldn’t. He stormed out to do

some disappearing of his own, and drank in a nearby bar with soreness, not fear, now upon him.

“You look like you’re in a state,” the bartender said.

“What state would that be?” Luther asked. “Idaho? New Jersey? Possibly New York State?”

“How about a bad state?” the bartender, with his patch of Ron Doug mustache, said.

Luther had no time for the bartender, with his mustache and his smart words. The soreness that had taken him from the loft now led him back, where he did violence to his typewriter with a hammer as Sarah lay above in bed.

“Yeah? Yeah? You want to mess around? You want to get crazy? I will show you crazy,” Sarah said, and swung into an action of her own by racing into her studio and slashing several paintings with a box cutter. “Are you happy now, Mr. Skinny Dick? Well, are you?” she screamed, holding the box cutter in her hand. Even drunk, something told Luther not to give her any more of his stuff if he didn’t want to feed the bonfire he had started.

And so he went belly up, and in dreamland that night Luke made his appearance, as he would, from time to time. Sarah had not heeded the plaintive call of Loggins and Messina. She had not gone to Boston. She had gone to the penthouse of old, where she was living quite contentedly with Luke, and was forthright in telling Luther why. “He has the physical equipment that I need and you lack. It’s as simple as that,” she said, and expressed no regret over seeking out Luther’s brother.

He did not need deep powers of analysis to understand what had triggered his dream. Skinny Dick, she had called him. Did that not say it all? Didn't it? Skinniness abounded in him down to his penis.

And yet how could he have a dream of abandonment when, with the wedding, he felt he had been dropped into that deeper hole that Mr. Dorf had alluded to, a hole he felt he was desperately trying to escape from?

"I feel like a man trying to build a life he secretly wants to destroy. How can that be?" Luther asked, at his session that evening with Dr. Dorf.

"There are contradictory forces in all of us. Our work here is to bring them into the light."

"I don't want such light shone on Sarah and me. Don't impose such filth upon us," Luther heard himself say.

"Light doesn't create what you call filth. It exposes it."

Always with the words Dr. Rosner was. Always with the words.

One evening Sarah did not go away from Luther with Erica but brought her to him at Robin's, on the Bowery. She was lovely but also wounded, a woman living separate from her husband and headed for divorce.

She came to the loft that night. She saw first-hand Sarah's work and mumbled her appreciation, but there was fear and intimidation in her voice and face, as might be expected in one learning where she stood in relation to someone more advanced.



Afterward Sarah remarked that Erica smoked a lot of grass and had probably been a bit stoned.

Luther gained her phone number from directory assistance and called to her the next night. The bottle of wine he had consumed did not allow for tentativeness.

“I must see you,” he said.

“We can do that,” she said.

“We?” he asked.

“You and I. A manner of speaking,” she said.

Her acquiescence did not surprise him. It told him she had been down this road before. She was a woman with the desire to be found when all she felt was lost. In the background he could hear Fleetwood Mac singing. They were not holler heads. They could put a tune together with words you could hear. The power of America manifested in their song, fighter jets taking off from and landing on an aircraft carrier somewhere in the Pacific as a deckhand signaled sexily with the flag in his hand.

Having learned from Sarah that Erica had smoke head ways, Luther arranged to stop in on Efram Ellsberg for some grass before meeting Erica. Zack Zeckler was the scale master no more. He had given up dealing and using, too. Methadone maintenance had replaced the junk he had been injecting in his veins. He was now on his way through medical school, and when the drugs called to him he would say, *Jamais, Jamais*, though French had never been his thing. How logical, how inevitable, that Zack Zeckler would resurrect himself, Luther thought, with envy-tinged admiration. After all, he had Brooklyn Tech High School aptitudes. He had thirteen hundred board scores. He had the

hard cast of mind to absorb the sciences. With that endowment was it not to be said that he had been merely play-acting at failure, like Prince Hal adopting the low tavern ways of Falstaff only for a while? Was it not to be said that no one could cling to the failure track more authentically than the Garatdjians, and that no others were more worthy of the failure that their deficient genes had committed them to?

“I can only give you my divided attention,” Efram Ellsberg said that evening.

“Why is that?” Luther asked.

“Because *Mork and Mindy* is about to start, and that is where my head is at at the moment.” But he was humming with Efram Ellsberg efficiency. He did hand Luther the goods he had promised, in a small plastic box, in exchange for which Luther gave him ten dollars.

“Hi, Luther. How are you?” What a sweet woman Maude, Efram’s wife, was, and how intent on normalcy. “Doing OK, Maude. How about you?” Luther replied.

“We’re doing fine,” she said. That word *we’re*, as if she could not see herself apart from Efram. He was large in body and large in her mind. And yet Luther heard, in her emphatic response, denial, a cover for the uncertainty she surely had to feel. She was a sober young woman with a responsible job and the modest goal of a family life centered around children, but there were no children. Efram, in his farmer John overalls, parked in front of the TV and zonked on Quaaludes, was the child. Without her, he might well be back in Midwood, Brooklyn, living with his mother.

In the bathroom, where he headed to relieve himself, Luther saw, on the hamper, a stack of *Penthouse* magazines. The cover on the top issue showed a dark-haired beauty

with kiss-me lips and breasts abundant. I must not go in my mind where I do not belong, Luther thought, a wave of horror passing through him at the brazen carnal display. But he could not check himself. These magazines, they are an expression of Efram's anger, Luther further thought. Efram is frying in his overalls. Efram is singing loud in his mind the song of the fat-lipped, prancing one. Over and over does he sing that he can't get no satisfaction.

But Luther did not have to sing. His heart was too busy racing for song to be in it. His lust love, his treasure, his I-would-give-anything-to-see-you- in-but-your panties ideal was waiting for him on the corner in jeans and a white wool sweater. No need for "But She's Not There" on this night. Erica did not resist. She did not say, 'Should we really be doing this?' or other utterances that would allow her to at least think she was attempting to have conscience serve as her guide.

"I came bearing a gift," he said, in the restaurant nearby.

"And what would that be?" Erica said.

"Close your eyes and open your hand."

She did as she was asked and he put the box in her palm.

"Now what might this be?" she asked.

"It's called Seedless Paradise, at least by me," he said.

"Aren't you the candy man?"

"I've never known what that term means."

"It means what it says. You're a man with candy."

“You have told the story of my life,” Luther said, thinking back to childhood, and the candy he had dispensed to the neighborhood kids with money he had stolen from his mother’s purse.

She was a woman with an appetite. She ate her pasta marinara quickly and without self-consciousness. She let him pay the check, and when, outside the restaurant, he said he would walk with her, she said, “Please do.” Soon they came to a building at One Hundred and First Street, halfway between Broadway and Amsterdam avenue.

“You live here?” Luther asked.

“I do. Why?”

“I had a friend who lived here.”

“Did he go on to fame and fortune?”

“Not exactly,” Luther said, remembering that a Plato’s Retreat T-shirt was stretched over Jerry Jones-Nobleonian’s bulging belly on the Broadway bus the last time he had seen him.

Her apartment looked out on the street, as had the one where Jerry lived with his mother and father and sister. Whether the floor was the same, Luther couldn’t say. That was gone from his memory, but the layout was the same: the one big room, the kitchen and bathroom behind it, and behind those the bedroom. An apartment built for two, at most, in which four had lived, but a step up from the welfare hotel where a body had been found decomposing behind the refrigerator in the public kitchen. And that sister, Leah, one year younger, of Jerry’s. A girl with that beautiful, coppery skin but unmarred by

those pink blotches that had contributed to the ruin of Jerry's life. The preadolescent lust he had felt for that girl.

"Try this. Maybe it will get you out of memory lane." Erica handed him her handiwork, an expertly rolled stick, after wetting it in her mouth.

The gates of smoke heaven quickly opened. "Oh yes, the alteration has begun." He passed the joint back to her and watched as she toked too, once then twice, then thrice, the lit end coming alive with each pull. "But I'm worried that I can't hold you."

"Hold me. You don't even know me." She laughed loudly.

"Yes, I understand."

"What do you understand?"

"Everything," he said.

"Me too. It's all come clear," she said, her words causing her to laugh again.

"What's come clear?"

"You. You've come clear."

"You've found me out?"

"I've found you out. You're no secret, mister. None of you are."

"There's something about you."

"What is there about me?"

"Something. A quality."

"A quality cunt. Is that what I am to you, mister?"

He had been sitting with her on the floor, but now he lay down and, as he did so, he reached for her. She did not resist. Nor did she resist when he tried to kiss her.

“No,” she said, however, when his hand strayed, then jumped up and crossed the room. She quickly returned with several of her paintings, a chaos of black lines on a white surface.

“I did them a while ago,” she said, dropping the paintings on the floor. There was defensiveness in her words, the suggestion perhaps that her more recent work was better.

He felt dismayed that she would treat her work, thin and desperate and derivative as it was, with such contempt. In her he saw himself. Two talentless pretenders on the fringes of the world of art.

He did not linger. As he was about to descend the stairs, she called to him, in a stage voice, “And don’t ever come back,” and then laughed, to signify that she was joshing him. The humor seemed strange coming from such a conventionally pretty young woman. Perhaps she was being ironic and did want him to come back. He held that thought in his mind, and tied it closely to the possibility that she had braked his hand because she was having her period.

And more came clear to him. She had been looking for validation of herself, as a woman and as an artist, and his only value to her was in relation to Sarah. Was she prettier than Sarah? Was she more talented than Sarah? The first he might give her, but not the second. No way he would give her that. Truth was truth.

Now Luther had heard the expression “Do not shit where you sleep” and “Do not shit where you eat.” The expression and its variation were not ones he cared for, relying as they did on blunt fecal imagery to give them their coarse power. He could only

imagine the Ron Doug type who had come up with such a saying. But he soon had reason to consider their application, with some modification, to his life.

Erica did not do the deep six thing. She had her whisper ways. She let it be known at the office that Sarah's husband was a runaround guy, and that she was the woman he had tried to run around with. Just because she was pretty did not mean that she was altogether nice. She saw Sarah with a loft and her art and, for better or worse, a husband, and then saw the relative emptiness of her own life, and the comparison made her mean with her words.

All this Luther could only surmise when Sarah came home and said, "They're talking about me. The chatter is more intense than ever. Now even Erica is in on it. As soon as I turn around it stops."

"But how do you know they're talking about you?"

"I just do. Even Carol Aprile is acting different. It's like they know something I don't know."

The warning light might be blinking red, but Luther's desire called him to a pay phone. He had unfinished business. He had a need to tell Erica that he wanted to come back, but he got her answering machine and as the days passed, the recorded message continued to speak for her. She had seized control. She had taken the scrap of him she wanted and thrown the rest away.

Still, his need for her continued, and led him to a porn theater on Broadway just a block from where she lived. *Babes of San Francisco*, starring Carmen de Janis, was playing. The seedy theater sucked him into its musty and forlorn interior, where the sight

and smell of hot dogs roasting on spits and bags of buttered popcorn did not greet him. All he saw was a closed and desolate refreshment stand, and beyond a few men sitting scattered throughout the orchestra. When he had had his fill of the carnal doings on the screen, he climbed the stairs to the men's room and quickly masturbated into the urinal. He had hoped the fever for Erica would pass, but outside the restroom he stood vigil at a window looking out over the marquee to the other side of Broadway, hoping to catch a glimpse of her as he nipped at the half pint of blackberry-flavored brandy he had brought along.

Sometime later, as he passed through the theater's recessed entranceway, he stopped short. There, on the sidewalk, she was. Her eyes held his. She was not alone but in the company of a handsome man in a wool overcoat. Having taken a mental snapshot of his degeneracy, she quickly looked away.

The air does not move, he said to himself that evening, on entering the loft, remembering his mother's words. He waved to Sarah, who stood at her easel, the radio playing softly, and went to his study under the loft bed, where he sat feeling a weight of deadness on him. An evening at home was intolerable, just intolerable. He couldn't face his work, his life, any of it. But what was he to do? He had nowhere to go. All doors were closed. He was trapped forever in a life he had pursued but no longer wanted.

On the bulletin board he saw the numbers he had written the previous year, broken up, to avoid easy recognition that they were in fact a phone number. Light filled his mind, his heart. The breath of life entered him strongly. Celeste. She was his light, his hidden treasure on the scrap of paper pinned to the cork board. He remembered how



receptive she had been to him and the interest she had expressed in his work. Maybe he could show her a story about his days at the bible camp when he was a child. Two years before she had seemed too high up to reach for, and after all, she was married. But now it was different. He was desperate. And all he would be doing was showing her a story.

He dialed and she answered on the first ring.

“Of course I remember you. I would love to see your story.” She spoke as if she had been expecting him.

He needed to take a walk and would be back in a while, he said to Sarah. Her studio was ablaze in fluorescent light, a fixture installed by the previous tenant. Once in her studio, she seemed to lock in. She did not suffer the problem of endless distraction, as he did. Fear did not drive her down pathways of escape.

The West Village remained an area of confusion for him, a tangle of streets with names more often than numbers, an anomaly in a borough with a logical, sequenced grid. Heading west along the southern edge of Washington Square Park, it occurred to him that the address Celeste had given him could not possibly be the same as the one where he had visited her two years before with Hermione. If he was standing in front of the right building, it was on the opposite side of the street from the townhouse she had occupied. And there was no way he would not have remembered the bizarre neglect, the tired gray paint peeling in curls over the entire facade of the four-story building. He unlatched the gate and walked up the steps to the front door. There on the intercom was her name—Celeste Rolm. He had only to press the button before he was instantly buzzed in.

Life. What an amazing thing, that doors so securely closed should now be flying open.

The two years had been a strain for her. She did not sparkle, as she had on that summer evening. She and her husband were living apart. He had left her, though not for another woman. He had met a man and fallen in love. The two were now living in a loft down in SoHo.

“Are you still married?”

“We are.”

In the next room the baby slept. Mia. She was two now.

“I’m sorry,” Luther said.

“What are you sorry for?”

“Sorry for your separation,” Luther said, though he wasn’t, remembering Peter’s arrogance and mockery of him.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Sure,” he said, and watched as she poured out vodka and orange juice into a glass, the same as she was having. “What do you call this?”

“A screwdriver.”

“The things I don’t know.”

“Why should you know that? I’m sure there are other things you are quite knowledgeable about.”

“I suppose,” Luther said.

The apartment was messy, with books, sheet music, mail, some of it unopened, strewn about. But the furnishings and the paintings on the wall, nature studies from another century in sturdy old frames, and the violin lying exposed in its open case atop a grand piano suggested a quality of refinement.

“Did you bring your story?”

He handed her the few pages he had come with. All those pages of writing, and this was the best he could find.

“Gee, this is really good,” she said, as she came to the end of the first page and placed it behind the others.

Emboldened by the drink, he came up behind her as she sat in the chair by the cluttered table and placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Let’s go to bed,” he heard himself say.

“But shouldn’t we wait? I should at least bathe.”

In his eagerness he dismissed her concern. He had waited too long. He had waited his whole life. Only hours before he had been alone and on the outside in a porno theater staring out the window in the hope of catching a glimpse of a woman who was torturing him with her neglect, as most women were now torturing him with their neglect, moving farther and farther out of range of him. And yet this one, beauty and culture combined, had opened the door and let him in, and now he was supposed to wait?

There was no braking of his hand, no declaration that she was not attracted to him. He felt strong, confident, even powerful. With her passivity there was

responsiveness, the way she gently stroked his skin when he entered her and the small groans of pleasure that followed.

“That was wonderful,” she said afterward. The word did not sound like one he could easily use, but the experience had been just that, and hearing her say so only intensified the light shining bright within him.

Baby Mia was crying when he left. She was crying for her mother. I too have been crying for her, in the day and the night, even if I did not know it, Luther thought, as he stepped into the street.

*Now Celeste, for days I have felt on the edge of disaster, thinking what kind of man, other than a predator of the extreme and cowardly kind, writes about the woman he professes to love, and in so doing exploits that love? But even as I excoriate myself, I recognize that the self-flagellation is more cathartic than redemptive. There is no great quest for moral truth here. There is only the desire to go on with my chronicle, purged of guilt, or failing that, to shrink it sufficiently that forward mobility is possible. This mindset is a shameful circumstance in that it prevents me from discovering what the true purpose of White Line, Continue is. But maybe there is no mystery. A man needs a center, he needs to love himself. Celeste, once upon a time I was that crying baby in the night and tried to deceive myself that the comfort and the support I sought came in response, but a part of me did not believe my own lie, a part of me understood that the world and its people would forever and ever meet me with indifference and that I must provide that comfort I was*

*seeking for myself. Celeste, if we sense we are irrelevant to others, we must claim relevance for ourselves.*

“Where were you? Actually, you don’t have to tell me. You were in some bar.”

“Yes.”

“Is it ever going to change?”

“I don’t know. Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow it will change.”

“It’s always tomorrow with you.”

“I try. But the women on the hill with the baked beans. They frighten me.”

“What am I to do with talk like that?”

“Interpret it. You have your own talk.”

“Are you giving up?”

“No.”

“Dr. Frodkey says you are.”

“He doesn’t know everything.”

“He knows you.”

“He knows the dead.”

“That’s a nice thing to say about someone who is trying to save my life.”

“He shouldn’t play God. He shouldn’t extend his knowingness beyond its proper borders.”

He had bought a used small black and white TV, but before he could turn it on he had to vacuum the carpet so as to bring it back to life. Order was the order of the day

when the weekend came. The premises had to be secured before he could settle down to the *Rockford Files* and watch as James Garner got his man. He went back with James Garner to the other time, the time of *Maverick*. He had his roots with James Garner, whom he knew to be good. James Garner was solid. He could smile into your face and measure his words and did not fly into different pieces when you looked at him. He could weather the storm of your stare.

Luther sat on the oversize pillows that Marc Gitall had left to them when he went on to a bigger and better loft. One pillow was for sitting on, the other for leaning his back against. The pillows had come with an L-shaped bracket. When you sat on the pillow you were also sitting on the part of the bracket that lay under it as you leaned against the pillow supported by the other part of the bracket, both parts of the bracket working cooperatively with the pillows to keep you from tipping over. The pillows were strawberry red and white in a mottled pattern and had no real softness to them. The colors and the pattern and the firmness were not pleasing to Luther, but he thought to be faithful to the pillows, as he tried to be to the structure and the things within that structure that Marc Gitall had left behind, Marc Gitall being the man who had thought of everything and had everything, and then left it all behind. Marc Gitall could be the change master supreme, if that's what he needed, but fidelity had a purpose in a world of flux.

They did not have a stand for the TV, and so they rested it on the carpet. No structure for it other than the floor could Luther find within the existing structure, and that was all right, too. It had to be.

“I am a fan of Bill Dorf, and have been lo these many years. And I’m more than a fan. I am a friend, a discreet friend. Professionalism and discretion go hand in hand, like wine and l’amour. Wouldn’t you agree?” Alice Bakullian joined her hands together as a visual aid.

“That sounds right to me,” Luther said. He had been led to Alice Bakullian by an advertisement for her agency in *Publisher’s Weekly* but also by his ambition, such as it was. He was seeing other editorial assistants elevate their status and it was not in his plan to be the second coming of Hedley Frazon, that is, to office marry Mr. Dorf as she had office-married Edward Harkin.

“If Bill Dorf says good about a manuscript, then the world says good. Ergo, I say good as well. Does that also sound right to you?”

“Yes, I suppose it does,” Luther said. She had haughtiness with the tensile strength of peanut brittle in her voice. Haughty or not, she had the power to dispense with him or come to his aid, and as he sat watching her appraise his one-page resume, he was more afraid of the latter.

“And what is this ‘White Line, Continue,’ if I may ask?”

“It is a work for the ages but of the age as well, at least my age.”

“But what is this work? Is it fiction? Nonfiction? Help me out here.”

“It has a classification all its own. Let us say Truth and Honesty, for lack of a better term.”

“And you offer this as work experience?”

“After much deliberation, yes.”

“Has any of it been published?”

“Let us say it has been aired.”

“Aired?”

“I remove it from its drawer from time to time.”

“You are a strange man.”

“And this is a strange time, wouldn’t you say?”

“No stranger than any other time.”

One voice was every voice, one interview every interview, confirming his thinness and the thinness of his life to him, as she did in letting his resume fall from her fingers to her desk and bidding him goodbye so he could go back out into the street from which he had come.

*Mother, you made me as I am. You had me focus on pride and haughtiness and all that goes with the world that I might pull it down. That was the purpose of the church you sought to immerse me in, that we might pass through the world to it.*

*Celeste, another way to say it is that she did not challenge herself. She did the things that were easy and passed this tendency onto me. Shopping bags full of money without a proper accounting in the ledger book—that was easy. And God was easy, the great emptying out and into. May I perish immediately for saying so.*



That weekend he stopped in at the End Bar as UCLA defeated Kansas and ran into Roberto, his former roommate, seated alone at a booth. Roberto said he was doing all he needed to do to keep up with his life, that he was on track for his BA and then he would be going on to Columbia for an MBA, and even as it was, corporations were calling out to him for his expertise. As he spoke, Luther saw that he was missing a front tooth and that the others were yellow.

“Remember one thing, Gargoyle,” Roberto said.

“What is that?”

“You’re still a gargoyle.”

“OK, thanks,” Luther said.

“You’re welcome,” Roberto said. Protected by his solitude, he went back to his cigarette, smoking it with a regal air.

Returning home, Luther brooded that he was not all he was supposed to be to Sarah. She sat in front of the TV working her way through a bag of Pepperidge Farm cookies. Had he been wrong about her commitment to her work? Perhaps it was fading. He wanted so much to see her back in front of her easel.

And yet these things were as nothing next to the light that now burned so brightly in him for Celeste Rolm.

Some days later Sarah showed retaliatory power against a world that inflicted blows on her through whispered messages behind her back. She quit the design studio once and for all.

“From now on I am a shut-in. A shut-in, baby. Can you dig it?” she said. Her face reddened with short-lived anger before she began to weep.

She got in touch with her parents. They would be providing her with a monthly check.

“Reparations. Have you heard that word, Mr. Editor?”

“Yes, of course,” Luther said.

Sarah’s father came down. He wore his beige trench coat, with the collar turned up. It was his first time to the loft since Luther’s phone call in the night. He stayed only long enough to hand-deliver Sarah the first check. Sarah did not fresh-mouth him. This Luther ascertained from the hiding place within himself where he had gone.

In the ponder place Luther considered Sarah’s situation. He was not thrilled. It was a blow to his dream for them that she was not with Radcliffe-rejecting Carol Aprile at the classy design studio. Something had come alive in him when Sarah took that job. She had not quit after one day, as she had at that design studio down in Greenwich Village following her first year in Boston. She was not blowing past him in a rage and streaking the next day for Camp. She was saying that she was with him, that she too would put her shoulder to the wheel and contribute an income to better meet their expenses. She was saying that she didn’t belong to Mommy and Daddy. But now, with her decision, she was back in a state of abject dependency. Still, his mind did not leave him in the sadness and regret gulch. After all, this was Sarah. Would it really be right for her to be mired in a five-day workweek? Time was essential to her if her creative energies were to be unleashed. Seen in that light, a job was a galling waste of her talents. Apart

from the money a job brought in, the best he could say was that it might prompt her to be more aggressive about finding a gallery that would sell her art.

Oh, he didn't know. He just didn't know.

A stranger stopped them on the street.

"Do you have many friends in the neighborhood or anywhere?" she asked.

Luther froze. The woman had named his shame, and so it was for Sarah to confess the truth. "No, we are profoundly isolated," she said.

Luther swung into action on the money front by calling Dr. Rosner.

"I am practicing addition by subtraction. I am terminating you," he said into the doctor's answering machine.

He did not hear back from the doctor. After several days of silence he could take it no more. "I am repentant, repentant. Do you know the meaning of the word?" This message he also left on the doctor's answering machine.

"Are you trying to bring me to heel?" Luther asked, at the next session.

"You tell me," Dr. Rosner replied, and indulged in some of his patented snuffling.

"What do you want me to say? That I need to be here?"

"Whatever comes to mind."

"Sarah quit her job. She did us dirty."

"Why did she quit her job?"

"The chatter."

“The chatter?”

“The gossip bingers. I saw her friend Erica, who also works at the company. It didn’t work out. I suspect Erica has not kept her experience with me secret at the company.”

“What was that about?”

“What?”

“Erica.”

“Hunger.”

“Hunger?”

“First I had to go to Erica, who toyed with me, reducing me to a porno palace vigil for her worth. And when I came home the air of the loft was not moving. It contained death-dealing stagnation. Fortunately, a phone number manifested. It had been there all along but now it presented itself to me. A door opened, is what I am saying, and I did not dawdle-dance but dashed through it. Doctor, I was alive in my senses. In childhood there was a man who spoke French and who owned a hosiery store just around the corner from where I lived with my family. He had two daughters. The younger one was plump and came to my apartment and washed my hair for me. The older one was dark and slender with a head of black curls and made my senses come alive. It was her, not her plump sister, whom I wanted to wash my hair, and on this evening, many years later, when the phone number manifested, my dream came true, for I ran to the woman after calling her, ran to my dream of life, and she took me in and read my story and I took her to her bed and now I am alive once again, as I need to be.”

Dr. Rosner, by temperament, was not receptive to word gush of the kind that Luther was demonstrating. Such excess sent him recoiling. “Sounds like you’ve been busy,” he said.

“I hear you reeling me in. I am trying to come back to the dimensions that you find acceptable,” Luther said.

“Why would I want to reel you in?”

“For the reason I just said. Excessive enthusiasm offends you.”

“What does excessive enthusiasm mean to you?”

“It means depriving me of the enjoyment of my senses.”

“And I want to deprive you of the enjoyment of your senses?”

“Someone does.”

“Could that someone be you?”

“Ushtah. Do not talk such foolishness to me.”

“Ushtah? What language is that?”

“One you will never learn,” Luther said.

A young man flew off the road on his motorcycle and struck a tree and was killed on impact. It fell to Luther to tell the young man’s father, but Mr. Dorf was stern with him. Luther was to keep to business and not mention the death...Sean had come back from the land of the dead derisive and sexually dangerous, summoning in Luther a great loathing and desire only to be with Sarah...An old man called Luther at Pilgore. “I’m going to kill

you,” he said. A man soon approached Luther’s desk and asked directions to the men’s room. As Luther began to answer, the man recognized his voice and tried to strangle him.

Luther did not go to Dr. Rosner with his dreams. Dr. Rosner did not have time for dreams, not with reality knocking on the door.

A new man arrived at Pilgore after MBI swung into action. Evidently, the conglomerate had minced words with Mr. Bad Minton. Yes, they had said he was forever when they took ownership of the company, but they had not said what form his forever-ness would take, or in what realm of existence, and so they offered a clarification. If he was a believer, then he must know that though the body was perishable, forever and ever his light would shine in eternity. That said, it was also for him to know that he must immediately vacate the premises. And so MBI threw Mr. Bad Minton and his title, broken in two, out the door and onto Madison Avenue.

Now Mr. Bad Minton did not sing “There’s a New Kid in Town,” and he did not permit the song to be sung to him. He did not live in the barroom world where the song was played so that it became an element in his emotional nature. But that did not mitigate the reality that a new kid was in town and that his name was Peter Ben-Gurion and the light of success was in him. All the way from Paris, France, did Peter Ben-Gurion travel so he could occupy what had been Mr. Bad Minton’s office and take his title as president and walk in his own distinctive style through the halls of the company. And yet he did not inspire the fear that the presence of Mr. Bad Minton summoned. Peter Ben-Gurion had

experienced fulfillment in his body and in his mind. He had won the Prix Mon Frere for his mystery novel *Time for the French Kiss* and other literary awards and was known for his many lovers and so did not have the same desire to inflict pain as his more repressed and self-denying predecessor. He had taken the admonition "People be free" to heart. And yet he did inspire another kind of fear, at least in Luther, a fear brought on by the annihilating power of his excellence. He was a publisher and a writer and at the very top in both domains, and was heard to mention, within earshot of Luther, that he was a Yale alumnus. Once again did the evidence conclusively show that Luther was but a hanging string, a man with thinness in his bones and in his mind, and must live out his days as such. And so, when Peter Ben-Gurion silently passed Luther's desk and turned to show him the dynamo of a mind his massive forehead housed, Luther could only fall to the floor in his imagining and softly whimper, waiting for the will to live to return. And though he could not literally fall to the floor, he could retire to a stall in the men's room and sit on the bowl with his head in his hands and say the whisper words his pain compelled from him for his ears only to ensure he had a safe place to which to withdraw when the world had beaten him too savagely. And he summoned other emergency responses to break his emotional free fall. He tapped on the porcelain tiles, five taps within the bounds of each with his index finger but never, never, on the line separating one from the other, and then he tapped on a second and third tile as well, choosing them with care, as his life depended on no one learning and replicating the pattern of taps in each of the tiles where Luther's index finger had gone, because then all sense of privacy would have been shed and he would surely have no place to hide and so would have to

die and die and die. And he took steps to make his desk a bastion of privacy as well by tearing off two tiny pieces of scotch tape and applying them to the front of the desk, where they would be in plain view but no one would see them, and in not seeing them they would not see him. All of them kicking him like a dog and assailing him with their specialness, and God, so big and so incredibly ugly, behind all of it, sending him out into the world with his thinness showing and then sitting back and laughing at him, just laughing and laughing, through his proxies.

Luther wept at the eviction of Mr. Bad Minton. Though he had lived in fear of him, it was still true that Mr. Bad Minton had allowed him in the door with his flimsy resume. In spite of the New England winter in his bones, Mr. Bad Minton had not told Luther to go back out into the street.

And now Midge Haller, the former personnel director, was on the scene again. Had she gone away because Mr. Bad Minton's love for her was too strong, or not strong enough? And had Peter Ben-Gurion rehired her with no better intention than to give her his French kisses? Things needed getting to the bottom of, even if Luther was not the one to do it.

Mr. Dorf was mum about the deposing of Mr. Bad Minton and the arrival of Peter Ben-Gurion, and so Luther could only assume his boss was going with the flow. But then Mr. Dorf called him into his office and exclaimed, "The Frenchman is back. He is back, I tell you," with great excitement in his voice.

"Sir, do you mean Mr. Ben-Gurion?" because the French kiss with which he associated the new president was so big in his mind.



“What?” Mr. Dorf cried out.

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m not sure who you mean.”

“Monsieur Henri du Pre Neuilly,” Mr. Dorf replied, landing softly on the double l’s.

“Oh, I see,” Luther said, with dread in his voice.

“What do you see?” Mr. Dorf asked.

““I see mountains of galley pages in French and a reader’s report in English.”

Mr. Dorf made an uncharacteristic two thumbs up gesture and struggled against the constraints of his lifted and tucked face to produce a winning smile before handing Luther the proofs. “Have the report on my desk first thing Monday, young man,” Mr. Dorf said, this time without the accompaniment of hand signals.

Fear drove Luther straight into the bottle, and he stayed in it for the entire weekend. Borrowing from Evelyn Wood, he told himself that if he read fast straight down the middle of the page, the sense of the novel would come to him but the words did not stay in place. Like worms they moved, making comprehension even more difficult.

Sacre bleu, incroyable, magnifique, Avignon, la nuit, parfait. A patchwork of French-ness he offered up, unable to declare his ignorance.

“This is the kind of work you submit to me?” Mr. Dorf asked, outrage in his voice and on his face. “I gave it to our new president. Do you know what he said?”

“I don’t,” Luther replied.

““If your assistant can read French, my grandmother is fluent in Swahili.””

“I never met my grandmother, on either side of the family. I had the feeling growing up that they were none of my business, and that, by not meeting me, they were sealing me into my American-ness.”

“I won’t fire you for this, but I am disappointed. I had great hopes for you.”

“Yes,” Luther said, staring into the coldness of his boss’s eye.

For some hours he sat seeking to draw comfort from the small pieces of Scotch tape that he had attached to his desk, but then tragedy sought to project itself. He unintentionally nicked himself on the hand with a red felt tip pen and the single mark filled him with terror.

Peter Ben-Gurion brought his French kiss to Manhattan. He was seen kissing on Fortieth and Lexington and Thirty-ninth and Third. When the doors opened, he was seen kissing in the Pilgore elevator. Peter Ben-Gurion had full lips meant for kissing. Many were the sightings of him practicing his French kissing. When he walked about he did not fermerz la bouche but kept his lips parted so no one should be deprived of seeing the thick tongue that lay in wait as a pleasure treat. His mouth he had learned to season with the smoke of the two packs of Gaulloises he smoked each day, regarding his fluids as a kind of wine for women to savor, wine not meant for casks of seasoned wood.

For the most part the French kiss was in Luther’s mind but not in his life. Sarah forbade such oral activity, not expressly, but subtly guided him to this understanding. And yet now he had the opportunity to practice the very same thing that Peter Ben-Gurion was calling attention to with Celeste.

“I’m coming over. I’ll be there in a half hour,” he said to her on the phone. His sentences contained no question marks and his voice had been leached of all tentativeness. The green light for assertiveness was on.

The smell of cooking was strong in the apartment when he arrived. Celeste was finishing up feeding baby Mia small pieces of sausage. A cute two-year-old Mia was, her big round eyes charged with the power of observation.

“Mamma, who?”

“This is Luther.”

“Loser,” Emma said.

A good mother, Celeste was. The girl was a gift, whatever the state of the marriage had been. A mother and her child. Sarah did not care for children. She had an attitude of hardness and mockery toward them, as she had about women who were pregnant. Cows, she called them. Her feminism did not allow for motherhood.

Luther drank while Celeste tended to her infant. When he had finished one screwdriver, she would serve him another. The vodka fought through the orange juice to dominate.

“You see this?” he said, when she had placed Mia back in her crib.

“See what?” Celeste said.

“This red mark on my hand.”

“You nicked yourself with some kind of pen,” she said.

“I nicked myself with the end.”

“That sounds dramatic.”

“The drama drums are beating, and beating wildly, savagely.”

“Why stop at one word, even if it will do, when you can have two.”

Later, when their thing was done, Luther spoke of Sarah and her ups and downs. He spoke from the point of view of a man who loved his wife. She was an injured superstar, of the magnitude of Bill Walton. Yes, she had fallen, but the world would see. It truly would. There was urgency in his voice; it was important that Celeste understand.

Celeste listened. She did not call him bastard or creep or otherwise revile him. She found his word storm comforting. It meant she could have him without having him. He need not be a burden. She could keep him as light in his presence as he was in his body. Though it was not for her to say, not then, if ever, marriage did not mean the same thing to her that it did for him.

“Poor Sarah,” Celeste said.

Celeste had no equivalent word gush to speak in regard to her own marriage, but she did speak of her father. She said he was a publisher for a company her family owned. He didn't own it, though to hear him talk, you might think he did, she said. He was someone who had just come along. Celeste's maternal grandfather had visioned the company into existence, in the way that Americans sometimes can do, those who have it in them to say that it is not for them to work for someone else and do his bidding but to bend the world to their will and bend it good.

Celeste had a mother, too. She was not a publisher of books but a writer of them, and had Horace Mann and Wellesley College brainpower with which to bring her projects

to completion. And yet Luther did not hear Celeste placing her mother above him in the realm of accomplishment.

“She makes those same symbols you must make when you are editing manuscripts. I love them,” Celeste said, and drew the deletion and delete and close up symbol and the caret for insertion and the transposition symbol, leaving Luther stunned by the magic flowing through her hand that it could render such perfection in her lines. And so Celeste linked Luther with her mother but not with her father, who made no such symbols and cared nothing for them, so employed was his mind with the manufacture of product.

As he headed home through the streets of the West Village, still loud with the sound of revelers jamming the bars they could not get enough of, he could only think that he had found the very thing he had been looking for in those places all those years that he had been in them, and now he would not have to go to them anymore. He had been taken in from the cold. He had been removed from the herd horde. He was now behind closed doors.

There had been much drinking, but no eating, and so he stopped, in spite of the lateness of the hour, at a souvlaki stand, where Mr. Man of Greece hacked at a vertical mass of lamb twirling on a spit and stuffed bits of it and grilled vegetables into a piece of pita bread, to which he added a squirt of sauce. And so Luther could get filled up, eating as he ran, and leaving a trail of slop in his wake.

Because Sarah was expecting an explanation and he could not come with the truth that he had done further violation to their love, he entered the loft with a hysterical

declaration that there was armed warfare at Pilgore . Even, as he spoke, Mr. Dorf was still holed up in his office.

“The battle has not been decided. Do you know what that means? And please, even if you do, leave me to the sleep I must have so I can enter the fray again in the morning. This is my life, too.” The journey that followed was a short one from this world to dreamland.

Sarah had reason to worry. She had nowhere to go but back into the womb of family, without him, having made herself a ward of their estate. He was the table she had built, and now he was wrecking it. Some shift had occurred. She could feel it. He was not a skillful liar. She saw that his preposterousness was driven by desperation.

Now preposterousness, elephantine as the word might be, was the very one that came to Peter Ben-Gurion’s mind in regard to Luther’s report on “Hombre So Grand, Hombre So Diabolical,” as Luther had loosely translated the Frenchman’s opus. The mistranslation of the title shocked Peter, and the conclusion he drew was that incompetence presenting itself as lunacy was seeking to have its day. And the terse plot summary was even more outrageous. A Mafioso who had eyes only for his mother went on rampages fueled by perceived slights of this one parent to whom he was permanently bound.

Midge Haller called him to her. Sotto voce she said, ‘Peter will be wanting to see you.’”

“Is that right?”

“He takes his French connection seriously.”

“La bouche. He takes la bouche seriously.” When he saw perplexity on her face, he said, “The French kiss. He takes that seriously.”

“Everyone takes the French kiss seriously,” Midge Haller said.

“Right,” he said, and took it no further. Midge Haller was a beautiful woman, but she was an older woman, and he must not go into that territory, lest he encounter an older sister he did not want to meet.

“Let’s see what happens, hon. You never know where things can lead.”

*Celeste, there is a line to the truth that I have not found, or if I once did, it has since been lost in the bloat of my gas-filled words. I must gain my bearings. I must bring exactitude to this testimony.*

Luther was spared an audience with Peter Ben-Gurion. One lived in the realm of excellence; the other did not. On what basis could they possibly meet? Once again Midge Haller came calling and summoned Luther to her office with whispered words.

“I have a plan,” Midge Haller said.

“A plan? What would that be?” Luther asked.

“A plan for your rehabilitation.”

“My what?”

“We’re going to build you from the ground up rather than have you assume an adult position before your time. Think of it as being like boys who start out in Little

League before advancing to the Pony League, and from there to the Minor Leagues before stepping up to the Majors.”

“You are scaring me,” Luther said.

“Don’t be scared, Hon. There’s a place for you at Pilgore, and we wish to find it for you. Cromartie Wonders, one of our two children’s books imprints, has an opening for an editor., for which I would encourage you to apply.”

“What do I know about children, other than that they scare me because they can see right through me?”

“It will be an opportunity to fortify your defenses.”

“What am I? A castle. This is preposterous.”

“More preposterous than your, ahem, report?”

“What are you trying to do to me?”

“You are a child wandering about on a four-lane highway full of fast-moving traffic. You must go where you will be safe.”

“Who *are* you?”

“You know very well who I am,” Midge Haller replied. “Every man knows who I am.”

A delegation of those he thought didn’t care for him or didn’t care for him enough appeared at his desk, among them Judith Everholt and her female cohort. “Baby, don’t go. Please don’t go,” they sang to him a capella. And when, through his tears, he was able



to respond, not in kind, as song was forbidden him to break into except in the privacy of his own mind, he replied, "Why do you come to me in this way?"

Once more they took to song. "Because it is a hole, a very deep hole, where you will be buried never to rise again."

"Assez bien. Assez bien," he heard himself shout, the cry coming from whatever depth was in him. That much of Frenchie talk he could muster.

Not that they were wrong. He understood the validity of their concern parfaiment. But he had to go where he had been directed to go. He was in a new life now, the work world, and he must take the direction he had been given. Besides, they were not in a position to weigh the assets that went with the one liability:

1. He would be an editor, not a nobody.
2. Editors had offices. He would be able to close the door on the world so people could not look at him and he did not have to look at them.
3. He would receive one thousand dollars more than he was currently earning. One thousand dollars.
4. He would be able to say, not that he had been fired, but that he had received a promotion, He would have some cover for his nakedness and the thin bones everyone could now see.

Because he had given himself reasons to feel proud, Luther told Dr. Rosner where he was bound, but Dr. Rosner did not jump up and down or otherwise register happiness for Luther within the understated limits of his temperament, having an alliance with Judith

Everholt and company as to where true progress was to be found. Luther read the signs of subtle disapproval in Dr. Rosner's impassive face.

He passed through a long corridor. On one section of the wall hung a large photograph of horses running between mesas somewhere in the Southwest. Facing the wall and the photograph was a plain metal desk of the kind he had sat at upstairs. A young man wearing a sweater vest with his jacket and tie was seated at the desk. His wire frame glasses made him appear more intelligent than he was. Luther decided that the young man was not someone he could like, and sensed that the young man felt the same, and so he passed silently by.

At the end of the corridor was an office occupied by a small, middle-aged woman who wore her dull brown hair in a ponytail.

"I'm looking for the office of Mr. Balistair Bonjo."

"Mr. Bonjo took ill and won't be in until tomorrow. May I help you? I am Karen Kermody, the managing editor."

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Luther Hedberg Garatdjian. Actually, my name is Luther Garatdjian. I won't involve you in the long story of that middle name. I will only say I want a new beginning when and if I begin working here. You see, Midge Haller, from the other world, dispatched me for an interview with Mr. Bonjo." He didn't have it right in his mind until he spoke those words to Karen Kermody, but now his course was clear to him. He must go back to what he was and work with what he had. He was not Bob Dylan. He could not reinvent himself. He could not pay that price. He

would cling to the old rugged cross. He would wander in the graveyard of the gray Armenians. There would be no masquerading.

“What other world?” Karen Kermody asked, seemingly on the borderline of umbrage at the distinction she sensed he was making.

“Well, I am sent from above. That is all I mean to say. Not in an ethereal sense. There is none of that in me, sad to say. And it’s not as if I wasn’t ever a child. I certainly was. But lately I have been reading the novels and stories of Jonathan Cheever. *Bullet Park*, with its luminous prose, and that heartbreaking jacket illustration of a suburban train station. And that novel *Falconer* of his. That he could embrace a character with only an average IQ.”

Karen Kermody had big, observant eyes that lived for the careful inspection of others and she now applied that scrutinizing power to the thin, depressed man before her. Seeing his inner workings with the clarity of her X-ray vision, she told him with her face and her mind what he had just done, told him so he would understand not in the moment but afterward that he had been passing gas, literary or not, in an attempt to elevate above the workplace he professed to want to be a part of.

I will use Karen Kermody’s thought beams and the fact that Balastair Bonjo is indisposed to my advantage, Luther said to himself afterward. Midge Haller had said it would show a measure of respect were Luther to read some of Balastair Bonjo’s books, and so Luther headed to the Donnell Library, on West Fifty-third Street, and took from the shelf *Fredrika and the Freedom Trail*, *John Adams and the Monkey Do*, and *Pigwig Sailor Has a Warship for You*. All three presented historical facts in amusing personal

narratives and so there was nothing to do but applaud Balastair Bonjo for finding his niche in the canon of children's literature and for his rise to the top as both an author and a publisher.

But what impacted Luther even more was the biographical note at the back of the books. Balastair Bonjo had a home. He lived with his wife and two children and their dog, Moonglow. Every evening, after work, Balastair Bonjo retired to the quietude of that home and, in his robe and slippers, sat in a wing chair and warmed himself in front of the fire, with Moonglow lying at his feet. A feeling of longing for the tranquility Balastair Bonjo experienced came over Luther. He would soon be off the four-lane highway. He would soon have an office door to close. He would soon know the peace that Balastair Bonjo was enjoying.

"I know who you are, young man with the prematurely old face. You are a reject from above, and normally I would not touch you, as a pedigree is lacking and the bruises inflicted by failed dreams have cancelled out any capacity for joy in your life. But I have grown slothful—I do not conceal my defects—and cannot be bothered with the wearisome round of interviews my energetic manager, Ms. Kermody—would put me through. All resumes are, to an extent, an expression of the art of fiction, and yours, even with its appallingly lackluster quality, is no exception, but that is to be expected. Ambition makes liars of us all. Only weariness with the daily round compels the truth. Do you see what I am holding in my hand?"

"I believe it is a mug, sir."

“Exactly. This mug is my life,” Balastair Bonjo said.

“Your life? Your books are your life. I have just read *Pigwig Sailor Has a Ship for You* and it’s great.”

“All praise to the face is no more than the passing of gas, and I suspect Midge Haller put you up to this public flatulence.”

“I am a cup, or a mug, man myself. I too can’t be without one,” Luther said, unable to go near the matter of gaseousness.

“Your feebleness led you to the cup at an early age, I suspect. Because I was gifted with more vigor, I only came to it at a later stage. But no matter. I am there now. If you will forgive me, I am feeling once again indisposed.”

Balastair Bonjo padded across the carpeted floor and lay down on the sofa, and within a minute was gently snoring. Luther noted the shock of white hair rising above a rippled and bulging brow. How pale and close to death he appeared, as if his whole being was crying out for relief.

Funereal as it may be in its fundamental aspect, I have found a home, Luther thought. I am sure of it.

Luther made one more visit to Cromartie Wonders before assuming his new position, fully expecting to encounter Mr. Sweater Vest at his plain and ugly desk in the corridor. Instead, a middle-aged man with gray hair and gray skin sat with his feet up.

“You don’t belong here,” the man said.

“You don’t know that,” Luther replied.

“I know what I see.”

“Maybe you don’t belong here,” Luther said. “You are not Mr. Sweater Vest.”

“Mr. Sweater Vest?”

“The person who was here before. The one with the air of feigned refinement.”

“I am temporarily filling the void.”

“Who are you, anyway?”

“I am Mr. Holiday Inn, and I have been that for too long.”

“Why would you give yourself a name like that?”

“I have been on the road for many years, selling books for this company. Life is a fool’s game when you see it for what it is.”

“Are you a citizen of the land of sadness?”

“I do live where hope has fled.”

“You are Mr. Afternoon Shadows to me.”

When Luther returned the following week, in his official capacity, the man was gone, and Mr. Sweater Vest had not reappeared. Well, so be it, Luther thought. We will see what we will see.

“Here I am,” Luther said, addressing Ms. Kermody as he stood at the door to her office. “You are in your office, and in another minute, I will be in mine, if you will lead the way.”

His words brought a smile to Ms. Kermody’s generally somber face. “Sure. I will lead you to your office. Right this way,” she said, zipping past him.

“You are leading me into the desert. I see no offices here,” Luther called to Ms. Kermody, as he followed her back up the corridor.

At the gray metal desk she stopped and turned to him. “This is your office.”

“My office? I do not understand.”

“What don’t you understand?”

“Where is my door, that I may be in the womb of privacy?”

“You have had enough of the womb. You are now in real life. Go and sit,” Ms. Kermody said.

“So this is it. I am Mr. Sweater Vest,” Luther said.

“Excuse me,” Ms. Kermody said.

“It is nothing,” Luther said. “I will sit, as you say, and gather myself.”

“And by the way, your title is production editor, not editor. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Luther said, omitting to add the word *now*.

I will make the best of this and can find some of the privacy I am seeking, Luther thought. The traffic, most of the time, is less than upstairs, and I have these drawers in which to place items, which no one, except those with prying eyes, will see. And I can have my bits of Scotch tape hanging from the desk to protect me. They will be the hiding place in plain sight I cannot entirely find for myself, he also thought, as it had been high on his priority list to fly the flag of secrecy.

The following were, in addition to Balastair Bonjo and Karen Kermody, the staff of Cromartie Wonders:

There was Bruce Bill, who was known by one and all for his editorial brilliance, the desk in his office piled as high with papers as Luther's desk was bare. He bent authors to his will whose texts were in his care with his insightful queries and smart editing, and did so in a manner that left them grateful, not chagrined or annoyed. He was born on Midwestern soil to a naval officer whose legacy to his son was discipline and the ability to make a crisp salute. Bruce Bill had the aptitude for Hotchkiss, from which he went on to Kenyon College, in Ohio, where he fell in love with Marcel Proust, and so entered a graduate program at Columbia University with the single-minded purpose of studying the French language only to suffer defeat by the same time that Marcel Proust had done battle with. Bruce Bill had a mentality for fashion. One day he came in silk-suited. The next he wore a blazer and penny loafers. The next he dispatched with suits and jackets and arrived wearing jeans and a crew-neck sweater.

There was Jacqueline de Harding, the department secretary who, in addition to her departmental duties, tended to Balastair Bonjo's personal mail and made deposits for him at his bank and photocopied personal documents and any number of other things that made his life livable. She showed no desire to rise higher on the company ladder than the lowly position she held, and with this attitude of contentment made herself attractive in Luther's mind. She spoke her words through sliver lips in a clatter of sound that put you in mind of breaking dishes, and yet her smile made it understood that discretion was her guide; she saw but did not tell. Luther sensed she was not a young woman who was open to being touched and was given to understand that she would allow no tampering with her given name or her surname. No, she was not Jackie O., she replied, when fools came



forward with the question. She was Jacqueline de Harding, an island of integrity demanding the traversing of all three syllables. And so Luther was left to see that while there was thinness in her bones, there was also strength in them as well, and how he might apply that to his own self.

In fact, Luther had reclaimed his name on arriving at Cromartie Wonders. The chorus of outrage, led by Judith Everholt, that he had sought to dismiss had somehow lingered in his mind. Something had felt not quite right in changing his surname. He had uncoupled himself from the train of history in giving up his Armenian heritage. It was one thing to revile his father; it was another to abandon him.

There was Katie Darl, the art director for Pilgore children's books as well as for Cromartie Wonders, who flew past Luther's desk like the Texas twister that she was, arms cradling the mechanicals she was bringing for the inspection of Balastair Bonjo and Bruce Bill and Karen Kermody. By this time the rushing ways of art directors had come to Luther's attention. He had seen the same hurried gait in the art director in the adult trade division as she closed in on Mr. Dorf. Rushing gave them a sense of power in their own right in dealing with those who had the power of approval or disapproval of their work. The mask of disdain came easily to Katie Darl's delicate face; it did not take much to make this so.

Katie Darl lightened her lips, as she did not care for the crimson glow, and eluded the sun with indoor activity so her skin could remain pale. She may have been from longhorn country, but that did not require her to have the browned face and skin cracked as a dry riverbed of the Marlboro man. But the feature that spoke the loudest truth was

her black and thinning hair. A single parent, she was past thirty and ground down by the ceaseless demands of motherhood and a pressure-filled job. Her husband might be a gold standard doctor with a Harvard Medical School degree, but his philandering ways had compelled her to tell him to hit the road.

It was not long before Luther saw that Katie Darl had a love supreme thing for Bruce Bill, who had the capacity to receive her in the way she needed to be received. And something more. They were tied together by history, as Bruce Bill had been a classmate of her soon to be ex-husband, who went by the name Sam Manfrankin, at Hotchkiss. The same excellence that had led her to Sam Manfrankin had led her to Bruce Bill, and that was Hotchkiss excellence. It was a safe love, as Bruce Bill was gay, and had a lover, and Katie had a fellow Texan with whom she went back to childhood who was eager to make her his own. He was not a surgeon, like Sam Manfrankin, but a hard-shell man with a fine decimal point understanding of finance and short and straight black hair to prove his corporate way. This man in waiting went by the name Chuck Fowler, and you did not make the mistake of going fancy in addressing him by the name Charles.

All this came to Luther's understanding at the gray metal desk with tabs of Scotch tape attached, where he sat as the first sign of life visitors saw on entering the premises of Cromartie Wonders.

Some other information came to him as well from where he sat, including the fact that Bruce Bill's lover was a whiner, if his voice was to be taken as evidence of such a disposition, and an imperious one at that.

“Get me Bruce Bill, and try not to make me wait. Can you do that?” So the voice dictated when Luther picked up the ringing telephone.

“For whom would I be getting him?”

“Do you mean, ‘Who, should I say, is calling?’”

“Well, OK,” Luther said, standing corrected.

“Miles. Should I spell it for you?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Well, then, please go.”

“Why do you not call him yourself?”

“Have you ever heard of a busy signal?”

Though he felt like a lackey, Luther did Miles’s bidding. Indeed Bruce Bill was on the phone in his office, but Luther knocked respectfully, in no way wishing to allow Miles’s rudeness to influence his interactions with his mate. There was no *ergo* to be applied to this situation, that is, if Miles is rude, *ergo* Bruce Bill himself must be rude. No, no, Luther would allow logic to lead him on.

“There is someone named Miles calling for you on my line,” Luther said, when Bruce Bill cupped the receiver and looked his way. Luther heard deference in his own voice. That was as it should be, given his lowly status.

“OK. Thanks,” Bruce Bill said, responding in kind.

Luther went to dreamland that night. He was a police officer but was terrified of strapping on his holster and gun. His fear was not merely that he would shoot someone but become a target himself.

Rectilinear. Busthead. Dunderhead. These words he put in his journal in the morning, as he had come across them, so he could be stronger in his vocabulary than he currently felt.

Though he continued to see Celeste, he did not abandon Sarah in his thoughts, noting her self-acceptance and social ability. If only she would recognize the quality others discerned in her. He noted as well her suffering, and saw how her pain was at least felt pain, whereas he deadened his with booze. The freedom the weekends gave him was too terrifying to endure. Not up to such a gift, he would drink the mornings into nighttime.

Balastair Bonjo was a frequent sojourner from his office. With mug in hand would he pass Luther's desk to refill his large mug. Now sometimes he would saunter past and freeze with his outstretched mug held high while leaning forward from his torso, to convey a striving figure of action. At other times, facing backward, he shuffled forward past Luther's desk like a choo choo train pulling a heavy load and wanting it to be known, whatever the guise in which he appeared, that he had a link to worlds not Luther's own.

"Listen up," Ms. Kermody said. "This is where you find out you are on your own. This is where you find your reality." She wore a face that suggested she was actually telling him something, and so he received her words with an expression of good faith.

And yet he did not deceive himself. Each encounter with Ms. Kermody was like being hit by a rock.

Dr. Rosner had his own truth to tell.

“You are unable to complete things because you are afraid to go below the surface. Drinking is an avoidance of writing, of feeling, of life.”

And Hedley Frazon, Edward Harkin’s assistant from the other world, came forward in a lobby-bound elevator the following day. “I’m broke until tomorrow, but not so broke that I won’t have enough for a bottle of gin.” So she whispered with lips that had received no kisses and a mouth encircled by hair.

*There is a reason for your sadness, Luther, a reason. Will you not admit defeat and cry yourself into another life?*

To the wind on Madison Avenue Luther did some whispering of his own. “ I need Dr. Rosner. He is strong and tough and refuses to make psychotherapy an alternative to life.”

Dreamland was waiting for him. He had become an officer of the law. The blue uniform and the badge he could put on but not the holstered gun. In truth, he was concerned that in introducing a perp to his well deserved fate he might be dooming himself. “I do not wish to be beaten senseless, as Luke was by the angry sons of Africa back in childhood,

who with their blows made him to lie down in the snow and turn its whiteness to red with blood pouring from his nose.”

“Go on,” Dr. Rosner said.

“More guns followed. I had gone into the mountains with Sarah to do some hiking, but a well-positioned sniper was intent on foiling our plan, firing bullets from a high-powered rifle that ka-chinged off the rocks behind which we had taken cover.

Vicious, vicious ka-chinging. Who was this monster? Who?”

“Was the sniper you?”

“Why would you say such a thing? Why?”

“Are you trying to kill off this marriage by keeping it pinned down?”

“Do not take me to the place of pain. I was not built for it.”

“What are you built for?”

“For pleasure, if you must know, though it shames me to say so.”

*Father, this is not writing. This is folderol. And yet I cannot right my ship and turn it to the waters of sincerity and high purpose. In the waters of denigration do I find myself drowning and visualize the faces of disgust of all those with the stamp of excellence right there on their foreheads.*

Balastair Bonjo arranged for dalliances in the world of frivolity, but he also had the substance to get things done, and though at a low ebb professionally, could nevertheless still display an attitude of dismissal toward those who fell below his one-time standards.

He had given Luther a picture book manuscript titled *Ike and Mama and Me* to report back on, and Luther had responded with enthusiasm. After all, he had his own relationship with Ike and he had a mama and he had a me of him as well.

“Billie Joe Fletcher has provided you with a best-seller because she knows a primary ingredient for happiness is the warmly smiling face of Dwight David Eisenhower now that his days of carnage are deservedly over. My own mother was sweet on Ike and knew a hero when she saw one and she had a son partial to the Republican brand, as he had been taught to favor Crosse and Blackwell jams over all others. Because quality was quality, and if we live today in the ruins of such image-making as concerns the presidency, we can still look back at it with a certain fondness. Surely nobility and sweetness did coexist in Ike, and because children are generally perceptive about adults, it is likely that the little girl read virtue in his face as well. And then there was lovely Main Street USA, which we have all visited, if only in our minds. The scene was filled with sunlight, and so you can rest assured that America was at the top of its game.”

*Celeste, do you suppose words could be placed under house arrest for subverting their intended purpose? The case might be hard to prove, given the task of determining where the point of deviance began. Words, like greased ball bearings, are forever rotating, leaving no doubt that we have pegged our fate to folly. Somewhere in the silence is all truth to be found.*

And yet some things could be said simply enough.

A few days shy of his thirty-first birthday he and Sarah had a Friday evening dinner at Bo-Bo's in Chinatown during the San Gennaro Festival. Sarah went for the roast duck while Luther brought the chaos of moo goo gai pan under control by wrapping the chicken and vegetables and other less identifiable ingredients in the flat rolls that came with the dish. Only with this element of unity was the dish allowed to enter his mouth.

"Time does not matter to the Chinese. They have had an eternity of it," Luther said to Sarah.

"Well, it means something to me. I'm not going anywhere with my life."

"Suppose we have it backward. Suppose our dream life is our real life and this other one counts for nothing."

"Nice try, but that's just a lot of wishful thinking. This life counts. It counts for everything. Someone's keeping score, and we're not winning. Not even close."

The boys who could hit and hit very hard were out on Mulberry Street, the weekend having brought the San Gennaro Festival, and so Luther had on the face of acquiescence, lest the hard hitters turn their attention toward him. He wanted his every step to be one of deference and respect as to where he was under the green and red and white flags festooning the arcade of light, and it came to him that such an attitude would best be demonstrated by partaking of the festival fare. For this reason he had not allowed the moo goo gai pan to get hegemonistic on him, crowding out other varieties of cuisine, just as the Italians were seeking to prevent the Chinese from overrunning their community. He had a canolli and due zeppoli and was sure his face was showing the right degree of appreciation for the fine desserts. And Sarah followed suit, though she was



guided by her stomach, not the fear that Luther found himself in the grip of. And all the while there was the big sound of Frankie Valli singing “Big Girls Don’t Cry” (eye eye), but Luther could not soar with the big sound. He could not wrap the song around himself in a fit of nostalgia and claim it for his own by immortalizing Fatso Scully’s stoop, being outside its power on this Friday night.

A vendor with hawk eye coldness called to him.

“Three tries for a dollar, Slim. Step up and win your woman a prize.” He twirled a basketball on his finger like Meadowlark Lemon. Three hoops bare of nets awaited.

“No, not tonight. Sore arm,” Luther said, patting his small bicep.

“Ladies don’t like excuses. Come on now.”

So Luther stepped to the line but his Wilt Chamberlain underhand style-tosses bounced off the rim.

“You need to trade this dud in, lady,” the vendor said, as they walked off, but Sarah did not reply. It was not her way to give comfort to those who would hurt Luther. Somewhere along the way he had accumulated love credits, even if he was quickly squandering them.

And some things could have been said more honestly than Luther was given to convey them. Speak now, Luther.

*I came home drunk on my thirty-first birthday and berated Sarah for the mental infirmity that did not allow her to be part of the workplace, and so went to a place with my words where I did not expect to go. I emptied myself of my fury and then discovered that, like*

*drinking, words fed on themselves. We are talking of a woman whose ramparts are not strong, a woman who takes things to heart and cries herself to sleep. More clearly than ever before I saw that I had an ungovernable personality and that my life was a succession of days devoid of order and purpose. Most painfully, I saw that my remorse would avail me nothing. I was doomed to repeat my excesses time after time; profuse apologies only paved the way for the next attack.*

*Celeste, this business of love. I have not summoned it sufficiently; the barriers seem too great. Take Hannah. Recently the very thought of her brought with it great regret. I saw in a flash that love is the answer, sappy as that may sound, and the only reality in this world of pain and illusion. And with this regret there is fear that I will receive a rough reception on the other side, that my father will have grown a smacking hand the size of a tennis racket and that Hannah's lips will have thickened to serve as ample cushions for her tongue as she delivers her sizzle pop smacks. So, there I go again, from contrition to my old and tired mockery, in the space of a sentence or two, but Celeste, everything must be said, must become a public record and this that I will tell you now, along with many things, must be summoned for remembrance. There was a time, when the concept of omerta ruled the White House. Silence and stonewalling were regarded as the most admirable of virtues. It was quite clear that RMN had seen Don Corleone on the screen many times and taken his way of life for his own, and that Hannah too had received him as a guiding light. In the darkness of the Manhattan night, she would slip from her room to journey down to Mott and Mulberry Streets to sing do wop with the heart of stone*

*boys, who, when they were not musically emoting, found the time and malignant resolve to pitch young men from outside the neighborhood off rooftops for being where they did not belong. She saw the contradictions in the human heart and yet obeyed the code of silence to which she had been sworn, not by Don Corleone, but by our father himself.*

His dream life did not abandon him. A train with his name on it went histrionic as it screeched from the station into the tunnel, where he and Sarah had gone exploring. The scalloped wall provided safety from the engine's intended violence and soon they surfaced in a movie theater where the lights had just been turned down low only for Luther to discover, at picture's end, that he was entirely naked. And so Sarah and he headed back into the tunnel that his thinness not be exposed for all the world to see.

And now Marge had to make her oppressive appearance, typing away at a desk across from where Luther sat at Cromartie Wonders. Her face had grown enormous and smiling smugness showed upon it. "You don't warrant such a smile," he called out, but she had no ears with which to hear him.

And so he turned to Dr. Rosner. "Violence is everywhere. The streets are due for a cleansing," he declared, going with the gift of prophecy the darkness had given him.

"It is your own that you are most afraid of," Dr. Rosner calmly replied.

Snuffling Dr. Rosner. Contained Dr. Rosner.

While just around the corner a woman in a gown of fairy tale whiteness called down her telephone number to a lost soul spiraling toward eternity.

He had vowed to stay free of the bottle after his berating of Sarah and a week later was holding true to his pledge. But fear came along, a shark showing in his waters. Ms. Kermody would fire him for incompetence, he became certain, and so he turned to Bruce Bill for assistance, as America long ago sought an alliance with France against the British and their filthy Hessian friends. Bruce Bill asked him for his sign. A strange request from a man such as he, whom Luther had assumed to be grounded in the hard facts of science.

“A Virgo am I,” Luther said.

“I might have thought so,” Bruce Bill said, “as sooner or later I get entangled with you people.”

“Entangled? Really? Lines of delineation are not kept clear?” Luther asked.

“I took a Darvon for an oncoming migraine,” Bruce Bill said. “I take them for other reasons as well. Would it surprise you to learn that I am addicted to pornography?”

“Apple strudel,” Luther said.

“I can see we will get along,” Bruce Bill said.

In California did Rose Malone become Luke’s wife. He had not flicked his hand under his chin and said *vaffanculo* to Harry “sometimes you have to shit on something to make it grow” Brown but he had vacated the premises of the family’s building because depth bombs of despair had been detonating in him that he was still, in his mid-thirties, where he had been since birth. And despite the violation to her brain by her ex-husband’s bullet, Rose still had a mind capable of sturdiness and resolve.

“We’ve got to get you out of there,” she said, speaking a fast yet easily fathomable patois the intrusion had induced. Rose Malone was not Get It On Brenda. She was Rose Malone. She was not built for idleness, and would not countenance it in her man. And so they drove to northern California, where he ran a Housing and Urban Development housing complex. Many of the residents were ex-offenders on welfare and fired bullets with their eyes at him for being The Man and then one came at Luke with the real thing when he tried to collect the rent.

“We don’t need this,” Rose said. Luke did not ask her to elaborate on her last word spoken as it hovered, bulging with meaning, before his eyes. She was only saying what America had come to know, that it was a bullets for breakfast country and “Shoot ‘Em Boy, Run Run its theme song.

“Rose and I have a great relationship. She makes twelve thou working part-time as a bookkeeper. She’s still got the goods upstairs, even if she motor mouths,” Luke said, over the phone.

Motor mouths. Those words hovered, too, in a way unacceptable to Luther. They were cruel words, even if not meant as such. He understood that Luke was in love and further understood, from previous acquaintance with Rose, that she was a woman of quality.

“Hey, are you listening?” Luke said.

“I am listening.”

“Then why don’t you say something?”

“Do I listen with my mouth or with my ears?”

“Why do you have to annoy me with your shit?” When Luke got no response, he went on. “Well?”

“I am waiting on the suitable response. And I think I have found it. *Dotage. Dormer. Basilica of St. John the Divine.*”

“What?”

“Exactly. Some words take the high road, others the low road. Where and if they will meet is the question. We will reserve your word *thou*, as in twelve thou, for another time.”

“What the fuck?”

“Another well-deserved exactly.”

“Look. I don’t talk to you anymore. You understand?”

“Rescue the perishing, care for the dying.”

The line went dead.

*Celeste, I had no cause for such perversity. None at all. I hurt my brother with the wall of injustice that I had put up, hurt him so that he could not stay away. This is where my emotion lived, that I had the power to inflict harm on others, to bring them to their knees, to bring them to their death. More difficult to accept was that I was a person of no consequence.*

There are those who want to share their favorite sounds, and Luther was among them; it has already been noted that, in his loose-lipped way, he waxed ecstatic to Ms. Kermody about John Cheever, going on and on about the writer’s voice. Ms. Kermody had no

opinion about John Cheever, at least none that she expressed, but her opinion of Luther oozed through her skin in that instance, shifting Luther to the place of shame that he should try to improve himself in the eyes of others by aligning himself with a literary god. But this was another sound he was coming to her with now, the sound of his childhood, of unfettered enthusiasm for baseball of historic significance, a one game playoff between the Red Sox of Boston and the Yankees of New York. The BoSox were going with Mike Torrez on the mound to throw his heavy ball, that the Yankee batters might pound the pill into the dirt and commence a great gnashing of their teeth, while the Yankees had Bones Guidry to hurl his vicious fastball and slider past aging Carl Yaz and Jim” I’ve got my defiance hankie hanging from my back pocket” Rice and Fred “ultimate in lefty grace” Lynn. He came to Ms. Kermody with the same urgency as to his mother when he was a child, begging her for money that he might sit in the grandstand at Yankee Stadium and live for the Mick in white pinstripes, with number 7 on his broad back. And Ms. Kermody gave him his leave, the better to delineate her sense of high purpose from his lassitude.

And that afternoon, with sun pouring through Sarah’s studio windows, Luther drank the beer of America and munched on the potato chips of America and bit into a ham sandwich on rye, heavy on the mustard, and whooped when little Bucky Dent lifted a high fly ball over the green monster in left field to put the Yankees ahead to stay.

But with the victory came fear that Ms. Kermody would recommend his dismissal. He had cheered the Yankees on to victory but would lose his job, and then he and Sarah would have to live on the street.

Now he was in a fix. Now he would need all the support he could muster, and so he called on Dr. Rosner. "Save me. Save me." He used those exact words when Dr. Rosner answered his phone.

"Save you from what? What is this about?"

"Ms. Kermody. She wants to rain down her viciousness on me. She wants to terminate me from the company."

"Who is Ms. Kermody, and why would she want to do that?"

"She is someone who has mastered the art of disapproval by seeping it through her pores. Why? Because Bucky Dent hit a home run to put the Yankees ahead for good. That is why. And she gave me permission to go home and watch him do just that."

"Are you drinking?"

"Am I what?"

"I asked if you are drinking?"

"Not at the moment."

"There are many reasons why you might expect and feel you deserve punishment, but I don't think this will warrant it. We can discuss the matter at our next session."

Dr. Rosner had held steady. He had not been swept downstream by Luther's fear.

In dreamland the big picture was presented. Two people thrown together in a tiny cage panicked and almost kicked each other to death. That cage the way the world could be.

And all the while traffic flowing down on the Bowery and drawing not a whit of suspicion.



A letter came from above. Peter had penned it. The letter gave off celestial light to prove its origin. Two friends of the family had paintings of Sarah's on prominent display in their homes. These were high caliber men. One, Roddy Hugh, was a literature professor at Bard College. The other, Simon Farg, was a big-time antiques dealer.

“*Somebody Up There Likes Me.*” Luther said, after Sarah had shared the letter with him.

“What?”

“The Rocky Graziano story. He grew up on the streets to become a middleweight boxing champion. And now somebody up there likes you.”

“I didn't grow up on the streets and I'm not a boxer.”

“No. But the light. The light.”

Luther saw the light in the letter, and he was sure Sarah did, too. All Sarah wanted was a little love, of the right kind. That she was cared for. That she wasn't forlorn and doomed to desolation.

Roddy Hugh had a bushy beard to define his robust intellect. He would discourse in his sleep on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* without flying off the rails and so drew Doris Dare, his star pupil and Sylvia Plath protege, to him. She had an electric laugh, causing appliances in her vicinity to come alive from the off position, and a careless driving habit, which got Roddy Hugh thrown from the passenger seat on a rain-slicked road in Puerto Rico, and into paraplegia. Some came to worship at his wheelchair altar

and to drink from his cup of manly acceptance. Doris Dare herself lingered for a while, until guilt and her urgings for the world compelled her to fly off.

*Celeste, about Simon Farg I will say nothing. There were no beautiful young women in his thrall. He had only his world-weary mouth, and the hairs around it, and the quiet sterility of University Place in the early morning hours.*

Luther fought to stay away from alcohol. A week passed without a drop. Then, on a Friday night, he stopped in at a tavern for a beer but left after just one, having perceived a desire to do him harm in the bartender's face.

Saturday morning was:

The Strand

William Carlos Williams

Paul Theroux

Simenon

A book on the Empire State Building

Seeking to go where others had gone so he might find his own path and build on knowledge as a barrier to ineradicable sorrow

Was

Canal Jeans, where he bought two shirts from the sale bin on the street, that he might have a look someone might admire

Was

Sarah buying supplies at Pearl Paints, also on Canal Street, that she might live

Was

The Atlantic and the Pacific, on LaGuardia Place, for midget bottles of Schmidt's Beer, poured from the urinary tracts of drunken Philadelphians. A store that tried to make you feel good about your life with its wide aisles and ample lighting and bonanza of American product.

That night two drinks in a bar on Second Avenue frequented by Polish-American murderers who bragged that their donges were thicker than kielbasa. Outside, in the October cold, he cupped his ears for the siren call of alcohol, but it was not there. All he could detect was the swish of torn net stockings as a tatterdemalion cohort of leather-jacketed women passed, a week's salary applied to their painted faces, and wondered if he could say what was calling them without sounding lewd.

Sunday was a torment. The face of the workweek would soon rise over the horizon with all its brutality, and he without a weapon to wield against it. As Sarah lay in the loft bed deep into her afternoon nap, he stared at the misshapen table he had tried to build for her to demonstrate that he too could summon manly competence. There the pine wood thing stood, its paleness crying out for a dark stain. As he drew closer he saw that the screws he had secured the table with to the wall with toggles were coming loose.

It was too much. He needed to take the edge off. He just did.

On Monday morning it was discovered that Jacqueline Harding was no more. She was somewhere on the planet, but had departed from Cromartie Wonders, having giving notice only to Balastair Bonjo and the personnel department. Had she really no affection

for Susan Kermody and Bruce Bill that she would depart without a goodbye? Was she seeking to lash them for not loving her more than they did? Were her insides a thing of torment in contrast with that smile mask she generally wore?

Well, it was not a question he could answer without her continued presence. Nevertheless he made a mental note to place her among those who ran silent and ran deep with their grievances and corresponding need to punish those most responsible with her absence.

A new one had come to take Jacqueline's place. Her name was Isadora Drayton.

"I'm only here because I'm fresh out of college and don't know what to do with my life. What's your excuse?" she said to Luther that first day.

"A man needs an excuse for making a living?" Luther replied. She had irked him with her bomb, her effortless ability to blow him to smithereens.

"You call sitting at an empty desk making a living? Now look at you. You're all hurt. What's the matter? You look like a professor even if you aren't."

"Go peel some onions."

"Why would I do that?"

"So you can cry yourself to sleep."

"You're dopey as well as shiftless. I'm going to like you," Isadora said.

Maybe. But he wasn't going to like her. How could he take to someone who showed such insouciant disrespect?

She was no more restrained regarding Balastair Bonjo. She passed by Luther's desk the next day holding a piece of mail away from her by two fingers and with her free hand holding her nose, as if she were carrying the man's dirty drawers.

"Where are you from, that you can act in such a rude and carefree manner?" Luther asked of Isadora on her return trip. She was ready with all her information, the cachet of Swarthmore and a father who owned as much real estate in New York City as the Catholic church.

"How is that for a combination?"

"Yes, it is a steak special," Luther said.

"Steak, my ass. It's a filet mignon. But now, look into my eyes and tell me if they are filet mignon eyes."

"Dolorous," he replied. "You are a sad-eyed lady of the Lowlands or maybe you just borrowed the eyes of a sand shark I happened to see as it lay dying on the pier at Coney Island after being snagged by a fisherman who had cruelty bred into his bones for letting the inedible fish expire in such a painful way."

"I am. I am that sand shark," Isadora said.

Neither of them could have said, from that beginning, what the next day would bring, and Luther was in no hurry to find out. In his mind he had reduced Isadora to a poor little rich girl, belonging to no one or no thing but her father's pocketbook, surely the source for her insouciance.

But the next morning saw her depart from her fresh-mouthed, truth abiding, and only truth abiding way. Something had riled her substance into a state of seriousness.

“Balastair Bonjo is dead. I just got a call.”

“Isn’t that interesting?” Bruce Bill said, regulating his emotion and warning Luther and Isadora to do the same. Because Balastair Bonjo belonged to Bruce Bill, at least more than to such as Luther Garatdjian and Isadora Drayton. How so? Because Balastair Bonjo did not sit by the fire in the evening with Rusty, his golden retriever, by his slipper-clad feet. He did not have a home life with a wife and loving children, or he didn’t have that anymore, having moved beyond the perimeter of domesticity to the raunchy and seedy wilds of hotel room sex fueled by quantities of cocaine. And he was not beckoning to him the young women of Manhattan for illicit adventure. He had one lover of whom he could not get enough, and in fact Luther came to learn that this lover had passed right before his eyes en route to Balastair Bonjo, and this lover came in the finery of his time, hot pants of phosphorescent orange and red, toting a boom box on his shoulder amplified to his taste so he could keep his groove on. The roundness of the young black man gave him the confidence that he could float in any waters. Luther had assumed he was a messenger who chained his bike outside the building. He did not imagine that Balastair Bonjo cooked in his kitchen and otherwise spent time in the domain of love with him.

Now it must be understood that a father had died, or one who could be considered a father by some, such as Ms. Kermody, who with Balastair Bonjo’s passing entered into a drama of her own. Sighs she uttered with some frequency, the pressure being brought on her as second in command weighing heavily. Charged with going through his office things, she came across his desk calendar, which offered substantial clues as to the

lewdness lanes Balastair was drawn to in the course of many days and months, if not the sounds of his liquor and drug-fueled debauchery.

“Can she be allowed to see such a thing?” Ms. Kermody asked of Luther, so in need of a man to turn to that evidently any man would do.

“Why hide the truth?” They were both thinking of Mortise Bonjo, Balastair’s wife, with whom Ms. Kermody had just spoken. “Throw open the doors. She may know more than we might think.”

Luther was flying at a high altitude, as he had when his own father passed on those years before. Again that attitude of paying no never mind to death and giving it the back of his hand as he silently pitied those who had found themselves in its grip.

Ms. Kermody sensed Luther’s cavalier manner. She found someone else, a man who walked like a man and talked like a man, having seen military action in the Korean War. He was an editor with the children’s books division of Pilgore on the floor above, and an author as well, producing new bite-size morsels for the imprint’s sports heroes series each year. “Finally the real thing,” she said, availing herself of his wise counsel.

It was no matter to Luther. He would scrape together the droppings of this affair and recycle them at some future date.

Ms. Kermody was not young. She had reached into her forties by this time and sadness was a permanent feature of her face. She also had a line of unspoken communication that said success was the answer to the things that ailed her, mainly her aloneness status, which seemed to be growing stronger by the day. Within a week after Balastair Bonjo’s passing, Ms. Kermody received a signal from above that the title of

acting director that had been bestowed on her by Midge Haller in the Pilgore personnel department might become permanent. Without prompting and any explanation Midge Haller said, “Entre nous, the national situation remains tense but fluid and is being closely monitored” in a hallway encounter with Ms. Kermody, breaking stride only long enough to deliver her cryptic utterance, at which point the words “This woman is under the influence of Walter Cronkite” passed through Ms. Kermody’s mind like a silent news update from the electronic message board banding the Old New York Times building.

As with any organization, there were some seeking to subvert Ms. Kermody’s greatness by removing her from the stage on which she envisioned it manifesting. Such a one was Florence Mith, editor-in-chief of Pilgore Books for Children. She had chipmunk friendliness in her face but also the teeth with which to bite. The words “She is not our kind” she heard in a central province of her mind. A woman with ambition but no vision, was her assessment of Ms. Kermody, and a contrarian to boot, with vinegar in her blood. A woman in whom childhood was not precious sufficient for a picture book worthy of the name to spark an inner glow. Florence Mith was well connected and regarded with respect and affection by those in the world of children’s books and was seen to have the antennae for excellence. So when she gave her blessing to someone other than the functionary Ms. Kermody as a worthy successor to Balastair Bonjo, the fix was in.

Luther was unsettled when Ms. Kermody, on learning she was not the one, gave notice. She was not dear to him but he did invest her with authority and stability, and now it could only seem that the roof had truly been blown off the second home he had found. Still, there was room for rancor in his heart toward her. She had wounded him. She had



said, without saying, that she had his number, as the counselor Ruth Pellalugra at the camp for Christ had explicitly said those many years ago. Ms. Kermody had poured her subtle sourness over him, as when, seeing him at the cutting board, she said, “Still haven’t figured out how it works?” that is, imputing to him an inability to perceive that the little squares were a means for aligning the paper. And so she had confirmed for him what he already understood, that he was stupid.

Campaniles. Free-standing bell towers.

A cambered bridge.

Corbels.

Mullioned windows.

Bollard, a post around which to wrap mooring lines.

Demijohn, a narrow-necked bottle wrapped in wicker.

Magenta, fuchsine, a deep purplish red.

The stockpiling of weapons for the arms race he could not win.

*Now Celeste, can a dream live if it has been pronounced dead? And so, though I ran to you every other night, no record could appear of such activity at the very center of my life lest Sarah develop powers of detection that would abort my dream even as it was developing. And was not the need for my extreme caution correctly anticipated? Did she not sit up in her sleep and punch me full in the face, and when I inquired as to her brutal*

*action, did she not respond that the blow was for crimes I had already committed and those still to come? No, no, Celeste, vigilance must soar if we are to live.*

In dreamland he rode with his mother in a cab on a rainy night meant for road carnage. She called the driver to a halt and stepped into a hotel, declaring she had something to check on but did not return. "What ails you?" he called after her, but she had taken her ears with her. "I will go where I belong. Take me to my bed," Luther now called to the cabby. Back in the loft he was summoned from that very bed by a pounding on the door. "Who stands there at this hour? I demand to know," he called out, in a loud voice meant to allay his fear. But no answer came. Calling now his courage to him, Luther swung open the door. There before him stood a man with a deformed face who disappeared before Luther's eyes as Sarah entered the loft. "Are you here to give me the business?" he called in a panicky voice, on a night of unanswered questions, fearing most of all that Sarah was the man transformed.

*Now it is a truth told many times how it was that the secret I professed to keep became revealed, and so the question is do I have the right to reenter such territory and take others with me? But does it not deserve to be a truism that to explore the new we must first pass through the valley of the old and in so doing extract new meaning? Are we not obligated to try? But suppose we discover even less? No matter whatsoever. Have we not been given the sky on which to write, and if that should begin to cramp us, the stratosphere and other galaxies and universes? All day long hegemony-fearing Americans sing "Don't Fence Me In" without quite understanding the resources*

*available to them. Celeste, we are beholden to no one. The rule of the patriarch is over. He has been smitten. No more the importunate flock begging for acceptance, and if we tell our own story repeatedly, it is in practice for the final telling, after which words can be retired to their posts.*

*However, in deference to all those who have not gone here before, we will give you the bare bones.*

*You will all recall Hermione Grunfelt. She had announced a party that would feature her poetry writing technique. The theme for the party would be, "Nota Bene: A Muse Is Where You Find HimHerIt." So the invitation read, along with a handwritten note: "Would Divine Sarah and magisterial Luther please come."*

*The same invitation was extended to you as well, Celeste. The prospect of the three of us together was not a deterrent but a source of excitement, though more for me than for you.*

*The Carlton Jaberwockis were there, and the Del Koonings, and Sid and Marsha Mabon, and Hudson Valley Iris and Rutabaga Slim. Others with names unrecorded were also present. All arrived with no clear consciousness of their decay.*

*For safety's sake, I had resolved not to drink before arriving at the party, but en route I coaxed Sarah to stop off with me at Paddy Boy's for just one and left after three strong scotches. At the party I had several more drinks and, seized with a sense of urgency, suggested to a woman I had fallen into conversation with that we go up to the roof and contemplate the moon. A wife, a woman I was seeing on the side, and now I wanted more.*

*The woman, visibly affronted, moved away quickly and, even drunk, I feared that the room had sensed my inappropriateness.*

*But a threat had presented itself to what I already had. A satyr, his red hair on fire, had attached himself to you, Celeste. As with the woman I had propositioned, urgency prompted me to act. I called Sarah from her wanderings and brought you and her together. If that wasn't part of the script, neither was taking each of you by the hand and running out of the apartment and out into the street. I remember laughing in the cold air with you on my left and Sarah on my right, the three of us led on by my hysteria, before my screen went blank.*

*The next morning I woke in a bed not my own. Sarah was lying right beside me. All was still around us. Keeping her eyes fixed on me, she cleared up my momentary confusion.*

*"Bastard. You went like a homing pigeon right for her bed."*

*Across the room the radiator hissed and pipes knocked. I didn't see why I too couldn't be a hissing radiator or a knocking pipe and have the relief of a consciousness-free life.*

*Now Celeste, you were waiting for us in the living room, where you were feeding baby Mia her breakfast, for a mother you were and understood where your anchor lay in the vagaries of life, that is, you were finding order amid the disorder, as you found it in your work. Him Who Had Placed the Squash Where the Penis Should Normally Be could come and go, and you could ride out his abandonment of the marriage as the rain shower*

*that it was. And you would ride out this disturbance to your equilibrium as well, this drama of marital betrayal in which you were now implicated.*

*“Momma, Lose-Her. Lose-Her;” baby Mia said, shredding any defense I might try to make that I was on unfamiliar territory. You did not acknowledge baby Mia’s feat of recognition. You allowed it to speak for itself. Out of the mouths of babes.*

*Your show of hospitality neutralized Sarah’s ire. She could not gore such a pleasant and attractive host of a caliber meriting respect. Meanwhile you saw not the troubled star my hype machine had painted a picture of but an insecure, overweight woman.*

*Following some uneasy chitchat, we took our leave, and Sarah no longer felt obliged to sit on her anger. “You will pay for this, skinny dick. You will pay and pay all through your sleeping and waking hours.”*

*That hissing radiator. Those knocking pipes.*

*Now, Celeste, Dr. Frodkey continued to monitor the situation. He had heard the reports of my erratic behavior and the gross injustice I had perpetrated on Sarah with the party fiasco and all that followed. As a result he had been preparing his smacking hand for action, that he might deliver the clean hard blow that he suspected Sarah herself might not be able to inflict. He had his wife. He had his child. He had his appliances. He had his Columbia medical degree. He had the moral order of the universe breathing self-righteous anger into his stance as he called me to account, saying to Sarah that I must appear with her for his full and face-to-face inspection.*

*Now, Celeste, when you are called by one on high, you go, even if the stuff of opposition coexists in your soul with the outside possibility of winning his love. Never forget that "For Your Love," a Yardbird creation, was written and sung with taut urgency in its sound for a reason.*

*"A report has come to me of malfeasance in your office as husband to this woman." Dr. Frodkey got right to it.*

*"Sir, I am neither in government nor the member of a corporation. Stay on the rails of your scientific competence. Do not rely on incoherence to fly you to your destination. Remember who I am. I am one who sits in his own private space accumulating small piles of used Kleenex."*

*"You have been committing acts of betrayal and refuse to acknowledge them. You are burdened and bounded by the stink barrel of a stonewalling cad."*

*Celeste, at this point Dr. Frodkey's ancient roots came large into my mind. His broad face suggested a lineage with Genghis Khan. The coarseness of his skin was surely that of forebears who had swept across the Mongol plain indulging in savage head butting with Tatars and their ilk till the light of unifying reason could be beaten into them. And now here he was in his Fifth Avenue office with his ancestors' bag of bone-crushing tricks. The quest for supremacy is unending, is it not, whether on the field of battle or the supposedly gentler environment of a therapist's office. I did not check his noise machine with a dead and severely smelly fish across the face but advocated for quiet in all facets of my being. The more he ranted the more I had to suppress a desire to laugh. I had heard this sort of sermonizing before, this high moral dudgeon back in my childhood, the*

*battalions for the Lord and all the rest. Once in a while, when she became exceeding wroth, I would hear the same from Dr. Dressler, but never from Dr. Rosner.*

*“I will take all that you say under advisement,” I finally said.*

*“Under advisement? What psychotic, pompous language do you speak?”*

*“I thought I was following your excellent example.”*

*“Will you yield to the truth? Will you confess that you have been carrying on with the woman whose apartment you led Sarah to this past weekend?”*

*“Carrying on? What is that?” I leaned into him with my inquiry.*

*“No, this will not do,” I hear you saying, Celeste, having pushed even you beyond the bounds of your tolerance, a category in which you are, as in so many, at the very highest level. A man needn't dwell within the realm of human feeling if that is his fate, you say, but he must be willing to give some attention to facts as they exist on the ground. He must not hover in the delusional state but instead value words for the honesty they can convey, not hijack them for the purposes of his own ego.*

*So am I chastened to acknowledge that insolence did not carry the day but that Dr. Frodkey it was who passed under the Arc d' Triomphe with arms raised. Celeste, he punched me in both eyes and boxed both ears and sent me sprawling to the floor with his earnestness, but not before extracting from me the confession that I had been with you.*

*A howl of pain followed. “You don't know how much I loved you. You don't know.” Sarah's words, which seemed to explode from the depths of her being, threatened to shake me from my pose of detachment.*

*“You sit there saying nothing when you should get down on your knees to her and beg her forgiveness.” To my amazement, Dr. Frodkey’s glare seemed genuine. Who were these people capable of standing behind their emotions uninfected by the laughing thing?*

*With hindsight I see that these storms of emotion had to be resisted if truth was to have its day. There had been too many lies, spontaneously offered. My silence was my only claim to integrity. In seeing you, Celeste, I had made a fledgling attempt to step out of what could no longer—could never—hold me. In that sense Dr. Frodkey of the frothing mouth and blazing eyes was a force for reaction seeking to keep me wedded to the past. We must go where the light is when that light presents itself to us. It was that light in which I sat in that office with Dr. Frodkey and Sarah. It was your light, Celeste.*

*This light is a light that the recipient feels but which others cannot see, which is why America is rife with the face police, the rabid dogs of inspection, saying, “You look sad. Put a smile on your puss,” then disappearing before you can even think to respond that a smile is not always proof of joy nor a frown of sadness. The art of concealment extends to joy and all that is within its family, lest the malefactors seek to take it away.*

*As France came to the aid of the American revolutionaries, preventing the Brits and the filthy Hessians from stifling the winds of change, so too did Dr. Rosner come to mine, but with no signs of Gallic foppery showing. He did not hide his fiery hair under a periwig or speak ornately when manly concision would do. He simply affirmed my right to the silence I had sought to maintain during Dr. Frodkey’s tribunal and cited the film *My Life to Live*, whose title, in his estimation, said it all.*

*Why is this important, you ask? Because while man is of woman born, he must*



*have a buffer to prevent him from falling back in and getting lost in her sorrows and making them his own. He must learn the meaning of the first live in Live and Let Live. Otherwise he takes on a misplaced sense of responsibility and is lost for all time, like those gangsters in the grade B movies of yore serving long stretches behind bars and swearing to make it up to long-suffering ma back home on their release. To turn on the lights where darkness has reigned is a victory worth noting. The question then is whether simply because one has been born a Garatdjian, one has to live and die as one, with the theme song "Beat Me like a Dog for the Fault Is All Mine" topping his particular chart. There is one who also came as a voice from his particular wilderness, instructing that I distinguish between an amend and penance (and said further, as if to illuminate the trajectory of my whole life, "What we are running from we are running toward"), but we will get to him in due course, as order must prevail if life is to have meaning.*

*We must stop here for now, but a strict accounting will be given, that history may hold a place for our lives, as the child's dictate to write "Kilroy was here" is also the adult's.*

Luther bought himself a winter coat on sale at B. Altman, where quality goods could always be found and the echoes of his mother's footsteps could be heard on the hardwood floors. It made him feel good to buy at a store that had Fifth Avenue in its address and a tone of gentility in the salespeople's voices.

The coat was long and tan and of synthetic material, inside and out. His hands

buried in the deep pockets could do things no one could see though he was right there in their midst, like cross his fingers or press a piece of paper against the outer wall of a pocket with the back of his hand. Delicious things, like the pieces of tape hanging from his gray metal desk at work.

It was a Saturday, and Sarah was by his side. Though she said he had killed her, she bought a couple of blouses so she too could be among the living.

He had bought the coat just in time, when his bones could hold out no more against the November cold let alone the more frigid temperatures winter was promising. He had not owned such a coat since his parka days of childhood and adolescence.

That afternoon they saw a movie that featured violence by a ventriloquist's dummy, who more and more took on a life of his own. The dummy was lowdown and remorseless, stabbing someone who did not deserve to die through a curtain that hid the murderer from view as the savagely thrusting blade did its work. All the while did the dummy hold to his smile so as to enhance his diabolical nature.

*Celeste, you were with me on this day. You must not think you were not.  
Somewhere are ledgers rife with my own fidelity.*

They had dinner that evening at Robin's, down on the Bowery. He had a hamburger and French fries, in keeping with his walk on the normal side where food was concerned. Sarah chose an omelet.

"Many eggs have been broken, wouldn't you say?" she inquired.

"At least several," he said, as she added a ketchup topping.

At home he finished *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy gave him nothing to hold onto. He had the hardness of his last name. Just cold rain and cold porridge as he lay on a bed of cold stones.

Thanksgiving came. He had not been on the lookout for it. His mother called in the morning. No, Sarah would not be able to come to dinner that evening, he said. She would have to see her parents.

“Could I ask you to bring a photograph of her?” his mother asked.

“I will see what I can find,” Luther said.

But he did not find. He did not search. Nor did he follow Sarah out the door for the subway ride uptown to the Cathedral Parkway stop several stations after Sarah’s at Eighty-sixth Street and Broadway. The day had vicious currents keeping him in place before the TV set and NFL football. And yes, red wine. A big, big bottle.

It was good to teach his family a lesson or two about the power of absence. Good to teach everyone about that power. His power. But then his mother found him, found her way to his mind, and he cried and cried at what he had done.

Dreamland awaited him with a story after bedtime had begun. He was on the steps of a building on Claremont Avenue belonging to Barnard College. Again, he was enrolled at the Claremont School. A girl had him fill out forms on a day as bright as his future should have been, now that he was being given a second chance scholastically. But he kept botching things. His handwriting was illegible and some of the information he provided was incorrect. Soon the girl tired of him and together with another girl began to

laugh at his errors. Once again had he blown an opportunity to redeem the past. Once again.

He read *Portrait of a Lady*. He climbed the mountain of words, resting often, and applied the name Isabel Archer to his walking stick.

Then dreamland came once again. Oh, what a thing. Sarah was asleep in his mother's apartment. His sister Rachel arrived from her room upstairs, in need of a hot water bottle. But on leaving her vigilance clearly was not soaring, as she left the front door unlocked. On his long legs did Luther run to quickly bolt it. He then ran to Gersten's Typewriters, across the street, for the portable manual he had seen in the window that afternoon, but it was gone, gone. The old owner called Luther into the back, where he was repairing a typewriter, and began to molest him. Afterward he tucked a ten-dollar bill into Luther's shirt pocket and said he was planning to visit. The sun was shining and girls were attracted to him, but where was his typewriter and his sense of vocation?

When he awoke from the dream in the night the thought came to him to write one paragraph at a time. What a concept. He grew incredibly optimistic. He climbed down the loft bed ladder and read from the Columbia Desk Encyclopedia, that it might put meat on his bones, drank two cans of beer, the only alcohol he could find, and swallowed a Valium, which Dr. Rosner gave him that he might continue to live.

*Now, Celeste, the Christmas season was upon us and brought with it much vileness. I do not have to tell you how it was that as I waited for an order of takeout food*

*one afternoon down in Chinatown, it came to me that I had conceivably done something earlier that day that I couldn't quite recall. The entire morning was a blur, which struck me as strange. When a mystery abounds, having grown from a sliver of concern, we must make inquiries. Where else to start but with you? You and I had both resolved, after the party debacle, that I must not come to your door again. And yet, was it possible I had done just that? I went to a pay phone and dialed your number, needing your confirmation that I hadn't paid a visit, but you sternly told me otherwise. I had come to you, and though you didn't elaborate, you described my behavior as rude and said I mustn't visit again.*

*I walked home in a daze. The day was gray and cold. A cluster of men stood outside the Salvation Army shelter near Houston Street and the Bowery. Reformed sots they were, or so I suspected. And now I was a sot, completely out of control and possibly dangerous.*

*I redoubled my effort to stay away, but could not maintain the straight and narrow with Sarah. One night, full of wine, I broke through the constraints and made a mad charge through the city streets and arrived at your door, which you opened wearing only a robe. With the blade of truth did you penetrate me. You had company, you said, and behind you I could see a bare-chested man with red hair on fire, a satyr sort, and recognized him as the one you had been chatting with at Hermione's party. I might have been Arbogast, climbing those stairs of the old house up the hill from the Bates motel, so coolly was I stabbed in the eye and the chest and all parts through which blood could be reached and mortality breached.*

*There had been, in truth, another stabbing, if you will permit me to hide out in the language of the extreme in the hope that I can gain my bearings. It was in the summer, not the autumn of our love, if I may dare to call it such. To me you announced your pregnancy, if not to the world, and said all that was growing within was my doing, remaining silent as to the wonder of God and your own miraculous inner workings. I took what you said to heart. You had allowed me into your chamber and procreation had followed. What was I to do with such a thing but feel the possibility of joy surrounded by the menace of inevitable sorrow, the close but not quite of those like me born to deprivation and self-denial. Why? Because I was not ready to assume responsibility, that is, to make a move away from Sarah, to leap from a sinking ship to one vibrantly afloat.*

*“What should we do?” That was your question.*

*I had no answer, no trigger to pull. I had only my own safety and the mold that must not be broken lest anarchy reign and the floodgates of heavens open up and pour through our roofless abode. There is a line that must be followed, Celeste, even if it means the refutation, the cessation, of one’s genes. But what was I saying? What could be more glorious than progeny spun through your matrix? You would be the compensatory factor for all my deficiencies.*

The Christmas season was upon him. It had come viciously fast. He had bought no one presents and sent no one cards. Dr. Rosner had gone away, serving up a portion of cruelty, but not before asking if his absence would have any meaning for Luther.

“Did you see me on the floor when my father went away for good?”

“Your father?”

“Yes, my father. Did you see me on the floor or did you see me taking victory laps around his fallen self?”

Dr. Rosner put Luther in the care of Dr. Abednego in his absence. Bull-necked and chunky, Dr. Abednego did not sit right with Luther. He filled the room with his big noise and energy, showing none of the subtle snuffling that Dr. Rosner could do.

“What’s on your mind? You look kind of hangdog. But not to worry. We’ll get you up and running.” In this way did Dr. Abednego speak to Luther, as if he were a machine sent to him for repair.

In this phase Luther had added something new to his life. Where a typewriter had been a typewriter, it was now something more, an instrument for his deliverance. He would linger in front of store windows staring at the machines on display. Some months ago he had bought a backup Olivetti 32 should something happen to the first, because by then there might be a shortage, and then what would he do? Only this time he bought a new Olivetti Lettera 32, one that would have a longer life in its frame. But when he inspected it more closely than he had in the store, he saw the vicious decline inherent in contemporary life. The machine was inferior in its parts and in its look and in its touch and in the quality of the pica type when he struck the keys. The little plate on the back said, “Made in Mexico,” not “Made in Italy.” Now he was in serious trouble. His front-line machine was second-rate, and all those that came after would be even flimsier. He would not have the hardware to get the job done. Disharmony reigned where order was to have been secured.

In this state of crisis he saw the typewriter that would save his life. There it was on Second Avenue in the East Village, only it wasn't a pale shade of green or made in Italy or Mexico. The machine was sleek and black and old, and summoned the conviction in Luther that it would be his friend for life.

Luther went inside and asked the owner, knee-deep in machines, how much the typewriter would cost.

"One hundred dollars," the owner said flatly, without looking up.

"That much?"

"You want something so badly, you have to pay the price."

"Who said I want it so badly?" Luther asked.

"Your voice said it. I've been in this business a long time. I should know."

"Is it right that you talk to me this way?"

"Right? Right? What do you know about right? The hardest thing you do all day is blow your big nose. And don't ask me how I know, because I'll give you the same answer. People like you shouldn't even be allowed to own typewriters, if you ask me."

"And why is that?"

"You imbue them with a power they don't possess because you have no power of your own. I've seen your type before. All of us typewriter store owners have."

"I have heard enough, I guess," Luther said, dejectedly.

The owner reached for the ringing phone and waved Luther away with a shoo fly motion of his hand.

Jesus, to be a man with such a skill.



Lately, Luther had been romancing the rails. He saw himself on a flatbed rail car writing “White Line, Continue” on one of his portable typewriters as the train sped past the cornfields of Kansas bound for California. He also saw himself living in an SRO with a bare overhead light bulb eating Chef Boyardee ravioli out of a can. The dingy ambience was one that surely would add to his creativity.

Whether he had a future riding the rails or living in a dive, a portable typewriter of the right kind was essential, and the shop owner had denied him. With Christmas bearing down, Luther saw that he would, for the first time, be denying others. He didn't have time to shop for gifts. He didn't have time to buy and mail Christmas cards. He didn't even have time for doing the laundry or taking clothes to the dry cleaners. He had time to drink and seek relief from the walls closing in on him. *Lebensraum. Lebensraum.*

And now, in a rage, Luther had time for the telephone and Dr. Abednego, Dr. Rosner's surrogate. Luther had nothing specifically in mind to say to Mr. Bull-Necked Alpha Man. He only knew he must hurl himself against his bulk with words, and so when the doctor said, “What can I do for you today?” Luther roared, “You can tell Dr. Rosner that I am going to put a bullet in his brain. That is what you can do,” before hanging up.

And did the same with Dr. Rosner's answering service.

In dreamland he learned that once more Sarah had been taken captive and was being held in a seedy hotel room. Frantic, Luther called Carol Aprile, who told him to come over and make love to her. And while his ego had received a boost, he did not act on the invitation. Some things you did not do while a crisis was unfolding, even in a dream.

Outlines and plans. Outlines and plans. A structure was lacking for any sustained work.

Literary organization was called for.

Lacquered wood. Pinewood cabinet veneered with dogwood. Cherry wood serving bowl. Chintz-covered armchair. Oak dresser. Settee. Commode. Silver leaf. Tubular steel furniture. Barcelona chair. Chaise-longue. Moulded plywood chair.

But here was the thing. Sarah was not being held captive in a rundown hotel room. She was alive and partially resurrected. Gimbel's had dared to expand uptown and call its new store on Eighty-sixth Street and Lexington Avenue Gimbel's East, as if it had the right to do anything but live in the shadow of Macy's. Employment was good, but the men's shirts department of a second rate department store was not the fancy design studio where she had worked with Carol Aprile. He imagined the hand of Dr. Frodkey here, telling Sarah that all work was honorable as he sought to guide her toward a more secure place in the world.

*Now Celeste, a phone call cannot go unanswered when it contains the belligerence that Dr. Rosner heard in my message and the message to his alpha proxy, Dr. Abednego. He could have reported me to the police, and perhaps Dr. Abednego advised as much.*

*Instead he picked up the phone and went against me with his own words, though with the subtlety that was his hallmark.*

*"Dr. Rosner here. What's going on?"*

*“Nothing. I was upset. That’s all. I wanted to buy a new typewriter but didn’t have the money.”*

*“You don’t need a new typewriter. You need a new life.”*

*“But wait. I was upset too that I didn’t send a single Christmas card.”*

*“Don’t worry. My colleague and I received a couple.”*

*That he would talk to me in such a way, Celeste. That he would.*

There was another development, this one at work. A new director of Cromartie Wonders was hired. No, she did not come as a voice crying in the wilderness. She came by way of silence and in the garb of blackness. One morning she just appeared, with fury in her aging pixie’s face, and blew past Luther’s desk.

“I am curtains, for sure,” Luther said to Isadora, the secretary.

“Why should you be curtains?”

“Was that the look of love, as sung by Dusty Springfield, on her face, or was it the ire of fire that she must countenance someone extremely disagreeable to her sight?”

“Why do you have to use big words, when nothing you say will convince me you have a brain in your strangely shaped head?”

Luther retreated from Isadora Drayton so he could have himself again, and though she followed after, suggesting, in her laughing way, that they explore an unused office for intimacy purposes, he held himself away so she could not reach him.

Within a week he had another visitor to his desk, and it was none other than Rafta Blackning, the new director.

“I am here to tell you that I am extremely impressed with your organization and the letters you write, and I have told Midge Haller, the personnel director, as much.”

“Well, thank you,” Luther said. Seeing that he was unable to say anything more, Rafta Blackning took her leave.

Unable to sit with the feelings that her bomb blast had stirred up, Luther vacated the premises of his desk and found an empty office. He closed the door, not that a carnal purpose might be pursued with Isadora Drayton, but in order to reconnect with a new love, an Olympia office model electric typewriter with the solidity of a tank. Was it possible he was mistaken? Was it possible he was meant to march into the future not with a lightweight portable but a behemoth? Or was there some way for the two types to join forces? These were matters that needed to be gotten right. Infrastructure must be laid if there was to be a glorious tomorrow. Dr. Rosner could put his sardonic thing on him, could seek to smite him with his mocking utterance that Luther needed a new life, not a new writing tool, but it was Luther’s life to live, and “White Line Continue” made that possible, and so attention must be paid to all that would move the project forward.

He turned on the mammoth machine, inserted a piece of paper, and wrote, “And then they went home and had a good time.” Oh yes, he could be friends with a machine of this kind. Oh yes, he could.

But then there was the question of time once again, and whether obsolescence would claim the behemoth, leaving him viciously bereft of accessories such as typewriter ribbons as the years passed? It was a matter that needed his full attention even as he despaired of having the quality of mind that could solve the problem.

But a social obligation was calling him and Sarah, one arranged for by Sarah's mother. Lydia had said to Mr. and Mrs. Hans Bernhard, "There is little to be proud of in my son-in-law. Frankly, we are worried for our daughter and would appreciate your best assessment of them as a couple."

Hans Bernhard was grateful for the faith placed in him and his wife and said Lydia would be rewarded. "And when I say rewarded, I mean just that. As you and many Americans know, the bond between a language and its practitioner only grows stronger when the latter is not native to the environment where he has settled." After taking time to give a prolonged suck to his eyeteeth, he continued. "We will set a trap for him, but it will be best if you do not forewarn him that he is entering the lair of the fox."

"Of course, Leonard. Of course."

"Because I am Austria-born and have skied on many slopes. This is no little Latin Lupe he is dealing with," he was obliged to add.

"I don't like Austrians," Luther said, en route to meet Mr. Leonard Bernhard and his wife Mati.

"Why would that be? You don't know any."

"Does the name Gerhard Kleiner ring a bell?"

"What's wrong with him?" Sarah asked, of her parents' photojournalist friend.

“The only thing he could find to like about me is the hair that comes down my neck. Besides, all Austrian men want to do is schuss down mountain slopes and wear smiles of incredible condescension on their long, horsey faces.”

“Be quiet,” Sarah hissed. The fire from his infidelity had burned her, and she was trying to heal from her scars.

“I hear you trying to masturbate in there, you skinny dick,” she had called to him just that morning, from the loft bed as he sat on the toilet. “I know you have a vision of that lesbian in that sick mind of yours. Don’t tell me that you don’t.”

He had had a fire to offer Doctors Rosner and Abednego, and now she had one of her own. He must not think he was off the hook, not when she routinely said things like he would pay and pay and pay.

Luther had Leonard pegged wrong. He was not a schuss man. He was from the vile and vicious slalom school, and all the darting and weaving that went with it.

“Would you care for a drink? We have some excellent wines,” Leonard said.

“Do bring them on,” Luther said.

“We will do them one at a time, in the interest of discipline and order,” Leonard said, and with filthy ostentation made a disgustingly meager pour into a thin glass.

“Thank you,” Luther said, with something less than sincerity.

“I have just handed you your essence,” Leonard said.

“My what?”

“I believe you heard me. And that is my point. You would do with a little less sauce and a little more source. For example, I read texts only in German.”

“That really helps to know,” Luther said. “I have had enough of your angled entries . Dispense with your slalom and give us your best schuss.”

“I will give it to you and you only, as it pertains to no one else in this room.”

“Schuss already.”

“Your primary relationship in this room is not to your wife but the bottles you sense I am withholding from you.”

“Who are you, sir, that you make such an assertion?”

“Though you assumed otherwise, I am a schuss man. I fly straight to the bottom, and I have done it before the evening has practically begun.”

And quickly ended. Luther bolted.

“I will not be where the assassin’s bullets fly. My will to live is stronger than that,” he said, when some hours later Sarah returned home.

“Your will to drink, you mean.”

“They are one and the same, an equation that anyone with a mathematical mind will explain.”

“Shut up,” she said.

*Celeste, what I have not told you is that Dr. Rosner did some schussing of his own when he called me on receipt of my “Christmas card.” He said I must go to the rooms where the men and women who had forsworn the drink congregated throughout the city. The firmness of his directive struck my inner being as just but also brutal, as if he were*

*pulling a blanket from around a child and tossing him into the frigid streets of winter. If I was not ready to live, I was not ready to die either.*

*And another thing that must be noted is that when I made my last attempt to see you, you informed me that the satyr you had taken up with rode the amyl nitrate express and that you had climbed on board for all-night journeys through the wild land of pleasure. Does delirium suffice as the word to capture the reaction your revelation triggered in me?*

*There was a woman from my past. She had big, glittering eyes. She had chipmunk teeth. She had a ballooning butt packed into jeans two sizes too small. She was looking to make the leap from Bensonhurst and Italian Catholic parochialism to Manhattan. She would meet me at the Canal Street entrance to the Manhattan Bridge in her little sports car and drive us to her borough. One night, drunk behind the wheel, she flirted with death, going into a long skid as we came off the bridge. There are opportunities for extermination that we all give ourselves, Celeste, in those years before vigilance can begin to soar, illuminating the subtle and pernicious appeal of the path called harm's way. That was my last night with her. I had given her so little sexually. She was content to do all the work. Maybe we were together five times. There was no hard feeling when we stopped. We had been nice to each other, in our way.*

*And so, Celeste, I called on her now to be before my eyes as I reached for the Manhattan White Pages. In the state of desperation engendered by your connection with Satyr Man was I guided to find what I had been looking for. "I call your name," I called out to this woman of Brooklyn who, by now, intuition told me, had crossed over the bridge*



*to Manhattan, for some of us are able to realize our heart's desires, and here, let us not mock these paltry dreams and their evanescence. Did I not have a bridge of my own to cross, and you and Sarah, too, and all those who would escape the stultification of the matrix? And there she was, with an East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street address. We will never know if she was galvanized to reach for her dream because of Saturday Night Fever and disco wonder Tony Manero. Why, you ask? Because I had not seen the film and so had no basis on which to ask. I had not witnessed Tony Manero carry his paint bucket through the streets of Bay Ridge or pair up with Stephanie Mangano, first on the dance floor, and then in a matter of the heart. I had not heard him do a number on the word interesting after hearing it spoken from her mouth in relation to him. I had not seen him eat with an open mouth. I had not seen the vicious tragedy of heights as manifested on the Verrazano Bridge. I had seen none of this. Why, you further ask, in a display of your relentless intelligence? Because my Almaden wine was a fiercely possessive lover, seeking to claim me for herself, in the year that the film came out. But the woman of Brooklyn would have seen the film. She would have seen the migration over the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan by Stephanie Mangano and she would have claimed Stephanie Mangano for her very own because inspiration is the greatest gift we can give each other, providing as it can hope to the nth degree.*

*At that moment there was my own hope, Celeste. Oh, angel of mercy, divine power of the universe, that you would provide me with the opportunity for the relief of a woman's arms, for the transplanted Brooklynite gave me the green light to come over.*

*Now this meant rushing out the door with my wine breath and all, because precipitous action was my only way free of the Almaden bottle, so demanding of my time.*

*Within twenty minutes I was at Brooklyn's door. The woman who opened it was recognizable but more attractive, having lost some weight. And she was quieter as well. Even drunk, I had the distinct sense of someone living within herself. I pushed past and flopped onto her bed, the effort of leaving the bottle to enter the day having been too much. I passed out and came to sometime later, with Brooklyn observing me from a chair by the bed.*

*"I don't live this way anymore," she said.*

*"What way is that?"*

*"With bottles and pills and all the rest."*

*"What way do you live? I feel an emptiness here."*

*"I live free of them."*

*"You are giving me nothing to hold onto."*

*"The truth is something to hold onto. I have given you that."*

*"Dirty and concealed from no one is the path of failure."*

*"Who said that?"*

*"John Lennon."*

*"Really?"*

*"Not really."*

*"Why did you say it then?"*

*"Because sometimes utterance will have its way. The prophecy has come true."*

*“What prophecy?”*

*“That of a sage at the bar on Spring Street. He predicted that someday I would step over a beautiful naked woman to get to the bottle.”*

*“I’m not naked and you didn’t step over me.”*

*“Do not allow literalism to divert your attention from the uber truth that is right in front of you.”*

*“You should go now.”*

*“Yes, that is the final truth,” Luther said, raising himself from her bed.*

His mother was mugged outside the building and had to be hospitalized. This happened in dreamland. Luther awoke to the awareness that the city had traumatized him at an early age.

A man entered Luther’s childhood room, where his mother now slept. As it happened, she had just woken from her afternoon nap.

“What is it that you want?” she demanded.

“I am here to check the meters,” he said.

But she was not believing him and rose up strong,

“You are not here to check the meters. You have come for evil, and so you must leave.” She stood and escorted him out the door.

This was not dreamland.

I repeat. This was not dreamland.

There was always a first time for clobber. Having given him her kiss, Rafta Blackning had to follow with her fist. There had been an omen in the Manhattan sky that morning, the unusual sight of crows, an abundance of them, flying low, as he neared his workplace.

“I have turned over to Bruce Bill *Dottie Duck Goes Waddling*, by Patricia Ellen Fitts. The mailroom must have left the envelope on my desk this morning. It was addressed to no one in particular, only Cromartie Wonders,” Luther said to his boss.

“Don’t make that mistake again. All manuscripts come to me,” Rafta said, turning a steely eye on Luther.

Fearing for his job and his life, Luther left an urgent message for Dr. Rosner. “I must hear from you. The attack has begun and could prove fatal.”

An hour elapsed before Dr. Rosner responded, ample time for Luther to die and die.

“You’re not going to please the boss all the time,” Dr. Rosner said, leaving Luther thunderstruck that anyone should have such a magic healing touch.

A lie was being spread in the cold that Doberman Pinschers were harmless. “I have three of them. You could put a lamb chop between their jaws and they wouldn’t bite without permission.”

The man wore a mask and spoke through a device that altered his voice to ensure his anonymity on an ice floe in the Hudson River. He addressed his words to the air, his intended audience.

Dr. Rosner was not his mother, who would often say, “Do my words mean nothing?” Dr. Rosner’s words had operational fortitude; they compelled Luther into the action they called for.

If only belatedly, Luther sought out the Rooms of Recovery, where the men and women of New York City committed to not drinking came together so they would not imbibe. As he descended the steps of a church on Sixth Avenue near Waverly Place, his heart was on fire that his journey should bring him into proximity with the neighborhood of Celeste, who continued to occupy every cell of his being. In his left hand he carried a rolled-up copy of the *New Yorker* so that he would not be without printed words should the time permit to read them, as he had the nakedness of his mind to cover as well as his physical parts, but he did not read the words of Ann Beattie or any of the others chosen for William Shawn’s love. It was enough for him to know the magazine was still there and his ambition still secured to his person.

I have been aboveground and they have been below ground all along. I have come home. So Luther thought, as he sat in a metal folding chair on that cold January night.

A middle-aged man was introduced as the speaker. He told of having drunk himself out of an executive level job with a prestigious company and out of his marriage and Westchester home. He moved to the city and found shelter in SROs and temporary jobs, wearing dirty clothes to work because he couldn’t find time away from the bottle to do his laundry. For his missing cufflinks he substituted nuts and bolts. Ultimately he

became unemployable and took refuge in abandoned buildings. Rats ran over him in his sleep.

The speaker said alcoholism was an illness and depended on denial to keep the drinker tied to the bottle. He learned that it was the first drink that got him drunk, not the second or tenth.

A man came up to Luther afterward. "Some of us are going for coffee. Why don't you join us?" the man said.

The little girl in Luther tittered. Luther should know. He heard her do so. Luther spurned the man, as he was sure the man was after sex. Still, someone had found him desirable. He left the meeting with a measure of hope.

*Celeste, you had given me a punch in the face. You had knocked out my two front teeth. I circumvented your building. I did not burst into that song beginning "I have often walked..."*

Now it had gone out into the city what had been done to Luther, that his security blanket had been pulled off him in the middle of the night. He could find neither physical warmth nor human warmth and said to Dr. Rosner that the world was lost to him and he to it.

"There is no addition by subtraction," he cried out. "In your viciousness have you taken my bottle and left me with nothing, nothing. You must give me something if I am to live and not expire on the spot. Do you not hear the roaring in my ears, heralding

annihilation? Would you have me helpless among the potentates? Even my bones are vacating the premises of my being. Will you not stop this exodus of flesh and spirit?"

Now Dr. Rosner maintained a pose devoid of perturbation, as if to say he had heard such hyperbolic noise before. At the same time he reached for his scrip pad and did some of his snuffling as he wrote in his doctor's scrawl.

"Sir," Luther exclaimed, "You are the United Nations Relief Fund all by yourself," so appreciative was he of the mercy the doctor was showing.

Now, in fact, the whole world heard Luther's thunderous exclamation there in Dr. Rosner's East Side office, including a bum of the obdurate kind. While passing Lugoff's Pharmacy, at the corner of Second Avenue and Eighth Street, he made eye contact with Luther, who stood inside waiting for his prescription to be filled. The fear that Luther was communicating emboldened the bum to enter and exercise power against him with kicks to the shins with his newspaper-lined boots, but the reek of him was more potent than his footwork, which was felt as feathery.

*Celeste, I do not know where that man came from, or the names of his parents or what his years from childhood through young manhood had been, or what set him on course for the hobo trail that left him walking unloved the wintry streets on that particular day. The legions of the lost are just that, legion, and must find their love in the jumbled privacy of their living hell minds. The question is whether we will meet again that we might have the opportunity for altered communication.*

*Frail and elderly Mr. Lugoff it was, in his blue smock, who came to my assistance, and ushered Stinko from his store, a space where Mr. Lugoff was committed to peace and civility reigning.*

*Now, Celeste, there were other assaults to afflict my mind and threaten my person. Terror would seize me on the cold streets that the government would imprison me in Fort Leavenworth for the years of unreported income back in my renting office days or that the gas heaters suspended from the ceiling would explode and dental records would be needed to identify my remains. One night the door rattled and the doorknob turned. It was quite clear that a murderer of the implacable kind was trying to gain entrance, and so until morning terror was my only companion. And there was the ghastly spectacle of the fire-gutted cast iron building on lower Broadway. No floor had been spared. From top to bottom the interior had been incinerated. Icicles, like gigantic jagged teeth, hung from the window frames to remind us of nature's brutal capacity and as a harbinger of the fires of hell that awaited me. And you should know there was an international dimension to this assault on my senses when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan with the intention of spanking to the point of annihilation the mujahideen who dared to take up arms against them and in the first year of their filthy occupation dared to take as their theme song "Ain't No Stopping Us Now", but even before its adoption their jaunty attitude communicated itself, the filthy ones atop their tanks and in their planes chanting first Afghanistan, then Pakistan, then India, then all of Southeast Asia and Australia and onto the very shores of America, where we will drag you cowering from under your beds and the back of your closets and give you a taste of Soviet reality.*



*Now Celeste, these were but a few of the instances of vileness the world sought to muster in an attempt to destabilize my regime forever in the aftermath of my daily drinking life.*

The medication Dr. Rosner prescribed was Haldol, a friend of Luther's from the past. And to be sure it did not get treacherous on him, as it had previously, causing him to wish to tear off his skin, Dr. Rosner also prescribed an ameliorating agent called Artane, which would deal quickly with any tormenting tendencies the Haldol might display.

Now because it was winter there was to be a sales conference at the Union League Club, on Park Avenue, to which only the most worthy were admitted as members. There the books on Pilgore's winter list would be presented to the sales force with key selling points, that they might go out strong across the land and commit booksellers to big orders so that the company might thrive. Let it be known that Pilgore was a publisher for all four seasons—it did not give short shrift to any one of them.

The event left Luther in a state of astonishment that Bruce Bill could speak with love and tenderness about *Bunny Rabbit Boo-Boo* and that Rafta could do the same with *Milka Dilka Dandy*, whereas Luther had to fortify himself with bits of scotch tape on the soles of both shoes simply to be present. Let it be noted that in this time ads were appearing in the subways for token booth operators and it set Luther's heart to longing for a life behind a Plexiglas shield sliding tokens to the ridership in exchange for the money they slipped through the opening in the window. In that booth would he be safe from a world in which he had been made to go about naked and shivering.

The Haldol did not make him strong. It did not cause him to sing “Under My Thumb” or “Rhiannon” or any of the other songs of ego inflation or celebration one might think of. But it did allow him to sit within the contours of his own mind even if it took away his short-term memory. He learned to carry a small notepad should Rafta Blackning have an assignment for him, as it would not do to forget his boss’s words.

Sooner or later a production editor must production edit, and one morning, after his sales conference triumph, Bruce Bill asked Luther to play with a dummy of a science book for young readers he had put together. Luther needed to be sure what “play with” meant, as he did not want to give Bruce Bill something he did not want. Already he had developed a comfortable feeling for Bruce Bill. He did not have to cower before his giftedness but could regard him as an older sibling serving as a mentor, and so the only thing occupying Luther’s mind at that moment was that he be a do-right man in regard to Bruce Bill. But as he was about to launch his inquiry as to the meaning of “play with,” a bad feeling closed down his mouth and his face and all of him regarding Bruce Bill, a sudden storm of affliction that left him desperate for relief. The dummy was posing a formidable challenge. It had lines of text. It had pictures around which the text had to be fitted. It had front matter, including Library of Congress data, and chapter opening pages that required uniform sinkage. The dummy was a measure of his intelligence, like those blocks the psychologist had given him to assemble. And now his skin was acting up. Once again it was pulling too tight around him with the intention of causing suffocation on the spot. I must run to the bathroom, where the cool tiles will ease the ardor of my skin for my extinction, Luther thought.

*Celeste, another feeling has been crowding me. Is it possible I have inflated....no, that is not a road to go down.*

But the tiles failed him. No relief came when he rested his forehead against them. Inch by inch his body was being encased in cement; his pores could not breathe. Artane. He must rush home and take one if normalcy was to return.

As if he were a horse, he slapped his haunch and raced hard through the wintry streets and descended the stairs into the subway station. But the subway was practicing a brand of viciousness on that day, stalling him, just stalling him, and so he jumped onto the tracks and began to speed south. Several yards into the tunnel, he tripped and broke his fall with his hands. The warning blast of a southbound train entering the station sounded, prompting him to scramble to his feet and climb the ladder at the beginning of the platform to safety. The conductor put his eye on him, as if to say, Fool, I have seen your kind three hundred times sliced and diced under the steel wheels of my unforgiving beast, but Luther was not in a tarrying frame of mind. He raced up the long flight of stairs and into a pharmacy at the corner of Thirty-fourth and Park Avenue.

The pharmacist had hardness in his face as he listened to Luther's hurried explanation, but that did not mean he had hardness in the mind that face was housing. He came out from behind the counter with one pill in his hand. Luther swallowed the pill in front of the pharmacist. Even as he walked toward the door, a rush of ecstasy dissolved the terror.

Turning, Luther called out, “You are an angel of mercy. You are. You are. And my friend for life,” but the pharmacist had returned to his business, having no more time for Luther’s words.

Rafta looked at him oddly as she passed his desk that day, but it was for Isadora Drayton to shed light on why some minutes later.

“That your new look?”

“What look?”

“You’ve got shit all over your face, Mister,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s like you smeared your face with a filthy rag.”

She showed him what he couldn’t see with a pocket mirror.

“Oh dear. I’m in blackface,” he said.

“Why don’t you sing us ‘Mammy’?”

“‘Mammy’?”

“Al Jolson, you nitwit.” Isadora Drayton could not resist the tide of her own laughter. She chuckled hardy. Like a wave her body responded.

Luther knew who Al Jolson was. And he knew who and what “Mammy” was, but that was nothing he had to tell Isadora Drayton as she had her laughing way.

*Celeste, it was on my mind that I had not provided a wedding ring for Sarah. The meaning of the word “remiss” was not lost on me, and if it was, the Van Dines were there to remind me of my failure when they took us to dinner to acknowledge our first wedding*

*anniversary. No, I did not offer Sarah instructions that she hide her left hand away so they could not see if her ring finger was adorned or not. And it is not for me to say that she would have done so should I have made such a wish known to her. And so, because she is a two-fisted eater, you can be sure that her hands were where her parents could see them, and so the badge of humiliation remained on my chest as I heard her parents silently call me by my rightful name. But you should also know that I was not seeking to rise from the abyss of humiliation by placing a ring on her finger that she perhaps did not want in the first place. Let her bare finger speak for itself, a voice I could not quite locate within myself was heard to say. Let it, this voice said. Just let it.*

“I’m in publishing because I want to edit. I can’t wait for my chance to do just that,” someone was heard to say. The phrase “poverty of intention” came unsolicited to Luther’s mind.

*Celeste, this business of being my brother’s keeper. Why is it for me to feel I have to carry his weight when I can’t carry my own? Since returning from the West Coast, he is morose and unemployed and drinks throughout the day. Now he reports that Rose, whom he has married, has swallowed half a bottle of aspirin in an attempt to end her life. Lately I have been hearing the term “life force.” If you know where to purchase such a thing, let me know.*

A voice from his past called to him.

“Gargoyle? Is that you, Gargoyle?”

And so, though it had been some years since he had spoken with the caller, it was not for Luther to feign confusion about his identity. Even so could he express perplexity as to how Roberto had come to possess his work number.

“I am always digging, Gargoyle. Don’t forget that.”

“Copy that,” Luther said.

“How about the phone book, and your true love who picked up the phone? Are those answers?”

“I guess so.”

“I’m selling life insurance. I have a special offer for you. How about it?” He gave a little laugh, as if to suggest the question wasn’t as straightforward as it might seem.

“Life insurance?”

“Your life mean something to you?”

“Of course.”

“You have to think of your true love should something happen to you.”

The last time Luther had spoken with Roberto, his old friend was wandering around Central Park trying to lure girls into what he called his private cave. And the time before that he was going about the Upper West Side in a soiled raincoat “flashing” for women on deserted streets. From those depths Roberto had risen sufficient to peddle life insurance?

Now Luther had a new terror to add to Afghanistan and the IRS and fire and the murderer at his door. But Roberto’s motive? What could it be? Luther had done him

wrong? Had pushed his cat out the window and caused his slow and painful death?

Luther had moved on while Roberto stayed in place in his life. Whatever Luther had done required a terrible and ultimate thrashing unto death. Roberto was the vengeance of his past upon him. Roberto was the murderer at his door—the murderer revealed, with his laughing claim on Luther's life.

Luther took his fear of Roberto to Dr. Rosner, who said no, he did not think Roberto was making a verbal death threat. But Dr. Rosner could not locate the fear switch in Luther and turn it off, and so Luther was left with the torment of Roberto's words. He sought out Bruce Bill and even Rafta, not caring that, behind his back, they might get the laughing thing going in them regarding his fear. It was not right for such brazenness to show its face—he was referring now to Roberto—and to so diabolically infect Luther's mind with terror.

Neither Rafta nor Bruce Bill opened their arms and offered refuge from the storm. But neither did they mock him that he should come to them with so pathetically personal—and strange—a matter, in the house of business where they stood. They spoke along the lines of Dr. Rosner, as if a casually dispensed sentence were sufficient to dispel a huge ball of anxiety. Did they not know the terror that his mind could fling at him with the brutal power of a catapult? Did they not know? Evidently not, but Dr. Rosner did. When Luther returned to him in the full throes of his ailment, Dr. Rosner turned on the power, the power that had always been there. Seeing that Luther was in crisis, he gave the matter the attention it deserved.

“You are concerned about your brother. You are running this character together with him in your mind,” he said, as if he could, with the audacity of his Harvard knowledge, reach inside Luther and flick off the hateful torment switch, causing Luther to inwardly bow down in wonder at the subtle touch Dr. Rosner’s introspective nature could produce.

Now Luther went to his brother Luke, for he had heard the beautiful and banished counselor at the camp for the Christ Jesus years before sing “Rescue the Perishing/Care for the Dying” in the cold Catskill Mountain air and the poverty of a 1950s night. He had heard her do so in the time of his youth before she was banished for the sin of her nakedness in the presence of an equally naked man. Luther did not come to Luke empty-handed and empty-headed, with only prayers for his resurrection in this life and beyond. He came to his brother with the help that could mean something, the same kind of help he, Luther, was getting from Dr. Rosner, only it wouldn’t be Dr. Rosner reaching into Luke and adjusting this valve and completely turning off another. That would be taboo. The words “too close for comfort” came to Luther. Dr. Rosner would not even see Luke for a consultation. Instead, he had provided Luther with the name of a colleague, Dr. Denise Joachim. Dr. Rosner did not add that the doctor was wonderful. It was not his way to impose such adjectives on human beings, as he was on the ground at all times and vanquishing of the hype machine in one and all.

There was a man—he had been established as such. His name was Gus, as in Gus Ribalderon, and he was head of advertising for the company. He was an old pro who had



fathered many children and whom his wife had continued to love. He did not walk invisible when he walked the halls of Pilgore Press but took up its spaces so that those who would dare to be passersby must spread themselves against the wall when his express came through. He was that sort of man, with the power that attached to his being.

One afternoon, it was for Luther to have the Gus Ribalderon experience, to which Gus added a new dimension, seeking to revile Luther with his face and identify him for all time as the loathsome bug that he was. But if he thought to slay Luther, Luther slew him right back, calling out,

“Hey, motherfucking white shirt. Hey, big and fallen face. Hey, pants so baggy in the ass you do not have...”

But Gus Ribalderon did not hear, or if he did, he did not respond, except with his feet, which took him and his face away.

*But Celeste, I heard. I heard Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons singing “Walk Like a Man, Talk Like a Man.” I did. I did.*

*Now Celeste, there were other matters, of both the mind and the heart. How is it that a man can be fully clothed and yet utterly naked? The answer is simply this: when the mind is unadorned, so too is the body felt to be without shelter from the eye. It occurred to me, standing in the presence of Rafta, that I knew nothing, absolutely nothing, that I was completely malnourished by the thin fare of the paperback books I had read through the years, books that did not present the intellect with the challenge of a complex equation or a polypeptide chain the length of a train. Intent on fattening up, on putting on the armor*

*that one needs to be invincible in this world, I read about the caves of America and beyond, stalagmites and stalactites and the petroglyphs left behind by ancient cultures, and the architecture of Mongolian yurts and the resilience of bats. Because what is intelligence but the capacity not to be hurt by the laughing thing.*

*Let me note here, while an ounce of forgiveness still lingers in this soul-shriveled world, that Roberto did not follow up on his life insurance call by entering the premises of my physical space and summarily extinguishing me. He did no such thing. Nor did he follow up with another phone solicitation. But suppose, Celeste, suppose, that he had been on the level with his offer of a policy? Who was I to drown him in an ocean of condescension, to hinder his attempt to climb back from the depths to a measure of respectability with such outright dismissal? It was I who sought to murder Roberto, not vice versa, with my supreme smugness. Once more has the hymn "Rescue the Perishing" rang in my ears as sung by the beautiful counselor at the camp for the Christ Jesus without my putting the words into practice. Once more have I reserved for another the laughing, scorning thing.*

A rat bit him with casual insolence in the loft. Surely this was the end of his life, as a feeding frenzy by other rodents would commence on his body. But he survived, and on the street a dog bit him savagely on his arms and legs. This was in dreamland, where it did not count as much as it might have otherwise.

Luke showed no steadiness in his mind or his body, not knowing how to exist upright in the domain of order. If his life had tangles, and he wasn't saying that it did, he would do the untangling himself. But he wasn't paying some headshrinker sixty dollars so she could hear him talk.

“Why didn't you tell me she would charge so much? The woman wasn't going to let me out the door unless I forked over the dough.”

“She didn't do right by you. Is that what you're saying?”

“She was your idea. You sent me there.”

“But what did she say to you?”

“She said I probably had a drinking problem and that I should enter an alcoholism program.”

“Are you going to go?”

“I don't know. It may not be my thing.”

“I've been going.”

“You weren't that bad.”

“I wasn't?”

“You could drink if you wanted to. You don't have to listen to those people.”

“Those people?” He heard his brother calling to him, but he wasn't going to him, not in that way.

“You should see yourself. You're afraid of everything.”

“That could be a good thing.”

“Not the way you do it.”

“I’m doing what I can.”

“Exactly,” Luke said.

The Eagles had a song for him in this time, “There’s a New Kid in Town,” and though it did not fully fit the situation, it stayed large in his mind. The kid was not a kid but a grown woman, and she was not coming to steal his love away but to serve as a new editor at Cromartie Wonders—not a production editor but an editor editor, one who worked with words, assigning them their place on the page. No scissors, no dummies for her. She was the real thing. Now he might have to socialize in a way he might not be capable of with someone of her rank and pedigree, for Rafta had let it be known that she was from Barnard College and so of Seven Sisters quality.

Rafta herself had tried to interact with Luther. She had inquired about Sarah and made a face when informed that she was an artist temporarily working in the men’s shirts department of Gimbel’s. What he saw was that Rafta had wanted Sarah to be more than she was and that she put a face on after hearing that she wasn’t. He saw further that in Rafta’s world there was excellence and then there was everything else.

A number of women had filed past his desk, one or two a day, for several weeks, all dressed smartly and with their interview faces on.

“Why don’t they hire you? Is it that you are not good enough?” Isadora Drayton asked, which got her laughing thing going.

“I guess not.”

“What are you doing here anyway? You look so depressed.”

“I’m doing what I need to do.”

“You sit at a desk all day doing nothing.”

“I do some things.”

“No you don’t, and that’s the problem. You don’t admit it.”

Luther found himself a ponder place, an empty office where he could sit free of the Isadora Drayton truth machine. Isadora. Such a haughty name for a funny face.

The door opened.

“Has the wounded animal gone off to die?” Isadora asked.

“Leave me alone” were the words he might have said, but they sounded too predictable to his ear, and so he allowed his silence to be. But Isadora was not the kind to be defeated by a tactic.

“You want us to go deeper than words can take us. Isn’t that so? Look at me. I command you,” Isadora said, standing in front of him now. “You’re wondering where to touch me first. Why not start with my lips?”

The blond fuzz above her upper lip. The smell of lunch on her breath. The unpressed, shapeless white chinos she was wearing for the second consecutive day. The neglected tangle of hair. He could not want a woman who so clearly did not want herself.

“Go away,” he said, and because he meant it she did.

“The problem is anxiety and how to reduce it without recourse to alcohol or drugs. The life problems that cause it won’t simply go away.”

This he wrote as a statement of fact that night before entering dreamland.

Luke and he were in a race up the facing of the family's building. Higher and higher they swung through ornamental loops. When Luther passed him, Luke displayed a fearsome grin.

In the morning he asked Sarah for an interpretation, as the pharaoh went to Joseph in days of old. And Sarah, like Joseph, delivered. She suggested that Luther was trying to anticipate Luke's behavior.

"Yes, of course," Luther replied.

But he did not go to her with the second feature film of the night, in which he was in bed with a voluptuous but immature dark-haired girl and in danger of discovery by her father, who lurked nearby. Luther had no need for Sarah's revilement of him to commence on this February morning.

The arctic weather continued, making a home in his bones. As he walked the streets he would look up at the residential buildings of the city, imagining the hiss of radiators and the warmth they spread through one room after another. What he would not give for the normalcy and order an apartment with steam heat would provide. The shelter he had provided for Sarah was no shelter at all. They were practically exposed to the elements. But then he thought, "There are heaters for positioning below as well as for above," the blowers suspended from the ceiling of the loft having come into his mind. "I will find what I am looking for. I will take the action that I can."

At the department store of quality, B. Altman, he found two slender electric heaters whose coils were promised to deliver radiant heat. Now he and Sarah could have

a ground game to repel the vicious cold. No more would they have to rely on the fruitless air attack of the ceiling heaters. One would go to her for her studio so she could know warmth as she stood by her easel. The other would go to Luther's studio so he could thaw and free up the words frozen within him. Oh happy day. Oh happy, happy day.

But the anxiety awaited him the next morning, and attacked even more viciously than before. Like a boiler about to burst was he, and so, at the lunch hour he once again sought out the quality refuge of B. Altman in the hope that pacing its wood floors would bring the peace that he was seeking. But the wood floors were of no avail. The drumbeat only worsened.

“Dear God, do not let me go crazy. Do not let me explode, never to be put together again.” Over and over again did he repeat this ambulatory prayer. Though swarms of noonday shoppers were around him, he was alone with a god he did not know but was now calling on because he had come to a fork in the road—he could turn to alcohol or he could turn to prayer.

And God vanquished the demon within, dissolving the drumbeat. Not in that instant, but in a while. And Luther could only say, what is this, remembering a quote he had read by a man from the genius sphere many years before that anxiety is in direct proportion to one's separation from God.

*Now, Celeste, the arrival of the new kid in town had been delayed so she could tend to some affairs. But the day did come, and if it was not on the level of a presidential inauguration, her arrival was nevertheless that of American royalty. The candidates I had*

*observed file past my desk in previous weeks were fairly ordinary in appearance. I must have been away from my post when Philomena Swangner arrived, but she was enough for Isadora to break out in song.*

*“Tall and tan and young and lovely... Well, I don't know about the tan part, but the rest applies.” Clearly had the laughing thing been checked in Isadora when it came to Philomena Swangner but not when it came to me, as she had another song she broke into before I could respond. “I've got you under my spell. I've got you deep in the heart of me...” and this time her laugh storm did commence, now that she had read my face and my being.*

*Rafta arranged for a departmental lunch that day, so that we might get to know Philomena and she might get to know us. We went to the Edwardian, a restaurant on Park Avenue, where it happened I was seated next to our newest member. A bottle of champagne had been ordered in celebration of Philomena's arrival, but when Rafta proposed a toast, Philomena leaned toward me. “I can't drink. I'm an alcoholic,” she whispered.*

*“Then don't,” I said quietly. “No one will notice.”*

*The impact of her confession was great. A high echelon woman, inaccessible to me by virtue of her educational status and position in the world, had come to the door and let me in.*

*Celeste, I waited for Philomena at the end of the day, so I might have a private moment with her. She had given me something and now it was for me to give her*



*something in return so she would know we were existing together on the plane of equality.*

*Doors do not open all the time.*

*As it happened, we were the last to leave. In a state of terror, I approached her office, the one I had thought, some months before, I would be occupying. She sat in profile to me, her back straight as her fingers raced over the keyboard of the red Selectric II. Seeing her so focused, my doubts increased. What did I think I was doing, intruding on this woman who was, in spite of her panicked confession, still a stranger to me and clearly my better. Before I could leave she turned, as if she had been aware of my presence all along and was only keeping me on hold so she could complete a piece of work.*

*Her tone was no friendlier than her expression. Perhaps she had anticipated my arrival and now needed to reestablish the proper boundary between us.*

*“Did you want something?” she asked.*

*Celeste, if ever the time was right for a beating, it is now. Why? you ask. Because I betrayed you. That is why. When love is love, there must be no other, but here there was. The love bug had bitten, and once more I was in flames. Once more I had taken some new infection to the eye.*

*“I came to see if you’re all right.”*

*“Why wouldn’t I be?”*

*“Yes, I see your point.”*

*“Well?”*

*“Well, I will be going.”*

*“Did I tell you to go?”*

*I did not rise up on her, Celeste. I did not ask if she had command of the heavens as well as the earth. I merely said no.*

*“There is something you wanted to tell me. Out with it,” she said.*

*“I only wanted to say that I identified with you.”*

*“Identified how?”*

*“I have the same problem.”*

*“Same problem? Speak, man.”*

*“I too am alcoholic. I too can’t drink.”*

*“Somehow, that is not news to me.”*

*“I haven’t been drinking at all for a while. That’s because I go to the Rooms of Recovery.”*

*“Liars. They’re all liars. They all drink.”*

*The accusation came strong from her mouth. I did not challenge it. I did not ask on what basis she was casting such a judgment. Her opposition to the truth was too fierce. And so I merely said, “Well, I’m going to keep going. I know a lifeline when I see one.”*

*“Learn to swim, Buddy. Learn to swim.”*

*“I see,” I said. Do not think I was burned by her contrarian fire, Celeste.*

*“Don’t condescend to me. This conversation is over.”*

*And so it was, Celeste, for the night.*

The next morning was not good. It was as if he sat naked, his emaciation fully revealed, at his empty desk while Rafta and Philomena Swangner and Bruce Bill and even Isadora Drayton were into full action. He told himself the seconds and the minutes and the hours would take him to better things, but some minutes before noon he beat a retreat from the office and headed home, where he set about rearranging his face. Anxiety drove him to his knees, and he found himself asking God to help him, to just help him, so he wouldn't have to be a hanging string in a strong wind anymore.

Then he got to his feet and called Dr. Rosner, who spoke roughly to him, saying, "You must understand that the anger you ascribe to women is a projection of your anger at them."

To the shame corner was Luther driven, that Dr. Rosner should have to explain such basic things to him. But then he came back strong in his mind with a slogan he had heard in the Rooms of Recovery—"Feelings are not facts." And then he dropped another bomb on his anxiety. "This too shall pass."

His mind adjusted, he returned to Cromartie Wonders and rode the waves of the seconds and minutes that passed, making note of the bits of Scotch tape here and there on his desk as a reminder that he was not alone.

Now Philomena Swangner was a woman of many parts. She was not restricted to her scolding nature anymore than she was to her confessional one. She came to him with olive branch in hand and said they were going to lunch and that it was her executive

decision that the lunch be on her expense account. And so was Luther in dreamland in his waking state that he should be sitting across a table for two from her.

“Your hair, like your nature, is diverse,” Luther said.

“Are we speaking English?” Philomena replied.

“Trying,” Luther said.

“Well, do a better job.”

What he had meant, but would not now say, was that she had three ways, to date, of wearing her hair: long and falling down to the small of her back; tied in a bun, as dancers often did; and braided in the complicated pattern that only the intelligent can manage and *Mother, it was you, you, from whom I learned to feel worthless in regard to my intelligence, to concede the high echelon of the fine mind to others.*

“I will have a glass of white wine to start with,” Philomena Swangner said to the waiter, causing Luther to go on high alert, as he had been hearing things in RoR such as it was the first drink that got an alcoholic drunk, not the second or third, and about the built-in forgetter.

“ODAP,” Luther blurted, because he could not keep the acronym to himself when the waiter arrived with a sweating glass of white wine for Philomena.

“Is this a foreign language?” Philomena asked.

“Of a kind,” Luther said.

“What was it that you said?”

“Nothing that would interest you but which might inflame you.”

“Out with it.”

“ODAP. Old devilish alcoholic personality.”

“Go on.”

“It sits on your shoulder whispering to you that you are not an alcoholic and that the next time you drink you won’t get drunk.”

“Well, here’s something you’re hearing from me. Salud,” Philomena said, and so he felt obliged to raise his glass of water to complete the toast.

“I’m concerned for you,” Luther said.

Philomena gave herself horns and leered before resuming the façade of normalcy. “I asked you to lunch so we can be friends and so I can lift you from your downtrodden ways.”

“Roger that. Mission possible for the first but impossible for the second.”

“Why so?”

“Because I am wedded to my downtrodden ways.”

“Rafta tells me that you do very good work, that you are very organized.”

“I am doing my best,” Luther said.

“I don’t believe intelligence can be measured. We are all intelligent in our own special way.”

“Yes,” Luther said, his response bordering on a question.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Achievement is one measure of intelligence. That fellow Einstein, for example.”

Before she could respond, he went on. “Where do you live?”

“In Poughkeepsie.”

“You have your own house?”

“No, I have an apartment in the city, not far from the train station, a city in which the arguments against insurrection are wearing thin.”

“I wonder what that means,” Luther said.

“What it means is that the minorities are restive and seeking to be heard.”

“Are you a revolutionary?”

“I am on the side of all oppressed people, including you.”

“That is comforting.”

“You are very different when you drink. I am that way, too. So people tell me.”

“I get very friendly.”

“Is that what you are being? I cannot tell.”

She reached across the table and took his hand in hers. A cold hand, in which he could feel every bone.

Philomena called to the waiter. “Bring him a glass of wine. He too wants to get friendly.”

“Would you care for the friendly wine that she is drinking, sir?”

“Maybe red instead of white, as red grounds me in the reality of the color of my blood.”

“Very good, sir.”

The smell of the red wine the waiter fetched put Luther immediately in his power. All that he had heard in RoR seemed to have been forgotten.

“You have asked me where I live and I have told you, but you must swear yourself to secrecy about the why of where I live, a two-hour train ride from Manhattan, which I will also tell you, is where I love as well as live. Because if that love is to be ongoing...”

“If it is to be eight days a week, as the Beatles sing.”

“Do not interrupt me. But yes, I must have proximity to my true love . He must be able to access me in his hour of need, as he is married to a woman he can no longer abide but who is also the mother of his two children. I am his future, his only hope, this man who is a powerhouse in the publishing world. Rafta must not know of my liaison with him if my life is not to be in peril.”

“I understand fear. False evidence appearing real.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“Someday soon we will be heading to California for a publishing operation he has been hired to oversee. But that will be then and this must be now. Is that clear?”

“Yes. California. I am still going there myself, not to wear flowers in my hair but to live on Tall Tommy’s farm.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tall Tommy. A surrogate father from my childhood. He left his avocado farm to come East and do secret work for the government. But he turned out to be an emissary from the land of delusion. It was very sad to come to the realization that he was lying to make himself important in my eyes and his own.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because he promised to take me with him to his farm. And Luke, my older brother, too.”

“I am beginning to think you will say anything. We need to go.”

On the way back she put her hand in his again, if only briefly. “As I was saying, sometimes I get very friendly.”

*But women can change, Celeste. They can change. Their surface garments can be shed to reveal the darker, tougher raiment beneath. This we must continually keep in the light of our understanding.*

He did not drink that night. The key had been inserted and turned, but the engine did not roar to life. Sarah being out for the evening, he smoked two joints and danced to Fleetwood Mac so he could go higher and preserve the ecstasy he had known with Philomena.

“Love of my life, I will tell you something very sad,” his mother said to him in dreamland that same night, but then made him wait until daylight and his awakening for her to complete the communication over the telephone.

“Do you know what the foolish boy has done? Do you know what ails him that he falls down in the snow, just as my father did back on the farm in Sweden? Am I to patrol the roads of Queens to ensure that the rushing trucks do not annihilate him where he lies



passed out in his own vomit? Do you know it was only by a miracle that a passerby dragged him from the path of the vehicle? Will you not go to him, my son?"

"Go to him where?"

"I have written it down. It is Elmhurst General Hospital, in Queens. They have found his bottles and smashed them against the rocks. Now run on your long legs. Run, my son."

Luther was faithful in fulfilling his mother's request, traveling on a train that broke from the dark into the light of day onto a trestle high over a rail yard. On the other side stood the Silvercup factory, and he remembered the smell of baking bread permeating the subway on those mornings he traveled to Queens College in the time of Jane Thayer only slowly dying to him.

Luther arrived at the hospital with the gift of cigarettes, as his brother had requested.

"Hey, Bill. Hey, Jim. You guys want a smoke? Come over here," Luke motioned to two robed men in slippers, the same attire Luke wore, and they came to him, as did others who had heard, and to all of them Luke gave the smokes that he had promised to the two of them. Unshaven men of varying ages with bleary eyes and a few women as well.

"You won't have any for yourself at this rate," Luther said, after the others drifted away.

"Stop with the worrying. These babies are built to last. That's why they're called prison weeds. Did you know that?"

“No.”

“Do you even know why they’re called prison weeds?”

“I don’t.”

“Do you want to know why?”

“Sure.”

“Because they are slow-burning. That’s important to prisoners. You know what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“All the social workers here love me. They say I’m the one. They say I can beat this alcoholism thing because of my insight. They see that I know. You know what I’m saying?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What’s that mean, you’re not sure?”

They were in an auditorium, with a stage and a big curtain and rows of seats between which the patients wandered, like sheep in a cluttered pasture.

“I mean, we’re not supposed to know too much. We’re not supposed to rely on self-knowledge, not where drinking is concerned.”

“I know everything. I’m king of the ward. Do you hear me?”

“Sure. I hear you,” Luther said, and soon headed for the door.

It was not right to have a brother like that, so puffed up and in denial about the illness he was facing, Luther thought. He left the facility with a great fear for his brother.

A shot while later he stood on the concourse at Grand Central Station staring at the chattering arrivals and departures boards and breathing in the musty railroad smell that promised so much and recalled the brightness of America as it manifested in Cary Grant and Eve Marie Sainte in *North by Northwest*.

*Celeste, Luke and I took a train from that station in the long ago, not all the way to Chicago, as did Cary Grant and Eve Marie Sainte. We dragged old suitcases the color of oatmeal. Our mother had come on board with us, but not to stay. She wanted us to be brave about the adventure we would be having in the fresh country air at the camp of the Christ Jesus that the train would take us to as an escape from the hot city streets. But when she left did the cold pain of separation start and to that pain I remained faithful for all those summer days so that I could be with her and she could be with me even though she wasn't.*

But it was not enough to stand by the information booth and feed off the travel vibe of the explorers all around him. He needed an exploration of his own and now Philomena Swangner was calling to him as strongly as Celeste had called to him when he came upon her number in the loft the year before. Once again the bleakness of a Saturday night at the loft was all he had to look forward to. But had the chasm between him and Philomena been bridged or would he plunge to his death when he stepped forward? And what if he didn't die and she simply rejected him? Would he then have to endure the laughing, scornful thing she would put on him for his audacity in thinking he could climb aboard a high echelon woman of her particular distinction? Suppose sober she was as chaste as she was exploratory when drinking?

*Celeste, I understand that the world fully expects the writer to embrace the power of invention and forego any fidelity to the truth, or actual experience, in order to reach a higher truth through the fictional process. Be a man for once, I hear the world saying. Let go of the training wheels and allow your characters to lead you. Finally, finally cede control to them. Have him race up the river and eat her panties off her body and enter her every orifice. Or have him show up at her apartment only to find the door open and her lying dead and a neighbor scream, "Murderer, murderer" and then have him flee with the aid of a beautiful Vassar student. But to all those who clamor for such relief from the mundane, I say simply this: "Order must prevail. It must. White line must continue. On the ground must we stay and not indulge in flights of fancy."*

*"You want things fast." In this manner did Luke speak to me in the long ago, Celeste, and his observation was accurate. How welcome, then, was the restraint I managed to show in Grand Central Terminal that Saturday night after visiting with Luke in the detox ward. Using my investigative power I had swung into action and gotten Philomena's number from directory assistance, but the stress was too much and after two rings I hung up and fled for home. Why do I cast this as a victory? Because Philomena was all business when she showed up for work on Monday in a smart new dress, that is why, and some of her business she directed to me.*

*"I'm leaving this in your capable hands," she said, of the set of proofs she placed on my desk, and while mockery and disdain often tinge such words, that didn't appear to be the case on this day.*

That afternoon Luther returned the pages to Philomena, having given them my best attention. Within an hour she was back at his desk, onto which she dropped the proofs.

“Are you feeling OK today? Everything hunky dory?” Philomena inquired.

Luther had been staring at the proofs, and the numerous tags attached to them. He now looked up. “I believe so. Why do you ask?” He couldn’t keep the dismay out of his voice.

“Because I’m terribly disappointed. You missed one thing after another. I want you to review the errors.”

In such a manner did she put the clobber on him.

“I see,” he said.

“You will need to do better.”

She mercifully left before he could answer.

*What can I say, Celeste? She was flexing her power. By land and sea and air did she deliver her barrage. But a man is not a man who cannot take a hit. A man must rebound. He must go to his interior spaces and, having found a resting place, whisper “I am not a body. I am free. I am as God created me,” for the merit of the sun is that it seals in our memory awareness of not only light but warmth and the promise of its recurring return.*

*Let it be entered into the record that this was the time, in RoR, of the huggy-kissy brigades, so named because they were made up of women free with their hugs and sisterly kisses. They were simply carrying through on the message on a plaque hanging*

*above the fireplace in one such room that read, "Let us love you until you can love yourself." And yet it was attention of a kind I could inwardly barely tolerate, as it brought home to me the domination by women I had experienced back to the beginnings of my time on this earth. However, the silent resistance I put up against these roaming women of the rooms I could not quite summon in regard to Philomena Swangner, my flame-throwing love goddess. She had beaten me to the ground with sticks and stones and harsher implements of destruction, but bruised and battered as I was, I could not swear I would not again entreat her tender mercies. Even so does the message of the plaque hold true: we must find a way to love ourselves, Celeste, to be a parent to ourselves, to say when troubled waters are rising, "Luther, would you care for a cup of tea?" and to respond, "Yes, I really, really would."*

*Eugenie Grandet*, by Balzac, in a hardbound volume; *Cheri*, by Colette; *Railroads in Twentieth Century America*, by somebody. All bought at the Strand so he would be up on what he needed to know.

Bracken and gorse. That too he needed to know.

And a dresser with burls.

The city muffled by the fallen snow. East to west he walked through the tangle of West Village streets, old buildings taking him back to a time before his time. The only sound that of chains around the thick tires of the trucks with plows. And there it was, around the bend, Hudson Street, and St. Luke's Episcopal school, and the divinity he could find in a crowded room that smelled of coffee on a Monday night where the word

was One Day at a Time, First Things First, This Too Shall Pass. Someone saying, “By the yard it’s hard. By the inch it’s a cinch.”

And Sarah, where was she? Was she still at Gimbel’s East? Was she still in daylight trying to find herself? Yes, she was, among the young and attitudinizing black women from Harlem, cracking hard on their gum and cracking hard on cracker Sarah. Some white woman coming to take their jobs but no way they were going to take a white woman’s job. No softness in their hearts for her whiteness. The more she came to them in her confusion, the harder came their cracks. “Why you coming to me with that? You supposed to know, so I got to ax you, why you here if you *don’t know?*”

And Peter? Where was he? Was he still reconnoitering the outer spaces, that he might tie objectivity to a sticking post? Yes, you can count on him to lift his family from the slough of despond with outings to the sights of the city and its environs, even daring to drive along Mosholu Parkway. Hornbills in the aviary, tigers, yaks, strutting peacocks, all on an unseasonably warm winter day, and an Egyptian cobra that rose, pharaoh-like, to intimidate them with its gaze. Attendance was sparse, the sprawling grounds desolate. Did Peter not know “Louie, Louie”? Did he not know “Sally Go Round the Roses”? Did he not know the mystery sound of violence sending disassociated Puerto Rican boys to do their stabbing thing on them? Was he illiterate in the language of fear written large on Luther’s face?

Then back to the womb of a family not his own, Peter with the notion that Luther and Sarah should buy an apartment in the same building. In that way everyone in proximity to each other. The Van Dines had divested in order to invest, the profit from the

sale of the grand apartment swelling their stock portfolio. But what world did Peter Van Dine live in that he could not see their own, that his daughter made little more than the minimum wage as a sales clerk at Gimbel's East and that his son-in-law earned ten thousand dollars a year?

*The Marathon Man* was playing on TV, Claire saying of the hero, Dustin Hoffman, "He can knock on my door any time." Because Dustin Hoffman, as Thomas "Babe" Levy, has a high board score pedigree, being a Columbia University graduate student in history, and the necessities in his face and body as well as his mind. Claire's remark caused a visual shudder in Sarah, as if she too had love on her mind when she stared at the Babe on the screen and maybe Dustin Hoffman was too much in the image of her genius love Lane not to feel pain.

Worthy of note, to Luther at least, were the Puerto Rican toughs, so unrelenting in their toughness, occupying the New York City stoop across from the building where Babe lived, saying to him and all the world, "What's yours is mines so give it up 'cause we ain't got no play in us when it come to you." Luther did not want his mind to be this way but it was, going back to Salvatore "Cape Man" Negron and then the Puerto Rican kids who took his Raleigh three-speed up near Grant's Tomb and the others who flashed knives and ice picks to signify that they weren't playing so he would give it up, just give it up. In Manhattan, as in the Bronx, were the young Puerto Rican men ready to do their stabbing thing, as they had been in the long ago.



One day at a time, Luther said, and then said it again and again and again, because he had heard the slogan in RoR and now he was rolling it out against the pounding fear that even occupied his dreamland, a nuclear holocaust triggered by the Third World War having forced him to retreat to Vermont.

His mother was not far away, having taken full control of Sorrow Central.

“It is the stress of the world that is driving him down. That is what I think,” she said, of Luke.

Think. It rhymes with drink.

The would-be murderer was back. Sarah heard him as well shaking the door to the loft.

The attempted intrusion happened just after Luther lit up. He didn't dare approach “White Line Continue” unless he was under the influence. A definite dilemma. Give up writing or risk murder.

Some days he wore his goodness hat, as when he placed a down payment on a fluorescent lamp for Sarah to use in her studio. He wanted to make things right for her by giving her the tools she needed for success. But the money wasn't there to pay in full. Later in the month there would be an insurance check, which would provide the funds to complete the payment. And so his love offering would have to be postponed. But how was he to wait to reveal his goodness and deal with the anxiety that something might go wrong? And then he remembered that once upon a time he had wanted to make things right for his

mother. His heart bursting with goodness that Christmas season he and Luke bought her plastic dinnerware at Macy's with money he had earned making deliveries in the snow for the neighborhood florist.

*Celeste, the goodness thing lives. It lives. And there was that hymn. "He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today. He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way..." Did you ever sing it? Would you like to do so now?*

A night at the opera. *The Magic Flute*. Tamino. Papageno. A storyline he did not quite understand. More largesse from the Van Dines. Showering him and Sarah with *their* goodness, wishing love to prevail as they neared the end.

Cromartie Wonders had a man in the manly mold to handle its printing. His name was John de la Questo and his title was production manager. He kept his wiry black hair short so he could reveal his face in its fullness. Sometimes he would show boldness in his step, entering the premises with a rolled up set of proofs, and sometimes he would arrive with a look of uncertainty abounding, like a child awaiting a scolding or worse, being a young man not of one mind about himself. And while Rafta Blackning was not of one mind about John de la Questo either, she seemed to be moving in a negative direction, and one afternoon called on Luther to offer his assessment of him. Luther had gauged the direction of Rafta thoughts about John de la Questo because his mere presence could cause thickness in her body and face, like that of a puff adder on the verge of a venomous

strike. Were she a woman guided by delusion rather than shrewd pragmatism, Luther might have said she was delicate Blanche to bruiser Stanley.

“I’m not sure. He eats his lunch and goes to the movies, I am sure. The thing to remember about the Italians is that they have no play in them either. What I mean is that they had the reputation, when I was growing up here in New York City, as the only ones who could stand up to the Puerto Ricans and the blacks in gang warfare. And they were known to dress really sharply, like Lenny from Long Beach, a friend from my teenage years. Have you seen *The Godfather?*”

“I am not seeking a history of the gangs of New York City. Could you bring your comments closer to our workplace?”

“If there is John de la Questo, there is also Salvatore de la Questo, his uncle. I see him as not only the head of production for Pilgore as a whole but a capo de capo tutti in the world at large.” Salvatore de la Questo wore rings on different fingers and had the girth of Luciano Pavarotti and wore the finest of silk suits.

“I know perfectly well who Salvatore de la Questo is,” Rafta said. “Is there nothing more that you can tell me about his nephew?”

“Only that he is ordinary, like me,” Luther said.

“That is what I need to hear. Thank you,” Rafta said.

*Now, Celeste, let it be entered into the record of life that Midge Haller, on those occasions when we chanced to meet, would offer not so much as a smile or a hello. She was in full rebuffing mode. No longer did I exist for her after she dropped me into this*

*lower echelon world of juvenile books. And yet, we must remember that all rejection drives us more desperately into the arms of God. Such is the ultimate purpose of the forearm blow. We must spiral up from the gulch of the dinky dimensioned and see existence with the glory eyes of God.*

Since January he had been attending regularly the RoR meetings and was beginning to feel their healing effect. Whatever his character deficiencies, he had an illness that he could arrest one day at a time. He would never evangelize about the program, but he could try to be a quiet and yet firm proponent with those he loved, like his brother.

Though he had little to do, the job overwhelmed him. He talked about his work life incessantly with Sarah. As he lay in bed, he would try to block out such thoughts with baseball statistics. Rafta was the big problem. Having to read her for her anger, as he would years before his father. But it was more than Rafta. He had been moved out of the world of words into the world of things—offset printing and four-color process printing and impositions and moiré effects and halftones and ems and quoins. Children's books meant a return to a childhood in which he had been the class cutup who tossed away those summer reading lists mimeographed in blue ink. He was a fraud, not even knowing who Eeyore was, and they were sure to find out.

He woke early so he could have his extra cup of coffee and extra smokes and half hour of ponder and digest time reading hideous *Pocket Pal*—plate-making, binding, paper, all the yummy yum things to the palates of the likes of John de la Questo and

Salvatore de la Questo—because without mastery there was only the drumbeat of anxiety, even if production was not where he lived.

That morning he stopped at a store window on East Thirty-third Street. A light brown Smith-Corona Coronamatic electric typewriter was on display and it made him dizzy to look at the machine. Soon he heard himself make small and subtle chomping sounds, five seconds apart, to audibly signify his delight in the wonder he was seeing. Never mind the silver and red of the Santa Fe or the sterling corporate gray plus the red decal of the New York Central diesels. Oh did his heart soar at the sight of his one true love. All around him was the rush hour crowd pouring from the subway and surging through the streets to begin their office day, causing Luther to murmur, under his breath, “I am dilly dallying. I am shilly shallying. But I am only doing what love compels me to do, for my life must not be about emptiness but the greatness I myself have foretold. It must be a match for the great song *Rihanna*.”

But as always, he began to fret. Smith-Corona. Did the company have staying power, or was his love too late and was it being directed to a dying endeavor? And if it did sink into oblivion, where would he be able to find Coronamatic cartridges and how would he replace broken parts? Would it fall into obsolescence like so many other products? No, no, he needed a faithful companion, one that would be with him throughout the remainder of his life, one that would walk with him and talk with him, so to speak. Let me come in at the beginning, not the end. These words he spoke as he turned onto Madison Avenue with all the other rushing ones.

“You are late,” Rafta said, passing his desk even as he was arriving.

“Enemies of the state must be dealt with quickly and effectively,” he replied.

“Would you care to tell me what you mean by that?”

“It is just morning effluvia, the excess that must be burned off so the truth can advance.”

“Well, I shall eagerly await the end of the one and the beginning of the other.” In spite of herself, Rafta did not smite him, but she did treat him to some trademark swelling of her cheeks so that he would remember who she was.

Isadora happened by. “She’s something. Not enough gamahuching going on in her life.”

“Where did you ever hear a word like that?”

“The mostly women’s college I attended, maybe? Are you a gamahucher? Oh, that’s right. You’re married. Of course you are.”

“If you say so.” *The Pearl*, bought at the corner convenience store with the shiny apples next to the Harvard Coop on his solitary wanderings, while Sarah committed herself to her path of excellence in front of the easel back at her apartment. Much gamahuching going on in that Victorian anthology. His prurience born in part of idleness.

“Actually, you don’t look very much like a married man.”

“A married man has a look?”

“They’re settled, in a way you aren’t.”

“You don’t miss a thing.”

“How come you don’t love me?”

“Did I say I didn’t?”

“You’re full of quiet rancor. A smiling hater.”

“And you?”

“A rich sack of flesh with too much security to make any progress in the world.”

“This morning I saw a woman in the Bleecker Street subway station happily reading a letter. Next to her I saw a crazy man talking out loud to himself. The city is divided into the haves and have nots.”

“Did you write her the letter?”

“Stop.”

“Do you wish you had written her the letter?”

“Double stop.”

“Do you not dream of making a woman you love happy? I’m not talking about your wife, you understand.”

“I don’t understand anything about you, except that like the wind you go in whatever direction you choose to go.”

“When are you going to join me?” Isadora laughed, uncontrollably.

“Not any time soon, if I know what is good for me.”

“Complete abandon awaits in an empty office.”

“What kind of engine drives you that you would perpetrate an anschluss?”

“Is that the word to use with a Jew?”

“Drayton not so very Jewish.”

“I will tell you who I am. I am a child living in a city owned by my father. I exist as one of his possessions, and among the least valuable. Do you know what I dream?”

“I have a feeling you are going to tell me.”

“I dream of sleeping where he cannot find me and I can float above his mental forays. The work is endless, of course. Each night I must find a new location. To be honest, it is an adventure. One night I am on Columbus and Seventy-seventh, the next on Park Avenue and Ninety-second. Do you know how delicious it is to sleep safe from my pursuer?”

“I was born looking up.”

“What?”

“I was born with aspirations for elsewhere as well.”

“Explain.”

“My brother and I. It was a game we played when we were children, imagining ourselves in a house of order instead of the chaos in which we lived.”

“Should I set this to violins? Are you going maudlin on me?”

“You have a deep well of contempt on which to draw.”

“You summon it, mister, with your fidelity to pain.”

“Our conversations never go anywhere.”

“*You* never go anywhere.”

“One truth bomb after another.”

“You’re not obliterated. You’re still sitting there, like the lump you are.”

“Maybe they’re not as true as you would have them be.”

“True to the mark they are. We’ve got your number.”

“Are you trying to augment your torment of me with plurality?”



“Plain English, my friend. Plain English. Language is your last and hopeless defense against your ordinariness.”

“What do you want of me?”

“I want your plainness to exceed the bounds of your imagination. I want you living in a South Bronx tenement until you die.”

*Celeste, once more must I seek refuge in you, since none of the preceding has a basis in reality. But we must soldier on. We must work with what we have.*

There was a man in the meeting room. His name was Reginald, and he had royalty in his face as well as his name and manner, though he identified himself as a pissy, shitty drunk in Luther’s first go-round in RoR. And there was a woman in the meeting room, Jelly Doughnut Phyllis, whom Luther also remembered from that earlier time. Once again she affirmed the importance of jelly doughnuts to her sobriety, citing numerous instances when the drink urge was on her and one savage bite into a powdery bun chased it away.

“And if jelly doughnuts are not your thing, get with the Tootsie Rolls or Mars Bars or a Snickers, and chase temptation away.”

Reginald spoke up. He said that sobriety must be unconditional and held separate from the ups and downs of life. He said that without meetings the voice that whispers it will be different the next time and it is OK to take the first drink will only grow louder and more seductive. He called that voice ODAP, Old Devilish Alcoholic Personality.

There was agitation in the room. Banger was no more. A Bowery flophouse guy, he had scars on his face from being jabbed in street fights with broken wine bottles. For

months he had been offering high-octane messaging on the beginners' panel, but now he was missing. Now he was deceased, having zoomed his used car off a West Side pier with him in it.

Here is what Banger said in this very same room that his words might stay on the face of the earth:

“They’ll try to get you to take their action but you just walk on by. They try to nudge you with their vehicle while you have the light and are in the crosswalk because that is just their hostile nature, but you don’t take that action they are calling you to by bringing your fist down on the hood and pulling them right through the window and giving them a beating that will make them one with the road you have pounded them into. You don’t do that. You just walk on.”

Members of the group recalled Banger’s words. They thanked him for his passion. They understood they were only a drink away from disaster. The boat steadied.

After the meeting Luther’s mother sang to him. She sang “And he walks with me and he talks with me” and all the rest of that hymn, and Luther walked a pattern along the streets of New York City so that nothing, neither pedestrians nor traffic, should come between him and the hymn because it was for him to treasure it in the solitude of his mind.

Then there was more death. Bruce Bill was killed. Isadora Drayton was destroyed. Rafta Blackning stood over their deceased bodies with her smoking gun.

“I have done what I needed to do. I have purged them from the premises. I have brought the mighty low and sank her who had no lift within her to even lower depths. I have done so for one reason and one reason only, as it is the job of a boss to link an employee to his and her fate, though you will ascribe other motives, imputing to me a baseness that does not apply. In any case, you I have spared. You have a native goodness I can shape to my own purpose and are directionless so far as publishing and your own possibilities go. Because you have no real ambition in this world, you are no real threat to me.”

“But what will I do?”

“You will do my bidding. I will be your command and control center.”

Bruce Bill had a manliness quotient that was not to be underestimated and so affirmed his fraternal tie with Luther, saying, “”This may not be the ideal place for you, stuck between two career women.”

“And you, will you survive your fate?” Luther asked, as he was fearful for Bruce Bill.

“I have one word for you, if you will accept all three plus the ampersand as a unit.”

“Give it to me.”

“Farrar Straus & Giroux.”

“That can only mean your quality has been ascertained.”

“I can relate to that.”

“I like the way that sounds.”

“What sounds?”

“I can go for that.”

“Take care.”

“That too.”

There was another man in RoR. He walked alone even in a crowd and wore a ten-gallon hat and clad his feet with cowboy boots. And yet his face, red and blistered from turmoil beneath his skin, showed him to be Bronx Irish Catholic in his origin.

“My name is South Wind and I am an alcoholic, and I’m here to tell you that if you want to stay sober, you have to get in touch with your drinking story.” So South Wind said, sitting at the back of the room and turning heads toward him not only with what he said but with the sound of his raspy voice, as full of weariness as it was of knowledge. He had been a pill head and a guzzler of terpin hydrate and he had done the heroin nod on the streets of New York City. Coat Rack and Scarecrow and Corkscrew and Sidewinder and Pretzel Man and Leaning Tower of Good Shit he had been called, for his ability to hold a stationary position. But before all the drug goodies had come the alcohol, the can of Bud or the innocent glass of wine.

Now Luther went to South Wind and said, “Will you be my mentor? Will you give me the direction I fear I am lacking?”

South Wind handed Luther his number on a scrap of paper. “Don’t be calling me after you drink. Call me before you pick it up. And if you’ve got ears to hear, then get the jelly doughnuts that the Jelly Doughnut woman told you to get. And if you don’t get the

jelly doughnuts, get a Mars Bars or Snickers Bar. You understand what I'm saying? Because I saw you in that meeting where she was holding forth."

"Got it," Luther said.

"And one thing more. Don't be feeling any need to be running your mouth in these meetings. Nothing you say in the rooms will keep you sober. It's your actions that will keep you sober. You got that?"

"Got it," Luther repeated, even though he didn't.

"Now get away from me. Your face is bringing me down."

"OK," Luther said, and went away from South Wind.

The thing was that South Wind had a face too, and while it didn't exactly bring Luther down, it did inflict torment on him, and that was so even when Luther was not right there in South Wind's physical presence. He quickly began to judge him. South Wind did not have a Harvard degree, like Dr. Rosner. He did not appear to have anything but his sobriety and his hat and boots and strange name.

South Wind did not slay Luther for terminating him as his mentor. He just said, "I didn't want you in the first place. Now get away from me, as I told you the last time," and in so saying dissolved the torment bond.

*There were women, too, Celeste, and one illuminated the direction of my life with what she had to say. She was of the people who need people kind and not beyond human reach. Her name was Mary Beth and she wore her blond hair like a wispy cloud over her pale face. She was sober an eternity, nine years, from where I stood and had in her life a man*

*who said he wanted to love her forever and she wore an engagement ring as proof of his devotion. But you and I both know that devotion rhymes with commotion. The engagement ring she wore with joy and pride and wonder could not save her from the factions of discord within him, the ceaseless waves of ambivalence that broke over him. And so he told Mary Beth that he would be going away from her and that they must not see each other again but that the ring was hers to keep. She flung not herself but the ring out the window and ran to the liquor store and bought a quart of vodka with no thought to the consequences it might bring as she drained the bottle. All this she shared at the meeting of the recovering people after raising her hand and saying she had one day back and didn't know if she would make it to two because the call of the drink was so loud and strong in her mind and she could feel its pull in every cell of her being. And in fact I did not see her again, and so the possibility is there that the fire that sought to ravage her from this earth did indeed do so, but what I did see once again was the power of clobber. And yes, Celeste, this time clobber had been administered by a man, not a woman, it is true, but clobber is clobber any way you look at it. And right then and there the words of Reginald, the old-timer, I heard in my mind: Sobriety must be unconditional, whatever circumstances life might present us with. And before I left that meeting, a man said it a different way: if your ass turns to gold, you take it to a meeting and if your ass falls off, you take it to a meeting.*

There was another and he went by the name of Solitaire. To accentuate his aloneness he led the meeting suspended above the floor by hooks secured to the ceiling of the church

basement. “I am a rock” were his first and last words as group members craned their necks to take him in.

“Walk like a man. Talk like a man.” That was Dr. Rosner’s theme that week, communicated not like the Four Seasons but in his whispered way.

“You need to understand the importance of making your way in the world. No one else can do that for you,” Dr. Rosner said.

“I believe I get your drift, but easy for you to say, with your Harvard degree.”

“At some point you will have to surrender that excuse.”

“I am disappointed. That is all. The covers have been stripped from me and my bones are showing and my teeth are bad and I have no place to hide.”

“The time for hiding is over. As we get older, people stop looking for us.”

“I find this very painful.”

“What is ‘this’?”

“This life of mediocrity.”

“Welcome to the human race.”

*Now Celeste, this longing for human connection does not stop when we put the plug in the jug, as the saying goes. People who need people—yes, the song has high mush content—but it expresses a fundamental truth that we are all at the water’s edge seeking until we find and, for some of us, the search unfortunately continues even thereafter. We must be seen. We must be recognized. The desolated city overgrown with weeds is not for*

*us. I am getting carried away when all I mean to say is that there came a time at the Saturday night RoR meeting that I was overcome with a feeling of loneliness akin to the epiphany I had as a hackie that my passengers were seeing me only in that capacity, if they saw me at all. At the break the group members moved past me as if I were a ghost and an adoration circle of men who wore their jeans tight formed around a plump woman celebrating her second anniversary in sobriety. For some reason they had made her their queen. For the first time it occurred to me that the meeting was attended predominantly by gays and lesbians, and so it became necessary for me to find my own kind.*

*I learned about another meeting nearby that met in a synagogue and attended it the following Saturday. In fact, there were two meetings, back to back, and I sat through both of them. There I met a man named Solomon, who was about my age and sober for several years.*

*“You graduated from Choate and then from Yale. Don’t tell me you didn’t,” he said to me that first night, and so I should have known we could never be friends but that his sole interest was in bending me to his purpose and taking what he imagined I had so that he might adorn himself with it.*

*Another man came to the meeting, and he too must be recognized, pulled from the scrap heap of oblivion. His hair was red and his face broadly freckled, and though that face had a Howdy Doody aspect it was coupled with an executive-level mind that produced balanced sentences and organized paragraphs when he spoke. But Milton was gone from the suburban life he had made for himself as a result of years on the bottle to a rooming house existence. In his forties now and two years sober he came to the meeting*



*in creaseless pants and a frayed white shirt and worn jacket from his office days. There were songs that came to him that night, Frank Sinatra singing “Saturday Night is the Loneliest Night of the Week” and the great Tom Waits croaking out “(The Heart) of Saturday Night,” and though he had been born to American pragmatism and rationality, he would fall into an aching longing for a woman’s love.*

*Now there was a woman named Ismelda who dressed herself fine in the way that she could for the meeting, as she too wanted to come out of her Saturday night loneliness. She felt the pressure of time, as she was holding out against forty and trying, through exercise and nutrition, to mitigate the punishment the alcohol years had inflicted on her body. And so when Milton saw Ismelda leave the meeting that night, he tore away from the group and down the stairs in pursuit. Panicked that she was nowhere in sight as he looked both ways along the street, he raced to the corner, where he spotted her some yards ahead.*

*“Hi, I thought,” he said, suddenly so winded by his pursuit that he couldn’t continue. He had approached her too fast and was, outside the context of the group, something of a stranger to her, and a menacing and unattractive one as well. And so she said, “No please. I must go,” which was enough to put the hurt of rejection on Milton’s face.*

*He hurried back to the room, the look of hunger soon returning, as there was another at the meeting he had had his eye on, but the group had scattered. Only a couple of men remained, putting away the last of the chairs, and so it was for Milton to sing*

*“Only the Lonely,” and sing it fiercely, as he headed to a diner for some eats before returning home.*

*And all this too is recorded in this book of time, for those with the patience and fortitude to wade through it.*

*Now, Celeste, if I was not singing “Only the Lonely,” it was because I was mired in complexity of my own making, as you well know, and in my own way I was grateful not to share with Milton and some of the other men a countenance of hunger.*

*Among this kind was a man who gave new meaning to the word “ponder,” as he was full of studied pauses and thoughtful poses. I saw from the first that he had a loneliness vigil going on, for he sat on the aisle in the front row facing the door, the lonely always looking toward the door for their love to walk through it.*

*The power of attraction is a mysterious thing, and it was there whenever Finn Flynn spoke, prompting me to want to raise my hand and be called on, so I too could display pregnant pauses and have the group at my full command. And the fact that he walked on the path of understanding, having a mind steeped in the psychology of the greats, and wrapped himself in a professional identity as a psychotherapist with several advanced degrees, only fed the aura of distinction he possessed. In cathedrals of thought constructed by Freud and Jung did he wander, immune to the power of the oligarchs over the political and corporate realms and mocking religion as the credo of the mindlessly superstitious. And such a story. Tall and proud and gifted, by age twenty-three he had become a stumblebum on the poverty-gripped streets of the South Bronx before being*

*struck sober on the Grand Concourse that his life going forward might be a repudiation of all that it had been before.*

*Now Celeste, I too had a hunger for knowledge and the proper attire of both the mind and body and one evening came from the St. Mark's Bookstore with an armload of works by Freud and Jung, that I too might wander in their cathedrals of thought. But by the time I got home not only were my arms heavy laden but so too was my mind sorely afflicted by the prospect of such a burdensome exploration. It occurred to me that I had sought out such paths before and that perhaps I did not need to go there anymore and that the program offerings of RoR might be more than adequate and infinitely simpler. There is learning and there is unlearning, and it was the latter I was in need of at this time, and so I returned the books of these two masters that I needed no more at this particular time than the bottles I had been drinking from.*

*Now I must leave Finn Flynn that we may go elsewhere. But we will return, as there is more about him that must be revealed and so saved from the oblivion bin of time.*

“You work a forty-hour week. You have plenty of time to write,” Dr. Rosner said, spanking Luther with the reality stick so Luther might see himself as he was. Luther noted the exchange in his journal, adding after it the saying “one day at a time” because he did not know what else to write and the saying was his only defense against the anxiety that beat on him like pounding waves. Well, not exactly the only defense. He had his supply of grass to try to enter smoke heaven now that alcohol was out of the loft.

Isadora took him to lunch on her last day and told him she loved him for his feebleness and also said she didn't hold it against him that he hadn't feasted on her bosom but that there might be other occasions. Luther said he didn't know what he would do without her insults but Isadora said she was sure he would live and find someone else to give him the business. He also said he would have to go backward before he went forward, and even if he did not know what he meant exactly, it had something to do with white line, continue. Isadora said no one would ever mistake him for a genius but that was OK.

Luther said her understanding had the elasticity of taffy and that he might surprise her by showing up at one of her alternative sleep sites in the city. At the moment he was favoring a building on Riverside Drive and Seventy-ninth Street, where the idea possessed him that Laurence Harvey had an apartment in *The Manchurian Candidate*. And who could say that sparks mightn't fly should they chance to meet on such a night. Isadora said moving about, even in a closed system, was the only way she could live. Luther said he understood, and that from early on he had been interested in the secret passageways through life and had found some of the best of them underground on the campus of Columbia University, long narrow spaces with a horizontal flow of padded pipes and the occasional maintenance worker in a coarse Dickey shirt and pants of matching color.

On his lunch hour Luther would sometimes visit with Celeste in her studio on Fourteenth Street and Union Square, and there she would shed her painter's pants and he would sleep

with her, this is the time before she did him in. In addition to her easel and canvases and paint supplies, she had a tabletop printing press with a solidity that Sarah's did not possess. Brand was the name, as in Charles Brand, and the company was but a short distance away, on Tenth Street.

Luther visited the company and began to pay on a layaway plan for an identical press for Sarah. He did not tell Sarah that he wanted her to arrive at a place of parity with Celeste, or that the press, when he presented it to her, served as another reminder of his time with Celeste, nor did he say that the sadness of days ultimately returned him to a phrase Peter had used to describe his union with Lydia following the death of Lenore. "The wake of a marriage," he had called it, after Lydia exiled him and even after she allowed him to return. And it gave Luther no comfort to sing the song "If You Can't Be with the One You Love, Love the One You're With" because Celeste was too bright a light in his consciousness, and so the message of the song left him in some doubt as to its validity, given his own experience.

It occurred to Luther that he could have bought Sarah a ring on the layaway plan, but a ring signified commitment until death, and was he truly in it for the long run with her? But a press signified eternity in terms of the art it could produce, and even if Sarah wasn't capable of defying the oblivion march of time with her work, the press could be a friend along the way, as were his typewriters to him.

Still, who was to say that Steven Stills (the name, the name) wasn't The Truth with his intelligible lyrics setting him apart from the Holler Heads or that he hadn't been specially dispatched to give Luther the life's lessons that he needed?

*Now Celeste, there are those who wish to call the police on me for being far in excess of the maximum length they have decreed. Pith, they hiss at me. Pith. Pith. Pith. What I hear, of course, is Piss, Piss, Piss. But whatever, they are pith-ing or pissing on themselves. Their tyranny is over. The sun has set on their domain of limitation and the wildebeest runs free. The ashes scatter on their burned banner, "If I had the time, I would have written a shorter book" and to worldwide treatment centers have they been remanded to remedy their anal natures. The sky and all the realms of space beyond must be our canvas, Celeste, a space without borders and no beginning or end, on which we write ourselves into the eternity we are seeking. Beware of the finite ones, those who seek to corral and contain. We are beyond their command. Beyond it, I say.*

In dreamland Luther was sentenced to death by cyanide poisoning but survived to see his brother standing in the lobby of Dr. Rosner's building. How old and tired and defeated Luke looked as he nipped from a pint bottle of vodka. "I need to see your doctor. I need some magic for my bones," Luke said, causing Luther to scream, "Jamais! Jamais!" in the voice of his ancient high school French teacher, Mlle. Gallimard, to his own horror, and woke in the night to the thunderous revelation that he would never be his brother's keeper.

Unable to abide Luther's zombie-like chanting, "One day at a time," Dr. Rosner continued with his spanking of his patient. Luther could only wonder if Dr. Rosner was

threatened by the influence of the fellowship. After all, the slogan was a formidable tool designed to bring alcoholics back into the now.

“I find something completely perverse about your job anxiety. If you were to be laid off, you would collect unemployment for a year, which would give you plenty of time to find other work. So what’s up here?”

“I have two words for you.”

“Only two?”

“Rafta Blackning.”

“Rafta Blackning?” Dr. Rosner said, as if he had never heard the woman’s name before.

“That is correct.”

“And she represents what?”

“The relentless force of my own fury. Do you not see that her name is full of soot and fumes and now that I am alone with her, except for Philomena Swangner, that she will apply her cruelty to me as she did to Isadora Drayton and Bruce Bill?”

“We have gone over your projection of your own anger onto women.”

“My listening devices tell me the same thing.”

“Listening devices?”

“Oh yes, and they are quite sharp.”

“What’s with you today?”

“What’s with me, or who is with me? If the latter, I would have to say Rafta. She is spanking me and you are spanking me.”

“As if you are a child?”

“What else can I be in the face of those who carry themselves as formidable?”

“So you see the world as full of formidable people?”

“Armies on the move. Stand to the side of the marching boot.”

Dr. Rosner put a silent eye on him.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” Luther asked.

Dr. Rosner was a while in speaking. “I’ll see you next week,” he finally said.

For Peter history was memory, too, and it called him to that part of New Jersey where the ocean met the land and sought, with violence showing in its nature, to breach the seawall and encroach on territory not its own. In the backseat Luther tried to conceal his terror from Sarah, lest she judge him a coward more than she already understood him to be. The towers of the George Washington Bridge against the dark gray rainclouds signaled not only the end of him but of civilization, as surely he and the rest of humanity would succumb to the payback fury of nature as it swept away all symbols of strength as if they were but matchsticks.. On the New Jersey Turnpike his state of high alert continued as Peter relied on a constant weave to keep ahead of the taillights of the average man, whose only purpose was to thwart him. Luther was not ready for this world that Peter was ushering him into. He was not ready for anything.

*Now Celeste, when I tried to come to you, the force field was too strong and redirected me home or to RoR. It was as if the air inside the loft, where the idea had originated, was*



*different and no match for the countervailing current when I stepped out the door. With every struggling step I tried to take toward you, the air said to me, "Your desire does not stand up to the reality of time. She is a thoroughbred and you are not and has returned to her own kind. Her rejection of you still stands." And so, in the face of such assertion, I had no choice but to retreat, because Clobber is Clobber in all its manifestations.*

I will create order where there is none and so secure the premises for our well-being. So Luther resolved when he saw that he could not have what was not his, that being Celeste. Was it right that a line of demarcation should exist where the living room carpet ended and a region of chaos began, that region being Sarah's studio, the splattered linoleum bringing to mind the action painting canvases of Mr. Jackson Pollock. No and no again. Order must extend in the way that it could in the terrain of turmoil. He proposed to her to paint over the droppings so as to remove them as a source of affliction to his eye and was surprised when she gave him the green light. And so he applied gray paint where none had been, and in doing so brought uniformity where only anarchy had reigned.

Dr. Rosner did not always operate in the spanking mode. It would not be in the interest of fairness to say so. At the next session Dr. Rosner suggested that the roar of anxiety Luther was experiencing might be diminished were he to accept that there were no doors through which to escape.

"You can do the job, but first, you will have to decide that you want the job. If you do, then you must stop looking for the exit sign."

*But Celeste, I was not yet where my feet were. I had not uncovered and discovered the power that would render me free of the past and the future and deliver me into the now.*

Dr. Rosner took Luther off Haldol and placed him on Thorazine, while keeping the Artane a constant in Luther's life should the Thorazine, like the Haldol before it, set its mind on mischief. Luther did not tell Dr. Rosner about his dead sister Naomi and her relationship with Thorazine before she was dead in death and only dead in life and of the long rambling monologues she would impose on him and anyone else who would listen. He just swallowed it with the hope that though it was a downer it would take him upward into regions of happiness he had not been experiencing but all it gave him was incredible flatness with subtle agitation around the edges of it.

The office was a hard place to be without Isadora Drayton and Bruce Bill. Even if Isadora had been mocking of him, he had taken a liking to her and to Bruce Bill too, who had the makings of an older brother if only he would know it. Luther walked about on the lunch hour on the streets of midtown feeling hopeless, with thoughts of suicide entering his mind. From somewhere in the distance he heard the song "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm" but could not relate. The song gave him no amount of cheer to hear.

He stopped at a pizza place on Thirty-fourth Street where Coward Shoe had been but was no more, and remembered as he got filled up on the special, a free Coke with two slices, that his mother had taken him to that store so he might have normal shoes to walk

about in, saying to him without saying that normal food and normal shoes were a combination no one should do without.

A note was on his barren desk when he returned. "See me," it said, in graceful script, with the initial P. below. Luther went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face so it would be rearranged for his meeting with Philomena with none of the Thorazine dullness showing. But it was like struggling to break free of a smothering weight and so he had to go to her with the face that he had, and the words of the Serenity Prayer, which he heard said in RoR, were there in his mind to comfort him.

"Did you want me?" he said to Philomena Swangner, who had her hair in braid formation as she sat at her desk. What he left unsaid was that she had barely acknowledged him since she had called him out on his inferiority in the proofreading department.

"Yes, I was looking to have a word with you."

"Just one?"

"I didn't know you to be a jokester."

"I am seeking the light."

"You are in it now."

"Yes," he could only say, not knowing in what sense she meant her assertion. "So what did you want? Was it to say that you love me?"

"Not exactly," Philomena said, calling on circumspection to reign. "But baseball is coming. How about we go to a Yankee game after work?"

“That should be fine,” Luther said, grateful now for the containment policy of the Thorazine, because sometimes showing too much happiness was more dangerous than showing none at all. People saw and wanted to punish you for it.

“Good. Because the BoSox will be in town and I’ve got tickets.”

“The BoSox?”

“The Boston Red Sox.”

“Yes, I know, but... never mind.” Because it was too arduous, while underwater, to present the words of explanation. BoSox. That she could adopt the language of compression.

“Are you OK?”

“I am on a new medication and it is taking me away from myself and preventing me from getting to the heart of your matter.”

“The heart of my matter?” Philomena Swangner said slowly. She came out of her sober primness and turned on her laugh machine, taking it to the highest level. She had herself a real heehaw. “You...are...too...much,” she gasped.

“Have I misspoken?”

“Time...will...tell,” she said, waving him away.

Dr. Rosner continued with his truth bombs, dropping another from an exceedingly low altitude and cushioned in his trademark whisper.

“You place a lot of energy into escaping into a childhood you never really had,” said Dr. Rosner.

“You must mean the railroads that still run strong in my mind, even though I live on the Bowery, where they are no longer to be found, now that the viciousness of time has destroyed the Third Avenue el.”

“Railroads?”

“Oh yes, the Pennsylvania Railroad, with the burgundy-colored engine that had pantographs atop it and the massive bulk of a rhinoceros, and the New York Central, which ran through the tunnel in Riverside Park before breaking into the light, and which we stoned and stoned in the days of our childhood for daring to fill the space with its power and its sound. That it should come and go and come again only to go again.”

Luther didn't tell Dr. Rosner about Breyer's Dixie cups and Mission soda from the grocery store cooler and Drake's cakes and Hostess Twinkies and the Good Humor truck with raspberry sherbet and orange sherbet creamsicles and the “I get the ball for the ball go the street” boy from Cuba, or the coal trucks that delivered their load through metal chutes into the basements of buildings and the old Jew with his cart hollering “I buy old gold” and all the rest. It wasn't the time or the place for that.

And was Dr. Rosner right? Revisiting his childhood through the experience of books and being reminded when he heard the name Eeyore or Winnie the Pooh of his ignorance and native deficiencies was a less joyous matter and brought the people with the laughing thing going for them and the fraud police dangerously close, because in the context of children's literature, he was outside the gates of childhood, not having been a reader of anything more than comic books in that time. Cromartie Wonders had brought

him into the early school life he had tried to escape from and reintroduced him to his failure.

But he was not without resources. He had his bits of tape to attach to his desk at the company and other means to secure his privacy while in the public eye. Not everything did Dr. Rosner need to know.

In all seasons did Peter continue with his precision driving as if to master his fear of the world before him, and spring was no exception. There was no road he didn't like so long as he had the wheels to roll over it, only this time his destination was camp, and so Luther had more time to live in an agony of fear that an accident was inevitable and great and endless suffering would be his to experience before he could be summoned into the chambers of death.

Snow held out in patches on the once white-carpeted lawn and the sun was stingy with its warming rays. All about him Luther saw nature's truculence in the passively defiant trees and the unyielding mountains and heard the call of sleep as the solution. I will let this weekend be my season of renewal, he thought, as he climbed the creaky stairs to the room where Lenore had been in life and found that she was there in death as well, misted but real in her youthful beauty, the walls and floorboards and objects soft and hard, big and small, pregnant with her presence. I am here too, and dying to the light on this early afternoon, he said to her, as he lay down and was quickly pulled into dreamland. Those few times he awoke only to discover that sleep had not had enough of him nor he of it. If he had been hoping for a more corporeal appearance by Lenore, that

was not to be. In fact, she was not present at all in dreamland. Rather was he in a giant industrial plant where water was having its way, pouring through windows and the increasingly porous walls. Boxed cargo, labeled and ready for shipping, lay willy-nilly and soggy, having been tumbled from their neat stacks. But all was not lost, for Luther was there to roll back the floodwaters and return them to their proper place. In fact, a chorus appeared and lionized him with a song about his heroics. While Luther was accepting of his good deed and the recognition that it brought, he also had the uneasy sense that it would not last.

And then there was Luther taking center stage in the NCAA basketball finals. A barnburner. His team, UCLA, was trailing with three seconds on the shot clock and the ball in his hands. From the corner he launched, soaring high over his man. The rock had a perfect rotation that would surely send him into the night in a blaze of glory, but somehow it rimmed the hoop and fell out as the buzzer sounded. And there was Sean, who had beat and beat him with his fists, in the stands holding up a sign that read, “Hey, Zero, we always had your number.”

*Now, Celeste, we know the meaning of the saying “From a hero to a zero” and that the world is in unstable flux, which is why we must tether ourselves to God so He and He alone may be the constant in our lives with whom the connection remains even when we would seek to stray.*

“Are you among the living, Luther? Are you on this earth as a hardy perennial?”  
So Lydia asked when finally he wandered from his bed that weekend.

“I am trying. I do believe the seeds of a new birth are within me,” he replied.

“Well, you have chosen the right season for renewal,” Lydia said.

“Yes, I am defying my own comprehension.”

They had driven down to Phoenicia to dine at Sal’s Restaurant. Sal, with his gregarious manner and slicked back hair, was not there, but his son, Hank, was.

“How is everyone tonight?” Hank said, standing in as the host.

“We’re all doing well, Hank. And how is your father?”

“Oh, he’s doing great. He’s enjoying the fishing too much down in Florida to come back.”

There had been a time when Hank was a disappointment to his father, having done the wild thing on motorcycles and cars all throughout these parts and even cycled along Route 28 without clothes in the dead of winter, which got him the attention of the authorities. But there is no love like a father’s for his son, at least a father like Sal. He called his son to him and had a man to man. He told his son that he loved him in a way that had deep penetrating power, securing his son more tightly to him than the marlins he hooked with his fishing gear. Luther had only to watch Hank moving about the restaurant to see that he had entered his father’s domain and there he would stay, secured to the premises by love and filial devotion. Because his father was not the kind to abide the tarnished substance of a life. He would offer a corrective to deterioration with his manly power.

*Now, Celeste, the bartender was there too, manning his position as bartenders are known to do and as he had done through all the years that I had been coming to this restaurant with the Van Dines. I believe his name was Doug, as he had the less than*



*tender face of any man so named. His military short hair was now gray and still parted on the side and under the control of Vitalis in keeping with the image of what a man should be, and he was still in constant motion with the rag so that spills and drink rings and other desecrations of the mahogany bar should not be allowed to abide. Unlike Sal, he lacked the fortitude to be an owner, of a restaurant or a house. He was employee material. He was rent a room material. He tried to keep his normalcy fixed upon him, as I was given to do, so he might be perceived as existing between the bounds of reason. But behind that bar he was a master of soft patter and, more importantly, of the pour, and so he was the man you must make nice with if you were to feel good.*

*Celeste, we must keep our eyes open to all who come within our gaze, and beam whatever love is in us to them. This must be our daily practice.*

Luther went the following week to his mother, as she was calling him to her. Thinking, if I can be with the Van Dines, then surely I can be with her who has delivered me into this world. Many had been the times that he had betrayed her, not in his thoughts but with his actions.

“Mother, I am doing right by myself and the world. I am being a do right man.”

“Are you speaking foolishness, my son?”

“No. I think I have found the answer for my drinking problem.”

“Drinking problem? Since when did you have a drinking problem?”

And so he gave her examples, though not too many, of being unable to control how much he drank.

“I see,” she said. “Do you know that I have never had a drop of alcohol? Not one drop?”

“Hannah and Naomi would bring a bottle of wine into the apartment and try to get you to have a glass. ‘Stop trying to be a saint.’ Hannah would say. I remember hating them for trying to tempt you and very afraid you would yield to the temptation. It seemed like an evil thing to do.”

“Ushtah, my son, ushtah. Do not speak ill of your sisters. I did not take that wine because I was afraid of developing a craving for alcohol. Have I told you about my father, my son? Have I told you how I would be sent by my mother to go and find him so he would not die passed out in the snow and to smash the bottles that he drank from against the rocks? Have I told you this?”

Luther did not tell his mother that her tale had been told with trauma-induced repetition through the years. Nor did he tell her of the letter he had written but never mailed toward the end of his drinking that began, “Mother, I am down here on Dead Man’s Hill in the snow, doing as your father before me did. Will you come for me as well and smash the bottle against the rocks?” He did not have to practice vile unkindness where his mother’s loss was concerned.

“Wine is a mocker. Strong drink is raging. Have you heard me quote the proverb as well?”

“I have,” Luther said. Some shift had occurred. The blue mindset was gone. That need, so shameful, to make her responsible for his wayward life had ended.

He spoke to her about the Rooms of Recovery and the program it offered to reclaim his life.

“These meetings you attend. It sounds like early Christianity.”

Disappointment showed in her face. She had wanted him to yield to the embrace of the church, but he had walked away at age thirteen. Now he came to her with talk of these strange meetings. Fear too he saw in her eyes. Who was this God of whom he now spoke?

As a child, he had reached into her bag for a quarter, and because she could read his mind, she had taken him aside and asked him what was in the closed fist that he had made of his hand. When he said “Nothing,” she asked him again, until her command was so strong that he had no choice but to yield to her power. But it did not end there, with her complete victory and his abject humiliation.

“Do you promise me that you will never go in my bag again like this? Do you?”

“Yes,” he said, seeing in her the fear he was now seeing, years later, that he was beyond her command and control. As a child he had felt a sense of exhilaration but now he felt only sorrow. The God she sought to share was her only possession. He did not wish to threaten it. He only wished to move into his own terrain so his life could be found.

“Your sister Hannah will be coming shortly and will be bringing her sorrow with her. You must give her the support she needs, for her heart is heavy. Do not run from me on your long legs, as is your way. I need for you to stay. I have cooked chicken with rice

so she does not make herself sick on the bags of takeout food from the stores that are not normal.”

As his mother promised, Hannah arrived with storm clouds gathered.

“Once again they are trying to deprive my son. They have brought him near only to push him far. Have you ever heard of such a thing? Well, have you?”

“Who are they?” Luther asked.

“Do not get personal with me. Have I not told you that before?”

“But Hannah, be reasonable. Luther has to know who they are if he is to understand what you are saying.”

“He knows who they are. They are the ones who put up roadblocks to success.”

Hannah then put all conversation on hold while devouring a plate of steaming chicken and rice.

*A dream dies hard, Celeste. Hannah's word storm was a poor indicator of her true pain, for we are talking about America, America, where dreams are as big as our buildings times infinity. If Hannah's growth had been stunted by the stringent bonds placed on the first-born, she had willed her son to grow tall and strong and to fly high on the wings she had broken. To blame was to relieve her of her shame, if only temporarily.*

*The story went like this. The filthy males in the student body at the State University at Binghamton, where Moses had enrolled, were filled with jealousy at his heroics on the football field, while the young women longed to lie down with him. The taunts and other provocations of the men were ceaseless until, from the place of aloneness to which they had pushed him, he landed a powerhouse right that broke the*

*face of the leader of the pack who, because he could not beat Moses on the field of manly battle, then sought his demise in student court. There too Moses proved himself equally adept, flaying his nemesis with forceful words of truth and chastising his herd horde for their odious cowardice.*

*Celeste, Moses was alone and had no awareness that his aloneness was of his own making and so had no way out. Many, many times had the laughing thing been applied to him by those who had clustered against him because they could not do battle with him one to one, and in this instance he put his defiance on display, saying theirs was a kangaroo court out of keeping with virtue and thus illegitimate, but the court had the last word in placing him under suspension.*

*The suspension was not a tragedy in itself. No lifetime ban had been decreed. But before the ruckus Moses had leapt up the ladder of success. He had applied to the very great Williams College, where he was to enroll that fall with a full scholarship as a transfer student and possibly become the starting quarterback. His suspension required that he go to summer school in order to complete the academic year but he did not follow through, and so Williams College withdrew its offer of admission.*

Some months before a bright light had entered Luther on hearing the news of Moses' good fortune. Luther's joy was on a par with that he had experienced as a child on learning that his sister Rachel had been accepted to the very great Vassar College, learned, that is, that the world was calling to his sister to join it in its upper echelon realm, for Vassar was like Barnard and Columbia and Williams was like them, too. But

now he was downcast hearing of Moses' fall. We are a fall down people, Luther thought. That is what we do best, we just fall down.

Now Luther took in his sister's words on this day, heard her rumbling discontent, but heard his mother too, as she spoke of Stelazine, querying him as to the benefit and the liabilities of this drug that had been prescribed for her, Luther giving special attention because many were the times that he had heard his mother go against his sister Naomi with words for her treachery in inducing Rachel to take the pills that she was herself taking and so to cause her sister's downfall.

"Why would he prescribe that?" Luther asked.

"He said my mood is not where it needs to be. He says the pills will cause the storm clouds to part and bring out the sun that they have been hiding."

Luther did not like what he was hearing, that his mother should wander down the same path he had taken and Naomi before him. He wanted to say she should not go there but who was to say there was not weeping in her that she was not showing to him or Hannah or any of them but that she was showing to the doctor that she saw, a confession of loneliness and pain and fear that led the doctor to reach for his prescription pad. And in truth she had gone on that path before Naomi and he ever did. Her locked closet just outside the bathroom had contained not only rent collections but a shelf of amber-colored prescription bottles. Had she not offered him her sleeping pills in those instances during his teenage years when Jane Thayer put the clobber on him, saying he must take one and lie still if he did not want his night to be sleepless?

"You must do as you need to do," Luther could only think to say.

He left with the waves of Hannah crashing over him and the waves of his mother as well, but in dreamland that night neither one was featured. He had been summoned to the New York Public Library to aid with a convention exhibit, where he stood at an unvisited booth feeling old and that no one wanted to bother with him. He saw in dreamland what he had seen in his waking life, that people went this way and they went that way but they did not go his way.

He woke in the night to a burning sensation in the middle of his abdomen, a small circle of pain that did not increase or diminish. "Are you ailing?" he heard himself ask, drawing on his mother's manner of expression. A circle of pain with staying force had come and summoned the image of the eye that appeared in the middle of the otherwise blank TV screen in the wee hours to signal that all programming was over until dawn.

Lying down or standing, the pain continued. It is my own personal ring of fire, Luther said in a whisper, as it would not do to have Johnny Cash loudness at that hour. And so, when morning came, he stepped into the street and took a cab to the emergency room at New York University Medical Center, whose fineness no one could dispute.

"Your problem is in your head, not your belly. You have come to me with a psychosomatic ailment," Armand Abruzzo, MD, said to him. "I will give you this prescription. If, tomorrow, your so-called symptom persists, then you can come back."

"But why do you give me pills if you say the problem is in my head?"

"Because I know your type."

"My type?"

"You are last week's newspaper being blown about in the wind."

“And you are a wet fart on a dry plain,” Luther screamed.

“That is a good one.” Dr. Abruzzo laughed.

“I will see you in court.”

“In that case you had better not die.” Dr. Abruzzo laughed even more.

Luther rushed off to the nearest pharmacy.

“This prescription is unreadable,” the pharmacist said.

“Unreadable? But it was written by a doctor.”

“I can’t fill what I can’t read. Tell your doctor to take a course in penmanship.”

Rejection met him at every turn, and so he had no choice but to return to the emergency room.

“I am in a state of emergency and must see a doctor who is not sworn to subversion of the Hippocratic oath,” Luther said.

“What?” the clerk said.

“A ring of fire is in my chest. I did not step into it. It stepped into me.”

A doctor was hovering in the vicinity, with all manner of listening devices. His nametag said Harry Hofstader, MD.

“You must come with me. You have acute appendicitis and we must deal with it now or the ring of fire will expand and consume all your parts.”

*Celeste, if there was indecision it did not linger. I did not do a sustained dawdle dance on the line between life and death. Rather did I allow Dr. Harry Hofstader to become the supreme leader and arrange for me to be wheeled into the operating room, where he said life was to be found. And so I will never know if Dr. Hofstader went where*



*he was needed with his scalpel or if he was an out of control cutting machine. In truth, he came to seem akin to him who came from nowhere to whisk me into a telephone booth in the Times Square subway station in the long ago so he could have me attend to his penis. He had the same wiry hair and the same chunky frame and same obdurate will.*

Luther spent a week at home following his release from the hospital. He did so at Rafta's insistence and continued to read *Pocket Pal* for the strength it could give him. Saddle stitching, side stitching, perfect bound, four color process (cyan, magenta, yellow, black). Stripping and imposition, that was a big one for him. And yet, in dreamland, ferocity of a kind he had not expected awaited him in the form of a calculus teacher in whose class he had enrolled so his mind might become more muscular.

"You cannot read," the instructor declared, in a tone of astonishing certitude.

"I can't read?" Luther repeated.

"You heard me," the instructor said, showing no give.

"What is this then?" Luther asked, reading from the first page of the calculus textbook.

"You have no comprehension of what you read and you never have and never will. You read to pass the time, not to learn, because you have nothing else to do."

With certitude the instructor spoke, and his poison effect lingered for days.

Luther went, in this time, to Barney's, on Seventeenth Street and Seventh Avenue, so he could look normal in the even warmer weather that was coming by purchasing summer-weight slacks and be free of the tyranny of wool. But was it normal for a store, a department store, to raise itself on Seventh Avenue on the border of Greenwich Village?

He grew more suspicious inside, noting the cool elegance of the establishment and the astronomical prices. No, he was not in an environment of normalcy at all. Those price tags shocked. Herringbone tweed, three thou. Silk dress shirts, one thou. Your mother's freaking bloomers, twenty thou. No, he wanted to be neat in the working man's army. No flash. Just the parameters of normalcy. Nevertheless he walked out with seasonal attire, a pair of blue cotton slacks for the office at a marked down price that approached decency.

*Celeste, you who are the light of understanding itself, when I returned from surgery Rafta did not beat me with a stick or puff out her cheeks. Lilies of the valley greeted me on my bare desk, a gift of the department. This was not good, Celeste, not good at all, as I give allegiance to those I love, not those I fear, and even those who have my heart do not have my full fidelity. And so I went to Dr. Rosner with my distress.*

*"People's concern places an obligation on you to reciprocate, you feel," he said, living as he always did in the land of insight.*

*He offered a double dose in this particular session, saying as well that I got angry when demands were placed on me. Now Celeste, is it necessary to tell the story of a man's whole life in one sentence and in so doing to expose his unmanliness to him? Immediately my mind turned to that afternoon at the Chinatown loft, to which Sarah and I had returned after our unsuccessful visit to the welfare office on Thirty-fourth Street, where she was attempting to apply for Medicaid, having just been released from Gracie Square Hospital and now in need of finding a way to pay for the outpatient visits to Dr. Frodkey he said were advisable if she wanted to fully heal. Just inside the door she caught her hand in a dangling wire for the intercom and pulled it loose. If Sarah's helplessness and*

*the mounting bills and the dreary, bureaucratic setting had been enough to unsettle me, the torn wire sent me over the edge. Because I feared I lacked the capacity to reconnect a loose wire, I tore into her on that afternoon, a woman with a mind as fragile as an eggshell, causing her to weep helplessly and cover her ears. This is what the unmanly do, Celeste. Rather than face the world with courage, they attack the women foolish and unfortunate enough to have given themselves to them. Let us take responsibility for what we have done. Let us do that.*

*Now Celeste, I gave myself a good talking to in this time, for the dark clouds had gathered and were not moving and the voice was great within me that said, quit, quit, run out into the street even if abandonment of your barren desk means the onslaught of anarchy and the endless mire of poverty. Rafta is too much for you. She is a cat in human form who will rake your flesh should you come too close. But then there was the opposing voice that said, "You don't quit, Luther. You don't dare quit. Now Celeste, a place had been given to me in the universe, and if order was to be preserved, then I must be faithful to the assignment. Does a coward die many deaths? Did the Shake have it right? Was I confusing fate with fear? We have all seen the men and women of vigor; those who strike out boldly on their own, singing the very American song "Don't Fence Me In" as they seek new horizons because they are American in their destiny and hold pioneering in their hearts. But I was not of their kind. Where I was was where I was. Should the roof fall in, it would be for me to dust off my desk and await the elements. It came to me in dreamland that the universe had assigned me to Rafta and so there I must remain.*

But Philomena Swangner was not of Luther's kind. She it was who gave fate the directions for her life. This Luther more fully understood when she informed him, as their Yankee baseball date drew near, that her boyfriend was in line for a key job on the West Coast, and if he got it, she would be going with him.

Luther's love lust for Philomena remained strong. She was a bright light on dark days, but as the day of the game drew near, qualms of conscience began to surface. Yes, he imagined Philomena in the buff except for a Yankee cap on a bed in some Bronx motel to which they had fled after the second inning and he was virtually delirious at the thought of cooking in her kitchen, baking in her oven, romping in her cabbage patch, or whatever other lewd metaphors came shockingly to his mind. But he had no cover for the deceit that would be required, no anesthetic for the pain that such an excursion would surely bring.

"I come out with my hands up. Order must prevail in all facets of my life if I am to move forward."

"How about applying some order to your speech?"

"Will do. I must ask that my wife accompany me so I am in the province of the good."

"Fine. No problem. Did you expect that there would be?"

He wandered off into the bathroom, where he enclosed himself in a stall and leaned his head against the tiles, as if acquiescing to the proverb that read, in part, "Lean not to thine own understanding," because his own understanding told him he had been a fool and given away a chance for Hall of Fame pleasure he might never have again, the

image of Philomena naked except for a Yankees cap and beside him in a motel room near the stadium. Many, many minutes were needed before he felt well enough to show his face again.

Sarah continued to change physically, and not for the better. There was her straw-like hair, over which she wept, as it continued to abandon her; and the weight gain, giving her now a permanent tire around her waist; and the dulled expression on her now puffy face, all traces of her once sharp features and the sparkle in her eyes gone. Too many bags of Pepperidge Farm cookies; too many Mellaril and whatever else Dr. Frodkey had her on. And the clothes she chose to wear reflected her diminished beauty: a drab, ill-fitting denim blouse and matching denim skirt she wore as a sort of uniform, often with a straw hat with fake fruit on the brim to hide her lifeless hair.

*Now Celeste, I had been to Yankee Stadium as a boy, as I have noted previously. I had witnessed mean Jim Perry hurl spitters with saliva from his wetted sliver lips, those lips signaling a lack of natural warmth as he dared to handcuff the Mick and Moose and itty bitty Bobby Richardson. I did not know then that his meanness included filling his mouth with snakes and lizards and washing them down with tobacco juice, but he was entirely that kind of man and came to New York by way of the anonymity of the Cleveland Indians.*

The cream-colored stadium had lost some of its luster and appeared to be dying along with the borough. The yo bro brigades ringed the stadium, setting up checkpoints

and casting themselves as a warrior nation. Their language they had spiked so it leaned forward into you and they wore their shit shorts and tops loose and baggy.

“Yo, lady, let me sample some of your fruit. Just a taste,” a yo bro called out from his bravado, understanding for the moment that the America he was calling out from was his, not hers. Sarah did not go at him with fresh talk of her own. She had her mouth under merciful control.

The stadium is our refuge, our enclave, the last habitable place in this fallen borough, Luther thought, as he handed the stadium official their tickets.

*The Mick was gone and Tom Tresh was gone and Clete Boyer was gone and itty bitty Bobby Richardson was gone and Roger Maris was gone and fat Bob Turley was gone and Whitey Ford was gone and whiteness of the kind to match their pinstriped home uniforms was gone. This is not to lament. This is to state that a new and black Mick was in town to cover centerfield, and his name was Mickey Rivers and where Roger Maris stood in right field now stood man of color Reggie Jackson, who put his fingers to his mouth so regularly during his every at bat, as if to call attention to that mouth and the possibilities of what it could do. We were not in the time of Ellie Howard and the few other scattered players of color, and so we must go back to the time of Tom Smits, my high school friend, who transcended all issues of race and ethnicity, showing no fear, in particular, as to what black advancement in America might mean. He was my teacher, Celeste, as when he delightedly made out an all-star lineup solely of black players such as Frank Robinson and Vada Pinson and noted my fearful reaction. But he did not have his roots in city life, as I had. He had not witnessed the aggrieved violence of the black*

boys from Harlem who came in summer on their bikes and took over the neighborhood with the terror they inflicted by beating the white boys without mercy until they all fell down, and then beating them some more, or a mother who said, "I work. Why don't they?" of the tenants, mostly black, of the two welfare hotels down the street, denying those who came to the building rooms if she sensed they had violence in their blood and in their bones. *But assez bien, Celeste. Assez bien. Let me not go dinky on myself, and let those who would impose the same on me look in their own presumably human hearts and then chastise themselves with the Frenchie's words, "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère."*

*If I may borrow from the future, Celeste, there was a man named Morning Sunshine who wore a large nametag introducing himself as such. He approached me on the street one morning in a wide lapel gray wool suit, paying no mind to the summer heat. With full aggressiveness he spoke, saying, "What are you going to do about racism?" because he was nothing if not Morning Sunrise, a man looking not so much for a solution as the last word, as so many of us are.*

*Celeste, I put on my rally cap and said, "Let it begin with me, and let it begin with you. What do you say, Morning Sunrise? Or should I call you Morning Surprise?"*

*"You call me any motherfucking thing you want to call me, so long as you be expecting a whupping for it. Is that what you expecting, a whupping?"*

*"No sir," I replied.*

*"Then what kind of nasty you looking for with your bullshit ? I give it to you right quick."*

*“Is the truth nasty?”*

*“Is the truth what? It better not be, or I whup its ass too.”*

*“You’re an ass whipping sort of man.”*

*“Now that the first truth you spoke.”*

*“Have you heard of the human heart, Morning Sunshine?”*

*“Is this more of your trickery?”*

*“No trickery at all. The human heart holds good and evil and everything in between. It is a garden of precious flowers and of malignancies as well. At least mine is. And what about yours?”*

*“I ain’t got time for no heart discussion. Black man got to be moving all the time. Black man got a target on his back.”*

*Now Celeste, on this day in the future I did not tarry with Morning Sunshine, for we had come to the place of bedrock difference that only love could erode. I had another encounter to tend to, and it was in the Times Square subway station where Jews for Jesus were patrolling en masse, and where one such, a young bearded man, stopped me as I approached the stairs.*

*“Do you believe in Jesus?” he asked.*

*“I am Jesus. I am the risen Christ,” I replied, and walked on by. This, as I say, in a future yet to come.*

The BoSox had their vaunted outfield on display: stand-up straight Darrell Evans with his howitzer of a right arm in right field; graceful Freddy Lynn with his left-handed elegance in center; and Jim “I be a black man in Beantown and smack that motherfucking



white shit over tall buildings” Rice in left, with his red hankie of defiance hanging from the butt pocket of his uniform pants.

Luther could put his eyes on the playing field but he must not let them go to the entranceway to the section in which he and Sarah sat. Latecomers were still arriving and he did not want to bring on that which he now most feared, his hope having grown as one inning followed another that Philomena and her beau would not show. But he did allow himself to turn his head and check the steps leading directly to the seats for their presence on them, making sure to keep his sightline low in the event they did appear so he would not make eye contact and reveal his fear so nakedly. Three innings came and went, and still he could not stand and do a victory dance for fear that such a display would bring on a hex in the form of their appearance and so he stayed in place and restricted himself to subtle eye movements worthy of the cagiest KGB man.

The spring night had a rawness to it. The magic he had witnessed on the field as a child was missing. The word *vicarious* entered his mind with negativity all around it. What did he have to do with these creatures in uniforms? What was Mr. Louisiana Lightning, Mr. Ron Guidry, to him? Surely he had some kind of sickness on him, with such thinness showing. A pitcher should have substance on his bones. And Reggie Jackson, who would not stop that finger-to-mouth action he had going on, signifying repellent ostentation, when he came to the plate. And what was with Mr. Mush, Thurman Munson, a name with high softness content to it? All that facial hair. It made him look unclean and conjured the suspicion of filthy underwear. Mickey Rivers was OK. He had

that tense quickness, but still, a rabbit now scampered about in centerfield where a lion had once roamed.

But Philomena and her beau did show, erasing every shred of speculation Luther had going on about their absence. In truth her beau was not a sparkle plenty man, whatever fireworks he might have going in his brain. Infirmity was writ large in the curvature of his spine and the halting pace at which he ascended the stairs and the grimace chronic pain had brought to his haggard face. Philomena remained on high alert should he stumble, a hand on his arm. She has tied herself to a cripple, Luther thought.

There were quick introductions followed by a silence that grew louder through to the last batter. I am not of his kind. He has assessed me to be so. Roderick Fielderston was coming from a place of rejection. So Luther determined. And yet it wasn't pain that made Roderick withholding, as he had plenty to say to Guidry in the way of exhortation.

"He's a stiff. Blow your slider past him," Roderick called down to the field, relying on words lost to the wind to establish his manly vigor where he had nothing else that would.

But Luther was of Philomena's kind if he wasn't of Roderick's. Her leg lightly pressing against his had told him so.

The Van Dines received Luther at Camp for two full weeks that summer. They did not sing to him that he should go away from their window or communicate the same by any other means, though they had been eyewitnesses to his mentality on more than one dark occasion. Actually, there were days when Sarah headed down to the city so she could be

with Dr. Frodkey, as these were troubling times for her and she needed his expertise more than ever and so, without her diluting presence, they had to take Luther full strength.

Luther played Scrabble with Lydia and thought he had aced the game with a “q” in a triple word score, but Lydia said, “Not so fast, Slim. I believe that *daiquiri* has three i’s, not two,” and a quick check of the dictionary proved her to be correct. You are a woman formidable, Luther thought, giving the F word a French pronunciation, but did not go vocal with his assertion.

And thought too, I am in my personal history, where it all began with *Moby-Dick*, the Signet edition, which went unread that first summer because agitation and distraction were upon me, and where I have now brought Henry James, mindful that Faulkner dismissed him as an old lady.

He had also come with his Olivetti 32 typewriter, not the inferior one made in Mexico but the real one made in Italy. Why? Because he did not wish to stare at the words of others with varying degrees of comprehension without the opportunity to add some of his own to the existing stockpile in the world.

Every morning he would retreat from the sun in its glory to the guesthouse with a mug of instant coffee, black, to do his typing. Should he hit a lull, he would type “First Things First” or “Easy Does It” or just “Doo lang lang.” He was certain that Peter had his listening devices tuned in and that the clatter of the keys, signifying a great and mysterious industry emerging as a powerful nation-state in his very domain, was provoking severe gnashing of his father-in-law’s teeth.

Dreamland was accessible at Camp as well as on the Bowery, and Luther rejoiced during one slumber to find himself in the ground-floor apartment of his childhood piano teacher Florence Wilkerson, as now he had discovered an apartment of order within a building of order where everyone was on the winning side, not like in the 027 track gauge days of his Lionel trains childhood. Finally, finally, he was in Lionel Super O territory, with its vaunted magna traction. But something went wrong. Patterns began to appear in the walls and cracks on the floor, and a damp, foul fog rolled in through the big bay window, driving him into the street.

And then another, in which Sarah asserted that Luther had pursued her for the sole purpose of eventually murdering her.

And then it was Lydia's turn. She entered the guesthouse in a state of high agitation and attacked Luther for snooping in her journal, which she found under his bed.

"You are a devil, a devil," she asserted, while holding firmly the big toes of both his feet in her strong hands.

If things are not as they seem, if there is an underlying content to the world that eludes the conscious self, I will nevertheless wear the face of sincerity, Luther resolved, upon awakening. This I will do in spite of the revelation in my dreams that I am a rogue nation entirely suspect in the eyes of the few if not the many. But if duplicity was not to reign and anger to share its throne, he would have to be honest with his hosts and tell them that he was a member of RoR because he could feel his temperature rising the longer that he didn't. And so he went to Lydia and explained his circumstance and asked her permission to use the car so he might attend a meeting in a nearby community.

“Yes, I have heard of such a place, and yes, of course you can have the use of the car,” Lydia said, as if from a faraway place, but no trace of the laughing thing did he hear in her.

Luther came to the greensward in Woodstock, where he stared at the spire of the Dutch Reformed Church reaching for God before heading into the parish hall. The smell of coffee brewing met him before he saw the urn and the spread of cookies. A few men and women had already gathered. How at home he felt, down to the core of his being, among these strangers.

A woman named Justice was introduced as the speaker. She said her name was the principle she lived by, and she meted it out where it was needed, and nowhere had that been the case more than in her domestic situation. She had been married to a long distance truck driver whose only guiding principle had been the call of the wild. He beat her regularly when he was home, claiming to know she was a lying slut as well as a drunk. One night she told him she had a plan to kill him. She would put a sleep potion in his beer. When he passed out she would tie him with knots that bind and peel the skin from his body, starting with his toes and working her way up and taking her own sweet time to maximize his suffering. She then asked him with her no-nonsense eyes if he understood or would he possibly be in need of a translator, as one could easily be arranged, but hubby might not care for him. Annihilation time must have sounded in her eerie voice, for hubby was gone that night.

Justice followed with a description of her descent into further alcoholic madness before the miracle of recovery came to manifest. I have come to the right place, where honesty guides the tongue and love the heart, Luther could only think.

The Bee Gees occupied the radio that afternoon as Luther drove back to Camp, and so he danced to their sound as “How Deep Is Your Love?” played while keeping his hands on the wheel but then it was “Night Fever” and “Stayin’ Alive” and those two required him to pull off the road entirely so he could more fully express himself while remaining in his seat. When the sequence was over he found himself screaming for more because the sounds had taken him high but not high enough. I do not like this. I do not like this at all. It feels too much like the alcohol thing. So Luther thought on that afternoon on Route 212.

Now on that drive back to camp an idea came to him that lifted his heart. He understood in a flash the true purpose of meeting Roderick Fielderston at Yankee Stadium, and it was not to put the laughing thing on Roderick for his infirmity. Roderick Fielderston was in a position to be an instrument for the happiness of Peter Van Dine and Luther’s own as well. After all, the burden of guilt lay heavy on his heart for his transgressions against Peter and his entire nation state. I do not have to slay Mr. Van Dine. I can love him. This thought came to Luther. And so, when he could, he put forth his idea to rescue Peter Van Dine’s books from the oblivion space where, out of print, they languished. It did not occur to Luther that a conservation society publisher might not be the right choice for a historical study of a region of the country or that, professional incompatibilities aside, there might be other barriers precluding a connection with

Luther's father-in-law. Roderick may have had a bad back, but he had ears fine enough to appreciate the instructive message of the title of the song "People Got to be Free," as sung by the Young Rascals, as in free of any connection to the lunatic predator who would impose himself on him in the guise of helping his father-in-law. To the gift of hearing was joined the gift of intuition. Strong had been the sense in Roderick that Luther was up to no good when it came to Roderick's number one, Philomena, no matter how he tried to disguise his intentions.

The Van Dines poured no cold water on Luther's offer of assistance, even if Peter had not been seeking it.

"It is wonderful that you should have a friend in such a high place, as you put it," Lydia said, as if to provoke him with her archness and rid the air of the pomposity he would disseminate.

"I only meant..."

"We know what you meant, dear."

Lydia slept for long periods of the day. For some of this time, his typing done, Luther would sit on the terrace hoping to hear the screen door open and snap closed, as, in spite of himself, he was often eager for a heart-to-heart with her. He had found a friend to help him with his guesthouse aloneness, that friend being Raymond Chandler, who instructed him that he must allot a specific number of hours for writing, and writing only, and in that time he must pursue no other activity. And so Luther tried to do, but in the hours afterward he was hungry for human contact and could hear a recording of big-voiced Barbara Streisand singing "People, people who need people are the luckiest

people in the world” in his sister Vera’s room just down the hall from the family’s apartment back in the long ago.

“I apologize. It must seem antisocial to sleep so much,” she said one evening, with a grin, as if she sensed that she was thwarting his desire for intimacy.

Ah, you have been sleeping the sleep of the just, Luther thought but did not say.

The Van Dines took him to dinner and then to a movie in Margaretville called *Players*. It starred the very great Ali McGraw, who falls in love with a young athlete after he has rescued her from a car she has driven off the road seconds before it explodes. She is married to a wealthy man and approaching forty, but love is love and the animal bond between her and the young man is the beginning of it. Oh, how it hurt Luther’s heart to see her dark beauty, for there had been others of her physical kind in his life. Did he have to mention Lenore? Did he have to mention Celeste? But her beauty and her intelligence had placed her in a world above his own.

“I know Ali McGraw’s brother,” he said, on the drive back to Camp, unable to help himself.

“How is that?” Lydia asked, with doubt in her voice.

“He lived in my mother’s building, where he had a room, but where he really lived was in the shadow of his famous sister. He had been a paratrooper in Vietnam who took to hanging out in the End Bar. His sister put the clobber on him with her fame and now he lives for revenge on her.”

“Is he a friend of yours?”



“No. I only know him from afar. He does not go toward those who do not have his imagined excellence.”

“But you have your own excellence, wouldn’t you say?”

“So you say,” Luther replied, monitoring for the sound of mockery.

“And this building sounds very interesting.”

“Oh yes, it is a building with many creatures telling their stories all at once so they don’t die with in their rooms with no legacy to be found on this earth.”

“And your mother provides these rooms?”

“With the skill her discernment will allow. Actually, that is no more. The building has long since been taken from us so Columbia could move in and make it over in its own image.”

“What image is that?” Lydia asked.

“Excellence,” Luther replied.

“Twice now you have used that word,” Lydia noted.

“We are all in mourning for something. The grave of mediocrity is a deep and smelly one.”

“Really, Luther.”

The sky is my canvas. The wind is my brush. Mistakes must be erased. So Luther thought but also did not say.

Margaretville

Fleischmans

Oneonta

Pine Hill Trailways

Shad roe

The next two evenings featured deep bombing runs perpetrated by the Van Dines. The explosions of the bunker busters reverberated through the hollow, and so it was for Luther to cover his ears as he huddled in a corner of the guesthouse with the lights off.

First it was Peter Cosmotelli, director of the Catskill Mountain Center, arriving with his wife and son, a recent graduate of Oberlin College and now in the fall a first year student at Columbia Law School. How those high SAT and LSAT numbers scorched Luther's skin down to the bones and then roasted his bones as well and boiled his blood.

The next night it was Operation Heywood Hart, the writer, and his wife Filigree Pensive, and their son, Heywood Hart Jr., who had taken degrees at Harvard and Oxford. Deeper in the grave of mediocrity did they try to bury Luther with their blitz.

“When you are a hanging string, you are a hanging string, ” Luther said to himself that night, in full acceptance of his status.

First in one corner of the guesthouse would he huddle, then in another, with the lights off, calling on the darkness to outdo itself, and then, in his delirium of worthlessness, extended the same shame that he had been lavishing on himself. In an instant he experienced the laughing thing being trained not on Lydia, who was spared because of her Radcliffe-ness, but on Peter by Heywood Hart, who mercilessly exposed the flimsiness of Peter's Rutgers degree, his shameful failure to win acceptance to the doctoral program at Harvard, and even more shameful dependency on Lydia's wealth.

Never had the laughing thing been sharper and more vicious, nature itself accompanying the pounding with sonic booms of thunder and rain that tore at the flesh like jagged strips of metal.

In the morning Lydia came to him. She did not tell him to choose life, as she had years ago, or with an ultimatum from Peter that he behave himself or vacate the property.

“We missed you,” she simply said.

In that moment it was revealed to Luther that he had died for Peter on the cross the night before, an abbreviated Calvary, that he had absorbed all the toxic rays that Heywood Hart was emitting so Peter would be free to engage with his guest in a self-respecting manner.

“I had a difficult night,” he said, hearing his mother as he spoke.

“Too much alone turns the heart to stone. You must end your isolation. Take down the antisocial sign hanging on this guesthouse,” Lydia commanded. “In the meantime, a woman just phoned. She said her name was Philomena and that you should get back to her as soon as possible about a development in the office. In doing so, she was letting me know, and I assume you as well, that this was a professional, not a personal, call. As you know, I speak the language of the French and have stayed in many of the capitals of the world, so let me just say that I am not without knowledge of the ways of the flesh.”

“Thank you. I believe I know the reason she has called. It is to say that she is leaving.”

“And you? Will you be arriving as she is leaving?” Again did she go the archness route with him.

“That I don’t know and it is likely that she doesn’t either.”

Luther went to the phone that very morning. He did not want for Philomena to think that he was dilly-dallying.

“Hello,” she said.

“It is I,” Luther replied, once more adopting his mother’s persona.

“I am leaving. I am going where it is greener. I am heading west, away from the exhausted East Coast.”

“To the land of the sun will you go with your paleness.”

“Thursday next will be my last day.”

“Is there anything more I should know?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“I feel you coming from a cold place.”

“A meltdown is not the thing right now.”

“Will I get to see it when it happens?”

“Who can say?”

*Celeste, I come to you too often, and though I try to space my visits I will come a thousand times a thousand times more. But this above is not the dialogue of caring people. It is the conversation of those who have died in life and who have lost the sense of words having consequence and true meaning. And yet I will find a way to continue and break on through to the other side, as the hideous Doors ordered us to do. We are in a different time of the moon altogether. Circles of connection have drawn tighter and we are assured of finding our way.*

In dreamland did the bombing continue, but now at the controls sat Jerry Jones-Nobleonian.

“Luther, I have found you in your private garden, Come out with your hands up and take it like the man you aren’t for the ruin you caused me and countless others. Come out and take it, I say, just take it.”

So did Jerry’s amplified voice come loud from the sky as Luther hunkered down in his cave. I have been driven to the barebones of civilization by the masters of technology, Luther thought. An image appeared on a screen of a slip of a girl with dirty blond hair and the smell of peeled bananas left too long in the sun. She was naked and bleeding from the place where she had been used and her big passive eyes were wedded to his. No, no, I will not walk in this path, Luther shouted, waking himself with his own noise.

Luther found Philomena in high perfectionism mode on her D-day. She had her whole operation to turn over, with endless memos to accompany the projects she would not be able to see through to completion. Behind her was the specter of Rafta Blackning, who wore funereal black as a gesture of mourning for her soon to be departed. It was no secret by now that Rafta was in love with Philomena, drawn not only to her beauty but to her seriousness of purpose. Excellence was always to be admired, and Rafta had the evidence of Philomena’s worthiness in her file.

But Philomena was not basking in a sense of her worth on this day. A force field enveloped her. "Serious business, no play," came the message, accompanied by hissing and snapping, like bacon grease spitting from the pan. Luther understood her body language sufficient to grasp that he would receive a hard slap were he to place his hands on her hips as he stood inches behind her at the copier. However hard it was not to reach out, the forces of restraint were in play.

For days afterward Rafta would pass his desk silently. Not a word did she have for him, and so it was left for him to recognize that Rafta was not only bereft but in a rage that Philomena had come and gone while he remained. She did not want him there, her face and spirit told him, and so a strategy was in order. I will be here without being here. Enervated must I be perceived, so her ire does not burn any brighter than its current reading.

But invisibility was not a state where he could linger long, not when other facets of his being came into play as if without his permission. One morning he found a manuscript on his desk with a note from Rafta that he should read and report on it. The young adult novel featured a boy growing up on a farm who ultimately faces the dilemma of whether to care for it as a student at the University of Wisconsin now that his father is ill. Clyde is aware of the urban stereotype of farmers as shit kicking hicks but he does not betray his father by joining the cool crowd in their laughing thing nor does he remonstrate with them. He simply and quietly affirms his father's integrity and intelligence as a man of the soil and of farmers in general. He was letting it be known that his father's blood was his blood and that he was coming to the defense of his honor, as

Prince Hal did in times of old when Harry Hotspur, who rode his horse on the perpendicular, threatened the very kingdom where Prince Hal's father had his reign.

And while Luther did not run to join the urban swells and support them in their mockery, it could not be said that he was a friend to the main character or the author who created him. I am decidedly on a fault-finding mission, he heard himself say, and heard himself as well acknowledge that he had borrowed from the arsenal of Peter Van Dine for adverbial force.

But Rafta Blackning was not on a fault-finding mission, at least in regard to the writer. However, that did not mean she was not on a confusion-engendering mission. Why? Because while she was willing him, Luther, into extinction, she was willing the writer, William Faddis, into recognition, if not fame.

Because honesty must be practiced if progress is to be made and we are not to live forever in the dimension of the dinky, it must be said that in the time of Philomena, Luther had put it to her that Rafta Blackning might be oriented toward the love that dare not speak its name, summoning a phraseology if not an emotion from the long ago, when *The Children's Hour* was playing in theaters, and lesbianism, or the hint of it, was on the silver screen. Because he could not keep his observation to himself, Philomena elevated above him with the quiet acknowledgment that Rafta Blackning might have, as she put it, "a lady friend," tingeing her response with a tone of reproach that Luther should feel the need to even bring the matter up. And Luther, though he smarted from her reproach, could see that he was deserving of it.

Still, if he had not yet fully arrived at the progressive mindset of Philomena, he could, once the hurting ceased, aspire to her level of acceptance. And it was not Waterloo. His army had not been left in stunning defeat on the field of battle. Rather was it a learning experience. Because Rafta Blackning was unto her own sex, it did not mean she had blackness in her heart for his. Rafta Blackning was an editor first and a lesbian second or a human being first and a lesbian second or a human being first and an editor second and with lesbianism holding a third position. Rafta Blackning was a woman of quality and had the integrity to recognize and acknowledge talent in others, notwithstanding their sex. As editor-in-chief it was her job to love good writing and strong narrative regardless of the source. There were things Rafta Blackning was causing him to understand as she shed him of the darkness of his misunderstanding.

“Your harshness in evaluating the manuscript disappoints me,” Rafta Blackning wrote, in a note she left on his desk in regard to the farm novel. She was telling him it was time to learn. She was telling him that she would serve as his workplace guide.

Among the men and women who occupied the adult spaces of Pilgore Press, those not dropped into the vat of smallness on the floor below, there was one you would have called the fair-haired boy in spite of yourself, as he was blond and sunny and Midwestern in his affect, but there were other currents passing through him, such as a Harvard BA and gayness, giving his tall and blond and just off Sunnybrook Farms look a twist, a coloring, that made you pause at the word *innocence* in regard to him even as you sought to embrace it. His name was John Sally, and in terms of time and space, there was one



more than any other where he stood in Luther's mind, that being Waverly Place, along which Luther headed on a Saturday night. It was there, as he was about to turn down the steps of the church to the basement for an RoR meeting, that their eyes met. And so it was that they were compelled, by virtue of their familiarity with each other in a work-related context, to have a few words with each other, though it was painfully clear that the discomfort John Sally summoned in him as he stood luminous on the pavement in the dark night was no greater than that he summoned in John Sally. John Sally lived in the full embrace of the world, and had the full aptitude to receive it, while the same could not be said for Luther. So it was that John Sally was spared the awareness of Luther's destination that night, and how right that he should be, as John Sally's eyes were not calibrated for the sight of Luther's bones and overall state of being.

In that same month Luke revealed to Luther a heaviness on his heart. He did not sing to Luther "That's How Strong My Love Is" because of the particular love that was weighing on him and which Luther might receive in a dubious light. Erin, daughter of Meghan, older sister of Rose, had passed away, though still in her twenties, and because Luke had lain with her many times and Erin had lived with him and get it on Brenda in their time of connection, he had cause to feel her loss.

"How did she come to be no more?" Luther asked.

"What?" Luke replied. He had sudden ire in his voice, the alarm bells of suspicion quickly sounding.

"How did she come to expire?"

“Hey, fuck you. I’m onto your shit.”

“I’m only asking in the hope of gaining information.”

“No you’re not. I hear you being judgmental. And that weird fucking crap of yours. Expire? Expire? What was she, a fucking lease?”

“I’m just seeking the light.”

“Oh fuck you with that shit too. You don’t care about anyone.”

Luther had the impulse to remonstrate with his brother, but he refrained because it was true that his nation state had its peculiarities. “What did you want to tell me?”

“It hurts. That’s what I wanted to tell you. We had a real thing going on. I could have done her good if she had stayed with me but her mother saw to it that she didn’t.”

“Witches have their seasons and their reasons,” Luther said, struggling to connect.

“That’s it. I punch you in the face the next time I see you.”

In dreamland Luther hung from a high-flying aircraft but even in the heavens he could not avoid the oppressive guilt machine of Jerry-Jones Nobleonian. And there was an unspecified contest with another man, Jerry making it clear whom he was rooting for. And Luke was there too for him to fight with when he was supposed to love him.

Nor was his love for Vera where it was supposed to be, given he was her older brother. She came to him near midnight, unannounced, with her husband Maury. He was startled, annoyed. The song “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away,” came to him, as if to comment on the distance that had grown between them. She arrived with a weapon of the

world, her PhD course of study at Columbia. And Maury already had his doctorate, in mathematics, no less. Clearly they were from the land of the strong.

It wasn't for Luther to comment on the lateness of the hour and that he and Vera needed their sleep that they might be orderly in their lives. The choice was between excessive politeness and open warfare, with antagonism beginning when she felt you were not with her. There was no middle ground.

A warming trend might have developed, but Vera said two things that night Luther found disturbing. One regarded Moses. Luther could only feel sad that Moses' opportunity to enter Williams College as a transfer student had been withdrawn by the college because he had failed to make up for incompletes in summer school after his suspension for the balance of the spring semester.

"He wouldn't have fit in at Williams College," Vera said.

"How so?" Luther asked.

"He didn't have the background for it."

"Is that right? What sort of background did he need?"

"A better one."

But did she have the background to be at Columbia University? Granted, she was attending graduate, not undergraduate, school, but so what? Afraid that he was now in dangerous territory, he didn't take it any further.

But then Rose, to whom Luke was now married, came up.

"She doesn't deserve the disability pension she is receiving," Vera said.

“How is that? She was shot in the head. The brain aneurysm she suffered can kill her at any time and she has lost a good deal of her mental capacity, making it difficult for her to find employment.”

“She should have known better than to go to her husband, given his violence.”

“That doesn’t sound quite right,” Luther said, in spite of himself.

“Doesn’t it?”

“Well, no. Her life is so dramatically changed, now and forever.”

“Whatever you say. We should be leaving, Maury,” Vera said, her soreness not allowing her to stay.

His sister’s attitudes made her hard to trust, Luther said to Sarah that night. “Do you understand why?”

“She’s a problem,” Sarah said. “I guess I should be glad she isn’t mine.”

*Lies and more lies, Celeste. Sarah was understanding of how it was that Vera was a dark and threatening force in my life and sought to support me in my struggles with my younger sibling. I am struggling, as you can see. One can only beg the indulgence of the reader for so long, especially in this age, when economy is everything. But then, is it possible that the need is not so terribly great to concern myself with what the reader thinks or doesn't think? Would indifference be folly if such an attitude of subservience to the reader were demanded of me? This is my last go-round, Celeste, the final chance to make right what has been wrong, and so it has nothing to do with the reader and everything to do with me. Now you could say a savage beating is in order for one with*

*such a self-centered attitude, but if that is so, then let the blows begin, as when is the body more important than one's soul? And yes, I hear it asked by the entirely dismissive what page after page of lies and exaggerations and pathetic distortions have to do with the soul, but let it be said that the truth is a journey more than a destination. Just as Con Edison, our public utility, once proclaimed, "Dig we must for a greater New York," so must I proclaim "Dig we must for a greater Luther Garatdjian." And yes, I hear the chorus of skeptics also say, "What does greatness have to do with the truth?" But what I say is that in a world of lies, greatness—genuine greatness—is the truth. We must go on, Celeste, because we can go on. Let us see despair for what it is—a pit stop for the hose of rejuvenation to be applied to our being. We are one, Celeste, we are one, laughing at the idea of fractiousness where unity abounds.*

The work week came, the first full one without Philomena Swangner. He moved into her office and closed the door and lay down on the floor. Outside he could hear footsteps and bits of conversation. The office had no window, but that just eliminated the possibility, unlikely as it was, of jumping. Some minutes later, he got busy with bits of tape for the more stylish desk he had inherited, so he could continue to live in the delicious knowledge of his secrets. As the day progressed there would be more time to lie on the floor, and he would be sure to do so at different angles to the door. He was home, in the sanctuary where he could truly live. And that evening he would have his RoR meeting to attend in the West Village.

It was everything not to go to Rafta and confess his inadequacy, to thank her for her generosity in allowing him to stay on but also to insist that he should leave, as everyone had a station in life and it was wrong, completely wrong, to fill positions with people who were unqualified for them. But she had other things on her mind. She gave him flap copy to write. Eager to make good, after several hours he turned over to her his draft. But the day ended and Rafta left the office without getting back to him about his effort. Surely his life was on the line and he was failing.

In dreamland that night he took a great fall. He got in a car he had no business being in and a wild ride ensued, resulting in the confiscation of all his privileges. And in the morning, on awakening, did the truth of his life come to him. Children's books was the car he had gotten into and the ride was proving ruinous, as it took away the opportunity for any sort of manhood.

We will not be a party of two, Rafta let him know the following morning, with the arrival of a rotund black woman named Roller Cormona-Hickson, who would be replacing Isadora as the department secretary.

"I have seen you before," Luther said, by way of greeting, for she too had been in the adult trade division on the floor above as well.

"Don't worry about it none. I've seen you, too," she replied.

"What I meant was..."

"Don't need to tell me what you meant. I *know* what you meant. Now I've got work to do, and assume you do too. You do have work to do, don't you?"

"Oh, you can be sure of that."

“Well, then, why don’t you get on to it and let me do the same. And while you’re at it, why not close your door so we don’t have to be looking at each other unnecessarily.”

In this way did Roller Cormona-Hickson aggress on Luther, seeking to roll him up behind tight borders.

Though Luther had not exchanged words with Roller in their time in the land of the adults, an impression had formed that she allowed hostility and truculence to be her guide. She comes here from the land of the adults, from which she has been exiled, but she also comes from the land of the aggrieved, as do I, Luther realized that morning.

What else he learned about Roller Cormona-Hickson was that she commuted from New Rochelle, where she lived with her mother and father in the house she had grown up in, and that she offered no apology for not establishing an independent domicile though she was already past thirty. Why should she throw away her money on rent when she had a big room to herself in the family house? Her domain was less the world of books than TV; she openly admitted to being a captive of prime time programming, which her parents equally embraced.

Luther was not kind to Roller in his thoughts. He saw her as hiding from life’s challenges, and her obesity and lifestyle linked him in his mind with Hannah. But it was also apparent that Rafta did not see her new employee through the same critical lens. Roller was fine, perfect, in Rafta’s view. She had made a sharp evaluation of Roller’s abilities, as she had of Luther’s, and what she saw was that neither of them had the drive or the intelligence to supplant her. She was safe, fully dominant, in a department with two drones.

Home improvements were needed: paint the bathroom, build additional shelving, create a more comfortable living area by getting rid of the weird lofa bed and replacing it with a real sofa; shampoo the carpet; weather-strip the windows in anticipation of winter.

And yes, purchase a wedding ring for Sarah. That would be a home improvement, too. But Sarah was not enthusiastic when he prodded her to pick one out. It was not an embarrassment to her that she did not wear one, as it was to him.

Sarah's mind was on higher things. She had been given her own show at the Woodstock Artists' Association. Among the works she exhibited was a full frontal nude. There was an attitude of blame in the painting, as if it were Exhibit A in the prosecution of God for making her as she was, half male, half female, her face a mask of peeve and her hands turned outward, as if to say, what is a person to do?

The painting put him in the ponder place as to his own body and its sorrowful history, how he had been ashamed to go swimming with Jane Thayer and the neighborhood boys in fear that they would mock him for his bones and Jane Thayer would leave him for a boy with a more robust physique, or the difficulties the shape of his head had caused him. The words "food for thought" took on new meaning.

Now the word "collective" also sent him to the ponder place because it did not signify Leon "I eat my bread sprinkled with salt" Trotsky and proletarian struggle. Rather, it conjured the odious word "failure," not the glitter of a commercial gallery. But Luther raised up on his mind for going on that path. He gave it a good talking to, saying



if he had betrayed Sarah with his body, it would not do to betray her with his mind by suddenly questioning her talent. That he must not do.

On this particular weekend up at Camp, he reserved his judgmental ire for Peter, whom he observed making reconnaissance flights with his fork over the platters of food set out on the table on the terrace—potato salad, pickled beets, cold cuts, sliced tomatoes, and cucumbers—before pronging them casually and delivering his piece de resistance, the slight scrape of the tines against his front teeth with each load the fork delivered. His face was cast in a smile of playful mischief, leaving no doubt as to his intent. But Luther did not rain down his fire on him. He kept his guns in full restraint, hard as it was. And it was hard, for all the pain of the universe was contained in that scraping sound.

Bruce Bill had not forgotten Luther. It is not easy to put from one's mind someone who has given you all his love. It should be noted that Luther had heard the song "All My Loving," but it had not played a role in his love for Bruce Bill, which had its strongest roots in fear.

*"What was that fear, Luther? Can you tell us?"*

*"That if I allowed it to win out over love, if I lived in fear of Bruce Bill for his fancy education and high board score numbers and his prominent place in the world of Cromartie Wonders, I would be separated from the world of success, as I had been when I ran from Tom Smits back in the long ago. I saw that I must replace this fear with admiration and thus seek a humility that did not seem to be my own."*

*"And why did you do this?"*

*“So I could live and live. So I did not have to die anymore than I had.”*

“You’re in the phone book. I looked you up,” Bruce Bill said.

“Is that right?” Luther asked.

“You weren’t in the old one.”

“Strange that they would shut me out. I do feel a need for my name to be seen, even if I am not. I don’t like the idea of being unlisted on the earth. It is like being dead.”

“How are things going with Rafta?”

“She has fire in her voice and in her face, and even when she doesn’t, there is the threat of it.”

“She is under a lot of pressure. She must wonder what she got into when she took the job, given the chaos she inherited and then the warehouse collapse.”

“How is your job? I have this idea that you have gone where the sun is.”

“Well, so far it is warm, not hot, but we’ll see,” Bruce Bill said.

Bruce Bill was warning Luther with his laughter to be careful when he wandered into the land of metaphor lest he get burned. That was territory all Bruce Bill’s own, as he had studied French literature. Luther took under advisement Bruce Bill’s subtle signal. He did not want to summon his friend’s bad side, as he had need of him in the loneliness he was feeling.

And yet he did have a question. It seemed to hang in the air. Why had Bruce Bill gone to the phone book to check for his existence? Was he saying that he had an interest beyond the confines of the workplace in Luther? Was he, behind his smiling demeanor, hiding predatory intent? Was he of that mind toward Luther? Luther was aware that he

was rushing his words when speaking to Bruce Bill and, in so doing, running from his concern and forfeiting any possibility of gravitas, for that went only to those who could sit in the silence, not those who went on and on like prattling ninnies. And then he committed a no-no. That was the precise word, or double word, that he heard in his mind. He ordered a glass of red wine, and then he ordered another, and in his mildly loopy state, he heard these other words, *double your pleasure, double your fun*, only they were spoken savagely.

Once a pickle, never a cucumber again.

If we don't pick up the first drink, we can't get drunk.

He had made a mistake, and yet he had no fear that the floodgates would now open and he would be swept out to sea. Besides, he wasn't truly sober anyway, not so long as he was on those pills he took four times a day. They provided a pharmacological, not a spiritual, buffer, and continued his old belief in oral magic. He was like a kid lapping the block on a bicycle with training wheels while others rode theirs without them.

Luther was aware of being unkind to Sarah with his mouth. He said she was singing a sad song and singing it too often, and it was bringing him down. But Sarah had fire of her own. She said he wasn't there for her any more than her parents or Dr. Frodkey were there for her. Everybody had forsaken her, she said, and began to weep bitterly, her body shaking, and then there was nothing to do but hold her and feel her sorrow and his own,

and it was like when he was a child and his mother would cry and cry and the world would end until she stopped.

*Even so, Celeste, my thoughts turned to you. Amid all the heaviness and gloom, you were the pilot light of love burning within me.*

Thoroughness. The word had meaning in his life even if he had been something of a flibbertigibbet. If he might be allowed to say, thoroughness was the driving force for order. And so it was necessary to return to the matter of Bruce Bill, that he be presented in a fuller dimension proximate not with his innate worth but with Luther's sense of him.

Bruce Bill had not hidden from Luther, or anyone, so far as Luther knew, that he had completed his undergraduate studies at Ithaca College, in the Finger Lakes region of New York State, a small school living in the shadow of the great Cornell University. But of his three academic affiliations, starting with high school, it was the last to which he made reference, at least to Luther, and only in passing. Far more did he care to be seen wearing the colors of the Ivy League. The question inevitably entered Luther's mind how a graduate of the exceedingly great boarding school Choate, which placed the vast majority of its students in elite colleges and universities, should wind up at a fine but lesser school. And so it came to Luther that Bruce Bill had suffered a wound in his adolescence. He was not, in his mind, all that he could have been; in fact, Luther suspected, Bruce Bill was quite familiar with the place of sorrow, to which he was likely, along with Luther, a frequent visitor if not a full-time resident.

Luther was not proud of this current in his mind and the direction in which it took him, but it was the only mind he had and so he resigned himself to going with its flow. At the same time he stayed open to the possibility of new facts in the case of Bruce Bill, and all other cases for that matter, as they were all, he sensed, subject to review.

Luther's birthday came, and once again, as if he had never witnessed her tears, he raised up on Sarah, not to the point of immeasurable castigation, but with a slice of peeve on Third Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street. It was to be Friday night at the movies. Sarah wanted to see *Peppermint Soda*, a French film, while he had his heart set on *The Onion Field*, a crime thriller.

"It is my birthday," Luther said, and while he didn't sound as insistent as Leslie Gore in singing "It's My Party," he was nevertheless abashed to have put himself forward in such an ungracious key. What good was giving himself the recognition he wanted to come from her? What groundwork for an evening of happiness was that laying? He had kept the fact of his birthday a secret from Rafta. He would not have been able to bear a fuss being made over him in the workplace, and besides, he might then have to reciprocate. But to go entirely unnoticed in the universe on his natal day was not quite right.

"*Onion Field* it is," Sarah said. She did not make him feel worse than he did, though in his mind he heard himself offer to beat himself with a stick.

He could console himself that they were going to a happy theater in a happy neighborhood, for that is how he saw that strip along Third Avenue, with Bloomingdale's

on one side and the Baronet and Coronet theaters on the other. Normal, modern theaters, for normal, modern people. But the film was not normal. Specifically, the shooting of a good man, a man of the law who lived for order, was not normal.

“I don’t like that world. It’s sordid,” Sarah said.

Sore did it, Luther thought. Sore had brought them to that depressing movie.

Luther had a family and now he would be seeing them somewhere else than in his head, though they were not very different in the flesh than in his thoughts. So he realized as his mother, in the company of Vera and her husband, Maury, and Hannah mounted the stairs.

“These steps are meant for climbing, but you needn’t worry. They will never climb all over you,” Luther said, suddenly in the grip of Nancy Sinatra and her hideous song about boots.

“What is that you say?” his mother asked, winded by the ascent.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” Luther said, taking her arm.

“My oh my. There are men lying in their own filth out there on the street,” she went on. “Is nothing to be done about this?”

“The police remove them in winter so they don’t freeze,” Luther said, “or I think that is what they do.” His mother did not bring up her father, though he was surely on her mind.

“What a big space you have. It must cost a fortune to heat,” Hannah said. She had her own way of talking, like a stereotype of a wearily tough and complaining New York Jewish woman, Luther realized, not for the first time.

“The heat is not one of the best things about this loft,” Sarah said.

“But it gives you enough space for your work,” Vera said.

“Oh, it’s perfect for me,” Sarah said.

He had invited them in a moment of confidence, but then came the fear. Would the wooden straight back chairs be comfortable enough for his mother? He couldn’t ask her to sit on the lofa bed, which more and more resembled a giant purple turd. Would Hannah erupt? Would Vera beat him to death with the PhD she was earning? Would his sisters be mean to Sarah? Would they later gossip about the weight she had gained? Would Moses decide to punch him in the face?

But his mother was fine sitting on a straight back wooden chair and it was for her to even reminisce briefly, saying, “I was very mischievous as a child.” And Maury was his usual kind and thoughtful self and Vera was civil. The only sour note occurred when Luther asked Hannah why Moses hadn’t yet arrived.

“Do I ask you personal questions?” she said, raising up on him. It was the way of his sisters to bury hatchets in the heads of men.

“You consider that a personal question?”

“Don’t get fresh with me. I know what you’re up to and I will tell my son if this continues. Do you hear me?”

“How could I not?”

“When you are rude you are supposed to apologize, but not you.”

“But Hannah, what would poor Luther apologize for? He simply asked a question. Can we not be reasonable?” his mother said.

“He doesn’t know what it is to be a parent. He doesn’t know anything but to be fresh. And he doesn’t care. Does he know where my son is? I don’t. I feel I have lost him.”

Exactly, Luther thought. When it was your big fat hope to secure Moses to your premises.” Luther did what he had never before been able to do. He raised up on Hannah right back, saying, “I have had enough of your stuff. You have been trying to crush me with a mountain of guilt since I came from the womb. You live to make your life and your son’s life my fault and everybody else’s fault. You must turn on the lights in your mind and see what it is that you have been doing.”

Some would take such rebuke to heart and fall down dying, but Hannah was not of this kind. She took her fire to the next level, as ire was her domain.

“You watch your mouth with me. I have answers you will not like.”

“Ushtah. Ushtah,” his mother said, as in days of old.

But fire is fire and ire is ire.

“You will pay for this. You will pay and pay. Nobody deprives my son. Nobody,” Hannah said, as she gathered up her things and headed for the door.

“I am so sorry,” his mother whispered out of earshot of Hannah, as she and Maury and Vera also collected their things. “She is not her normal self today. She is under stress. We must go to her and comfort her.”

Luther waited for his mother to use the word *condition*, as in “Hannah has a condition,” but it was not to be on this day.



*Celeste, let it be said, strange as it may seem, that in this time Hannah was losing her absolute blackness in my mind's eye. A hint of gray was coming into the picture, notwithstanding her outburst. I had not seen her as a human being so much as a vengeance machine. I had not seen her as a mother in her own right but as a thing who lived with her mother. A change was occurring. A small one maybe, but noticeable, and not unwelcome.*

*Candor must continue to have its place with us. In dreamland did you chase me with an uncapped fountain pen. No matter that I ran my very fastest, you would catch up and jab me in the rear with the nib. To add to my pain, you told me casually that my brother, Luke, had been over to lie with you, this after you came across an old newspaper clipping that had me listed for merely honorable mention on the all-city private school basketball team.*

It came as a surprise that Rafta should throw him a lifeline. No, she did not sing “Rescue the Perishing” as she tossed it. She merely said, “You should know that you write very good copy,” referring to the jacket copy she had asked him to provide her with the week before. Alone in his office he lay down next to the locked door and rewarded himself with a good twenty minutes of leisure. How delicious to lie on one side of a locked door while others were going about their business on the other side. And he did the same that evening after Roller and Rafta had departed, so he could have this period of unseen intimacy with his surroundings in different parts of the day.

Rafta had her morning love and her evening love. She was the first one into the office, where she could be seen buried in the financial section of the *New York Times*. The love that kept her warm and happy in daylight hours was generated by a rise in her stock holdings while a downturn brought clouds to the sunniest day. Her investments were her garden. It was only natural that she should want them to grow.

How like my aunt she is, Luther thought, a woman so enterprising and unto herself and unafraid to walk alone, without a man by her side. What was there to do but fall down in admiration of her? But unlike his aunt, she would not be shunted onto the tracks of Simon Weill. She had her own rails on which she would run forever and ever. She was pledged to the world, not to the old rugged cross.

And when evening came she had the glitter of the opera at Lincoln Center, where in the dark she would be moved to tears by beautiful arias sung by coloraturas with soaring voices.

At times Luther would worry that New York and America were not good enough for Rafta. And so, how startled and happy it made him that she should approve of Jimmy Carter and call him a “good” man. Even more shocking was her embrace of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, by Richard Yates, a copy of which he saw her with. It was cause for him to almost fall down dying that she should cross over to the adult realm with a book on such a theme and acknowledge, even indirectly, that loneliness, whether howling or murmuring, was a presence within her.

In the land of psychosis there grows a garden. These words came to him in this time.

There was no going forward or backward with them.

From the vantage point of a retaining wall a man read: “And other agencies of doom rallied round to support her in her aggrieved assertion of absolute probity, but he wasn’t having any of it, not for a single second.”

*Now Celeste, there was much trouble for my fragile vessel on the waters of life, and this must not be denied. Though it might seem laughable to some, I had not solved the typewriter problem, and so took it where I must, to wonderful Dr. Rosner. To him I confessed my distress that harmony, despite my best efforts, did not reign in regard to these writing machines. To his credit, he did not raise up on me with an annihilating laugh at my superficiality. And to my relief no apprehension showed in his face or his demeanor that I had brought up a subject which, the year before, I had used as an excuse for declaring outright war on him, engendering his now famous reply, “You don’t need a new typewriter. You need a new life.” No, no. He took my distress seriously, refraining from raining down the judgment thing that Saul Bellow had when he dismissed excessive concerns about writing implements as immoral. “It’s complicated,” Dr. Rosner simply said. “It will take time to explore.”*

*We must take stock, Celeste. We must review, if clarity is to be ours. At this point my armamentarium consisted of an Olivetti Portable Lettera 32 and for insurance against the tides of time I had purchased a second one. But this first typewriter brought*

*new understanding, for the color was a darker shade of green that gave it a dignity the second one lacked. And it had metal parts where the first one had substituted plastic. And though the Courier 12 typeface was the same for both, clearly the first made a stronger impression on the page than the second and furthermore had no trouble typing in a perfectly straight line. No way did such a flimsy second machine have the staying power needed to accompany me through eternity. On closer scrutiny I saw that whereas the first machine was made in Italy, the home of the Olivetti, the second had been manufactured in Mexico, where the workmanship as well as the materials may have been of a lesser quality.*

*Now Celeste, as we may also have discussed, there is genuine spiritual instruction in the song "Love the One You're With," and that instruction can be applied to things as well as persons, but such an accomplishment proved beyond my powers. The result was emotional turmoil of the first order, sleepless nights, and looming insanity. I was in a hell of my own making, careless consumer that I had been.*

*There was a walk-in closet in the loft, and there I thought to put the offending machine so it would no longer tarnish my mind, but it had the power to call me back, and so I found a farther point in the loft in which to banish it, but there it called to me as well with its song of torment.*

*"Chien, chien," I said, driven to a foreign tongue by my outrage, and pulled the treacherous beast from the shelf where it had been assigned. "Vous quittez cette domicile. Comprenez vous, chien?"*

*Through the streets I dragged the little beast to the store where I had purchased it.*

*“Un fauve,” I said.*

*“Excuse me,” the owner replied.*

*“The wild beast of mockery you have sold to me, a creature driven to this extreme by recognition of its own inadequacy.”*

*“Speak English, pal.”*

*And so I did, Celeste. He was not a rogue, but a man of solid parts, able to sustain a business for many years. I was the one of inferior parts. And if he was tight in offering me a mere ten dollars in exchange for the undesirable machine, it was a transaction I could, with some struggle, come to accept, as when I left the store and passed from one street to the next, the voice of the beast seemed to grow fainter in my ears.*

In dreamland Bill Walton lay dead on his back in his uniform on the basketball court. A huge knife had been plunged into his belly. Luther did not mourn his demise. He was tired of the endless infatuation and of carrying his hero through one injury after another. He tore up the record he had been keeping during Walton's time with the San Diego Clippers. Enough of vicariousness. Enough.

But he was not quiet in his mind. It upset him to read in the book review section of the *New York Times* that filthy ones like Updike and Ann Beattie were publishing new books, and that those who had previously been without filth were now being turned to filth with their debut novels. Such smug faces they displayed at having arrived. It is because I cannot put the blocks together that I am being punished with failure. Is that not the truth? And if I cannot put them together in the pattern that I am asked to replicate by

the psychologist, then how am I to put together a story, let alone a novel? I have assigned myself a task at which I can only fail and fail. Such were the thoughts that captured Luther's mind on a Sunday morning and which sent him back into dreamland that afternoon, where he stole a metal part from someone's typewriter to replace the plastic part on his own. On a hill he was approached by two men with the implacable finality of murder in their eyes, but he woke in a sweat before the deed could be done.

Death comes to the thief, and that is all I am, Luther thought, an appropriator of other people's lives for my own purposes. Or are the metal parts and plastic parts really private parts that I have secured for my own pleasure-seeking purposes? Oh, to be a lamppost in Denver, he further thought, borrowing from Sonny Liston.

Then Claire came to the loft, as a further sign that the east was opening to the west, as Japan had to Commodore Perry in the previous century. She did not raise up on him for any of his crimes, large or small, including his sex overture to her that night in the long ago that he came home to his Hell's Kitchen apartment to find that the mayhem men of the street had knocked down his door, driving him to seek refuge with the Van Dines until the morning.

Claire's birthday had come, and Sarah had a love for her older sister that overrode her ire, Claire being a part of her and she being a part of Claire. It did not matter on this day that Sarah had suffered the wound of displacement by Claire in the family. A gift of earrings she made to Claire that Claire should know she loved her.

Claire was beyond where she had been before. She was working toward a master's degree in social work at Columbia University. Because she was phi beta kappa and lived in the land of the high board score, no door had the right or the desire to stay closed to her.

“My gift to Claire will be the gift of departure. As she is arriving, I will be leaving, like the trains at the great railway stations of the world.” So Luther said to himself. The two would have dinner down in Chinatown, and it was clear in Luther's understanding that the evening would be more relaxed for them without him. Besides, he had his life to save, and that meant a doubleheader of meetings at the temple, first a beginners meeting and then an open discussion meeting.

How peaceful the walk up Lafayette Street past the Public Theater and Cooper Union at the midpoint of the weekend. Having the meetings to look forward to, he felt safe and secure from the emotional pressures of the workplace. Tomorrow, Sunday, would be different; the anxiety would build to an intolerable level, but for now he had the buffer that he needed. He could simply arrive and take a seat and no one would ask anything of him. And if people didn't seek him out, that was OK. He had brought along a book to read in the time before the meeting started and during the break between the first and second meeting. And he could busy himself making a cup of coffee and treating himself to a couple of the cookies that were laid out.

Yes, he saw people who had come to the meetings in the same month he had, and he felt sad seeing them raise their hands and announce their sober day counts and even begin to take service positions and sit in front of the group and lead the meeting, but it

was OK. He was where he was, a bit isolated, to be sure, like that bubble around the man, the Colgate protective shield, in the toothpaste ad that had played on TV some years before.

Some at the meeting had become familiar faces. There was the man of deep loneliness, who had substituted nuts and bolts for cufflinks toward the end of his drinking days. And there was the gaunt, pale man who paused, thoughtfully, between words. And there was the space taker, who sat in the front row and spread his massive thighs. And there was the teapot lady, who brought her own refreshment to the meeting. And there was the old Irishman, sober for forty years, who would say, “You have to stay sober in order to get sober.” And there was the burly Russian man, who would raise his hand and say, “Biggest war I fought was war with myself. Biggest victory I win is victory over myself.” And there was that annoying man from Brooklyn, who would say things to Luther like “How you doing with the pot? How you doing with the pills?” And there was the man of the perpetual smile who told everyone when he shared that he had attended Cal Tech and was, at best, a pantywaist drinker. And there were the pretty women Luther would have loved if only they would have let him, though you weren’t supposed to do that in your first year.

And there were the stories, of life and love gone wrong, and the redemption that followed.

And there was the walk home afterward, in the solitude of his being, and the great joy that filled him along the dark streets back to the Bowery. Sarah was still absent from the premises. Evidently, she had much to talk about with her sister. The only sign of



Claire's presence was the empty wine bottle in the sink, which Sarah had rinsed free of any trace of its content so that, as her mother had said, the beast in Luther might not rise again. Luther was not offended; rather was he grateful, as he did not wish to be in harm's way anymore.

Now he had read *The Tenants of Moonbloom*, by Edward Lewis Wallant, and so understood what a tumescence in a bathroom wall could mean for the movement of one's bowels. But the bathroom wall in the loft had no such swelling. Its problem was a hole the size of a bowling ball, and in dreamland Luther had been alerted to the movement of rats, legions of the long-tailed filthy ones, for no other purpose than to deploy throughout the loft and seize it for their own omnivorous purpose.

And so, in the waking state, Luther did the manly thing, assembling plaster powder and a trowel and a hammer and sandpaper and other ingredients for success so the border against darkness would be sealed. But his resolve ran down when he could not mix the plaster with water to the right thickness, and so it was for Sarah to come to his aid and finish the job, as once, on a lake, she had to take the oars from him and row them to shore.

From time to time he would remember, as he did on this particular Monday morning, the warning he had received that a move to children's books would stereotype him as qualified only for that realm of publishing. Once again he saw that it was a world he wasn't born to, a world with some charm, for sure, but somehow unsuitable to his nature.

He hadn't been read to as a child. Picture books were not an event for him. They did not explode in his consciousness as they did for Rafta and other adults who had been exposed to them as children. He lacked the capacity for wonder such books brought, though not entirely. He did remember his amazement at the illustration of Rapunzel letting down her hair in the Golden Book that had been given him as he lay in his parents' bed after having been struck by a car when a child and the image of Pinocchio's nose growing with each lie he told had been cause for wonder. And the four-color illustration of an organ grinder with his monkey near a tall red-brick wall fronted by trees remained vivid in his consciousness as the ideal environment in which he would want to live.

I am a man with a title and no real job, Luther thought that morning. He could manage all right when he had only to deal with Cromartie Wonders, but there was a luncheon Rafta expected him to attend that day for a celebrated children's books author at the Gramercy Park Hotel. How at ease Rafta was among the gathered from the world of children's books and how estranged, by comparison, he felt. People seemed to sense his discomfort and ignore him as he moved from cluster to cluster, an atom incapable of bonding.

The executive editor of children's books from Simon and Schuster addressed the assembled, offering a witty and glowing introduction of the celebrated author of thirty young adult novels. Luther drifted to the bar and poured red wine into a plastic cup. My old friend, he thought, as the burgundy warmed and comforted him. But the refill left him feeling sluggish and thick-tongued, even more ill equipped for socializing, and so he slipped out the door.

“I believe I warned you that mixing alcohol and Elavil is dangerous,” Dr. Rosner said to him that evening.

“Dangerous how?”

“Dizziness. High blood pressure. Coma. Death.”

“How great is the risk?”

“How great does it have to be?”

Luther understood the meaning of the word *rhetorical*, and even if the question was not quite in that category, it sent him not to the ponder place but to his notebook, in which he wrote “It’s the first drink, Sweetheart.” Many, many times did he write these words so he might get back on the sobriety track and followed up by writing “One day at a time” an equal number of times so balance could be his. Because when he went to his meetings it pained him that others were rising in their day count and taking service positions while he continued to flounder. And because there was only one letter separating “flounder” from “founder,” he recognized that it was imperative he right his ship and right it now. This he resolved out loud in the loft, startling Sarah from her nap.

“What did you say?” she called down, from the loft bed height.

“I was just taking care of business. It is all done now, you can rest assured,”

Luther said, and would say no more.

*Now Celeste, we must be kind, to ourselves as well as others, and silence the dark angel when it sings in the key of violence. Too many the times that savage fists have battered faces that deserve better.*

He did not care for Roller Carmona-Hickson, and on this day when Rafta was out of the office, he cared for her even less. All morning she had been on the phone, speaking in a muffled voice. Luther guessed the party on the other end was her mother. Even with his door closed, he sensed the continuing contact, experiencing it as a form of torture Carmona was purposely inflicting on him. He saw her in a giant diaper devouring one Mallomar after another in front of the family TV set.

And yet his disgust got hidden away in her presence. That afternoon he thought to have an amiable conversation with her. Having learned that she was part Cuban, he asked if she didn't think Fidel Castro had turned out to be a disappointment, given the widespread repression in the country.

“So let me ask you. Do you see any black Cubans jumping into boats to get to Florida?”

“I can't say I've noticed, one way or another.”

“Then maybe you need to pay more attention.” Roller raised her eyebrows to punctuate her statement.

Trying to get past his hurt, Luther said, “Prime time TV might not offer the options it does here. You would likely get the loudmouthed one, Senor Loquacity, holding forth whatever channel you turn to.”

“Don't be in my business as to what TV I watch and don't watch. Understand?”

Rafta stopped by the office at 5 pm, by which time Roller had left for the day. She was full of praise for Luther.

“I have all the confidence in the world in you,” she said.

Her words terrified him, as now he had nowhere to go but down in her estimation, and that was only a matter of time. Unnerved by the good vibes and unable to think of a thing to say to break the unbearable silence that had descended, Luther offered up Roller.

“I’m a little concerned about her. I wonder if there isn’t something more that she could do,” he actually heard himself say.

Rafta paused before speaking, scrutinizing his face to better understand what it was she had just heard. It seemed her own features darkened but then lightness returned, whether feigned or genuine he couldn’t say.

“Perhaps you might think of things for her to do,” Rafta responded.

“Well, yes, of course. I will try.”

“Very well, then. Good night.”

“She is a deplorable human being. I don’t care if she is the only black woman in the company. I hate her so much. She is vile.” he complained to Dr. Rosner that evening.

“That’s a pretty strong reaction to a departmental secretary.”

“I liked Isadora, or even if I didn’t always like her, at least she was capable and trying to have her own life and not some hideous woman-child who couldn’t leave home.”

“Roller lives at home?”

“It’s all she talks about, what she and her parents watched on TV the night before. It sounds like death.”

“If it is, it is her death, not yours. The real question is why you are so focused on her.”

“Hannah, my oldest sister, never left home. She caused a lot of problems for me and my brother. That hand of hers. Always ready to hit with it.”

“Roller has hit you?”

“She has hit me with her words, suggesting it is so wonderful in Cuba for those who are dark-skinned. I don’t see her and her parents hopping on a boat to Havana.”

“Is it possible what you see as Roller’s idleness causes you to question your own level of responsibility within the department?”

“I’m a nobody. I understand that. But Jesus, can’t I at least be a better nobody than that blimp?”

“It’s not your responsibility to take care of Roller, whatever personal issues she might have. That is Rafta’s job. Did you tell me that she is the only black person in the company?”

“Except for the mailroom.”

“Race must also be an issue. It cannot be easy to adapt to an environment of overwhelming whiteness.”

In that moment Luther felt Dr. Rosner’s judgment of him and the weight and force of Jewish morality. The chronic disposition to champion the underdog and the oppressed was something to admire. Dr. Rosner’s hero, after all, had been Jackie Robinson, a fighter, a trailblazer, struggling to perform in arenas where he was the recipient of pure, unrelenting hatred on the field and in the stands in the ballparks across America and yet never giving in. Dr. Rosner had a moral compass that he lacked, a natural ability to see people fairly. And it was somewhat the same with Rafta. Her expression had turned

severe when he brought up Roller because she was put off by his judgment. You need to take a look at yourself, both she and Dr. Rosner appeared to be saying.

*Now, Celeste, Gene B. Goode was someone at Pilgore Press I have touched on only in passing, as I touch on most people only in passing, but the ground action that Dr. Rosner took on my transgressions against Roller Carmona-Hickson and the facial smack down Rafta laid on me have brought Mr. Goode to my consciousness. There is that song "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," as sung by The Band, in which they lament the taking of "the very best," Robert E. Lee, who was forced to surrender at the Appomattox Courthouse when Ulysses S. Grant and his Union forces surrounded Lee's Confederate army. Now it is a song that can allow men afflicted with ordinariness and, in my case, infected with cowardice, to rise in fantasy from their lowly stations to gallant, courageous, and brilliant battlefield leaders, and many, many are the times that I have rode Lee's faithful horse Traveller down that courthouse road and felt the respect not only of the Grays but the Union Blues for my military genius.*

*As I have noted, Celeste, Gene B. Goode was tall and black and gay and proud of his title as mailroom supervisor. In the night he was a bird of many feathers and a disco damsel and whatever else he wanted to be, but in daylight hours he wore his gray smock with distinction and presided over his staff with generally cool and wry authority. In his house were many mansions, and he had no need of a father to prepare a place for him.*

*But then there was one who came and presumed to say he was Gene B. Goode's daddy. He was not black as the forest night but as white as the paper on which I write*

*and he had the meanness of the streets upon him. His name was Joe Coluccio—he was truncate nation in the matter of his given name—but his real name was Oppression, Wrath, “You Leave These Brats with Me. I’ll Teach Them to Behave.” Because the mailroom was known to have its constant sounds, and when “YMCA” or “Stayin’ Alive” or “Get Up...I Feel Like Being a Sex Machine” or “Last Dance” played, then the time for getting down had come, and those present, including Gene B. Goode, took time out to show off their moves. Evidently, there were some at Pilgore Press who, having witnessed the frivolity, feared that the orderly ethic was being undermined. And so the repressive presence of Joe Coluccio.*

*It was painful to witness the colonization of the mailroom: no more sounds of music and in place of laughter, a quiet stoicism on the faces of Gene and the staff. Forced restraint had replaced natural exuberance, and I could only hope that Gene and his crew would outwait and survive the harsh and joyless regime of Joe Coluccio, but had no great faith that this would be so.*

Midge Haller was still on the scene and demonstrating the vitality to organize both the adult and children’s books divisions. One afternoon it became known to Luther that she had called Rafta Blackning to her for an *entre nous*, as she had proven famous for having. Luther could only imagine that the screws that had been turned on Gene B. Goode would now be turned on him, or that he would be let go altogether. That evening the pain grew intolerable. There was no point to calling Dr. Rosner, who would not be happy to hear from him, and so he rolled a joint and smoked it and then rolled a second joint and



smoked that as well to ensure that smoke heaven would be his to enter. Sarah was not present to rise up in protest and he would open the window so the cold late fall wind would carry away the stink before she returned. Though he had been hoping for a productive evening, he turned on the TV to *The Rockford Files*. He was happy to see James Garner. James Garner was All-American in his name and in his history, going back to *Maverick*, in which he had his gun to cover what his card playing savvy and charm couldn't. But Luther could not follow the plot. It had no center and James Garner was not helping with his smiling oddness.

It was for Sarah to rouse him from his slumber in front of the TV.

"I thought you were dead," she said.

"I am dead."

"You don't get to talk like that anymore," Sarah said, but he wasn't listening. He climbed the loft bed ladder and passed out again.

"Jamais, jamais," Luther could be heard to say the next morning, as he flushed the remaining pot and roaches down the toilet. He had awakened to the reality that he had been smoking the pot "alcoholically." Many were the times that he had heard, in the meetings, the saying "You can't be high and sober at the same time," but now he really heard it, in his mind. "Jamais," he said again, and then again and again.

And what was the fuss about? He hadn't been fired. Midge Haller had not swung into action against him. Relieved, he bought himself a pair of charcoal gray slacks on sale and an Italian sports shirt so he could be normal for his life with winter coming on. On the way back to the office with takeout from Chock Full O' Nuts, he saw Judith

Everholt, the young editor who had occupied the tiny office next to Mr. Dorf's, with her arm out to hail a cab. Imagining her headed for lunch with an agent or author at the Oak Room or the 21 Club, he could only be grateful that she hadn't also seen him toting the lunch he would eat at his desk. No 21 for him. He would return to his little hideaway and close the door and feast on his clam chowder soup and nutted cheese sandwich. And yet there was also shame that he was not part of the adult world she moved so freely in. He had let himself be shepherded into a dead end.

*Celeste, I believe it was here that I began to see editing as an act of revenge, a means of "correcting" others and having the final word. It was an opportunity not so much to serve as to triumph.*

Now it was Sarah's turn to enter dreamland and report on what she had seen. She and Luther were in a car with a faceless driver at the wheel. The car was speeding toward a wall. With his own survival in mind, Luther jumped free of the vehicle, leaving Sarah behind.

"Is that what this is about? Are you preparing to bail out on me?" she asked in the morning.

"Of course not," Luther replied.

Luther answered with a dream of his own that night. Once again they were in a car with a faceless driver.

“You’re going in the wrong direction, you idiot,” Luther shouted in his sleep, startling Sarah awake and himself as well.

“You’re up to something. What is it?” Sarah demanded.

“Order. I am up to order. It must be preserved.” With that he returned to sleep.

He was in Rafta’s power. She did not give him the free rein Mr. Dorf had.

“This would be an excellent piece of editing were it a story for adults, but it is a work for children,” Rafta said of the sea adventure she had entrusted to him. “You will need to simplify the prose so children can read and comprehend it,” she went on.

Darkness came to him in the daylight, and weariness, as if sleep had escaped him for days.

At his home group that Saturday, the teapot lady led the meeting. Before she spoke she prayed for guidance from above so her words would have meaning. She had brought the teapot to the table with her and said she hoped she would not be confused with the Teapot Dome scandal because, while she had been involved in her fair share of trouble, never had she worn her teapot on her head.

“No. I must get honest,” she then declared. “Scandal has hardly been my middle name. No such thing has ever visited me. My wieght, my girth, has been the moat that no one has been able to navigate to get to the authentic self that lives within me.”

A lonely life she described, one without friends. The liberation alcohol had provided, beginning in her teenage years, inevitably turned to a kind of imprisonment. She would stare out the window of her apartment at the street below and wonder how it

was people were out strolling and socializing while all she could do was drink herself unconscious behind a locked door.

When she had finished, Luther raised his hand. The voice was great within him saying he had nothing to say and no way to say it, but there was another voice, that of the Young Rascals, singing that he had been lonely too long and he would be marginalized no longer. But the teapot lady called on those to his left and to his right and in front of and behind him, and so, in his heated mind, she became Miss Malignancy because was it not clear that she was treating him like the hanging string she saw him to be?

At the break he sought her out and asked if she would not end her shunning of him when the meeting resumed.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“You are denying my right to live by not recognizing me when my hand is continually up.”

“I simply didn’t see you. Of course I will call on you,” she said.

When sharing resumed she called on this person and that while paying him no mind though he waved his hand wildly, like a man signaling for help. But then she did call on him, just when he was about to give his arm a rest.

“You were sentencing me to death and now you have relented, and for that I give thanks,” Luther said. “I too have looked out a window with glass in hand, but that is not what I wish to dwell on. The fact is that I am badly, badly dressed, figuratively speaking. There are holes in my pants and the soles of my shoes and my shirt is threadbare. I need new clothes with which to adorn myself so I can leave this shabby

status behind. And I lay the blame for this state of ignominy on a world that is seeking to ignore me as you were trying to do. But I will fix the world's wagon before I am through. You can count on that."

The teapot lady had brought him no peace with her liberation of him from the silence. Someone held up a sign: "The sky is up, the ground is down. Where on earth are you?" Another whispered, "Keep coming back. If it doesn't get better, you will." The teapot lady showed him no particular kindness either. He had heard you never left a meeting without thanking the speaker, but when he went to shake her hand after the meeting, she met him with frostiness and her thin lips sealed.

Oblivious to the Saturday night energy of the downtown streets, Luther told his troubles to the air, confiding the need to elevate his rhetoric if he was to stay afloat.

There was a test waiting for him Monday morning. Cromartie Wonders was to be on the move that week, not with a globetrotting extravaganza, but from its present location to a suite down the hall.

"I will need you to prepare these boxes for packing and I have instructed Roller to do the same," Rafta said.

Luther stared with dismay at the flattened cardboard boxes. "I don't know..."

"What don't you know?" Roller smiled. She smelled his fear.

It did not go well. He could not find the right sequence for the flaps so the bottom of the boxes would hold. Roller, on the other hand, assembled the boxes masterfully.

“Things are not right for you in your mind. I see that now. You have no more ability to put together your life than you do to put together these boxes. That is why you are here. Roller, on the other hand, has the supreme capacity to impose order and control on the boxes and her life, and that includes here at Cromartie Wonders. So she will not be needing you to schedule her day. Is that clear?” The note of castigation was strong in Rafta’s voice.

“Yes, I have come out with my hands up,” Luther said, when he was able to speak.

There followed much weeping and gnashing of teeth, for the thin screen behind which had been hidden his most shameful secret now had been pulled aside and Roller Carmona-Hickson stood as the gloating conqueror she was.

And then it was for God himself to stand over Luther and say, “Hereby is served your penance for every supercilious thought and attitude you have adopted in the course of your life toward others with less education. Is it now understood that the ground you stand on to elevate above them has been forever taken from you?”

Luther could only nod in the affirmative.

“They have a window into my life. They see me in the psychologist’s office back in sixth grade raging when I cannot arrange the blocks as they are shown on the cards. Rafta and Roller know everything about me now,” he said to Dr. Rosner that evening.

“No one can know everything about you,” Dr. Rosner said.

“A person needs a hiding place. He cannot stand naked in the street.”

“You are fully clothed.”

“I am in pain, doctor. I am in pain. They have drilled down into me but not filled the cavity. I am an aching hole. I don’t know what I am saying. I have been beaten senseless.”

“It will look different in the morning.” It was clear, for this evening, that Dr. Rosner did not know what to say either.

On the subway ride home the Four Seasons came to him, singing their “Walk Like a Man” song. “What? What?” he called out, startling those around him and himself as well.

Moses called. He was feeling down.

“The sharks are in the water and so am I.”

“What does that mean, Moses?”

“It means I am in an environment of pain from which I cannot escape. It is circling me now.”

He was living in the self-sabotage of his college dream, and Luther did not know how to be his nephew’s keeper. “Every day is new. Every day is a fresh start. We have twenty-four hours to work with,” he heard himself say, as he had heard it said in the RoR meetings.

“That’s all you’ve got to give me?” Moses asked.

“It doesn’t sound like much, does it?” Luther replied.

“Don’t be a ghost in your own life. Be fucking real. Can you do that?”

“I will try,” Luther said. He couldn’t tell if the instruction came from above or below. With his nephew the source was sometimes be in question.

On Thanksgiving Day did he make Sarah cry with a barrage of verbal abuse. The soreness was in him and he had to witness her tears to fully comprehend what he had done. But if he was the agent of her pain, then he also saw himself as necessary for her healing, and offered an apology of the kind he was capable, saying he would have to deliver himself into unconsciousness with a soup can bashing to the head if she did not offer forgiveness. By the end of the afternoon he was right enough with himself and with her that he did not have to imprison himself in the loft. He did not have to go and do the savage thing by being alone with the bottle. He could go and be with his family and she could go and be with hers. No, no, a degree of normalcy could reign.

The gray shop gates and the graffiti that covered them along Broadway were a depressing sight, as was the scaffolding on so many of the buildings. The streets looked dirty and the air felt the same. A city in decline.

And the building in decline as well. Gone from the lobby were the framed verses of scripture that had hung on the walls and the carpet and the antiques and the vase that held rhododendron leaves by the big chicken wire window. The lobby was bare except for a desk behind which sat a sullen security guard.

And the family too. It was going down, down. Luke had grown heavy. His face and gut showed drinker’s bloat. He had brought along Rose, who with her dark features resembled his dead sister Naomi. Her brain aneurysm had a noticeable effect when she



spoke. Her words came out rapid fire in sentences that veered in seemingly unrelated directions. Or they would trail off with a mumbled apology for having spoken at all. Whatever self-esteem she had had, the shooting had destroyed. Rachel was nowhere to be seen, but Vera and Hannah were present, as was Moses. And so too was Vera's husband, Maury. How unobtrusive he was. How unthreatening. Luther felt no silent judgment about the family coming from Maury. Vera had married well. She had his Bronx High School of Science and Ivy League PhD strength to rely on.

It was left to Luther's mother to prepare the food while Hannah sat about as if such service were her due. His mother was old and the situation was untenable. Surely Hannah had to see that she could not expect to be waited on forever. Surely they all had to see that.

Efram Ellenberg called. He was struggling. Marriage seemed more and more like a burden. He and his wife loved each other, he supposed, but it was an effort to make love to a woman whose asthma caused her to wheeze during the night. And she was talking about having a baby, when all Efram wanted was to zone out in front of the tube.

"I'm not sure this can go on," Efram said.

And Luther didn't know if it could go on either, not Efram's marriage, which had struck him as built to last, but his own connection to Efram. Where he had been going to Efram for solace and guidance, Efram was now coming to him. Luther could only wonder if their relationship could survive such a shift. Strangely, it did not pain him to think that it might not.

Rafta did not beat on him with the knowledge she had gained of his ineptitude. Her only real concern was that he not be a threat to her. His incompetence with the boxes showed his threat level to be extremely low.

“You seem to have done just what was called for with the sea adventure tale,” she said.

He had taken to heart her comment that the tale was meant for children, not adults, and thus required language they would understand. He then went to a men’s room stall, where he tried to call back the parts of him her positive words had scattered about, because there was great risk when someone wore a velvet glove on one hand and wielded a club with the other, and his scattered parts sensed that the threat of a further attack was greatest following a compliment.

The typewriter urge was on him again, a crazed absorption that made waiting unbearable. With it came self-loathing over what he recognized as his superficiality, though not enough to keep him from placing a down payment on another portable. It was all well and good for Dr. Rosner to say that he didn’t need a new typewriter, he needed a new life, but Luther wasn’t buying a new typewriter on the layaway plan, he was buying an old one. And now he had to live in a state of torture, because the days did not pass quickly to the end of the month, when the final payment was due, and he could be with his new love.

His life was not in order without an additional typewriter and not in order with it. He spent a restless night struggling with the problem. At the lunch hour the next workday he forced himself to search for a gift for Sarah at B. Altman, so he could show he loved her and was not being neglectful. and picked out an expensive wallet in which she could put some of the little money they had and that he could only wish they had more of.

That night they went to the Carnegie Hall Cinema up on Fifty-seventh Street and Seventh Avenue and Seventh Avenue, where they could sit in the dark and watch Toshiro Mifune and his little band emote as they battled bandits come to steal the villagers' harvest in *The Seven Samurai*. It was an extra attraction for Luther to watch a stylish couple converse in French at a table in the theater's café before the film.

He did not leave himself at the door when he attended a meeting of RoR. You should not think that he did. He came with his listening devices intact and overheard, before the meeting began, a young woman in the row behind him tell an older man that several more of her poems had been accepted by *The Chicago Review*, a literary magazine that regularly threw his submissions into the street. *The Chicago Review*, you should know, was under the auspices of the University of Chicago, and so every word had to have the ring of intelligence to pass muster, because we are talking about a high board score institution, one where the likes of Saul Bellow and Philip Roth had had their brain power tested and certified. And so Luther, in what should have been a setting of equality, where sober was highest, now had the demon of jealousy to contend with.

From somewhere he heard Lesley Gore singing that you would cry too if it happened to you. Not that he did cry. He just sat there with his frozen face. Earlier in the day he had made some progress with “White Line Continue” and felt genuinely excited for the first time in the longest while, and now this young woman had to come along with her glad tidings of great joy and ruin everything.

Altogether the members of RoR were giving him to understand that they were not nobodies in the day and the night. There was Wide Spread in the front row who always had smart things to say in the sharing part of the meeting. Luther learned that Wide Spread wrote two books a year and was working on a device that would allow him to write additional books in his sleep, and that all his books reached the top of the bestseller list. And when the informing member saw the look of doubt on Luther’s face, he spoke Wide Spread’s legal name that Luther might go and check for himself the truth of what he claimed. And Luther did just that. Opening the very fat volume *Books in Print* available to him at Cromartie Wonders, Luther saw page after page of titles as proof of his prodigious output.

And though jealousy could wrap him around like an octopus’s arms, Luther was greatly pleased that an author of renown was there in that meeting, because his success signified that if RoR meant God, it did not mean the God of sequestration, the God who outfitted believers with a hair shirt and had them walk the trail of failure and renunciation, committing them to exist on the sidelines and jeer at those who embraced the world and participated fully in it. He, Luther, could be in the world without being of the world, as he was now hearing it said.

A woman named Coalblack (she was very white) spoke at the second meeting. She identified herself as a lady writer and said she had moved away from the Bronx so she could get free of all the Irish Catholics, whom she hated, she being one herself. In RoR she was running into them all over again. They all had moved on to have homes in Connecticut and New Jersey, and when they came to meetings in Manhattan they found “a bunch of broads living in the now.” Coalblack said she didn’t like to think of RoR as a reprieve from drinking. She associated a reprieve with death row at Sing Sing and a last-minute reprieve from the governor. Coalblack gave Luther much to ponder with her talk.

And there was a man who spoke not to the group but to Luther personally, saying it was great that Luther had come to RoR in January, because that meant that the following month, it now being December, Luther would be celebrating his first anniversary. But Luther was in the domain of honesty there in RoR, and so he was obliged to set the record straight that prevarication not take hold and leave him with a foundation of quicksand on which to build this new life to which Dr. Rosner had assigned him. And so he said to this man, who went by the name of Blinker, that he had been circling the block with a bike equipped with training wheels while Blinker and Coalblack and Wide Spread and all the others were lapping the block on two wheelers. And when Blinker said whatever did he mean, Luther said he was on Elavil life support, fifty milligrams four times a day, and now and then, when eyes were on him at work-related parties, he took a drink so the men and women of the company would not suspect he had a problem and shame him with their laughing thing. Blinker gave Luther a pat on the arm and told him to keep coming back.

Now the overrunning of the American embassy and the taking of hostages by those whom Luther called the “Irateians” was very much on his mind, and though he could not say why, he imagined himself shocking Rafta with his strong views on the crisis, mainly that the United States government was merely reaping what it had sown by engaging in evil practices overseas, such as the coup in 1954 that deposed the legitimate ruler of Iran in favor of the Western-leaning Shah. He said he was not going to allow himself to be manipulated into a phony patriotism by the fact of the hostage taking, not after what the CIA and their cronies had done to Iran and the Irateian people. He worked himself up into a real fit of righteous anger over the fact that the U.S. government had allowed the Shah into America and strongly suggested that we drop him out of a plane in a parachute over Tehran and let the Irateians boil him in their crudest oil if that’s what they had a mind to do. And when he read a column by the very great Alexander Cockburn of the *Village Voice* confirming his view of the matter, his indignation soared.

It was that way with Luther in this time, as it had been for all his days.

Righteous anger could seize him and run him along the course it took.

And there were other developments to gain his attention and keep him mindful of the stream of life. Sarah was reviving. True, she still claimed that she had married a murderer and that he had deceased her, but she also had Dr. Frodkey to tell her that she did not have to live her life as one of the downtrodden. Once again, with some pride, he recounted his own journey from darkness to the light, from his days spent among

cadavers as a medical examiner to instilling hope and direction in those still breathing but who had lost their will and their way.

Dr. Frodkey encouraged Sarah to channel her artistic talents into practical endeavors, such as children's books illustration. Powered by his guidance, she enrolled in a course with the acclaimed illustrator Cudlee Cutebow, who said she had the goods for success in his field, but that she would have to overcome her shyness in making the rounds of children's books publishers.

All of this was big news for Luther. The sun was shining. It was a December sun, but a sun nonetheless.

Frieda Volcker, the assistant art director for the department, came to him with a set of mechanicals, which she placed on his desk. Still in her twenties, she had already illustrated several children's books and was under contract for several more. She was a product of the sun, her hair and face and heart having caught its light. Her good cheer and industry and talent were there for everyone to see.

The mechanicals, with their overlays, crop marks, PMS color tabs and written instructions for the printer made him nervous. He longed for the days of simple texts, of words only. Anything more and he was on dangerous ground.

"It's so quiet down here," she said.

"Yes," he replied. "A library."

"I read the story you gave me." He had, in fact, given her a story, which he had incorporated into his "White Line, Continue" narrative. The story involved a young man

who abused his girlfriend on their first trip abroad. He showed it to Frieda because it was one of the more presentable pieces. But the smile was gone from her face, suggesting the story had troubled her.

“I like the writing, but the story is sort of sad. I’d like to see you create something from your imagination and not just take something from your life and put it on the page. Do you know what I mean?”

“Sure. I do,” he said, and then let the silence come in and have its way and take them where it would. He had no energy to protect himself with words. And what was to protect? She had laid him bare. She had seen his issue. He had held onto an idea all the great writers rejected—that reality, so to speak, held a greater truth than a work purely of the imagination. She was telling him as well that he was a thief.

She was a good person, Frieda Volcker, a well-nourished person, from a cultured German family. She had been given strong bones and teeth and a purposeful, constructive disposition. She had no wild fires burning, or if she did, they were not visible. There had been a love of her own whom she had to leave behind, a young man who had wanted her to place his needs before hers, to type his papers and help support him while he made his way through graduate school. But life had called her beyond the bounds of him. Her spirit was too strong for the fences he would put up. And now she was alone and wedded to her career. She saw the truth of her life and wanted Luther to see the truth of his.

Rafta came into his office to say hello to Frieda. As she did the phone rang. Dolores, from Accounting, wanted to know what services were being compensated for



with a check request she had received. Luther told her that the marketing director's wife had addressed Christmas card envelopes at the rate of ten cents per envelope. Luther could speak with confidence because he had put through the check request on a day when Roller had been absent. He hung up the phone with the proud certainty that he had done right in the presence of two strong women bearing witness to his command of the facts.

And so it came as a surprise when Rafta's cheeks swelled and from her mouth came fire. "Why don't you just shut up?" she demanded.

Luther looked about before realizing he was the target for her wrath.

"Has there been an error?" he asked. Surely her fire was for something he had done wrong.

"Did I not say you can just shut up?" Rafta said, before fleeing his office.

Frieda was astonished by the outburst. "She had no right to speak to you that way," she said.

"Yes. I mean no," he said. And yet he had thought she did have that right. He had been guilty of doing something wrong. And such a sense of panic had gripped him to right the wrong, as if an avalanche would crash down on them if he didn't act promptly. Why else would Rafta bring such vehemence to bear on him? This immediate assumption of guilt dismayed him almost as much as her outburst. He told himself that he would have come to the same conclusion as Frieda, but he couldn't be sure.

But now that Frieda had set him straight, a sense of outrage filled him. Rafta had revealed her true feeling about him. He was a nobody in her eyes, someone to be

contemptuously silenced, and it mattered not in the least to her that she should humiliate him in front of Frieda.

It gave him no satisfaction to realize that he had been right to fear her temper. Even so, the incident could not pass without a response. His pride would not allow for silence; it would suggest acquiescence to her abuse and invite more of the same. As he spent the rest of the day preparing himself to meet with Rafta, doubt began to enter his mind, weakening his resolve. She was his boss, after all. Despite what Dr. Rosner said about the good prospect for finding other work, jobs were not going begging, not for someone like him. Perhaps Dr. Rosner was ignoring the qualitative difference between a Harvard degree and one from CCNY. Doors flew open for the certifiably gifted, not those with the meager skills Luther possessed. He and Sarah could find themselves on the street with winter not even officially begun.

And yet the sense of injury persisted, and when Rafta did not come to him with an apology, he realized he could not carry this bad feeling into the night. He went to her office, where she looked up at him with the remains of grievance on her face, as if she herself had been the injured party.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I find it hard to work under these conditions,” he said.

“What conditions could you possibly mean?” she replied, seizing on his cowardly vagueness and punishing him for it.

“I mean the way you spoke to me,” he said. He remained standing, as she hadn’t asked him to sit.

“I agree that I went too far, and for that I apologize,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Is there anything more?” she asked, seeing that he had not moved.

“No, I’m sorry. Excuse me,” he said. He walked awkwardly from her office, feeling her eyes on him as he went.

He had it in his mind and heart that Rafta’s apology was perfunctory and that she and Roller Carmona-Hickson could let their unpleasantness hang out while he had to live on the plane of circumspection, as it had been back in childhood, when it had been for his sisters to bury hatchets in his head when they so pleased. He had an understanding of the terrain he was on but none as to what he might do about it.

He took himself to a meeting of RoR, where he helped himself to a cup of coffee and two yummy yum chocolate chip cookies and let the warmth of the room spread over him. What a happy thing it was to be in the light with darkness all around him.

The speaker was a woman whose man had done him wrong. She did not break out into plaintive song about the heartbreak he had caused. She just described her life as it had been, with her calling the bars and asking if her husband was there, because it was past midnight and he still hadn’t come home and she was all in knots as to where he might be and with whom. The ache of loneliness would not leave her, she said, as the room fell silent in collective empathy.

As he sat there, Luther felt pangs of guilt acknowledging to himself the times and ways he had done Sarah wrong, seeing how he had verbally and emotionally and

sometimes even physically abused a woman who had no real defenses against the world. These things he saw and wanted to die for being the worm that he surely was.

The church where that meeting took place was on lower Fifth Avenue and was part of something big in his mind, as it was near the apartment where the woman he met at Gosees bar down on Sullivan Street took him back in an earlier chapter of his life and served him cranberry juice and vodka the night before he was to spend a month up at Camp with Sarah and her family in the summer of love. Because a man needed markers as to where he had been so he could better situate himself in where he was.

And yet that very night of the RoR meeting he wasn't home ten minutes before he snapped at Sarah and made her cry. Her hangdog manner, her thickening body, and the bloat in her face from the medications Dr. Frodkey prescribed for her—she was not the person he wanted her to be. That he wasn't the person he wanted to be made no difference insofar as checking his word storm.

Luther had heard it said that people are not always what they seem, and that had certainly been true in the case of Balastair Bonjo, though a qualification had to be offered. He had been the author and publishing director and husband and father the book jackets said he was, but he had been other things, too. He had been a lover of men and an alcoholic and a drug addict. These aspects of his life Luther had only discovered following Balastair Bonjo's death, and Luther often thought that he might have related to his former boss differently had he been aware of some of his proclivities and vulnerabilities. And in the aftermath, that is, in the light of a better understanding, he might have done the same with

Simona Harlow, the premier illustrator of children's books, who was there in attendance at the departmental Christmas party. But he did not have that light of understanding. Not at that time. All he had was his fear and acute self-consciousness when, lit by booze, Simona Harlow asked with a penetrating smile why he wasn't drinking when she and everyone else were. He didn't know enough to say that wine didn't agree with him or that he had an allergy to alcohol, nor that those overly curious as to why he wasn't drinking likely had a problem with alcohol themselves. He just heard shame shame double shame and felt burning eyes upon him.

"You can tell me," she said.

"I have nothing to tell," he said.

"Don't you?" Simona Harlow replied.

Wherever she was going, he had no choice but to get free from her presence and the harm she was leading him toward.

A bus had been chartered for the winter sales conference in Great Neck, Long Island, and it was for Luther to sit next to John Sally, the name so perfectly American, as his tallness and blondness and handsomeness were so perfectly American, this being the same John Sally Luther had known from his years in the adult trade division. A strong young gay man with a sunny disposition and a Harvard education.

"We never see you anymore," John Sally said.

"This is true. I am in another world," Luther said.

"A good world?" John Sally asked.

“I like it well enough,” Luther said.

“That doesn’t sound convincing.”

He was afraid of John Sally. They didn’t belong together.

“I am trying,” Luther said, afraid now that John Sally would attack him because he could not match his manly embrace of life.

“What books are you presenting?” John Sally asked.

“Books? No. No books.”

“But why is that? Bruce Bill presented when he was down there working for Balastair Bonjo.”

“Rafta does all the presenting.”

“But you work on the books, don’t you?”

“Some of them, I guess. The ones she doesn’t want. The ones that were put under contract before she arrived.”

“I hear she has a temper.”

“You could say so,” Luther said.

“Why do you stay?”

“It’s winter and it’s cold outside.”

“Yes,” John Sally said distractedly, and turned away to look out the window at the world that awaited him.

Now Luther had not been idle. He had forced himself to train the light of understanding on Rafta’s display of bad temper. The effort served to remind him that Rafta was under considerable pressure and had been since her arrival. The company’s

entire inventory of books had been destroyed with the collapse of the warehouse. Any day she could be out of a job, given the necessity for cost-cutting. The company itself could go under. And so maybe the supreme bosses were applying closer scrutiny to expenditures, and she might have a hard time justifying the hiring of a freelancer to address envelopes. And yet Rafta was tough as well as tense and knew the stuff that she was made of, and now Pilgore Press was knowing the stuff that she was made of and, more importantly, the stuff that children's books in general were made of, the truth being that Pilgore Press had put the laughing thing on children's books, there not being time for the things of childhood for busy staff doing deals for the next blockbuster at 21 or the Oak Room, books as disposable as yesterday's newspaper, as per the publishing philosophy of the editor-in-chief, Ellen Gruen. But now they had been relieved of their laughter and neglect. Now there was neither time nor justification for an attitude of condescension. Pilgore Press was a front list publisher with no backlist to speak of, except for *Alee Walee Cat Fat* and *Muffy and the Mudpie Mystery* and other books for kids. These were the books that were bringing home the bacon, and so respect was due. It was due.

Still, the sense of shame lingered. He had arrived at Pilgore before John Sally, but John Sally had advanced further. It did not reflect well on Luther that children's books had risen in status. He was still a nobody in a female-dominated industry. Though he was happy for the recognition that had come to Cromartie Wonders, he was not happy about Rafta, and that day took pleasure in her obvious discomfort as she spoke before the mostly male sales staff. How pale and intimidated she looked. How small and

insignificant. She could terrorize him, but she couldn't do the same to them, and whom she couldn't control she had to fear.

Not that day, not when John Sally was sky-walking on the power he was feeling, but the next day, when the pendulum had had a chance to swing, did Luther act so right could be separated from wrong, true from false, and certainty be nailed to the floor, saying, right there into John Sally's All-American face, "Is it true that you were holding me in serious contempt yesterday on the bus and with the non-recognition in your eyes whenever our paths happened to cross at the conference? You should know that I am on a fact-finding mission of the highest importance."

But John Sally was not John Sally for nothing. He had his amour propre going for him and the quick wits that had made him Harvard eligible going for him too to deal with his interrogator.

"Do us both a favor. Don't talk to me for the rest of the day," John Sally said, and went on about his busy business.

And yet, in spite of the dismissal, Luther could take satisfaction from having situated himself in John Sally's consciousness. John Sally had to know what the authentic Luther Garatdjian was about now.

That Saturday the Strand Bookstore called to him, saying come and get filled up on the knowledge you don't possess. Luther purchased a book by Loren Eiseley, that he might have a grounding in nature and know the names of the things that grew from the earth; a novel by the despicable Hinckner Thor, so Luther could activate and make active war on



the envy and resentment that sought to rule his day; a volume of essays by the heavyweight critic Lionel Trilling, so he could know who was up and who was down; and a novel by the formidable Margaret Drabble, so he could have some Englishness in his diet.

Satisfied with his choices, he went home and slept the sleep of the just, but awoke to a state of increasing soreness, hearing Sarah going about her business in her studio while he had not invested so much as a minute at the typewriter moving “White Line, Continue” forward, her commitment to her work feeling like a tormenting rebuke to him every second of every minute that he lay idle.

And so soon he joined the chorus of sound, tapping out words on the typewriter about his day, where he had been and what he had done and the thoughts and feelings he had and was having, including his soreness. The words he produced brought immediate relief. He was where he belonged, in the space he had given himself under the loft bed. He was where he definitely belonged. He was home.

That evening, at RoR, Luther heard the speaker say that en route home from the bar with a load on, he would stop off and buy a BLT on toast, and in hearing the speaker heard a truth to match his own, as he had done the very same thing, though in his case it had been not a BLT but lo mein from Happy Palace or a plate of shrimp with clam sauce at Umberto’s, where he was careful to show respect. But a load on. It wasn’t quite right. Something off-putting about that. Always had been. Still, Luther said yes. Then he said yes again. Said it in his mind, not out loud, so he could confirm for himself the truth he had heard that he did not walk alone in his ways where alcohol was concerned.

*Now Celeste, there were other things, dire or of no consequence, I will leave it to you to determine, but it can't be stressed enough that order must be maintained and requires the chronicling of our days with a dedication to absolute thoroughness; in so doing are we not pressing an iron to the wrinkles of time so that all will be linear and in line with the preceding and pleasant to our mind's eye? All this we must accomplish if we are to live on in the memories of others as well as our own. Were we not so instructed by that frantic subway graffiti of our childhood, "Kilroy was here"? Do we still not regard that messaging as an impassioned cry from the anonymous mass for recognition?*

*What happened was this: obligation compelled me to attend the Pilgore Press Christmas party. But obligation to what? To confront my timidity and at the same time bring Sarah out of the shadows of my life and into the full light of day. For a different reason so did the powers that be—Peter Ben-Gurion and Ellen Gruen and Judith Everholt and Adrian Zecker (*Him Who Walks on the Balls of His Feet*) and Irene Strep and all the rest; on this day they wished to create the impression of oneness. But all Sarah saw was my isolation in a hubbub of social uncertainty, and so I expressed my intention to seek solace and strength to ease the sense of apartness, that is, I said I would head to the bar for a drink. With alarm did Sarah whisper, "Are you crazy?" She, of all people, understood the yuletide cheer I was likely to spread when off on a toot. And so she held me in check with her sharply delivered rhetorical question.*

*But there was another occasion when she was not present, a party at the Children's Books Council, down in Gramercy Park. Once again was my social mettle*

*being tested, though I had no hope or desire to be more than a ghost in this milieu. If children's books was a passion for most of the gathered, for me it was only a job, and a shameful one at that, as I have noted, returning me to the scholastic and social failures of early childhood. And if I saw those in the field at times as cases of arrested development and also at times harbored an attitude of indifference, that was not entirely possible at this gathering, as there was one present who was of my ilk. His name was Charles Herring and I was his replacement as production editor at Cromartie Wonders when he moved on to a bigger position at Delacorte. Handsome and smart he might have been in the estimation of others, but I saw him as like myself, an actor seeking to conceal his inadequacies—a faux Bruce Bill. Unable to exist comfortably in the same room with this Charles Herring, I poured myself a glass of wine and then more followed. The drinks seemed to take the edge off. They got me past my dislike sufficient to chat with him. But just as quickly things changed. I turned disagreeable. What I said I cannot recall. All I remember is the shock and anger on his face, as if I had slapped him. It was the wine, I realized. I had to get out of there before igniting trouble plenty, and so I removed myself to the next room, where I had left my coat. While there, I noticed an unfinished drink and downed the remains of that as well. The few times I had picked up a drink in the year since coming to RoR, the compulsion hadn't kicked in. This time was different, as if an engine that stalled each time the key was turned in the ignition suddenly jumped to life. Just as suddenly you filled my mind. Yes, you, Celeste. I would get a supply of liquor and show up at your door and the party would be on, as if nothing had occurred to end it. But fatigue set in. I suffered an energy failure and struggled to get home. In the morning,*

*when I came to, Sarah expressed her horror, having smelled the alcohol on my breath, and demanded to know if she should expect the return of the beast of drunkenness, and if so, we were done, done.*

*Now, Celeste, other alarm bells were ringing too, some in the corridors of the sanctimonious and others in the venues of the humbly righteous. The following day I took myself to a meeting of RoR in the SoHo section of town. A woman who spoke with authority was leading the meeting, with intimations of her own greatness sounding in her voice and yet with authenticity and truth and love ultimately prevailing as her guide. Let me also say that her amplified voice reached into every corner of the huge basement of the church in which the meeting was held. I had made no request, formal or otherwise, for her to have any bearing on my reality, but when those new to RoR or coming back from a relapse were asked to raise their hands, I did just that, as it was necessary to be seen in whatever light, good or bad, was available to be shone on me, because to be in the light was to live and to dwell in darkness was to die. "I drank the other night," I said, allowing candor to be my guide, my words defeated, so I thought, by the space they found themselves in. But the speaker, who went by the name McVey, came alive. Her nostrils flared and color rushed in where only pallor had been and her words rose on the scale of sharpness with each one she spoke.*

*"Do you have a mentor?" she demanded.*

*"Do I have a what?" I replied.*

*"A mentor," she repeated. "A guide for sound and prosperous living."*

*"No. I do not."*

*“Well, why don't you get one?” A peculiar torquing action she applied to her words for maximum impact.*

*Celeste, I did not care for the way this McVey woman spoke to me. I did not care for it at all. Or if I did, even now I must give the appearance that I didn't. But love in the tough love category was within the range of her experience and I would like to say was a mitigating factor in any vocal opposition I might have had to her harshly delivered suggestion. And yet, love or no love, I headed for the exit with no conscious intention of allowing a mentor into my life. “Those with ears to hear, let them hear.” Is it not written? And if I did not have the necessary ears, there was one who did. “I'll get a mentor for you,” a woman said, having caught me at the door. Her name was Conestoga, after the horse-drawn wagon she had guided through the streets of Manhattan as an advertisement for Chuck Wagon Stew, a chain of restaurants in the Times Square area with a home on the range ambience. What can I say, Celeste? Angels are where we find them or they find us. This may seem like a silly or extravagant statement sufficient to get the laughing thing going in some who read it. But here we must ask what they are laughing about, given that the help that was offered I lacked the capacity to directly request myself. A fact is a fact, and if some of us are willing or of necessity go through life embracing a lie, why do we greet the truth with mockery? This is not a matter for us to dwell on. Let us instead turn to Kierkegaard for sustenance, in particular when he gives first place to earnestness and conviction as the proper key in which to speak about one's faith. Are you listening, Celeste? Are you? My heart begins to quicken and my cells strengthen when we approach the matter of the Almighty, the father lode of existence.*

*For the next two days I went about my business, as a man should. Then one night the phone rang. On the line was someone named Ringle. So he identified himself.*

*“And does the ‘l’ follow the ‘e’ or vice versa?” I inquired.*

*“You’re asking the wrong question. You’ve been asking the wrong question your entire life. Meet me at Chernenko’s at 6 pm tomorrow. You got that?”*

*“I am in the process of getting it,” I said, when the line went dead.*

*Now there are headwinds that will challenge the flight path of the most powerful aircraft or raging storms that buffet a ship at sea, but no wind has ever been stronger than that in my mind, the hurricane force wind of doubt as to the wisdom or need of sitting down with the brusquely directive Ringle (I will go with this spelling, Celeste, as it gives the name the touch of class it forfeits with a reversal of the two letters, and class is class, which, even as I utter the silly word summons the image of Vietnam War deceased Sean, with whom it will always be identified in my mind. This man Ringle would see my worth. He would see that my status was superior to his and have no choice but to attack. And yet, in spite of internal opposition, I pushed forward.*

*Ringle wore a thin leather jacket and black T-shirt, as if he were one who needed no great protection from the cold. He kept his wiry black hair short so the features of his badly scarred face could be on full display. His nose had been broken more than once, I suspected, and there was fire and grievance in his eyes. And yet he was handsome and had the power to command a woman’s love in a way I never would, or so I suspected, his ruggedness giving him an irresistible dimension.*

*"You look sick. You look like you could use all the help you can get," he said, as I sat down.*

*"Anything else?" I asked.*

*"What's your story?"*

*"My story?"*

*"What's going on with you?"*

*"Nothing."*

*"Conestoga says you were out drinking."*

*"Only a little. And just one night. And that was a week ago."*

*"Are you on something now?"*

*"Why do you ask?"*

*"You don't look right. I'm sitting here with the air. There's no one is in front of me."*

*"I am here, present in the way that I can be," I said. "But it is also true that I am on Elavil, an antidepressant prescribed by my therapist, Dr. Rosner."*

*"What you're on, you're exhibiting antisocial tendencies. You can't even make eye contact with me. It is not Rooms of Recovery that is making you feel bad about yourself. You are feeling bad about yourself because of the pills you take."*

*And so he got to the heart of my matter. And if I had any doubt, he dispelled it when he added, "The pills you are taking loosen your commitment to sobriety."*

*Celeste, the man was speaking truth against which I had no defense. He went on to tell me a story of riotous living in different parts of the world, including opium dens in*

*Afghanistan and of close calls with dangerous men. For two years he wandered barefoot in India, sleeping in the streets of teeming cities and enduring stench others had long since habituated themselves to. He spoke of the hardness that came over his heart when his mother abandoned him at age eight on the side of a road outside Tempe, Arizona, in the brutal heat, and the beatings he endured in foster homes and the malign power adults had exercised over him. But he also told me of the solace he found in literature and of the PhD in the classics he earned from Yale University before the bottle derailed his tenure track assistant professorship and how he was now on the comeback trail.*

*“You look ill and you’re very pale. You need some sunlight in your life. Are you listening?” Ringle asked.*

*Yes, he was armed with an intelligence he deployed with rough edges, but love, even if it was of the wounded kind, was at his core. His words had spikes, yet they served to secure them to my premises, and so I was compelled to say, “I am.”*

*That night, as I lay in bed, the image came to me of my mother’s locked closet, the one just outside the bathroom. I remembered her words as she would come to me with a tiny sleeping pill and a glass of water after one of the many times that Jane Thayer left me. “Lie still so the pill can take effect if you do not want your night to be sleepless,” she would say. And I remembered all the speed I had taken in college and the years following and the low dosage Valium prescribed for me after I gave over my last bottle of diet pills to Dr. Rosner. I saw how I had come to embrace the belief in oral magic.*

Dr. Rosner did not disagree with Ringle. He did not seek to destroy him as a credible advocate for health. He was not a prisoner of his ego to that degree. He did



caution, however, that Luther should go off the pills slowly. He should cut down to three pills that week and two the following and so on. But Luther could not wait. The momentum for release had started and within three days he had taken his last Elavil, with no ill effects.

“I won’t pin a medal on you, but you should treat yourself well,” Ringle said.

“After all, how long has it been since you went through a day without anything?”

*Celeste, Ringle had not bent me to his will. He had given me the strength to align myself with my own will. Nor did Dr. Rosner beat me for violating his disengagement timetable from Elavil bondage. He simply said there should be no physical withdrawal but there might be some emotional discomfort.*

*Now had the training wheels been shed. I was not even cycling; I was flying, and on a chariot of fire. Angels of mercy heard the change when I raised my hand at meetings and said I had one day of recovery and then two and three days. They cheered me. They gave me their love. They told me to keep coming back. They were breathing their life into me, their energy and spirit. We must not discredit miracles. We must not. An effervescent spirit is, if not a joy to behold, a wonder to experience. The light had been lit, the darkness cast out. How long had I searched for this treasure, only to find that it was not in the drink and the pill but in their absence. Minds joined in a common purpose are powerful, Celeste. They are powerful.*

*I was asked to do hospitality at the Saturday evening meeting. I would arrive early and make coffee in the large urn, heat water for tea in the smaller urn, and set out the cookies I had purchased. As I did so, a great feeling of anticipation would come over*

*me. Soon the now empty room would fill up and the group members would avail themselves of the refreshments I had set out. I was giving them something. And in giving to them, I was giving to myself. Great joy was the gift I received on those evenings, Celeste. Great joy.*

A more subtle joy was his on visiting dreamland that night, journeying to the Riverside Drive apartment of the family of Tom Smits, his high school friend and nemesis. The room he was in had a spare, modern décor and a cool, subdued blue lighting. It also had a portable electric typewriter at which he sat in stunned bliss at his unencumbered aloneness.

The dream was not one to share with Sarah. It simply was not if he was not to announce to her that he was freedom bound.

And another followed that he was compelled to keep in the privacy of his mind, as it had prurience as its theme. It began at an outdoor café where, from the darkness, a trio of high-heeled women of the night appeared. Back and forth they slowly walked in front of the table where Luther sat with Luke, the three of them singing, with mock sincerity, “I Only Have Eyes for You.”

“A man chooses and then acts,” Luke said, clapping him hard on the back. Luther too broke out in song, tailoring “I Will Follow Him” to the occasion. And follow he did, summoned by the call of the flesh. Because if meagerness lived in his bones, fraudulence didn’t have to. Even in dreamland he didn’t have to put his lust upon his brother. Lasciviousness was his own to claim.

Crying time came to him after his session with the woman of the night he had chosen. He cried and cried at having chosen so poorly. The woman was old. She was ancient. She aged before his eyes, her white teeth turning to black stumps.

As if a savage response was needed to the cool blue lights in the apartment of Tom Smits's family, further on in dreamland he received a blow to the head while with his sister Vera that had him on the verge of non compos mentis. Whether following his lead or not, his sister made a quick feast of insanity sandwiches and too began to babble, quoting the fulminating prophet Isaiah and leaving Luther to wonder whether this was a revelation of her true nature or she were channeling his sister Rachel.

But no matter where he journeyed in dreamland the outer world persisted, bringing him near to shouting, in the workplace, "Beat me like the slave I am."

*What ailed you, Luther? Can you tell us?*

*My love returned. Bill Walton appeared in the soft blue attire of the San Diego Clippers of the National Basketball Association, causing all of Southern California to bow down in worship. He had signed a multiyear contract as a free agent after his contract with the Portland Trailblazers expired. And Stanford had recognized his academic excellence in admitting him to its law school when his basketball career was in doubt. Should love call to us, we must demonstrate our fidelity. It would not have done to go to bed when live, from the West Coast, the game between his new team and the New Jersey Nets was being televised. I could feel, though the city was in the grip of a New York winter, the golden rays of the Golden State on my very skin. Love is an action. It requires that we be there until the final buzzer. And yet the morning was hard. I woke*

*exhausted, physically and mentally unprepared for work, and the fear arose that Rafta would dismiss me on the grounds of general uselessness if I did not show up.*

“You do not see things as they are. Your vision is clouded by harshness, I can only suspect. You must do better.”

If Rafta was hard-slapping him, it was only proper, as she had entrusted him with an agented manuscript for his evaluation. The novel told the story of a teenage boy whose best friend is struck and killed by a man driving a stolen car.

“I see,” Luther said.

“Do you see? What I most object to is the sarcasm central to your dismissiveness, as when you write in your report, ‘A journey into the realm of lachrymosity awaits the reader.’ I do begin to wonder if you are temperamentally suited to this field. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“You are right. My vision was skewed. I will order new glasses,” Luther said.

“Are you fooling with me?”

“Not at all. I was only meaning to say that I will try to effect a correction.”

Rafta gave herself the free run of Luther’s face, putting her scanner on him so it might detect signs of mockery, but he held to his countenance of sincerity. Even so did Rafta scan on, seeking a final determination as to whether she should consign him to the scrap heap of similarly acerbic nincompoops she had encountered in her publishing journey.

“One thing more. There are mistakes you overlooked in *One, Two, Timbuktu*. You will need to be more careful.”

With those final words did she dispatch him to the chagrin corner, where he lingered until the lunch hour, when he took himself to RoR. The speaker wore a T-shirt with the image of an open window printed on the front of it.

“That’s because a spirit wind has been blowing and I want the window of my heart to be open to it,” the speaker explained.

He spoke of drinking on different continents and of being set adrift to die at sea and of articles of indictment drawn up against him for crimes against humanity. Many times had his life been spared when justice cried out to be done. He was there to bear witness to the power of the rooms while acknowledging that his enemy would always live within.

“Sauerkraut. That is my latest venture into hopelessness. Two jars of the stuff do I buy each day, as if I have the need to corner the market. Just another way the disease talks to me,” the man testified.

Sauerkraut indeed. Luther’s mind turned to the boxes of pencils and reams of typing paper in his desk drawers and of the typewriters, a different one daily, he was continually fantasizing about. At least I have someplace to go and sit with my wounds, Luther also thought among the lunchtime gathering, some munching on sandwiches or trying not to slurp their soup.

*But then, Celeste, the darkness rolled in, and all the old pain seized me. Once again was the voice saying I was among the lost, those deprived of a real place in the*

*world, such as you were establishing with your life of glamor in the downtown art scene, all of SoHo knocking on your door and seeking to claim you for their own. I remembered you as you were when first we met and I was a lowly cabdriver and saw that nothing had changed, you were still among the chosen and I was a cipher aimlessly passing my days under the thumb of a scold. In the privacy of a bathroom stall I asked God for his help, that I might not fall down and die and die and die and die. I had to seek strenuous opposition to the lies my own mind was manufacturing, seeking as it did to negate my very existence. I had to ask that you not be a figure of torment in my thoughts, that if the pilot light of love had been lit, it not consume my very being, that it be purified, that the element of competitiveness be removed, for in my mind there grew the awareness that I didn't so much want to be with you as to actually be you, that you were the standard of excellence I had not been able to rise to on my own resources.*

*Let me note, Celeste, that in this time Rafta dealt with me forthrightly and with full vigor in the matter of salary as well as literary judgment. No, there would be no pay increase, she said, in response to my written request. True, my salary was low, but there was no money for an increase. Essentially, she was saying that I could accept things as they were or I could move on.*

Now Luther had heard the moral instruction of Aretha Franklin and was trying his best to be a do right man in Sarah's world. If she could not be Celeste, then at least she could have tools of equal quality with which to work. No finer presses were available on the

market than those made by Charles Brand, right at his plant in the East Village. Luther had seen the sturdiness of the Charles Brand press Celeste used for printmaking and noted how flimsy Sarah's little press was by comparison. And so, for Sarah's birthday, they together went to the site, where Sarah made her selection. And though he had to make payment on the layaway plan and it would be some months before the press was paid for in full and could be delivered to the loft, still she could know that it was coming and that the future held good things in store for her.

Because she was hurting. She was living her life in the sorrow acre.

"You are looking at a dead woman. You have killed me. Dead, dead, dead," she said to him one night, during one of their fights. And in a way, he believed her to be telling the truth. He had killed her with his betrayal and his abuse, as much as he tried to pretend otherwise. When sorrow filled him at the sight of her weeping over the loss of her hair and the changing texture of what remained, or over her other travails, he understood the meaning of loving her but not being in love with her. That love had gone elsewhere.

The world of women was a world of tears. All the world over were women crying. So it had been with his mother. So it would always be.

"Utilize, don't analyze," he had heard in the rooms. And the "Think" sign at meetings was often upside down as a peculiar reminder that he shouldn't think. Should he stay or should he go? Even before the holler head Clash posed the question did he begin to see that the matter of his marriage was not one he could resolve through conscious effort. And so, on his knees did he go to God, confessing his inadequacy to make a

decision and asking for his guidance. And peace came to him when he did, if only temporarily, a peace he had not known.

*Celeste, I had entered a world for which I was not quite right, as I have said many times about children's books. For some reason it brought back all my feelings of scholastic inferiority. What right did someone who had not read or been read to, who had no real knowledge of the literature or affinity with it, to be serving as an editor in that field? And my childhood, had it been a match for the cute tales I now read? Had there been a childhood at all?*

*And now, here was Sarah following on the same path, in her way, by taking a course in children's book illustration at the School of Visual Arts. She, too, was trying to come in from the cold by exploring the commercial possibilities of her talent rather than art for its own sake. But those who had gone before her, those who had lacked the boldness or talent to enter the realm of real art but had settled or sold out to begin with were waiting for her without kindness. There was confection in their names—Donna Honeysworth and Elsinore Candee and Abigail Sweet—and hardness in their hearts toward this latecomer to their midst. Visiting illustrators, all of them successful, offered harsh critiques of her work. "It looks like all the life has been sucked out of your drawings," said one. Under the influence of Edvard Munch and Chaim Soutine and James Ensor in this time, her figures were distorted and in the grip of overpowering emotion. The saccharine was not her terrain. And so these illustrators beat her with their stick of convention, as was understandable if also painful. I found myself hating their*



*neat little world of prettiness. Life wasn't all ribbons and bows and confection. Had the original folktales that served as source material for the Grimm brothers been so pretty? But these illustrators—they had their job to do as protectors of the realm.*

Smallness was as smallness said. So Luther was coming to see in the RoR meetings as well as in the world. A woman in middle age named Ellie who had wrapped herself in leggings against the cold spoke up at the Saturday night meeting and rained fire on her father for his incessant need to control her. The words “a churning urn of burning funk” came to Luther in focusing on her mouth as she spoke, it being clear she was in a state of sizzle. It seemed to him not in the natural order of things that a woman of her years would be going on and on in such a way about a parent. A man stood up in the middle of her rant. He had Annoying for his first and only name. In his hand he held a mirror in which he studied his face with great and ostentatious care, drawing the fury of Ms. Sizzlepop, who understood quite well the import of his pantomime. While it had been a breach of decorum for Mr. A to perform his act, it had also become apparent to Luther that the group would receive a lie and yet, in the silence it kept, convey that it was not countenancing the lie. In so doing did it raise in the consciousness of the teller the fact that he or she was off the mark. In so doing did it compel each member, as he or she listened to the complainant, to begin to confront their own judgments. So it was with Luther that night. Had he not lived in the sins of his mother and father? Had he not failed to take full responsibility for his own existence? Did he not have to now come out, with hands raised, in full surrender? And was not Sarah trying, in her way, to do the same?

*Now Celeste, my education continued the following week over lunch with Efram. Previously I told you that the ties that bind were weakening, and as we sat together I understood why. He had just spent the weekend in Washington, D.C., where he had visited with his new love, Alberta, who had only to call to him and he came running, just as Carole King promised in her song from time past. Love was pain for him, in or out of marriage. His divorce had come through and he was living alone in an apartment with his name on the lease for the first time. All the while there was another calling to him. All day and all night did he hear his mother summoning him back to Brooklyn with a lyric, to his ears, most threatening: "Baby, won't you please come home?" But if home meant death to a man of his kind, as it did to me, the way forward meant high anxiety—picture Mel Brooks through the window of the plane as it begins its descent in the film of that name. Why? Because Alberta had a song of her own, or Efram was imagining she did, and that song was "Love for Sale." Oh, the sorrow and the pity. The thought of providing for Alberta when he could barely take care of himself filled him with dread. He was confronted with a dilemma no one constituted as he and I are wants to face. Was he a man or something less? Such, I suspected, was the question before him. He had lost his Quaalude detachment. Anger had broken through the mask of Buddha equanimity. Celeste, what I saw was the fear, the helplessness, and possibly I didn't love him in the way a brother should. I did not hear the hymn "Rescue the Perishing" playing in the theater of my mind. What I heard was the call to separation, to distance. We were continuing to become strangers in each other's midst.*

*Altogether, this was a different time, Celeste. There were young Republicans throughout the land. No, that is not an oxymoron but a reality. High school Republicans, many already planning for their retirement. Communal living? They were incorporating. I did not fully recognize the land I had surfaced into. The conceit of thinking we would be the defining generation.*

Luther's mind and heart were not deprived of sunlight in this time, though winter still held its grip. Powerful golden rays shone down on him when Rafta announced that she would soon be leaving for the Bologna Children's Book Fair; he would thus have a week of workday peace. And Sarah was on the rebound. She had reasserted the primacy of her artwork over illustration and would be traveling to Boston to submit a number of paintings for a scholarship competition at the Museum School. And Luther was intent on making himself strong in body as well as mind and spirit. When he had the money, he would purchase a set of weights so he could have a body he could show the world. Because it was time to become something more than a hanging string, especially with spring on the way.

Ringle did not disappear. He was only a phone call away. Luther dialed him one night so Ringle could be well informed about his travails, because even with the sunshine there were also periods of darkness. He told him about the literary magazines that scorned his submissions, about the beatings inflicted by his boss, about his hopeless confusion about his marriage.

“Sunshine does make its appearance. Don’t get me wrong. But there is also a lot of rain, and it is soaking me down to my very bones,” Luther said, in full confidence that Ringle was listening.

But Ringle had a way of his own, as he had established at their first and only meeting. “There is nothing going on. Did you hear me? Nothing. Nada. Zilch.” And with that truth bomb did he hang up the phone.

Luther had heard the adage “When the cat’s away the mice will play” but he was not about playing in the absence of Rafta. Not at all. Rather was he in full earnest to improve himself. He would have that new suit of clothes so he could be presentable in the world and not have to hide himself away. Bruce Bill had said he should strongly consider vacating the premises of Cromartie Wonders, and Luther had taken his words to heart. And so he had put together his resume, skinny as it was.

Toward that end he checked the very reputable *Publishers Weekly* for any and all who could help him in his quest. Yes, he had heard of headhunters, but no one out there was hunting for his flat head, and since he knew no one and no one knew him, he would have to find an employment agency he could have faith in. And there it was, right before his eyes, a name that stood out above all others—the Hakoonian Agency. Those last three letters—ian—told him all he needed to know. An Armenian had dared to make himself present in the world, had come out from behind the curtain of shame.

I will go to this Hakoonian man. I will go to this Armenian. I will find the home I have exiled myself from with him. So Luther said in the privacy of his mind.

“My name is Garatdjian, Luther. I am putting my last name forward first so you will know immediately who I am,” Luther said.

“What can I do for you?” Mr. Hakoonian asked, from behind his big desk piled high with papers and folders.

“You can rescue me. You can put me where I can be seen and not seen, but do not let me remain buried in childhood.”

Mr. Hakoonian gave his mustache some attention with the fingers of his left hand. “Please explain,” he said.

“Excavate me.”

“Excavate you?”

“I have been buried alive.”

“You look quite present, quite unburied, to me.”

“Pay no attention to what you see. Pay attention to what you hear.”

“What I am hearing is oddness. You may leave your resume.”

“Thank you for your consideration,” Luther said, but Mr. Hakoonian appeared not to be listening and in any case made no response.

Luther had other matters for his mind to deal with, such as the temp Rafta had hired in her absence to read manuscripts. Her name was Viv Bean and her manner was one of smiling hostility where Luther was concerned and love everlasting for Roller Carmona-Hickson. So it seemed to Luther, and why wouldn't it? Hearing her say to Roller that she

was a friend of Bruce Bill, erstwhile editor at Cromartie Wonders, Luther thought to join in the conversation.

“Bruce Bill’s a great editor,” Luther said, seeking to give credit where credit was due and abolish smallness wherever he found it within him.

But Viv Bean had to get all snarky all over him, snicker-laughing to Carmona, “Luther has found his true calling is to be a PR man for Bruce Bill,” and in so doing seeking to emasculate him for all time. Roller laughed with glee, happy to have an ally.

“I wouldn’t say I’m a PR man for Bruce or for anyone. But I am glad he was able to advance,” Luther replied.

“Well, you know what they say, don’t you?” Roller said, with a wide smile.

“What who say?”

“What those who know say?”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“If you don’t like the job you have, then why don’t you go and look for another one?”

“Well put, Roller. Well put,” Viv chortled, and so it was for Luther to take his leave of them, as best he could, Roller’s malignant victor’s smile lingering long after his departure.

Though he resolved to stay away from both Viv Bean and Roller, he wound up drifting back their way, believing the next time would be different. Especially did he see Viv Bean as he did his deceased sister, Naomi, in that time when he was a child and Naomi would call him to her with a smile and he would go to her in a state of trust and

happiness only to receive from her trademark hard slap delivered with a smile. He saw the way that he was programmed and the little he could do about it.

His world was one of smallness, he saw, that an unpleasant duo such as Roller Carmona-Hickson and Viv Bean could give him the old one-two and cause such internal bleeding.

Luther did have work to do. There was *The Story of Your Eye*, for one, by the eminent science for children team Sidney and Tooma Flickin, and *Jelly Bean Giant*, written by Glinda McGlinda, with illustrations by Cadence di Suestra Longerly.

“Are we Cyclops that we should have only one eye?” Luther queried. “Even Dee Clark saw the error of his ways, changing course from the singular to the plural in his hit song of the day, ‘Raindrops,’ when he veered from ‘eye’ to ‘eyes.’ Where two is two, we cannot allow one to rule. The precedent it sets might be unfortunate and widespread in its ramifications.”

Luther waited on a response from the man and woman of science, and the wait was not a long one. “The cogency of your argument is not lost on us, though your pop cultural reference is. We are endeavoring to write literature, not songs of transiency. Please stet ‘eye’ where the word appears in the title of our book.”

“Songs of transiency.” Luther heard the high snippiness content shouted out by the phrase. Well, the Flickins were no one to make war on, not given their relentlessly methodical nature. They had worked their way up on the human anatomy, starting with *The Story of Your Foot*. He just hoped he never had to meet the Flickins, and he was

reasonably sure they felt the same way, given the fact that their communications were always through the mail.

As for Glinda McGlinda, his main query was about her own name, not the title of her book. He wrote, "I am glad you resisted the impulse of some to double down on their first name. Take Humbert Humbert. Would he have lodged more securely in the minds of readers as Humbert McHumbert? The 'Mc' might have added a touch of distinction but we will never know, will we? The Chinese, I am afraid, with their many names like 'Ling Ling' and 'Yang Yang' are doomed to obscurity. High on my all-time favorites list is 'Boutros Boutros-Ghali,' though of course the second name is compromised by a hyphen. But the power of the first two Boutroses. Don't you just feel it, like a locomotive gaining speed and power? As for 'Sirhan Sirhan,' it continues to leave me in a dark place."

The phone rang some days later. Glinda McGlinda was on the line. "Is this Luther Garatdjian?" Glinda McGlinda asked.

"It is indeed."

"Not Luther Luther Garatdjian?"

"Oh, no. This must be Glinda McGlinda."

"None other," Glinda McGlinda said. "So tell me, Luther McLuther, if I may call you that, how is my manuscript coming along?"

"It is coming along splendidly. I am on page 10, and so far it is a definite go."

"A definite go, did you say?"

"Abso-abso-lutely."



“Would it be too much to ask if you applied the same scrutiny to my manuscript as you have to my name? In fact, if you would take the energy that you have invested in my name and invest it in the manuscript, that would be greatly appreciated.”

“I can do that, Ms. McGinda. I certainly can.”

“I’m so glad to hear. Good day,” she said, going formal on him.

Luther understood when he was being chastened. He understood when he was being instructed to watch his p’s and q’s.

A strike was called by the transit worker’s union. It was “on strike, shut it down,” but these were real workers, not college kids, and they had no play in them when it came to a paycheck for the trains and buses that they operated. The union had its militancy and the city had its mayor, big Ed Koch, and all hours of the day and night could he be seen walking about asking “How am I doing?” of passersby because he needed to know, though his smile of satisfaction said he already had the answer. Even Dr. Rosner, who generally kept himself under wraps, was moved to ask, “What kind of horseshit question is that for a mayor to be asking?”

Now Luther had his ten-speed bicycle and he had clasps for his pants so there would be no need for the bottoms of them to get caught in the chain. “This will be my subway and my bus. I will be unto myself in transit mode,” Luther said to Sarah. And so each morning he set forth on the city streets, hitting his stride on Madison Avenue, where he had the opportunity to open up and express himself in relation to the big boys, the rampaging trucks and cars of New York City and show them who was boss. Along the

middle of the road would he fly, trusting in his navigational instincts and the sturdiness of his bike to keep him from disaster as large vehicles roared past on either side. Everyone on the sidewalks a cheering blur at the marvel of his wizardry. Seen at last, seen at last, seen at last was he.

Only years later did he sit bolt upright in bed or come to an abrupt stop on the street in full recognition of the horror he had avoided.

The softness of spring came to the city but not to Sarah's heart, which held a grievance profound against her parents. They had not loved her enough. They had not provided her with the same shelter from the world that they themselves enjoyed. Reparations were due for childhood harms done to her and for infecting her with their attitude of entitlement.

During a visit with Sarah's parents, a firefight erupted, instigated by Sarah. She was accusatory, prompting her father to try to put a lid on her explosion.

"You wouldn't care if I died in the gutter," Sarah screamed, and ran weeping from the apartment, leaving Luther little choice but to follow after her in a state of abashment. Hearing her ingratitude for the gifts her parents had bestowed on her, he heard those words Lydia had spoken to him at the loft after the phone call in the night he had made to their country place, informing them that their daughter was dead. "How long are we going to have to take care of you? How long?" Lydia had screamed at him with blazing contempt as dawn approached. What kind of creatures are these? Questions such as this he could imagine Peter and Lydia thinking as he backed out the door to catch up with Sarah.

And so he had his own firefight with Sarah in the privacy of the loft, all the fire coming from him. He had heard it said at the meetings that it was necessary to stay sober to get sober, the distinction having been made between physical sobriety and emotional sobriety. If one drink was too many and a thousand were not enough, so too was one angry word too many and a thousand not enough. If not thousands, many did he direct at Sarah, lambasting her for making a scene in front of her parents and causing him such discomfort. He did not understand the consequence of his words as he spoke them. He did not see that she had absorbed too many of his torrents of abuse through the years to absorb many more.

She did not sing to him her version of the Roberta Flack song. She did not sing “killing me harshly with your words.” Why would she sing what he could not hear? But she did bring to his attention some days later that death had been on the doorstep, that she had penned a suicide note after his tirade and that if he wanted her gone from this earth, he would just keep doing as he was wont to do with his abuse. And when she spoke to him in this manner, it was he who fell down dying from fright at the brink his tongue had led her to.

“I am not a murderer and I will not be called that,” he screamed out in the night, and cast a watchful eye upon her for the next several days lest she make a move on eternity.

*Where does this savagery come from, Celeste, that we hurt the defenseless with our own bile?*

Sarah visited with her friend Carola Aprile some days later. Carola was now living with her new love, Tom Terst, in a loft in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. If Hunger Longing had been as dark as the coal his home city, Pittsburgh, was famous for, Tom Terst was lit by the sun. The light was truly on him and in him. Grant after grant did he win for his public sculptures. "He is my little wunderkind," Carola Aprile said, and indeed he was an even match for her on the physical as well as mental and emotional plane. Luther was struck by the magic of life that this little man of light had entered Carola Aprile's world.

Luther had come home with his own plan for the evening. He would do some work on "White Line, Continue," he had thought. He was free now. Alcohol could no longer claim him for its own, and so he would do what alcohol had prevented him from doing before.

But the song "Oh, Happy Day" filled his head as he walked the last few blocks toward home. And then it was Laura Nyro singing "Wedding Bell Blues" as he climbed the stairs. And then it was Al Green singing "Love and Peace and Happiness" and Janis Joplin belting out "Down on Me" and he took to the skies as Stevie Nicks and Fleetwood Mac sang "Rhiannon." For the entire evening did he stay in the escapist embrace of the holler heads, playing their records and imagining the literary stardom he would achieve. The emotional excess left him dismayed. He saw, not for the first time, that he lacked the ability to make the daily effort to succeed.

As punishment for his self-indulgence, the next day had its share of vileness in store for him: a pile of work on his desk he was resistant to tackling; having to go through

the day with only a piece of bread and a candy bar for sustenance; and withdrawing from the Bowery Savings Bank all but the minimum needed to keep his checking account open.

“I am a bum. I am nothing but a bum,” he said to Ringle on the telephone that night.

“What you are is addicted to your own unhappiness. Your mission in life seems to be to find things about yourself or your circumstances to feel bad about,” Ringle replied.

“Are you a truth bomber?”

“Am I a what?”

“Do you drop truth bombs from a high altitude?”

“What’s wrong with a little truth?”

“What’s wrong with being blown to bits?”

“You’ll live, my friend,” Ringle said, and hung up.

“Can you not see that I am busy?” Rafta asked, in a reprimanding tone. She was back from Bologna only several days, and there were matters of a high priority for her to tend to, she was only saying to Luther, who had showed up at her office door with an armful of mechanicals for her final approval. Could he not see that she had a powwow going on with Florence Mith, the director of Pilgore Press’s other children’s books imprint, and big Belton Borschwinki, the director of marketing for children’s books? What was she to do

with such obtuseness but deal with it forthrightly? So Luther heard her to say with her words and her tone and the visual of her scolding face.

But it was not to be a day of sulking and licking at internal wounds. He was not free to sit about and cultivate an attitude of grievance against formidable Rafta Blackning, not on a day that was designated as her day by Roller Carmona-Hickson and Viv Bean. He had to put on his happy face and walk through the rain to pick up a cake for the surprise birthday party for Rafta. But then it struck him, stepping off the curb. Had not Doug Rader, an infielder for the Houston Astros back when, done such a bombing in the locker room on a birthday cake meant for one of his teammates? Luther could only imagine the look of flabbergast on Rafta's face when she saw—and smelled—what had been wrought. Luther quickly reined in his cruelty before it took him down that fecal path.

That night Luther got Ringle on the line.

“Ringle, you were on my mind in a big way today,” Luther said.

“Is that right?” Ringle asked.

“You bet. If you are the truth bomber, I was going to be the fecal bomber.”

“The what bomber?”

“The fecal bomber. Like fetal, but with a ‘c’ in place of the ‘t.’”

“What is this crap you’re giving me?”

“Not you. My boss, Rafta,”

“Listen, you give your boss crap, you’ll wind up on the street. You can say whatever you want in the rooms, but not in the workplace. There you will be asked to leave.”

“I have an editor of sorts.”

“Well, use it or get a better one. You’ll need it.”

“Ringle, you definitely are the truth bomber.”

“Enough,” Ringle said, and hung up.

*Now, Celeste, Ringle needn't have worried. I was not quiet in RoR, as I had been when the training wheels were still on me. Rather was I making a loud and, if not joyful, angry noise about my pain. Though the voice was strong within me that said, "You have nothing to say and no way to say it," there was another voice, a prevailing voice, that said, "You have been on the margins your entire life. You will not be doing that here. Get your hand up and get it up now." And so I did. To the sound of Ray Charles's Born to Lose did I air my loud complaint that the world had snapped my twiggy sentences in two and thrown them on the street for the feet of fat men to tread upon and the wheels of two-ton vehicles to crush, but that my love should save the last dance for me, as one day I would appear in the winner's circle. Sometimes the forces of malignancy sought to prevail over me, but I was end zone bound; there would be no lasting impediments to my desire. The impetus for sharing each and every time was that I had something important to say and a burning need to say it. I was not alone in this need. There were others—the shunned, the broken—equally unfettered and insistent on being heard. Against us came a posse of the righteous*

*riding hard, their leader being a man with a misaligned slash for a mouth in the shape of a crescent moon.*

*“Taisez-vous. Taisez-vous,” he said, exasperation blocking his word flow, but he soon saw, as did his brethren, all of whom dined on sanctimony stew, that the few he spoke were in vain, my silence bringing them to an understanding that they were futilely flying the flag of intolerance and nothing more.*

*The meeting was some blocks north of my place of work and up a flight of stairs. In fact, two meetings were offered at the same time: a general discussion meeting in the big room and a beginners meeting in the small room. While the posse of the righteous did not care for my sound, there were, evidently, those who did. A second delegation beseeched me to speak at the smaller meeting when I was approaching three months of recovery, and how could I say no? I let Ringle know, and while he couldn't attend, he did send his representative, a man of enormous girth who endured, with a patient smile, my thirty-minute recitation of childhood and adolescent angst, for I was still in the place of what Daddy and my sissy-poops had done to me and with no means of elevating above such recrimination: how Hannah held her hands so high the quicker to move them into correct smacking position, and clamped her tongue between thick lips as she smacked and smacked; how Naomi sang arias in the lobby without knowing the words and called me across the room with a big smile only to crack me across the face as punishment for having a misshapen head and had to be coaxed off the ledge outside the window of the room high up she shared with her husband, Chuck, by the men of the police and fire department and how the crowd that had gathered on the street below cried out at me as I*



*stood among them, "Shame, shame double shame everybody knows your name," as they knew only too well that I was tied to Naomi by blood as they also knew I had a blood tie to Rachel, who left Vassar College to run drunk and naked from the room where she had been stashed in the building into the street below before streaking was in vogue in a show of love for John F. Kennedy, for which she was committed to Bellevue and how, when my father died, she found God and the Bible and watched for signs of the Christ Jesus from the window of her room. I spoke of the disappearing words of Pastor Cohn and the volatility of the Ukrainian for Christ in the Catskill Mountains and the dynamic husband and wife team for Christ and the rubber-lipped girls I kissed at that same camp and of my father, who had come from the land of the annihilated as the smacker supreme, crying out, "Don't make me get up or I don't know what I will do" when we were noisy in his midst.*

"An interesting story, but it has nothing to do with alcoholism," Luther heard a man say, at the end of the meeting. And so he understood that he had failed. He understood completely. He had barely mentioned his drinking. In fact, the verdict had been rendered when the smile on the face of the man of enormous girth vanished and he left before Luther had finished his lead. I have driven out the fat man. I must die and die and die, Luther thought.

He had tried to say too much, and so he had said nothing. Now it was for him to return to work and hide himself away in the shame corner. He entered a bathroom stall, where he could talk to the tiles on the wall in a whispering voice and give each selected tile five light taps with his right index finger. To ensure his safety from those on his trail

who meant only death for him, he chose three tiles initially, and then five and then seven, to reduce the probability that the posse of murderers would guess each and every one, or the order in which he had chosen them, should they track his trail to the stall. In this way would he stymie their pursuit. Hard enough for them to guess that he had tapped any tiles to begin with, and even harder which ones he had chosen, or in which order, or how many times he had tapped each one. A man had to have a place to hide from his marauding pursuers.

About the flatness of his head he could do nothing. No roundedness could he bring to it. But a bag of bones did not have to be a bag of bones forever. This idea came to him as the air continued to soften and winter yielded to the sun's increasing strength. I will go to the heart of Sin City. I will go to the cesspool environs of Times Square, where knives flash and bodies are sold amid the abounding marquees. I will go to Herman's sporting goods and do my body right because by then Davega, where he had bought his baseball gloves and bats, was dead and gone, the name itself having given it the need to die, as how could an entity with such an ugly name survive. This he could do when he received his paycheck and the health insurance check finally arrived.

But it was first things first all the way and all the time in his new life. Before going to Herman's and taking care of himself, he would make another payment on the press for Sarah. Because order was order and chaos was chaos and no road to freedom could be paved without scrupulous attention to this reality.

Luther stopped outside of Herman's and cast his eye on the passing pedestrians. With a smile on his face did he say, Hah, where are you now, Jerry Jones-Nobleonian? And where are you now, Lenny Cerone? Have you followed me again, as you did when I was in high school? Will you be waiting for me, as you were then, to emerge with a hundred pound set of weights? Will you put the laughing thing on me once more as the store clerk and I lift the weights into the trunk of a cab? Will you call out, Lenny Cerone, "Hey, Charles Atlas, don't be kicking no sand in the face of those ninety-nine pound weaklings on the beach. "And will you, Jerry Jones-Nobleonian, do your "Oh shit, oh shit" thing, the two of you defeating my body building plan before it could even begin?

The answer, of course, was no, and no again, on that spring day in 1980, because Jerry Jones-Nobleonian had gone down and down. He had gone into a Bowery flophouse with gangrene in both legs and been removed as a corpse. And Lenny Cerone had once more become Lenny from Long Beach, because there was no place but his mom's that he could go in the state of junkie dilapidation that had befallen him. Because time could be that way with some of the people it dealt with.

"The secret is in the rewriting." So one of Mr. Dorf's big-time authors had said in an interview, as had other successful writers. The idea was one that made Luther uneasy. Reviewing the copy he had wrought was not something he could easily do. He did not want to be reminded anymore than he needed to be of his mediocrity. To protect himself, he focused on the daily word count to assure himself he was making progress. He told

himself that he had new territory to cover and had no time to go back. Something was chasing him; he couldn't say what.

He had bought the weights with the hope that he could put some meat on his bones, but he had no great expectation that he could put meat on the bones of his anemic prose. Still, he could strive to clear it of clutter and excess. After all, he was an editor, if in title only. He would face his fear. But what he was seeing wasn't pretty. He saw kaka sentences, one more malnourished than the next, his prose afflicted with a poverty of detail he sought to compensate for with inflated language. Day after day he continued his review, and day after day his depression grew. A crazy man, a nobody, totally deluded. All he had done was create an unsalvageable manuscript. All those years riding a wave of drunken gibberish. He wanted to cry, but tears were too honest, too cathartic, for the likes of him. He had sought to find a place for himself at a distance from the world, and that he had accomplished; he had hidden himself away, but that was all he had done. What was left? A dead marriage. A dead-end job.

But there were some nice things. He wasn't sitting at the wheel of a battered Checker cab, and did not have to depend on restaurant bathrooms to relieve himself; he was working with words, as Dr. Rosner said, and had an office with a door he could close. And he was showing some editing skill, even if he couldn't apply it to his own work. Even Rafta said so. And he had his RoR meetings to attend. Every meeting different. Every meeting giving him a bit of hope.

He saw other things, too. He saw a connection between stealing from his mother as a child and stealing from Sarah. Dr. Rosner concurred. With success came increased responsibility, both in a marriage and in the workplace.

“Do I sound like a braggart when I say I have developed as an editor? Do I need to be beaten?” Luther was compelled to ask.

Dr. Rosner let the “beaten” part ride. That was for another time. “In a way you come across as rather humble,” he said, while cautioning that if Luther was to gain more responsibility, he would have to ask for it.

In dreamland came a report that Sarah had been significantly impacted by Luther’s alcoholism. The bearer of this news was a young professor from the long ago who had the radiance of the sun in her blond hair and her being, all of it enhanced by the golden rays of California and Stanford University. She had liked him in her way. She hadn’t scorned him for his dullness. In fact she gave him an A on a mediocre paper and an A for the graduate school course in Romantic Poetry in which he had enrolled. She lived on Claremont Avenue, which meant that the light in her life was reaching a blinding intensity, given the avenue’s proximity to Barnard College and its neighbor to the immediate east, Columbia University.

Luther woke up shaken and told Sarah the general nature of his being without getting specific. He said the wildness pathway had been his and that he had lacked the ability to stay home with himself just as in childhood he couldn’t stay a full day in the apartment where he had been raised. Sarah listened, never once interrupting, and when he

had finished, made a pistol of her index finger and thumb with which she shot him through the head and heart.

Now there was in this time a man with a proclivity toward irateness who called to Luther from the wilderness where he lived. Solomon Burknor reminded Luther that they had encountered each other once before. During Luther's time in adult books, Solomon Burknor had sent Mr. Dorf a manuscript, which he rejected. Solomon Burknor then called Mr. Dorf with the intention of rebuking him for his shallow taste in literature but got Luther instead, who informed him that Mr. Dorf was out of the office. Unable to restrain himself, Solomon Burknor vented his fury on Luther, who was able to comfort him by saying that he too had had a manuscript which he held near and dear thrown into the street, though not by Pilgore Press.

“You are a man I can work with. You are a man with a heart I do not have to tear from your chest and eat as I stand over your deceased body. Now give me the spelling of your last name so I may keep tabs on you,” Solomon Burknor had said, back then. Fear had its way with Luther, compelling him to comply.

Now it was over a year later, and Luther could only say to Solomon Burknor, “There is nothing I can do for you. I'm at the very bottom. I work in children's books. We have nothing to do with the adult world.”

“I have faith in you, so much so that I have already sent the manuscript to your attention. I am sure you will be there for it,” Solomon Burknor said. The line went dead before Luther could reply.

That same day a parcel arrived for him. Inside was a manuscript with the title “My Love Affair with the Dolly Llama.” Luther read the first two pages, in which he learned that the Dali Lama had been reincarnated in a small town in the heartland of America as Dolly Llama. Her siblings were named Molly, Polly, and Holly. Luther stopped reading at the point where Dolly elevated ten feet above a man who meant to do her harm, not because the manuscript was uninteresting, but because he had his own work to do.

He took the novel upstairs to John Sally, in the adult trade division, who agreed to read it. Two days later Luther received from him a carbon of a kind but firm rejection letter enclosed with the manuscript that had been returned to Solomon Burknor. The carbon served as a forewarning of what was to come. Even as he read it, the phone rang.

“You betrayed me. You sold me out to a company drudge. Do you know that I have a wife due to give birth to our first child in less than a month?” Solomon Burknor said.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out, but I was entirely honest with you. I told you that I don’t have that kind of decision-making authority.”

“You’re not sorry. You wanted me to fail. Someone like you isn’t interested in seeing others succeed. You’re too small to be such an agent or catalyst. You just wanted to give the appearance of being helpful.”

“Well, maybe you are right,” Luther said.

“The only thing you have to offer is your niceness. And it isn’t even niceness. It’s indifference. How does it feel to go through life so feeble?”

“I’ll have to think about that.”

“Think about this. Go to hell. Go directly to hell. And just be grateful I’m not the one dispatching you there.” Solomon Burknor slammed down the phone.

This was not good. How could it be? To have a man mad at you who pulled people’s hearts from their chests and ate them as his victims lay dead at his feet. And yet he suspected that the man was just passing gas; surely he was a word slave who had ceded the world of action to others. Maybe the yak yak Luther had been hearing was simply the burning funk of a man dying to his own unholy ambition. And maybe Luther could find reason to be grateful. In a way the savage one had spoken truth. He had seen through to Luther’s smallness, his limitation. Information was coming in from near and far, information that he could conceivably use. He was in a place where truth could find him, and so he had cause to be grateful.

Luther that same day journeyed to the photocopier, where he was surprised to find Judith Everholt, the young adult trade editor who had been laying siege to the bastion of privilege enjoyed by Mr. Dorf, senior editor, in his office just across the floor. The fear factor was still alive in him on seeing her, as she represented all that he was not, with her drive and intelligence and the *je ne sais quoi* that infused her being. *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*. The film title came to his mind but he refrained from speaking it lest the disclosure lead him down the wrong road with her.

“The copier on our floor is broken. That is why I have come down here. So this is where you have been hiding.”



“It does feel a little like that,” he said, noting the gap in her front teeth and remembering that he had made drunken love with a woman whose teeth had the same spacing.

“You have some choice in the matter.”

Her words did not become her. He had expected something more than toughness. “Yes.”

“Take care,” she said, and hurried off with her papers. I am no match for her excellence, but I do not have to fall down dying. My day will come, he said, in the privacy of his thoughts.

*Now Celeste, the world is full of meaning and hidden import, and none of us has the listening devices to fully apprehend its ways. But this we can say. What goes around comes around. If indeed I had done Solomon Burknor dirty, then it was only just that someone should do the same to me. The reality was that in this time I had some minimal contact with you, having sent to your attention my “Marge on the Line” story as a way of staying present in your consciousness. The gift of friendship has always been yours, and at this point you had drawn to you a man named Gwaltney R. S. Brooke, the ‘e’ at the end of his surname signifying what had already been suggested by his given name and the double initials serving as a bridge, that this was someone with a rich family history. Choate. Harvard. Now a regularly featured writer for the New Yorker. You passed my story on to him and he dropped me a note. “Have always liked the name Marge. Your story is now with an editor whose job it is to accept it or not.” Celeste, it was a hill I*

wouldn't climb and wasn't meant to climb. Gwaltney R. S. Brooke didn't tumble me down that hill because I had not even begun to make the ascent insofar as believing the story had a chance of breaking into print in such a magazine. And when, two weeks later, the boilerplate letter came, with a handwritten "Sorry, and thanks" added at the bottom, I did not howl or throw stones, as castigator Solomon Burknor had done. No, I knew my place: bones with bones and upper echelon with upper echelon. This insistent prayer to be more than we are—we must all come out naked, sooner or later.

Now Celeste, I say that we should all accept and understand our station in life, but can I not also say that I did not heed my own counsel; had I not sought you out, understanding full well you were in a higher league than I could possibly play in and using alcohol to suppress that very awareness? And was I not now, having let go of the bottle, using RoR to delude myself into believing that I was equal with you? One's station in life: can anything be more important, or more elusive, for some of us?

One thing more. Addressing you in sobriety can feel awkward and not without the fear that all the old magic and excitement will be missing. Like dark clouds do thoughts come over me that my dream of you is entirely vacuous and destined to turn to crap, as is everything in my life. In these moments all the delusions and illusions fall away. How intolerable, how close to extinction, their absence brings me. To live without a dream is akin to be slowly drained of one's blood. I see that I have gotten it wrong. One's station in life is the equivalent of death. "Fly Me to the Moon" is more than a song. It is a dictate, an American dictate. It is an American imperative. We must seek, we must aspire to higher ground. But then comes the question: what constitutes higher ground?

*And is it not just like the higher power, in his or her or its freshness, to respond: "That is for me to know and you to find out"? There are uncertainties we must just put up with and take our guidance from the following ungrammatical utterance: you pays your money and takes your chances.*

Now more mindful of the steady income stream that children's books represented, Pilgore Press, in this time, purchased Constable Books. To celebrate the acquisition of this jewel, a party was thrown. Obligated to attend, Luther found himself standing next to Peter Ben-Gurion, the president of Pilgore, who handed him a glass of champagne. Peter then asked everyone to raise their glasses and made a toast to the new staff. While others then drank the sweet bubbly, Luther lowered his glass to the table and left it there. He had been doing so well. The urge to drink had not visited him in the three months he had been sober, he could honestly say. How strange and miraculous to be free of the burden alcohol had become and the insanity it ensured. But this experience at the party was more of a challenge. The sweet scent of the champagne had come to him when he lifted his glass, and for a moment it could seem that every admonition he had heard about alcohol in the RoR meetings, including that it was the first drink that got an alcoholic drunk, had been erased from his consciousness. For that moment the call of the old life was overwhelming. He eased away from the glass, as from a poisonous snake, and the urge left as quickly as it had come.

What a wonder that he could stand there at a social event without a drink in his hand. Only eight years before, he remembered reading, with a shock of recognition that caused him to shudder, a quote in *People* magazine, to the effect that if you need a drink

to be in the same room with others, then you may have a problem with alcohol. The source for the quote had been Morris Chavetz, MD, the director of the Harvard Alcoholism Studies Center.

But being with others without a drink did not ensure his comfort. The social wound remained gaping. To calm himself, he tried to apply some of the suggestions he had heard in the RoR meetings. “Don’t compare your insides with someone else’s outsides,” he recalled, as he stood only several feet from Peter, with his degree from Yale and the several books he had published and his international contacts. How was he to fit in with such a person, given his level of excellence? Just because Peter wore the raiment of success, Luther was not to assume he wasn’t bleeding on the inside as well? And there was that other saying, “The only valid comparison we can make is between where we are now and where we were when we first came to the rooms.” That was easier. He saw his progress. He was not quite the wretch he had been. And he silently repeated the slogan “Feelings are not facts.” Simply because he felt inadequate and inferior didn’t mean he was those things. The low numbers. They were the fault line and as unyielding as his flat head.

He retreated once again to the bathroom stall, resting his forehead against the cool tiles, where in privacy the self that he had betrayed could return to him.

From the stall he came out strong. Enough with feelings pulling you this way and that, coming and going like the scudding clouds. He turned his mind to the material world: a new pair of slacks, preferably tan, and a new shirt and a pair of light-colored shoes to make himself presentable for the coming spring. But then he did a *jamais jamais*

on himself, because the traffic light was holding dead red and a sign was flashing in bright white neon: “First things first, buddy.” The message was clear. The press for Sarah had high priority. Clothes could wait. There was a way forward, and he would have to follow it.

But that didn't mean, come Saturday morning, he couldn't make his way through the garbage-strewn streets to Chow House, on Second Avenue, for his eggs over easy and hash browns and toasted blueberry muffin soaked in butter, and wash his face in the *New York Times* and *New York Post*. Sarah had been up late and was still asleep. A few tables away sat an overweight punk rocker in dirty jeans and a sleeveless black leather vest. She had more hair under her arms than on her big head. Without ostentation he changed seats so his back would be to her. The world and its flesh. Sometimes you didn't want to see it, at least when you were eating. She was making a statement, whatever that might be, and he was about to put his scorn all over it until he realized he had done the same back when his hair was a tumbleweed rooted to his head.

The meal overpowered him, and he fell into a snooze on the lofa bed, where he dozed away a good part of the morning. I have the afternoon to rally strong, he told himself, on awakening, but it was not quite to be, as he found another bed to lie on, even while sitting at his desk, that being the bed of despair. He could assume any posture he wished, but the reality was that the smelliness of “White Line, Continue” laid him low. Oh Jesus, was it stinky stuff, not only because of the appalling meagerness of the sentences but the obvious and futile attempt to pad them with inflated, hysterical prose.

Sarah would be having dinner with her sister, Claire, and then the two would take in a movie. That was one bright spot, because the light of the Ivy League was on Claire once again. She had left Barnard to enroll at Hunter College, from which she had graduated phi beta kappa, but now she was working toward a master's degree at the Columbia University School of Social Work. A woman who had the goods, certifiably so. Luther could go off to his double RoR meeting knowing Sarah would not lack for companionship of her own, and he could vacate the premises before Claire arrived, so he would not have to see the loft through her shaming eyes.

He walked up the Bowery and over to Fourth Avenue, where he heard the quietness of the shuttered antiques shops whispering to him from their place of peace. Such moments in the city were precious. They were a reminder of those nights his mother would take him, and him alone, to the Rock Church on the East Side, to hear the sermon of the Swedish pastor for the Christ Jesus. And on the way there would be that same stillness, that hush of silence brought to the sidewalks and the buildings, and there was the store on one of those magical side streets, a store where no store was supposed to be, and in its window there was another rock, delirium overcoming him as he saw a Lionel model of a Rock Island diesel with a band blister red amid the engine's blackness. With every step he took was a commotion of hope rising, and joy began to spread throughout him when he filled the urn with water and added coffee and put out the Oreo and chocolate chip cookies in anticipation of the group arriving. No more sad rags. No more. He had the group's love to keep him warm. He had the teapot woman, she who brought her own so her brew would taste just right; he had the woman dressed up with no place to

go and the man dressed up with no place to go; he had slobber lips, him with the perpetual smile who called himself a pantywaist drinker and referenced his Harvard degree each time he shared; he had the man who spoke the high-content sentences that his bulging forehead promised; he had the man who lived in the ponder place; he had “keep it simple” Hyacon, old and with his feet on the ground; he had the little one, who talked of what her daddy hadn’t given her; he had the mayor of Brooklyn, who did not need to ask him how he was doing with the pot and the pills anymore; he had an endless army he could know without knowing on a Saturday night.

The woman leading the first meeting was a history professor but had sold herself on the streets of America as a teenage runaway. The speaker at the second meeting emptied the contents of his head into a Hefty bag three times a day so he could be free. It was all good, everything Luther was hearing.

After the meeting, as he was cleaning the coffee pot, a woman who introduced herself as Cassidy said to him that she had been born to run free and the night was calling to her. There was a punk rock band she was intent on doing. Doing? Though the word sprung from her sentence, Luther did not query her about it. He just let her continue so he could better know the lay of her land.

“The only problem is that I had a really bad slip and am back only a few days. I don’t know what to do. I feel like that club is pulling me right into it.”

Luther seized his moment. “There is a song in my head and also my heart called ‘Rescue the Perishing.’ I will not sing it to you, as, like some members of my family, I am challenged to remember lyrics and I cannot carry a tune. But it begins like this: ‘Rescue

the perishing/care for the dying.’ That is what I will try to do for you with what I have to say. And actually, it is not me saying it but RoR. Try to avoid people, places, and things that bring you closer to a drink. The club is in that category, I would think. The second thing is this: Do you really want a haircut? I mean, your hair looks great the way it is.”

“What?” Cassady replied.

“Because if you don’t want a haircut, then it’s best not to go to the barber shop, and there is a barber shop lurking in that club, if you know what I mean.”

Cassady kissed him on the cheek and flew out the door.

Luther did not call out to her. He did not say, “Do my words mean nothing?” as would his mother, back in another time. He understood the call of the night and the pull of the night, although now he only wanted safety from it.

He understood the call of sleep as well, and when it took him some hours later, he entered dreamland to find the head of Saul Bellow attached to the body of a bird. The Bellow bird was performing stunning aerial maneuvers, rotating three hundred sixty degrees in full flight and doing all manner of dips and dives in a bright sky as a visual demonstration of breaking free of the literary strictures of Gustave Flaubert so he could be free to write *The Adventures of Augie March*.

Luther continued to ride his bicycle to and from work long after the transit strike had been settled., and Sarah took note. She too wanted to experience the city on wheels, and so asked her parents if they would bring down her bicycle from Camp on their next trip



into the city. And so it was that, some days later, the phone rang as he sat in his windowless office.

“Luther Garatdjian, Cromartie Wonders,” Luther said into the receiver.

“My, do we sound official. This is Lydia, Luther.”

“Hi. How are you?” Luther said. She had caught him in a moment of internal disintegration, and it was everything to pull himself back together.

“Very well, thank you. I tried reaching Sarah at the loft but there was no answer.”

“I believe she has an appointment with Dr. Frodkey this morning.”

“Please tell her, should you speak to her, that we will be bringing down the bike for her this afternoon. We should be there about 2:30 pm.”

“That is good news. I will give her the heads up,” Luther said.

“You might also tell her we will be bringing the paints and other art supplies she requested.”

“Gee, that sounds like a lot of trouble for you and Peter,” Luther said.

“We are managing,” Lydia replied.

She had gone short on him. Unless he was mistaken, peeve was now in the air. She wanted to be done with Sarah and him and could barely hide her disgust that she wasn't. First her husband disappointed her by hiding from the world and now the daughter who was in his image was also failing to shoulder adult responsibilities and had the nerve to turn Lydia into a delivery service. Lydia needn't mention that her daughter had also gotten involved with a drunk and inflicted him on the family. *How long are we*

*going to have to take care of you?* Wasn't that the question she had fired him at the loft the night of his insane phone call that Sarah was dead? And hadn't she really meant *How long will I have to take care of all of you?*" Yes indeed, that was surely the question. Luther knew the face of contempt when he saw it and the voice of contempt when he heard it.

"Well, thank you for doing this."

"I believe we are doing this for Sarah."

"Thank you, anyway."

"Goodbye, Luther."

"Good..." Lydia did telephone hang-up before he could finish.

He closed the office door so he could have a wall of shame for himself and himself only for ten minutes. That was not a lot to ask.

But there were actions he could take against the scorn. For one thing, he could show love where he had shown none. He could put his babies, his manuscripts, in file folders, and add labels, too. In this way they would be covered in the day and night and order would extend to all regions of his world. Oh what a feeling of hope the organization gave him. Because now he saw the truth. He could label a story draft #1 and then begin another version and mark it draft #2. And on and on he could go, each one an improvement on the previous one, and all of them contained in one place. Was this not coming home to himself? Was it not? To have something that was his own?

Burt Burke, director of marketing for the adult division, made the rounds that day, warning one and all that company eyes would be on them should they be apprehended at the purchase desk of the Silver Fox himself, Mr. Bertram Bert, proprietor of the Strand bookstore, trying to augment their meager incomes with wheelbarrows full of review copies. But his smile said that angels would be angels and rascals rascals, and that he had no familiarity with the one but great familiarity with the other. He presented himself as a marketing director with a human face, one who lived within the realm of understanding. He let them subtly know that he too had once had fast fingers.

And yet, Luther had only to hear the warning once from the Pilgore town crier to visualize the long hand of justice seizing him by the shirt collar and evicting him from the premises of the company, as a pharmacist had done from his store after catching him back in the days of childhood trying to steal a pen with fingers not quite fast enough. His whole life had become about watching his Ps and Qs, to prove that he was above suspicion, so no beating would come to him, and this circumspection seemed only to be growing now that he was sober in RoR. Because eyes might be upon him he did not take so much as a pencil that was not his. In this way could he walk the walk of the just.

But there came a day when Sarah heard one thing that he spoke and he heard another. Such was the language he was speaking on the day that led her to gather all the Pilgore books in the loft and sell them to Bertram Bert when all Luther thought he had said was to ask her to return the books he had borrowed from the library. And so he had to live in fear of the umbrage of Bertram Bert, but the threat of annihilation eased with each warming day of spring.

There came another day soon after when he had reason to doubt his mouth was speaking words in line with his best interest. Kenda Judd, the new secretary for Peter Ben-Gurion, confided to Luther that she was anxious to move out of her parents' apartment and into her own as she held him with a stony stare.

“Tell me this, Kenda Judd, are you loving Peter Ben-Gurion by day so he will come and love you in the night? Is that your plan for the master of the French kiss?” Because by now it was common knowledge that the president had French-kissed many of the attractive women in the company, a number of them during daylight hours. (This was before Luther saw the mouth in terms of mucus, germs, bad breath, tooth decay, all that would hinder surrender to it.)

“One thing's for sure. I won't be loving you in either the day or the night,” Kenda Judd said, giving Luther a poke in the chest for emphasis.

This too shall pass, Luther said to himself throughout the rest of the day, so the sun might find him wherever he was and wherever it was, too. He just allowed the slogan to carry him through.

Now Sarah had been demanding of her parents that they pay for her to see Dr. Frodkey twice a week as reparation for crimes committed against her person in her growing up years, crimes that infected her with a soreness against the world and the incapacity to do more than work in the men's shirts department of Gimbel's East with hostile black girls from East Harlem who did not care for her whiteness. But Peter and Lydia put their foot

down, and Luther was in silent accord with their decision, because it had come to his attention that Dr. Frodkey would only take Sarah so far in this world.

In fact, when Dr. Frodkey called the loft seeking a word with Sarah and got Luther instead, Luther took the opportunity to say what was in his heart and on his mind.

“Have you ever considered that Sarah might benefit from seeing a female doctor, given the level of antipathy she has shown toward her mother? A man’s love for a woman is one thing, but a woman’s love for a woman is another. Am I creating chaos in your world by suggesting as much?” Luther showed no fear. He felt he was taking it to the hoop with authority.

*Celeste, I resolve to tell the truth and then I revert once again to exaggeration or outright falsehood. If the choice comes down to integrity or the ego, the ego seems to win. And yet sometimes the truth is too meager to countenance. We cannot go about broadcasting our thin bones all the day long, saying “Skimpy was here” and “Skimpy was there falalalala.” There are many forces operating in us, and is it not possible that they coalesce into a chorus of truth, whatever territory individual voices may be claiming? When the huggy kissy brigades of Rooms of Recovery swarmed all over me and I sought to drive them away, not to extinction as Samson of old with the jawbone of an ass, but with a sound and a face strongly rebuffing, was the banner of liberation not flying proclaiming the beginning of the end of my servitude? And was this revelation regarding gender realignment not worthy of dissemination, of application to the life circumstances of others, of those I hold, or should hold, near and dear? Did they not have the right to fly the flag of revolution as well? Is it not the metaphysical dictate of all*

*Americans, and all people, to live free? These are not idle questions, Celeste. We must not hide/hoard the light we have been blessed with. We must share it. So while there are those who would deride and denounce, we say to them, as did the great Fleetwood Mac, "Go your own way. Just go your own way."*

Dr. Frodkey hung up without responding. Luther was left with the understanding that hard slap had been dealt to him for threatening Dr. Frodkey's hegemony. I am on to something, Luther could only think, but Sarah told him to mind his own business and not be all into hers.

That spring, while the Central Park carousel whirled and children rode on its carved horses to the uplifting sound of marches and waltzes and polkas, Edward Harkin sat glumly in the empty, out of the way office he had been deposited in. Save for the slow shuffling of his feet, all movement in his life seemed to have ceased, and no gay music played in his ears.

"Ellen Gruen shafted me. She was patient. She waited until a rheumatic heart condition forced me to take a week of sick leave before exiling me to this wasteland. And when I returned she didn't so much as ask about my health. She is a cold, conniving woman," he said of the editor-in-chief of the adult trade division, who had come on board during Luther's time with Mr. Dorf.

Luther, in trying to navigate the corridors of the premises, had gone down the wrong one. There Edward Harkin had been waiting, staring out beyond his bare desk at the door as if willing someone to come by and relieve the monotony of his day and his

life. I will surrender to the moment. I will love this man when no one else does, Luther thought. After all, Mr. Harkin had opened a door for him, and so he owed Mr. Harkin his understanding. I will be a sunbeam for the God of my new understanding. But it was hard. Other sentiments kept intruding. The atmosphere of defeat was overwhelming.

As if he heard them, Mr. Harkin said, “You’re not the most up and coming sort of person, are you? Where are you working now? Do you even have a job here any longer or are you just wandering about?” His impulses taking him in a new and jabbing direction. Showing him something more than his dolor now, Mr. Harkin was. A man with such shrewd little eyes and such sliver lips had to have a streak of cruelty somewhere in him.

“Cromartie Wonders. That is where I hang my hat now.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I went where there was an opening.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate, but maybe it will work out in the end. Would you care to go for drinks and lunch?”

“I don’t drink,” Luther blurted.

“You don’t drink?” Mr. Harkin asked. “If you don’t mind myself saying so, your drinking didn’t go unnoticed when you were on the floor.”

“Really?”

“Some days you looked like you were going to fall out of your chair.”

Luther was taken aback that Mr. Harkin and others had noticed. Every night Mr. Dorf saying “Stay sober” as a way of saying good night, and Luther thinking that it was just Mr. Dorf’s way of saying good night to everyone. But it wasn’t all just about him,

Luther. Mr. Dorf had had a few things to say about Mr. Harkin. How Mr. Harkin's life revolved around the bars. Mr. Dorf saying it with such distaste, as if such a life were utterly foreign to him. Mr. Dorf had an appetite for life; he devoured food, people, experience. But Mr. Harkin had only a thirst, a thirst for booze; his only desire was to devour the contents of a bottle. It was something for Luther to ponder. In a way Mr. Harkin was him, with his unattractive self-pity and his drinking, at least as Luther had been.

“Well, I stopped. I got sober in RoR.”

“Is that right?”

“It is.”

“Well, that's too bad.”

“Why too bad?”

“Because now there won't be any fun in your life. The light has gone out.”

“Oh, no,” Luther said. “The light has come on.”

“Is that right? You are a strange one,” Mr. Harkin said.

“I am no stranger than the truth that has been given me,” Luther replied.

“And what truth is that?”

“That happiness is in not reaching for the bottle.”

“Yes, that is a strange truth, if it can be called that,” Mr. Harkin said. “If you will excuse me, I have a phone call to make.” Mr. Harkin reached for the phone and began dialing. Luther stood outside, listening for the sound of Mr. Harkin's voice, but it did not



rise from his mouth. Mr. Harkin is speaking to the air, to the silence, to that which is not there, Luther thought, as he heard the receiver placed back in the cradle.

*Celeste, I didn't show the necessary kindness and compassion. I will have my chance in the next life. Mr. Harkin will surely be waiting.*

Goodness was a quality that Luther was seeking. He did have it in his heart to be loved by others. But in some way—its degree—it was a debilitating need.

The night that Sarah punctured her forearm cutting a loaf of rye bread, and wound up being held overnight at St. Vincent's Hospital for observation, Luther felt his goodness need leading him to Lydia, as it had before at times when Sarah was in crisis and Luther became all but the town crier. To what was he referring? That time in her Boston Museum School days when she was depressed following Lenore's suicide and that time at the Chinatown loft when she didn't want to hurt him, she just wanted to go out in the middle of the night, signaling the beginning of the breakdown Luther alerted Lydia to the following morning.

A powerful urge came over him to run to a pay phone as he stepped out of the hospital onto Seventh Avenue, and so he grabbed hold of a lamppost to save himself from precipitous action. But holy moly. The force ripped him free of the pole and the next minute he was dialing. He gave himself reasons. The accident had been frightening—so much blood spurting from the puncture and the towel he used as a compress quickly soaked red. Then there had been the terrible anxiety trying to hail a cab and the interminable lights and the traffic on the cross-town journey; the fear that she would lose

consciousness and bleed to death; the endless wait in the emergency room, even with her visible need.

*Celeste, there are not so many paradises that we visit on this earth. Camp was such a paradise. Peter and Lydia and all the Van Dines were such a paradise. I was seeking to repay my debt to them. I was seeking to prove I was worthy of their love.*

“I am so glad you told us, Luther,” Lydia said on the phone.

“I only mentioned it because they are keeping her overnight, though only as a precaution. So they assured me. Maybe I should have waited until morning to call you regardless.”

“No. We need to know these things. And it was an accident, you say?”

“Yes, of course. Completely.”

“Because accidents happen for a reason.”

“No, no. It was just a slip of the knife. Sometimes these things just happen.”

“Just happen. That is good. I will take that to bed with me. I will sleep on it.”

When he got off the phone, he turned his face to the wall and kept it there in recognition that he had done harm where he had meant to do good.

When he could he moved to the window and stared down at the bums on the corner of Houston Street being loved by the warm spring air. He could only hope that they would get the coins that they needed for a taste of wild Irish Rose or Swiss Up or whatever nasty stuffy they were drinking to ease the commotion in their minds.

*Celeste, sometimes we break too soon into our goodness dance. Far too soon. This must be acknowledged.*

“Why did you tell the hospital people that you work at Gimbel’s East when you have been laid off?” Luther asked.

“I just did.”

“Why didn’t you say you were a freelance artist or unemployed?”

“They didn’t need to know that.”

“Why not?”

“Because they just don’t. You think I want to be a bum? You think that?”

“Who said you were a bum?”

“You don’t think I hear you thinking that?”

“Hey,” Luther said.

“Hey yourself,” Sarah said.

Sarah’s parents stopped by the loft. They came so she would know they wanted her among the living.

“I see you gave yourself a gift,” Lydia said to Luther.

“A gift?”

“That nice new bicycle.”

“It’s not so new. I’ve had it for years. I use it to get to and from work. I started doing that during the transit strike.”

“Well, it certainly looks new. And where is your motorcycle that you used to ride?”

“That is gone. I sold it sometime ago.”

“But you liked it so much.”

“I did at the time. That is true.”

She was saying that he was cheap and shallow. She hadn't forgotten what he had done with the money she had gifted him with for staying on at Camp after Lenore's suicide, that it had been full out mockery to pull up alongside her in Riverside Park several weeks later as she walked with a family friend. She was saying that she remembered how he gloried in his power as she visibly suffered the torment of her devastating loss. And why should she forget such a display of callousness? he thought. And why should he, for that matter?

*“Where does such sadism come from that I showed Lydia in her time of need?”*

*“Where was her compassion for the loss of your life, young as you were?”*

*“What does that even mean?”*

*“She had everything and you had nothing. She had Radcliffe and the gift of intellect. You had the City College of New York and no intellect to speak of, just your sensitivity, as Sarah had noted. She had wealth—a nine hundred acre estate and Riverside Drive apartment— and you had poverty. She had a dead daughter but you had a dead family, or deadness in it—your sister Naomi and your father and auntie Eve—with more death on the way. She had a native and material endowment you would never possess.”*

*“So you're saying I felt deprived?”*

*“You had nothing and others had everything. Why should you feel for Dr. Rosner when he told you he and his wife had separated? Why should you feel for Tom Smits when his father left his mother? Did they have your sisters, your brother, your father? Did they have the shit-canned family? Did they have your meager endowment? Did they? Did they? No. So screw them. ‘You want pain? I will show you pain.’ That was your motto.”*

*“How you talk to me.”*

*“How you talk to the world, or don’t talk to it, with your bottled-up rage.”*

*Now Celeste, I can say all I want, but I was not rationality’s child in this time. Umbrage of the storm cloud variety was blackening my sky, and Lydia was inducing it. She wanted us to come to Camp the weekend before Memorial Day but I took exception, saying Memorial Day weekend would be better. It turned out that she had already invited Maggio Capici and his wife, Sally. But Celeste, here is the thing. I replied with an unassailable fact on the ground, saying that a holiday weekend trumps a regular weekend because three is better than two where time is concerned. Lydia refrained from challenging my assertion; she did not bring me up short for my audacity. How far I had gone in the “taking liberties” department one can hardly exaggerate, that I should assume it was my right to request one weekend over another. In this strange new world of sobriety one can wander into the land of impropriety and journey a ways before properly reconnoitering the terrain and saying assez bien! Simplement, assez bien!*

*And so, when Peter arranged to drive down from Camp and pick us up so we could all be together on the holiday weekend, my jubilation knew no bounds. The sun so*

*brightly shining. But no. Wait. The wheels of speculation began to turn. Suppose we had been invited only because of Sarah's accident? Suppose Claire and Maggio and Sally had been invited beforehand with the understanding that we would not be there? Suppose they had all agreed that we were undesirable company? And so did soreness visit me, Celeste, and I had to do battle with it, there in the darkness where I had been dragged, before the light could find me once again.*

*Let me here report that the holiday weekend came and the sun blazed overhead and so did my own personal sun. Yes, Celeste, I stood in the light. Maggio and Sally offered me a joint, but I said I had found something better. I was just like Mickey in Maurice Sendak's children's book, In the Night Kitchen. Mickey was in the milk and the milk was in him and I was in God and God was in me. Lydia was in earshot and thought to query me. "Is that right?" she asked. "Is he occupying much space? What is he doing in there?"*

*"He is spreading joy," I said.*

*"Well, so long as he is not spreading trouble, I suppose that is all right," Lydia replied, as if to remind me of my difficult ways.*

*"He is showing me the way to eternity," I said.*

*"Is that right? Eternity. Well, well," she said.*

*Now Celeste, if the laughing thing was on them, and surely it was lurking, this was no matter to me. I was strangely impervious for someone so susceptible to shame. But there it was.*

But he had more than God on his mind as the weekend progressed. The human power of Lydia was required. It was that time again, the time to lay himself bare, to have a heart to heart, to surrender to the banality of sincerity.

As if she sensed his neediness, she made him wait. She did not want his drabness oppressing her. Knowing she saw his dependency was humiliating, but what was he to do? He was too far gone. She was the answer. His mind had locked on.

“Were you looking for me, Luther?”

He had just come from the kitchen. Lydia was just entering.

Seeing his stricken expression, she said, “Step into my office. That’s what the kitchen is, isn’t it? My office?”

“You are a great cook.”

“You don’t care about food. It shows. You just tear into whatever is around you and then you’re done. You pride yourself on being born with a glass in your hand.”

“You know a lot but say little.”

“You didn’t come here to talk about me. What’s on your mind?”

“My mind is seeking forgiveness, but I fear what it is really looking for is trouble.”

“What kind of trouble would that be?”

“The kind that comes when neediness presents itself. I feel ashamed of what I put you and the family through for all those years.”

“You have to look forward, not behind you.”

“Not so easy to do. I know my name was Trouble Plenty.”

“I would be lying if I said that you weren’t at least partly responsible for Sarah’s suffering. Peter and I are partly responsible, too. And Sarah is partly responsible. I have seen a tremendous change in her. Five years ago her attitude was that we should support her. Now she is seeking work and seems to understand the need to make her own way.”

Though Lydia had divided Sarah’s suffering into thirds, Luther took away only his portion, which had the weight of a bowling ball. There, in the Catskills, the rooms were calling to him, as they did in Manhattan. Yes, he was with the Van Dines and their guests, and yes, the Van Dines had been a family to him for these many years, but he was in need of air, more air than the mountains could provide and more space. And so, with the Van Dines’ permission, he drove on down to Kingston for a meeting, because the rooms were a family too, the brothers and sisters his own couldn’t be to him and his parents as well. He knew a lifeline when he saw one.

And he was beginning to know a problem drinker when he saw one. Maggio Capisce was not one and Sally was not one and neither Claire nor Sarah nor Peter nor Lydia were one, but heh heh Brian might be one, with his hand around a bottle of beer the entire weekend and being in smoke heaven as well. And yet Luther didn’t get all righteous on Brian. He did no proselytizing. That would not be proper. It would be downright offensive to go busting in on someone else’s business, especially when that business meant the difference between life and death, at least in the person’s mind. Luther remembered how he hadn’t appreciated people saying this and that about his own drinking, as if they had the right to threaten the only thing of value in his life. No, no, no.



He saw the things he often saw that weekend, that he would never be close with Maggio and Sally. Like him, they were supplicants at the palace. Thus, they were his competitors for the attention of Lydia. They were there to relate vertically, not laterally, and so they were to be seen as dinky in their interpersonal ways. And even if he had sought to communicate with Maggio, what chance was there of succeeding? After all, Maggio was rock hard, like his physique.

And he heard things, really heard them. Lydia saying, “I won’t live long. No one in my family did,” and Claire saying, “Family history is not the sole determinant,” and Lydia saying, “It will be in my case.”

And Peter saying, “There is this myth that Columbus discovered America and Henry Hudson was the first explorer to sail up the Hudson River. It’s all rubbish.” His tone emphatic, dismissive, and expressive of his hurt and rage at a world that had no room for the truth bearers but readily embraced its big fat liars.

And he overheard things that weekend, a universe of sound coming from the master bedroom, Peter declaring, to someone not present, and with great finality, “And that is all there is to it,” following his utterance with loud burps and farts as he made the bed and pounded the pillows into their proper shape. Saying further, “Righteousness *is* mine, *is* mine, *is* mine.”

A great comfort it was for Luther to be privy to these off-stage utterances of Peter Van Dine, as he too was subject to a riot of feeling for which interpersonal communication was lacking and he too had the fire of his own discontent.

Always with the slights it was. Closing the door in his face, extending invitations to others while ignoring him even as he stood in their midst. It was OK. He would hide his hurt away from Lisa Becky-Jill Gradyson, author of *Frieda the Happy Frog*. Though he was nominally the editor, she saw that he had nothing to contribute to her manuscript and nothing that she wanted in her life. And so she went to Frieda Volcker, the art director, and to Rafta, bypassing him completely.

“She says you frighten her. She thinks you are a strange man and that you no more belong in children’s books than she does in the French Foreign Legion.”

“Is that right?” Luther asked. “Gee, maybe I should leave right now.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Frieda said.

Frieda wouldn’t be asked to leave. She was in like Flynn, with her proportional wheel and PMS colors and tissue overlays and other magic beyond the reach of words. And she was already making a name for herself by illustrating books as well. She was industry itself, with her blond Kirk Douglas face.

Turning him into his father, they were, right before his eyes, the way they all bypassed him. Auntie Eve invading the apartment and pulling his mother away from the breakfast table and speaking with her exclusively in sing-song Swedish so his father would be outside the gates of comprehension.

“Have some champagne. That will cheer you up,” Frieda said. There was a birthday party for Amanda Plessy, Frieda’s assistant, who stood beside her. Twenty-two. A Yale University graduate. As dark as Frieda was light. Someone who lived in the silence.

“No thank you,” he said.

“Why don’t you drink? You don’t want to be happy? It’s champagne.”

“No, really,” Luther said.

“You are strange. How can anyone not like champagne? It will make you laugh and smile.”

“I laugh,” Luther said. “I smile.”

“Do you? Not enough. Does he, Amanda?”

“Luther can smile or not smile as he pleases,” Amanda said, and in that moment winked at Luther as if they had an understanding that they operated on a subtler plane than effervescent Frieda.

Ringle, Luther’s mentor, displayed his power to fortify that evening.

“Ask her why she is so interested in your personal habits if she brings up drinking again. That will quiet her down. But the fact is that you didn’t drink in spite of the awkwardness of the situation, and you have told me that you used to pick up a drink in situations like that because you were afraid everyone would assume you were an alcoholic if you didn’t. Try to remember that alcoholism is an illness and that you are saving your life by not picking up the first drink.”

Luther gratefully borrowed his mentor’s strength. He felt it filling him. Going forward he would not have to come from a place of shame. He could stand strong in the face of interrogation. He could bend the riotous laughing thing back on itself. Not that Frieda Volcker had been delighting in his discomfort. She was not one to come from a place of maliciousness, not with that big sun burning so bright within her.

Let it be said that Ringle was not all power all the time. That very night, in fact, he revealed to Luther some soreness leaking from his person, this in regard to a nemesis in his department, a woman, as he described her, of formidable powers who was making his academic life miserable.

“Vera? Did you say Vera?” Luther said, when Ringle spoke the woman’s name.

“You’re not deaf,” Ringle shot back, his vexation transferable. “What about it?”

“Is she tall and brown-haired?”

“Yes, she is. Are you saying that you know her?”

“She is my sister.”

“Your sister?”

“Yes, I am afraid so, one of a number. Now, if you are to understand anything about Vera, it is that she has a loose alliance with my oldest sister, Hannah, the smacking queen. It is their gift to hurt you and then make you come back for more, so be on your guard at all times. Do not allow the altered tide she has created in you flow you back into her takedown presence.” In this manner did Luther seek to advance the psychology of the Garatdjian women—some of them—into the consciousness of his mentor.

But he did not go to his sister Vera and say he had an acquaintance who was in a state of umbrage over her manner, as then it would come into question as to how he knew her colleague. It was not for him to divulge the identity of Ringle vis a vis RoR lest he be struck dead, spiritually speaking, for the transgression; he would be living outside the lines of integrity. If Luther wished to wear a signboard up and down Broadway declaring

his membership in RoR, that was his affair, but it was not for him to make such a declaration about Ringle or anyone else.

All that day was he hearing the song “Oh, Happy Day.” Whatever his face might be saying, loud was its sound in his mind and heart and entire being that Sunday. A new phase had begun with his writing. He would send out as a matter of course: *Iowa Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Chicago Review*—all the reviews and quarterlies. Life was no longer so difficult. He had problems but he also had solutions. He felt whole and healthy in a way he could never before remember.

He took this feeling to the RoR meeting that evening, and it was still with him afterward as he headed back downtown on Park Avenue South. Outside an old watering hole of his, where the holler heads would come to perform on the floor above the bar, he saw the young men of violence gathered, the ones who had no play in them but hit and hit until you fell to the pavement and then they hit you some more so you could not get up for a week, if at all. His sunshine, in the darkness that had fallen, was being challenged now. His old life was suddenly calling to him as he remembered his nights drinking glass after glass of wine while standing alone at the bar watching the owner with the Cro-Magnon face gobble chickpeas from the bowl atop the cigarette machine by the front door. He didn't see the owner on this night. He had no idea what time had done with him. No more would he have the opportunity to get savage in his head about the owner's chickpea breath. At the meeting he had heard the speaker refer repeatedly to bars as “toilets.” This one was a toilet and that one was a toilet. A toilet was a toilet, whether pish

posh or a dive. So Luther heard the speaker, his tongue governed by vehemence, to have been saying. He walked on by the young men of violence. No flowers did they wear in their tough New Jersey hair. What world was this he had entered in sobriety?

The streetlights had come on. The weather being mild, he sat in Union Square Park. All around was the viciousness of motor vehicle traffic, but he tried to pay it no mind. The image of his father sitting in this park came to him. Surely his father had been here in his city wanderings. Surely he had breathed in the exhaust-filled air of freedom in his Robert Hall suit and Stetson and wingtip shoes. His father went to the places where there was no aggravation, where he wouldn't be made to get up. On some level he was probably just happy to be alive. His father. He could forget him for a while, but he always came back. His attitude toward his father. His treatment of him. He was mindful of it, especially the events surrounding his death. Suppose he was following in his father's footsteps, walking where he walked? Suppose he was destiny bound to meet him again?

"Need something for your head, man?" A hard-eyed young man stood before him.

"No, thank you," Luther said.

"You sure, man? You look kind of messed up. You don't look right. I give you some shit that make you look more than all right."

"Go away, please," Luther said.

"OK, man. It's your loss. Just don't get righteous on me for trying to help."

Righteous. A word that could not be improved upon.

The path of righteousness. The one his weeping father had falteringly tried to walk.

Rafta had a surprise for him. His mother. This was startling. Worlds were not supposed to intersect in this manner. It was not within the natural order of things. He heard her out with great fear and trembling.

“I came across a recipe in a cookbook submitted by a woman with your last name. Her first name is Maya. She submitted a recipe for veal scaloppini. Could that be your mother?”

“That is the name she answers to,” Luther said, though he could not bring his mother together with Italian cuisine. Surely it existed outside the gates of normalcy for her. “I will check,” he went on. He did not want to disappoint Rafta, seeing the state of excitement, the virtually violent effusiveness, the recipe had brought her to. It was that way with intelligent people. Curiosity was a driving force in their lives. A new discovery was like a shark smelling blood. It put them in a frenzy swirl.

When it was safe—when, that is, he could be sure that Rafta was not in the vicinity—Luther called his mother about the matter.

“What is that you say? Veal what?”

“Scaloppini. Veal scaloppini. Is this a dish that you have been cooking?”

“What are you saying, my son?”

“My boss came across a recipe in a cookbook. The recipe was submitted by a woman with your name.”

“How very strange. But you don’t have to be strange. Stay in the bounds of normal food. Are you listening to me, my son?”

“I’m listening,” Luther said.

“How are Sarah’s parents? Are they well?” So came the inevitable question. She had met them that once, in that dark Italian restaurant near City Hall. Lydia and Peter and Sarah and Luther and his mother squeezed into that booth. For the prosaic wedding ceremony in the Municipal Building had he brought her out at least, if not before or since. “You children. You all treat me as dirt, the dirt beneath your shoes.” Is that not what she would say, with full vehemence, in his growing up years? And was this hiding of her away another instance of such treatment of her? Did she know what he knew, that he had, in spite of himself, been grossly uncomfortable with the idea of his family meeting Sarah’s family?

“They’re OK,” he said. He didn’t say great or anything of that kind. Just OK, lest his mother be looking for the pain that came from comparison.

“That is good. They have no problems?”

“I’m sure they do,” Luther said. “They lost a daughter.”

“It is terrible, the loss of a child. You cannot know, my son. You cannot know.”

He had not done right by her. He lived with that guilt. And yet soreness was building in him. He was not her savior. She had other children to help support her. He gave himself a talking to so he did not fall into the gulch of despair.



In this time were Luther's eyes opened to the concept of spiritual pride. Having been asked to lead one meeting in RoR, he was hungry for more opportunities and unhappy that he had received no further invitations. This is an ego problem, he thought. I want to be famous in an anonymous program.

In dreamland he came to the decision to leave Cromartie Wonders, but there was no sense of liberation, none at all. A hard rain was falling, as if the heavens themselves were weeping over his impulsive foolishness, having seen, if he couldn't, the harm that would come to his writing and to his person as well. His high school French teacher, Mlle. Gallimard, made an appearance. "Ne quittez pas. Ne quittez pas," she said, her rouged cheeks quivering. And so was linked his decision to leave Cromartie Wonders with his bailout from the Claremont School in the eleventh grade, a year when the competition intensified. And yet, there was Edith Conrad, the subsidiary rights director in the adult trade division of Pilgore Press, coming out from behind the beaded curtain that served as her door to calmly tell him to walk on, just walk on, that there would be other jobs.

I am being given clues to aid my understanding, Luther thought, come the morning. It is for me to sit and assess the what and why of the dream, if only I can. He saw that he was in bondage not only to brand name goods—his mother's warning to buy only Crosse & Blackwell jam—but to brand name institutions as well. I equate Pilgore with respectability, as I did the Claremont School. But here is Edith telling me to vacate the premises. She is saying that Pilgore adds nothing to my life. It does not make me

more or less than who I am. Luther saw that Edith was in his dream because she was solid, unpretentious, and sage.

There was more here than the dream had revealed. In less than four months he would be thirty-three. The years came and went and he was still in the same place, The dream hadn't summoned the shame he imagined he would feel if he were still there serving as a minion when his birthday came around and Rafta and Frieda and Amanda Plessy and all the rest bore witness to his humiliation in the obligatory celebration. I have no plan, he had to admit. He was defenseless against the time train roaring down the tracks.

He had brought order to his desk drawers, and now the time had come to bring the same to his closet. A blizzard of moths met him as his initiative began. There at the back he found a suitcase containing family photos his mother had given him. She had not wanted the burden of them any longer. The photos, black and white, went back to a time before his own. Most of them were unframed and many of the people were unknown to him. I will bring order here when I can, he thought, imagining one photo album after another, but not now, not now. For now I will secure the premises of the photos, transferring them from this old and battered suitcase to this modern hard-shell Samsonite case. That will be the first, and not negligible, step toward order.

He had order to achieve but he also had ignorance to cover up until he could walk the earth with the necessary fortification. His foundation in Eeyore was not secure. In fact it

kept giving out on him. No matter how much attention he gave to the creature, two weeks later he would forget whether the animal appeared in *Wind in the Willows* or where. No man could live forever with this degree of fraudulence. He could only imagine the laughing thing that would be unleashed on him should his lack of knowledge be exposed, and so every weekend he took himself to the Donnell Library in order to get filled up on picture books and young adult novels. And in doing so he could feel the substance in his mentality increasing, as when he was an adolescent his calves seemed to grow thicker when he wore white sweat socks with his gray trousers. But illusion was illusion. Within a couple of weeks his mind would be wiped clean, like those magic slates you wrote on as a child and then lifted the sheet to erase the content.

To be in a job he was unqualified for and in a field he had no great interest in and to have a scold for a boss was, he could sometimes think, preposterous. His fear of Rafta did not lessen over time and seemed to reach its peak in those rare instances when the conversation drifted from work to more personal conversation, as happened one afternoon when she acknowledged that Bruce Bill had left because he did not care for her and she wondered out loud if Philomena would marry her beau. What Luther saw was a good and principled, if stern, woman confessing her vulnerability and her loneliness, and rebuked himself for his part in allowing such a conversation to develop in the first place. Well, he would come in the next day and it would be business as usual. He needn't fear that she was becoming emotionally reliant on him, that she would draw near and find that he had nothing to offer her. He needn't fear her Rafta love or whatever it was she might

be developing. He would keep his vigilance soaring so she did not relocate herself onto his premises.

He would go to the Time-Life Building, a bastion of prestige, and drop off his resume. The hateful one, sport columnist Dick Young, of the New York *Daily News*, had not given him the courtesy of a reply, but maybe that was his savagery speaking, not the place where truth and beauty reside. Luther would, as he had heard in RoR meetings, take the action, and let go of the result. After all, journalism was the thing of adulthood. It was bombings and kidnappings and murder and internecine strife. It was all the things the world and its people suffer, and he could keep an eye on it, just as Time-Life, as its name suggested, was committed to doing. He would do for the globe what he was doing for his life.

He was moving on other fronts, too. He would send out "Camp," though he didn't know where. He would let the world know about the rubber-lipped girls and red-faced Pastor Chernenko and how he had a darkness Elmer Fudd did not possess. He would tell them about the hymn "Rescue the Perishing" and the counselor who sang it and how she was sent away in the day for receiving a man in the night. He would tell them about hell and what it could do to you in the incomprehensible forevermore of eternity, and of the Puerto Rican boys drowning in their own repentance for calling him Square Head and Flat Head and all the names Naomi and Rachel called him. Readers would know what he had to say about where he had come from and how it had a hold on him to this day. All these things

would they know and see him for who he had been, if not who he was, and commit him to their memory.

And he would send a payment to the IRS, so the men who kept the books would know another facet of his being, that he was in a process of reformation that required him to settle accounts because debt was a weight on his back he no longer wished to bear.

And as further proof of his reformation vitality, he would make the final payment to Dr. Abednego, the therapist he had stiffed, so Dr. Abednego would know what goodness was but not from whence it came.

And he would put a down payment on a portable electric typewriter as soon as the coast was clear so far as debts were concerned. But you could be sure he would not fly in the face of obligation; instead he would surrender to it so he could be free, because freedom was the assumption of responsibility, not flight from it. The typewriter would be portable so his love could be with him wherever it was he went. And it would be electric so he could bring himself into contemporary life with keys that struck the page with gentle authority and left their mark cleanly.

All this, and more, was on the agenda for his life.

Summer hours meant summer fun. The afternoon off every Friday. He could go home and write and then have Saturday and Sunday to do the same. Just as when he was at the Claremont School he had his excellence and he had his freedom, too. Even if he had been lowered to Cromartie Wonders, he was still part of Pilgore Press, and Pilgore Press was excellent in the way that the Claremont School had been. In a sense, the same excellence

that had been there at Claremont was now occupying the desks and offices of Pilgore. If not the same people, the same kind of people. Oh, those happy happy spring Fridays back in seventh and eighth grade eating ham and cheese heroes with lettuce and tomato and loads of mustard on Dead Man's Hill before the time of Jane Thayer came and occupied his life and made it not the same.

Not that there could be exactly the same happiness now as then. No, he knew too much about his own lack of excellence for that to be so. He had the numbers to show him that.

Now a letter was waiting for him when he arrived home. Not a Con Ed letter or a New York Telephone letter, but the letter on the stationery of a company, Harper & Row, equated with supreme excellence. The sender was one Stefanie Altifano. If his hope was that she had somehow gotten word of White Line, Continue, he was quickly set straight. Literary discovery was not on Stefanie Altifano's agenda, at least in this missive. She was seeking workplace justice. Harper & Row was trying to unionize. Would he show solidarity by bringing his body to the Starlight Disco for a rally the following week and make a donation to the cause? Do you have it in you to stand with your underpaid and overworked brothers and sisters or are you a stand on the sidelines Louie? So he understood her to be saying.

Confounding the situation was the fact that the company's name was crossed out and below was written District 65, 13 Astor Place. Lines were intersecting. He had begun attending a Friday evening RoR meeting at the union hall at 13 Astor Place. The union was hoping the presence of such a meeting on its premises might attract some of its

members with an alcohol problem. On the building's marquee was the name District 65, and so Luther had no cause to try to extend his confoundedness beyond its limit. In the light of reason did he want and need to live.

Luther did not want to go to some disco for such a cause. He was under the rule of his indifference and had no caring he could summon for this matter. Anyway, he was no friend of Stephanie Altifano. He had never so much as met her. She was not in his heart or his head.

Asking tact to be his guide, Luther wrote his response:

Dear Ms. Altifano:

I must defer to my own guidance and pass on your invitation to contribute bodily and financially to your initiative. Beyond the practical constraints of a lack of time and money, there is the matter of ambivalence. I say this as someone who has read the Isaac Deutscher trilogy on Leon Trotsky and as a Democrat in the polling booth and a Cesar Chavez supporter. Picking words is not the same as picking cotton or grapes or any of the other gifts of the soil. This may sound silly, but there remains a question in my mind as to the place of a union in the publishing industry. Would membership include those at the very top as well as those as at the bottom of the grid? My fear is that such a system would reduce individual initiative and result in a less dynamic workplace than we currently have. If the truth be told, there is a reason why I am at a low level and others are high above me. Hanging strings do not good publishers make.

PS

There is also the matter of the disco. I do not boogie. I have no moves to make except the twirl and the wave my arms as I step one way, then another. The science of movement, and there is one, has eluded me. There are blocks to measure pattern recognition as a facet of intelligence.

Best,  
Luther Garatdjian

John Braine, the English novelist, had instructed him to read his contemporaries and never mind about the classics. In doing so he explained why Luther felt lost to his life in reading *Phineas Finn* or *Bleak House* or *Middlemarch*. John Braine made him understand that he must stay current on the scene and reconnoiter. And yet he could not read his contemporaries without the risk of falling to the floor dead, as happened when he picked up *Going After Cacciato*, by Tim O'Brien, a novel about the Vietnam War whose authenticity dealt him a mortal blow. And waiting in the wings was *Final Payments*, by Mary Gordon, a novel he sensed was steeped in Catholicism. He already had reason to believe she too was lethal, having read her description somewhere of a woman's shoes as being "edible." And as for Thomas McGuane, he was dominating *The New Yorker* with his "tooled prose," as the magazine described it.

"I'm a nobody, a nobody in the day and night," he shouted into the phone at Ringle that night.

"Yes you are, but you are a sober nobody," Ringle said. And hung up.

Now there was a man, Solomon Rhein, he had seen before in RoR, the "How you doing with the pills? How you doing with the pot?" man. Beyond his provocative mouth he had fire red hair and a smile that said he knew, he just knew. But when he raised his hand and shared at meetings, he plumbed the depths of sincerity, as Frank Sinatra confessed to being honest only when he sang. Though he had a Mensa-eligible IQ, he had taken to the poolrooms along Surf Avenue as a student



at Erasmus Hall High, the Erasmus Hall of Billy “I can skywalk” Cunningham. His father had vacated the premises of his life when Solomon was only thirteen, having been taken by the “big C,” as Solomon called the illness, in a tone of reproach that his father hadn’t beaten it.

And now Solomon was on him again with the same question, because he had a memory for Luther, and Luther could happily say, “I’m done with both of them. I’m free of their harmful persuasion.”

“Don’t expect a medal. We don’t do that kind of shit here,” Solomon said.

“No. I don’t imagine you do.”

“Where’d you go to school? Choate? Exeter? The way you fucking speak,” said Solomon Rhein.

“I am from the City College of New York, class of 1970,” Luther said, but his answer had no meaning for Solomon. From one meeting to the next would he pose the same question, in an accusatory tone. It soon became clear that he had a wound that made the question necessary. Solomon’s high school guidance counselor had said that he was Ivy League material of the highest order, and so Solomon carried forward an expectation of himself that he could not fulfill because apathy had come in control of his mind, directing him to those pool rooms and to meaningless and dangerous joy rides instead of the books that Erasmus Hall had assigned. Though he barely graduated, colleges still came calling because he had done the SAT up right, but he turned them away, joining the army instead so he could be the man his father, to his mind, had not been. Because if a man left, what could there be to care about in this world? So when Simon called Luther

Choate or Exeter or Andover or any other name of the New England elite, he was not talking to Luther, Luther did not exist, the unholy hype machine would not recognize him as he was, because if Solomon could not be who he was, then why should Luther be allowed to be either? Because pain was pain and its dictate had to be obeyed.

And so Luther called Solomon Rhein, in the privacy of his mind, Him with the Mouth from Which Fly Sparks, not knowing there was no private domain of the mind, that all thoughts were drawn from the general pool of knowledge and returned there till called upon again. He also challenged his vigilance to soar, that he might unfailingly repay Solomon's caustic way not with indifference but with passivity. As with Tom Smits back in high school, Him with the Equally Sparks Flying Mouth and high board score status, he would allow Solomon to come to him but never never go to him, as he recognized a nemesis when he saw one with a complete agenda of annihilation or negation. He had love for Solomon Rhein but he also had wariness.

Now Luther had his own work on the past to do. He understood that he had run away and stayed on the sidelines with his tissues and his beer and his wine and how this lack of participation had preceded his drinking. As a reminder, the Claremont School was summoned to his attention that night at the RoR meeting. There was to be a business meeting to elect officers for the new six month term starting in July, but instead of staying he just walked on by. Only on his way home did he see the opportunity he had missed, how the Claremont School had called him to service on the library committee or the yearbook committee or whatever when he was a student and instead of heeding the call he had walked on by there as well. Why, you might say, would he do such a thing, but

Jane Thayer had been calling to him with her teenage love in that time and the boys hanging around Fatso Scully's stoop and Hammerhead "I don't take shit from no one" Sean, and it was not for him to be away from them, not for a second, lest he miss whatever action was going on, if only smoking and spitting and drinking from the beveled bottles of Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola and lest Jane Thayer's love be taken from him by another. He had had to go where his heart was. Well, he would not do that again. He would arrange an understanding with himself that it was a program of participation, of action, that you had to be in it to win it, as he had been hearing. Not that there was anything to win, except happiness, the same happiness his coffee service had been giving him, and no one had said he couldn't continue to be where his heart now was.

Ringle was not the oracle but his words had meaning, and he did not always seat himself among the scornful. Such was the case when Luther reported to him on his full court press for new and better employment.

"Writing seems to be your passion. Why not stay where you are? Anywhere else you move may cut into your writing time."

"You are saying I should not trouble trouble but instead recognize heaven where it exists?"

"You heard what I said."

"Yes, I did, and I will continue to do so."

And he did. When he got off the phone he heard what Ringle had said in the light of his evolving understanding, and came to the awareness that Ringle was suggesting he had a cushy job and the real world he was not a part of would be another story.

He woke from a nap unable to remember anything of his dream or if he dreamt at all. What he carried from sleep was a sense of dread. He turned on the TV and tried, as he always did, to make peace with the jumbo pillows and the tired carpet and the long desk that separated Sarah's studio from the living area, all of which they had inherited from Marc Gitall. What was that saying he had heard in the rooms of recovery? If you can't have the things you want, then want the things you have. Well, he would try to go with that to have some peace.

On the news there was a report of a community in the Bronx rallying to keep the neighborhood firehouse from being closed. The on-the-scene reporter spoke with earnestness and the newscaster at the desk thanked Rosalie Ceballo with equal earnestness for keeping everyone up to date. Luther turned off the TV. He did not need their sad earnestness in his world. He did not need any more evidence that the world was going down.

Luther had read about the Sun King, Louis XIV, and if he had showed off his brilliance, Frieda Volcker had her own glow thing going. And why not? Macmillan was about to publish a children's book she had illustrated. She was Kirk Douglas in a female body minus the dimple. She had broken the bones of the man who would hold onto her. She

had typed the last of his papers and left him for dead. His hegemony was over. And she had shown her power in the animal kingdom as well, facing down a gathering of chimpanzees intent on giving her a bashing in the African bush. She brought to America a private and complicated understanding of the races based on her life under apartheid. She did not say what she did not have to in that matter.

“But what do you do, Luther? You must do something,” Frieda said, at the beginning of the workweek, because she needed to move him out of the cipher status where she had placed him. And so he told her about White Line, Continue, how though it was near and dear to him, he had been going through a painful period of estrangement from it.

“One day you will show me what you do.” Frieda Volcker tried to present herself in sympathetic accord with him. There were times when she would look at him, because he was a sort of man, and wonder if love would come through the door for him, as she was at an odd angle to relationship, not tethered to her past nor fully free to move on either. And marriage or no marriage, she saw that he was in the same position, this man who did not wear a ring and who came to work in a jacket and tie so he could sit at an empty desk.

Luther took himself away from the mushroom cloud of shame her query had created. He went to the basement room of darkness the sun above could not reach, but where the light shone nonetheless, relying not on nature’s offering but the fire within. A moon-faced man led the meeting. He had been born in the suburbs into a prosperous family, received an Ivy League education, and yet drank himself out of his executive-

level job and home and marriage and onto the Bowery. He had to lose everything to understand that he couldn't drink and that the first drink was the drink that got him drunk. He had to clean house. No, he did not mean he had to clean his living place. He had to get as honest about his life and what he had done as he had about his drinking. And he had to give away what he had found by carrying the message to the next suffering alcoholic. These things the moonfaced man said, and Luther heard him without resistance. He was changing Luther's channel from despair to hope so Luther could go back to his desk with a face approaching normal and rejuvenation in his soul.

Ringle had the stuff of unyielding wisdom. He did not leave the door open for self-pity but just got on with it, being committed to his own toughness the way some are to a cause. So Luther ascertained by listening to his words.

"I will probably be in Europe for the summer," Ringle said, after casually acknowledging the surgery that had been performed for the removal of a grapefruit-sized tumor from his left side.

"Gene Fullmer," Luther said.

"Gene who?"

"Gene Fullmer. Boxer. Middleweight thumper. He soaked his face in brine so he would not bleed so easily. You are his spiritual heir."

"Are you all right?"

"I am now."

There were a number of sayings he heard in the rooms, among them “If you can spot it, you’ve got it” and “If your finger is pointing at someone else, then three fingers are pointing back at you.” He was told to place them in his spiritual toolkit because the day would come when rancor would dominate his emotional space and he would need the guidance the sayings could succinctly provide. If I cannot be handy with the tools of man, I can perhaps learn to use the tools of God, Luther heard himself say.

And so he strapped on the spiritual toolkit and that was a good thing, as trouble was waiting for him at the Binibon down on Second Avenue, where he had gone to get filled up. A filthy one came to his table with pencil and pad in hand. He stood with pencil poised, but remained silent, as if words were too precious to be wasted on the likes of him.

“I will not rival your silence, as where is the profit in that? I will have the eggs over easy with hash browns, a glass of orange juice, and your special Binibon blueberry muffin, toasted and saturated with butter. And no, you needn’t tell me it is not the lunch hour. This I know, but my day is only beginning in earnest now. Not that I wasn’t awake before, but now I am really awake, as I am not on company time.” He was referring to the early closings that occurred on Fridays.

“I don’t give a shit what time you are on,” the waiter snapped.

Luther sought a mental barrier against the image. “I have spotted it, and so I have got it.”

“What?” the waiter said.

“You are not happy in your work, and in that way you remind me of myself. You hear the call of greatness, as do I, and are rendered unhappy by your circumstance, as am I by mine, but do either of us ask who is doing the calling?”

The waiter did no more afflicting of him, either by gesture or expression or spoken word, and so Luther could have a happy meal in the peace he had been seeking. An hour later he returned home with his shirt full of Binibon stink. It wasn't right that such a stink should be. It wasn't right at all.

*Celeste, I will get on top of things. I will do the things I have to do so I can continue. I will correct the weak and feeble dialogue and purge the pages of so much affected prose. I wanted so much to stay on the track of simple sincerity, and yet once again, every piece of copy I produce is tainted with fatuousness when I should be committed to manly economy where it can be found. And yet my heart is not there with the fences of containment. It is with the open sky as my parchment.*

That afternoon he gave his attention to the previous Sunday's *New York Times Book Review*, which included an article on young writers, so he could know who was current on the scene and who was not and who was up and coming. There was big Ann Beattie (needing no “e” at the end of her first name but calling for vowel fortification at the end of her last name); big Barry Hannah; big Tim O'Brien; big Mary Gordon. Well, he would show them what the truth could do, how it could overpower the strongest fiction. Truth fiction, he would call what he was about. But then another article broke his face and his heart in many places. It said agents and publishers were hard, almost impossible, to find. The article told him to live with the reality that doors were closed or



closing to the likes of him and sent him down and down. Its weight crushed him and then crushed him some more.

But the hours passed and he came back up strong. There would be no god of sorrows permanently darkening his life. He would go back down to Second Avenue, not to the stinky Binibon, but to the store of the many typewriters, where he would say what he would say.

“You have seen me before,” he said to Mr. Feltonbras, the owner. Shelves of used typewriters surrounded the man. “You know me to be a man who can put his money where his mouth is, that I have been here for repairs and also the purchase of a manual. Last year I came to you with the intention of buying a used electric typewriter on the layaway plan but fell victim to my fears and more pressing concerns, which we need not discuss. Let me just say that a man must meet his obligations if he is to be a man. But a great battle has begun for me to claim myself, and sorrow will not deter me from the conflict. I am here to say that while my ambition was stalled, it is still alive and I will be back with cash in hand for the typewriter of my dreams, and one that is electric. I have not gone down the road of decision as to a final choice. There is much fineness out there. Royal, Adler, Olympia, Smith-Corona, etc. To try to go down that road now would only bring on emotional turmoil, where order is called for. But I will tell you what I have not told you before. I am good enough for such a machine.”

Mr. Feltonbras had been leaning back in his old office chair, where he sat at his workbench. He sipped from a paper cup of coffee and drew on his cigarette. “You sound

like a man with a plan,” he said. Hearing this, Luther gave him a double thumbs up before exiting the premises.

At the meeting that night an older woman wrapped him in a hug, pulling him into her older woman self. She was not a woman to hide her age; there was no makeup on her face. Then, in the sharing segment of the meeting, she raised her hand and spoke of the lust that had driven her during her drinking days, before God could do for her what she could not do for herself. A great shudder passed through Luther as he listened and his mind filled with an image of his mother. He could say no more than that.

In dreamland larceny was afoot and Luther was beside himself over his powerlessness to stop it. He was in a place unfamiliar to him and thieves came from everywhere to snatch his camera and his typewriters. Surely they had taken his bicycle too. Seeing that they hadn't, he cried and cried.

“Your anxiety about work is a constant. Your boss is living in your mind,” Dr. Rosner said.

“I do not dispute that,” Luther replied. “She is a constant lodger.”

I am an alcoholic. I will be so for the rest of my life. In order not to drink, I will have to attend RoR meetings for the rest of my life. He had not thought of his condition that way before.

One morning, feeling out of sorts, he called Sarah an ingrate, then lived in fear that she would tell Dr. Frodkey, who would then weigh in with his *opinion of him*.

He bought the cookies of America at a nearby D'Agostino's, knowing full well his time would come, as a paying customer, to receive a Dag bag. Oreos, chocolate chip, chocolate chocolate chip for those who were extra daring, and vanilla wafers he bought so he could go back to the meeting place and provide a plate of goodies that truly sparkled. And he bought the coffee of America, choosing Savarin, in the red can, in loyalty to his father. This was on a Saturday afternoon in the quiet of New York City, when all was holy in his world because he had a mighty purpose of serving the group the best coffee and cookies that he could. But when he got to the counter, the total rung up by the checkout girl was more than he had.

“I am afraid there will be no Dag bag for me,” Luther said.

“Whatever do you mean?” The checkout girl had a theatrical way, with her voice breathy and her eyes wide.

“I mean I am short where I mustn't be, in my wallet. The receipt you have handed me is my introduction to reality.”

“And we can't rectify your shortness? We can't subtract an item or two?”

“You have shown me the way,” Luther said. “I had hoped to put together a combination of quantity as well as quality. Whatever the merits of Nabisco, it is my sense that Pepperidge Farm is of a higher order. Can I let my plainness speak? Well, I will just

bite the bullet and forego royalty so the masses can be fed. I do wish to be a respector of reality and the limits it imposes.”

“I am so impressed. Truly,” the checker replied.

Minutes later he was filling the large urn with cold water and adding coffee to the filter. Oh, the heavenly smell of the grounds. And oh, the satisfaction of hearing the water knock against the metal as it heated and then began to boil, percolating up into those grounds and drawing the savor from them. Right on time for the first arrivals did the red light of the urn go on. And a great thing occurred. No tone of castigation did he hear from those who partook that they should be offered a plate with the full absence of pedigree. Luther could see that he had brought happiness to their minds and hearts and palates and so it was given to him as well. I would like to do this service for the rest of my life. For the rest of my life. So Luther thought in the joy that he was feeling.

And if a dark cloud even thought to show itself, it was only this. The receipt given to him by the checker girl did not show the adjusted amount following the subtraction. Thus, he had the means for evil to do its way. He could submit the inflated receipt and receive more than his due in recompense. Or he could be swept along by the tidal wave of emotion dictating that honesty be his calling card if happiness was to continue to be his. These very words came to him, aligning his actions with his state of being and saying *jamais jamais* to his former underhanded ways. And so he said to the group’s treasurer, “You must not give me the amount of the receipt I am handing you. If you will turn it over, you will see that I have deducted an item from the total. I am on the straight and narrow now, and that means I am leveling with you.” And so he squared accounts with

the treasurer and the group and, as a result, a song of happiness was in him as he made his way home. He was not living in the land of separation but of oneness.

Luther was familiar with the sound of the group known by the unassuming name The Band and understood them to be a cut above the typical holler heads. In particular was he sensitive to the lyrics of “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” and more specifically, the line “They should never have taken the very best,” meaning Robert E. Lee. He didn’t care for Joan Baez’s rendition, as she had been formatted for pathos and lived for it only. The Band had grit in their faces and their souls and came to the place of pathos only at the right time. Because they could not be accused of false emotion could Luther listen to them. And so, when his sister Vera came to him and said her old friend Roddy Blakely, he whom Luther associated with the Fat Man from Harvard and with whom he had been roommates with Roberto, was being driven down, the news did not sit well with Luther, hearing as he did Garatdjian schadenfreude in her voice as she described Roddy’s plight. He heard her calling out to Roddy to be sick not for one day but for all his days after Roddy told her that he had been diagnosed as manic depressive and had been prescribed Lithium. What Luther heard was her driving Roddy down, exulting in the fact that Roddy had lost his teaching job and was now living at home with his parents. Schadenfreude was schadenfreude. Luther had sensed a degree of envy in his sister that Roddy should have such a fine mind, even if he was limited in his capacity to use it. Luther had said it before. It was important that stations in life be respected. Not everyone could be in that highest station. Didn’t mean that you had to bring others down

to your level. America was distorting itself. People wanting to believe they were better than they were. Brown University. Imagine being a student at such an institution, let alone teaching at it, as Roddy had been doing. No, no, it was wrong not to bow in admiration of the high echelon caliber of such a mind. And what a field Roddy had been exploring. Not the land of the paperback novel but philosophy, mind you. Heidegger. Immanuel Kant. He had been walking the tightrope of the ethereal. So no, Vera had no right to consign Roddy to a lower existence, just as the army of the North had no right to drive down Robert E. Lee, as the Band would have it.

The world and its people needed watching out for. So Luther thought on this day. He returned to his work life. A man couldn't spend his every day drowning in the swamp of family. That wouldn't be right. But grievance had a way of finding him where he was. Once again was Frieda Volcker flexing her muscles in regard to one of his projects, putting him in the small space where the question of his worth arose and whether he could have a rightful place on the planet instead of feeling like a galoot. And then came along Frieda Volcker's assistant, Amanda Plessy, to bring her hammer down on him, saying "I think we've already had this conversation before." A woman flying her asperity flag because he had made the mistake of asking about the book she was reading, *The World According to Garp*, by fathead John Irving, without remembering that he had talked with her once before about the novel. Everyone with their Garp this and Garp that. Not like him to read a book at the height of its popularity. Now it wasn't for Luther to know that she was mad with desire for him, that she had interpreted his forgetfulness as

indifference, feeling, as she did, that her words meant nothing, absolutely nothing, to him. It was not within the range of his understanding to comprehend her ways, that she might be feeling slighted and overlooked and in the shadow cast by Frieda Volcker's sun. No, no, the light of his understanding revealed to him that the women on the hills with the baked beans had struck again, telling him to get out of their way and get out of it fast.

"Just remember. Wherever you go, you take yourself with you," Ringle had said to him, a saying he would sometimes hear in the RoR. And just that very awareness came to him the next day, when he had lunch with Bruce Bill. The maître d' had not written down Luther's last name. He had him on his list as Mr. Luther. So Luther said to Bruce Bill, "Maybe Mr. Dorf was right. Maybe I should have stayed with a simpler name." But Bruce Bill came back at him with the terse *amour propre* he could not give himself, saying, "No, I don't think so," ensuring, with the brevity of his reply, that it would echo through eternity with the understated wisdom it conveyed. In that moment had Bruce Bill shown his mettle, the modest economy of his response resonating more loudly than any word rush could have. But there was also military sternness in his response, as if he were saying, "I have given you what you need. Don't ask me for more." For that alone—never mind his general excellence—did Bruce Bill belong in the Hall of Fame. But there was a downside as well. Luther had to bow down to Bruce Bill's excellence. He had to be afraid of dismissal should he offend Bruce Bill with one wrong word because Bruce Bill had listening devices, the most sound sensitive in the world, all over his person. And so all Luther's energy went toward pleasing Bruce Bill, he saw in that restaurant. A great cry

rose up in him, a cry of longing to be in the RoR right then and there so he might continue to shed the personality that was not working for him. Because Bruce Bill was not his life and this appeasement was not his life and this fear he dressed himself in was not meant to be his life.

Now Luther had a thought in this time. It was about Frieda Volcker, the sun queen. She came to him one day with a radiance that singed his eyebrows and sought to set his skin on fire and said, in passing, that he always looked so neat. Some weeks went by, and on a day that Frieda Volcker was not in sight, the urge was strong within him to find her and ask if he still looked neat. And so he saw, not for the first time, the dependence he had on women for his self-esteem and that what they gave they could also withhold or take away.

And there was a woman named Nora Blatt who had gone the chunky way, and she too was an editor, though with Pilgore Children's Books, and she said to him, as he waited behind her at the photocopier, that she had responsibility for eight books on next year's list. Eight books, she repeated, leaving him to feel small, as he had responsibility for only two. And so he felt the burden of his envy and the image of his father in his suit standing at the silver cash register in Jack Dempsey's Restaurant while the men of power circulated all around him.

He did have a family. He couldn't and wouldn't say he didn't, even if he mostly walked the earth without them. His mother came to the Bowery loft on a Saturday afternoon in June. It was her birthday, and his real gift to her would be to allow her to see more of his



life. She had shown no eagerness to visit, but even so, what was right was right. The time had come to amend his ways and include her more in his life. He had been embarrassed, even ashamed, of the very woman who had given him life and sacrificed for him. He had not been a good son. A man was someone who walked down the street with his mother, not someone who ran and hid or denied her when she walked on by, as happened that time he was with vicious Tom Smits, who sneeringly asked if the woman passing by was his mother because of the timid wave she had given Luther. Getting all up on Luther's mother with his nastiness mouth and Luther hadn't laid waste to him on the spot or laid waste to himself on the spot either for his denial. Did his mother not see what he had done? Did she not see that he had put the shunning thing on her by not introducing her to Tom? Was it her way to say, as she often did, "You all treat me like the dirt beneath your shoes" for no reason? Did he think she had not seen? And did an eternity of beatings not await as the consequence of his denial of her?

With her was Hannah, who arrived without her son Moses and let it be known it was no one's business why, and Vera, in the company of her husband, Maury. Vera brought along a bottle of wine. She and Maury went through the bottle together, with some help from Hannah and Sarah. But his mother did not drink. She did not go down that road, as she had shown that she knew what the word *craving* meant, and neither Hannah nor Vera pressed her to stop being a saint and take a drink and ruin her life for their amusement as Naomi and Hannah had pressed her to do in days of old.

But his mother came with the only real gift. She told a story that evening from the archive in her head.

“Your paternal grandfather had a saying, ‘Repay evil with good.’ We would not be here tonight if your grandfather hadn’t helped a Turkish man get out of jail. That man was responsible for saving the lives of your father and his family by hiding them in his basement and telling the Turkish authorities who had come to his door that there were no Armenians in his house.” The incident occurred in a small village not far from Constantinople, from which the family escaped to Marseilles.

“I fall into a deep hole of confusion when you tell this story,” Luther said.

“What deep hole would that be, my son?”

“There is no before, no after. There is only the inexplicable void of history, the cruel void that mocks all attempts at knowing. Are we not deficient without knowledge as a foundation to build on?”

“You know what I have just told you, my son. More you do not need. You are not built for large consumption.”

His mother, wizened, almost Asian in her countenance now, surprised him.

“Well, I may pursue it in my own way, with bold new investigative techniques.”

“Since when are you so interested in Daddy? You were always running away from him,” Vera said.

“The wheel may be turning. I can’t say. And the book of life should be open, even for those who are dead. Otherwise there is no hope,” Luther said.

“You should write for the *National Enquirer*,” Maury said, his trim beard adding to the image of thoughtfulness he projected.

“Why would I do that?” Luther asked his brother-in-law.

“Because its readership has an appetite for the occult.”

“I should submit an article to a tabloid I never read, except to glance at it on a supermarket line?”

“As you said, the book of life is open.”

“You are expanding my horizons even as we speak,” Luther said.

“Maury has the capacity to do just that,” Vera said.

“What is that you are talking about?” Mrs. Garatdjian asked.

“The afterlife, Mother. Luther and Maury are speculating about where Daddy went.”

“Ushtah. Such foolishness. He went to heaven, where my only prayer is that we will all find our rest.”

“Rest from what? Apathy. Discontent, subjugation, malice aforethought, unbridled evil?” Luther asked.

“Ushtah, my son. You must sip on the spirit of the Lord for your sustenance. Only he will quench your thirst and satisfy your hunger.” His mother was coming with her strong talk, sweeping the field of any potential opposition. Well, he had his own Lord to meet, not hers, and not on the plane of battle but one divested of the harsher aspects of his childhood religion.

“I do what I can,” Luther said.

“I know you do, my son. But tell me. Those photos of the family that I gave you. Do you still have them?”

“They are in good hands,” Luther replied. Snapshots, studio portraits, photos of living and deceased family members. None of them labeled. None of them framed. She had handed them to him in a battered suitcase the month before.

“Your hands look empty to me,” Vera said.

“They are in my closet. You can be sure that they are safe.” The phrase *a labor of love* came to him. That is what it would take to research and sort the photos and organize them in albums. And, in truth, he feared he was not up to the task any more than others had been. The Garatdjian way was to throw their photos into boxes for sorting and organizing another day. The Garatdjians were shootists, not follow-throughers. At least he was. His own photos were a mess, were they not? Hundreds of contact sheets but very few prints to show for it. And into the closet with everything.

Now Hannah had been quiet in this time, but that didn't mean she was silent. She had begun to radiate her vibe to all regions of the loft and they were having their unsettling impact. Nor did she lack an aggrieved dignity to go with that angry vibe. She was communicating in the funk key he was entirely familiar with. And because his mind was now on her, she sensed as much and could speak her soreness directly at him.

“Nice place you have here, you thieving coyote,” she said.

“Kye-oat,” he said.

“What?”

“Kye-oat. That's the way the he-men of the West pronounced the word and the way we should too if we don't want to be effete western liberals.”

“Never mind with your crap. The only thing I want to hear from you is where you got the money for this place.”

“Ushtah, Hannah. What is the need for such unpleasantness?”

“Ask him what the need was to deprive my son.”

“How has Luther deprived Moses?”

“Ask him,” Hannah shot back.

His mother didn't ask him, but was it possible Hannah was speaking not only for herself and her son but for Vera? Did she have her tacit approval? He had a harder time believing that his mother was anything but genuine in disapproving of Hannah's outburst. After all, if one were to speak of *tacit*, had that not been the word for her unspoken approval of his reaching into the till in the last years of their management of the building?

Though he was not a potty mouth, Luther heard himself use the “F” word out of range of his mother as Hannah got into a cab that night. He was not himself in speaking thusly, but had somehow planed onto the road of the histrionic. And he saw the mistake his foulness had been in the smile it brought to Hannah's face, as now he was down in the slime with her. And so he spent a night in shame that a man of impotence should call upon a word to make him the tough guy that he wasn't.

*Now Celeste, I had a thought session the next night about the women of this world, going back to my mother and my sisters and the nuns at the Episcopal school and Sarah and on through Rafta and all the women of Cromartie Wonders, and of my fatigue in trying to please them, to be good for them, to make right any wrongs for them, and I felt tired and*

*wondered if a new day would ever come. And yes, do not think I do not hear the laughter it evokes in some as they consider the kind of goodness I could possibly be thinking of.*

Luther continued to hear truth, as it was revealed to him, in the RoR. Uptown and downtown, it continued to be spoken, as in the storefront on Charles Street, in the West Village, where a man said, “We come to meetings to find out what happens to people who stop coming to meetings.” Luther’s mind turned to the *backsliders* at the church for the Christ Jesus. And the man had more truth to speak. Jamais to those fictive resumes the man had submitted to prospective employers. The day came when he put down the jobs he had really held so he could live in the truth of his being.

Someday Sarah would have a job, too. There would be no more crying in the rain. Her mind would be made whole. In the meantime, he would follow a course of action for himself. He mailed a resume to Harper & Row, doing what RoR told him to do. Easy does it, but do it. Because he had to have a place to go if Rafta did not want him anymore.

Because they were committed to a life of nakedness with others and had found truth and freedom in this life, Maggio and Sally Capici felt compelled to introduce Peter and Lydia to their world, knowing as they did that Peter and Lydia also liked to take their clothes off in the company of others under certain conditions. They had a film in mind for the Van Dines, and this film had respectability written all over it, having been produced by none

other than Bob Guccione, of *Penthouse* fame, and scripted, at least in part, by Gore Vidal, of literary fame, and starring Roddy MacDowell and Peter O'Toole and Helen Mirren and John Gielgud and other film notables, all of them bringing to the screen the depravity and licentiousness of life under the Roman emperor Caligula. Maggio, in particular, was only being true to his satyr's face and being. He did not understand the complex equation of Peter and Lydia's sexuality, and so he didn't anticipate the muted horror of their reaction. And Luther could only think of the same path of moral corruption he had tried to lead Sarah down and feel shame by association with Maggio and Sally.

Now the office door that Luther had was not a negligible thing when he had the courage to close it. Behind it he could say the Serenity Prayer or rearrange his face or go deeper still and rearrange his mind so he could return to himself, even if his autonomy was not complete. It was his understanding that a door was closed for a reason, the primary one being privacy, and that this privacy would not be violated without, at least, a knock preceding the opening of the door. But Peter Ben-Gurion was not guided by any such assumption. As president he had a more pressing concern: was the company full of worker bees or infested with layabouts or trysting French kissers? Now the pieces of tape, strategically placed, had some talismanic value, but they were no defense against prying eyes of the kind that Peter Ben-Gurion put on him when he inserted his massive head inside the door. Too late did Luther swing his feet clear of the desk and toss away the magazine in a futile attempt to conceal his slacker ways. He kept his silence, as did Peter Ben-Gurion, whose raised eyebrows conveyed that he had seen all he had come to see.

That same evening Luther was given another chance to lead a meeting. He hadn't been blackballed, as he feared he might be, after the fiasco of his first lead. The meeting was held in the basement of the parish hall of the church at Twelfth Street and Fifth Avenue. He hadn't forgotten the cranberry juice and vodka woman he had gone home with after a night of drinking at Gosees Bar, on Sullivan Street, just south through Washington Square Park, where he had listened to Scott Mackenzie sing "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)," this following his shift at the post office. Important elements of his life had coalesced on that night. He had expected to go higher and higher but wound up in the shower at Roberto's apartment trying to scrub himself clean and failing to do so because the stink was inside him and he couldn't reach it with a bar of soap drunk and strung out on speed and nineteen years old. A night that he had wanted to stretch into eternity he now wanted to put behind him. So he shared some of that experience with the group, seeing that it was on his mind and feeling the need to convey what it had meant to him. Surely elements of his story conferred specialness on him. Surely the time he had lived in had conferred that specialness. But afterward another memory came to him, of being on a diamond in Central Park as a seventh grader and whiffing as he swung at the lobbed softball and then whiffing and whiffing again, the reality settling in that he would never make contact as walking home that night under the memorial arch in Washington Square Park after the RoR meeting he realized that once again he had whiffed in his attempt to connect with the group.



*Celeste, I had been intent on proving I was different, not the same, and that I had a story for all time. I was seeking confirmation of my own specialness when in fact I was the same. How can a man hope to succeed with such an approach? A man can tell when he has failed. Surely that is so when few people in the group raise their hands to share after the speaker has finished. If I am to be honest, I wandered where I shouldn't have gone. I brought up Simon Weill and my mother's judgment that he was little more than a crook. I even mentioned her admiration for the fine minds so many Jews seemed to have. I was not on the message I needed to be on. It did not feel like I myself was speaking. But no matter. No matter. I will find my way onto the right set of tracks.*

*But wait, Celeste, wait. Let us not go on the errant path where lying would direct us. Let us not put on the pose of respectability where none is to be found. Let us eradicate the corrupted corridors of connection with the cleansing breath of truth. Let us say what I have to this point concealed it from your mind and heart to know, that as once I was a counter where the blacks of America were concerned, adding up their numbers on the baseball and basketball teams of America in fear that they would outnumber those of my own alleged color and thus inflict the beating thing on me from their place of power, I was now doing the same with the Jews, the Jews. Not in sports, no, but in The New Yorker would I count their numbers on the contents page, by their surnames assigning them their race—the Bermans and Cohens and Lugoffs and Steins and all the rest, and feel not fear, as I did with the blacks, but resentment that their numbers were disproportionate with their representation in the general population. They get everything and I get nothing, nothing. So would my thoughts go. All prejudicial thinking leads to*

*Buchenwald, the very great Paul Theroux once said to me, through one of his travel books. I have taken his words to heart and followed them up with action, Celeste, that is, I ask in prayer that I be healed of this sickness within me. Every day do I ask to be released from anti-Semitism and racism. I do have faith that this power will take me where I need to go, and that possibly there will be no requirement that I be beaten to death with a stick or other implement of destruction. At the same time I could wish that others would look into their own wretched hearts before going on the path of judgmental fury.*

Rafta was a tense woman, he told himself. It was not her fault that she didn't much care for men and found them generally stupid and oafish and pompous. Life hadn't been kind to her. She had her sorrows, surely, but there was much he could learn from her. She was, after all, an excellent editor and highly perceptive. And he was lucky to be there at all. There was no way she would have accepted him had he applied during her tenure, not if the face she made when she learned what college he had attended meant anything. He might as well have told her, given her look of disgust, that he had graduated from reform school. Shunning him in that moment as if he were a leper. And why not? Had she not declared St. Andrews, in Scotland, to be her alma mater? For Isadora Drayton, had it not been Sarah Lawrence? And for Amanda Plessy, Frieda Volcker's assistant, was it not a trip to the stars, Yale University being her alma mater? He had earned her disgust, her revulsion. Was he joking? The City College of New York, with its current absence of admission standards beyond a high school diploma? There was nothing to fault her for.

She had a need for her own excellence and naturally was wounded when others in her circle did not meet that standard. She cared. That's all it was. She couldn't tolerate failure in herself. How was she to accept it in others? And who was to say his failure didn't dredge up her own? Suppose she had applied to Oxford and Cambridge and failed to make the cut? Was that not a possibility? And sure, there was friction between them, but that didn't mean there wasn't an element of compatibility. In his quiet moments at Cromartie Wonders, and there were obviously many, he sometimes took refuge in what he saw as Rafta's asexuality, her force field neutralizing his own in that regard. Within her web of terror, he could feel strangely safe. She was coming to represent an aspect of his recovery. Was she not an exemplar of moderation and thrift and hard work and a spirit of flinty humility? But then there were the other times when she would huddle with Florence Mith and Belton Borschwicki, the marketing director, the three of them unto themselves. The power structure revealed to him once again, his wound would reopen. Even if self-inflicted, it was painful to see himself at the margins and little more than a cipher in the department.

She was cold toward him on that particular afternoon when he tried to talk to her about the sea tale she had assigned to him. She pushed right past. She had been out of town, in Philadelphia, the past two days, on business. Maybe traveling had put her out of sorts, or maybe her brusqueness was simply the price he had to pay for the small measure of autonomy she had granted him. Or maybe she was irritated that she had to cede to him any editorial function in the department whatsoever. Or maybe it was all these things. All day walking back and forth past him as if he didn't exist. Those times she did throw a

bone his way in the form of a manuscript to read, if his opinion didn't agree with hers, then he was sure to hear of her disapproval, in one way or another. He sought to arrange his face to meet the occasion, then he too walked on by, just walked on by, so she could know his power to be a heart of stone as well.

*The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker* punched him right in the face. Take this, *The Atlantic* said, in regard to an excerpt from *White Line, Continue*. Take that, said the big *New Yorker*, in response to his submission from the same source. I will send them back out in the mail right away. I will live manifest my defiance with action. But the typewriter called to him and so he sat before it. It was a funny kind of calling it had done, calling him to it but then not being able to touch it. Sometimes a man couldn't just go on. Sometimes he had to accept that he had been punched in the face and acknowledge the beating he had received.

The sometimes kept coming. Sometimes he said to Frieda Volcker, "Hello, Superstar. I know just who you are." Sometimes the words would just erupt out of him. He could not stay sore at Frieda Volcker, not when she had her innocence abounding. But he did not go near Rafta Blackning with any such spontaneity. Rafta Blackning held him in check with her force field of darkness.

Then Farrar Straus & Giroux punched him in the face, and also in the chest. It did not show itself as the Love Boat for him. He had sought to follow up on the submission of his

resume with a phone call during what he now called Operation Rolling Freedom. A woman who said her name was Peggy Garr came on the line and said, “An interview is pointless, pointless. Your resume says everything we need to know about you. Everything.”

“And what is it saying?” Luther summoned the courage to ask.

“That it has more air in it than the great outdoors.”

The punches hurt, but Luther rose up on the awareness that had been given him. I have been put in my place. I have been given a new understanding of who I am. I will adjust my acceptance to the level of my circumstance with a good heart and never mind my mind. We needn't dwell on that. So he said to himself.

But his resolve was not long-lasting. The American Library Association Convention was scheduled for that weekend, and he was expected by Rafta to come out from behind his closed door and show his face among the living. For starters there was a cocktail party at Halloran House, on Forty-ninth and Lexington, to attend on Saturday night. Big name authors and illustrators would be present and some of them would be acknowledged. Try as he might, the authors would see he was not who he wanted to be. Clearly would they see that.

A short ways from Grand Central Terminal he stopped in at a Lamston's so he could get his bearings among the old and familiar. A sweet scent commingled of rubber bands and food and candy and whatever came to him with the holy loneliness of late Saturday afternoon. I could stay here forever holding a bottle of Elmer's glue, Luther thought, chomping hard on the bubble gum he had bought so all offending smells would

be gone from his mouth. There among the paperbacks he reached for a copy of *Sophie's Choice*. Turning to the biographical note at the back of the fat paperback, he read: "After a brief and unhappy tenure in publishing...." So it was all there for Luther to see. The torquing power of the author's brain, with its engineering capacity (see Norman Mailer) had enabled him to produce a masterpiece and escape the quotidian, the hell that Luther had been assigned to. It took only a phrase to destroy the positive mindset he was seeking to build. Now, in every cell of his being did he experience the haplessness and hopelessness of his situation, and in a state of emotional nakedness did he show up at the cocktail party. All avenues of connection were blocked to him. The little eye contact he could achieve was shattering. Several times the distressed stares of Cromartie Wonders authors seemed to communicate his oddness and unfriendly nature and to pose the question as to what he was doing there in the first place before they quickly turned away. It was clear that they had discerned his unfitness to be part of their world. In those moments did he see that he carried within himself the same malignancy he so often accused Hannah of manifesting. *How far does the apple fall from the tree?* The therapist at the psychotherapy clinic had asked those years ago. How far indeed.

He ran from those who would beat him with their eyes alone through the streets of midtown to those who would, in the collective sense, love him as he was. He was late to arrive at the RoR meeting at the temple, down on Twelfth Street. The second meeting was half over and only a few members were left. A woman named Sally was sharing from the floor. "All I remember is the cocaine and the hotel room and the wall against the future that went up. I apologize, but I have had no sleep. None."

A pretty but bleary-eyed woman being devoured by the nights of America. Her suffering made her a welcome voice in his ears.

Another hand went up. A man saying, in a voice of assertive knowingness, “The past is history. The future is a mystery. All we’ve got is today. All we’ve got is right now. The only valid comparison I can make is between where I am now and where I was when I got to this sobriety outfit. And when I do, what I’ve got here is a satisfied customer.” Even if something in Luther wanted to say that something odoriferous emanated from the man, owing to his smug assertiveness, the greater part rejoiced in his affirmation of the power of RoR, as power was what he needed in a world that still insisted on beating him with a stick.

The next morning he showed up for the convention at the New York Coliseum. The big, ugly white-brick structure seemed to Luther to be misnamed. It wasn’t a theater or stadium but a big space filled with booths, at one of which he stood. He was still weighed down by comparison with William Styron and his big brain flight from publishing captivity. But then he had an ah ha moment that could conceivably change his sad rags into glad rags. He remembered the odoriferous one from the night before, and more than remembered him. He sought to apply what the man had said to his own situation. Listen, he said to himself. Just listen. Did you not come to RoR with stumblebum status? Were you not a trembling thing in the wind? Were you not the hanging string of hanging strings? And do you not see an iota of change in your substance since that blessed day? Rearrange your face, Luther. Rearrange it, I say, informed as you are by this newfound perspective. And just in time did this adjustment occur, as Luther

then spotted a member of the face police walking toward him. He has come to appraise the status of my visage and whether it is beginning to approximate normalcy. John Monahan, president of the Children's Books Council, grabbed a program off the table, as if to communicate, with his angry gesture, an attitude of displeasure, and directed his glare at Luther before heading off. I do not feel for you, John Monahan, Luther called out silently, nor do I for anyone in whom peeve has found its way, as now have you broken free of the American dictate to smile. Now is your soreness reigning, that reality may have a place in your life. And it added to Luther's pleasure to suspect that he was the agent of John Monahan's soreness, whatever he might have done to bring on this state in the man. Just a short while before, Luther had been thinking that he hated these saccharine children's books and the packs of fat, middle-aged librarians wandering about with their weird, fat faces. Now he was in a different place, and John Monahan had helped to get him there.

That morning he gave the RoR recovery tool more thought. In his case it was OK to move back the comparison of himself as he had been with where he was now. Twelve years before he had been living nearby in a Hell's Kitchen apartment, painted a dreary brown, which he paid for with money stolen from the renting office of the building his aunt and mother managed. In that apartment had he begun to drink wine alone, a whole new world of sorrow opening up to him as he listened to Billie Holliday sing "Gloomy Sunday." So what if he appeared to be something of a fool standing at a booth with a display of books he had no great interest in? He was free, one day at a time, of the tailspin his life had been in.



*Saying, sometime before: "I dislike these middle-aged librarians." Frieda Volcker saying, "Hey, someday I'll be a middle-aged, too."*

He had Dr. Rosner to stand naked before. He had him to turn to when the winds of the world were too cold and rebuffing. Dr. Rosner would understand when Luther contrasted the ease and comfort Rafta and Frieda Volcker displayed at the convention with his emotional turmoil. But Dr. Rosner was not playing that way. He had some hard hitting on his agenda.

"Did you think they were there to take care of you? Did you think they were your mother and sisters?"

"Do you mean....?" Luther began.

"I mean exactly what I said."

"Oh dear," Luther said, as he could say nothing more. Even so he could carry the thought forward in his mind. And what he carried forward was that just as he had a soreness thing in him, so too did Dr. Rosner have his own soreness thing, and now Luther had managed to activate it. But then he did bring it into the light of day, in spite of the fire he had now come to expect. "You are saying that I am a sissy, a grown man seeking to hide behind his mother's skirt. I will have to see what I can do with your message. And I will say too that I deserve your wrath, as it must be a galling thing to have in your midst a man, or sort of man—do I dare to say it—who threatened to confiscate your life. What is it you would have me do? Is it for me to jump out your window to the street far below?"

Dr. Rosner did not respond. He lit one of his small cigars and did his sniffle thing. Strangeness was in the air. They were far apart now. One was seeing the other, and the other was seeing him. "We'll continue next week," Dr. Rosner said, after the longest silence.

But there were more travails for him to negotiate his way through. They came from the east and the west and all points north and south in this city of ambition and sizzle-pop success. He was committed by Rafta to attend a reading being given by three children's books authors so his ear might be attuned to the language of the gods. But he had also heard in RoR to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Four years before he had been in a taxi line at the New York Hilton, near the Donnell Library, where the reading was to take place, hoping for a fare to the airport, and now he was walking about in a jacket and tie and cigar box free. I will put aside my smallness and allow my bigness to walk the earth, Luther said, as he approached the library, where he sat in the back with the small crowd that had gathered. And though all his senses were on alert for affectation and posturing and pure conceit, he could find nothing in the tone or manner of the young adult novelist or two picture book authors anything to drive him from his chair. And just as Ringle had instructed him, saying "Never mind your horseshit. You don't leave the meeting without shaking the speaker's hand, whether you liked what he or she had to say or not. The world does not need any more of your dumb shit ways," Luther could do the same at the reading. He could, at the end, let justice have its day and congratulate the trio.

Now Bruce Bill had said of the newest Pilgore childrens books editor, Meg Pilner, that she was like a missionary, and the word instantly came alive in terms of her rectitude, as she was as straight in her manner as she was in her posture. She also had Swarthmore intelligence, and so it was clear why Ms. Mith had chosen her for a position in the department, it being known that Ms. Mith didn't take just anyone. In the short time she had been on board, she had shown that she had the goods not just on paper but in her being. And Meg Pilner also brought it to Luther's attention that she did not do negation, of herself or others. Luther had been given a watch, a sleek and slender Seiko. It had been a gift of love from Sarah, with special meaning for her and for him as she had saved to purchase it for him during her time in the men's shirts department at Gimbel's. And so, when Frieda Volcker noted the quality of the handsome watch, he had to say, because he heard the self-mockery bell ringing, "Isn't it, though. Perhaps a little too elegant for my wrist."

With hard and spanking laughter did Meg Pilner respond as a warning that she would tolerate such self-mockery once from him but not a second time. It was laughter that said, "Stand up for yourself. Be an All-American in your mind even if you are not in your body." In that moment did he feel the full weight of her disapproval.

But you must not believe that she was singing solo. She was not one of one but one of many, a chorus of voices there to show him who he was and who he must not be if a satisfactory life in civilization was to be his, by which she meant he must stop calling attention to himself. Hard, hard did she hit him with that laugh that said, I know who you

are and it is not working. Straight, straight—so you must stand. We do not do crouching here. We do not do deformity here. Deep deep was her laughter drilling done.

In this time did a committee of the righteous query Luther, having learned of the spanking dealt him by Meg Pilner, but their real purpose was to assassinate his nerve. Saying, “What right have you to go on in this negating way when the sun is shining and America is abounding?” Now Luther heard them out and noted their special devices for augmenting their shaming ways and responded with the ferocity that cowards find courage in numbers summoned in him, saying back, as he had a voice too, did he not, “The rhythm of my life and the verbal appurtenances I carry forward for display on my journey are for me to decide, as it is for you to decide the speed with which you choose to flee my scorning face,” as it was not for Meg Pilner to be the last word on anything as it pertained to him.

From Sarah it came to his attention that Sally Capici had called on behalf of Maggio with the offer of a ride up to Camp that weekend, but the thought of three hours in the confines of their car was an instant torture in his mind. He didn't need to make friends with someone destined to be a stranger. He knew from afar that all the softening agents in the culture could only ameliorate slightly the roughness of Maggio's DNA. And yet, if they were worlds apart, why would Maggio reach out in this way? It could only be the brief penetration of Luther's and Sarah's world the night they arrived with Peter and Lydia at the loft following Luther's hysterical phone message that Sarah was dead. Luther could

think of no other reason. But did Maggio really think he could build on such flimsiness any more than he could stand on a platform made of balsa wood? No, it was for Luther to bring sense to the situation. He did not want or need the burden of a primitive man. Had he not dwelt in an apartment with one for the first seventeen years of his life?

Maggio's body was where he lived. It was his work of art. But Sally had been marked. She had given birth, and bore a shocking scar from the C-section delivery. Had she not had enough of the body and what penetration could do? But if it was required, she would take her love into lust's domain.

*Celeste, to speak this way. The toll is incalculable. How do I recognize my own unbridled sexuality in theirs and yet dare to mock them? Is it that they give my own lewdness a bad name, as does my brother Luke?*

Now Maggio had come with a Capici book-of-the-month club special, a volume on male sexuality by the very great Nancy Friday, and dwelt in the realm of the hyperbolic in describing her gifts. "Incredible. Fantastic. Profoundly insightful. She certainly rocked my boat."

"But superlatives aside, what is it about, Maggio?" Claire asked.

"Male heat, and where it comes from."

"But don't we know that already? Isn't there a little thing called testosterone?"

"A potent little thing, but that doesn't factor in the male psyche. And that's where the author is so good."

In Maggio's voice Luther heard the aspiration to be good, to please Claire and be worthy of the Van Dine standard—whatever it was beyond material assets that allowed them to live in a condition of excellence—because the Van Dine world stood beyond his own, the brutal corridors of pain out at Riker's Island, where it was for him to show that other aspect of his nature, the one capable of banging the ruthless and defiant into submission.

That night Sarah tore into Luther. He was just using her. He didn't want her in the least. In bed he was just going through the motions. He was sleeping with a corpse, having killed her.

"You haven't wanted to be with me since that other woman." No more saying the woman's name than Luther, for many years, would say the name of the genius boyfriend. "All you men are pigs. You, Maggio, all of you. You live for fucking. That's all you do. But at least Maggio has the equipment."

Though he had been stabbed by the comparison, Luther tried to answer with the voice of reason. "Why do you have to talk that way?" Not "Why do you have to talk to me that way." Not wanting to personalize it anymore than necessary, not wanting her to see how severe the damage was from her attack. Not wanting her to know, that her father, with his apparatus, was her first choice and would always be her first choice, that in her guilt and horror she had run to the other extreme, away from the man with the full endowment toward the hanging string, the man (ha!) of meager substance.

"I say what is true. Lying is not my thing. All that talk by Maggio about his book is just a way to get my sister into bed. This place is one big whorehouse."

*You're nothing compared to Dylan. Nothing. He's a genius and all you have is your sensitivity....I could put the blocks together twice as fast as you. And now this.*

Luther could think she was in a fog, but she knew where his ammo dump was. She knew how to blow him up. She had done her heavy bombing thing before.

*Now Celeste, it is good that viciousness is met with viciousness, that the fire from my mouth should inevitably be met by fire from her own. Have I not often said that I needed a woman who would stand up to me, not simply lie there and take it. Sarah was letting me know she was inside me and seeing from within my borders.*

*And something else. Posses were forming, as well they should have, and riding hard for the protection of the worthy, if not the completely righteous. A man must be stood up straight for his crimes, for parasitism, for a demeanor of earnestness to your face and deceit behind your back. Justice is a seeker. It must go forward with its probe, stumbling in the dark.*

*Now what happened to the book of revelation, which Maggio Capici came bearing to the Van Dines out of the goodness of his heart on this holiday weekend? Rise above your smallness, Luther. Rise above it, I say. Here we must call upon justice. We must. This author was no lightweight, as I would have dubbed her with my slime stick, but a diviner of great truths. First, she exploded into the universal a truth I held to be my own, saying it is in the nature of men to truly doubt that women enjoy sex. How many porn extravaganzas like Debbie Does Dallas have I sat through seeking to confirm this simple reality? Second, she stated that men seek unlimited sex with an unlimited number of partners. She was not playing, this author. In her gentle, hype-free book was she*

*bringing clarity to forces that operated in the dark in me and that no one must know about. And so it was for me to see that there were bearers of the truth who did not commit their whole lives to uncovering and discovering what was already there for everyone to see. She was Nancy Friday. If you gave her the job on Monday, it was done by the end of the workweek. No pretentiousness. No shillyshallying. No dillydallying. No making a life's work out of nothingness. Here was something for me to ponder with the tolerance I could muster, and I must confess my tolerance gears were grinding.*

That night the song "That's How Strong My Love Is" did not come to his ears, either from Otis Redding or fat-lipped Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. And yet the theme, if love it could be called, came to him in dreamland. Peter's master work was stacked to the ceiling on the remainder table of the Woodstock bookstore. Seeing this abomination of disrespect and wanton neglect by the nation, Luther grew frantic to raise the money to buy up all the copies.

"I have got to right the wrong," Luther said the next morning, between sips of instant coffee out on the terrace. The air and sunlight, the twittering birds, committed him to total clarity.

"What wrong is that? Is this more of your stuff?" Sarah asked.

"Where there are valleys, such as this one, then there are mountains to either side draped in green. We must rise to their height. That must be our aspiration."

"Where are you going, Luther?"

"I am going toward the truth as the answer to sorrow."



“Can you be less opaque?”

“I had a dream.”

“And?”

He told her about the remaindered copies of her father’s books, and the urgent need he felt to acquire the money to purchase them.

“You don’t owe my father anything. Don’t get more foolish than you need to be.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just what I said.”

“Why the harsh tone?”

“Because he gets everything he wants. That’s why.”

“He has his sorrows.”

“None that he doesn’t deserve.”

Her words, they had staying power, yes, and summoning power too. To his consciousness came Regan and Goneril. Was that the territory to which she was heading? It sent a chill through him to see her fury.

“Rafta’s digging a grave for me, and digging it deep,” he said, seeking to change the subject.

“Maybe you’re digging it for yourself?”

He took a sip of his Taster’s Choice instant coffee, still hot to the touch in the blue metal mug. “I sound like an old lady.”

“Don’t insult old ladies.”

He had other things on his mind. Ringle was away on the island of Crete and Dr. Rosner had gone somewhere, he wouldn't say. People going here. People going there. It wasn't right.

Frank came out onto the porch, all bronzed and looking slim and strong in his pale blue shorts and V neck T-shirt. He was also fast as a bird on the wing. Seeing Maggio pull up and get out of his vehicle with Sally, he called, "Hey Vito, nice, be nice. This is a friendly party."

But Maggio was not without arrows in his quiver to try to bring high-flying Frank low. "It's ten o'clock already. Shouldn't you be having beer with your breakfast?"

But Frank knew how to receive the repartee arrow, even when it stuck in his heart. And Maggio liked that about Frank, that they could have the male bonding thing going without either one of them breaking apart when the heavy verbal banging began, while Luther, Luther couldn't even get in the same car with Maggio. Sheesh!

And Claire, she too had her appearance to make, and her stuff to release into the air, saying this: "Gay Talese—you all know who Gay Talese is—says in *Thy Neighbor's Wife* that it is OK to have extramarital affairs, and to prove it, he had sexual relations with his neighbor's wife over a two-year period." Signaling what? That if Maggio wanted her, then she would declare that she wanted him through the proxy of authors and their books? Sally Capici could only show a pained look of acceptance, for love was somewhere in her heart abiding with the lust and with that love came fear of the loss of her Roman stud to the younger, better equipped woman.

And Luther had his own small contribution to make, though not on male sexuality. It was not for him to go public on that which belonged in the dark. Luther offered up Moses, saying, "My nephew broke his hand socking someone in the jaw." Because Moses had done just that, according to Luther's mother, and now Luther could mention someone, a relative, who might, like Maggio, qualify for a warning before being allowed admittance to Frank's friendly party.

"That's because he didn't make a proper fist," Frank said.

Once again it was for Luther to marvel at the far reach of Frank's high numbers mind as he took himself off to the meadow, where he fell asleep under a crab apple tree. Giants of the earth had been here, glaciers on a slow reconfiguring path. He too had been here, with Sarah. They had made love under this tree. He had filmed her pornographically under that tree when they were young. He had shown his vileness to her and she had protested from her place of innocence, telling him to put away his Nikon Super 8 camera with the zoom lens, to just put it away.

Dreamland took him that afternoon, right there, under the crab apple tree and a short walk from the shale pile. A baseball stadium. Packed. Packed. And in the outfield, rookies, a squad of them. A world of understanding came to Luther. Those rookies were expected to perform in a league with a higher caliber of play than the league they had come from, and no mercy would be shown to those who failed.

My whole life is winning and losing, Luther thought, as he came to, and mostly losing. Where does it end?

He returned to a scene of fire. No, flames were not shooting through the windows and licking the walls and the ceiling. The fire was within Sarah. She was belching heat.

“You ruined me and now you want to throw me out in the street. You thought I was a plaything of your monstrous egos. You raped me. You destroyed me. Now you look at me as human garbage to be disposed of.”

“Poody, your father and I try so hard, but nothing we do is good enough. What would you have us do?”

“Die. Die. That is what you need to do.”

“You are not permitted to speak that way in this house,” Peter said.

“Don’t worry. We’re going. We’re done. Done. Do you understand? Finito.” She snapped her fingers in her father’s face and headed to the bedroom. In no time she reappeared with a packed traveling bag and was out the front door.

A feeling of shame had come over Luther. What was this revolution he had been fighting with Sarah? What was this war against the patriarchs? What was this unending bad behavior?

“I’m sorry.” He looked away. It was too much. First him causing trouble, injecting terror into their lives with his drunken phone call claiming Sarah was dead plus all his other misbehavior. And now Sarah.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You’ve been splendid with Sarah,” Lydia said. Was she mocking him with irony?

“I hardly think so,” he said.

“I don’t say what I don’t mean,” she said.

“Well, thank you,” he replied. How inane his words sounded in his ears.

“I won’t send her a check for August. I’m afraid she would rip it up.”

Reparations. Was that what Sarah was after? He headed off to the bedroom to pack.

Tearing off after an attack like that. Filling the house with a maximum of guilt before taking off on foot down the road. That was a tactic from his own book, and a pretty ugly one, now that he saw someone else put it into play. An image of Lenore, the ultimate avenger, filled his mind.

Frank drove him in the family jeep to the bottom of the road. Halfway there they caught up with Sarah, trudging along with her knapsack. Luther moved to the rear of the jeep to make room.

“It’s the fourth of July weekend. Fireworks are to be expected,” Frank said, and laughed, but Sarah didn’t join him.

The Pine Hill Trailways bus was not long in coming. As Luther stared out the window, a pickup truck passed by. In the back was a crew-cut boy. For a moment Luther’s thoughts turned to childhood and the Bible camp not so far away. A strange path it had been to get from there to here, where he was, with an angry and aggrieved wife beside him, a woman he had pursued as if his life depended on her through all those early years of their relationship. Things weren’t as they had seemed at the time.

A sick mind can't think itself well. So he had heard, in different ways, at the RoR meetings. And he had heard the holler head Clash sing "Do I Stay or Do I Go?" He had also not forgotten the dream in which he found himself sitting in front of an electric typewriter in the coolly lit apartment of Tom Smits's family, with everyone gone but him and Tom's mother. That dream. In it he was trying to adopt the free and adventurous spirit of Tom Smits, the high board score mentality of the truly gifted, who manifested that gift in detachment from the snares that were always snaring him and dragging his life into the ditch. That dream was his vision. It was. But was it the right vision? Wasn't that what the holler heads were asking? And if they didn't know, and they didn't—all they knew how to do was make noise—then he would have to go to the one who did know. Because he had given much consideration to the poor quality of his mind. He had the living proof of that with the low numbers he had accumulated. But sick? That hadn't occurred to him, and even if it had, what could he possibly do about such a situation? He knelt in his studio and began a silent prayer, now that Sarah was asleep. He could have his god all he wanted, but he also had his shame, and had no need of Sarah augmenting it beyond bearable proportions by discovering him on his knees. Even when she was retired for the night, he couldn't be entirely sure that her listening devices were. He continued anyway, thanking the god of his understanding for another sober day and he told that god to take the torment in his mind, to just take it, because his mind was a hamster on one of those wheels going around and around. He truly didn't know whether to stay or go. The futility of trying to make such a decision was apparent to him, and that futility would remain without the higher power's intercession. He had done his job. There was nothing more to

do. He had told the truth to the higher power. He now had someone on his side who could make him more than he was.

A shift had occurred in the night. He had been shunted to the loyalty track. He woke up in a state of full allegiance to Sarah, seeing that she had been outnumbered by Peter and Lydia and Claire that weekend, and forever, and seeing as well the threat of displacement from his own family that Vera, his sister, posed. Claire was the special one in the family now, the one her parents doted on and whom guests such as Maggio ogled. Sarah was feeling the pain of displacement. He could not imagine Claire walking down that dirt road away from the house after going against her parents with words. As for him, he would continue with his stay or go prayer. He would be faithful to the entity he was reporting to now, but that did not mean his heart was not with Sarah. His revolutionary credentials were intact.

And yet, that evening, at his therapy session, he tried and failed to imagine Dr. Rosner going against his parents in a fashion similar to Sarah. Such conflict would have been impermissible in the Rosner household. His father would have held a tight rein on his son's emotions and made clear there were parameters beyond which he could not go. He would have calibrated his son's emotions for success, as he himself had been calibrated. No sloppy excesses of feeling to distract from the primary purpose of advancement.

“There are undercurrents in every family, even the most seemingly harmonious,” Dr. Rosner said, after Luther had told him of the flare-up at Camp. “Still, Sarah may have a developmental problem.”

“Developmental problem? What does that mean?”

“She may not be able to assume responsibility for her life in the way that you want her to.”

Always with food for thought was Dr. Rosner.

*Now Celeste, a man's mind must be on his own furtherance. He cannot in all instances, or possibly any, take up the cause of another at his own expense, regardless of the Christian dictate. On leaving Dr. Rosner's office, I heard a voice say, "Luther, you must remain au courant. You must not fall behind." This voice directed me to the St. Mark's Bookstore, where I purchased a copy of the Chicago Review. No nineteenth century for me. I must have the now. I took the slender volume home with me guiltily, as another voice said there were more practical items to be purchased with that money. Before sitting down at the typewriter for my evening writing, I thought to read a bit from the first story in the magazine to gain some inspiration. But I could not understand where the writer was going with his tale; his prose was too polished to gain traction on. I turned to the bio note and saw that he had been published throughout the land. Do you need to hear that there was much gnashing of teeth and little writing that got done that night, or of the downward spiral my self-hatred took me?*



*But there were other things to do before going into the pain of “compare and despair” with the Chicago Review. There were the plants. I had a responsibility for them—the dracaena marginata, the schefflera, the fragile dieffenbachia, the hardy philodendron, the flourishing ficus, whose growth was cause for great pride. And then there were the sounds I needed for sustenance and to reach the higher ground that I was seeking. There were the Four Tops doing their “Baby, I Need Your Loving” thing and then there was Linda Ronstadt doing her sad, sad “Blue Bayou” thing. But don’t think I was swept downstream on a raging river of song-induced emotion. No, no, I did not linger long in the songs of America because RoR was telling me to live in the now, to turn off the fantasy machine and do the thing in front of me when the fear arose in me that the new landlord would put Sarah and me out into the street or that I might lose my job and not find another while Sarah remained unemployed. RoR was telling me the now was in me and I was in the now. But great battles are not won overnight. We must persevere.*

Sometimes Luther gave himself a talking to, on the great streets of New York City or in the privacy of the loft, as when he said, confronting the typewriter and the blank sheet of paper in the roller in his study, “Remember the children’s books reading last week, Pal. Remember the internal bleeding caused by your envy binge and how you swore to make maximum use of the free time afforded you going forward.” Seeking to whip himself free of all dilly-dallying, all shilly-shallying, so purposefulness might be his middle name.

Now was the world paying him some attention. The great Harper and Row replied with a very respectful letter to his request for employment. True, there were no openings, but the tone was apologetic, and there was the assurance that his resume would be kept on file should an opening occur. Because things could occur. They didn't say that, but he did.

And Sarah. She was building her new life in spite of the intermittent rain. A Lippincott editor was all in a rave about her portfolio. Said she was "tops, just tops." The way people spoke, as if they were in a movie and real life had nothing to do with them.

A woman from Texas was called upon to lead the RoR meeting. The transcript of her talk was written on the air and was for you to find if you could. Let it be said that she used up all but ten minutes of the meeting. She had gotten her quota of words into the air, but the group members, except for a couple, had not gotten to share theirs. Luther saw what he saw, that people needed their disappearing words to be heard.

This I resolve: To mail at least one resume per day till I am out of Cromartie Wonders; to stay to myself; to accept that I have a right to be unhappy with a control freak boss and a dead-end job.

There was more RoR stuff, as there had to be, it being a never ending resource. A woman accused a man of lying about his sobriety date. He was sober one year, not ten, having drunk the year before by his own admission, the woman said. The man rose up on her. He

came at her with brandished fist and a raging red face. “You’re taking my goddamn inventory, you bitch. I was in the front lines in the World War II. You watch your mouth. You watch I don’t shove a cannon in it.” People intervened. They took him to the cooling off corner.

Memories of family eruptions came to Luther. Someone cuffed him gently on the head. “You got to take the shit with the shinola, Bones,” he said.

Arno Press. Arbor House. Atheneum. Avon. He was *reaching out*.

“You should have a family,” a voice from his past said. But who?

This I also resolve: to attend RoR meetings every day, be they at the lunch hour or in the evening.

Then his brother died, in Luther’s mind, on a country road in the Deep South. Luther traveled down to the scene of the accident and made arrangements for the body to be brought back home. The urgent need to tell Rafta of his pain, and also to give her a date for his own departure, not from life, but from Cromartie Wonders.

He struggled home with the Brand etching press. It was small but heavy. A worker had to help him lift it into a cab, and then he had to pay someone he stopped on the street ten bucks to get it up the stairs to the loft. He had bought a sturdy table to support the press.

No more of his self-made fall-down tables. He now had a table he could rely on not to make in the night a catastrophic noise of destruction, a table he could turn his back on without worry of gross betrayal. Now had a monument to his own goodness been installed. Such was his thought.

“Now has a monument to your own goodness been installed.” Such were Sarah’s mimicking words. But she could not shoot him out of the sky with those words. It was not that his plane flew so high but that he had a defense against her quite accurate ack-ack fire. It came in the form of an RoR saying, “We take the action and let go of the result.”

*Celeste, she did no such mimicking of my thought. She had a goodness of her own. It was in her heart. She too could let love have its way. Let us, then, correct the record for all time, as we will all meet face to face again in eternity, where no cloud cover will exist for what we have wrought. This is a life that we live but also a tape that we play. We are on to your horseshit, Luther. We are on to it.*

The staff of Cromartie Wonders and Pilgore Children’s Books were called to the main conference room. All of them, and on the double. So the summons came from Mercanto Konic, the recently hired director of sales for the adult division, replacing Burt Burke, who had recently retired. That meant you, Rafta Blackning, and you too, Florence Mith, and even you Luther whatever your last name was. Mercanto had vigor in his body and his brain and his mouth, which fired words on a rotating axis that hurt you on impact. No vestibule of his mind was without the profit motive, some might have thought, but his

message had a different focus: “You are loved. Do you hear me? Loved. Don’t be going around like second-class citizens. Are you hearing me?” Talking from his huskiness, his white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his tan, his short black hair, his full-lipped mouth. Hearing him the gathered were, but in silence. In that silence was the question being silently begged: Who said they were second class in the first place? Was it possibly Mercanto Konic himself? Surely not Florence Mith and Rafta Blackning. They understood the lesser status of children’s books through the years in publishing and the historical limitations on women in the industry. They knew how to relate to the likes of Mercanto Konic. They had been handling his type for years. The due he now gave them, while awkward, was not unappreciated.

Let it be noted that Mercanto Konic was in need of a love life. He was looking to find someone to provide the dimensions that he himself lacked, and saw her in that very conference room. Her name was Samantha Sellar and she lived her life behind a Madonna mystery smile that held out the hint of wildness behind the mask. Smooth-skinned and delicate, she was an enigmatic haven for his hirsute bullishness, not at all like Meg Pilner, the other Pilgore children’s books editor, whom Bruce Bill referred to as a missionary.

*Celeste, Mercanto Konic found his love in the room where he was standing, and thoroughness being essential, I have included this information here. Mercanto Konic clearly had a power that I lacked. The couple of times I was drunk enough to allow myself to feel drawn to Samantha Sellar and in fact expressed an interest in seeing her over the phone—yes, I had somehow gotten her number—just a few minutes on the line*

*was enough to defeat me, as it became quickly apparent that she possessed resources far greater than mine and that I was overmatched. There is this as well. I saw things in her that I didn't like, mainly a reptilian coldness.*

Since his return to RoR, he had been hearing it said that many more were in the fellowship than in the program of recovery. "We grow or we go" was a warning for those who took the program lightly. Included in this program was a moral inventory. God was thundering at him to take some sort of action. I am in school, Luther thought, and once again I will fall behind and be placed with the dunderheads, as there is clearly more to this thing than sitting in a chair for an hour and sipping coffee.

As for chairs, there were two that had Luther's attention, both in the front row of the Saturday night meeting. On one end sat the ponderous one, Sham O'Malley, tall and ghostly white and thin, who had raised himself from the rough streets of the South Bronx to become a psychotherapist. "Him who talks with pregnant pauses," caustic Solomon Rhein was heard to say of Sham, noting his long bouts of silence between words waiting for *le mot juste* to materialize. At the other end sat Gladwell Glanton. "No one feels sorry for a successful man," he shared more than once at the meeting. Gladwell Glanton had written a prize-winning novel, and when Luther learned the title, he was astonished, as he had been tasked, while working in a neighborhood bookstore as a teenager, with continually refilling the special case in which copies were displayed. The shrunken, balding, middle-aged man Luther saw on Saturday nights at the meeting in no way resembled the vibrant young man with the broad face and sparkling eyes and thick

head of hair staring out from the back of the paperback edition of the novel. He looked now like a man to whom death was calling. His fame was not a magnet. The ponderous one, on the other hand, while afflicted with a ghostly pallor, somehow exuded worldly success.

Luther was not of one mind about his sober life. One Saturday afternoon he raised up on the maddening force field of newfound virtue and, led on by his desire, broke on through to Celeste, who was now living on Greene Street, in SoHo, in a cast-iron building painted blue. But standing face to face with her, he could do no more than strike a tone of admiration for all that she was and all that she did. She had put down the brush and was now carving small wooden figures, which she then painted in bright, dazzling colors. And her environment was so different; the cramped apartment had given way to a huge open space with white wooden floorboards. She stood there powerful not only in the context of her art but in her own right. A stop sign was emblazoned on her chest. She had changed, grown into herself. Beauty, brains, sizzle pop talent, breeding—what could Luther bring to match these? And so he was bounced hard from her premises and onto the cobblestone street.

That evening he staggered into the meeting place and approached Gladwell Glanton. “I have been where my feet prevented me from going before. Because a fleshpot leads to a drink and a drink conceivably equals death I am telling you this. Do you recognize the peril I am in and do you wish to do right by rescuing me from it?”

Gladwell Glanton was a man who made his words count. “Do you want your marriage?”

“Yes. Of course,” Luther replied.

“Then you have to give it 110 percent.”

That’s more than humanly possible, Luther thought, and staggered away. Two minutes later he was back. “I don’t know if I want my marriage,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter. You still have to give your marriage 120 percent.”

“Two minutes ago you said 110 percent.”

“The road gets narrower.”

“Who are you, anyway, that you talk this way?”

“That’s right. Who am I?” Glanton Gladwell replied, and put a mammoth chuckle on Luther.

“Why do you laugh in this way? This is serious stuff and here you are with your chuckle-thon.”

“If you practice the principles of the program in all your affairs, then the things and people that are meant to be in your life will be in your life and the things and people that aren’t will fall away.”

Luther sat stunned through the meeting at the oracular content of Gladwell Glanton’s mind. This was in great contrast to the stiff-arm reception he had given Gladwell when the man had approached him after a meeting some months before at which Luther had railed at the universe for throwing his manuscripts out in the street and otherwise not treating him with the respect he deserved. Luther had deigned to take the phone number Gladwell had written on a scrap of paper. How satisfying it had been to give the old man short shrift and then to fly in the face of the program wisdom that said



phone numbers were for dialing, not filing. Luther's wallet had been his filing cabinet for Gladwell's number. Still, Luther had not thrown the number away. He had not done that. He had a limit to his disrespect, which went no further than being dependently independent.

That night Solomon Rhein led the meeting. A great weeping occurred in Luther listening to Solomon tell his story, not because he was crushed that Solomon had been given this featured role but because he spoke in the key of frightened sincerity. His taunting, his mockery, his sarcasm—that side of him was not in play. He spoke fast, rushing his words, as if an uninterrupted narrative flow was needed to keep the group at bay. Luther saw the low self-esteem in his friend that he saw in himself. Solomon could say all manner of sharp-edged things to him from now on, but it would always be in the context of the damaged and insecure person he presented on this night.

He was not a demographer, but he had begun to notice such an abundance of single young people in the RoR meetings that he wondered if there was a place for married people like himself. But then he beat that perception into the ground until all life had left it and he was safe from the evil wedge the idea was seeking to place between him and the program. There were married RoRs and single RoRs. It was as simple as that.

In dreamland Luther met up with Dr. Rosner, who assured him that soon they would have their last session, as Luther was reaching the point where he would no longer need the

doctor's services. Luther woke up afraid. The dream felt less like a vote of confidence than a casual dismissal.

Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich and Holt, Rinehart & Winston. Luther was not playing. He was not. He was saying, here I am, world. Take me away from where I am. There would be two more resumes the next day and two more after that and on and on, until he got a job that would pay him a better salary.

He did something he had not done before at a RoR meeting. He sat next to an attractive woman but was quickly told by the man to the other side of her that the seat was taken. Thinking that the man and the entire room saw through to his intention, he moved to another row without protest. When his sense of shame eased, he dared to look around and saw that the seat he had vacated was still empty. Had the man lied just to get rid of him? Was he, Luther, that obviously driven by lechery, and because of it, deserving of ostracism?

Nearby sat a pretty blond woman who looked somewhat familiar. He tried to catch her eye, but with no success. Was she purposely ignoring him? Had she heard him speak at a previous meeting and found something to dislike in what he had to say? What was this world he had a part of creating since entering the room?

At the end of the meeting he stood by the door. The man who had spoken to him and the woman left together. As they passed, the man said, "See you," in a scornful tone, as if to say "Fuck you for messing with my girlfriend and don't you look like the perfect

ass right now.” Right afterward the blond woman he had eyed brushed past him. Even in the summer heat was her face frozen in anger.

I have some serious considering to do, Luther thought, as he made his way along the streets of Manhattan. The universe has sent me a message. I must walk on the straight and narrow in regard to sex. Extramarital activity will only start me drinking again. I must look into myself and find the conflicts, the inner tensions, that lead me to act on my desire for women other than Sarah. This he said while the tall buildings of New York City thrust themselves toward the soft and yielding sky.

*Now Celeste, eye contact will continue to be dangerous, whether in Abilene, Kansas, or the streets and other public spaces of New York City. If the eye is truly the window to the soul, it may be that some don't want others to be looking into their deep-down business, particularly if storehouses of brutality intended for their fellow human beings, can be glimpsed. And do not think the office building that accommodated Pilgore Press would provide a safe zone from the malignant ones. I should know, as I was in breach of this common wisdom just this morning as I rode up in the elevator to start my day of work. “I can get rid of the shit fast, Jim,” I heard a man say, and assumed, because of the intonation, that the black man behind me was speaking. To my surprise, when I reflexively turned, it was the white man beside him holding forth. He it was who met me with his eyes of deadness. “Look at this cracker, Jim, trying to fuck with the black man's freedom of speech. White man fuck with black man's freedom mean it be time to fuck the white man up. You don't be fucking with no black man, black or white. You dig?”*

*“I do. I do,” I said, and stepped off the elevator quickly, the elevator having reached my floor. For Celeste, no one is more dangerous than a white man trying, in the presence of a black man, to effect a transformation of racial identity.*

Luther and Luke had a love for each other, but it was not a love that spoke its name outright. It had developed in their growing up years together in that time when Hannah would invade their room with her tongue clamped between her thick lips to give Luke his goodnight smacks as he lay in the lower bunk. It was a love born of injustice and threat from their marauding older sisters. Vestiges of that love remained, but they were only that. When Luke called to Luther from a trailer park in Bergen, New Jersey, that summer to inform Luther that he and Rose and her twin boys had taken to a life on the road, Luther had the feeling that Luke wanted to bring his chaos to the front door of the loft and leave it there for Luther to handle.

“The heat was too much down in Florida, so we drove up in the camper and we’ll be staying here for a couple of months. And hey, I got my old job back hacking out in Queens. And I’ve also been trying to reach Dr. Fredenosi, my therapist at Elmhurst General Hospital. He’s the one who was in my corner when I was in the detox ward at the hospital last year. And yeah, I’ll be getting back to those RoR meetings when I can.”

Luther didn’t ask how his brother planned to get from Bergen County, New Jersey, to Queens and back or what kind of existence Luke could hope for with him and Rose and the kids living in a trailer lot, like American nomads. What he heard was Luke’s innocence, his naivety, his desperation. Luke was asking Luther to believe that he was

ready to take constructive action to reclaim his life. He was asking Luther to believe in him. It had always been dangerous to love Luke. It had been dangerous to love any of his older siblings, cast as they had been on a sea for the perishing.

“Let’s go to a meeting together,” Luther said.

“Yeah, we’re going to do that. You’ll see.”

There was guilt and sorrow afterward. Luther had a job with benefits. He had a place to live. He had a therapist. He had sobriety. Luke had none of these things. He was surviving on the monthly disability benefit check Rose received following the shooting by her husband. Without her Luke might be sleeping in the street. And yet Luther had not reached out to Luke. He had not been the brother he was supposed to be. But there were reasons, weren’t there? Hadn’t Luke, while drunk, called the loft and said suggestive, inappropriate things to Sarah, awakening old fears in Luther as to his brother’s real intentions toward him?

His mind took him down a darker road. Suppose Luke had betrayed him that night years before, as Luther had betrayed Sarah with Lenore? Suppose Luke had slept with Sarah the night she hitchhiked down from Camp and he intercepted her as she was on her way to see Luther at the apartment he shared with Roberto, and where he lay in bed with Nora from Norway that very night? Suppose Luke, whom Luther had just turned away when he knocked on his door, hadn’t called Luther from the bar where he took Sarah and alerted him to the situation? Suppose Luke had not made his proposal that Luther come to the bar and join Sarah while he, Luke, went to the apartment to keep Nora company till Luther could return?

It was not a road to go down.

*Now Celeste, emotion is a useless thing—useless, I say—worthy of being beaten to the ground and left to die. And if it is only to play the futile game of whack a mole, so be it, the effort must still be made to effect the affect of a zombie or cultivate the laughter of a hyena. Beneath even the most gentle manner lies the heart of a murderer.*

*What a world it would be if we embraced such a lie, how unbearably cold and cruel. But is that not the American dictate, to put good cheer above sadness and grief. Put the laughing thing on the fact that your brother is making his way onto the hobo trail and becoming a bum de la bum and never mind the emoting of the treacle boys and girls. So we are directed. It will not be easy to silence the callous ones and explore what is beyond the gates of their mockery, anymore than it is with human resources to tame the wildest sea. Many are the guardians of bestiality within, and I am currently at a loss how to get beyond them.*

It continued to be on Luther's mind that he had done Peter and Lydia and the Van Dine family, in general, wrong. A big, heavy ball of wrongness bore down on him every day. I must right this wrong if it is not to break my back. So Luther thought as he reached for the telephone. When Lydia came on the line, he got right into it.

“Lydia,” he said, “I have been bad where I needed to be good. This I know to be so, because there are no leak-proof psychopathic chambers in my brain for me to store the toxic residue of such wrongdoing. I will not catalog my wrongs. We would be here on

the line for a while were I to do so. But I will say this, that I am on to myself as to what I have done and my conscience is not clear. I just want you to know that I am sorry for my bad behavior so I can set myself on the path to gaining my manhood and self-respect. Furthermore, I am trying hard to get a raise so Sarah and I can become a self-supporting sovereign state. Can you relate?"

"I believe so, Luther. You are a well-meaning sort when the darker aspect of the shadow self is not in control."

"The shadow self. Yes. I will be on the lookout for it. In the meantime, I want the flag of Sarah and me to fly high."

"I will be on the lookout for your flag, Luther. Of that you can be sure."

*One thing more, Celeste. Those nights back in childhood when Luke and I walked along the bridle path in Riverside Park with the dogs and spoke in the dark about God. I cannot say for Luke, but the conviction of God's presence on those walks would spark a rush of love in me which in the morning, the cloak of darkness dispersed, brought a flood of shame that Luke had been witness to my avowal of faith. Was it there I learned to protect myself with the laughing thing, having glimpsed in that darkness my brother's grin?*

In his sadness one morning Luther said, to no one but himself, I will see to my mind so I can have some order in my day. His confidence soared as, first thing in the office, he sent off flaps copy Rafta had approved to the authors of *The Story of Your Nose* and two resumes to publishers so they could know who he was and what he was about, at least on

paper. At the lunch hour he streaked up Madison Avenue to a RoR meeting ten blocks away. All was good as he zipped back to work, his only bad moments when people dawdle-danced in front of him instead of getting a move on.

But then his mind turned to money, and the salary raise he felt was his due. As he entered the lobby, he saw Meg Pilner, the children's books editor for Pilgore, disappear into an elevator. He would call her and ask if she had any information for him about possible salary increases. If she was as Bruce Bill had said, a missionary sort, then she would be bound to the truth. When he got to his desk, Luther reached for the phone and dialed Meg Pilner's extension, ignoring the warning whisperer telling him this was not a good idea. Meg Pilner came on strong with her voice of clarity, saying only that, "Meg Pilner," because it was for her to know she had a name worth announcing. Now Luther could have done telephone hang-up and she would never have found out it was him on the line, but he was led forward into her danger zone.

"It is me, Luther Garatdjian. Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could spare me a minute when you have a chance."

"Sure. I have something for Rafta. I'll stop by on my way."

"OK. Thanks."

Two minutes later she was in his office. "Hey there," she said.

"We should probably close the door," Luther said. As he got up to do so, Roller passed by and gave him an unfriendly stare. She would probably imagine a conspiracy unfolding and pay him back for his treachery, but no matter.

"Your desk is so neat," Meg Pilner said.



“Yes. Others have said the same.”

“So what’s up?”

“I was wondering if you had heard anything about raises and when we might expect them.”

“Why would you ask me? Isn’t that a question for Rafta?”

“I have tried. The answer is not very satisfying.”

“I have no idea. But your desk is not only neat. It’s virtually bare. Are you expecting a raise for just sitting here? Just kidding, of course.”

“Of course. But now all wind has been taken from my sails and so I will be quiet from now on about the matter.”

“Are you OK?”

“I am A-OK.”

“Well, take care,” she said, and was on her way.

“I will do that.”

I have been beaten by a rock-ribbed Republican who told me in plain English that I was a freeloader, and I opened the door to her. Vigilance, Luther, vigilance. Though there was an afternoon to be gotten through, he was already longing for the merciful refuge of sleep.

A man needed to be resourceful. He needed to know where to go with his work. He needed to be guided. He shouldn’t just be throwing his writing into a strong wind and have it blown right back in his face. *Kenyon Review*. He would submit his rejected pieces

there. After all, they had John Crowe Ransom, a man with three names. *Kenyon Review* and John Crowe Ransom. He was sure they would be his direction home.

Now, in RoR there were murderers, rapists, con artists, and outright thieves. Among the last was Johnny B., who said, “Sometimes you got to fuck someone up, fuck him up real bad. Sometimes the higher power wants you to do bad so you can do good later on.

Sometimes he wants you to do bad just because he digs it. Don’t be listening to all this motherfucking bullshit how he wants you to only do good. Higher Power a motherfucker who goes both ways. You white motherfuckers understand what I’m saying? Shee-it.”

Johnny B. had the high forehead of intelligence. He had the cold look of the omniscient drifter. He had the bald head of unadorned power. He had a light set in the back of his mind that gave his face a glow.

*Celeste, sometimes I feel that what love comes through me is not my own, as when I walk through the medieval galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and imagine it in ruins and hear your voice of sorrow at all the lost treasures. Or, on a less dire note, I hear your voice in appreciation of the credentialed man entrusted with the care of the museum.*

*Celeste, I am hearing your love for this museum flow through all its galleries, touching every corner.*

To the Strand he went so he could once more get filled up, not with facts that would grow his strength, but with first editions that would enhance his financial future. He purchased

first editions of the big guns Renata Adler, Donald Barthelme, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Gore “Don’t Fuck with Me” Vidal. He took them home and wrapped them tight in double plastic bags so no air could get in and violate the pages and turn them old and crumbly. They might mean nothing now, but in twenty-five years, when the authors had turned to dust, a great weeping would consume some that they had been here and were no more, just as they who had these thoughts would soon be no more, and so they would reach for their wallets and their purses to purchase the artifacts and stop the tide that would wash away all life from where they were. And yet a soreness came over Luther for no reason that he could name that he had gone down this road of purchase when he had been wholly committed to production.

There was other soreness in him too, soreness he hadn’t expected to be there still. Soreness that Philomena Swangner and Isadora Dreyton had vacated the premises of Cromartie Wonders, making it not a place of permanence but a pit stop in their lives of adventure, leaving him with the likes of Roller Carmona-Hickson.

In dreamland did Woody Allen come after Sarah and ask her to screen one of his films at a restaurant. Woody was putting Luther on notice that he would be claiming Sarah for his own. Always could the man with something move on the man with nothing.

Ringle followed after Woody in dreamland. He had nothing he wanted to take from Luther. He had come only to give and give. “Do not treat writing as a test. See it as

an adventure. See where it takes you,” Ringle said, offering his kindness in a gruff manner and leaving Luther no choice but to regard him as love itself.

In less than two months he would turn thirty-three, the deadline he had set for getting free of Cromartie Wonders. He was more convinced that Rafta wanted him gone than he was of his ability to make it happen. But too bad for her if he couldn't oblige, he told himself. He had gone too far out into the world to care what others were thinking or not thinking about him. I will do what I have to do to survive my life, he declared.

Luther went to the rooms. The man leading the meeting spoke of bleeding from both orifices as a result of years of drinking. He gave Luther what he needed to hear to get his senses straight.

*Now Celeste, I am as tired as you must be with these pedestrian ramblings. Page after numbing page of the quotidian, with not a word worthy of the category of “late-breaking development.” But if the mundane is a fact of life, we must be willing to call it by its name and say here 'tis, here 'tis, as no one is above or otherwise exempt from the routine, we all blow our nose and sit on the potty and put one foot after the other in our daily pursuits. And in the end will we not deserve and receive acknowledgment for our thoroughness? And should we not, should the forces of smallness prevail—those who whisper and backbite among themselves—pledge to hold our heads high and walk on by, just walk on by? A person can be a hero wherever he or she may live within their being in contending with the multifarious as well as the more one dimensional nefarious. And so I*

*will tell you, though the ill wind of indifference continued to blow against my own particular person, I dispatched two stories, “The Rise” and “The Meeting,” to Sun and Moon, though whatever crumb of optimism I could summon derived solely from the response of an editor with The Ark River Review years before, who wrote that he wanted to add them to the two the review he had already accepted, but was unable to win over the other two editors. What is one to do but to pursue the world until, in a state of fatigue, he collapses, and new perspective—a new direction—is given him? There is a wall we must all run into, a wall fashioned by self-will, and if we are fortunate, as we lie in a stunned state, a reorientation process will be initiated that will dissolve that wall and we will be rendered whole right where we are.*

*The next day I received from the great publishing company William Morrow, represented by Phyllis Acke, personnel director, a letter in response to the resume I had submitted weeks before. That letter can be summarized in five words: “Hang on, Sloopy, hang on.” I was no femme and I wore no red dress, but I was from the poor side of town, and Phyllis Acke was wanting no one to bring me down. Hang on, she was simply saying. Hang on. And so I took her at her word.*

*But I was not done. Action was the order of the day. Had RoR not encouraged me to act my way into right thinking? And so I called Lydia wearing the cloak of humility. Allowing honesty to be my guide, I simply said that my earlier manifesto of financial independence and full sovereignty might be further delayed, as Sarah and I would again need to borrow money if I didn't soon find a better-paying job or Sarah didn't begin to*

*provide an income. I then expressed the hope that she and Peter would be understanding and forgiving, although I also said that we were deserving of neither.*

*“Peter and I are becoming resigned to the unfortunate inevitability that our assistance will continue to be needed.”*

*“Not forever.”*

*“Do you mean not into eternity, Luther?”*

*“Certainly not that.”*

*“So then we do have some hope of relief from you.”*

*“You can be certain of that.”*

*In the evening I had my island of stability, Dr. Rosner, for the fifty-minute hour he afforded me. He went deep on me with a truth bomb exploration, saying, “You feel you have to please women, whether they are your mother, your sisters, or your boss. That is the source of your anger.” I had brought it on with a rant about Rafta and her failure to advocate for a raise for me. I mentioned Mercanto Konic, the new sales manager for adult books, and the patronizing talk he gave to the two children’s books imprints to the effect that we shouldn’t regard ourselves as having the status of stepchildren in the Pilgore family.*

*“I suppose we should thank him for his kind words and the non-living wage we are paid?” Luther said.*

*“Why not thank me?” Dr. Rosner said, with an enigmatic smile, and here he closed me down, Celeste. Was he calling me out? Was that it? Had he suddenly morphed into the fraud police, ready to arrest me for the crime of ingratitude? Was he saying,*

*“Who do you think you are, Mr. Skinny Man, with your unwarranted anger at the compensation you receive for doing virtually nothing? Do you not remember your nights of loneliness as a hackie and your measly wages in a cigar box? Why don’t you rail at me? I’m the one who directed you toward publishing. Is it that you lack the nerve?”*

*He had me in a confused state and on the perimeter of the hall of shame and so silence was my only answer as the session came to an end. At the next session would I bring the matter up, I thought, even as I rallied my resolve not to call Dr. Rosner between sessions to ask him for the how and why of what he said, lest he add to the bill of indictment my perennial weakness.*

*Celeste, it is possible I may have to stay here with you for a while. I will have to see.*

*Some unsteadiness has come over me.*

*Now there was a building that still stands in my mind down on Astor Place. A union building it was, with the name of the union on the marquee. One member of the Saturday evening group, Alfonso Ricobahn, took it upon himself to inquire about starting a RoR meeting on Fridays at this address, and met with success. The union was happy to have RoR on the premises in the hope that some of the union members with a drinking problem would be drawn to the meeting. Let it be said that not a single one, to our knowledge, ever set foot in the meeting. Possibly, the fact that the meeting was being held on union turf deterred some of the union members from seeking help. “Shame, shame, double shame, everybody knows your name,” and all of that. For those who are new to recovery*

*or contemplating seeking help, the stigma of alcoholism can be quite strong, as we have noted.*

*Alfonso Ricobahn, let it be said, was a man who went on and on about his ex-wife and her gross abuse of him before she left the marriage and sought a divorce. "A lesbian. She is nothing but a lesbian," he was often heard to shout about this woman who vacated the premises. The image of him as a hysteric blinded to the truth of his own sexual identity began to take hold. But his domestic affairs are for Alfonso Ricobahn to sort out. Let us simply give thanks for the initiative he took in securing a new meeting place for RoR and cast aside any and all supercilious attitudes we may harbor toward this excitable man.*

*Why this resolution to do right by Alfonso, you may well ask? I can assure you that I have an answer. Alfonso Ricobahn was vital to my growth. Indeed he was an agent of the higher power. Of this there can be no question. And why do I come to you with such a blaze of certitude? Because Alfonso Ricobahn secured a venue where the higher power could enter my life, not all at once but in stages.*

*First let me say that the reign of terror that the men of the Christ Jesus had imposed on me was over when I left the church at age thirteen. Never again would I be subject to the thundering voice of Pastor Cohn consigning me to the eternal flames for my iniquity. I came to RoR in a defensive crouch, a posture of defiance toward religion and all the things of God, a posture necessary to my survival as a child not only against a fulminating pastor but also a proselytizing mother and her warning that we were living in the last days and all her talk of Jesus coming as a thief in the night as I lay sleeping.*



*One Friday evening at this RoR meeting it happened that many young men were in attendance, and each was surpassed by the succeeding one in the tone of vehemence with which he expressed his outrage at the abusive treatment meted out in his parochial school days by the nuns and priests of his Catholic faith. Buried in an unmarked grave was their open-hearted faith and trust, they seemed to be saying, with scarring and hardness and the evisceration of their souls the legacy of this maltreatment. From the street could be heard a hippie remnant chanting "Peace now" and "Love in our time" but these wounded ones were having none of it. The road of one-track sorrow was theirs to avow and walk upon. Soon even the walls were bulging from their outpouring. Perhaps it was catharsis of a kind, a venting that would ultimately take them in a new direction. I do not want to say that they were a long-playing record stuck in the trauma groove. Nor do I wish to make a mockery of others' pain with the laughing thing that remains great within me. I too had some bruises from my early years in church custody. I too could have chanted the humiliations endured by the men of the Christ Jesus. But a parting of the road occurred at that meeting. Suddenly I realized that as poignant and compelling as their narratives of betrayal and abuse were, it was imperative to understand that the mockery of God perpetrated by these men of faith on defenseless children was irrelevant in relation to the spiritual path that RoR had laid out for us.*

*I would not have been able to say anything more about the matter at the time, but the following week I returned to the same meeting. It was held in a long narrow room with a green blackboard. As I sat through the speaker's lead, I suddenly felt within me a presence that I could only identify as God. It manifested as a sense of hope. My life was*

*not only ahead of me but I seemed to have been granted a newfound sense of purpose. The room had a view down to the side street, which was dominated by a giant wines and liquors store that had gotten a great deal of my business through the years. Often, as I rode the number 6 train after work there had been the dilemma whether to get off at Astor Place and pick up a bottle or two or stay on to Bleecker Street, my home station, and avoid trouble. What I remained unaware of was the absence of choice. I could no more have resisted the call of the bottle than I could have the promptings of diarrhea. But now I would never have to enter that store again so long as I stayed close to this power and to RoR itself.*

*Celeste, because it was a Friday evening, my mind turned to the church farther north and across town, where the women of the Christ Jesus came on Fridays to teach Bible school, seeking to situate us in the hard rocks of the Old Testament, and I could only think, I was there and now I am here, the glory and the power of this thing exploding within me as it did not then, even as a sweet warmth came over me, melding all difference into a smooth continuum of time past and time present. Now Celeste, rose my father before me, not as a shuddering beast from a mysterious and forbidden east, his weeping prayers a source of shame that a man, my father no less, should need such a crutch, but explicable in his longing for all that he could not see even as he envisioned it. I am going where my father went, and I am going without protest, I could only think, in full astonishment, the shaming thing about all things of God and especially as they related to my father having fallen away. Go where you must, I heard a voice say, and leave all apology behind.*

*Celeste, we are moved across an invisible line into active alcoholism, unless we are born with the illness, and yet, when we release from the drink, the void created by its absence is filled by a higher power. From a sense of desperation I had been driven to prayer since coming to RoR, but there had been no feeling of connection, no experience of God. Now there was. Gently had he come. A great gift had I received, the most wonderful gift, after physical sobriety. There was nothing for me to do but give thanks.*

*What had happened? RoR hadn't installed in me some trademarked God of its own. It had simply enabled me to uncover and discover what had always been there.*

*Celeste, how strange that we should run about, here and there, seeking this or that, when the thing we most need for our sense of wholeness lies right there within us.*

*And so I became the sort of man my father had been, the sort who could talk about God in public without mortification.*

Now these were some of the members of that Friday group.

There was barrel-chested Saunders B., who had, while drunk, brandished a samurai sword on the campus of Dartmouth College, where he had been enrolled; Trevor B., blond and British and persnickety, with a mind attuned to the deprivations of his childhood; Cantwell W., who had allowed the bottle to take his teeth and his health and his mind, but who persevered in spite of this lack as an advertising copywriter; Gwaltney C., who wanted more happiness than his face was showing. All were in their thirties and aspiring to a new life.

In addition to admitting that he was powerless over alcohol; that his life had become unmanageable and coming to believe that a power greater than himself could

restore him to sanity, there was a third step, Made a decision to turn his will and his life over to the care of God, as he understood God. He could see what his own will had wrought in his life. He had manipulated himself into the renting office of the building his family managed and with stolen funds had established a loft life with Sarah, and given himself all the free time he needed to write his novel. He had the girl he said he wanted and the life he said he wanted and wound up a severely alcoholic man brimming with anger and self-pity and with nothing to show for his writing efforts.

And he saw, going further back in time, how his mind had worked against him. There was that La Rochefoucauld maxim, Whom one has loved once and ceased to love, one cannot love a second time. How that pith had wrought havoc when he translated it from French into English in tenth grade, threatening the future he had established in his mind for him and Jane Thayer. How they would, after high school, go their own way in college and make new friends and then get back together after graduation and marry and live together happily for the rest of their lives. But there was the stinky Frenchman saying no, no, jamais, jamais. And so, for the next two years he tortured himself and Jane Thayer with his insecurity about the future, grasping at anything he could to refute the Frenchman, as when he read in a society column in the *Daily News* that Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood still cared about each other years after their divorce and shared this news with Jane Thayer in a state of elation. And what happened? The summer following graduation from high school she went off to Mexico for two weeks but decided to stay for the year, and he was alone and miserable, riding the Flushing Main Street Line out to Queens College early every weekday morning, sharing the car with workers outfitted in

Dickey pants and shirts and toting lunch buckets, the *Daily News* tucked under their arms. For two years he lived with the pain of the breakup, even as he understood that Jane Thayer had done for him what he couldn't do for himself in leaving. And when she did return to New York, he didn't want her, having found more interesting girls to be with. He had found Sarah Van Dine. And when she went off to art college in Boston, there was a plan for her, too, a four year plan. All the anxiety he endured during their separation would be gone and they would live together in happiness for the rest of their days, for she was the bounty of America. And yet, when that time came, he couldn't be sure he wanted her, and for the years since he had acted at times in ways that suggested he didn't.

He had a present to face as well as a past, and RoR had something to say about that, too. Said he'd better watch his step at work, just as Ringle had warned. It was right there in the text. How some believed that they were too good for their jobs as a way of justifying their laziness, when, down deep, they didn't feel good enough. Telling it like it was, the text was. Well, that was all right. He was on vacation now. He would regroup. He would be an American.

In the meantime the thread connecting one day with the next would be the meetings. "Let's play two," Ernie "I have more power in my wrists than you have in your whole body" Banks, home run hitting shortstop supreme of the Chicago Cubs would say, relishing the idea of a doubleheader. And Luther felt just that way about his Saturday evening meeting. He had his hospitality setup commitment that brought him to the meeting place early, and then he had those two glorious back-to-back meetings to look

forward to. He could go deep into the stories of the speakers—what they had been like and what had happened to them and what they were like now—and forget about all times and all places but where he was, just as Ringle had told him to do, saying “The now is wow.” Luther just let the stories wash over him. First up was McFee, who prided himself on having been knifed in all fifty states—no, he didn’t do that stuff sober, he wasn’t into that anymore. Then came Flossy, and she was every bit a match for him, saying she had sold her body in all fifty states, but no, like McFee, she didn’t go that way in recovery.

During the sharing session, Luther felt moved to get his hand up. What he had to say was important and had urgency written all over it. But other group members were vying for the speaker’s attention, and so he had to endure what they had to share, listening without listening, because truth should always have priority. Only at the very end was he recognized.

“There was a poetry anthology some years ago with the title *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*. I want that voice to be great within me, but the publishers are not hearing it. They keep throwing my manuscripts into the street. Sober I will find my justice where I can. That is all I have to say.”

Solomon Rhein was lying in wait for him after the meeting. “You talk some strange shit, Choate,” he said.

“Truth doesn’t have to have a capital ‘T’ to be the truth.”

“That’s what I mean by strange shit.”

“You have come in your loneliness from Brooklyn to Manhattan looking for love on a Saturday night.”

“There are some babes at the meeting, that’s for sure.”

“Aye,” Luther said, as now Solomon Rhein had registered on the side of truth.

“I’ve got a new mentor, Fitz Flaherty. Irish, in case you haven’t guessed. But he has a Jewish girlfriend, so that makes him all right. He wants me to explore new meetings.”

“How does that work, the ‘all right’ part?” Luther asked. They had come to Astor Place. The full moon was in easy reach above Manhattan.

“He’s connected to the race,” Solomon Rhein said.

“Is that important to you?” Luther asked.

“Life is important to me,” Solomon Rhein said.

And now Simon & Schuster and Viking had heard from him. Quality publishing houses. He was taking care of the business he could. But then, he thought further, what kind of business was that? A steady Freddy office worker when there were so many out there in the big leagues, riding the entrepreneurial wave. He saw that he had settled for a life in which he would not have to overly exert himself and where the order represented by a clean desk could reign.

In dreamland Carola Aprile came calling, prompting Sarah to say, “I just know she’s going to paint that vase.” And indeed, Sarah later discovered that Carola Aprile had applied paint to that very vase. This being so, Sarah felt compelled to say to Luther what she hadn’t said in the waking state. And she had her reason, as Luther had showed no

sign of being bowled over by Sarah's prophecy about Carola Aprile. "You don't respect my instincts. You don't understand the wave length I operate on," Sarah said, giving Luther a sit-down with the truth and forcing him to listen.

But if he was not listening to Sarah, he was beginning to listen to himself. At his meeting that night, a woman got her arrogance thing going, saying she had led a meeting three weeks before even though she had been smoking dope. Anyone who didn't like it could inhale the smoke from her ass. Now she had the audacity that her temperament readily mustered, and there were some in the group swayed by her display of cheekiness sufficient that they formed a complicit laugh brigade in support of her. This was not a sound that Luther welcomed. In fact, it was a sound that drew his ire. That someone should so brazenly flout the standard for sobriety that had been established through the years—that you couldn't be sober and high at the same time. And then for others to support her in her anarchic thrust. No, no. Jamais, jamais. This could not be. His eyes had been opened—not everyone was holding to the same criterion for sobriety. He would regard this woman differently from now on, and the group as well. And to think that only a year before he had been smoking grass even after coming to RoR. There had been a change. Now he was fully engaged. He was becoming protective of RoR, as he understood it to be.

The shame of it. The shame of it. Money was tight and Sarah was still boycotting her family, refusing to talk with them. "I don't want their damn money," she said, heedless of the possibility that she and Luther might be calling the street their home if they were not



careful. When the end of the month came and the rent had not been paid and the check her parents promised to send regardless of the break in contact hadn't arrived, Luther waited for the warm current of connection to fill him and then swung into action, picking up the phone and dialing the Van Dines. It was as if Peter had been waiting with a wet sock filled with flour to smack him across the face.

"The check is in the mail," Peter said, before Luther could say anything more than hello, thus designating him for all time as nothing more than a groveling hustler. And yet Luther sought to melt the frostiness with the light of understanding. Because if Sarah had thrown up a wall of adamancy against her father, then Peter, with defensiveness and a bruised heart, would have to do the same. If she gave him love frosted over, he would feel compelled to retaliate in kind, and frost Luther in the bargain, for whom he had no love to begin with.

Now, events being what they were, Luther was compelled to refine and record what had been an unwritten doctrine: I must remain within my own nation state. I must be as I am within my own borders. I must establish a policy of self-containment.

Luther also wrote the following so he could try to understand what was what:

She would protest vehemently when he would say that she was just like her father. He would then wonder what cause there was for such pain in her following this identification of her with her father. It was quite inexplicable. Then one day, as he stood in front of a mirror, the thought came to him that he was growing day by day into the physical image of his father; at the same time he was coming to

embody his father's remoteness. At that point he came to realize the pain he was causing her.

Whether near or far, Ringle remained for Luther the champion of the now. "Where are your feet?" he could hear Ringle demand. "Right where I am standing," would come Luther's reply. "And your head? Is that where you are standing, too?" Always with the sharpness Ringle was. A little slap here, a little slap there to bring Luther into the necessary alignment. Like that Brylcreem advertisement of yore: a little dab of him would do ya. O Yes indeed. Ringle by now a force within his mind, Luther coming to understand the rightness of having no past and no future, if ever he could get there, because once chased from the pocket of the now by fear and regret and all manner of negative whatnot, time became a ball and chain event. And nowhere was the now more applicable than in his writing because *right now* meant *write now*. He did not have to allow the brutality beasts to deride him for his bony moronic sentences. He could make each new sentence his shelter from the laughing thing. With the stick of now-ness would he beat such wanton mockery into the nothingness it was and dispel the slough of despond in which he had habituated himself.

At the same time he could add some intellectual muscle, now that he was on vacation. He would start with the foundation, *The Wind in the Willows* and *Winnie the Pooh*. Should the discussion turn to Rat and Vole and Eeyore and all the rest, he would not have to excuse himself in a panic. But he mustn't stop there. He must have a better grasp of the full publishing process than *Pocket Pal* could give him. For that reason he

called on *Words into Type*. From manuscript to copy and proof to copyediting to typography to use of words, he would master the essentials. Each day he read ten pages, and the sense that he was building from the ground up grew stronger. Others could preen over having purchased this or that manuscript, but he would actually know something about the process of putting those words into print. *Words into Type* was filling him up, and in so doing, was leading him to an understanding. He could not do his own work, or do it well, without paying some attention to the publishing field, which provided him with his income.

A letter arrived from the Van Dines. Inside, Luther hoped, was a check bigger than the envelope that enclosed it. Luther carried it up the stairs with the other mail for them that the postman had shoved through the slot in the door. He found himself praying that, in a moment of rage, Sarah would not tear the envelope to pieces, as it could mean the beginning of an eviction proceeding and a long succession of hungry days.

“They want to own me so they can destroy me,” she said bitterly, after reading the letter that accompanied the check.

“What do they say?” Luther asked.

“The usual crap. How they miss me and feel such pain.”

“You don’t think they’re telling the truth?”

“This is my life we’re talking about.”

Luther felt for Lydia and Peter. They had lost so much already with the death of Lenore. And now to be deprived of Sarah, to have her dead to them in life. The shame of

it. And yet, hadn't he done something similar to his father, ignoring him in life and showing up drunk for his funeral?

"Right. Your life." Her life and no one else's. But she had to come first. For all he knew, her break with them was a vital part of her recovery.

"They are calling this a loan when they have so much money."

"Why shouldn't it be a loan? Besides, families have been known to lose their fortunes."

"They are not losing anything. Anyway, they owe me."

He could not fault her. Maybe the world was beyond her ability to participate in, except on her own terms, as was the case with her father. But he felt cheated. Somehow, she wasn't a partner. In a way, she was using him. Her illness was real, but it could also feel willful at times, like a means for getting her own way, as when she dropped out of high school because she couldn't be bothered completing the requirements for graduation. She had understood that her parents would save her, that she was different and special. Some attitude of entitlement, of conceit, masquerading as illness. Once in a while the mask would drop. That business about the blocks, and how she could put them together faster than he ever could. Where had that come from but her department of truth?

Dr. Rosner couldn't count on occupying Luther's love space forever, if Luther had anything to say about it. Not that he did say anything, but he thought it as Dr. Rosner told him he would be away for the following week. Luther showed Dr. Rosner a face of

equanimity, as if to say, what's the fuss about? But he went no further. He did not want to hurt Dr. Rosner. He did not want to destroy him in his mind, as he feared he might if the doctor detected that Luther was feeling guilty for not missing him and not feeling weak and lost.

Though it was evening, now was a time to sing "Oh, Happy Day," as he walked down Park Avenue and stared up at the apartment buildings of order and cleanliness. Not only had Sarah endorsed and deposited her parents' check that morning but he had a place to go. He did not have to walk and walk the streets. Dr. Rosner, despite all Luther thought, had filled him with his warmth, and now he had a destination that would provide him with further and even greater warmth, the first such address on the avenue, Park Avenue, to ever take him in.

And so, at Sixtieth Street, he hung a right into a church and took the stairs to the basement. Even there in the stairwell could he hear the buzz of the gathered. Life was in session. But what he saw was what he had not seen before, people seeking each other out for social connection and bonding with their own kind. Flying past him did they go in a criss-crossing pattern while he stood on his aloneness ground.

A speaker stood on the stage. At the conclusion of her share, she proposed a topic, isolation, for the group to discuss at the tables it had been asked to break up into. A great cry erupted at the mention of the topic, a cry that Luther did not take part in, as it was not for him to make a noise, joyful or otherwise, in such a circumstance, it needing to be understood that while he was in a crowd, he was not of the crowd, whether in a

stadium or arena or church basement, because aloneness lived where aloneness lived wherever it was that it stood.

*Now Celeste, I have been proceeding slowly so as to exercise caution, like one of those trains heeding the amber light on the signal box lest the train speed up recklessly and fly off the rails. Such excesses are to no one's advantage, unless it is the mortician, who will have our business soon enough, or those of us who remain faithful to our bodies and do not treat them as the disposable encasements that they are when our work here is done. We don't want to overlook any morsel and have that be to our detriment, as everything that has lived in us through our senses must be recorded. Yes, I hear your objection. I hear you say that our lives will always outpace the narrative that seeks to secure it to the premises of memory. How could it be otherwise? But we are bound as stalwarts to the path of order—the popinjay's erratic itinerary is not for us. This we must make our peace with, and go on like medieval scribes.*

*From one thing to another have I led us. But do not be angry with caprice. It has an urgency all its own and a logic as well, known only to One Mind. So let me ask: suppose that all dreams are one dream, an alternate world in which we time-travel effortlessly. Would you not change this world for that, where the range of experience is so much greater. What have we lost? Have we been deprived of our emotions? Certainly not. The bells of sadness can be heard ringing and those for fear and longing as well. Even as I speak must I recognize that joy is more elusive. But no matter. Adventure is adventure and*

*danger brings us to a heightened state of life, as it was in my witnessing of a street scene on Eighth Avenue, outside the mammoth General Post Office. One man had only to lightly jostle another in passing for death to open its door. For twenty paces did they continue on their opposite paths before turning simultaneously to face each other. Their rage switches turned on, they quickly closed the gap between them, that slashing and slicing and deep penetration might begin. The random call of wildness they were hearing, Celeste. Do not think I dawdled as a willing witness to carnage, a murderer manqué. I fled up those steps and sought a buffer among the mass of humankind in the confines of that granite building from the annihilating violence unfolding on the street below. Here do I lay bare a hard-wired psychic pattern of my life from childhood on with no explanation for it.*

He had a continuing need to look presentable, to wear clothes that added to his bones and in which he could feel comfortable in the world. And so he returned to Barney's, on Seventh Avenue and Seventeenth Street, and, as always, the store put him on notice that he was in a place of specialness as he came in the front door. Divestment of his amour propre seemed to be its aim, as if to tear him down in such a way that only it could bring him back up. He had his defenses against what the store was dishing out. He wasn't about their summer linens or fall lineup of tweeds and whatnot. Just staying within the parameters of normalcy. A pair of gray wool slacks with the proper fit. No need to be a working class hero but no need to be a swell either. Just wanting apparel to fit into the modest proportions of his life was all it was. But now here came the sales boys and girls,

swirling about him in their tailored outfits and summoning in him a feeling of timidity. “Oh, world that is not mine,” he heard himself exclaim, his mother suddenly speaking through him, and causing them to step back.

He took a pair of slacks into the dressing room and saw in the mirror that they didn't show him off as the man of normalcy he wanted to be. Hanging off him like sackcloth, they were. Absolutely no affinity with the contours of his body.

“How's it going in there? Are you all right?”

“These pants should be labeled clown pants. There is something wrong with the mind of the one who made them.”

“Something wrong altogether with the one who just tried them on,” he heard one salesperson say to the other, but that was all right, they could have their opinion, their little laugh. It was Barney's, after all. With a comical name like that, laughter could never be far away.

It wasn't like Dr. Rosner to practice delayed bombing, as he did with a letter he posted before slipping away to a destination unknown. This he did to his patient Luther, who slit the envelope to find inside a bill for two hundred dollars that blew him across the room. Generally, Dr. Rosner handed Luther his monthly bill at the end of a session, but this bill was for services rendered over a longer period of time. Luther was shocked and angry at the impersonality of the notice, vowing to debase Dr. Rosner from his life, but then a big button appeared in his mind. On it was written the word “Pause.” Oh my God, it is the button that the RoR people are talking about when a crisis occurs and restraint is called



for. So Luther thought, and availed himself of it, calling upon the saying “Give time time” as well from his RoR toolbox. He sat and paced and sat and paced until the boil had become a simmer. “Ire” had been uncoupled from “fire” and the one lonely consonant remained, like those weird-looking trucks on the open road without their trailers. To the air he spoke: “I too will practice patience. I will not rush here and there like Mr. Pants on Fire.” But still, for Dr. Rosner to drop such ordnance as a token of his esteem. He wasn’t Mr. Fat Lips singing “That’s How Strong My Love Is.” That was for sure. The jolting message had been received. Dr. Rosner loved him no more, if he ever had.

*Celeste, I have been wavering in my conviction. The outside world has been beating up on me, big Alice Munro, whose stories I have been reading, in particular: “Step out into the light. Look around. Be rooted in specificity even as you couple it with a poet’s imagination. Or else quit. You are standing flatfooted on the earth with your mouth hanging open. Frankly, I have never seen a dumbass of your description.” There is her Canadian coldness, but she is teaching me something about truth in the all-seeing way. What is worse, Celeste? To go through life without a purpose or with a purpose that serves no purpose? Or should I simply accept that one is the same as the other? It is at times like this that I could wish to miss the father I never really had but in reality do not.*

Now Luther had every right to stay at home if that’s what he wished to do on his vacation, but that didn’t mean he was of one mind about the decision. And he might never have discovered he had a second mind about the matter had it not been necessary to visit

Pilgore Press and claim his check, because always it was for you to go to Pilgore if you wanted money; it was not for Pilgore to go to you. I will make this a surgical operation, he said, as he approached the building. Many times had he heard the term, and now he could apply it. He would also apply stealth mode, and avoid seeing this face and that face, any face that dared to have knowingness on it, so he could keep his vacation of apartness intact. A man should have a right to easy in and easy out and not have to suffer the snag of unwanted conversation. But it was not that way. There was Rafta looking back over her shoulder directly at him as she stood at the payroll department window to pick up her own check.

“Why, Luther, what are you doing here? I would have expected you had flown off to Rome by now.”

“Oh, I am playing the tourist right here in New York City,” Luther responded.

“And what have you been seeing?” No vapors. No vagueness. Just direct communication.

“I have nothing to rescue me but the truth.”

“Excuse me?” Up the severity scale she went with her cold response.

“I have been tapping away, trying to breathe more life into White Line, Continue, than it currently has. It has been a long-term struggle.”

“Is that your novel?”

“It is my everything.”

“At some point one has to reconcile oneself to failure, painful as that is.”

“No, no. Failure is the mine that must be explored. It is there where treasure is to be found. It is the province of the prince and the pauper, the domain of the king and the leper. To eradicate failure is to eradicate life. Hold it dear to your breast, I say, and hear its quiet voice.”

“Yes, of course. Oratory in place of truth.” Rafta, check in hand, moved briskly past him.

With a check in his own hand Luther rode down to the lobby in the elevator. On the way he gave himself a talking to. “Shut up, Luther. Just shut the hell up. Die, Luther. Just die.” These words he spoke as the elevator descended. And on Madison Avenue he addressed the air directly and forthrightly. “I am not feeling good about myself. I am not feeling good about myself at all. Ringle has taken to the sky and Dr. Rosner has now done the same, or so I can only assume. Where are the men in my life and why will they not come to the aid of this party?”

Now Luther was familiar with the American Revolution. He had read how the Brits had tried to do the Yanks dirty by bringing in the Hessians to help stomp out the fledgling Continental Army’s effort to throw off the yoke of tyranny, and how the Yanks called on the Frenchies in return. He had been stirred by the Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...” He did not have the wherewithal for cynicism in that regard. “I am American-born. I too have the unalienable right to my own freedom,” he said that same day, preliminary to declaring himself a sovereign state, separate and apart from the hegemony of Dr. Rosner. He would no longer be a colony of King Rosner. He would be

free, once and for all, of his oppressive bills. RoR was sufficient to see him through the vicissitudes of life. The money saved could be allocated for other purposes. Therapists were like a drug. They promised big results, but left you with empty pockets. Now he could allocate his resources for clothes and movies and books and all sorts of things.

But something was not right in his mind. He returned to the loft and snapped at Sarah. The decision to be shed of Dr. Rosner had come too suddenly. He was unsure of the wisdom of trading in the doctor for things. Things were not his future. His future was his future, and he could not get there without Dr. Rosner. He must beware of the easy solutions that popped into his head.

It was such a struggle not to be overpowered by bad feelings in Dr. Rosner's absence. You piece of garbage, Luther.

But then it came to him the next day, through no effort of his own but simply through the sheer efficacy of the delivery system of time, that if America could have its guns and its butter, so too could he have Dr. Rosner as well as his things. And it was in no way for Luther to decide whether his doctor was a gun or a stick of butter. He didn't want him to be either. He was just trying to make a point so he could explain himself. He bought himself a pair of low-cut black Converse sneakers. Never mind white—he took care of the white department with the pair of canvas hush puppies he also bought so he could have appropriate footwear for the tan slacks he sometimes wore in the summer months. He too could have an eye for color coordination, or at least make the effort.

But before he did any of that, he took two shopping bags stuffed with old clothes to the Goodwill store, because it was a law of nature that you had to release from the old before the new could advance into your life. And if the thought came to him that he should maybe buy Sarah a dress with the money he had appropriated for himself, he told the thought to stay in its place till he had asked it to show its face, because the sun was shining and he needed to make the morning his.

Then he went and got himself filled up at a West Village diner so he did not have to go to that place on Second Avenue that filled his clothes with stink, even if its toasted blueberry muffins soaked with butter were out of this world. Within a few minutes he got weepy. A real waterworks. Right there in the padded booth, even before he had finished his eggs over easy and hash browns and butter-saturated rye toast. Remembering how his mother would give him money to run on his long legs to a diner in the neighborhood when she was too busy with building stuff to take care of his food needs. Crying because he had come home, if only briefly, to his own aloneness.

That evening he found his happiness abounding as he headed for the RoR meeting, and put a move on to be sure he was in time so he could have his gift to give. And he did, being ready with coffee and cookies for the flock that assembled. His work done, he could sit among them and listen to the two speakers. Anita of the angry tongue was the first one up, saying how proud she had been of the fire she had belched from her mouth in her drinking life and how she could shred the toughest person and make him weep, but how she wasn't about that now. Luther's jury was out on her. He had come with his listening and seeing devices intact. Sparks of fire were showing on her words

and the darkness of her eyes served as backdrop to the glints of pride that would sporadically brighten them. He saw her anger sickness as he saw his own, and all her blah blah wouldn't change that. Did the recalcitrants have to be beaten with a stick for honesty to be their home, or would love bring them to their final destination?

Then it was Sham O'Malley, letting the group know right away that he would be speaking as if time did not exist by taking a few minutes to slowly survey the room, his eyes resting on one member until he was satisfied and could then move on to the next.

"You'll never hear from me the big opinion, or the small one. I'm just here to tell my story. I was born in the south Bronx. It had a bar on every corner. From birth there was a poverty to my intentions. You could say I was depressed by the absence of the evidence of the dignity of man. This was the time of neighborhoods being bulldozed to make way for the urban freeways that left the borough with the scarred face of a former beauty queen. So I understood that I had been born into the time of death and desecration."

Here Sham paused to give a loving suck to his greenish snaggle tooth.

"In the absence of beauty I drank—in the bars, on the street. I was given up on as hopeless, even in a community of drunks. Pissed myself regularly and worse. No trouble getting a seat on the bus or subway. Got to RoR at age twenty-four. Unheard of at the time. Got an education."

He put pauses between his words so they came out as big as manhole covers.

Once again did Luther see Sham O'Malley as someone to emulate in his use of words and his system for delivering them.

Now Solomon Rhein was at both meetings, and though his caustic manner did not suggest his heart would be singing Paul Anka's "I'm Just a Lonely Boy," suspicion arose in Luther when he heard Solomon say, "You got some primo babes here," hunger once again being in Solomon's face at the treasures around him. Because it was Saturday night, and there Solomon Rhein was in the full splendor of his aloneness.

"You should ask one of them out," Luther said, as he emptied the coffee urn.

"You've heard of the fear of rejection?"

"What I heard the other day is this: Rejection is God's protection."

"Smartass."

"Not so smart. I've had a bad day. In fact, I wanted to tear myself to pieces."

"One day at a time, Old Sport. One day at a time," Solomon Rhein said, on that Saturday night in early August 1980.

Efram Ellsberg had a love supreme going on that lifted him free of the morass of *Dallas*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, and other series that had been transfixing him in their unfolding. He was now in bondage to an animate being, her name being Thrush.

"Thrush? Her name is Thrush?" Luther queried. "As in 'Bird, thou never wert'?"

"Something like that," Efram replied, going laconic on Luther's sudden effusiveness.

They had met at MacFinn's, as usual. A booth with cushioned seats and an old wood table with nicks and grooves. At the bar men in suits fueling up for the afternoon grind. The clatter of plates and bustling waiters.

Efram had fled his marriage while still living on the premises with Maude. He had just seen Thrush off the previous night at Penn Station for her trip back to Chicago.

"The untidiness of life. You think it stops here, but then the train starts moving again."

"And I'm not on it."

"But do you want to move to Chicago?"

"Not in winter."

"You would have your love to keep you warm."

"What's going on with you?" Efram asked, signaling weariness with Luther's patter.

"It's hard being back at work. My boss. I just need to learn to stand up to her, I guess. It's her anger. That's what I'm afraid of. And I'm not doing too well in the writing department. We have a new neighbor in the place above us. He's a filmmaker. He wins one grant after another. He's going off on a Greyhound bus trip with an 8 mm camera to shoot bus depots all across the country. He says he is taking the idea from a Beckett short story, *The Lost Ones*. That's pretty impressive, right? Getting grants to do your little things."

"Is that what you want, to ride across the country on a Greyhound bus with an 8 mm camera?"



Luther thought about it. “I don’t know that that would do anything for me. The only bus depot I ever cared about was the one above Penn Station. As you walked through the arcade heading west, you hung a left. There was an escalator that would take you up to the Greyhound buses slant-parked on the street just across from the General Post Office, where I first met you. Don’t you remember? ‘Go Greyhound and leave the driving to us.’ That’s the only one I could ever care about, because it’s lost in time and leaves a hole in my soul. But Berenice Abbott partially fixed that by photographing the station in 1936 from above, like she was a bird with a camera. And Trailways never had it quite right, like Greyhound did. Greyhound was the heart of America. But no, I don’t need for loneliness to claim me in dingy, desolate stations.”

“Well, then?”

“Well, then, indeed. You are a truth finder.”

“For others, if not for myself.”

*Celeste, August was an eventful month, for one the likes of me, even if, as often, it was things impacting me and not vice versa. The word proactive was not then in vogue, and yet how am I to believe that would have altered the current of my life? There was that mercurial halfback, Gayle Sayers, for the Chicago Bears some years ago. He didn’t bother with smashing into refrigerator-sized linebackers. Rather, he penetrated the line, as if by osmosis, and time after time found himself free to run wild in the opposing team’s thin secondary. But I didn’t have Gayle Sayers’ instincts for freedom; I tended to find the*

*obstacles along the way, or they me, and some had been carrying my name for a long while.*

*On a Friday night, Sarah and I took a bicycle ride, single file, through the streets of the East Village on our way toward the soiled waters of the Hudson River, our allegiance having always lain with the west. I was doing nothing ostentatious—no wheelies, no hands-free, no derring-do between the rampaging mastodons on wheels of New York City. I was cycling within myself, a captive of the modesty my station in life required and which at times I sought to escape, like a lunatic on self-granted leave from the asylum. I was simply trying to be of the earth, in the kingdom of now that Ringle required for his daily sustenance.*

*The streets, however, were living beyond themselves, alive in a summer time way or in exaggerated desolation over what their history had wrought. Stones and cement and asphalt and brick and metal, all have their karma, too—they are not neutral spectators to the madness of aspiration. It was not the pavement that rose up to confound me or a loosened window pane that called out my number as it crashed down on my head. If the night required something to tamper with my own serenity, it sent along a sojourner from a province in hell, his hate hidden behind a mask of passivity. It was he who inserted himself with his vehicle between Sarah and me and struck me from behind with sufficient force that I flew, helmet-less, like a projectile to an inevitable landing on a gravel stretch, my knees and hands serving as landing wheels. And it was Sarah who bore witness to his malignity, as I was incapable of turning. “You bastard. You ran him down on purpose,” she screamed. Later, she would tell me he wouldn’t get out of the car, that his wife, beside*

him in the passenger seat, scolded him as well. "Don't move. Just hold on. The ambulance is coming," a woman, a good Samaritan, said to me. Sarah was brave and she was real. She loved me in her way, and this awareness added a different kind of pain to the bodily pain I was experiencing. Even in my physical circumstance I understood it was not a love that I could honor with fidelity. Sarah accompanied me in the ambulance for the ride to St. Vincent's Hospital. As the siren wailed, I lay on the stretcher experiencing immense relief that responsibility for my life, at least for the time being, no longer rested with me. No need for such wailing. No need at all. I was going someplace new now. A new journey had begun. Sometimes these things took time; it was just a matter of patience. But the hospital was not singing in the key of love. The emergency room doctor spoke callously and with disgust. "What's wrong with your knees?" Imagining he meant that they were big and bulky, I tried to respond to his rudeness in a civil manner, as if a courteous reply were deserved. "I played a lot of basketball on asphalt," I said, a response so evidently absurd that he met it with silence, as if to put his love further out of reach and make his victory over me more complete. But Celeste, we must not be tyrannized by the desire to be the object of another's affection. We must not cravenly seek to have our complexions changed from white to rosy red. We must simply spiral upward into God's love and become the seer, not the seen. No longer can we live in servitude to our smallness. But I was not there yet, and so I came to him via the dinky path. Even so, we must not beat ourselves with the stick of fury when we fall short.

I was dispatched on a gurney for an X-ray, and so left behind the shrieks and groans of those who had fallen victim to Friday night mayhem there in lower Manhattan.

*Blood seemed to be everywhere in that emergency room as evidence that the apocalypse had arrived and soon would be consuming me. The attendant left me in a small room with a technician. "Get on the table," he said. Though it was just a matter of shifting my body from the gurney, which was alongside the table, the move seemed too difficult. I asked for his help, but his response was to repeat his instruction in a cold and unfeeling manner. Sequestered in that room, the man, who was black, had me under his power. His hatred seemed palpable in spite of the mask of impassivity. I was some sort of loathsome creature he couldn't bring himself to touch. With some effort and much pain, I did manage to comply and was returned to the emergency room. "Get up and get out. There's nothing wrong with you," my physician said, some minutes later.*

*Celeste, we see a doctor in his white lab coat and we say, "There goes a doctor." All our trust are we conditioned to place in him. But we must accept that no one is as he appears. Is that not the lesson we learned from those TV ads back in the 1950s and 1960s in which physicians, or actors playing them, advocated for Camels and Kools and Chesterfields? Are there not Quackenbushes in every realm of existence, exhorting, cajoling, enticing, doing what they can to bend you to their will? And who is to say my attending ER physician was not from the madhouse arrived. The strongest emotional current in him, which he was powerless to resist, was antipathy. When I stared at him, dumbfounded, he simply repeated his imperative, this time even more forcefully, his face now scarlet red. He was striving for maximum power to blow me out of the building and sought, quite effectively, to obliterate any sense of my rights in so doing. He succeeded in turning me against myself. I am just a fraud. I have incurred no injury whatsoever. He*

*has exposed my desperate attempt to escape the responsibilities that come with being an adult. I deserve everything he is throwing at me. Such were my thoughts as he beat me with his stick of wrath. And so, with Sarah's help, I struggled out of the hospital and into a cab and transferred my moaning to the loft, where I lowered onto the coils of the lofa bed.*

Before Luther left the hospital the doctor stuffed a prescription for a pain medication in his shirt pocket. The pills would contain codeine. Luther had been warned about the dangers of such substances in the RoR meetings, even when prescribed. Into the wee hours he held on, but his lower back was on fire. There was an all-night pharmacy. Sarah could go there, not on the long legs she did not have, as his mother would instruct him in the long ago, so her night would not be sleepless, and not in the vicious and erasing dark, so violence could claim her and page three of the *Daily News* could claim her, but when the dawn came grayly through the east-looking windows of the loft, so preventative eyes could be on those who might be inclined to do Sarah harm. But the dark was calling on him to send her and the fire in his back was daring him not to, driving him to finally scream out, "I can't take this anymore. But you must hail a taxi. Do you swear to me that you will not ride the graffiti-covered subways of New York City? Do you swear that you will not engage with switchblade knives in the hands of creatures with the souls of sewer rats? Do you promise that you will not let the rain pour down on my life anymore than it has, leaving me to feed on soaked newsprint smeared with dog shit? Do you promise? Do you promise? Do you promise?" Because while he was not smashing his head with Campbell's soup cans and claiming that the horseshit desperado

rode again, he was saying that there was war where there had been peace and it was consuming him and he could not abide anymore the soreness that it brought. "Go. Go. Run on your not so very long legs," he cried out, in the deteriorated state he had come to. And so she did, within an hour returning with the relief medication that he had requested. She had done no shilly-shallying. She had done no dilly-dallying. His injury had put her at his command.

In the meantime he had reached out to Solomon Rhein, there in the darkness, telling him of the driver wanton in the night who had laid him low with his vehicle and of his subsequent ejection from the emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital. "Brooklyn, tell me true. Am I exiting the sober path if I take so much as one of these pills that Sarah has gone for? The pain has settled in with a vicious consistency that cannot be reasoned with. What am I to do?" And Brooklyn Solomon Rhein saying to him, "You do what you have to do, but you tell your wife to hold on to the bottle so you don't take all of them." Luther thanked Solomon Rhein and apologized for having busted in on his night. "Not a problem," Solomon Rhein replied. He did not call Luther a pussy for having been struck down. He did not go that route.

Luther outlived the darkness. He surrendered to the sweet magic of the pill. The light that came from outside was not at the level of the light that was in him now owing to the medication. And then a new and brighter light showed itself, the telephone exploding into sound and the very great St. Vincent's Hospital on the line, saying "Is this Mr. Garatdjian Luther?" and Luther saying "It is I," just as his mother would, whereupon the hospital person told him to freeze his movements, to not budge one single inch. 'An

ambulance had been dispatched to take him back to the hospital. “Even as we speak is the ambulance on its way,” the hospital person said.

*Celeste, this was no fakery. The attendants arrived within minutes, men of strength and vigor securing me to the premises of a stretcher and whisking me from the loft into the ambulance. Something had been spotted on the X-ray that had been overlooked by the technician and the emergency room doctor. My spine had been damaged. I was kept in the hospital for three weeks. This was 1980, Celeste, a time long ago, when the world was young and we were young, and before apocalyptic justice was the law of the land and naively could we still remark on the lushness of nature. I was given a semiprivate room and placed in the care of Dr. Bellum Bellavacqua, a world-renowned expert on all matters involving the spine, his authority enhanced by his foreign accent. “We a no gonna cut a you open. We a gonna be a nice. We a letta you lie in a bed a. We a gonna give a you a pills a.” No one would say such a thing today. I would be thrown out into the street, as the ER doctor had done the night before. What my doctor didn’t know was that I could do no further harm by walking about, that my spine was not a friable substance. Time offers the probability of a correction. Thus is our ignorance assured, no matter our degree of presumed enlightenment in these bodies. A spiral is a spiral, with its windings. Only eternity can bring it to cessation, say enough of discovering this and discovering that, it is time for the now and the light of infinite brightness in which it exists, illuminating every shadow. So it has been conveyed to me in the time that has passed, not in words but in silent communication that passes all understanding.*

*Now Celeste, there was a man, Mr. Algernon Vanceley, who shared the room with me. A smarter person with a more retentive mind would offer a verbatim report of what he said, though not to me, to whom he never spoke a word. Nor did I utter a single word to him. There were barriers, social and cultural and whatever, that could not be crossed, but not so for the steady stream of visitors who arrived. The ideal would have been for him to deliver a one and done lecture in some packed auditorium, as his explanation of the operation that had been performed on his foot never varied. This is where they cut. This is where they scraped. Throughout the day and into the night the same, as if he were reading from a script. And the superlatives. A masterpiece of surgery. A genius with a scalpel. Never once did I look at this man. The act of seeing him would have been abhorrent. No one has the right to talk about the body with such clinical detachment. No one. In so doing he had undeniably declared himself a filthy one, for it was manifestly clear that his detailed descriptions were meant to destroy what equanimity I had managed to achieve and keep it from returning. Everyone in the room knew he was not talking to them but to me. Everyone. But I was in no position to take action against him, lunatic though he clearly was.*

*Solomon Rhein came to me, in keeping faith with his purpose of being perceived as a loyal friend. No, no, Celeste, do not believe that I am going down the denigration road of labeling him solely as an image man, unable to do the decent thing for its own sake. It is no hanging crime to have posterity in one's calculation, particularly when the calculation is about the love dividend a small investment of time in visiting with me would yield him down the road. He arrived with his surveillance equipment in full*



operation. "They got you on the pills? They got you sailing off to la la land?" I did no dissembling, Celeste. I came back to him with the truth of my experience. A nurse would appear with a small paper cup containing pharmaceuticals: muscle relaxants during the day and a sleeping pill at night. "You don't have to go along with a hospital's traditions. You need to be faithful to your own, the ones on which your life depends." So Solomon Rhein spoke to me on that day, seeking to place himself between me and the forces that would check me out of this existence. Call it the algebra of addiction. Call it what the world will, but he exposed my secret. He spoke clearly what had to that point been contained in the closed circuitry of my mind. Celeste, I am speaking here of the mental vacation provided by the medications as they performed their function of masking the pain of the fractures and the muscle trauma to my lower back. So now, when the nurse came on her bedtime round of mercy, I was able to summon the strength to say, "No, I am OK without it." Now, Celeste, this nurse did not fight me. She did not stand on hospital protocol. She saw virtue trying to present itself and acquiesced silently.

It is here where we come to the danger zone, the place where I do not have the protection of words, though they serve as my only recourse. You had given me hard slap. You had broken my back before I broke my back. You had sent me reeling to distant places that only pain called home. You had said *Jamais, jamais* to me, taken the resolute action one takes with an axe swung mightily to sever the bond that been forming. (Even as I write this do I see a neighborhood meat store of my childhood and scraps of fat being whacked off a pair of pork chops by the butcher's cleaver and guided off the block into a bin. Do you understand, Celeste? Do you?) But while there were many moments my mind

*devoted to manufacturing shame-based thoughts related to the debacle, that same mind was working to springboard over the dark abyss and into the light. And what was the energy source for this colossal leap? The fact of my physical debacle. Was it reasonable for you to expect the likes of me to come to you with award-winning stories? When I called, a recorded message played. Your number was no longer in service. The new number was such and such. You were not where I had placed you. You had moved on. Your life was in motion. I could not arrest or contain it. I dialed the new number and you came on the line. Now, Celeste, you answered the phone in the same high-spirited voice I remembered, as if you were intent on riding the waves of life and not being submerged under them. I quickly told you I was in the hospital to give my call a context, seeking to present myself as an acquaintance with some news of a late-breaking nature in order to conceal the full nature of my need and longing that remained long after the rupture in our communication. I did not tell you of the light of love burning within me or of the celestial quality of that light emanating from you. I did not want your hurting thing applied to me as punishment for such naked avowal. I did not want you slotting me in the nether regions of existence. The brutality directed at the needy passes all understanding and yet is real.*

*“Oh, how terrible. The fractures will heal, will they not? You’ll be able to walk?”*

*“It hasn’t occurred to me that I won’t,” I said, and gave her the story of how the accident had occurred.*

*“I suppose it could have been worse.”*

*“How are you?” I asked.*

*“I’m doing great.”*

*“You’ve moved. I tried your old number.”*

*“Yes, I’m in SoHo. In an enormous loft. I love it.”*

*“You’re close to the action.”*

*“That is true. I have a gallery now and I’m close to it.”*

*“Which gallery is that?” I asked, as if I was so familiar with that world.*

*“Charles Roqson.”*

*“Is he a big name?”*

*“He’s become well known.”*

*Your voice changed. The key of envy in which I spoke did not go unnoticed by you. The vibration of it had traveled. “And where is he?” I asked, succumbing to the downward drift of my mind.*

*“On West Broadway.”*

*“That sounds like the territory of the big guns,” I said, as if my unsolicited opinion mattered.*

*“I suppose,” you replied, with some wariness.*

*“Well, it was good talking with you.”*

*“You, too. And good luck,” you said.*

*There you left me, Celeste. Just dropped me off the cliff. For hours I remained in free fall—no branches, no hooks, to snag myself on. You had shown yourself sleek as ice.*

*I had brought myself close to the source of my pain. I had been brought nearer to you and*

*yet farther away than ever. Now would begin the slow, arduous process of regaining that distance, stripped of any and all illusions that time had fostered. A chill passed through me, in spite of the summer swelter in the room. You were good with executions, whether with a satyr standing behind you or on your own.*

*Now the nurses, many of them, were Irish and strong in their purpose. You could tell they had love in their hearts if not in their faces for the duty they were sworn to perform. They came with the tough love that had been instilled in them in the parochial schools they had attended. Mary Marie, the twin sister of Kathy Kathleen, was my favorite. She came with a scolding manner, saying “You’re all bones, not even fit for the glue factory. You have to eat so you can at least look like a man. Now I need you to help me get you onto your side so you don’t get bedsores. Those you don’t want if you know what’s good for you.” Sometimes I would scream as she attempted to shift me, but I never failed to convey my cooperative nature so the friendliness of nations could be maintained.*

After three weeks he was sent home. Get out, they told him. Just get out. Three weeks had been enough of lying about. The bed was needed for those who were properly sick. He returned home with the instruction to continue with his bed rest for another three weeks. That time would be needed for his spine to fully stabilize.

Ringle called him his first week back. “All right. You’re not dead. Don’t be going down the dying road when you are not on it. This is what you need to do. Write out your inventory. Your resentments, your fears, the secrets you were thinking you’d take to the grave with you.”

Luther raised up on Ringle in his mind. Do you not know who I am? I am Garatdjian, Luther. I have the foremost therapist in Manhattan . He has fathomed all my ways and put up roadblocks against my trickery. There were a thousand reasons not to begin. But Ringle's directive had depth charge power. Within ten minutes Luther had started to write. If he had had every reason not to begin, he now had one for continuing—it felt so good to give a straight accounting of his life. The tension seemed to drain from him with every word he put on paper. No rationalization. No justification. Even as he proceeded did his grievances take hold of him. His father came first. The smacking man supreme, who had raised his hand higher than all of them in creating an environment of fear and violence, and how Luther had been wounded as well by his lack of ambition. He wrote with anger and no compassion for all that his father had committed against him. And of Hannah, who drew on their father for inspiration when it came her time to smack and smack *with her tongue between her thick lips*. And all he wrote about her was powered by grievance as well, any love for her he could call his own not present even as it sought, in his depths, for expression. And he wrote about Naomi, who called him across the room with a smile that lit him up, causing him to live in the wonder of the magical realm of big sister, but who with that same smile gave him hard slap across the face, saying that is what he deserved for being such a little flathead. For Rachel he did not express the same self-righteous anger he had for his father and Hannah and Naomi. He did not go down that road of intense judgment, as for a time, the light of the world had been in her with her Vassar success, and her time at CBS before her fall, CBS too being the world and not the stultifying atmosphere of the church that laid down carpet liner but

no carpet and featured the pastor with the disappearing words. She had shone the light where there had only been the gloom of the old rugged cross and the sticky Blood of the Lamb over everything. She had brought the paradise north of the city along the Hudson to him, the excellence of Vassar College, the sun shining on it even in the darkness. Of his brother, Luke, he could say little. There too did sorrow abound that Luke could not rise to his full stature but had to live in a box built for one when there were others all around him. Luther could have castigated his brother for saying, “Your blood is rotten and thin as water” and “My penis is twice the size of yours.” He could have gone down the reviling lane for his brother mocking his lesser lumber or driving the air from his stomach with a surprise punch in a bout of Christmas jealousy, but he was not fully of a mind for that, as his brother was his brother and lived in him as he could. His sister Vera he did have words about. The others had beaten him with their failures, but she had beaten him with the stick of success, her PhD power. But before she could take the professional identity he should have had for his own, she had taken his father, calling in his artillery on him for annoying her. First taking her father’s love, then declaring she would take his name, claiming to be the only one who could carry it on, and saying so with a filthy smile.

*Celeste, my revenge on Vera for her success was to disappear. Her marriage? I did not show. Her graduation ceremony at Columbia University, where she received her doctorate? I did not show. There was no reining in my smallness or my soreness.*

*All my life have I been disappearing at people. Savagely so.*

*And what of my mother? I had broken her heart. I had not walked the straight line. I had placed myself in bondage to her goodness with my failures and misbehavior. I*

*had not been her salvation. I had not done right to cancel out the wrongs of others, and so I had not dried her tears, those tears I saw her shed back in childhood, crying brokenheartedly those times Naomi would be taken away comatose in an ambulance or any of my older siblings would fall into the darkness of their ways and bring pain to her. I had stolen from her purse and refused to promise never again to do the same and saw the look of fear come into her eyes when she realized she would not be able to control me, as even then I was determined to have my own life, that the blanketing weight of religiosity could not be thrown over me for confining purposes. Those times I balked when she called me from the TV to run on my long legs to the grocery store and then stalled me by taking her time to make out the list, provoking me to say, "You're stalling me, quit stalling me," stamping my feet in fury and eliciting the chuckle from her my grievance summoned. This is old in the telling, but some comprehensiveness is required if we are not to pass this way again. Or when she rose up on me with prophecy, saying, "Do you know we are living in the last days? Do you know He will come as a thief in the night?" There was no wrong in my pushing back, saying she had had her life and now would she allow me to have mine, but her religiosity should be seen in a kinder light. She was trying to tell me that the world is treacherous and full of foolery and downright evil. She was seeking to anchor me and all of us in the life of the spirit. The shame was that, in spite of all she gave, I failed. I did not have the goods to measure up in school. Such failure was not the fault of my mother. It was the fault of God. He gave me an O27 mind when I was seeking Super O, with magna traction, and so I had to live in the smallness of*

*my life and ultimately point the finger at her. Life becomes diminished when we show no attitude of gratitude and consign ourselves to an existence in the sorrow acre.*

*And Tom Smits I put on paper too for punching him in the face and all parts of his body with my letter threatening to kill myself. Why? Because he had won and I had lost. Because he had beaten me on the basketball court and in the classroom, mocking my SAT scores. Because he had put the laughing thing on me one time too many and so I had to drive him from my life for all time so the excellence of his 1400 score and Reed/Oberlin successes would not be an ongoing reproach. And so now I was compelled to do right by him as he had been on my mind ever since.*

*There were others, Celeste, many, many others, who stuck to me like burrs and whom I had to shed from my consciousness. There was ninth grade Frank Snyder, who put shame into me when I said, "We went to see Splendor in the Grass," in answer to his question how my family and I had spent the weekend. Because I had wanted Frank to believe that my family and I could be worldly too. It would not do to have Frank learn that some of my family went to the church of the Christ Jesus or that others stood on window ledges high above Broadway. I had just wanted to inform Frank Snyder that the Garatdjians were to normalcy bound. Then Frank going public, saying "People, people, listen to this. Do you know where Garatdj and his family went this weekend? They went to see Splendor in the Grass." And so Frank Snyder had to die and die. And before Frank Snyder, there were the anonymous students who had written under my photo in the eighth grade yearbook, "We wish for him the back of his head," dropping me onto the trash heap of shame in confirming what I already knew, that my head was all wrong. And there*



*was Jackie Maltor, who cupped his mouth when he laughed so you would not see his crooked front teeth. Jackie Maltor whispering, "Is it true that you are a Negro? That is what they are saying because of your big nose and big lips?" Then showing off his sickly chuckle. So Jackie Maltor had to die too for making of the Claremont student body a monolith of malice through his use of the word "they." And there was me as well, bringing shame on myself when I tried to put the laughing thing on Ogden Connifer by telling Diane Coleman, the ninth grade class beauty, in a self-conscious moment alone in the classroom with her, of his eccentric habit of picking up bits of trash on the street and depositing them in the garbage can. Diane saying to me, "Never mind Ogden. The only thing funny about you is the shape of your head."*

*Now Celeste, a man could go on forever with the slights and insults inflicted on him by those who did not have peace and kindness in their minds and hearts. And while forever is daunting to try to contemplate, I do find it necessary to go on with my exploration of this period. Of course I have visited it before. Of course. But each return is from a higher perspective, and so the work must go on.*

*There was one in this time who stood at the gate of excellence and had power of decision as to who stepped forward and who did not. Mr. Arbuckle came to the school by way of Princeton with a Fifth Avenue face to teach high school math and in the spring of 1962 took away my life. He said to the class that there was no way to study for the SAT, that you were either equipped with the wherewithal or you were not. It was utterly futile to try to prepare for the exam. The world is full of falseness in the guise of truth, and while he was well meaning, he was pegged to a concept of worth from birth, and so*

*dismissed the many he sensed were lacking in the necessities from his thoughts, those without the ability to pass through the gate. He was no more a dispenser of truth than the lab-coated pseudo doctors on TV shilling for Chesterfields, Lucky Strikes, etc., in that period. But he bolted me to that gate with his determining words and I have been there ever since. Even at the moment that he spoke did I have an understanding of the binding nature of his decree. And so I left that day with the iron bar of failure across my chest.*

*Celeste, we cannot remove those bolts if we don't have the proper tool; only God, at his chosen speed, can provide that liberation, and so we must be grateful that the tool he provided us with will budge no scale and remains unseen. Prayer has he given us when we fall down dying from the pain of being unchosen. It is for us to call on him with all our heart to fill us with his love. For God is a filling station. He will fill us up from our point of emptiness. But I was not there. I was fourteen, and what filled me sometime later, after taking the test, were the numbers indicating my incompetence. It is a slow and painful journey to that point of surrender and subsequent discovery of the voice for truth, that we are whole and complete and not a number.*

*Celeste, there is one in this period to whom all thought must be given, as his love followed me to the ends of the earth and is with me now. His name was Mr. Sadowski and he did not have a Fifth Avenue face or a Princeton pedigree. His face and being were of more rugged construction. He had seen the face of war—the Korean War—and it was there in his own face and body. A crescent scar ran under his left eye and a shrapnel gully along his right forearm. A gym teacher as well as a tenth grade science teacher, he wore long pants on the basketball court, possibly to conceal the wounds he had received*

on his legs. He first called to me when I was in eighth grade, following a softball game on a diamond in Central Park. "I'm counting on you to come out for the basketball team next year," he said, and walked away. For the rest of the day, I was undone. Can discomfort coexist with joy? Then and there I resolved to play hard to get, as if I were a boy some girl had expressed an interest in. No adult had reached down for me in such a way before, certainly not my father. There was that one man, in the Times Square subway station. He might have been the exception, the one in the dark overcoat who gave me what I can now call the stare of lust as I looked up from the old copy of *Sport* magazine I had been browsing through in the used book shop. But my contact with Mr. Sadowski did not engender endless fantasies of him bathing all parts of my body, as had been the case with the Times Square man. There was no erotic tingle. Because Mr. Sadowski was not a man who spoke to boys with his eyes in that way. He did not say I know you in the depth of your being with his gaze, as the man in the overcoat had. He was not appealing to that part of me. As the summer months passed, I did not see how I could allow myself to be within Mr. Sadowski's love. He had no right to put the weight of such expectation on me. But whatever thoughts I was having, the fact was that I did show up that fall and made the varsity basketball team as a freshman and no death occurred. But then tenth grade came and I was called to be a man. No more could I hide in the facts of history or the similes of literature or the ablative and dative of Latin or the *plusque parfait* of French. I was being told to show up for the meiosis and mitosis of biology, the dissection of frogs, the smell of Formaldehyde. By this time I had the weight of Jane Thayer on me—she had come into my life in the spring of my freshman year—and the everyday call of Scully's

*stoop, on One Hundred Thirteenth Street and Amsterdam Avenue, where my life after school had come to be, but beyond the mountain of lab work calling me away from this idyll, there was the likelihood of my classmates putting the laughing thing on Mr. Sadowski—laughing, just laughing at his scuffed shoes and thin suits and frayed shirts and dull ties. He did not have the peacock plumage of Mr. Arbuckle, a different suit and radiant tie and shirt for each day of the week and an orderly rotation to meet the challenge of the changing seasons. No, no, the thought of such intimacy with Mr. Sadowski was out of the question. I could not be asked to bear witness to his humiliation, for they would mock him not only for his thin suits but his thin mind. Mr. Sadowski had no Ivy League degree. He hailed from Murray State. For a week did the torture of indecision afflict my mind. Finally did I go to Miss Redding, the high school secretary, and inform her that I could not be part of the class.*

*“You cannot be a man without science in your curriculum. It is not possible. And colleges will look askance at the fact that you dropped the course,” she said.*

*This was a time in my life when I believed in addition by subtraction, a belief I cannot so readily adhere to anymore. I could have gone home immediately after school and studied and devoted more time to studying on the weekend. I could have called for tutorial help. I could have said nay, nay to seeing Jane Thayer every day of the week lest our love fade and disappear forever. I could have said nay, nay to Scully’s stoop every day of the week as well, but I couldn’t, I just couldn’t. I did not have the fortitude to dive in deep and make biology my own. Only Jane Thayer could I dive into deeply. Only her.*

*Jane Thayer had become my curriculum, and Scully's stoop was where my afternoon vigil for sighting her began.*

*"Now Celeste," I say to you over and over, as if I am setting the table for the consumption of a delicious and definitive verbal meal. Do not think for a second I do not truly understand that the folly of such an endeavor rivals that of trying to permanently arrange the sands on a beach when, in reality, the shifting is unending. But the world has its ways and I have my own and so I must continue. The sky is big. It can accommodate me under its watch. I am simply trying to tell the truth in regard to the premises where I have lived and by which I have lived.*

Luther called on all the derricks of New York City to lift him from the morass of the past. A great sucking sound could be heard as he was pulled free from the muck and mire.

Now Luther, when the three weeks of bed rest at home were up, released himself from the confines of the loft and let his feet lead him to the Saturday evening meeting. When he arrived, he told members of the group what had befallen him. "Oh, that's terrible," they said. "What a horrible thing to have happen," they said. "Oh, poor you," they said. Hungry for more, he went to Gladwell Glanton and spoke of the vehicle's violation of him. "Maybe this will hasten your spiritual development," Gladwell Glanton replied, and turned to chat with someone else.

Stunned, Luther wandered back to his seat. Had Gladwell Glanton given him hard slap? Those words. They reverberated so painfully through his being. "I will remember him, and remember him good for doing the dirt he did in spanking me as he

did.” But love was in the air, some alchemizing element turning this same words soft and warm where they had been cold and hard. “Gladwell Glanton is being cruel to be kind, just like Willie the Shake wrote.” So did understanding come to Luther. Gladwell Glanton was giving him some of that RoR tough love, which Luther had been hearing about. Oh yes, had Luther been hearing about it, and now here it was.

Luther contacted Sham O’Malley. He said he wanted Sham to listen to the inventory he had written and offer any comments and insights he might have. Sham just nodded his assent in his customary slow fashion. No words were needed. Luther understood that he was not doing right by Ringle, and he could not even say why. Was Ringle not good enough? That couldn’t be right. Ringle lived in the province of the Columbia PhD. Ringle had possibly saved his life, but he feared Ringle might bang on him as Luther read his inventory. He might show impatience. Something, he couldn’t say what, was pulling him toward the ponderous one, him who put much space between his words.

Sham O’Malley had Luther meet with him at Pain et Chocolat, on Waverly Place. How white, how pale, Sham was in the afternoon light. And with the tip of a snaggle tooth resting on his thin bottom lip. A ghostly creature. How was it Luther hadn’t noticed?

“Begin,” Sham said.

Luther read, word for word from his handwritten manuscript, pausing only to sip his coffee and munch on the cherry cheese Danish the waiter had brought. But he couldn’t say where his words were going. Were they being received by Sham? Every time

Luther looked up from the page, Sham's eye were not on him but checking out the doings into big space. Not that there was much going on. They were in the sleepy part of the afternoon. Sham's distracted air was discouraging, but Luther persevered, though after two hours, his voice was growing hoarse.

Suddenly, sphinx-like Sham flagged the waiter, and mimed someone writing out a check. The waiter was quick to respond, and Sham placed a five-dollar bill on the table.

"Don't be too hard on yourself,;" he said to Luther, who watched him disappear out the door in astonishment.

Well, if I am supposed to be freeing myself of the past, Luther wondered, why does it still feel there as heavy as ever.

*In this time, Celeste, I went to see the physical therapist, as my doctor had ordered. His name was Abdul Hassan Hassan. To him I said, "I have my aches and I have my pains. And so I have come here for your assistance." It is possible his homeland was Lebanon and that he had witnessed rivers of blood flowing as the result of internecine warfare in Beirut and elsewhere. It is possible his life was uprooted by the bullets for breakfast culture that had spread and the etiquette of the knife against the throat. Whatever it was that fed his stoicism, he had this to say: "Do not be sicker than you are."*

*Do not assume, Celeste, because his mode of speech was low-key, that he was not firing a bullet with each word and that those words failed to hit their target. Tethered to the real world as he was, he was merely trying to bring me into the same realm. "Do you know the men and women and children with missing arms and legs, left to die*

*untended in the atrocious Middle Eastern sun? Do you?" Such, I can imagine, was the gist of his reproach of me.*

*Celeste, the mouth can be a silencer, and you can be sure Dr. Hassan Hassan took effective action in silencing me. He shut me down completely with his knowingness and took up permanent residence in my psyche.*

*Celeste, something I hadn't previously seen was that Sham O'Malley had an eye for women. The austerity of his single life, approaching age fifty with no wife, no children, no family of origin to turn to, left him longing in middle age for connections he had never had. He was a man seeking a do-over. Now a young woman named Canadian Flower, newly arrived to RoR, had taken a liking to the Saturday night meeting. Because the meeting was open to the general public, her nonalcoholic husband, Roderick de Fonteley, would often accompany her. Their excellence was reflected in their attractive faces and their bearing. Roderick was already a distinguished novelist and poet, and Canadian Flower was on a tenure track for a professorship.*

*As for Sham O'Malley, he could be heard thinking, "I must have her. I must make her mine. I must move the young fop out of the way so this can be." Machinations of this low order had begun in the mind of Sham O'Malley, who made a point of showing civility and extreme courtesy to the young couple as the initial element of his strategy to insert himself in her life.*

*One evening Canadian Flower showed up at the meeting unescorted by her husband. Sham O'Malley was elated. It was the sign he had been looking for, having*



*interpreted her solo entrance to mean that she had eyes only for him. That night he resolved to put a share of maximum ponderousness on the group. If malodorous fumes could be expelled from one end, intoxicating words could be expelled from the other.*

*“Your share was beautiful. You helped me so much,” Canadian Flower said, as the two of them left the meeting together. Sham, puffed up by her words, proposed that they go for coffee.*

*“Great,” Canadian Flower said, and so Sham received further confirmation that he was on track.*

*Canadian Flower ordered an egg salad sandwich, while Sham restricted himself to tea. Eating could be an operation, what with his dental issues and all. He had no need for Canadian Flower to witness food hanging from his snaggle tooth or his lecherous tongue flicking between his thin lips to clean up the mess.*

*“Where is your husband tonight?”*

*“Roderick is away on a book tour.”*

*“A book tour. Well, that is something. What kind of book tour?”*

*“Radio and TV interviews. Book signings at various stores. That sort of thing.”*

*“I see. So he’s a commercial writer.”*

*“Not exactly. He writes fiction and poetry. To try to boost sales, he gives these interviews and readings.”*

*“I’ve done some writing.”*

*“Oh, really? How exciting. What do you write?”*

*“Poems and essays.”*

*"I'd love to see some of your work. Are any of your poems and essays in print?"*

*"Not yet. An artist has to protect himself from those who might not understand."*

*"But you want to show your work. Right?"*

*"When the time is right."*

*"Oh, I believe in you. I really do," Canadian Flower said.*

*Canadian Flower had heard the program wisdom about men sticking with men and women with women so far as mentoring went, to cut down on the possibility of emotional entanglements and hanky-panky. But how could that apply when she had someone as wise as Sham to guide her?*

*The weeks passed. There were more visits to the coffee shop and there were long walks and even a movie in those times when Roderick was away again. Roderick expected things of her, while Sham was simply adoring. Then she began coming home late even when Roderick was no longer on the road.*

*"I don't like that man. I don't trust him as to his intentions with you."*

*"He's just a friend. A mentor."*

*"He's a lascivious old creep," Roderick replied, but didn't reserve his comments only for Canadian Flower. At the next meeting Roderick de Fonteley went chest to chest with Sham O'Malley. He did not versify. He told it as it was. "You're a sham, just like your name says you are. You present yourself as a wise, spiritual man, but what you are is a lecher, preying on women who are new to the program. I've come to these meetings enough to have heard that men and women should have mentors of their own sex, and*

*here you are messing about with my wife. Why don't you go and find some men to try to mentor, for God's sake?"*

*"Why don't you try minding your own business?" Sham O'Malley countered.*

*"My wife, my marriage, are not my business?"*

*Now Celeste, the fury that Roderick directed at Sham was heard by all at the meeting place, and so, though RoR is a judgment-free zone, Sham was being looked at differently. Thereafter Canadian Flower drew closer to the program. Women did come into her life, and now she went with them for coffee. As for Sham, his behavior altered, and in a somewhat startling way. He began to belch fire. He accused those whose who served as mentors to RoR members with less time in the program of being phonies trying to pass themselves off as gurus, the very accusation that Roderick had leveled at him. He dismissed all the RoR literature as propaganda. Some began to wonder if he would soon be rotating his head and wagging his tongue, a la Linda Blair in the movie The Exorcist, and whether he himself might need the devils driven from him. Then came the day that, on a trip to Mexico, he ordered a glass of rum, and many more followed. Perfectamente borracho he was for the duration of his stay. So he reported on his return to the New York and the Saturday night meeting. And then he dropped away from the group. Evidently, it was too much for him to try to come back. He had been reclaimed by the bottle.*

*Now Celeste, as the year moved forward, tensions began to ease in the home. (At the same time let me tear the face off concealing blather and acknowledge my occasional explosions of vileness. Let me be many things, but let me not be a gross fabricator.) No longer, when I closed the bathroom door, did she shout at me, "You're*

*masturbating to some fantasy of her," meaning you, of course. I had settled into a routine of work and writing and meetings, and yet all the while the light of love was burning within. Many times, while sitting at the RoR meeting in the basement of the church of St. Anthony of Padua, there on the corner of Sullivan and Houston, would I stare at the phone booth against the far wall and imagine myself calling you and being present at long last in the physical dimension of your love. Because you could not beat my love with the satyr standing behind you inside the door as I raced to you in that time before. You had hit me with a bat and sent me reeling, but the love came back. It had never left. How could it? I had been looking for you my whole life. My whole life. But here I am accounting for my love, not yours. How could I presume to know whether any feeling for me remained in you and had not vacated the premises of your being? How could I know that adoration circles hadn't formed around you in happening SoHo? RoR had told me to think the drink through should it call to me, and I had to try to apply the same to you. Because what chance would I have if you were before me in living color, your aspect showing in real time, not the time stored in my memory bank? The tipping point back to the status quo was that you would give me hard smack all over again, if not with the satyr, then with your words. There was fear that you would display a soul-destroying coldness. My life-sustaining illusion of your abiding interest in me shattered, what fate could await me but to fall down dying?*

*Then one evening, on congested Prince Street, in transit to the same RoR meeting at St. Anthony, I ran into you as you were emerging from the Korean grocery a block west of West Broadway. With one hand did you hold your bag of purchases and in*

*the other the hand of little Mia. You were tanned and had the sex of summer in your bearing, and when you said, "I wish we were still together," I left in flames, the phone booth at the meeting place screaming at me. The need to get back to you seemed impossibly strong. I stared at the word "God" on one of the plaques. "Good orderly direction," RoR members called it. Wasn't good orderly direction to put one foot in front of another, to bring the body to meetings and trust that the mind would follow? Was the word "slip," for relapse, not also the acronym "Sobriety Loses Its Priority"? Was there not also the saying "Under every skirt there is a slip?" Did I not hear that a beautiful woman could be a walking cocktail, if only in relation to a lonely man? Did Gladwell not say to me that whether I wanted or didn't know if I wanted my marriage, I would still have to give it 100 percent, and that if I did so, the things that were meant to be in my life would be in my life and the things that weren't would fall away? Suppose you were just a siren song, Celeste, leading me away from the rooms and back to drinking so you could slam the door on me again? I thought of that poor woman who had been a mainstay of West Village RoR and yet picked up a drink after nine and a half years of recovery when her fiancé broke off the engagement. And so I stayed at that meeting and all the meetings that followed. A train on one track cannot just jump to another if it wants to avoid derailment; it must wait to arrive at a switch up ahead. And that train, if it is to be me, has to hope that the switch that is thrown redirects it to your track so our destinies can be aligned forever after. And so I would settle into surrender each morning, compelled to trust that, like a deep sea diver, I would not rise to the surface too quickly and suffer the bends. Celeste, I am mixing metaphors madly, but you were the Chevrolet sign in the*

*night of my childhood, the one over the old meatpacking plant next to the railroad on One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street, overlooking the Hudson River. You were the wild nights of America calling. You were the new life I dared not rush into before I was ready for it.*

*Now many were the events that took place in that year, 1980, Celeste. There was the bazooka-ing of Anastasio Somoza, the deposed Nicaraguan president, for doing the people of that country wrong. Many, many times had he been warned that there was no right way to do a wrong thing, but the man just would not listen, and so he wound up getting his on the streets of Paraguay, because he could run but could not hide from the brigades for justice. And there was Ronald “I can nod my head with the best of them” Reagan, completing his ascendancy from the stage and screen and governor’s mansion in Sacramento, California, to the White House, with an electoral victory over Jimmy Carter when the hostage taking by the irate Iranians continued on and on. And Bernadine Dohrn and Cathlyn Wilkerson, the cream of America, brought themselves to the halls of justice after finally hearing the song “Desperado” and not just listening to it. And Mark Chapman went and killed John Lennon, but he did not kill The Walrus because The Walrus was already dead. You must not think I was not abreast of current events; my eye was on it all.*

*My job was still there for me, so I returned to work. But there were no more tears up Madison Avenue, no more displays of two-wheeled vitesse to keep in check the swollen egos of those who commandeered the rampaging vehicles of New York City. The desire was gone to compete with the buses and trucks of the city, vicious as their drivers*

were. It would now be for someone else to put them in their place. My Peugeot was a crumpled objet d'art, worthy of MoMA. This I repeated well over a hundred times in responding to inquiries about the accident, as once upon a time I had similarly repeated that there were more tourists in Spain in the summer of 1970 than there were Spaniards. The effect of such repetition, as it goes on, is to make one ill at the thought of communication.

Celeste, there was kindness shown me on my return, but I also understood that I was of diminished stature in the eyes of Frieda Volcker's assistant, Amanda Plessy. Frieda, of course, had properly reassessed me sometime before, having come to perceive me as an indolent with an ordinary mind. It was only this. The two had come to the loft while I was still laid up, and had a chance to see not only the meagerness of me but of the abode I shared with Sarah. The shock was most evident in the plain face of Amanda Plessy. Her estimation of me could be seen to drop minute by minute. If she had expected a dynamic and cheerful downtown artist's space, she was left to witness the sorry state of our dilapidated dwelling. It is hard for those who wish to shine and shine some more in the light of American success to endure such pockets of drabness, and we must feel compassion for them in their effort to comprehend that one they had imagined to exist in a superior realm should prove to be so dishearteningly ordinary. One can ask if it is right to be given a face that suggests more intelligence than the individual can deliver or a voice or manner that promise the same and yet deliver only disappointment. But the inevitability of others' disappointment is a reality that I must simply bear, and who is to say it is not a punishment for seeking to be more than I am?

*Now one who would not take failure to heart and let it sink her deep into the typical Garatdjian depths was my sister Vera, who drew her strength from madcap Lucille Ball. We have previously discussed her resilience in the face of rejection and her subsequent ascendancy in the family pantheon. She who was the least in the family had risen to the top. She had her marriage to Maury, and she was soon to have her PhD, and, of course, she had ownership of me to the extent that I allowed it. She had passed through the Ivy League gates of Columbia University, from which I had been barred.*

*Now Celeste, let me be clear. Vera was a mountain in whose shadow I was forever more destined to dwell. The shadow was unrelentingly cold and dismal. Ugly growths formed on all my apertures and I was clotted with dried slime. Whether I was conscious or in the grip of slumber, she was present, as she had come to be familiar with all the recesses in which I sought to live. RoR had released me from the bottle but not from my fear, my competitiveness, my insecurity. It had not released me from my resentment that she had stolen from me my father and beaten me so that I had to tremble when in her presence.*

*One Saturday night that fall the downstairs buzzer rang. As we had no intercom, I went to see who could be calling so close to midnight. There stood Vera with her husband, Maury, and a third person, a woman wearing a dorky wool cap. For some reason I was transfixed. Was I looking at my sister Rachel? I couldn't be sure. She began jumping up and down and launched into a chant. "Vera told me you were antisocial. She told me you were antisocial." Over and over she repeated herself while acting like a hyperactive child with a crazy smile. Outright mockery was being directed at me by either*



*my older sister or a total stranger, only it had to be a stranger. Rachel, so antisocial herself, wouldn't be able to label anyone else as such or even spend an evening with Vera and Maury. No, Rachel at that hour would either be asleep or staring up at the night sky from the lone window in her room for signs of Jesus coming.*

*Vera too was grinning, as if amused by the woman's hysteria and my discomfort. Seeing that my sister was not aligned with kindness but a tacit ally of the demented one—had Vera not fed the nut this perspective on me—I turned not to her but to Maury, as if to say that since reason had fled the premises of my sister's being, why should I bother to go there. But if I am to be honest and not dwell in the land of the dinky, where grave offenses are committed only to be followed by outright denial or extravagant rationalization, let me say that I derived savage satisfaction from this tactic, saying to myself that there is no point in visiting where reason no longer lives. "Please, Maury, try to help my sister and her friend understand that it's not a good idea to drop by unannounced at close to midnight." I then withdrew inside and locked the door.*

*I had held the mirror up to Vera. I had exposed her machinations through the antics of lunatic Louise, or whatever her alter ego's name was. I had stood up to her without having to declare total warfare. Now could I show my face at my mother's apartment for Christmas dinner without cringing before her the almighty power. But as the holiday drew near, my anger returned. I would need to speak with Maury once again. They had no right to treat me in such a way. Further remonstrance was a must. Through renewed dialogue with Maury would I further expose Vera and her disease of antic-ness.*

*Because a transgression had occurred. She had sent her tanks rolling. Walls must be built against closeness when aggression is the underlying intent.*

*Alas, Celeste, events often do not conform to our anticipation of them. When I presented anew the gravity of the offense that had been committed, Vera discarded amusement in favor of the face of rage. Artillery was in place for a cannonading. I am a nation state in my own mind, and my borders must remain inviolate, but now the threat was even greater than the time before, so relentless was her shelling. Belching fire, she scorched me from head to toe with an attack of intended incineration.*

*“Maury, don’t you dare let him talk around me a second time. Don’t you dare let him insult me again.” She then called to my mother, who was in the kitchen. “Mother, kick him out. Kick the thieving bum, the rip-off artist, the crook, out.” And to Hannah and her son, Moses, and Maury she said, “Get away from him. Get away,” and began to drag them from the room. A quarantine to defend against contamination she sought to establish.*

*Celeste, great opportunities are provided only every so often. We must be grateful for those occasions when the big picture is presented to us in living color so clarity can have its day. Exactly that occurred on this Christmas night. There, for everyone to see, was Vera seeking to isolate me. “Pariah. Bum de la bum.” Her invective was unceasing, creating profound illumination and laying bare the emotional landscape. She was intent on driving me away and securing the family for herself.*

*Celeste, because I did not wish to inflict on my poor mother an ongoing conflagration on a holy night, I withdrew my troops. I had no ears on the ground, no*

*listening devices intact. I simply did the vamanos that was called for while fully anticipating the hailstorm of gossip that would follow. There are times when we must elevate above dinky-dom, be robust in the manufacture of strength to leave where we do not belong, regardless of the viciousness to follow. I staggered with Sarah through the dark streets. Everywhere was the deep silence of Christmas. After chowing down on pepperoni pizza, we sought refuge in a movie theater, where Apocalypse Now was playing. We saw helicopter gunships in the sky, like giant hornets. We saw a bare-chested American soldier being pulled along on water skis by a patrol boat to the sound of the fat-lipped one singing "Satisfaction." But the war was internal, there in that mostly empty theater. Vera had burned a hole in me. She had her own chemical fire to offer for my final elimination. The film was ponderous, interminable, and no buffer against my pain.*

*At home I rushed for the phone.*

*"Ringle. This is an emergency. I am on fire. You must call me back pronto. No dilly-dallying. No shilly-shallying. Please. My life is on the line."*

*Celeste, while we are waiting for the dawdling Ringle to come to the phone, this might be the time to note a couple of things. The first is that my heart sings when military power, particularly American, is on display, and though the film depicted war in vain and emotional pain diminished my enjoyment, I too succumbed to the fat-lipped one as well as to Creedence Clearwater singing Suzie Q and longed to have the Mekong Delta and the pageant of war on my resume so I too could be part of the light of America.*

*Speaking of light, the second thing is that a question presented itself to me as I waited for Ringle. Did I have a part to play in the difficulty with my sister Vera? Though the thought had the dim power of a fifteen watt bulb in the blackest of caverns, it was, I realized later, the fledgling advent of truth into my lair of lies and misperception.*

*The phone rang a minute later. I had roused Ringle from his hiding place, forcing conscience to be his guide, but he did not affirm my insight, as I had hoped.*

*“Have some ice cream and go to sleep. We don’t manipulate the program that way.”*

*“But Ringle, isn’t my pain telling me something?”*

*“It is telling you that your sister flattened you and you didn’t have the moxie to stand up to her.” So Ringle spoke, in the tone and from the angle of his own understanding. He then hung up because it was of no consequence what others thought of him or didn’t. He needed no receipt for his words. Celeste, I had a sense he was off the mark here, that a measure of complicated thinking keep him aloft and out of alignment with where others lived.*

Effective January 1, Luther received a \$2,500 raise. Things were going well at work.

Things were going well, period. He was in better shape than he had ever been. His life had finally taken an orderly direction. Most importantly, he was determined to take stock of his writing, that is, the *fact* of his writing. He was beginning to rewrite, not simply add new material with no attention to what had come before. The time had come to inventory what he had and cease stuffing the product of his labor in a closet where it would remain

out of sight and, he had hoped, out of mind. Because a man has the right to review the particulars of his life, with the intention of breaking the circle route he has been on so a straight line to a goal he could only previously imagine can now be achieved. A man does not want to stand on Madison Avenue in his bare feet staring into the window of Tourneau Corner forever. He does not want to write and see his papers blown away on the wind.

Once again, in dreamland, were metal barrels falling from the rafters of an enormous hangar and smashing on the concrete floor. A busy time of it Luther had dodging his own destruction.

Bruce Bill had not put himself off limits. He had not gone anywhere that Luther could not see him. He was neither out of sight nor out of reach in the echelon he had risen to. Bruce Bill had love and compassion stored in him. He also had dollars and cents sense. Because Bruce Bill was where he was from, where a dollar plus one equaled two, he ate the food in front of him in the restaurant where they met, while Luther's food grew cold on the plate on which it was served.

"That's money," Bruce Bill said, pointing to the platter the virtually untouched sandwich lay on.

"Yes. I will tend to it later," said Luther, hearing rebuke in Bruce Bill's voice and resolving to call on the waiter for a doggie bag so his words could have some meaning should the sandwich not get eaten while he sat before Bruce Bill. Did Bruce Bill

not understand the effort that went into trying to make the impression Luther was trying to make, lest one savage word from his lunch companion destroy him?

“I fought with my sister Vera. She had savagery in her midst, which she made me contend with,” Luther said, seeking to use his sister as a shield.

But Bruce Bill wasn't having it. “You don't hear the name Vera so often anymore,” he said, deftly deflecting Luther from his animus course.

“Vera Severa.”

Bruce Bill just stared at him blankly, that Luther might have nothing to feed off to continue with his personal noise. Bruce Bill was not there to be his ear for family troubles. But then, what was Bruce Bill there for?

That evening did Dr. Rosner maintain his supreme interpretive authority in regard to Luther's dreamland. “The weight of the past is still seeking to crush you,” he said.

“My sister Vera is seeking to crush me,” Luther said. Seeing no sign of deterrence from Dr. Rosner, of the kind at least that Bruce Bill had erected, he still asked his permission to go on.

“I'm here,” Dr. Rosner simply said.

And so Luther told Dr. Rosner what was what, how Vera had dug up the dirt of the past and tried to bury him beneath it, never mind barrels falling from the rafters. He said hatchets sunk deep in his scalp were the piece de resistance of the Garatdjian women, their recompense for not being loved to the degree they might wish.

“Can you not meet your sister halfway?” Dr. Rosner asked.

“This is most astonishing. The idea had come to me that I had some part to play in the difficulty with my sister, but Ringle put the kibosh on that. Nix and double nix, he said.”

“And who is this character?”

“Ringle is an emissary from outer space. He is my RoR mentor. I will seek to reason with him again. He may have simply been feeling sour on the night I called.”

Luther called Ringle that very night to discuss the impasse with Vera.

“Do whatever you want to do. Call your sister on the phone and apologize to her if you think it’s going to make you feel any better.” Ringle did not give Luther recalcitrance; he just gave him dismissive surliness.

Glanton Gladwell suddenly came strong into Luther’s consciousness, as if he had been waiting to emerge. He reached for his wallet and pulled out the scrap of paper on which Glanton Gladwell had written his phone number those months ago. No search party was needed to find him. Luther told him about the fifteen watt bulb burning in the darkness. Unlike Ringle, Glanton was quick to affirm its meaningfulness.

“The light is in you,” he said.

“But will it last? Bulbs burn out.”

“The truth can never die.”

“And what exactly is that truth?”

“What are you still doing with that guy?” Glanton gave Luther a question where he had been expecting an answer.

“Ringle? Ringle is a desperado trying to ride on the right side of the fence,”

Luther said.

“Well, the guy doesn’t seem to believe in the program.”

*And so, Celeste, Ringle was no more to be in my life. A new door had opened, and it was for me to walk through that door and close it behind me, and do so in a way that would honor Ringle for his service and not demean him, for Ringle had done right by me. He had not wronged me in any way, for his karate chop responses stood the test of time. And yet I did not honor Ringle. In fact, I failed him. Instead of telling him that I loved him for putting me on the broad and sunlit highway, I informed him tersely that I had found someone new to be my mentor. He took it well. He did not fall down dying. But that very terseness leaves me with regret. One should never ever be in the twilight of love. It should be as constant as the most shining star.*

*And the fiasco of choosing Sham O’Malley over Ringle to hear the personal inventory I had written? For this too atonement must be made if a black mark is not to be placed against my name on the roll call for eternity. We must not so much as hurt a fly. A fly, Celeste, a fly. Did Norman Bates not tell us so?*

Now there were rearguard actions occurring at Cromartie Wonders that needed Luther’s constant monitoring. It came to his attention that two books for which he had been assigned responsibility—*Who Chopped Down This Cherry Tree?* and *Poopee Doo’s Magic Trip*—appeared on the abstracts in the circulating file and in the contract abstracts looseleaf—with Rafta Blackning credited as being the editor. Such denial of his existence



Luther understood to be the work of Roller Carmona-Hickson, and if so, why go to her and remonstrate? She would just be full of denial and loud and huffy indignation. No, no, to the white-out he went for a redress of his grievance. Rafta Blackning out on the abstracts, Luther Garatdjian in. And if Rafta wanted to make an issue of his assertiveness and desire to further himself, she would get a quick and direct response from him, namely, that he had paid his dues and it was time to take off the controls.

That same day did Rafta stand at the open door to his office. “Is it curtains for me? Is that what you have come to say?” Despite his previous bravado it was everything for him not to throw himself on her mercy or simply bolt past her out of the suite and out of the building. But she wore the face of sheepishness, not vengeance, as she handed him a manuscript, saying “Here is the most recent version of *Poopee Doo*. I am afraid I gave you an earlier draft.”

“Oh, good. Thank you,” Luther said, avoiding even a hint of displeasure that he might have wasted several days of work he had already done on the previous draft if it turned out there were many changes from one version to the next. *But Celeste, my mind’s eye was on the matter. Was this not prima facie evidence that ambivalence ruled Rafta’s days and nights regarding me? And, if so, was I not called upon to let understanding be my guide in handling her? And let it here be added to the record of my life that consciousness was only partially mine to possess at this juncture, that if I was railing at Rafta she was only a stand-in for my mother, from whose control I was still struggling to break free.*

*On another front, Glanton Gladwell was all too happy to serve as my new mentor. He did not say as much, but I had the sense, from the start, that he was in need of more contacts than he had. In the department of pith he was very strong. “The truth without love is an attack...What we are running from we are running toward...Don’t judge. Accept what is. Accept where you are at. Get on with the business of living...” There were others, but they have, for now, slipped my mind.*

*Glanton suggested I call him every morning, as I had that morning, an arrangement I agreed to even as I experienced inner resistance. But by evening that resistance had become complete. Jamais. Jamais. So was this word screamed into my inner ear. By now I was in a full state of paranoia. Glanton’s goal was hegemony; he was seeking to format me for his full power and control. The next morning, I told Glanton I didn’t know if I could live up to the commitment I had made, as the pressure had sent me beyond the borders of my own mind. What followed was a mammoth chuckle.*

*“Did I say something funny?”*

*Glanton had trouble getting hold of himself. Like a long-time shuddering engine he was, before he could return to stasis and speak, if only haltingly.*

*“We-embrace-the-lie-and-fiercely-resist-the-truth,” he said, and hung up.*

*Celeste, it was as if he had dropped me in no-man’s land, with only his enigmatic utterance, and no map to direct me home. What truth was he referring to? His push for intimacy had aroused in me suspicion not only of him but of RoR as a whole.*

*But it worked out. For twenty-two years it worked out.*

Luther ran to Glanton Gladwell's gruff love more frequently than he had to Ringle. It shocked him, but soon Glanton became all the day, all the time. Is he the father I never truly had? Luther could only wonder, taking note of the fact that Glanton was twenty years his senior and so old enough to be a parent, while Ringle was much closer in age. And he entered full confession mode with Glanton Gladwell, coming out with his hands up for inspection as he had with Ringle. Because where there was dirt, it was necessary that Glanton see it if Luther was to be made clean. The cross was rugged, but he was not.

Glanton was a party to his own accessibility. He had a house in Chappaqua, New York, and in that house he had a study, but the creation of words was a sometime thing, with many dead spots in between, and at such times he would pray for relief from who he was, the famous writer, so he could be ordinary in his manner and his mind. Luther on the line became a respite, a distraction, from the pain of infertility, and that first week he had much going on that needed the older man's attention.

He had begun a young adult novel over the weekend, and was now twenty pages into it. But he could not put the brakes on when he showed up for work Monday morning. The cease and desist order he gave himself was not working.

"Glanton, it is like this. I am worried that I have been stealing."

"Stealing what?"

"Not money or things, but time. I have been doing my own writing here at work while the boss is away. Once upon a time I had an aunt. Her name was Auntie Eve. When she would leave her apartment on Sunday mornings to go to church, I would let myself in with a key from my mother's key ring and help myself to large bills I had seen her place

in her closet. I came like a thief not in the night but in the day. Am I doing the same thing now? That is the question. I'm not liking myself very much as I speak."

"You're operating from guilt because you're taking from the company, not giving. You'll need to stop," Glanton said, before doing telephone hang-up.

Luther's self-hatred had only grown. He had been on a roll, and then he went and blabbed to Glanton and ruined a good thing. Easy for Glanton to tell him how he should behave in the workplace. Glanton hadn't had to hold a job in years. This wasn't honesty. It was self-sabotage. It was scrupulosity, sending Luther into deprivation mode.

*Celeste, we must not underestimate the power of this scrupulosity. It has shown its face before. There was that time, in my twenties, when I believed that all the trouble I was experiencing was the result of having left Jane Thayer. Never mind that she had left me. And the solution? To somehow restart the relationship from the point it had broken and move forward with her. The two of us would attend Sunday services at a church and share a hymnal and drench ourselves in piety. Oh, Lord.*

I must bind my secrets to myself. Bind them fast. Fast, he whispered to the tile, in the corner stall in the men's room just down the hall from Cromartie Wonders. The whiteness of the bathroom shouted out its history. Generations had come and gone and yet it remained and someday he would be gone and not even the tiles would live to tell about it. The cat. He had let it out of the bag, and now it was running all over town. Blabbing. Blabbing. Did you hear, Bruce Bill? I'm writing a young adult novel. Did you hear,

Amanda Plessy? And now there they were, sitting in his ruined garden, before it had so much as a chance to grow.

There was one who had entered his life, and though existing on the tangential, cast a worrying specter. She hailed from Litchfield County, Connecticut. Her thin lips and downturned mouth and small, cold blue eyes communicated severity. In keeping with her pedigree, she came with three names, Cecily Hillsdale Waterston, and an abiding interest in the country's roots, for she was Mayflower descended and needed communication with and about her forebears. She also had a scintillating knowledge as to who was up and who was down in the food chain of life. On her visit to the office the previous month a thin stream of snit smoke could be seen emitting from her ears and nostrils on learning that Luther, not Rafta, would have editorial responsibility for her manuscript, *Uncle George Washington and the Goody Two Shoes Girls*. It was not in Cecily's nature to take kindly to devaluation, and the appraising eye she cast over Luther did not bode well for their relationship.

But here it was, the next month, and Rafta was trying to arrange a charge account for Luther at the Sheraton-Russell Hotel, so he might take Cecily to lunch. American Express and Diner's Club had rejected his applications for credit cards. Rafta saw their decision as no reflection on him, and did not seek to humiliate him for being turned away. She saved her disparagement for the policies of the two credit card companies.

“I will see to it that you have the money to handle Cecily when the day comes,” Rafta said, “but first I must handle you. Frankly, the energy you manage to expend does not always yield excellence. There are a number of issues that must be resolved before we can return the manuscript to Cecily.” Issues, as in kiss oohs. Luther was crushed out of all proportion to what was going down, and afterward ran bleeding internally up Madison Avenue to the RoR meeting, where the grumble boys and girls were singing loud their grievances against unreasonable bosses. “I cannot shake the feeling that I have been put down in extremis. I want to self-destruct for being so stupid. There is no getting used to the fact of one’s stupidity.” In this way did he speak his truth.

He returned to work and wrote Rafta a fiery note. It was not in him to allow her to have the last word. She had left early for a doctor’s appointment and so he placed the note on her desk. He then returned home, and as the hours passed the feeling grew monstrous that he would be fired. He made the night unbearable not only for himself but for Sarah. “My boss has ordered me to sleep in the streets. In the streets. My boss has ordered that I be run over by two thousand cars and as many trucks. Is that number in accord with your wishes? Please let me know. Please, please, tell me, so I can fly out the door.” Over and over did he repeat these words, or a variation.

In the morning Luther called Glanton. “I am dying even as I speak,” he said.

But Glanton brought another mammoth chuckle into play. It was like waiting for a slow-moving one hundred car freight to clear a crossing. When the chuckle had exhausted itself, he spoke thusly, and with no trace of irony: “You are finding that you

indeed have a program, that it is not all some hypothesis, that you are willing to go to any length to stay sober.”

Fortified, Luther could face his day and maybe any music Rafta might provide. Her song was short and sour. “I will discount your tantrum as one from an emotionally immature young man. Would you care to hear how many manuscripts of mine have been subjected to further editorial review?”

“I apologize. I was wrong to leave that note,” Luther said.

“We will start anew,” Rafta said, and left before he could say anything more.

So the day came when Luther walked from the offices of Cecily Hillsdale Waterston to the Sheraton-Russell Hotel. In his wallet were the five crisp twenties that Rafta had given him, and though he was ashamed, deeply ashamed, he kept his bearing, making small talk, little observations along the way.

“It is racket city at the moment that we are approaching,” he shouted, over the jackhammers of helmeted Con Edson workers tearing up the blocked off street. When the racket was in abeyance, he continued. “We must all remember their slogan and take it to heart. ‘Dig we must for a greater New York.’ What a strategic wonder the inventor of that slogan came up with simply by placing the monosyllabic verb first to give the slogan its imperative thrust. Does the sentence not dig right into us?”

“Yes, I see your point.”

“You do remember George Metesky? He was from your state.”

“George Metesky?”

“The Mad Bomber. The disgruntled Con Ed worker who had been laid off and swore vengeance against the company?”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

“He had a very different digging in mind. I used to ride the subways back when I was a child and they had those rattan seats and I would look around for anything that looked like a pipe bomb so I wouldn’t get my tush or my legs blown off.”

“Yes, that must have been very worrisome.”

“Well, here we are. We can give our feet a break from the hard sidewalks of New York City,” Luther said, as they entered the Japanese restaurant on the ground floor of the Sheraton-Russell. “By the way, do you know where the word ‘restaurant’ comes from?”

“I would have to think about it,” Cecily said.

“Back in the old days a horse-drawn carriage would approach such an establishment and the coachman would call down to his passengers, ‘What’s it to be, ladies and gentlemen? Do you wish to rest or do you wish to want?’ That is the beauty of the English language. It is intensely practical. Utilitarian words. Utilitarian beliefs.”

“That is charming as folk etymology, but I believe the word comes from the French verb *restaure*, to restore or refresh.”

“There you go, the French with their obsession with food,” Luther replied. “Of course, I was only joking about the derivation of the word.”

“Of course,” Cecily said.



“Do you live in a house in Connecticut? While I know it isn’t true, I imagine everyone in that state living in a house of some sort.”

“My husband and I have lived for many years in a colonial house. We are quite comfortable and grateful to have it. It was a wonderful house in which to raise our two children, who are long since out of the nest.”

“Out of the nest. That is a strong image. And do they have Connecticut names?”

“I’m not sure what a Connecticut name is. Chad is a doctor with his own practice in Cambridge Massachusetts. He attended Harvard and Harvard Medical School. My daughter, Muffy, graduated from Stanford Law School and now is a partner in a firm here in New York.”

“Well, that is very impressive. It shows they have the right stuff to succeed.”

“And how about yourself? Do you have a context for your life?”

“How do you mean, context?”

“Well, where did you attend college? What did you do before you came to Cromartie Wonders?”

“To answer the first part of your question, I attended Queens College my first year. It was a lonely time, a lonely, lonely time. In fact the great Eddie Holman a few years later had a hit song, ‘Hey There, Lonely Girl,’ that could have described me. Of course I was not entirely innocent. It was a first love that had to die, and had spanned all four years of high school. We had exhausted each other, or I had exhausted her. Her name was Jane Thayer, and her father sent her down to Mexico City the summer following my graduation from high school. And let me be honest. He and she did for me what I could

not do for myself. After my first year I transferred to the City College of New York. Now, instead of two subways and a bus, I had only to hop on the local at 116<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway and there I was minutes later.”

“Why did you not attend Columbia University? It is right there at 116<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway.”

“As you well know, not everyone is Columbia material. It is the land of the astronomically high board score and the perfect grade point average. There are indicators for success in this world, and we must know our place. And all the yip yap in the world will not change this. Everyone has a station in life, and I am trying to stand at my particular station. As for my previous work experience, I came to Pilgore Press from driving a cab. I began to feel that doors were closing on me. I felt lonely, invisible. My passengers were no longer seeing me. The scary thing was that they had never seen me. What I mean is that they saw me only as a hackie, not an interesting young man. Have you ever felt invisible, really really invisible, and that doors are closing on you?”

“Well, I don’t know. I would have to think about that.”

He wanted to tell her that her time was over, that things were rapidly changing, without singing to her the Bob Dylan anthem. He wanted to tell her that there was planned obsolescence and the unplanned kind, and that she belonged in the latter category, but even that was planned, though by forces higher and more complex than they could ever know. At the same time he wanted to protect her in her repressed life, in which appearances counted for everything. Finally, he wanted to tell her he was her rebellious slave, obedience beaten into him by years of waywardness; defiance lived only in his

humbled, humiliated tell-all mode of speech mocking of her constriction. But failure, outright irrevocable failure of the kind that her progeny, Chad and Muffy, had clearly never experienced, robbed one of one's confidence, confiscated it forevermore and said to him, "Son, you just stay where you belong. You hear?" It was an internal barrier to progress, to joy, to life.

"And let me respond with a 'Well' as well. I truly did not mean to put you on the spot but only to encourage empathy in all its dimensions, so "seeing me, seeing you" could truly take hold. But let's talk history. Enough of the personal stuff I so readily indulge in. Let's talk George Washington. For example, suppose he was transported through time to the present. Would he even have a name for our Japanese hosts? Hardly likely. Commodore Perry hadn't come along yet. There were still worlds within our world to discover. Then too, there was Norman Mailer's observation that George Washington, the father of our country, was really a woman. One does have to admit he showed a womanly face, and what are the ramifications of such ambiguity for our national psyche? It can mean only one thing. Gender lines are converging; a national mandate has willed that this be so. Scott McKenzie said we should wear flowers in our hair and, from abroad, Donovan instructed that we wear our hair like heaven. We must listen for the signs. We must."

"Your mind seems to have a free-associative quality. You go from here to there, like a hummingbird in flight."

"Yes, when I am under pressure, flight can occur."

"Are you under pressure?"

“From inside and outside. The excellence level is not where it should be, to be frank.”

After the meal, Luther called to the waiter. “Faites le compte, s’il vous plait.”

“What is it you want?” the waitress asked.

“We will settle the bill,” Luther replied.

“I am sorry.”

“We will do our business with the money.”

“You would like the check?”

“Yes, please.”

In preparation for *l’addition*, the proper word, which he had failed to summon, but which would have fallen on uncomprehending ears regardless, Luther reached for his wallet and began extracting the bills Rafta had provided him with. Four twenties in a fantail did he set down on the table.

“Now we are talking a universal language, are we not? And one that requires no words.”

Cecily held her silence, in mounting pique at what she perceived as Luther’s gaucheness.

“Well, I know the sound of music when I hear it, and money makes its own special kind,” Luther went on. “I brought along some silver as backup, but we won’t be needing it. That is the thing about real currency instead of a plastic charge card. You see how much you are actually spending, and it imposes on you a degree of fiscal responsibility that might otherwise be lacking.”

“Is that right?” Cecily said, a quiver in her face, of the kind seen on the visage of America’s new and strange president, Ronald Reagan.

*Celeste, once more I must come before you with honesty as my guide. Trust me when I say I stayed within the parameters of my trembling, contracted self in seeking to appear presentable to Connecticut Cecily, that no monkey dance of the kind I have described took place.*

*Now Celeste, regarding another matter. Dr. Rosner was of the world and the world was of him. He was not the only begotten son of the Lord. He rejoiced in the world’s abundance and partook of it with the key he had received from the great Harvard University. Yes, gratification must sometimes be delayed, but it must also, inevitably, be experienced for the good life to have meaning. And he wanted for me with all his heart and mind to experience the same fruits of the earth. He did not want me saddled with the sobriquet “Failure Gulch.” And so, when I told him that I had taken time from “White Line Continue” to try to write a young adult novel, he put the timer on me and has had it there ever since, to ensure that my pursuit of excellence not be open-ended but have imposed on it the restraint of a date certain.*

*“When are you going to show the manuscript?” he asked.*

*“At some point,” I said.*

*“That’s ambiguous,” he replied.*

*“Soon,” I said.*

*“That’s better.” He laughed.*

*Capitulation is no laughing matter, Celeste, but resistance is. If I had told Dr. Rosner that the sky was my canvas on which to write a YA novel, with no need for the parameters of length or time, he would have put the laughing thing on me, not from cruelty but to convey that he was privy to my fears. He wanted me contained within the world in which I was trying to function. He wanted a time limit on my aspiration. He wanted me to eat the same reality sandwiches he munched on and leave my love behind if the world did not say yes, so I might then move into a more mature realm of existence, one that called for full and complete acceptance of my incapacity.*

*Let it be noted that in this time my typewriter obsession was doing violence to my person. There were days when no forward movement of my life seemed possible without the perfect acquisition, and so it was that Dr. Rosner felt the need to double down on me by applying his acute powers of perception to my malady of mind.*

*“Your fixation on typewriters masks your concern about the quality of your inner machinery,” he said.*

*There can be no question that he planked me severely with his assertion and sent me sprawling. I curled up in a ball and cried. But even the power of insight was not enough to eliminate the hellish obsession, and so, in desperation, I turned to God in prayer, and from him seemed to receive the release I was seeking, only to have it return with triple the force the following day. God himself had been defeated by the power of the Smith-Corona Coronamatic 2200, in gorgeous blue and edible brown, my once and current loves.*

*That morning, Celeste, I took the necessary action. With the horde did I ride the number 6 train to East Thirty-third Street, and went directly to the typewriter store I passed every day on my way to work. My loves were waiting for me in the window, and so, fortified by new resolve, I stepped inside to do the deal.*

*“I would like to leave a deposit on your Smith-Corona 2200 in cheerful blue. I may return for the backup in brown as well, but for now I must go with the blue, as it the color of the sky, and that is the height to which my aspiration has soared. For now, it is first things first. I am here to be grounded in the reality of a new life, regardless of what Dr. Rosner, my esteemed therapist, has said on this matter. Power has an obligation to its source. But I must know, before I give my heart to this machine, whether it will still love me tomorrow, as the Shirelles sang, and for all the tomorrows to follow? The extravagance of my desire stretches into eternity. Can you tell me if supplies will be available, if not in perpetuity, then for the foreseeable future?”*

*Thusly did I speak to the young and slender Chinese man, clearly hardened by the demands of the business he was seeking to run. He was of an ancient race, and had no time for Caucasian foolery, if one is to judge by his total ignoring of what I said and his irascible reaction to the check I had begun to write out for a deposit.*

*“No checks, man,” he said, pointing to a sign on the wall and tearing excessively the one I had been writing.*

*“Did you have to be so aggressive?”*

*“Get out. No need mental patient in my store. Go now before I hurt you in your sick head.”*

*Celeste, he treated me with all the contempt he might have shown for an addict coming to him for a fix. But here is the thing. My defeat was not long-lasting. As I lay dying on the floor, a revelation came to me and rose me up and out of that store. Swept aside were the Smith-Corona Coronamatics, the Olivetti portables, the Royals and Adlers, and all the rest.*

*Within days I was headed in the opposite direction, to Water Street, in lower Manhattan, in pursuit of my true and abiding love, to make a down payment on an IBM typewriter at IBM headquarters. The salesperson took my deposit, a check in the amount of \$540.00, and did no violence to it, ostentatious or otherwise.*

*“And I’m going to buy some of those golf ball elements, so I do not have to be a slave to pica or elite or Courier or Garamond. What do you think of that?”*

*“I think you can do whatever you want so long as you pay for it. That’s the way it goes here. We’re in the business of doing business,” she replied.*

*Speaking of which, I had to put down my own place of business. I had to tell IBM about Pilgore Press, including Cromartie Wonders, to qualify for the installment plan. And so I filled with fear that Peter Ben-Gurion or Rafta would find out and rebuke me. But I quickly rose up on my fear and told it to be gone from my premises. How dare anyone even think of censuring me should he or she find out? What business of theirs would it be? Was it not my money? Was it not my ‘White Line Continue’? Was it not my life?*

Luther was all set now, whole and complete, with a state-of-the-art electric typewriter that featured a correcting key. No need, as with the Smith-Corona



Coronamatic, to remove the typing cartridge and replace it with the correcting cartridge. And the Selectric III had a little plastic flap you could lower to muffle the sound of the element striking the paper. And it had big keys to cut down on errors you might otherwise make on a smaller keyboard. And except for the sound muffler, it did not do the plastic thing---no no no no no. IBM did not play that way. A pebbled metal black beauty. And so he would soon be set for the long march. All he would need to do was to personalize the machine—a tad of tape here, a tad of tape there—as a little secret to secure their bond one to the other.

*Now Celeste, I was ready to face the music. It happened that Bruce Bill wanted to have lunch that week, and so we met. My unworthiness went with me. I carried it in a shopping bag so it could be separate from my person. Bruce hadn't unfolded his napkin and placed it on his lap when I told him about the young adult novel. He greeted the information with what appeared to be genuine enthusiasm.*

“So tell me what it’s about.” Such a modulated, gentle voice Bruce Bill had.

An angry, troubled father. A tearful mother. Out of control older siblings. A crumbling building his family managed. The wrongs done to them by the owner. The snooty school where he felt socially intimidated. The obsessive relationship with a girl throughout his high school years. “It’s about different things,” Luther mumbled, unable to organize his thoughts and make a lucid presentation. Bruce Bill was disappointed. He would hold Luther’s inarticulateness against him. Of what value could a manuscript be when the writer couldn’t even discuss it intelligently?

The wall of silence Bruce Bill responded with summoned in Luther acute self-consciousness. Bruce Bill's scorn of him seemed to have settled in his every cell.

"Are you still upset about what happened at Cromartie Wonders?" Luther blurted, seeking only to end the agony.

"Excuse me?" There was coldness in Bruce Bill's voice.

"Nothing. Nothing. Forgive me. Sometimes I just get tangled up."

Luther gave himself a bad afternoon. He would be a fool to entrust his manuscript to Bruce Bill now. After that debacle, Bruce Bill would surely toss his YA novel into the garbage.

But tomorrow came, and brought his folly thinking with it. Oh, he heard his wisdom thinking too, saying do not go where you do not belong. Yes, he heard it, but not in the strong way that he heard the other. His wisdom thinking was a murmur; his folly thinking was a roar. So he took himself to Bruce Bill's place of work, and saw a spectacle of glass and steel, saw happiness combined with great purpose, saw the lightness of being that Bruce Bill manifested to all those around him. But he did not see Bruce Bill, who now had a secretary of his very own.

"Mr. Bill is unavailable. I will see that he gets the package," she said, and because the glass doors were calling, he went back through them to the elevator and to the street below.

Luther had other actions going, too. He had other baskets for other eggs. He sent out to *Ploughshares* and *Antioch Review* and *Michigan Quarterly* and *Sou'wester* and *Epoch*

and *Agni* and *Gettysburg Review* and *Bellingham Review* and many others in many states, all of them having in common that they were seeking quality fiction and nothing but. And he did so even though they always always hit him with their indifference so he could continue to live in the land of the unchosen in his mind and all regions of his being and feel the feelings of the unchosen, with the understanding that things would never change but that he must continue on this path as he had no other at this juncture of his life and never would. Because meaning had to be found where it existed.

In this time, before spring could dare to come, Glanton Gladwell called Luther up to Darien, Connecticut, so Luther could tell him face to face all Glanton needed to know so he could gauge the condition of his mind: where Luther had been, and what he had done to cause himself shame and embarrassment and humiliation; what his fears were, that they might no longer serve as a mountain atop his being; whom he resented and why—what they had done to him; what he had done to them; what, if anything they had done for him so he could get a handle on his victim mode of being and see his part in the daily life of the world; what made him feel most inadequate as a person; what, if anything, he would change in his life if he could. Because by now it was clear that Sham O'Malley was in the scrutiny of Glanton Gladwell and it was more than chance that they should sit at polar ends of the first row at the RoR meeting. Luther had let it be known to Glanton that a certain *je ne sais quoi* had been lacking when he read his inventory to Sham, and so Luther was sure Glanton was on alert to ensure that Luther not have the same dismal experience again.

Because of where Glanton lived, Luther had the opportunity to ride the rails from the great Grand Central Terminal, and it would have been cause for happiness on even the most inglorious day, Luther being a train-bound person, as Gertrude Stein had defined such persons forevermore in *Melanctha*. True, he was not riding north along the Hudson River to Philomena Swangner in her Poughkeepsie abode, which she had long since vacated so California could become her state of residence, she being unwedded to the sameness that prevailed in Luther's time on earth. Definitely true about that. But he was riding forward toward his own unburdening. So he told himself as the train stalled and moseyed and stalled and lurched through the tunnel until it broke free into its own rhythm along the straightaway through Harlem. I am riding the caravan of whiteness, Luther thought, through a vista of dilapidated tenements, and have just now endured the apathy-bound stare of a black man experiencing from his window the commotion of sound before him. I am a witness to the aggrieved spirit of this very community. But breaking free of the hard, scarred streets and more and more into nature's way did not bring the peace of mind he had been seeking. Non non. Jamais jamais. So he heard the inner voice to say. There has been enough betrayal. Assez bien. Assez bien. Retournez-vous. Retournez-vous. Thus did his mind speak, imploring him to get off the train, to just get off, if he cared to live in this world any longer. Then his mind spoke further, saying "Have you not hurt her enough? Are you murderer material? Where is the love, Luther? Where is the love, that you would tell of her life as well as your own to a stranger? Is this not a betrayal that requires death? Do you not see that the whole problem has been that you let Glanton Gladwell into your life in the first place? Go back, I say. Go back."

But Luther did not go back. He just sat disconsolate in his seat and let his feelings rush by like the houses the train flew past, and told himself the whistled warning was not for him but for vehicles thinking they might have a mind to challenge the power of the onrushing train where they were being held in check by grade crossing signals.

From the train Luther could see Glanton standing back from the tracks, his shoulders hunched and wearing only a windbreaker against the blustery cold. A chill passed through Luther as he turned away from his mentor. He did not like the dilapidation he saw in the still wintry light: the thinning hair, the pale, papery skin. Such dilapidation did not belong on the earth.

“I have to make a quick stop before we head to the house. The motor on the lawn mower up and died. You wait for something to go wrong in this world and it surely will.”

Luther saw the long handle of the mower sticking out of the half open trunk. He had the sudden sense that he was on dangerous ground and needed to tread carefully. Whatever the appearances, he might be in the vicinity of a volatile temperament.

“There’s some pretty serious per capita stuff going on up here,” Luther said. He did not tell Glanton about Dahlia, from Darien. Glanton would hear all about her when he got into his life as it had been. No need to drain away any of the essence of his document with releases out of the natural order of things.

“Per capita stuff, eh?” Glanton said, as he went into chuckle mode while sitting at the wheel of the car. Luther could only sit back and admire the full flowering of the

chuckle that followed. A man had to be pretty sure of himself in order to put his everything into a chuckle, after all, without rushing and without apology.

The house approximated what he had thought it would be from the outside, if a bit small. But the interior had a barrenness to it, as if they were still awaiting the moving van. A living room without a sofa, and the bare expanse of scuffed wood flooring. Somewhat filling the space was a chaotic metal sculpture, like some abandoned piece of farm equipment and what looked like garage sale findings. However, if the furnishings were not impressive, Glanton was. He was at ease. No self-consciousness showed in his manner. As much as anything about that day, Luther would remember Glanton's detachment from the minimalist environment. He could only aspire for the same, remembering his acute agony when classmates caught a glimpse of how he and his family lived: the cluttered surfaces, the bed that served as a sofa without a backing, the dirty wood floor in the living room...

*Now Celeste, just so you know, within the house of lack there was a space of plenty. This I discovered when he led me upstairs to his studio; the moment I stepped inside did I see that he was himself a man of rigid order. That word order. We can't say it often enough. We must say it until it fills our very being and lives in the forefront of our consciousness. The space had several windows, and so was filled with the light of America on a paradisiacal community of blond children with perfect teeth and perfect grades and perfect homes, far from the teeming cities. Not so much an aspirant to this life as a pilgrim passing through did Glanton appear to be.*

*Atop the filing cabinets was an open reel tape recorder of exquisite quality and intense complication, with its many knobs, to signal that yes, Glanton was a word man, but he could live in the world of the machine as well, that he had the hard-edged knowledge to operate such equipment without bowing down to it.*

*In the front part of the studio was a sitting area, with a small sofa and two club chairs and a standing lamp, that told you he was in his element with design.*

*Celeste, his typewriter remained covered, and so triggered a pulsing, insistent curiosity in me that threatened to make a mockery of my cleansing purpose. Lord knows, I did not want it thus, and yet I did. The shrouded thing set me on fire and caused me to call on all powers of restraint available to one such as me.*

*This is how he copes, I could only think. This is his retreat, his sanctuary. A memory of my father arose, and the corner he established for himself in the dining room, where he would sit in his black wicker chair with his religious pamphlets close at hand on a small shelf—the writings of A. A. Allen and Morris Cerullo and Oral Roberts and Billy Graham, orators with tower of power sound coming from their silk-suited selves. I saw Glanton, Celeste, and I saw my father, and an association was forming, no matter how different the circumstances of their lives might be.*

*His wife, Babs, was tall and gaunt. There didn't seem enough of her to get lost in. Her spiritual focus was apparent in the afterburners she had strapped to her shoulders to boost her into the new dimension she was seeking. Periodically, as I sat with Glanton, she would appear with a tray of sandwiches or cups of herbal tea. She showed an attitude of stunning servility. "You're an angel. Now fly away," Glanton said, after her*

*first trip, and would dismiss her jocularly on her follow-up visits. But if a rush to judgment was occurring in my mind that here were master and slave, with Glanton as a poster boy for male chauvinism, then it was for me to rein in my horses. Can we not say that if superficially he was chauvinistic, that his heart nevertheless held true for Babs and their two children? Is love not a bond we form more than an attitude we carelessly express? There can be no “gotcha” in the realm of God.*

“My biggest fear is that if I give myself to God, he will take away my ambition. He will run off like a thief in the night with my hopes and dreams,” Luther said.

He spoke of the years of sexually compulsive behavior; the thievery; the people he had hurt through his actions.

He spoke of his low numbers, and where and how he had gotten them, and how, to that very day, they hit on him and hit on him without ceasing, at all hours of the day and in his sleep time as well.

He presented the affliction of his family, how his godly parents had given birth to ungodly children, and especially of his older sisters, who lived to smack and taunt and who now were rotting away in the rooms throughout the building where his mother had stationed them in outposts of loneliness. Waves of darkness did he command to break over Glanton, who remained in his chair regardless. *Celeste, Glanton had a child of earnestness in his midst, to do with as he would. The smirk was long gone. Long gone, I say. I was dealing.*

And he spoke of his sister Vera, who had beaten him not with her hands but with her torquing power, that she should climb to the top of the educational ladder and say I



have won and you have lost with her face and manner for the rest of his days and follow him after his expiration from the earth. Spoke of hiding her schoolbooks to set her back academically because of the fear that she would someday outstrip him, causing Glanton to say, "What we are running from we are running toward." Because Glanton had the essence thing to share when it came to him. And while it stopped Luther in his tracks to hear, it did not stop him forever, as he had territory to traverse with Glanton as his witness, if only Glanton would master the art of restraint.

The savage glee with which he struck at Tom Smits with the threatening to debase himself note, that Tom Smits would dare try to remain a presence in his life after destroying his mind with his SAT truth bomb.

The remorse he expressed over striking Jane Thayer, and the confiscation of any possible sense of manhood that resulted.

The place of no sorrow he went with his father's death, and the death of Auntie Eve, and the death of his smack and taunt sister Naomi. Just throw dirt on them. Throw dirt on the whole bunch of them so order could reign.

Maura Goldberg and her father, the WW II veteran, and the pain he caused them and caused her date, Fred.

And the infliction of himself on the Van Dines. The insane phone calls in the night as a repayment for their hospitality and kindness. And Lenore, for going where he did not belong so he might forevermore be tarnished with the word *repulsive*.

And the abuse of Sarah.

*And the abuse of you too, Celeste. Treating you like a rag doll ooh in that time of my drunkenness.*

All the while Luther understood that he was in a house and a house could be a home, no matter how often Bert Bachrach and Dusty Springfield took him down the sorrow alley, love living here in the way that it could. Glanton had a righteous ring to him as he sat in his chair. He was not Sean O'Malley. He had a constitution all his own and a rigor all his own.

Saying to Luther, "I will leave you here alone for fifteen minutes. I have been receiving a strong sense that you need to get down to it, go right through it. Word salads are fine, but you must now get to the main course and write out your resentment against God if healing is to truly course through your being. And please note that I will beat you within an inch of your life if you do not complete the assignment in the time allotted." Glanton then paused in a somber silence before launching into some chuckle plenty, which he took from the study with him that Luther might apply himself to the task at hand.

Chuckle or no chuckle, Luther tried, as Glanton had instructed, to get down to it.

"He wants me to wear a hair shirt of supreme itchiness. He wants me on the sidelines watching the parade of victors. My only function is to curse and jeer at the worldly ones as they proceed with their preening parade. He would have me shout that the present is theirs but the future is mine, that they will roast in hell forever, that they

will get theirs for having gotten theirs here on earth as I will get mine for not having gotten mine here on earth.”

Some minutes later Luther read his statement to Glanton.

“Yes, I can see where you have been that you would hold to such a belief system,” Glanton said.

Luther continued to read from his document. Now and then Glanton would comment with incidents from his own life, unlike Sean O’Malley. Luther felt grateful. He felt received. And yet there were times when he could wish that Glanton would hold his silence. After all, this was his parade of darkness, and he was sensitive about anyone raining on it.

Luther found himself pulled back into the land of the low numbers and was compelled to report on everything he saw and felt in that bleak land. The song of sadness and self-pity sounded loud even in Luther’s ears, and caused Glanton to intervene and to reply to Luther’s theme that he was not a man and could never be a man.

“A man is someone who can humble himself before God,” Glanton said.

For Luther this was a whoa whoa moment. What? He did not need to be a tower of power? He did not need to be Johnny Weismuller or Mickey Mantle or Muhammad Ali?

He just needed to be able to kneel and pray?

Then Glanton delivered something more.

“Your number one failing is your self-pity,” Glanton said.

“You have dropped another truth bomb on my head,” a dazed Luther said.

“No bombs here, my friend. This is a bomb-free zone. The truth without love is an attack,” Glanton reminded Luther. He then left Luther to ponder the work they had done. When Luther had finished, he could come downstairs and join the family for dinner.

Luther tried to spend his time as Glanton had suggested. He sought to arrange his face in contemplation mode, but his feet were not on the ground. He had been transported. A sensation of expanding joy filled his being. Glanton had received him, not beaten him with the stick of righteousness for the vileness he had confessed to. Oh, what is this world when veils are suddenly lifted and you look at it with great love? So he could only wonder. And that love encompassed himself as well. A feeling of compassion came over him for the young man he had been, parked on a barstool for hour after hour. He had done the best that he could with what he had at the time. And he had been all right. There was no need for him to immerse himself in the lake of shame. He had been accepted to decent schools. He did not have to die and die and then die some more. But it wasn't only him. With a great shudder did he experience release from his judgment of his father. That judgment had frozen him in time. It had not allowed for a new angle of perception. These things he saw and felt with and without his contemplative pose.

But joy or no joy, there was an earthly reality seeking to tether him to the planet. It was no dictate prompted by The Flamingos singing “I Only Have Eyes for You.” He did not need sha bop de bop for his interest to be directed to the sheathed typewriter on the stand by Glanton's desk, or for his ardor to be stoked when he uncovered the beast and beheld a red Selectric 1 with a prestige pica element.

He fell down not in love but in abject submission to the beast and hopeless surrender to the world of objects once again. Oh, God, save me from my sickness. Save me, he heard himself say, as he returned the cover over the machine, rebuking himself for an inventory that did not include such a major preoccupation/obsession.

Babs served a simple dinner of brown rice and steamed vegetables and bits of tofu. Luther was happy to see that their seven-year-old son Bobby was allowed to have a hot dog on a bun and so had some freedom from the austerities of a macrobiotic diet. Bobby was a cute kid with big blue eyes and curly blond hair. Glanton took a napkin and gently wiped away the ring of mustard, with bread crumbs stuck in it, that had formed around his mouth.

An older child, with straight black hair, arrived some minutes later.

“Where have you been, Rosie?”

“Scoping boys’ buns with my friend Denise,” Rosie answered. Her dark eyes and direct manner spoke of teenage rebellion in an environment of love.

*Celeste, there was a painting on the wall near the dining table. A reclining nude. I cannot speak to the aesthetic quality of the work, but the image of the young woman was riveting. A mass of black curls ringed her delicate face so similar to yours, as were the contours of her slender body. It could only be you I was looking at. Only you. Once again my life with Sarah felt old and exhausted. The fire had burned itself out and now there were only ashes in which to live my remaining years. I judged myself harshly for the sexual longing the painting aroused. What sort of spiritual progress could I hope for if, after reading my inventory to my mentor, I found myself first lusting for his typewriter*

*and then lusting for you? What I couldn't see were that these promptings deserved not my condemnation but the understanding that from the depths of my being some force was calling out for change, that it was not enough to accept the things we cannot change; we must be willing to change the things we can, and have the wisdom to know the difference, in line with the Serenity Prayer.*

*Now Celeste, it may sound like forces within were seeking my disintegration, but really, an ambience of peace, inner as well as outer, came to reign at that dinner table. I saw that Glanton had opened the door for me to join the family of nations, and so, though I did not forget the iconic typewriter or the figure in the painting, a degree of order returned that I could live with.*

*Now just as a car needs filling up if it is to run, so too did Glanton need some filling up if he was to sustain his existence. He had supped on the thin fare that Babs provided, but his spirit hungered for a meeting, and so Babs and he and I got in the car, but not before Glanton knelt in prayer. As for the children, they stayed behind.*

“What are you praying for?” Luther asked.

“A devastating earthquake is due to hit New York City in the near future,” Babs explained. “Only a few buildings will be left standing. He is praying that tonight not be the night,” Babs said.

“Yes. I can see why he would not want that,” Luther said.

“When the spirit speaks, it is important to speak back. That’s the way relationships work. They can’t be just one-sided.”

“No. Of course not. Dialogue is key,” Luther said.

*Celeste, they had me as an audience on the drive down to the city with the chatter they engaged in. Glanton called Babs "Toilet Tongue" and boasted that his penis was so large he needed to lift it with both hands to keep it from dragging along the floor. They were just looking for their freedom on a Saturday night in a fragile piece of motorized tin zipping down I-95 as I prayed without ceasing that Glanton not get some idea to try to bang with the big boys in the giant rigs we were often sandwiched between.*

*And then it was over. When we arrived in the city an hour later Glanton and Babs went to the RoR meeting while I headed for Madison Square Garden. Glanton had suggested I burn the inventory when I got home as a means of symbolically putting the past behind me. Unable to wait, I tore the document into pieces and tossed it into a dumpster a block from the Garden.*

*Solomon Rhein was waiting outside, on Seventh Avenue. He had received, gratis, a couple of tickets to the New York Knicks game. Walt Frazier was gone. Dick "Fall Back, Baby, Fall Back" Barnett was gone. As was Dave "I like my wine" Debusschere and Bill "I was born looking old" Bradley. They did have a backcourt of Michael "I Can Stick It" Richardson and Ray "Get Your Hand Off My Arm" Williams in the backcourt. But none of that mattered. The Golden State Warriors had Bernard "I Light Up the Scoreboard" King, formerly of the Knicks and forever from Brooklyn, performing facials on all his defenders in operating like the scoring machine he was. And, in a sense, that didn't matter either. It was not lost on me that this was the first time I had sat at a basketball game with another male, or anyone, since those evenings at the previous Madison Square Garden, at Fiftieth Street and Eighth Avenue, with Tom Smits*

*back in high school, or that I was being reconnected with my youth, in some odd way. Because I was not there, Celeste. I was not there. The hold of vicariousness on me was weakening. I was in the spirit realm into which Glanton had somehow delivered me. The jubilation force that had begun that morning continued to have its way with me. **Stopped here***

*Now Celeste, let me take honesty and seize it with both hands and make it my own. If I have already told you, in oh so many words, that the elaborate plan of God did not include me in his vision of perfection, I need not despair, as no false promise was made by him or her or it. What I am saying is that I know what it is to walk down a street alone and then walk back along it in the same circumstance. The middle road has inured me to defeat. Courage does not need a badge blue or green or Sally Tomato red. Courage does not think in terms of colors. Engines often stall on the straightaway of misery, leaving the curve as the domain of acceleration. Sometimes we have to burn off the excess to speak normally. I will try to come back to Earth, where I have been told it is I belong.*

But quickly he saw that he had not ditched the old Luther. Lines of defense against the world were still needed.

He saw a woman on the street. In his mind he asked if she would be his.



He still had no protection against the lash of Rafta. Fateful punishment awaited. So he feared.

Before the start of a RoR meeting, a gabby man spoke at Luther about “his writing” within earshot of a professional writer. Luther felt tainted by association with the loose-lipped man in the eyes of the established writer.

A man on the street referred to him as a “distant punk” and he failed to respond with Air Force strength.

The typewriter obsession was still in him. Was a Selectric I in his future? Did he have to go back in order to go forward? Could a typewriter without curves, such as his Selectric III, have character? Could it have the feminine wiles to produce art? Well, could it? When afflicted like this, nothing else can get in. Nothing. So Luther said to himself.

However, he did reach a new level of respectability. B. Altman issued him a charge card, and one for Sarah, too. It was a start. He didn't want to crush her flower. He really didn't. How could anyone be so cruel as to think so? How could they?

Then he was present in dreamland, if not a full participant. When was he, ever? On the beach, under a bright sun, parties reveled. But the blue sky darkened and the sea grew violent, extending to the boardwalk and sweeping all but Luther away. How could that be? Luke appeared. Luther told his brother about denial, that it was not a river in Egypt but a formidable element in dealing with alcoholism. His grin was rebuffing of the awareness that Luther sought to give him. "Do you not see? The party is over. It is over." But Luke was already moving away and well out of earshot.

*Q: "Let us go back. Who is this man, this professional writer, of whom you are afraid?"*

*A: "He is a man with big thighs and a big brain and a wide stance when seated, to suggest bigness in his apparatus as well."*

*Q: "And?"*

*A: "He is on schedule for the lifetime achievement award. Every goal he sets does he achieve. He writes four books a year while finding time to travel the globe."*

*Q: "And?"*

*A: "He has entered my world without my permission. In his latest book, he presents a character who can't get beyond his desk job. He is held back because of a lack of ability and insufficient drive. Mr. Wide Stance writes of him dismissively, without an iota of compassion, going so far as to describe him as a man whose manuscripts are thrown into the street as soon they are received. He based this character on me. Of this you can be sure."*

*A: "Your certainty remains my doubt."*

*Q: "Do not fool with me when right is mine to hold. Before I knew who Mr. Big Balls was, before I researched him in Books in Print and discovered he was breathing down the neck of Willie the Shake, I would share at the RoR meetings that the publishers, the filthy, filthy ones, were flinging my manuscripts into the street. And so Wide Man goes and puts what I said into a book, making a mockery of me. He has dismissed me unto death."*

*Q: "How you speak."*

*A: "As if you have left me any choice."*

A check for seven thousand dollars came for Luther from New York State No-Fault Insurance as compensation for having been struck from behind by an automobile whose driver sat impassively behind the wheel the previous August. And though the day was cloudy on which it arrived, Luther was led to sing "Oh, Happy Day," in the silence of his mind, that is, he sang the first line over and over. And there was good reason for the sun to be shining even when it wasn't, for now he could begin to make right the wrong he had done in being a burden to the Van Dines. Lydia could not continue to bury him with her words, "*How long must we continue to take care of you?*" Or whatever the exact words she had spoken. Because she had driven him down, down, when he was already down, though if he was to shine the light of truth on what she had said, and not go all dinky but examine those words through the lens of clarity and stripped of all emotion, she was simply making an inquiry as to how long he would need their help.

It was not enough for him to mail a check to Lydia for half the amount he had received from New York State. He must call her so she could hear him say he was

becoming a free and independent nation, beholden to no one. And so he did. And if he could not quite find the words, as Lydia hardly represented the yoke of tyranny, he did convey his need to return some of the money Sarah had received because of her disability.

“Well, thank you, Luther. We do appreciate your effort to make things right,” Lydia said that same day. He heard no trace of cordiality in her voice. He had the sense that he was on the phone with someone who was disliking him intensely.

Afterward he discussed with Sarah whether to suspend the financial assistance she was receiving from her parents every month and live on what remained of the insurance check.

“No, Luther, no. They made me the way I am. They have the means to help me heal. This is not your problem.”

“What is the ‘this’?”

“You know what the ‘this’ is. ‘This’ is me.”

“Don’t talk that way.”

“What way should I talk?”

“In a way that doesn’t make me sad.”

*Now Celeste, the universe has been punching. Glanton tells me not to take the blows personally, that the universe does that to everyone. He says that in recovery pain is our teacher and we must learn from it. “No pain. No gain.” The slogan is loud in my ears.*

*There is a rodent living next door, a filthy rodent in human form. Obese, unshaven, inattentive to basic hygiene, slovenly in his baggy thrift store attire, he totters about. I thought, considering his attributes, I could love him and he could love me. But treachery has a name, and in this case it was Constant. In this area of artists who placed no value on order, we both clung to words as our salvation. I had found someone who did not need a canvas or tubes of paint to convey the meaning of his life or life in general. He was the same as me, a bottom dweller, a dink, someone I could feel safe with.*

*So what did he do, Celeste? What did he do? He went and got filthy on me. No, he didn't tell me that Antioch Review or Prairie Schooner had taken one or two of his scribblings. The pudge atom-bombed me. He told me that The New Yorker, yes The New Yorker, had accepted twelve of his pieces and offered him a position as a staff writer. This is the cruelty of the universe, that viciousness should display itself so abundantly. Glanton said it was for me to answer, not with a message of hate but a song of love for the universe. Celeste, he was telling me to rally strong with the light that was now in me. But let us speak plain and not indulge in gibberish. While I drew near to him on the spiritual plane, fear and envy filled my being at the sight of Constant on the street. God or no God, love or no love, let us be clear. Viciousness abounds on this planet and I must surrender in all of my being to survive it.*

If he was denied visibility in the pages of *The New Yorker*, he was on display in the anonymity-protected venue of the Saturday night RoR meeting, on the occasion of his first year of sobriety. And if he wrote prose that got thrown into the street, he could

nevertheless possibly deliver the best lead ever at the meeting. He arrived with that thought in mind, paying no regard to the oxymoronic notion of a spiritual star.

Glanton was there, as was Babs. Right there in the front row they were.

“I wouldn’t miss this for anything,” Glanton said, adding to the pressure Luther had already placed on himself to excel and maybe even putting the kibosh on the talk, for now it was likely that Luther would strike out instead of hitting the home run he was expected to deliver. And in fact he did go weak where he needed to go strong. He started with his childhood, referring to his Auntie Eve as looking like Gyro Gearloose. When the room remained silent, what confidence he had was gone. He had tried to sacrifice a family member for the sake of a cheap laugh, and instead brought shame upon himself. In RoR members laughed at themselves and with others, but not at others, they were reminding him. He turned to his left and saw Glanton struggling to maintain the smile on his face, its tentativeness saying that Glanton was reassessing him. Once again had he failed. The sense of humiliation poured in on him. He sat there red-faced. “I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I’m sorry.”

Afterward Glanton gave him a pat on the shoulder. “You’re all right, my friend. You’re all right. You’re not going to be all right. You are all right. Now. Now. Now.”

Luther hoped to leave his humiliation behind in sleep that night and wake up in the now, as Glanton emphasized, so the flaying whip flaying whip would cease. “My ramparts have been overrun. You must help me, dear God. I command your assistance. I command it.”

In the morning he thought, I will take refuge in the work I have been given for my job. In so doing will I secure the premises against my demise. He got busy with his George Washington research so he could be strong for the work week to come. But the debacle had put a hole in his soul and several times that day he heard himself say that he could not even narrate the events of his own life, so what on earth was he to do?

If he had a plan for the day, he also had one for the night. “We will go and dine on the food of the Chinese people. Would you like that, Luther?” And Luther replied, “Yes, I really really would.” Because the pain remained acute, and so he had no choice but to treat himself as if he were a suffering child. And he had a precedent for the happiness the thought of the journey brought on, as once upon a time on Sunday evenings he had walked the long block with his mother and Luke and Vera from the church down to the corner, where they could all eat the normal food of the Horn and Hardart Automat. He did wonder out loud if he was doing any harm by referring to an entire race with such a phrase but all he could come up with was intelligence and industry and benignity when he gave the words a human face. And yes, that included Charlie Chan and his number one son from days gone by.

The same waiter wearing his wisdom face did they find at Joy Palace and the same open kitchen with the woks and big steel pots and the anonymous and stoic men in white working long hours and sleeping twenty to a room, for all he knew. The waiter padded toward them and threw down the menus as if they had never been away. What was two years or so in the history of the world when the collective memory of his race told him he had been here for eons. The old waiter turned wordlessly and came back a

minute later with a pot of tea and those small handle-less cups and waited with pad and pencil in hand. Luther opted for the steak special so he could be fortified for the week ahead while Sarah favored the chicken with cashew nuts. Both were in favor of a steaming cup of egg drop soup and would not be denied. And would he please bring them two egg rolls apiece so their night could be spent in heaven. Because a man needed refuge from his pain in the places where he could find it.

Many others were drawn to the winding, mystery streets of Chinatown on this particular evening, Sunday being their day of rest and escape from the kitchen. They came from Long Island and from Queens and Brooklyn and from the great if sad state of New Jersey so they might sit in Hong Fat and Lucky Dragon and Fire Garden and wherever else and experience a respite from the monotony of routine.

In dreamland that night many fell down dying on the streets of New York City, one dropping on top of the other right there in public under the gaze of indifferent buildings. Their only consolation was that they would now be able to confirm the status of infinity as it pertained to the afterlife and possibly reduce the suffering brought on by endless afternoons in the deserts of their minds.

Dreamland did not turn itself off come morning. It went calling on Luther at his workplace. He was seized with the idea that he was going to die, like those fallen people he had witnessed in his nocturnal slumber. Was it possible that the IBM typewriter he had purchased was in fact the instrument for his salvation that he was seeking, one that would enable him to write for his life? If so, he had better step up the pace. Something was gaining on him.



It is time for me to take some action against this mind of mine. I will count on the fresh air of the coming spring to set me straight with its embrace. So Luther thought as he headed for the elevator and a late lunch break after hours of idleness. Joe the deli man had the soup to set his body and mind straight, a tomato bisque. But Luther would have to be careful. Joe the deli man had an ornery streak. He had spent time in the slammer in his younger days, and there was still a hard hitter in him ready to go should disrespect, be it superficial or serious, manifest in the faces and manners of the patrons. Tone of voice was he especially sensitive to, and even the slightest hint of sass. Many men of greater size and strength had he been compelled to fell.

“Take your your bullshit for a walk,” Joe Deli said to the gentleman at the counter, who had shown grave disrespect by questioning the change he had received.

Luther needed to hear no more. Joe the deli man was wearing a white paper cap with the word “NEXT” in all caps because it fit with the economy of his mind to be spare with his speech. Luther bowed down to the brilliance and the audacity of the concise directive and showed abundant amiability in his manner when his turn at the counter came. He did not want the fire that was in Joe Deli to come and burn him good. He wanted only the fire of his soup to warm his insides as he savored it in the privacy of his office.

For Sarah’s birthday he brought her flowers and a box of chocolates. The sweets weren’t quite right for a woman putting on weight the way she was. It was bad enough that night after night she sat there on the carpet in front of the little TV with her quarts of Haagen

Daz ice cream and her Pepperidge Farm cookies. She was tense. She was sad. All that weeping. Over her hair, her life, her illness. He wasn't doing right by her with a thoughtless gift. And there was the gift, if it could be called that, he still hadn't given her. Over two years it had been, and she still didn't have a ring to wear on her finger. Nor did he. Needing to buy something for someone he didn't really want to buy it for. That's what it came down to. Fakery all around him. He the biggest fake of all, living the lie day after day. Celeste a pilot light of love deep within him. To be torn away from her like that. And torn away from the bottle as well. Almost too much. Through one outwardly bland day after another the fire still burned. Those smoldering sexual images that drove him to the bathroom—at home, at work—to masturbate. And all that even though she had put the kibosh on him, kicking him back down the stairs so she could be alone with the satyr. He acting as if she had never discarded the love thing they had had. High hurdling all the evidence so he could keep her his in his mind, as if she was the best thing that had ever happened to him or that could happen to him.

Not that he was so good about staying away from sugar himself. In his drinking days he had prided himself on having little interest in desserts, not realizing that the alcohol he consumed converted to sugar in his bloodstream. Those Swedish fish he would stuff his face with as he rode the subway home from work. And how he had known Haagen Daz nights himself, spooning it out of the carton just like Hannah used to do in the days of Breyer's ice cream.

Now there was a RoR meeting on St. Mark's Place called The Living End. The meeting was on the ground floor of the building that had once housed the Electric Circus. Gone were the strobe lights and light shows and the driving sound of the Holler Heads and the pot-smoking, acid-dropping throngs. The nineteen sixties had vacated the premises completely. The grayed out stoners who had once been upstairs were now seated downstairs in folding chairs drinking coffee from paper cups in a vast room with a makeshift platform. One half the room was for smokers, the other for nonsmokers. As if the smoke would respect the division and stay on its side of the room.

From the window he saw across to the LowLife Tavern, where he would stop off on his rounds back when. The sound of the Filthy Ones' "Proud Mary" found its way out of the bar and to his ears, the big noise of gritty Southern guys having the power to make him want to dance in his seat. The meeting had a different atmosphere than some of the others. A more low bottom crowd, for one thing. Men with bad teeth and dirty hair and dirty clothes up from the men's shelter on Third Street, some attracted more by the coffee and cookies than the message of recovery, Luther sensed. Urine- and feces-tainted pools of water in the bathrooms, owing to toilets overflowing.

*Celeste, there were men of violence at the meeting, men who would strike women in their private as well as public places, men who could not restrain the anger that informed their lives. One named Bastinado punched a woman in her eye as she sat at the back of the room, and the other men of the meeting, those who had the courage, those committed to keeping the violence in check, rose up and chested Bastinado from the room, daring him to strike them as he had the woman he had caused to fall from her*

*chair. He did not go against them. He did not raise his coward's fist, but kept it at his cowering side.*

*Now there are warriors in their imaginations who, in the idleness of their days, will tell you that The Living End was a bucket of blood meeting, but they are only telling tales of bravery and wildness it was not theirs to experience. Every RoR meeting has its unruly element awaiting the opportunity for chaos to erupt; however, all but the most irredeemable are pacified by the singleness of purpose that defines such groups—the desire, the absolute need, to stay sober.*

*It was at that meeting that I was to meet a friend who was to become less of a friend as the years passed, but here again, we must be methodical in our march so the days that we lived can be covered in the comprehensive manner that they must if order is to abound and truth have its way.*

*But never mind any of this, just never mind. The important thing is that I had a place to go, to call my home away from home, on a Tuesday or Thursday evening, should I need to, here in New York City, where I planned to live and live until my day for dying came.*

Sarah understood that spring was coming, too. Into the world she was often shunning for having shunned her she went for cosmetics, two new blouses, and a skirt. It really was sunshine on a cloudy day. She is lifting a boulder from my chest when she does things for herself, Luther thought. She was among the living. She had not been deceased before her

time. Because, like any American, he wanted sun-shiny days and not the gloom of forever darkness.

But there was no sun that night, no light burning bright in his mind. He came home too tired to write. Against the tyranny of his own fatigue he felt powerless, like a man being buried alive under the ever-increasing weight of reality. I cannot have this circumstance every day, he thought. I must write to live and live to write. He stared at Black Beauty, his IBM Selectric III. You are my good friend, he said. You will do me no wrong, and I will do you no wrong either. And then he thought, instead of a wedding ring for Sarah, I have bought a typewriter for myself. My typewriter is my marriage, my love, my life.

if Sarah bought with the no-fault insurance money he had received, he bought even more: two sports jackets at B. Altman and two pairs of shoes at Brooks Brothers, so he could be spared the humiliation of clothes that hung shapeless on his body and made him feel bad. Because that is what such clothes did; they activated a torment unending in your mind until you had dropped them to the floor. They made you dead in the life you were trying to live. Because looking good was feeling good. So he could look and feel important, even if he was not, like his father before him in the days of Robert Hall, when the values went up up up and the prices went down down down.

As for Glanton, he was showing himself to be a man for winter and for the coming spring. When Luther expressed his regret for the faux pas he had made with Bruce Bill, clumsily inquiring as to Bruce Bill's feelings about having been let go by Cromartie

Wonders, Glanton did not just commiserate with him. He offered a solution. “Sit quietly and visualize how you might have handled the situation differently,” Glanton said. In this and many other ways did Luther know that Glanton was the real thing and that he had struck gold in finding him.

*But Celeste, you must not think that I was on easy street because I had come clean as to the wrongs I had committed and whom I had committed them against. There were many reasons for the manufacture of discontent in regard to my current spiritual status, if you will, as a guard against complacency. If one is to have no past and no future but only the eternal now, then he must go out and face those posses riding hard with their sticks of studded hickory for the beating of an individual on his head and arms and all parts they can locate on his person, as it is not only the adverse actions I have taken but the vilifying tendencies of my mind. The one finger I had pointed at the world meant that three fingers were pointing back at me, as RoR members are fond of saying. And those fingers pointing back were now saying, How about you, Luther? What was your part in the war on many fronts that you waged?*

And so Luther saw, with the help of Glanton, that in regard to his father, there had been anger and hurt and dismissal where the natural order of things called for love. The journey seemed one whose distance he could not traverse, but if there was a whiter shade of pale, there had to also be a lighter shade of black. And so it was for Luther to understand that understanding had to have its place if forgiveness was to have its place.

Because the smacking hand of his father, raised high to the perfect height and angle, was not all that he was about, nor was Jack Dempsey's Restaurant, nor was the literature of A. A. Allen and Morris Cerullo and the mighty Oral Roberts. His father had come from a land far away, and while it was a land overrun with corpses, his father had not been a corpse. He had been a human being. He had come to America, where he met Luther's mother, and together they had given him life, while Luther, at age thirty-three, had given life to no one.

All this would he have to reassess.

As for his sister Hannah, he would have to call out the iniquity of his disease for shielding him from the truth that he had not sought any understanding of his oldest sister: what it meant that she had been the firstborn and thus the primary recipient of parental dictates; to have been alone with their father while their mother worked as a domestic for a Park Avenue couple who taught her to cook American dishes, including apple pie; to have absorbed so much shame for having a son *out of wedlock* in a time different and less forgiving than Luther's own; for having called her, behind her back, Mount Hannah and The Load and She Who Smacks with Her Fat Tongue Clamped Between Thick Lips and for disturbing her peace as she sat in the dark watching *Million Dollar Movie* and eating her spoonful of Breyer's chocolate fudge ice cream by coming with Luke and Vera from the bedroom with a sheet over their heads and making a noise disturbing to her ears and provoking her wrath sufficient that she had no choice but to smack and smack and smack. All this would he have to atone for if he was to live with a right mind toward himself and her, for he was she and she was he and they were all together.

And he would have to call out his disease for denying the legitimacy of his sister Naomi's illness, which contributed to her vileness of tongue and her own brand of smacking, so that when she stood out on the ledge far above Broadway, he was only able, beyond his fear, to see her in her histrionic glory, seeking one way or another to be the center of attention. This too had to be called out if he was to give his sister her due for being the sick person that she was.

*Celeste, for Rachel there was no need of a calling out, for love had ruled wherever it was she stood, and sadness too ruled the same land, because wherever she stood was aloneness standing. She had gone to the great Vassar College. She had studied for a year at the great Barnard College. Around her shoulders had she worn the mantle of the world. She had been in the world and the light of the world had been bright within her, extending itself to me. She had come bearing hope, while Hannah and Naomi had offered only darkness.*

*But that last is not right. I must not go against the grain of truthfulness. Naomi had had her light too. She had had it when she stood up to Luigi, the Sicilian upholsterer, who chased me down and banged me on the head with a frying pan for having sat in one of his restored chairs after he had warned me not to. "How dare you hurt a child?" she had said, with genuine anger in her voice and face. "What is wrong with you?" In that moment was she my big sister, even though I deserved the beaming and much, much more. And as I have said before, she brought the sun when she sang those Broadway show tunes, "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right out of My Hair" and "Hard-Hearted Hannah" as Rachel accompanied her on the upright in our parents' bedroom back when I was a*



*child. They had summoned the light of Broadway and the world with their singing and playing, chasing away for the moment "The Old Rugged Cross," with all its mournfulness.*

*And there is this too, Celeste, as we approach the portal of eternity and see that love is the answer and its absence the problem and increasingly anguish over its deficit in the course of our lifetime. Institutions had become Naomi's second home. She was known to the staff in the psychiatric unit of Bellevue and St. Luke's and Rockland State and others. All of them she had survived, habituated by now to a daily diet of meds whether in or out of such facilities. But Manhattan State Hospital, a complex of soul-less buildings on Ward's Island, was a first for her. It was not a good place to be in the early 1970s, if ever it had been. There were frequent reports in the media of violence among patients and abusive practices by staff. As I have noted, there was that one day she called as I sat in the renting office. She was weeping. The wolves had been put in with the lambs. She was being intimidated by others on the floor who hit her and demanded money, cigarettes, whatever she had. When she complied, the beatings continued. Couldn't someone come and help her?*

*Did I go to visit her on that day, Celeste? Did I? Or did I imagine the animalistic scene out there and fear for my own safety? Did I show cowardice or bravery in the moment when I understood that this was my sister on the line and she was, in fact, a human being in need? What I did, Celeste, was go to my mother and tell her of Naomi's distress. A man would have gone right out to Wards Island but I went to Mommy and that night to the bottle. Some days later she was found dead, as you know, her body bloated*

*and drifting in the currents of the polluted East River near the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge when spotted by a police patrol boat. There are things we must live with, Celeste, things that stop us in our tracks and leave us aghast at our own paltry dimensions.*

*Celeste, we must bring truth where there have been lies, whatever the cost to our narrative. We must boldly hit that lie on the head with a hammer and see what its true content is. And that imperative includes Hannah, whose darkness, dare we say it, was less than monolithic. Because she had the world in her too at times, as when she took Luke and Vera and me to the swimming pool in the St. George Hotel, in Brooklyn Heights, after the women of the church had tried to fill us with the rocks of ancient Judea and Samaria during Friday afternoon Bible School. She would come with her friend Spice, who had a voice loud and full of cigarettes and whiskey. From some mystery place in the city did they arrive, for as I have said, we were forbidden to get too personal with Hannah, lest she raise up with her hand or barking mouth, shame being deep-rooted in her. If she was to survive, then we, and everyone, were obliged to steer clear of her business. And so she showed us a kind of love on those evenings down at the world's largest indoor swimming pool, as it was advertised to be. And though she had her smacking hands, she had her faithfulness, too. I had wanted her to go away so I could live, and she in fact tried. As I have said, she fell down in front of the hardware store and sued the owner for the concussion she received, citing negligence. As I have also said, she had dreams of a settlement that would make her rich and enable her to journey to Greece and move into her own apartment and spend her evenings before a big color TV. But the lawsuit was dismissed as frivolous, and so there was no travel, no apartment, no new TV. She moved*

*back into the family apartment after Luke and Vera and I moved out so she would have it all to herself when my mother passed away. But so what? So what? Was she not there while my mother was there? Was she not there so I didn't have to be as my mother grew older? Hadn't she, in this sense, given me my freedom even if she could not claim her own?*

So yes, he was forced to acknowledge the goodness amid the darkness that his oldest sister had shown. So was it that his disease was being punched in the face so he might live.

*Now Celeste, as you know, there was one who did not fall down and die right before me, one who, in fact, rose and rose to a state of ascendancy for all time, like some colossus of old, and whose ascent was marked by jeering, mocking, and innuendo following the theft of my father and the exercise of increasing hegemony over my family to the exclusion of me, she being one who killed me dead each and every time whether I was in the same room with her or far apart, as like Stalin before her, she was a master of icepick love and her reach was long insofar as displaying it.*

*You are doubtless as tired of me as I need to be of myself, but an accounting is an accounting and tedium must therefore have its place. As I have documented, Vera began to exhibit ostracizing tendencies in the long ago when she called down my father's artillery on me, and ever since I can truthfully say I have experienced great pressure emanating from her against my very existence. I am left with love as the only solution to this increasing sense of separation from her even as I hold out no hope for its healing*

*power in this particular instance. What I mean to say is that she will continue to go her way and I will go mine with a widening gap.*

*Here are the things I owe her for if order is to be reestablished:*

*--I pooped in the bathtub as our mother bathed us together when we were still toddlers.*

*--I later passed gas in her face.*

*--I moved up on the danger list by shooting a rubber band-propelled half of a paperclip that left a two-inch gash in her hand but could have put out her eye.*

*--I quelled her teenage rebellion, dragging her inside the apartment from the landing, where she had been sitting with Pam Becker after my mother said, "We cannot have this. We cannot have this." I came to Vera not with love but with the righteous anger of my father.*

*--I succumbed to family shame shame double shame when Vera requested, on several occasions, that I introduce her to Tom Smits. If I was not good enough for him, then why would she be either? So my reasoning went. Never mind that she had pushed me to go out with her friend Pam Becker. We must live with our lack of loyalty, Celeste, and call such moral cowardice what it is. To not stand proud behind one's own flesh and blood will, over time, lead one to his own reckoning. He will stand instead in the shadow of death and long for it, seeing as he does in a flash the consequence of immorality and the squandering of precious relationships. Can the truth be borne, Celeste? Can I acknowledge that I was ashamed of everyone, of my own flesh and blood, and thus had to stand alone in the world, lacking any real context whatsoever?*

*--And now we come to the place where iniquity assumes the throne, where I not only deny Vera Tom Smits's supercilious love but seek to deny my sister her very future by hiding her schoolbooks where they cannot be found. For fear, the deformed child of woeful insecurity, has me. Vera has begun to come alive in the classroom. Her grades have soared and did she not say that she scored in a high percentile on a standardized reading test? And is not on her face, newly arrived, an intimidating smile of confident insurgency? For all time will I be seen for who I am should I screw my courage to the sticking post and go to her with what I have done.*

*--For all time as well has the face of fear and envy been captured for the universe to witness when Vera some years later—fear being a form of negative prayer, as Glanton says—comes to the renting office, where I have now been for some years extracting sums of money, and announces to me her acceptance to Columbia's graduate school of literature. Click went the camera of justice for evidentiary posting before she fled the scene of my distress for those who would receive her news more happily. It is all right, Celeste. It is all right. We must allow others to see us as we truly are even if the image they have seized on is not who we truly are, for whatever that image is that we have presented them with for deposit in their judgment bank have we long since vacated the premises of. It is but a relic of the past, as we are in motion. Let them live in the mausoleum of discarded identities if that is their wish, but we have moved on. I understand that the fire can sometimes be withering seeking to retard our progress, but let us acknowledge that some bullets are being fired from within chambers of our increasingly one mind.*

*--Now, Celeste, do we come to a further exhibit in my hall of shame, and here the renting office figures as well. As I have previously noted, Vera came once again to the office window as I sat there, but on this occasion her expression was not one of radiant joy and her mouth held itself silent. This was in the time of Roberto, whose premises I had managed to vacate, owing to newfound resources, for the Hell's Kitchen apartment. Less than a year before had I been deposited in the New Haven Men's Detention Center after the judge, in the full throes of his righteous indignation, set bail at five hundred dollars, a sum seemingly impossible for me to raise. Celeste, we must fend for ourselves in this world. That was the reality that came to me in the aftermath of those few days I spent in the facility, days that could have turned into weeks and even months, were it not for the mercy and kindness of the Van Dines. That was the real meaning of the epiphany I had en route to the day care center where I worked part-time as a feckless tutor after my release from custody. I was alone. I had always been alone. There was no safety net should I fall. I had seen what money could do for Sarah, with her trust fund, and what the lack of it could do to me. The rationalization that the Garatdjian women, or some of them, had conspired to keep the Garatdjian men out of the renting office and the sense that my mother was allowing Simon Weill to help himself to money that wasn't his, by terms of the lease, provided moral cover for my insertion of myself into that tiny, cramped office. In addition, I had it on the word of emissaries of the then President of the United States, RMN, that my operation was well within the then prevailing national zeitgeist. But you know the story. You know it very well, Celeste. Vera had taken the room I had given up in Roberto's apartment, and it was not long before she found the book from which I had*

*been issuing receipts to tenants for rent paid without entering the amounts into the daily tally. With all her shaming devices intact and operational did she arrive at the office window and silently pass me that book, evidence so incriminating it required not a word from her, before splitting, leaving me to contemplate my own wretchedness. So yes, I must acknowledge and atone for the shock to her moral sense the discovery of the secret receipt book caused, for she was not of my kind. She had not been in my mother's pocketbook as a child, nor had she entered Auntie Eve's apartment on the sly. She was one of the Garatdjian brood, and had not sought to exist apart from it.*

*--Now we come to the commencement ceremony on the campus of Columbia University, with the statue of Alma Mater. Though I was proud of her for her achievement, I primarily viewed it as a defeat for me, and a crushing one. And so there was no way for me to show the same loyalty to her that she would surely have shown me had it been I wearing the cap and gown and receiving my degree. We need say little more about this absence, as we know the defect that was operating, the vengeance I insanely sought by denying loved ones my presence. We know the corrosive regret that I could not be more than I was. My only relationship to Columbia University had been as a young vandal and in the company of a pedophile campus guard. I was but a permanent outsider, a visitor within its gates but not its buildings and classrooms and dormitories. It can be hard to deal with, this coalition of the missing and the never found that occupies so much of my thought space. And yet what is one to do but continue the battle, sending in the reinforcements that RoR has provided me with through the higher power. There are those of us who come into this life with no sorrow tags upon them, and then there are those who*

*are covered with them, and for those of us in the latter category, who lack the beefcake body and the scintillating mind and the back of our heads, we must be on guard against the brutality of the former; as there will always be those in that category who would deny us an outlet for our sorrow and further, would do so with one switchblade sentence, and in so doing seek to gut us for all time. But I have taken us far from where I need to be, the place of atonement, that oneness with myself and others might eventually be achieved. So this wrong I must acknowledge*

*--As well as the other absence, from Vera's wedding.*

*Diligence, Celeste, diligence. The river of forgiveness is not an easy one to cross. The currents make it treacherous, especially where there has been transgression by the other. But we have prayer to take us where we could not go before. And so, when I felt the willingness had come, and after speaking with Glanton, I moved forward.*

*I simply told Vera there were some things of a personal nature I needed to discuss with her. Hearing my request, she buried no hatchet in my head. We met at an Indian restaurant near my place of work. I told her flat out that she had grown into a colossus while I had been reduced to a speck. I added that I had viewed her success as a reproach to me and that a serious flaw in my makeup was the inability to persevere. When a challenge grew too big in my mind, I simply quit. So I had done when faced with tenth grade biology. So I had done with law school. I was capable of occupying myself with only the simple things of life. Thus, my high school classmate Diane Coleman's taunt, the Monday following the Saturday on which I had failed to show up for the PSAT. "That spelling section was pretty tough, wasn't it Luther?" she called to me while she sat*



*with her entourage in the cafeteria at lunch break. With that mock query did she define me for all time. She was seeing what the Cat Lady, in my building, saw some years later, that I was indeed just a hanging string. All I was good for were things like the spelling bees I had excelled in back in seventh grade. This was not a crime, I told Vera. As I have said many times, people have stations in life for which they are suited. Problems only arise when people do not accept their stations. The common mistake of humankind, I further said, is the delusion that the next time they will do better. I told Vera that she was the exception, perhaps the only one, and brought up her love of Theodore Dreiser, in particular his novel Sister Carrie, for in it he credits the heroine with an emotional intelligence unnoticed and thus unappreciated by the world. Therein lay her gift, not in intelligence as the world judges it. Thus had Dreiser given Vera hope that she could rise above the circumstance and station of those fated to be a Garatdjian. As for myself, I shared, the only hope I had for torquing power was the Lord.*

*“The what?” she replied.*

*“Not that Lord, not the one of the madman preacher at the camp for the Christ Jesus. Not the one who roasts us forever,” I quickly assured her, “but the one I have found through RoR.”*

*“And what is RoR?”*

*Did she not know? I told her it was for drunks who had received a savage beating from alcohol and who now were determined to live a different way. But I also told her that time was passing, and that it was for another occasion to fasten onto the*

*intricacies of RoR. For now, I must remain mission bound, and so it was imperative that I present her with a question of great moment involving a time back in time.*

*“Are you all right?” she countered.*

*Being on the cusp of a new day, I could only nod and continue. “We are talking about high school now, not commemorative moments but those that exist in the shameful shadows of compromised time.” Before she could query me, because I sensed a question forming, I went on. “Those books of yours from high school? One year in particular? Perhaps your sophomore year? Do you remember textbooks and notebooks that went missing from the premises of our building?”*

*No vagueness clouded her eyes or voice.*

*“I certainly do,” she said, as if she had raced on ahead of me in the unfolding narrative. Already was she preparing to step into the black robes of righteous indignation.*

*“Well, I have to tell you that I am the one,” I said.*

*“The one what? The Messiah?”*

*“No. But that for many years mendacity ruled my kingdom, that is, my actions were not in alignment with my words. Mr. Two-Faced Man had I become. Or there were the times when my actions were not preceded or followed by my words. I do not remember if you queried me directly about your missing school materials, but surely you put out a global alert. Thus was I included in your missive of distress and yet held my silence.”*

*“What language is this you are speaking?”*

*“The language of truth in league with the necessity for freedom.”*

*“Of course.”*

*“So I was the one.”*

*“Oh no, we’re back to that again? The one what?”*

*“The one who tried to take your future from you. Obviously, I did not succeed.”*

*“Why are you telling me this?”*

*“I must let myself out of this prison of my own making.”*

*“Have you considered seeing a therapist?”*

*She knocked me back with her question and gave shame fertile ground in which to grow. She seemed to have slapped the label “sick” on me even as I was trying to heal.*

*“I am working with one of the finest in the land. Dr. Rosner is his name.”*

*“Well, maybe you need to work a little harder.”*

*Celeste, I left Vera feeling somewhat down, as if a basis for human understanding had been denied me. Doubt began to grip me about the efficacy of my action. Had it been merely an exercise in self-abasement? But as I walked the endless streets back toward home my spiritual bearings returned. I had done something important, however clumsily. I had sought to atone and the conviction came that by turns Vera would understand what had transpired. And if she didn’t, that would be of no great consequence. Other opportunities would arise for the dissolution of the barriers to love.*

He had wrongs to right in all areas and one was a wrong he had also done to himself, if only he would know it. But it was not falling to him what that thing was by the light of

his own understanding. That was for a young man named Clyde to awaken him to in spite of the evangelical fervor with which he led the RoR meeting, Clyde being a man speaking in a rush of certainty as he was powerless not to and punctuating every sentence with Christ Jesus. But Luther did not want to make it about Clyde when it was about him because Luther saw the one finger pointing outward while the other three were pointing back at him. Following program guidance, he took what he needed and left the rest, because Clyde had particular words of pertinence for him. "I had parking violations that I had to pay after ignoring them for years," Clyde said, causing Luther to confess that he too had amassed a number of parking fines during his Volkswagen Beetle days. Hearing what he did, Clyde came back strong, saying, with full throttle righteousness, "You have to pay those fines if you want to stay sober."

Jarred by Clyde's retort, Luther left the meeting and sought whatever comfort Glanton could provide, saying "Is it so? Is it so? Must I die and die?" not about the tickets but something of bigger and more dread-inspiring moment, Clyde's response having led him from municipal violations to the sums extracted from the renting office in the years of his tenure, 1968-1974. If he was hoping that his query would be a prelude to a kiss, Glanton had his own stern thing going on, saying "You absolutely do" and reading to Luther a dictionary definition of embezzlement. In mind and body was Luther distorted by this new addition to his consciousness, and yet he made the adjustment without bursting. I can bend without breaking. I am like Pascal's slender and supple reed yielding to the mighty wind while the rigid oak is uprooted. So Luther thought in that very moment. But a more forceful pensée quickly came to dominate his mentality. A man is

not a man who hides behind a woman's skirt, as Luther had hidden since childhood whenever Simon Weill appeared on the premises or had run in hysterical and enraged search of his mother should he have the misfortune of picking up the phone when Simon Weill called and asked to speak to her. No man could live with such cowardice forever, and yet Simon Weill was no ordinary nemesis, he with the soft voice that traveled entire continents, ensuring everybody listened. And Luther was no army in the night but an eternal anomic ectomorph, with a voice that traveled not the world but three feet.

But now was Luther shaking off the closely guarding cycle of disbelief in himself. *With God on my side.* The words echoed in his ears. *With God by my side. With God in my side.* A saying he previously had no truck with now filled him with aphoristic strength. That so, he had no choice but to get after it.

"Simon Weill, please."

"Speaking."

"Luther Garatdjian here to right a wrong."

"I'm listening."

Luther gave him the history so there would be no mystery. He was counting on full disclosure to minimize the eradicating impulses of his terrifying foe.

There was a long pause. "I won't hold you to repaying the money you took. I will let you decide. You should know that you were not the only one."

Simon Weill did not come and beat him with a stick, nor did he dispatch his men of violence, with their knit shirts buttoned at the top, to break Luther's bones in all

the places that bones can be broken. Still, he had planted a bomb in Luther's psyche and then detonated it. *You were not the only one.*

Luther sent Simon Weill a check for a small amount—thirty dollars—that month, and committed himself to doing the same for all the months and years that followed so he could be free of the man's darkness and live in a light that hadn't been compromised. Then he went to his mother in the quiet of the afternoon and spoke with her, saying what he had said to Simon Weill, that he had done wrong when he ought to have done right. He did not say that he had begun to repay Simon Weill, only that he was considering it, causing his mother, debilitated back and all, to rise up.

“Have you completely lost your mind, my foolish son? The man is a crook. The man is Lucifer himself. Do not give him a single penny. Do you hear me?”

And it was for Luther to say that he did hear her, though he did not add that he heard her from the vantage point of his own understanding.

Big Balls aka Him Who Spread His Legs So Wide spoke again at the Saturday night meeting. People could not get enough of him. They said as much. “I could eat your words with a spoon,” said one, quickly surpassed in grotesqueness by another who said “I ate up every word and then licked the plate.” His story involved a Volkswagen van in which he slept as his drinking progressed, and of sodden days darker than any nightmare. He was an artful storyteller, cinematic. Luther was an appreciative witness to Wide Spread's intelligence. It seemed at such a level as to make envy impossible. Nearing the nadir of alcoholic despair, WS called out one night, “God help me.” The response was immediate.

“We’ll help you.” Right then and there did God speak to WS. He went on with his story. “You see, in baseball, there is such a thing as a finisher, whether he comes from the port side or the right side. He is out there on the mound to slam the door, put out the fire, whatever metaphor you choose. The point is that he is out there to bring things to an end. But, you see, I was not a wrapper upper. I was not a seal the deal kind of guy. I was an extender, a prolonger ad infinitum, not a closer. But not now. Not now. With God on my side, I seal the deal. Call me the finisher par excellence. As a result, many awards and rewards have come to me.”

A closer indeed. No disputing that. Closes everything but those fat legs of his.

But I am not a closer or a finisher or anything of the kind. I am an open-ender. I cannot even finish the YA novel that I have started. I must go away from this man before he makes me ill with his happiness and fulfillment.

Lest Luther think his cogitations on the matter of God and Wide Spread had no carry beyond the contours of his own mind, some days later he was asked to speak at a RoR meeting where the writer was present. But even as Luther was being introduced by the chairperson, the writer promptly left, saying with his action that he had previously ascertained Luther’s dimensions and found them wanting. Before he vacated the premises, he treated Luther to a full frontal view of his maximum stretch and showed him a satyr’s leer so Luther could know where he was coming from. From the street Luther heard the strong sound of Creedence Clearwater holler rasping “Bad Moon Rising.” The dire lyrics meant nothing to him, only the sound, which told him he had no need to be the prisoner of sorrow. And so he let the song float him above the concept and the reality of a

hanging string so he could say the words he needed to say to the group that had assembled.

Luther did not carry his brother with him night and day, but it was worrisome in this time that Luke was on the slippery slope. So when his mother called to say that he was back in detox, there was nothing for it but for sadness and concern to show themselves again.

“What he needs is for Rose to smash those bottles of his against the rocks, as I once did for my father,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

It was not for Luther to tell his mother that her smashing action had availed her little insofar as her father’s demise soon followed. But it was for him to say that Luke’s stay in another detox was not a story in itself but the next chapter in a story, that Luke was in the grip of an illness progressive in nature.

“He has to want to stop.” Luther was only repeating the fellowship wisdom in RoR that alcoholics have to drink until they have had enough. They have to be left alone to hit their bottom. And yet, for many there was no bottom, just institutions or jails or death. Suppose Luke kept falling and falling, like the sots down below on the Bowery? Suppose he too made of the sidewalk his bed?

“Yes, of course,” Mrs. Garatdjian said.

“I’m afraid for him.” The words “I am sore afraid” had come to him but he did not speak them, as to do so would be to mock his mother, and it was not for him to disrespect her ever in that way.

“Give all your fear to Jesus.”



“Right,” he said. He could find no basis for argument in what she said.

Luther started the weekend strong, going down to Second Avenue to get filled up on eggs over easy and hash browns, and a blueberry muffin toasted, on which he watched the tab of hard butter succumb to the heat. Then he went to the Strand, where he purchased a biography of Abraham Lincoln by Chicago Carl Sandburg, so he could get filled up on knowledge and live in a sense of the president’s nobility.

But there was no nobility in Luther, only soreness reigning, that Sunday night when Sarah came home from a visit to her sister, Claire. The anger that could be his found him when she didn’t come to him as he lay in the loft bed but instead did a dawdle dance in her studio, stalling him, just stalling him, so as to make his need for her conspicuous. It did not sit right with him that she should negate his existence and so castigation was in order, though that it should be of the severest kind he could not have predicted. “You deserved to be run around on,” he screamed.

He slept with his pain that night. In the morning he woke to the destruction he had caused. Because there was no way to be forgiven for having fallen so far below the accepted standard of decency, he continued to carry on.

“Do you wish to beat me with a stick? Do you wish to murder me where I stand? Do you wish to flee to the women on the hill with the baked beans? What is your plan for my disposal? Do not be withholding. Share it with me now.”

“This, nitwit,” Sarah said, and hurled a book at him as he stood below, and then another, missing with both but managing to smash the medicine chest mirror above the sink.

The morning was a miserable aberration of meaningless sound. Time, as it had a tendency to do, got vicious on him. Seeing the emotional pain he was in, the minute hand chose to stay in place so as to perpetuate his torment. Repeatedly did he call the loft but Sarah did not pick up the receiver and give him the relief that he was seeking. So from work back to the subway did he run, only to encounter the further viciousness of the train dawdling outside the station and merely moseying along once it did. Then, from the Bleecker Street station to the loft did he run that with his own eyes he might ascertain whether Sarah was dead or alive, the fear having grown monstrous that she had expired herself. He let himself in and inched forward, the stillness strongly communicating a sense of danger. The books were where they had fallen, sending a shiver through him.

“I have a hole in my heart that is not healing,” he shouted, into the eerie silence. No answer. He paused on the bottom rung of the ladder. “Sarah? Are you up there?” But the quiet persisted. He climbed higher and saw her lying in the ruin of her dream under the bedding. He shook her foot and she began to stir. “Are you among the living?”

“What are you doing here?” She was groggy, only half emerged from the sleep she wanted to claim her.

“What do you have against the phone that required me to be here?”

“What do you have against my life?”

She was in the gray hell of her life and he had put her there. His mind turned to Naomi and Chuck and the dreariness of their drunken and druggy days. I am the shit maker, he thought. I turn even beauty and talent such as Sarah possessed into shit.

“Will I ever be forgiven, or must I fall down dying forever?”

“Just stop your crap, Luther. Just stop it now.”

“Do you promise not to avenge yourself on me with death, so I will have to live there too even as I continue to breathe?”

“Just please go away.” Sarah fell back on the bed.

“I must have your commitment to stay among the living. I must. Are you hearing me?”

“Go away, I said.”

“I love you.”

She made no response.

“That is all you can give me, your silence?”

It evidently was.

Later in the same week did big Carola Aprile and her boyfriend, big Tom Terst (he had none of the issues of Hunger Longing; he had his own life. And they were not big, not in their bodies, they were small to the size of each other, like Tom and Theresa Thumb, but they were big in their minds.) came to visit, and if they saw the cracked mirror, they did not comment, as they were too busy gushing over Sarah’s work. If they did no gushing over Luther’s work, it was because it was not for him to show himself to them, and

besides, they had already ascertained his dimensions, including his abusiveness to Sarah. They saw that he did not have the blond lightness of Tom Terst. They saw instead that he had the dark sadness of his low intelligence. They saw it sitting in his face and everything his defeated eyes showed them. He felt his repulsiveness being in their midst. There he was, a dull and lifeless man, the sort, as Carola had once said, who could do English but not math. And so he nodded as they spoke and held on to himself, so he did not go away from himself, if not from them, forever. And all the while was there the desire to show them who he was as soon as he had made himself presentable to do just that.

*Now Celeste, we have all heard of Samuel Beckett and are familiar with bits and pieces of his oeuvre (that word). For me the lines with the most personal significance are “I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now.” Why? Because an opening such as that could set the tone, in its profound simplicity, for an eternity of writing. The other is, “You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” This passage as well I derive hope and strength from, but not as consistently as from the first. Why is that? For the obvious reason that Samuel Beckett was an internationally recognized author; while I am, well, me, borne along at times by a stream of doubt of nightmare proportions. The work is not good enough. No one in his right mind—or wrong mind—would wish to read such an opus of despair. Already are the face police at the door, ready to place me under house arrest for my long face. Smile, they demand, their anger rising, for they cannot countenance pain, having been apprised of my tome full of whining and whinging and extreme feebleness. They have ascertained that this writer is distinguished only by his ineptitude and fatuity.*

*So I am left, every day, with the understanding that the heroic pose is not to go on but to stare into the sun until I am blind, as what good does sight do me if I cannot see? Many, many are the manly men massing, those with muscular prose to go with their mighty limbs. Stalwart in their forcefulness are they that demand I cease and desist and stay where I belong. I will try, Celeste. I will try to let this be an exercise in restraint. See me put down my pen. See me idle. See me bury myself in the grave of apathy. But really, let us stop, let us finally stop. There is no massing. There is no nothing, only emptiness outside my front door. The world has something better to do than witness someone stew in his own juices.*

Dr. Rosner was a man in motion. He was going away again.

“Are you headed for the sun? Are you tired of winter pallor?”

“What do you think of my going away?”

“I think the sun is hot. I think it burns and burns if you let it.”

“Are you the sun, burning and burning?”

“I wouldn’t think so.”

“You don’t have a burning anger about my going away?”

“I am a peaceful nation.”

“A peaceful nation in a time of war?”

“I would never say that. So where does that leave us?”

“Here. Right here. You and me,” Dr. Rosner said.

“Yes. There must be some truth to that,” Luther could only think to say.

*Now in this time, Celeste, there was a man, a manly man, who went where fear would not allow me to tread. He bore witness, as a journalist, to the Vietnam War not on TV newscasts or in a film set to the rock and roll music of the holler heads, but with all his senses reporting there in Hué and Khe Sanh and My Lai and the Mekong Delta. He reported on the rich redness of a soldier's blood and of organs exposed to the cruelty of the air and grown, corn-fed men crying out as they lay dying for their mothers. All this he saw and wrote about in poetic yet masculine prose collected in a volume titled Dispatches. And is it not true that we all have duties and functions in this life and some of us have to accept the circumscribed circumstances that fear creates as the architect of our existence, as when I did not journey to Chicago to protest the war at the Democratic National Convention in 1968? Why? I did not want my skull fractured by the leaded billy club of an officer of the law. It was as simple as that. Once more I must say it: I had my own war to fight, and it was with Sarah and her family and my own. The shame of it, Celeste. The shame.*

Three essentials for writing success:

1. Tough narrative voice. "Here's the way it was. Thursday, the Ninth, I was on my way to a lunch date with Billingsgate."
2. Do not tolerate unresolved situations. Do not tolerate them, I say.
3. Exaggerate situations, emotions, everything. Do it, I say. Do it.

There was something happening here, and it wasn't exactly clear, just as Buffalo Springfield had sung. Luther had that thought after a Glanton weigh-in.

“One thing I don't like about shrinks is that when they go off, where does that leave the patient? The patient becomes dependent on them. But if you put everything you have into RoR, then you don't have to fear that happening. Then when things get rough, you can go to the bank.”

Was that a rebel yell? Was that the Grays firing on Fort Sumter? Was that Glanton firing on the Union blue of Dr. Rosner, demanding—dirty word—secession? Well, Luther didn't have to bother his head with the historicity of things. He could leave that to others. He needed only to relate to the things that related to him, and deploy the guiding question, “What does this have to do with me?” And what would he find if he did? A lot or a little. All he could know for certain was that he must be sure to ask.

Frieda Volcker came to him in a daylight hour with a night-time confession. She spoke now not from a space bursting with sunlight but from the dark side of her life. “I am going back only so I can go forward. You of all people must understand.”

Luther stared at Frieda Volcker. Sweat beads had formed on her Kirk Douglas face and broad-based sensors reached into him. “Going back where?” he asked.

“I don't have time for this. Acknowledge what you already understand. I command you. Germany, of course. My freedom is on the line.”

She spoke with uncharacteristic impatience, and worse, causing Luther to be afraid to show ignorance of any kind in the face of her ferocity.

“I see,” he said.

But she tore the mask off his deceit. “No, you don’t. You don’t see what I see. I was wrong. But you need to see. Just as I cannot go forward unless I go back, you must do the same. My boyfriend is calling me. He would have me return to type up his papers for him and be his secretary. He would have me settle under him so he can be above, but this I do not want, I do not want to be under anyone. And you, you are the same. I have seen it for a long time, and then I saw it up close and in living color when I visited your loft. You don’t belong with this woman. You must leave her. But you must do so methodically, as I am doing. Have I made myself clear? Now are you understanding?”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“So I can tell myself. Why else?”

“Yes, I can see your wisdom showing,” Luther said, helpless in the face of her Anschluss.

“Wisdom is not a slip. It hides under nothing but is the full raiment showing.”

“The full raiment showing,” Luther repeated, more to himself than to Frieda Volcker, who had already taken herself away.

Now if Frieda Volcker came from one direction, her assistant, Amanda Plessy, came from another, with news of equal import but a different nature to bear. She was there to report that she had the torquing power to thrust above her current station, saying, “It is time for me to go away. Harvard University has invited me into its doctoral program in physics. Physics, I tell you. I am leaving New York City to join the Cambridge elite. The elite, I



tell you. You, on the other hand, will stay here with your new mother, whom you will try to please even as you resist her. You are a simple man in a complex land. You are fortunate to have found even this humble job, manning your position at an empty desk.”

And Luther said in response, “Yes, I hear you with your deserved claim of excellence. I hear your pride in rising above all those who sought to consign you to permanent obscurity. I unreservedly applaud your excellence and your matrimony with the halls of science, but love is not love that does not wear a ring around its person, a ring enveloping of others. You stand before me a solo sojourner crying out your pain in a mode of terse communication.”

There was nothing more to say. Life was a phantasmagoria of sudden appearances. It was for Luther to try to ponder these developments and place them in the context of vanished time. Bruce Bill had gone, and Philomena Swangner, and now Frieda Volcker and Amanda Plessy were taxiing for takeoff. The last two had gleaned his essence, and so what could he do but to accept that this was so while staring at the empty spaces on his desk. He reached for the scotch tape and tore off a small piece and then put himself to the task of finding its spot, because every piece had its proper destination if you only put your mind to locating it.

Bruce Bill did not and could not go away forever, not with Luther lassoing him with his thoughts.

“The few pages I read are interesting. You should call me next week. We’ll make it an author’s lunch. You’re an author, after all.” So Bruce Bill spoke to Luther over the phone.

Now that he was sober, Luther had finally seen *Saturday Night Fever*, and all the dance floor moves that Tony Manero could muster. He had loved the film from the opening scene, with Tony doing his signature bop down the avenue, paint bucket in hand signifying that sharp threads notwithstanding, he was tethered to the mundane. What grabbed Luther more, though, was when Tony’s disco damsel, his one true love (and Ariadne to his Theseus, as Sarah had in the long ago been his, Luther’s, Ariadne) spoke the word “interesting,” and more than once, causing Tony to turn it over time and again in his mind for inspection, the word troubling him even if he couldn’t say why. Because, as Luther had noted many years before, it was a word reserved for the innocuous. And now Bruce Bill was applying it to his manuscript and causing Luther to attach the word “mockery” to Bruce Bill’s use of another word, “author,” which he hadn’t used quite properly, as Luther had merely published a couple of stories and not a book-length work. But he could not afford to do battle with Bruce Bill, who was not one to countenance warfare of either the open or covert kind. Because, while Luther might be able to lasso Bruce Bill close with his thoughts, it was not lost on him that Bruce Bill could do the very same, and give those thoughts of Luther’s some very close inspection.

*Celeste, the lords of lunacy continue to circle about us. With them we will have our intermittent connection. But we also have our freedom path. “Strait is the gate and*

*narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” And does not the same text say, “A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways”? Are we not being molded in the image of the risen Christ and Buddha breath Gautama? Is the mask of cynicism and duplicity not falling away? Are our words not slowly commencing to align with our actions? Can we not sing “Oh Happy Day” that this is so?*

Bruce Bill was wedded to his word. He met Luther at the Trattoria for lunch the next week, and though Luther had his sensitivity meter on, there was no vibration of derisiveness to move the needle. Bruce Bill was forthright and masterfully concise—commanding—in what he had to say. Luther would need to streamline, have one pivotal scene, and bring the novel in at two hundred pages. Bruce Bill didn't ask if Luther understood or how Luther was receiving what he had to say. He just put his words out there for Luther to absorb in the way that he could because he understood that it was a free country and that gave people the right to work contrary to their own worth or linger idle when the spirit moved them to do just that.

Luther pondered all that had transpired at the lunch, but not a morsel brought the happiness he had been hoping for. He felt cramped and constricted. He felt his size thirteen foot was being squeezed into a size ten shoe. Just as he had been reduced in his life, he was being reduced in his work. Had he not been dropped from the floor above at Pilgore to the floor below when he joined Cromartie Wonders, never to be part of the adult realm again? And did he now want the same shrunken, antiseptic fate for his manuscripts as well? To the air around him he answered a resounding no.

But he wouldn't do the dirty to the manuscript he was abandoning. He would not see that it was buried alive. And he would not extinguish its breath of life with a hot flame. He would not bury, burn, or otherwise abandon. He would just let the manuscript be. If it wanted to call itself an orphan, that was its business. All he could say was that he would look in on it from time to time.

The issue of money was never far from his mind, and so, once again, he thought to have a discussion with Sarah. He wanted and did say that having their hands out to her parents didn't feel right and he hoped they could move beyond the monthly check she received from them. Though he spared her any claptrap about being an independent nation state, that was an image and an aspiration that came to his mind. But even his more humble approach elicited truculent fire.

“You with your job, your job. As if you are such a big man for sitting at a desk all day. I have told you before. I am not equipped for the world. When will you stop trying to make me something I am not? I'm deformed and deficient in this area. Nothing can change that.”

She had truth on her side. He did go on and on about his job, throwing it in the Van Dines' face that he had work that took him outside the home and inflating his worth with stories about his mundane office life. Their whole time together he had been going against Sarah's grain. Trying to get her to finish high school. Trying to get her to spend the summer in New York City and she quitting the job Lydia had found for her and bolting for Camp. She was her father's daughter, not only in looks but in attitude, and it

wasn't even an attitude but a cast of mind that required her to be at a distance from the world. And so Luther was to her what Lydia was to Peter, only he didn't have Lydia's resources.

Things came clearer to Luther in the next few days as to why he had spoken to Sarah in the way that he had and when he had. Rafta had vacated the premises for ten days and was counting on Luther to represent the department at an upcoming event at the New York Academy of Science, where a Cromartie Wonders author, Louise Huxtabelnor, was being honored for her most recent book, *Atom Me Atom You: The Building Blocks of Life*. But it was beating on him that he was not a man of science, and this and related thoughts were making it hard for him to show his face, particularly as he might have to have a sit-down with the notable, Ms. Huxtabelnor. The blocks were on his mind again and his inability to replicate the patterns in the pictures he was shown by the psychologist. Once again was he back there as a child in the psychologist's office, having to endure her thwarting him, just thwarting him, laughing and laughing at him, just doing ah hah hah hah hah over and over again as she took away his life. And Mr. James Jane was there too, with his haughty scorn that Luther should have received the lowest score in the senior class on the national chemistry exam. Once again were his bones and his blockhead and his openmouthed stare being revealed to the world. Luther tried to rally strong against the tide of doubt and shame beating on him, but the thoughts had staying power. Once again was Luther left to see the pernicious effect of children's books, taking him back to school and his early years and laying out his low percentiles for everyone to see rather than freeing him from that time.

He had been afraid he wouldn't be able to show up and that he would lose his job, and so he had asked Sarah for her help that they might have an extra income should there be a coming storm, and she had said no, that wasn't her territory to occupy.

So on the day of the event, he called on RoR to speak to him, and it did with fellowship wisdom, saying "Act as if. Fake it until you make it." And so he did rally strong, fortifying himself with tape on the inside of his jacket and inside both pants legs, and took his seat among the women and the decidedly fewer men, and put on an attentive face for the speakers at the dais, so no one could doubt that he was lacking in comprehension of all the fine words they spoke, including those of Ms. Huxtabelnor. And afterward he went to Ms. Huxtabelnor, summoning the patience to stand on the long line but also summoning the words he would speak to her, and when his turn came, he said, "I am Luther Garatdjian, here on behalf of Rafta Blackning, director of Cromartie Wonders. And let me say you were aces, just aces. The atom is at the bottom of everything, as you have led me to understand. What I will take away from your learned talk is that it is the fundament of my fundament. And so, every time I chance to sit, will I be reminded of my true bottom."

With that he gave the astonished woman's hand a hearty shake and streaked for the door.

*Celeste, the truth is a manner of speaking. The truth is speaking. The truth is. We will get there.*

*In the meantime, the Throw-It-Downs were not in town but close enough. Solomon Rhein, loving America, did not hide himself in dark corners but sped to its pageants and spectacles, knowing bounty when he saw it and having a hunger for it. We are talking now of the NC2As, taking place that year at The Spectrum, in Philadelphia, where George “See me do my one-handed thing” McGinnis and Julius “I can sky forever” Erving had done their power and grace act for the NBA 76ers. Now Solomon Rhein had an older brother, Benjamin, who had not been knocked down by life to the degree that Solomon Rhein had. Benjamin Rhein had not died to his ambition when his father died. Benjamin Rhein had gone on with his living to become a dentist, with all the hard science that entailed. He also had a car in which to drive his brother and his brother’s friend and Luther down to Philadelphia. As Luther understood it, Solomon Rhein’s family had a structure in place that enabled his brother to grow strong and stable while Solomon lived between his headphones listening to his sounds.*

*And so, Celeste, once again I was shown that I need not spend all my days with the women and that some of those days could be with the men as well. And I will not be lying to you in saying that the motion of the wheels and the fact of the New Jersey Turnpike and the sight of the HoJo we passed by summoned the sound of someone singing “It’s a Big Wide Wonderful World,” the sun being high and bright in the sky on that particular day.*

*Celeste, this was not the journey I took with Sarah in 1976 to that same Spectrum to see the Bill Walton-less Portland Trailblazers play the Sixers. It did not have the same desolation and desperation, or the same announcer to say, over the PA system,*

*“George McGinnis to shoot two,” his voice dropping into a basso profundo on the last word.*

*Now here are the four teams that played that afternoon. In the first game, the Indiana Pacers, led by Isiah “I can’t stop smiling” Thomas, went up against the Louisiana State University Tigers and were too much for them. Luther had no great caring for either of those teams. The second game was the deal, with the North Carolina Tar Heels going against the Virginia Cavaliers, both members of the Atlantic Coast Conference, which was known for its primo quality hoops. Now Virginia had all-American Ralph “I am a gentle giant” Sampson and Othell “I am missing a vowel” Wilson while North Carolina had James “I see the dark parameters” Worthy and Sam “Smooth” Perkins but mostly they had straight up Al Wood to settle Virginia’s hash and send the Tar Heels into the finals against Indiana.*

*Celeste, once again I have come to that place of doubt, and have no choice but to surrender with my hands up. I see that I should have devoted my energy, such as it is, to the adventures of drunken explorers, ascending rocky trails in the Andes riding bareback on llamas with remorseless banditos slinging lead in dogged pursuit.*

On the drive back to New York City, Luther heard in his mind Mr. Cub, Ernie Banks, say “Let’s play two,” as he stood on the dugout steps wearing a uniform with his number, “14,” on the back. Because the sun was shining down on Wrigley Field and Mr. Cub wanted life to go on forever. And so Luther, taking his instruction where it appeared, also said, “Let’s play two,” thinking of the Saturday night RoR doubleheader. But it wasn’t to be. Evening shadows had long since fallen when they arrived back home. Still,



if there was not time to play two, he could play one, because one was not none. And so he got to keep his consecutive streak of days that included an RoR meeting by arriving in time for the second one. He got to sit in a folding chair with a cup of joe and hear the message of recovery, as there was nowhere else he wanted to be at the end of the day than there where the peace of God could find him. Then he went home and slept the peace of those who were as just as they could be.

*Now Celeste, though it is stepping out of chronological time, the stacking of the minutes and hours in orderly and neat columns, let us go back to the Spectrum, on that Saturday in Philadelphia, where a man came toward us with the face of laughter and even of joy and his straight black hair slicked into obedient flatness on his head, prompting Solomon Rhein to call out, "Hey, Jimmy V., are you signing Ice? Who else throws it down with such authority?" "Ice can't read. Ice can't write. What's a man to do?" Jimmy V. replied. If you will indulge me, Celeste, Jimmy V. was none other than Jimmy Valvano, who was later to become coach of the North Carolina State Wolfpack. He had some giddy up in his recruiting style that made him attractive to colleges. But he was saying that even he could not work magic in the case of Ice, who could stick the J from forty feet but for whom the things of the classroom vacated the premises of his mind. So spoke Jimmy V. on that day, that I should remember it forever, how he came out of a crowd and disappeared into a crowd, and once again the song "It's a Big, Wide Wonderful World" could be heard, because the dream of spring and heroics and renewal was upon us all, even if, for some, in a bittersweet way.*

Sunday morning, about 11 am, Luther and Sarah walked north and then south to where the art of SoHo was, trod the cobblestone streets where the cast-iron buildings stood, and got filled up on burgers on pita bread, heavy on the ketchup for Luther, at the Broome Street Café. And though the sun was bright, it was raining in Sarah's mind because of the letter she had received from her mother, with whom she had not been speaking though the checks kept coming. Luther had himself a Coke to go with his burger (Jesus it was good, topped with onion and tomato). The Coke came in a stein, which set the warning bells going in Luther, but Sarah took a test sip and said the drink was alcohol-free. And because she had honesty at her core and didn't want the beast in him awakened, he knew he could rely on her report. Continuity continued to abound at the café. The bathroom was still standing in the back room and the chalk board with menu items written in pastel colors hung right next to it and at the front the open kitchen signified no funny business of the filthy and contaminating kind was going on. Luther saw with eyes that understood that the cocaine waitress with her ruined tear ducts was still there in whatever iteration of destructive love she had come to, as were her assorted cronies. The slow-moving sidewalk traffic was heavy, as Luther saw through the casement window.

*No sign of you, Celeste. No sign of you whatsoever.*

A shot had been fired, like at Fort Sumter back when. But not by the Grays or the Blues. History could take you only so far. You had to live your own life. The thing was that it had been fired. Glanton. He was the one. Coming at Luther as he did, with his words,

trying to separate Luther from his truth or driving him deeper toward it. Dr. Rosner wanted to claim him for his own, make him live in his snuffles and pregnant pauses. And Glanton, he had tried to make a bed for him with his words. And now Luther was lying down in it, seeing if it was comfortable.

“I’m thinking of leaving therapy. Thinking of it. Haven’t decided. I guess that sounds pompous. I guess I have to get out the stick and hit myself now.”

“What’s been going on?”

Insurrection. Shots fired. It wouldn’t do to say any of that. Leave third parties out of it.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Tell me about this nothing.”

“I went to Philadelphia to see the throw it downs.”

“The NCAA Final Four?”

“Yeah. The semifinals on Saturday.”

“You went alone?”

“With my friend Solomon and his older brother. Solomon killed his father, just like me. For this reason he doesn’t believe he’s entitled to buy a decent shirt.”

“And what are you not entitled to buy?”

“You.”

“I’m for sale?”

“You’re in the marketplace along with the other avocados.” Luther paused.

“Forgive me.”

“Forgive you?”

“For how I speak. I don’t mean any harm. I’m not a murderer.”

“Did someone say you were?”

“The signs are up all along the roadways. Oh please don’t ask me to go deeper into this than I can.”

Dr. Rosner put a silence on him, packing it with Harvard intelligence.

“Do you have to do that, lean on me so hard with the stillness? Are you trying to crack me open?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“You are a hard man in a soft shell, or vice versa. Either way, you ride long and hard for truth, justice, and the American way.”

Dr. Rosner smiled, but didn’t say why.

*Now Celeste, it was here that all movement of a forward or backward nature ceased and the term holding action came into play. But a shot had been fired—at Fort Sumter, at Sarajevo, wherever. Is that not what the shoot ’em boy run runs exist for? Desperate, I did some examination of the workings of my own mind, giving myself permission to be footloose and dangerous. No deep dredging was required to bring to the surface my disappointment at having gone through the no-fault settlement money for the injury that put me in the hospital like a soused sailor. Glanton said I should have deposited the money in a bank account. It is demoralizing to run through a stop sign and wind up in a*

*ditch time and again. And so I then called Dr. Rosner and reported on my fact-finding mission, and also offered an apology for my heresy of doubt and indecision.*

*“We will talk about it more next week,” Dr. Rosner simply said.*

*But here is the thing. I could not wait to talk with Dr. Rosner again. I had to get on the line with Glanton. Why? Because, by now, I was answerable to him.*

*“I cannot undo the therapy knot,” I confessed.*

*If, previously, the cannon fire had been light, this time it was salvo city, even in the guise of gentility.*

*“Do not even try. Just keep praying and it will fall away.”*

*So he spoke to me, Celeste, and if it is doubtful that he had so much as heard of the Rolling Stones, clearly could I hear the fat-lipped one holler singing “Time Is on My Side.” Glanton had declared the future, and it was him. And yet Glanton’s assumption of victory did not feel like a defeat for me. Staying—that would signify defeat for me. All I was saying, to myself if no one else, was that I couldn’t leave therapy that very day.*

*Celeste, we don’t know what this thing is that grows in us and leads us away from that which we love or think we love.*

*“But I’ve grown comfortable with Dr Rosner,” I said.*

*This time the cannonball had no gentility surrounding and buffering it.*

*“Sure you are, just as you were comfortable sitting on a barstool.”*

*As if that were not enough, he decided that chuckle time had come and let loose a mammoth one that had me holding the receiver at some distance from my ear. Even so*

*could I hear its various and nuanced stages, and the image came to me of a lazy but powerful river charting its own course and drowning everything in its path.*

“You’ve got to finish things, you bastard.”

“Don’t you be calling me no bastard, bastard.”

“Is my ‘Letter to Mother’ story making me hateful? Do I feel that my writing in some way constitutes betrayal? Why am I always fearful of consequences?”

“Because you deserve them. Pull down your pants. Now. Now, I say.”

*Celeste, there is a dangerous energy in the city we must all be aware of that requires a force field of emotional intelligence to be lived within if we are to survive. Voices must be modulated and attitude checked at the door, lest it be sensed by the mayhem men of the streets. No grievance, no judgment, no scorn must seep from the eye or escape the tongue. Just today was I reminded once again of the consequence of deviation. A slouching man in a zebra suit ditty bop shuffled down Fifth Avenue, his right fist behind his back. Around his neck he wore a signboard. Front and back, the message read: Ain’t playing/now or ever/Gonna make it forever/You fuck with me.” Zebra Man pulled from his back pocket a six-inch stiletto and began fake-stabbing his friend, doing him high and low and all around that everyone might witness the scope of his initiative. Then he kissed the blade and folded it back into its handle. “Don’t be fucking with my piece, people. This*

*be my piece. Don't be making me tell you twice," he went on, boldly eclipsing the norm so as to commit himself to our memory.*

*Once in a while, and maybe not even that often, we get to see ourselves as we might otherwise have been had we not buried ourselves alive. This is true, Celeste. We have glimmers of understanding of what might have been, how the bounty of America could have been ours and our lives too could have been set to songs like "It's a Big Wide Wonderful World." Here is what happened. I will try to get all my facts in a row so the truth may climb a ladder to freedom. Fact #1: I walked into an elevator at Pilgore Press. Fact #2: At the next floor, John Sally, gay and All-American with his blond good looks and Harvard pedigree, entered. Fact #3: In vanished moments of time, John Sally said, "Hi, Luther. Bruce Bill said he had a nice lunch with you last week." Fact #4: "I did. We did," I replied. But here, Celeste, is where the subjective lens, the warping filter of our accumulated lives, comes into play. I cannot say with full certainty, but it appeared that he now was showing a new face, one that featured fear and insecurity, and that, if truth be on my side, it was there verging on breaking free from the moment of his elevator entrance. His face was telling a story of disruption and disequilibrium, suggesting more information than he was orally communicating to me had passed between Bruce Bill and him, and that Bruce Bill might even have said, "Who would have thought, but Luther is somewhat literate." Suppose John Sally himself has the desire to write but is afraid to put pen to paper? What I came away with and chose to live in was the possibility that he was now gazing at me with newfound respect born of intimidation. What I can say with far*

*more certainty is that it I felt good and pained me at the same time. Why pained? Because a glimmer of understanding came to me of what might have been in the way of recognition and respect by others, if only, if only. We must not feel ashamed for wanting these things of our fellows. We must not, Celeste.*

*Let us also here give voice to the inevitable. If I had my day of uplift, it was only natural that viciousness should come calling in the following twenty-four hours and invade me in my most private place. The universe giveth and the universe taketh, and our whole lesson in life is to roll with its vicissitudes. Frieda Volcker and her assistant, Amanda Plessy, while taxiing on the runway bound for new horizons, let it be known that they were both stepping up in the childrens books world. They too had turned to writing, investing ten minutes each morning in their new craft, and after five such grueling days, they went forward to Rafta with the products of their pen, and Rafta waxed ecstatic, drawing up contracts for them to seal the deal. I met the news not with a joyful heart at the gifts they had rendered to the universe but maximum peeve that such confectioners should be heralded as authors for producing their little bonbons. All of which begs the question as to why I couldn't elevate into bigness and be happy for them or at least adopt an attitude of live and let live? But Celeste, smallness reigns where it can and spreads itself like crabgrass. I was wedded to my smallness and my anonymity. I kept silent about my own endeavors, and when I didn't, I didn't like myself. I said to myself that my day would come while knowing that it never would. When Frieda Volcker said, "You never talk about your writing. You never talk about what is important to you," I was perversely*



*happy, even if this statement were not quite true. For was it not my lot to rail against the worldly ones? Yeah yeah yeah.*

“Is it that I have not loved you enough? Is that why you come to me now? And what is the meaning of the gift you have brought? Are you trying to put me in shame?”

Amanda Plessy had showed up at his office door and stepped inside. She was full of young love seeking freedom from what he saw as her darkness. It was possible “It’s a Big Wide Wonderful World” was playing in her ears; with her full scholarship Ivy League graduate school admission and Cromartie Wonders contract, she had a life worthy of song.

“Stop with your extravagant crap,” she said. His words had irritated her. They had pulled her out of the zone she wished to stay in.

He opened the package slowly, too slowly for her, as if in mock reverence for what might be inside.

“Ann Beattie? *Falling in Place*? I wonder what the title can mean,” he said, when the gift had finally been exposed. “Shouldn’t it be *Falling into Place*?”

“I guess you will have to read it to find out.”

“Or am I the one described by the title? Are you saying I am the one falling in place, the one falling right where he stands because he does not have the gift of movement/initiative/get up and go that you and Frieda Volcker possess?”

“I can’t help you with this kind of thinking. You have to do that on your own,” Amanda Plessy said.

Luther put a look of assessment on her. “You are a good person, aren’t you? A good person who suffers silently with her wound, like an English heroine in some nineteenth century novel I’ve never read.”

Amanda Plessy tore away. She did not need the airless space he was occupying.

Not every day was one for being punched in the face, only some days, a fact that he was learning. On this day Luther took himself to a lunch hour RoR meeting where he sat among the munchers in hoagie heaven doing a devouring of roast beef, heavy on the mayo, and the crunchers with their filthy Cobb salads and stinky, stinky Caesar’s salads. He put them far back in his rear view mirror that he might focus on sharing his truth that a fear of success kept him from working on his young adult novel and had, in fact, prompted him to bury it alive. But the leader of the meeting wasn’t having it. He had slits for eyes and a slit for a mouth and from all three fired his bullets.

“People come here with shit for brains and be thinking that they be sparking and all that bullshit. Don’t pay to be running no motherfucking bullshit in RoR. What RoR indulge you to say don’t mean it accept. I be working hard on my sounds, day and night I be pounding it, but when I send out my demo, what happen? Motherfucking record company punch me in my fucking face. That what happen. Get out of here with your bullshit sound, they say. So don’t be telling me bout no fear of success when fear of fucking failure be where it at.”

The man had banged on him, loudly and righteously. He had tried to put him down down into the ground. But he hadn’t done the job. Luther was still there. He had his

seat at the RoR meeting, and he would be sure to come back day after day to claim another and another on his one day at a time journey to truth.**stopped here**

In dreamland that night he journeyed to a bar where the lights were soft and low. And because he was drinking from a green bottle of Heineken's and it was between 5 and 7 pm, he was OK. But then worry overcame him. Could it be that he was wrong and the business of the green bottles and the hours between 5 and 7 pm were just a bunch of bull and that he was indeed drinking and that he had lost his sobriety? He thought of Glanton and the confession he would have to make and a sense of dread overcame him. At that point he woke up, and though the loft was dark, there was light all around. It had just been a bad dream. He was free. He was free.

Glanton gave Luther his bigness. "It was just a dream. You'll have many more of them, if my experience means anything. All these dreams are telling you is that the illness wants you back, but it can't have you back if you don't take the first drink."

Luther listened to Glanton with full attention and gratitude that he had found a source for the truth.

Then there was more light. There was the light of Carole Aprile's love for life and life's love for her filling the loft. Even in the dark the sun was always on Carole Aprile because of her Harvard acceptance. Though she had elected not to go, chosen was chosen. And the light was on her because of the famous design company she worked for. And it was especially on her that day at the loft when

she said to Sarah, “Come on back. The company would love to have you.” Because Carole Aprile had a mind that worked for her, not against her, when she was scoring a perfect 800 in math on the SAT and at all times before and since, a mind saturated with solutions.

*Now Celeste, we can't always know where trouble comes from. We can't know the door it hides behind, or anticipate the time it considers propitious to enter our lives once again. Just today I was in my own mind and no one else's when it showed its face, in fact a tandem of faces. It was not enough, as I waited for the elevator at Pilgore Press, for Richard Simone, the president of the imprint Solar Books, to step from behind that door, so to speak. You know the man of whom I speak, he who walks with one hand in his pocket and generally cloaks his tall and elegant frame with a casual blue blazer and charcoal gray dress slacks but for whom on this particular occasion those daily duds would evidently not suffice, given the expensive black suit he had attired himself in. With him was the noise machine herself, his editor-in-chief Marigold Coulter, her chatter as loud and startling as a pheasant taking wing from the branch of a tree. He was on his way to a reception, I gathered, from hearing Marigold apologize for not being able to attend. I had in my hands a number of children's books from the round robin pile, as it was my way to seek a better understanding of this genre I had no affinity with, and even a seeming deadness to, as if children's literature were somehow lost to me, never having been found. The two took me in and then turned back to each other, seeing that I had nothing to give them but my fear as well as reading me for my shame at not being part of*

*the adult world they inhabited. My dress reflected my lower status: a pair of brown slacks losing their crease and a peppermint striped shirt open at the collar and no jacket and shoes that squeaked should I dare to move. But RoR had an answer, Celeste, and I called on its big guns. "Compare and despair," I said to myself, and that other one, "Don't compare your insides with someone else's outsides," or maybe it's the other way around. But no matter. I gave the situation the boom boom of "What other people think of me is none of my business" and then threw in, for maximum fortitude, a Gladwell Glanton special, "In this moment I have everything I need; in this moment I am being taken care of; in this moment I am, I am." Only then did I thought-beam them with the hammer: "God does not make junk." Because, Celeste, when the going gets tough, when we are not in the safety of rocks and trees but in the presence of people, we need to turn to the big stuff to get through.*

*Dominated. Controlled. Limited. These words I apply to myself often in regard to Rafta, the hegemonic one. And Glanton? He remains committed to the idea that whenever I am disturbed, I must look within myself for the source of the disturbance if I am to be free. He asserts that if practiced perfectly, the RoR program can prevent tooth decay. He signs off by laying his chuckle on me, to which he is also deeply committed. Glanton talking his Glanton talk, which I find greatly comforting.*

*Update, Celeste. Update. Roller Carmona-Hickson is now the contracts administrator, a promotion of sorts, and from the self-satisfied smile she displays, it is clear that the title*

*change is a source of great pride for her. I must here bow down to Rafta. Flinty she may be, but she operates from principle and a core of kindness, in the main. She has genuine affection for Roller, which I seem to lack. Glanton says I must commit myself to loving Roller as she is, and has laid out four guidelines for successful living: don't judge; accept what is; accept where I am at; get on with the business of living. The business of living, for me, means reportage, and this I must remain committed to, so let me get on with it.*

*Because of the change in Roller's function, we have a new secretary. Her name is Janet Proux. Unlike Isadora Dreyton, who preceded Roller, she is neither garrulous nor provocative, and unlike Roller, she shows a gentle, pleasant disposition. Indeed, she is a model of circumspection. In my mind but never with my tongue do I call her Nibbleacious, for the slow but relentless devouring of the foil- and plastic-wrapped morsels she snacks on throughout the day. At such times her lips retract and reveal her big front teeth. A faint smile frequently plays on her face. Whether it is prompted by the goings on at Cromartie Wonders or the product of some amusing memory I cannot say. The word enigma may be too strong, but an element of mystery there definitely is that she can glide so effortlessly through the day. Like many of the others in this narrative, she will appear and then disappear, but she was there when I was there, and so has a place in my memory, which I must draw on now to further the record of where I was and who was with me, that order and thoroughness may prevail.*

*Now Celeste, as if two children's books imprints were not enough, Pilgore Press opened its pocketbook and purchased a third, Carousel. This newest acquisition was headed by Gina Deductio. She was a petite woman with a big name in the field who was*

*savvy about the marketplace and the possessor of great cunning. So rattled by this new member of the family were Rafta and Florence Mith, the Pilgore children's book chief, that they were driven to a whispering way about Gina Deductio. Many were the times that they were seen raising their eyebrows to convey their dubiousness about the wisdom of bringing such a person on board. But Gina Deductio had only to turn her gaze upon them to put them in the small place all who indulge in whispering ways deserve. Why? Because Gina Deductio had her amour propre going strong owing to the award-winning authors and illustrators in her stable. She did not sing "I Am Woman," but she did not need to.*

*Gina Deductio had two editors, and they were also strong not only in their minds but also in their not so petite bodies. I will give you one. Her name was Jean Noble, and she came to Gina Deductio by way of Park Avenue and Wellesley College. The bob she wore her hair in and the ironic intensity of her speech and the brevity package in which she presented it showed her place of origin in specialness. And yet I was attuned to the hint of bitterness that showed itself in her slightly Asiatic face as she moved toward the age where her beauty could not preserve itself and recognized myself as a potential target for that bitterness, given that I was the lone male in Pilgore's children's books world.*

*Now because Cromartie Wonders and Carousel Books bordered on each other, it was not uncommon for the folks in each to be neighborly with each other, which Jean Noble demonstrated by strolling over to the desk of Janet Proux.*

*“I have a slight but annoying tickle in my throat that causes me to cough uncontrollably. You wouldn't, by any chance, have a cough drop to help me quell this cough, would you?” she said to the Cromartie Wonders secretary.*

*Janet Proux was forthright with Jean Noble but within the bounds of courtesy. She gave her none of the curtness that we must always be on guard against lest it serve as a catalyst for world war. And let it even be said that she exceeded courtesy and demonstrated that love was within her core with her gentle response.*

*“I'm afraid I don't, but Luther may. He offered me one earlier,” Janet Proux said.*

*Hearing this, Jean Noble came calling on me, which was a great misfortune I would have avoided were it only possible, as from such conversations can moments of shocking truth arise that alter forever how we are perceived. From somewhere back in time came the sound of Frankie Valli singing “Walk Like a Man,” but the admonition was not working, not with the reality of wickedly beaming Jean Noble bearing down on me.*

*“Luther, you're to be the man of the hour, Janet tells me. She said you have just what I need, and I always appreciate a man who has everything.”*

*“What would that everything be?” Luther asked, as if he had not been within earshot of Jean Noble's conversation with Janet Proux.*

*“I am sure you have admirable qualities, Luther, but I am here for one specific thing. My throat needs soothing and I was told you might be kind enough to spare me one of your cough drops.”*



*“There are any number of things I would do for you, resources permitting, but that is just the thing. My resources do not permit.”*

*“What can you possibly be saying?”*

*“I can’t believe I ate the whole thing.”*

*“You did what?”*

*“The whole thing. Yes.”*

*She gave him the lake of shame treatment, saying, “That’s shocking. Have you no ability to moderate?”*

*“Evidently not.”*

*“Well, I will remember this about you,” Jean Noble said.*

*“I can see how you would say that, but we can’t always know beforehand what will be snared in the net of time and what is destined for the oblivion spaces.”*

*“This surely goes in my memory bank,” Jean Noble said, as she backed out the door.*

*Celeste, self-righteousness is pow’ful (yes, the contraction is justified if we are to feel the word and not just say it). Recent studies have shown that all human beings have monitoring devices and that all but the most saintly focus these devices on their fellows so data can be obtained as the basis for accurate judgment. Many times I have retreated to my reconnaissance tower for just such a purpose and have to admit that my dossier on Roller Carmona-Hickson is quite thick. Here are her crimes against humanity:*

- *She has never left home, or even tried to separate from her parents.*

- *She spends her evenings watching prime time TV with these same parents.*
- *She holds to a smug conviction as to her rightness on racial matters where others, such as me, might have some doubt. “Do you see any black people leaving on those boats?” she says, about the exodus of Cubans, many on fragile vessels, in an attempt to escape from Cuba to America. This she says after I have voiced some criticism of Fidel Castro on the matter of human rights. “I haven’t noticed one way or another about the racial makeup of the boat people,” I said. Then did she give me pow, pow, pow, offering up her signature rudeness. “Try opening your eyes the next time,” she says, as if the definitive word is hers and hers alone.*
- *She smiles slyly when anyone leaves the department. “I’m still here and they aren’t,” she says, unable to contain her glee. It does not matter that Frieda Volcker and Amanda Plessy have left of their own volition. Her continuance is not an indicator of her passivity but her value.*
- *It has just come to my attention that she will not be staying overnight in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, the site of the Pilgore’s spring sales conference. Why is this noteworthy? Because it proves conclusively that she cannot cut the umbilical cord.*

*What else do we see, Celeste? We see that I too have not left home, that I still sit on the throne of judgment, as I did as a child in regard to, in particular, Hannah and Naomi and my father. I am seeing through the same lens, and nothing will change until the lens changes.*

“I work. Why don’t they?” his mother would say in the long ago, of the tenants in the two single room occupancies down the block. Men and women of violence and indolence and drunkenness, many black, going on and on with their tormented sound in the day and night as they lived in the now of their welfare check life. All of this had been said before, confessed before, no more beatings necessary for an accurate transcription of fact. And of the woman tenants in their own building, women with sources of income that did not require them to hold jobs—white women—his mother would say, “I’m not afraid of a little dirt, not like some of them.”

But that was then, and this was now, and in this now his mother called. She was showing a worried mind about Rachel, whose rent she was paying for a room on the seventh floor. It was hard, hard. His mother had to take a job cleaning apartments. At her age. With her back. Not that she was complaining. Was there an alternative? Did she want to go to her grave knowing that her daughter was a shopping bag lady living on the street?

“Is she not willing to work?” Luther asked, anticipating the answer.

“She walks away each time I ask her that very question. She simply will not discuss the matter.”

“Maybe she has to accept the consequences of walking away. Maybe she can’t just be free to have others cover for her irresponsibility. Maybe prolonging the situation is making it more difficult for her to adjust to reality.”

His mother's silence served as a mirror for him to see himself. She wanted him to have a good look.

"This may be so," she finally said, "but I couldn't bear knowing that my daughter was living in the streets." She did not say he did not know what it was to have children, as she would when he was a child and would come to her demanding that she kick out Hannah and Naomi after one or the other of them had struck him.

*But Celeste, I say to you this. There are no final words, not in this life. They go on and on because the angle of their delivery is always different. A few get caught in the net and live on, it is true, but they are the exception. So it is with the word condition. In the hall of fame/shame this word belongs, as immortalized by my mother in her application of it to my father and to my oldest sister, Hannah, saying of them, as I have reported before, "You must understand. Your father has a condition. He cannot handle stress. And your sister. She too has a condition. She too cannot handle stress." Allowing them to lie down on the floor when life was calling upon them to get up off the floor. So you must understand why my vigilance soars with the use and misuse of that word, whether it is spoken or simply hanging in the air hidden behind the fog of other words. At the same time, yes, I saw my self-righteous inhumanity, that I should be so unfeeling about a sister so afflicted.*

Now the world called to Luther in a big-time way. Two colossi in the NBA were meeting in the Eastern Conference finals. The winner would go on to meet the champion of the Western Conference. The Philadelphia 76ers had as their coach

former NBA star Billy (don't be calling me "Bill") "I Have No Hops Left in Me" Cunningham directing from the sideline while the Boston Celtics had Bill "I Have Seen a Thing or Two" Fitch.

Starting at forward for the Celtics was Larry "Garbage Man of Yesteryear" Bird. At the other forward was Cedric "I Can Play" Maxwell. At center was Robert "I Give New Meaning to the Word 'Serious'" Parish. At the guard positions were Nate "Tiny" Archibald and Gerald "I Can Streak" Henderson. Coming off the bench at power forward was Kevin "Minnesota Man of Many Moves" McHale.

The Philadelphias had Julius "Disdain Dunk" Erving at one forward and Caldwell "Deep South" Jones at the other and Darryl "Monster Mash" Dawkins at center and Lionel "Train" Hollins and Andrew "Don't Get Me Started" Toney at the guard positions. And they had Bobby "I Am White but I Can Sky" Jones as their sixth man.

It was for Luther to live and die with Boston during the seven games series. He fell in love with the garbage man and many moves McHale while denying his love to the Doctor of Dunk, Julius, having seen his cranky and erratic jump shot. He went where his affinities and his fear took him.

Rachel was born in the early years of the Great Depression; she was born in darkness under the caring eye of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As a child she developed a silent and abiding attachment to her mother. She would come up behind her standing at the kitchen sink and surprise her with her stealth. In truth, her mother was frightened by

her presence. She equated Rachel's persistence with a will to dominate her. The smile on her child's face was less friendly than demonic, in particular the heightened intensity that showed in her eyes.

"Is there something you want, Rachel?" her mother would ask, before she learned that once her daughter was committed to silence, she moved out of it only when she could or would, not in response to the verbal prompt of a question.

Such was Luther's understanding of his sister's early years, as partially told to him by his mother and partially the product of his own mind.

His mother, in her old age, had Rachel in her thoughts in a burdensome way.

"You must send her a card. Her birthday is this week. She will know she is in your heart if you do. It is the only way to bring her back. We must sow the seeds of kindness."

So his mother said in her phone call that evening. And was it not a small thing to ask for a pitiful, broken sister? And yet all love for Rachel was buried under annoyance that his mother should remind him of her sad reality.

That night, he had a falling by the wayside sort of dream, rather like the ones in which he was trying to return to the Claremont School, only in this one he was struggling to return to work. He had climbed the stairs to the adult trade division and was at a meeting where Adrian Zecker, (Him Who Walks on the Balls of His Feet), was holding forth. Judith Everholt, his onetime boss, was there too, though in reality they had long since moved on from Pilgore, as those with torquing power did. It was difficult to stay in the same room

with them. He was without a jacket and his shirt was wrinkled and dirty and his pants had no crease. And though he tried to follow Adrian's words, he had no comprehension as to what he was talking about. It was left to Judith Everholt to confront him.

“You project only a creative persona, though it is only a persona, not a reality, and you lack a normal, everyday one. For this reason you must leave the room. Make it easy on yourself and go back where you came from. You needn't ask if I am driving you down, because I am.” In this way did Judith Everholt seek to defeat him with finality.

“Don't be tied to no motherfucking bullshit. Don't be tied to no books. They won't save you. Got to open your eyes and check things out if you want to see what is real and what is not. You dig? You got to put your ears on when I be talking to you unless you wanting me to hurt you for disrespecting me. You a mere scrap. I take on anyone. Anyone. And I bring him down by force of will. You dig? You motherfucking dig?”

--Message delivered to Luther following an ROR meeting

He would have to stay in the present in anything he wrote. The minimization of flashback critical. Go with small scenes. But the prescription had consequences. All his old work would have to be discarded. But how could he go on if he destroyed everything? It was too late. Too late. All this pressure to get stuff out but who was he trying to impress—he meant impress? No, no. He would have to give himself to RoR even more. At a minimum he would have to attend one meeting a day if he was to keep the dark, disquieting thoughts at bay. This writing thing a monster in his midst.

*Now Celeste, I am not at liberty to speak lasciviously, to put my lewdness on display. That would never do. But there were times when my being would flood with desire for you, and my only recourse was to seek safety in a RoR meeting lest my feet lead me where wisdom said I should not go. The light of lust/love for you was proving strong. It was a driving force I had no power to abolish, nor any wish to.*

The roads were slick. Several times, in the rain and fog, the van skidded, but the driver calmly steadied the vehicle. Luther sat in the back with the other children's books editors. The front seats had gone to editors from the adult trade divisions. It seemed only proper that they should. He was relieved when they arrived in Stroudsburg without incident.

He was also relieved to have a room to himself at the hotel, where he could sit alone and pray and meditate and read a couple of pages of RoR literature. All that weekend he could feel the tug of his alcoholism. There was that big bar in the lobby and, beyond the conference room walls, the sound of a band rehearsing.

That first night, after a day of presentations and dinner, he ran into Jean Noble and Gina Deductio, from Carousel Books.

"So, Luther, are you going to take us girls dancing?" There was playfulness in Jean Noble's voice.

"Of course Luther's going to take us dancing. Luther's a real man," Gina Deductio said, locking him in.



“I will look for you on the dance floor. But first I must go to my room,” he managed to say.

“Don’t forget, because we won’t,” Jean Noble said, greatly amused.

Back in his room Luther had the truth of his life to ascertain. Once again, as with the high school prom, he couldn’t present himself. Gina’s perceived mockery *Of course Luther’s going to take us dancing. Luther’s a real man* ensured that he would hide himself away. He picked up the phone and called Sarah. It wouldn’t be right if he didn’t. He was glad, in that moment, to have the safety of her, the excuse of her. Should Jean choose to question him closely, holding her anger in check, he could simply say he had meant to, but he had first to call his wife, and then fatigue had set in. That he could say, and live within the realm of truth, and so save himself from the flesh wounds sharp teeth could inflict, because Jean Noble could smile, but there was fury to the other side, and it was best for him to understand that this was so.

In the morning Jean Noble did question him, but she did not do so closely, and in any case was assuaged when he cited the need to call his wife and exhaustion as reasons for his nonappearance on the dance floor.

*Now, Celeste, we cannot tell when revelation will occur, when that which we only strongly suspect suddenly is confirmed as a reality. What can be reported is that Jean Noble blew her lid the second she stepped into my office on the first day back following the sales conference. A scathing bill of indictment did she render against the likes of Mercanto*

*Konic, adult trade division sales manager; Salvatore de la Questo, head of production for Pilgore Press; and Belton Borschwicki, sales manager for children's books.*

*"I don't care if they each have ten wives and fifteen mistresses. They are all closet gays who hate women."*

*It was sad, as well as frightening, to witness her verbal explosion, and the cause could only be obvious. With the waning of her beauty, she had lost the power to spark the growth of male adoration societies. Perhaps she had gone on to the dance that night with or without Gina Deductio, and perhaps it broke her heart that no one sang "Save the Last Dance for Me" or asked her to dance at all. Perhaps she saw that she had sunk to wallflower status. Let us be clear, Celeste: inside Jean Noble was a weeping child seeking the comfort of her mother, and in her absence was I being asked to serve. And yet the winds of change are fierce and unrelenting. Into the far and no longer discernible distance do they blow one's Wellesley face and one's Park Avenue face. All, all, is blown into the far and no longer discernible distance. We must orient ourselves to the god of change and therein find our permanence.*

*Rafta was not where Jean Noble had gone. Rafta knew where not to be, and when not to be there. She didn't have to be a Bob Dylan's female artist to know that. She had only to know herself. So Mercanto Konic could not plank her on the dance floor by not seeing who she was or where she was in her lifetime. Yet if she had made her peace with plainness, she had not done the same with ambition, and it was there he two by four'd her, denigrating before the entire assemblage her flagship publication of the previous year, Bunny Rabbit Bliss. Stricken and pathetic did he render her with his brief*

*and dismissive assessment. So she too came to my window, so to speak, with her broken wing, so to speak, and while I lacked the cruelty to tell her to go away, I also lacked the wherewithal to comfort her. Dalai Lama love was not mine to give to either of them in that moment. Celeste, it was for them to discover the wind of change and disappearance on their own.*

Janet Proux, the department secretary, was engaged, and wore a ring with a ruby set in it. Because she was getting hitched, Rafta organized a departmental party for her. The first order of business was to secure two bottles of champagne, and on this errand she dispatched Luther. He did not balk, for Glanton had set him straight, saying that if he was spiritually centered, he could go anywhere, even a liquor store. The question for Luther to ask himself was whether he had a legitimate purpose in taking on the mission. So Luther sat with himself in the quiet of his office and asked what purpose it would serve for him to run and do Rafta's bidding. And the answer came that he was being of service to the department.

“Luther is our expert champagne opener,” Rafta declared, and turned to Luther to engage his expertise. And so he did. The corks popped, but there was no champagne shower for anyone to endure, nor did the flying corks do sockeye to any of the gathered. Some of the bubbly having streamed onto his hand, it was only right, if he wanted to live, to head for the bathroom and scrub the offended hand with soap and rinse with an ample amount of hot water. On his return he heard the surprisingly dulcet sound of Janet Proux

singing, a capella, “Today I Met the Boy I’m Going to Marry.” Evidently Janet Proux was not only nibbleacious but had a robust fondness for the grape.

None of this could save Luther from the soreness that had been building. Rafta mocking him to his face with her remark, implying that bottle opening was his one area of competence. Feeling his fury rising, Luther made a snit call to Glanton and gave him the lowdown on Rafta’s lowness.

“Too much thinking, Luther. Too much thinking. All the woman said was, ‘Luther is our expert champagne opener.’ For this you want to throw the book at her? Why not take her at her word? Don’t let your disease rob you of a good day.”

Glanton held his chuckling in abeyance. There was a reason. He had to keep the channel clear for an important message.

“We say in the program, over and over, ‘Utilize, don’t analyze.’ And you’ve no doubt seen the slogan that says ‘Think’ upside down in its frame in the meeting place. Why do you suppose that is?” Glanton asked.

“It can only be because people do not have a firm grasp of the concept of order or are simply in flagrant contempt of it for all the anarchic reasons people of their ilk can summon.”

“Really?”

“I think so.”

“That’s just it. You’re thinking again. The ‘Think’ sign, upside down, is telling you not to think.”

“Why would I not want to do that?”

“Because a sick mind cannot heal a sick mind.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“I’d like to see you do some outreach to the alcoholic who still suffers.”

“I can do that.”

“But do you know why we do that?”

“Because it was done for us.”

“And why else.”

“I’m not sure.”

“What does it mean when we say, ‘We can’t keep recovery unless we try to give it away’?”

“It means just that,” Luther said, feeling slow.

“It means we can’t know what our message of recovery is until we try to share it with another alcoholic. In the process the message grows stronger in us.”

“How is that?”

“When you exercise a muscle, does it grow stronger? What is the purpose of lifting weights?”

“I get it. It’s like bringing in the sheaves.”

“Bringing in the what?”

Luther began to sing. “Bringing in the sheaves/Bringing in the sheaves/We shall come rejoicing/Bringing in the sheaves.” Then he stopped because like any true Garatdjian, he didn’t know all the lyrics.

“Well, OK,” Glanton said, as he once again found his chuckle.

The forces of coincidence, if not of God, were aligned for Luther's higher purpose. That very weekend the central office of RoR called him. He had submitted his name, along with other members of the Saturday night group, for a mission of mercy (MoM), should the need arise. And the need had arisen. A man desperate for a meeting had just called the central office. Formerly a member of RoR, he had picked up a drink and been in relapse for over three years.

"Can you call him to arrange to meet him at a meeting?" the central office rep inquired.

"This is something I can very much do. In fact, I am raring to go." *Raring*. Such was the level of his excitement that it had expanded his vocabulary to include a colloquialism he had never before employed. And there was no hint of irony in the moment of its departure from his lips. Indeed, Luther was on fire with a sense of purpose, as if he had found his life's calling.

He phoned the man, Roderick H., that Roderick might know help was on the way. Roderick expressed no gratitude but focused solely on his specific need, that it might be met.

"You must come to my apartment and fetch me. I am in no shape to meet the world alone and so you must, you absolutely must." Roderick H. spoke solemnly.

Luther was taken by a rushing wind that blew him north up Lafayette Street past the brown and formal sadness of the Public Theater and the beginning of the evening tumult at Astor Place.

In no time was he standing with Roderick H. at the door of his apartment. A tall and unsmiling man, Roderick continued to must on Luther.

“You must come into my apartment. You must,” he said.

With trepidation Luther followed Roderick’s lead. The apartment was furnished with well cared for antiques but the most conspicuous item was a half-drained bottle of vodka on the coffee table.

“We really need to leave if we are going to make the meeting on time,” Luther said, having grown anxious.

“Do you expect me to attend a meeting in my slippers and pajama bottoms? Sit down. I must tell you a story.”

Intimidated by Roderick’s blustery manner, Luther took a seat. At no time had he contemplated the possibility that Roderick might still be drinking and was unaware of the fellowship wisdom that, if so, it was best to go on such a mission with two or three other sober men because alone, the risk was greater that an active drunk would get him drunk than that he would get him sober.

Three years before, Roderick had gone to a nearby RoR meeting. No sooner had he stepped in the door than he was on high alert. The meeting had already begun, and the speaker had a voice as disturbing to his senses as fingernails scraping along a blackboard.

“You must cease and desist at once. At once you must, if you are not to destroy me,” Roderick called out to the offending woman. The woman paused, but only for so long as it took several men to move Roderick back onto the street, in accordance with the group conscience that anyone who disrupted the meeting would be asked to leave. In great pain over his dismissal, Roderick ran to a liquor store for the comfort of a bottle, and had been on it ever since.

Roderick had been lonely too long. Thus, his call to the central office and thus his insistence that Luther come to his place. Roderick’s feet were nailed to the floor. He couldn’t leave the apartment except on a liquor run, just as Luther had once been unable to leave the loft except on the same mission.

Seeing what he saw and hearing what he heard, Luther bolted for the door.

That workweek the ponder place awaited Luther, this after a day of grievance directed at Rafta, who sparked his ire when she let it be known that she was considering a certain someone to replace Frieda Volcker as art director. His unspoken inquiry began and ended with this:

“Why should I care whom she appoints when I don’t even want to be here most of the time? Is this not a question I should ask myself over and over again?”

The Memorial Day weekend was upon them. Work and frolicking in the sun were in Luther’s plan. He would go to the beach with a body he did not need to be so ashamed of, a body that would not cast a shadow of total meagerness in the sand. He had been doing a



good job seeing that he got filled up, and he was also moderately exercising with weights so love could continue to be in his life in the near and the far term. He went so far as to buy a bathing suit and a short-sleeved shirt at B. Altman so he could be properly attired. Maybe he would take that package deal, the LIRR plus a bus, out to Jones Beach, and have himself a couple of those Nathan's hot dogs so he could continue to be filled up and proper in the shadow that he cast, because for that to be, daily maintenance was required. He had been casually monitoring the eating habits of men with oak tree thighs, chunky chests, pillar of strength necks, and Popeye arms. He saw what he saw, that they did not all eat half a cow for dinner or other immoderate quantities of food. The conclusion he drew was that they could go for a week on only half a string bean without losing an iota of their bulk. The further conclusion he drew was that they were not necessarily of a human kind that meager sustenance could sustain such physiques. He put his finding in his vault of understanding that he might take it out as needed for perspective on the world he had been born into.

No, he did not give himself to the sun that weekend. He had his order and his life to preserve. He stayed inside that "White Line, Continue" might continue and he along with it.

Glanton led the RoR meeting that night. He spoke of the priest who had been called to give him last rites at the hospital where Glanton, then a young man, lay dying, and how he hurled maledictions at the priest to check his forward progress and send him on his way while vowing to give God the finger should they chance to meet face to face. He told how he cursed the medical establishment for their brutal and radical surgery that

left him a shell of the robust person he had been, and how alcohol and dry goods became the answer to his living problem. He told, too, that he wrote a book in the midst of tumult that brought him wealth and fame and everything he needed to kill himself. In the midst of his disintegration, he met a woman who was also going down. Together they came to RoR. First they fell in love with God, then they fell in love with each other. Glanton told it that way, so the sequence for the good life could be established for one and all in its proper order. One day, as was his way, he provoked a fight with his love, Babs. (They were the marrying kind. They did not fool around. They knew when love had come to the front door.)

“Go to hell. I’ve had it with you. You’re as dumb as your dumb name,” Glanton shouted, and stormed off.

Babs did not have the chuckling way of her husband. What he said in meanness she received as hot stones to her heart. She wept and wept, fearing that Glanton would use the flare-up as a pretext for getting ossified and then she would have a hysterical lunatic on her hands and their marriage would be nevermore. But he came back, not raving, but with composure. More than that, he had contrition to offer with understanding added on.

“Babs, I’m on to my stuff. I’m *on to it*, I tell you. And I’ll tell you something more. There is a power greater than ourselves. This is not theory, Babs. I tried to walk through that barroom door and a gale force wind knocked me twenty feet back. Babs, it’s astonishing, but I can’t drink even if I want to.” RoR had done for Glanton what he couldn’t do for himself. So he testified on that evening and Luther was there to take note.

Sham O'Malley, to whom Luther had read his moral inventory sometime before, was present too, and he also had it on his mind to testify. It was not lost on Luther that Sham sat at the opposite end of the first row from Glanton, and that they were at opposite ends more than spatially. He was not in all ways the same Sham O'Malley Luther had first set eyes on. He had the same ghostly pallor, the same angularity, the same hand gestures, but fire was now supplanting his ponderousness. Smoke came from his hairy ears and his gaping nostrils and his words flew scalding from his fevered mouth.

"Phony mentors with their phony talk acting as if they are gurus. Phony books. Phony talk of God. Just phony, phony, phony," he fumed from the floor.

"Sham's into his disease. It's a shame," Glanton said afterward.

"A real Sham shame," Luther replied, eliciting a chuckle from Glanton.

Sham had a fire going on in his mouth, but he also had a fire going on in his loins, and there was no hope of putting it out. He still had a thing going on for the young woman Canada. Now it was understood throughout the RoR fellowship that newcomers should try to avoid major changes in the first year and simply focus on getting and staying sober. They were strongly advised against new flings or romances, lest they take the focus off the program and put it on the object of their affection.

The added thing was that Canada was not only new but had a beau, a handsome Russian trapeze artist who would on occasion come with her to the Saturday night RoR meeting, as it was open to nonalcoholics as well as those with a drinking problem. To Luther they looked like a till death do us part couple, but Sham O'Malley worked overtime to put her under his spell with supreme instances of resurrected ponderousness.

Seeing that she was young and somewhat impressionable, the Shamster soon won dominion over her. That very night did he escort her from the meeting place, Canada's beau being away on tour. Sham put his unhealthy pallor and unsavory disposition right alongside her bloom of youth.

When Luther called to Glanton's attention what Sham was up to, Glanton did not go into the zone of righteousness even as he said, "That poor girl is going to need an exorcist." He had seen what evil can do to innocence, how it could rotate the head of a young girl, as it had in that movie, *The Exorcist*, with Linda Blair. He had seen what it was doing to Sham O'Malley.

But before getting to thinking that wrong triumphed over right, that Sham got to suck lasciviously on his snaggle tooth while exploring the treasures of Canada, know that her heart was miraculously returned to its proper place with Boris, her acrobat beau, And now there was nowhere for Sham to go but to desolation alley and sing, along with Roy Orbison, "Only the Lonely." But it did not stop there. He smelled the suds of his youth calling him back, and so once again he disappeared into the bottle, as if those intervening sober years had never happened.

*Celeste, I was under wraps in the workplace and the rooms of RoR, or if not entirely, I kept something of a check on my potential for vileness. But my home life was another matter, as you well know by now. Savagery spoke first, with restraint a woeful second. Last night was just another instance. I was tired, too tired to write, and resentful of Sarah for not appreciating me more or forgiving me for past wrongs. But is it possible I also*

*fought with her to close the sense of seeming distance between us? Is it right that a woman who is fragile mentally should be driven to cover her ears as protection from the verbal abuse being directed at her? That is attempted murder, not love, so I must have no illusions about my capacity to do harm. Nor must I pretend to believe that everyone is conflagration central. Carola Aprile and her husband, Tom Terst, come to mind immediately as refutation of such nonsense.*

On his way to visit the Metropolitan Museum, he paused at the Claremont School. It was closed for the weekend. He called out to Robin Abel and Diane Coleman and Bert Bach and Ogden Connifer and Tom Smits and Mr. Arbuckle and Mr. Sadowski and Mr. Horst-Lehman. He called out to all of them but the edifice was as unyielding as a tomb. Here is the graveyard of your dreams, it said, right here in this old converted hospital. They had gone away and taken the life he was intended to have with them, a life he couldn't have because he hadn't measured up. Once again was he in the land of low numbers. Once again was he at the dividing line, the line that separated him from the boys and girls of excellence. Once again was he compelled to understand that he had had his chance and muffed it. He hadn't cut the mustard. He had shown his unfitness. Now it was for him to live with his self-hatred and try to minimize its effects.

But he was not done, and so he called out again, first, to those who had written, in his eighth grade yearbook, under his photo, "We wish for him the back of his head," to identify themselves, that they come out of hiding, that he might remonstrate with them. He called out Diane Coleman, for saying that the only thing funny about him was the

shape of his head when, alone with her and extremely uncomfortable, he made a disparaging remark about a classmate. He called out Tom Smits to die and die and die for mocking his low board scores as they rode to school on the number 4 bus. And he called out to Tom Smits to die and die and die some more for causing Luther to quit the varsity basketball team because Tom Smits was doing better than him on the court. And he called out Mr. Horst-Lehman to die and die and die for telling him he would someday have to develop a stronger backbone when Luther was summoned to his office to confirm that he would be withdrawing from school.

Then he said, no no, jamais jamais, and called out himself to die and die and die some more. He called out himself to do just that because in all cases he gave them not only the last word but the only word. All he had ever given them was his passivity. It would not do to go dinky because RoR had put a prohibition on doing the dinky.

*Now Celeste, Glanton was not a man in whom mental agility was lacking. He could tie all manner of knots and name the constellations and go from Celsius to Fahrenheit and vice versa. He had been accepted to a specialized high school, Brooklyn Technical, but did not let his acceptance keep him there, being impatient for the bigger world. What I am saying is that he had a mind that moved forward on its own pathways, placing no reliance on the direction of others, and gave no never mind to the absence of degrees while finding contentment in his own private spaces. Because he was stellar in his mental capacity and it had powered him to the top, I had no choice but to confess my own intellectual feebleness to him, as it was shouting out at me night and day. With sincerity and*

*conviction as his seeming guides, he replied, "The intellect is the lowest form of mentation."*

*Celeste, I held to Glanton's pith as if it were a talisman when a tidal wave of insecurity was about to hit and wash me far from shore and usher me into a deep and watery grave, and yet many, many were the times I was still swept away to my slow death. That is why one must get muscular on this matter of intelligence, and call it out for what it is. If I have said it before, I will say it again: Pith cannot take the place of understanding, and understanding comes from examination, when it does not come from above. And so I said to myself: "Self, what is this big deal business you make of intelligence, that it should be the sine qua non of existence? Talk to me. Talk to me."*

*Self replied: "It is your armor against those bent on viciousness against your person, those who would put the laughing thing on you for not knowing the Pythagorean theorem or the opening lines of the Areopagitica. It is your defense against vulnerability."*

*"That is its only purpose?"*

*"You equate it with the power to open doors: to Yale, to a universe beyond your own. You equate it with the singing of "It's a Big Wide Wonderful World" and the bounty of America."*

But the illness was riotous in his mind, loud and mocking of him, and no bag of spiritual tricks could heal it permanently. No matter the level of humility he sought for as an antidote to his pain, someone new would come along and challenge his right to existence.

And that new someone was Kaplan Acedit of the lantern jaw. He had Dartmouth College credentials. He had Columbia University MFA credentials. And he had the forward motion of his life, with a list of publishing credits the length of his arm.

Rafta gave Kaplan Acedit to Luther. He had been one of Bruce Bill's authors, and she was not partial to his subject, John Muir, conservationist extraordinaire. Luther had seen all the brilliant queries on the tags attached to the manuscript, and also Bruce Bill's careful line editing. What could he hope to contribute, by comparison, to the manuscript? He would only embarrass himself. So he did very little.

Over lunch at the Japanese restaurant on Park Avenue Luther watched as Kaplan Acedit drank glass after glass of sake. Life for him was clearly a feast, and he was here to partake. There would be no abstinence for him. Rafta said he deserved his success, noting not only the quality of his writing but his attention to detail with contract matters. He was not a docile child out there in the world but someone able to stand his ground in negotiations. What Luther saw was someone who possibly had the same problem with alcohol as himself, an inability to leave it alone, and possibly as well the beginnings of a messy life. His wife, according to Bruce Bill, had supported Kaplan while he was trying to get his writing career off the ground, and he had repaid her with numerous infidelities. Bruce Bill had much preferred her over Kaplan, he had confessed, suggesting that he had spent time with the two when they were still a couple. Luther understood there would be no such social connection for him with Kaplan. It would be one and done, as he had nothing that Kaplan wanted.



“She left me. That’s a pretty rough thing to deal with,” Kaplan said, looser-tongued than he might have been had he abstained from round five with the sake.

“I’ll bet,” Luther said.

“Have you ever been left by someone?”

“Oh, yes. It can be hard to secure a woman to the premises.”

“What?” Kaplan blurted.

“All I meant is…”

“Who talks that way? Secure a woman to the premises? That’s so crazy.”

“Yes. I suppose so. But then, women are built to give men clobber. Even when we appear to be hoping to leave them, it is they who hold the power.”

“Are you all right? Did you come to Cromartie Wonders by way of the nuthouse?”

“Not at all,” Luther replied, as if the insult-heavy question merited a matter-of-fact response and not a punch in Kaplan’s ugly face. “But I do come to the truth by way of dreams, and in one such dream last night my very own wife declared that she would be leaving me. Devastated, I sought rhyme and reason for her impending departure—I say *impending* because she had placed all her possessions in a grocery cart and was raring to wheel it into the street. In fact, she bulled right past me. I defy anyone to try to describe the depth of my pain at this abandonment. No one should feel that love has walked out the door, and taken everything, including yourself, with her. But that is exactly what she did in dreamland, if not in what we call the waking state.”

“Where did you come from?” Kaplan asked, trying now to draw a bead on Luther. Kaplan was concerned for himself. He wanted to be sure competence and stability still endured at Cromartie Wonders post-Bruce Bill.

Luther gave his standard answer. He saw no reason to lie. Who you were was who you were, so you might as well get on with it, that others might see the station you had been assigned.

“I come from above,” Luther said.

“You come from what?” A tone of soreness had entered Kaplan’s voice. After all, he didn’t want to be trifled with where his livelihood was concerned.

“From above,” Luther said once more.

“You come from above? What can that possibly mean?”

“For the Supremes it meant that heaven must have sent me, just as they sang. But I am not talking of heaven, or maybe I am, a heaven that existed right here on earth and that I chose or was led to leave.”

“Come on, man. This is getting tiresome.”

What Kaplan meant was that the sake was leaving him sodden and sullen.

“I come from the adult trade division, on the floor above, where grownups reign and the smaller proportions of the young are kept in perspective.”

“You were a book editor?”

“I was given books to edit.”

“I don’t know. There’s something not real about you.”

“How so?”

“You don’t stand in the place that you have been assigned.”

“Now you are sounding like me.”

“You’re right. Let’s call this a day,” Kaplan said.

*Lies, Celeste, lies. Woulda coulda shoulda lies. But there will be no beating of me with a stick. I will stand my ground in the land of untruth when not walking in sandaled feet in the garden of veritas.*

*Celeste, there is more from the past, following on the heels of the Claremont School. Mr. Lewicki, the former owner of the paperback bookstore on One Hundred Fourteenth Street and Broadway, emerged without my calling him out. There he was, in Damrosch Park, in Lincoln Center, idly wandering on a warm Sunday evening. Clearly, in his unkemptness, he was not dressed for the opera. His pants and shirt were worn, and his unshaven face haggard. And then there was the pint bottle he took from his back pocket as his eyes met mine. He looked, in that moment, like a man on the outskirts of his own life, as I too had been when living in the domain of the bottle.*

*I was not alone. I was with Sarah. We were to attend a piano recital that evening with Carola Aprile and Tom Terst at Avery Fisher Hall. Undoubtedly startled, Mr. Lewicki quickly put away the bottle and called out, in a loud voice, “Hey, Luther, how the hell are you?” and gave my hand a vigorous shake with his own freed right hand.*

*“I’m doing fine,” I said, and introduced Sarah.*

*“What’s a woman like you doing with the likes of him?” he went on, running on nervous, even hysterical, energy.*

*“We’re married,” she said.*

*“Married? Married did you say? Well, you two will learn,” he said, imposing the cynicism of his years upon us. “So what are you doing with yourself, Luther?”*

*“I’m in publishing. I work as an editor.”*

*This brought another roar from him. “Publishing? There’s no money in publishing. Publishing is for rich people with trust funds.”*

*“I guess,” Luther said.*

*“What do you mean, you guess?”*

*Mr. Lewicki was the man who knew everything, even if he knew nothing. Still, he was bent on having his say. Let him have his putdowns, I figured. Let him put his insecurity on display.*

*“How about yourself? Have you been away? Someone else seems to have taken over the bookstore.”*

*“I sold it some years ago and have been traveling about, here and there, ever since. But now I’m back. My father is ill and I’m doing what I can for him. And I’m helping out a friend at a bookstore on One Hundred Nineteenth Street and Amsterdam Avenue.”*

*“Maybe I can stop by,” I blurted, when truly I never wanted to see him again, given what seemed to be his depressing circumstances.*

*“You do that,” he said, as if he sensed I wouldn’t.*

*The following night I spoke with Glanton, and described Mr. Lewicki's condition. I also mentioned that I had stolen some or all of Henry Miller's Rosy Crucifixion books from the store back when I first started working there, and so I owed Mr. Lewicki a financial amend. Glanton agreed and had these words for me.*

*"Love him," Glanton said, his voice full of the quiet conviction that he knew whereof he spoke, and full too of the understanding that I had not been loving Mr. Lewicki but fearing him as a man on the way down with the disease of rootlessness that I too might catch if I drew too near. Glanton was saying that I lived my life outside the gates of his understanding, but to be lacking in empathy was not the same as saying I was lacking a conscience. And my conscience was guiding me to right a wrong.*

*Now, Celeste, do you imagine for one moment that Mr. Lewicki told me where he could be found for no reason when, going back to my store experience, he existed among the mysterious as to where he lived? Was he not, consciously or unconsciously, saying to me that we had some unfinished business? But it did not matter whether he was calling to me or not. My life was calling to me to be free, to not trade it for Sexus, Plexus, and Nexus. And so I found him in this store he did not own but merely worked at, manning the cash register.*

*"I have come on a mission of mercy, for myself if no one else," I said. The store was in a state of bookstore stillness.*

*"Speak English," he said.*

*"In the early days of my employment, I took from you what I shouldn't have."*

*"I said speak English."*

*“I took two books, it may have been three, without paying for them and wish to make restitution.” I handed him an envelope containing the estimated value of the books in cash.*

*“Get out,” he said, as he snatched the envelope from my hand.*

*It was painful, and yet of no lasting consequence, that he had let sternness be his guide where I had allowed myself to hope that love instead would shine.*

And there was more to come if he was to right the ledger book of wrongs. After leaving Mr. Lewicki, he passed through the gates of Columbia University at One Hundred Sixteenth Street and Amsterdam Avenue, and walked west along the mall. Midway along the path, he paused. Amid the bustle of students on the campus, there was Roberto resting on his elbows on the sundial. In a pair of baggy jeans and an oversize denim jacket and with a giant bush of frizzy hair, he looked like a remnant from the nineteen sixties bearing witness to the reality that the times had passed him by.

Luther might have considered veering left and avoiding Roberto had he not appeared to be directly in his old roommate’s sight lines. Even from afar, it seemed that Roberto was reserving his amused grin solely for him and had been calmly awaiting his arrival.

“What have you brought me, Gargoyle?”

“How are you?” Luther replied, seeking to ignore Roberto’s question.

“Come on. What are you withholding from me?”

“Withholding?”

“Give it up. I can feel it, man. I can feel it.”

His face was recessed under the billowing bush atop his head, causing Luther to think back to the bush he himself had maintained atop his own head. Roberto had not been a hair head. Not back then. Oh, it was hard. The purpose of any amend was, in ways small or large, to put the wreckage of his past behind him, but now he felt, through association with Roberto, awash in its contaminated waters.

“I just want to say I’m sorry. I didn’t harm your cat, but I was insensitive in not getting it to a vet when it was harmed. Even as I speak I feel how horribly neglectful that was.”

“Fucking Gargoyle.”

“And it was wrong when I invited Roddy to the country but did not include you. That unkindness has stayed in my mind, and I want to acknowledge it,” Luther went on.

“Gargoyle and his bullshit.” Roberto laughed his sickly laugh as Luther walked off.

Late-breaking news spread through Pilgore and down to Cromartie Wonders. Richard Simone—he who had his own imprint under the Pilgore umbrella and had the audacity to walk about in a blazer and turtleneck and who also walked about with his right hand in the pocket of his charcoal gray slacks and whose primary author owned a typewriter of gold—had been fired. And Marigold Coulter, she with the voice that could knock down walls and who served as his editor-in-chief, had been tossed onto the street with him, and the titles on their doors had been tossed onto the street as well. “Get out! Get out! We

don't want you anymore" Pilgore had shouted. And Luther could only tremble at the fact of the world of violence the grownups lived in. Memories of the prehistoric plane of battle he had witnessed when his father had been made to get up by intemperate Hannah and quell her insurrection echoed in the silence for the balance of the day.

*Celeste, my cruelty did not end with Roberto and his cat. Studies have shown it was an ongoing thing, right there in what should have been the sanctuary of the home. Why, you ask? Because money, the need for it, was an ongoing thing. Sarah was a woman with a broken wing. She sought to fly, and fly straight, but there was structural damage. Her flight pattern was erratic, inevitably arcing toward disaster. So it was with her latest attempt at employment. Carola Aprile had moved on to a new design firm and soon arranged for Sarah to come on board as well. But all Sarah saw was new faces with mouths afflicted with the same old tendency to have their whispering way. Though Sarah's listening devices were keen, the whispering campaign was hardly detectable at first, but built day by day. By the end of the week she was dealing with a full-scale laughing thing that left her with the option to go mad or flee out the door, as she did. That evening I found her weeping in the loft.*

*Now and then, Celeste, the dream of a true partnership would arise. I would convince myself that each of us could step out into the world we had kept at bay for some years, but it was not to be. The following day I took my grievance to an RoR meeting. I shared my disappointment that my wife had once again let go of an employment opportunity at a time when we were in desperate need for money. Yes, I came with a*



*desire for the group's understanding and sympathy. Yes, I came seeking their support. Instead they did the shunning thing. No one came up to me at meeting's end and said, "I identify," or "I know how you feel." Instead, they put me in an isolation ward so I might hear my own words, the better to get in touch with my self-pity. The hard smack of silence is what they gave me. Once again did they remind me that their listening was active and shaping. Celeste, they were communicating in the silence, their message louder than any they could speak.*

Hungry for his own life, Luther continued to go to bookstores to get filled up. At the St. Mark's Bookstore, he bought a collection of stories by Raymond Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* A man owl-like in his observant stillness sat stiffly on a high stool at the cash register. He had words impacted in his head and all parts of his body, words that he would not spend in idle conversation but save for the paper that would receive them. He really did belong in a tree with the stillness that embraced him. Then Luther thought how all the words he thought about the owl-like man he would never speak either and how he too would save his words for the paper that awaited them.

If the winds of failure had been blowing, Luther found that they had ceased as he stepped back onto St. Mark's Place. In the store he had read the first page. Simple words. Not the words of the big brains. Not Nabokov words. Not *Pale Fire* words. American words, lying normal on the page. The kind of words, in the order they emerged, that deserved to be there on the page.

In the morning Luther woke up. Sarah was not there beside him. He sat up and saw her sitting at the oak gate-leg table in the dining area.

“What are you doing down there?” he called to her, but she was busy writing and did not respond. She too was saying she would save her words for the page. “Copy that. Roger that,” Luther went on, like the space travelers he admired for their technical wizardry, spirit of exploration, bravery, and Texan brevity.

All parts of Sarah fell in line behind the fixations of her mind. There was no distracting her from her silence until she had completed her task, and so Luther gave up trying.

When, finally, she put the pen down, she said, “I was writing to my father.”

Luther might have guessed. After all, a woman never looked more beautiful than when she was returning home to her source, her denial falling away and the dimensions of connection growing more apparent. The bonds of filial love were still secure.

*Celeste, once again a major lie of my life was revealed to me. Once again the spotlight was shone on me without cease, leaving me no place to hide, and forcing me to confront my exploitative and appropriating nature. I was no better than a common thief. Just as I had stolen from the renting office, so too was I stealing from Sarah, taking from her life and putting it on the page. What moral structure can a man have who does such a thing? Just as I had no regard for the well-being of Roberto's cat, I had no regard for Sarah*

*either. Indeed, I saw that I am the laughing thing, laughing at one and all. Such a cold place, such a terrifying place to be in.*

Luther journeyed to dreamland and found there more truth than he thought he had come for. Mr. Sadowski, his high school basketball coach, had put together a successful program at a school with its own gymnasium. In fact, his basketball team won the state championship. Luther sought out a face to face with his erstwhile mentor. In their private time together, Mr. Sadowski let it be known that he hadn't rated Luther quite as highly as Luther had believed. What became even clearer was that Luther had come to Mr. Sadowski seeking the boost to his self-esteem that he wasn't receiving. The only solution was to leave quickly and find a private place where he could attend to his new pain, and so he did. There he cried for many days and nights. Because forsakenness was a serious business, whomever it might come to and however it might arrive.

Efram Ellsberg called one night, from San Francisco. He had taken his love with him or it had taken him. Either way, he could not stay where his new love was not and he was now living with her to secure the premises for that love. He said the Golden Gate Bridge was a challenge for him because of the low retaining wall and the aesthetic setting for suicide, but this destructive urge was more than counterbalanced by *The Maltese Falcon* and *Vertigo*. Efram wasn't talking like his normal self and Luther had to wonder if his new love was emitting toxic rays. But Efram did put the future into his life, at least in the next sentence he spoke, saying he would be coming back east in the fall to attend the wedding

of his long-time friend, scale master Zach Zeckler, who had resurrected himself away from the wasteland of heroin to become a medical student, and other friends, including Luther. Luther had the thought to say that the scales had fallen from Zach Zeckler's eyes, but there were protocols of conduct to be followed. And there was also no need for Luther to shout out to Efram, "Are you planning to remain among the living?" Still, the sense remained that Efram was speaking to him from more three thousand miles away, and that even if he had been in Luther's face he would have been farther away than that. There is no distance that love cannot vanquish, and no diminishment of distance that can be achieved in love's absence, Luther heard himself say, summoning the Frenchie aphorist, La Rochefoucauld, to be a party to his mind. And in so doing, he could marvel that he was not sadder than he was.

Luther took the A train to Far Rockaway so he could visit with Luke, who had moved there with Rose and her twin boys from the trailer park in New Jersey. The house had some rotting clapboard and was in need of paint and the patch of lawn was balding. The streets were quiet and sunbaked, and you didn't see people going about on the broken strips of sidewalk. The neighborhood looked like one the long-term residents had fled.

Rose laid down a carpet of incessant chatter, punctuated by bursts of nervous laughter. At times she was difficult to understand, like a speeded up recording.

"Luke's at the store with the kids. He promised to come back. I believe him sometimes. The house isn't great, but what can you do? There are drug dealers everywhere. Guns. They have guns. Lots of violence Lots of killing. Not good. Not good.

Speaking of good, I used to be good with numbers, but not now. Figures run together. I get confused... The house isn't good. Maybe it will be. Maybe not. Maybe we will die here. Everyone dies sometime. Right, Luther?"

"That sounds right," Luther said.

"You sound like a diplomat. Are you a diplomat? Luke says you are smart. He says you went to college. There are some dumb people who went to college, I told him, but he doesn't listen. Someday, he will."

She was speaking of him, he was sure. She knew who he was. Women always did.

In RoR, the emphasis was on living in the day and ultimately the moment. Rose was doing just that without a program. The aneurysm in her brain could break free any time and kill her, and yet she dealt with it. He saw her strength. He also saw her anger. It was there in her free-flowing words.

She wasn't the teenage Rose he remembered from his adolescence, the girl who stunned him with her beauty, her poise, and seeming maturity as she walked up Broadway that day long ago. A girl in a league far beyond his own or that of his neighborhood friends. A girl who modeled, who had a manager and went on tour and sang and danced. Time and motherhood and trauma had done their thing to her.

Luke returned with the boys. They arrived carrying bags of groceries. Jimmy and Joey. Fraternal, not identical, twins. You could tell them apart, Their hair, for one thing. Jimmy was blond, Joey brown-haired. And Jimmy had the broader face. Like fawns, the two twelve-year-olds seemed to Luther, with their big eyes and long, thin legs.

Irish beauty it was, the kind the Garatdjians could never produce. A dark and glittering diamond she had been, only now without the luster in the Wonder bread world she inhabited.

“You want a beer?” Luke had pulled a six-pack of Schlitz from the bag and had his hand around a can.

“No, thank you.”

“Come on. Have a beer.”

“No, really. You know I don’t drink.”

“I know you say you don’t drink.”

“I go to RoR meetings every day, or practically every day.”

“You weren’t that bad.”

“How bad did I have to be?”

Luke laughed and poured small amounts out to Jimmy and Joey. “Go ahead and drink it up,” he said to the boys. Then, turning to Luther, he said, “That’s what Mother didn’t understand. You can’t shield kids from temptation. You can’t create forbidden fruit. Because that’s what kids will eventually grab at. Better to do like the French. Give the kids some table wine so they learn. Right, Jimmy? Right, Joey?”

“What’s forbidden fruit? Bananas? Peaches?” Jimmy asked.

“They aren’t forbidden. We eat them all the time,” Joey said.

“I know. I’m just saying...”

“Adam and Eve. A serpent tempts Eve to eat fruit fallen from the tree of knowledge. She gets Adam to do the same. Women are always to blame for trouble. That’s what men always say, even God.” Rose laughed.

“What’s God got to do with it?” There was complaint in Luke’s voice.

“What’s God got to do with anything?” Once again Rose laughed.

“Never mind any of this. Just drink your beer, Jimmy and Joey.”

“It tastes terrible,” Jimmy said.

“It sure does,” Joey said, grimacing too.

“I thought the same thing when I first tried it, but it grows on you. It’s an acquired taste, just like caviar.”

“When is the last time you ate caviar?” Rose asked.

“I’m just saying...”

“If it grows on you anymore, you’ll be drowning in it,” Rose countered.

“Hey, respect. Respect. It’s what I told you and the boys. All you need is a strong mind. That’s all. If you have a strong mind, you keep alcohol in its place. It’s when you have a weak mind that you don’t.”

Luther hadn’t anticipated the dissoluteness that attached to the union Luke had achieved. It was one thing for him to drink. After all, that was Luke’s choice, or more accurately, his need and obsession. It was another to try to undermine Luther’s recovery or, worse, to encourage, in some degree, the boys down his own drunken path. Was that what Luke was saying—if he couldn’t be raised up, he would try to lower others? He had always thought of his brother as having a good heart. Malignancy was not part of his

makeup. But what about those childhood years? Luke popping his head into the shower stall at the swimming pool and saying , with an evil grin, as Luther stood naked under the stream of water, that his was twice as big as Luther's. Or saying that Luther's blood was like foul water? Or the time he wheeled and punched Luther in the stomach for no reason? Or the time he "air-mailed" a bag of soot from the roof and laughed when it narrowly missed Luther, who had been playing down in the alleyway?

Well, that was the past he was there with Luke to lay to rest, was it not? Luke had perceived him as a rival, a not entirely welcome addition to the family. What else but jealousy could have led him to act as he did in those instances? Glanton had reminded Luther that his mission was to take care of his side of the street. "You must pray for the willingness to dissolve the walls of resentment that keep you sequestered and move forward. Prayer will get you there if it is continuous," Glanton had said. But Luther's prayer wasn't continuous. It wasn't continuous at all. It had interruptions. It had snooze and sleep time and wandering mind time. Glanton had meant *continual*, if he had meant anything at all. Continuous or not, Luther had dissolved that wall. In truth, there was no wall to dissolve, unless it was a wall of disappointment. He stood in a place of sorrow where his brother was concerned, that Luke couldn't rise straight and true. When the Coast Guard came for him, drawn by his score in the ninety-ninth percentile on their test, and then lost interest because he had a felony charge for "auto theft"—backing a car out of a driveway, in Albany, New York—Luke began to drink more heavily, and earlier in the day. Wine for breakfast and all that. Failure was not a cause for resentment where his brother was concerned, only sadness. And so he was vague in his understanding of why



he was there in the first place. No clear reason for an amend presented itself, unless it was those ferocious fights they had when he was a child, triggered by what? A sound Luke would make with his mouth that Luther heard as an enraging provocation.

Maybe the amend was that he was spending time with his brother, listening to him go on and on about his motorcycle and how he wasn't giving it up for anyone or anything as he drank his cans of beer.

“The problem with you is that you're nothing, just nothing. You're like a blank piece of paper. All you ever show is your blandness, your emptiness. Me, I'm a risk taker. I stick my dick in a woman and things happen. I can create and I can destroy and you can do nothing but leave a trail of tissues.”

Luke was on his sixth and final beer when Luther left. Luther knew, because he had counted.

*Now those boys, Celeste, the world had done them wrong and their father had done them wrong but they had the right stuff to overcome. They didn't fall down dying into self-pity. No, no, no, they didn't play that way. They had a genetic inheritance that the whiny, excuse-making Garatdjians would never possess. Going on ahead into a future that was not then mine, they proved they had high board score content in their genes. They didn't need no private school. They didn't need no books. They did not need no quietude of the peaceful home. They did not need food to eat or water to drink. Their excellence was sustenance enough for one to win a full scholarship to Williams College and the other a full athletic scholarship to chuck the rock for the University of South Carolina. They just*

*got the job done.*

*For a while, anyway.*

*Celeste, my planes were in the air, long-range bombers on a night run to take out the very infrastructure of my life.*

*But no, insane military bombast is not the way to begin this account.*

*Once again I brought up the matter of termination with Dr. Rosner. I was at pains to make clear I was seeking to terminate therapy, not him. Even so, my words meant nothing, nothing, as my mother would say. They died before they could even reach his ears. The sight of them lying there on his carpeted floor evinced in him not an iota of pity. Then he spoke his own words and each had the force to reach and penetrate my person. The master of laconism simply said, "You need to stay if you want to grow. We can talk about this more next session." His second sentence he punctuated with a snuffle.*

*And so I left him, defeated. But Celeste, this you must know. Resurrection has a life of its own, independent of words seeking hegemony. I arose, Celeste, I arose. My hand arose and all my being arose behind it and I put pen to paper and wrote, "I am gone from you now, but not without love and gratitude. The time has come." A sealed, stamped, and addressed envelope I dropped with finality of purpose in the mailbox down the block. There. There. Let the long-range bombing begin. Let laconism prevail over laconism.*

But there was an omission that required insertion for the account to live in the realm of truth. At the previous session Luther had once more brought up termination. The response it evoked from Dr. Rosner was uncharacteristic.

“Who is behind this?” he demanded.

“What do you mean?” Luther replied.

“Just what I said. Who is encouraging you to leave?”

“But what are you saying? That my desire to leave is not my own?”

“What’s the name of that character you mentioned?”

“What character?”

“That mentor. Or whatever you call him.”

And there was his mistake, referring to Glanton as a character, as someone not quite cut from the cloth of respectability, as he was. And it was also there that love and loyalty had to declare itself, if only inwardly. Dr. Rosner, intentionally or not, was asking, or demanding, that Luther choose between him and Glanton. Luther was hurt for Glanton, stricken that Dr. Rosner would apply a word rendered pejorative by tone and context to someone Luther had put all his faith and trust in. The offense ran deep and fed his resolve in the follow-up, and final session.

He returned to the low retaining wall, seeking it out in the August heat, and there he sat under the shade of plane trees and stared at the three modern high-rise buildings in the complex just to the south. His legs, when he walked, felt shaky, as if they would give out beneath him. It was the Rosner effect. The plug had been pulled and now he was losing

power. Now he didn't feel so strong and full of resolve. Now Glanton's assurance that he would not regress and no harm would come to him after leaving Rosner was in doubt. So too was Luther's conviction about the rightness of his decision to leave so he would no longer have one foot in one boat and one foot in the other and inevitably fall in the water. The decision didn't seem to have unified him at all; rather, it was as if he had been torn apart. But then, just as he was about to fall down dying from the feebleness that afflicted him, he rose up on himself. He said, "Let me go to a phone booth, crawl if I must, and call Dr. Rosner and beg to come back. Let me do just that." Then further words, words of rebuke, "Jamais. Jamais," came, causing him to see, in that moment, the truth of what Glanton had additionally said: "Your pain is not because of the decision you made to terminate therapy. Your pain is owing to your delay in accepting the decision you have made."

He began to grow stronger, in his legs and in his mind. A new happiness found him that he didn't have to be in two places at once and that he could discontinue writing a monthly check to Dr. Rosner, that he could now be where his feet were.

*Celeste, one morning I encountered a woman from my not so distant past, the same woman Hinckner Thor had paired me with in his writing class. There Augusta Johnby was, waiting for the elevator, as was I, in the lobby of the Pilgore building, looking as pale as the drab raincoat she wore and with a head of lifeless blond hair. But if her hair was dull, her mind was not. She was active on behalf of her own life and building a*

*sturdy structure for it. Why do I say this, Celeste? Because in her bag she was carrying the final manuscript of her novel, which she was to turn over to her editor.*

*“Well, that’s great,” I said.*

*“Is it great, Luther? Is it?”*

*“Of course it’s great,” I said, but already she had come to occupy my mind and read its contents. “Who is your editor?”*

*“A man named Alfred Dorf. Do you know him?”*

*“I couldn’t say.”*

*“You couldn’t say?” She laughed in amusement.*

*“We have come to my floor. I must leave you here.” I stepped off quickly.*

*For the rest of the day the beast of her was rampaging through my garden.*

*Many times did I have to close my office door or sequester myself in one of the bathroom stalls. Many times did I sing “I’m just a lonely boy, lonely and blue, I’m so alone since I lost you,” because the “you” I had lost was myself. She had trashed and tarnished me forever with her accomplishment and would not let me hide in peace with my inferiority. In the kneehole of my desk, with the door closed, did I kneel and call out in a feverish whisper to God to relieve me of myself entirely, to make of me an empty vessel for him to fill, so the occupation by Augusta Johnby might cease. On my knees did I accept my hanging string status and the poverty of my intentions for myself. On my knees did I see the futility of my own endeavors and pray that Augusta Johnby, with her steel wool hair and parchment skin, have all the love and joy and peace and happiness I might wish for*

*myself. And so, if only for the time being, the peace of God could enter me and I could sit in my office chair and did not sing about lonely boy or have any desire to do so.*

*But it did not end there, Celeste. It did not. Yes, prayer is an action, but we must make amends where we have done harm. If I cannot stand in the same room, or the same elevator, with someone such as Augusta Johnby without agita in my bearing, then I must turn the lens on myself and apply rigorous honesty in determining the cause for my distress and then go outward to the offended party. It is not enough to state the vileness of her horse teeth or the sickliness of her egg salad face. From the outset I had not wished her well, and as a result God had punched me in the face with her ascent to fame and glory in the Pilgore elevator. Now was it for me to expose my smallness to her, my chronic schadenfreude, and express my gratitude that she had not been thrown off the course of success by its toxicity. "I am sober now and righting my ship of state so I am not buffeted by seas in turmoil. I have a vision of my own peacefulness that I am beaming to you that its light might be added to your own. And trust that I am walking in the correctness of my own better person as I compose this note of amends. Respect is due. When a bill comes due, we pay it, and so it is with r-e-s-p-e-c-t as well. We must be ironclad in our spiritual understanding."*

*Celeste, I am writing. The sky is my parchment. I have started in a tiny corner. Even with infinity before me, I am conservation minded. Before the sun goes down, I have assigned myself a window into eternity....And now this. My skin has turned black. My whole life I*

*have been waiting for such a shift. Now that it has happened, I am happy to feel solid in my identity. Causal connections have been suspended. All reason is lost to the rush of necessity. This is what it means to be in dreamland. Let us rejoice at the freedom it brings.*

*Rafta was not my lover. That would be a death-dealing venture to even explore. She was the friend I could not awaken to in the time that was permitted me. I am not some freaky plant with accelerated margins of growth. I am slow and pedestrian and trying to stay within the lines of truth with English as my first language. I saw something, Celeste. I saw something it is dangerous to get too near. It radiates the poison of sunlight. Fear caused me to spurn the help that was offered. There, I have said it unadorned. Why? I would have had to give up my judgments. I would have had to come closer than I could bear. No one should be sandwiched into a reality he cannot abide. The strength of poets like Anna Akhmatova is in the commemoration of resistance to an order never meant to be.*

*Celeste, I have settled down. I think I have located the problem. Actually, on some level I have been aware of the problem for some time. It goes back to childhood and those times I would burst into a room with the element of surprise, startling Luke and Vera with my one-person banzai attack. Even then Luke was astute enough to say, "You're a different person when you feel strong." That is my problem here. I use language to empower myself. At such times I am prone to fly off the rails and into the realm of extravagant excess, or what some would likely call gibberish. The feeling at such times is that I am*

*not subject to any rules, that I can make sense by ceasing to make sense, that letting go will lead me to a higher sense of sense.*

*So let me try to approach the matter in a simple and clear fashion. There was Rafta. There was me. Rafta said, "How was your weekend?" I couldn't very well tell her I had been snappish with Sarah, and so I was reduced to the word "fine." But then I took a chance. I said I had taken my YA novel down from the shelf and was trying to work on it, but that I was discouraged by Bruce Bill's assessment that I would need a central event and a maximum length of two hundred pages. "And why should that trouble you?" Rafta asked, living in the practical realm that she did.*

*"Because the truth is that I don't have a central event," I replied.*

*"There are novels that don't have a central event. For some, smaller events suffice."*

*And so she destroyed me with the plainness, the grounded nature, of her formidable intellect. She had not only read the paperback novels and the hardbound ones as well; she had also analyzed them. On demand could she extrapolate facts, structured facts. She was an engineer of the English language. For her, words did not rush in to form a chaotic pile. She had shelves to put them on and labels to assign. Now Celeste, I will try to answer with the plainness but sans the analytic intellect with which she responded. She had given me a way forward not only for the work but into her life. The two were somehow linked. I had only to ask and she would, in her loneliness, say yes to helping me. I saw that there was love beneath her tart and British crust. But know this as well. Celeste, I could not go where she was standing. Her unspoken overture would lead*



*to disappointment and misunderstanding. What I am saying is that I lived within the confines of my own mind and did not make the necessary effort to cultivate relationships that could help me in this life so I did not have to wear the garments that I do. We will talk about this further later on. We will.*

*And further, there is this, Celeste. It is not required that we be born in ancient Athens to have the strophe, antistrophe Greek chorus thing going on. Though the competing voices were loud—"I am nobody" "You are somebody"—RoR was providing me a new vocabulary, words for which I already had definitions but which previously lacked application to my life. For example, disease. "My disease has been talking to me," I would often hear RoR members say. A more colorful synonym was the acronym ODAP, "Old Devilish Alcoholic Personality." "ODAP has been sitting on my shoulder, whispering its poisonous stuff," you would hear someone also say. There were days when "the disease" hammered me, saying I could forget about any progress; it would be all regression from then on. But soon the other voice would come strong; it was only a matter of waiting for it. And what would it say? Only this: to have faith and continue to go to meetings and work the program, not the problem. If I did so, things would be all right and more than all right. To which Glanton added, "Things are all right," so the definitive could have its day.*

Now Sarah was finding strength of her own. Dr. Frodkey may have been doing double duty so the power within her would be made manifest in her consciousness. Once again did he provide the structure she required so she could do her paste-ups and mechanicals

by day and pursue her dark Soutine/Ensor vision by night. She could not live in the abstract forms of Agnes Martin even if she admired her white paint strength. It did Luther's heart good to see her getting well and gaining confidence in herself. And though he did not care for Ronald "I can nod my head with the best of them" Reagan, he heard himself use the president's line. "It's morning in America again," Luther exclaimed, because the sun was coming up to vanquish the darkness. He had love for her. He did not want to see her down and weeping the way she had been. He did not want the fate of running toward what he had been running from in fleeing the instability in his own family only to find it among the Van Dines. And he did not want the blemishes he had put on her to last and last. He called on the sun to kiss them away so he would not have to live in the forever shame shame double shame of everyone knowing him by the name *abuser*.

Heartened, Luther sought to lay down some serious infrastructure for their lives with the purchase of insurance against fire and theft. While it was not living fresh and constantly in his mind, those early days in RoR in which he imagined incineration to be nigh were not forgotten, nor were the break-ins by the second-story artist. He then bought a double boiler, that veggies might be properly steamed and as an aid to domesticity.

Luther was not a friend maker with those of his own sex. Since Jerry Jones-Nobleonian back in the days of childhood, he had gone to no other male, with the exception of his initial overture to Tom Smits the summer between seventh and eighth grade, when his feet took him from the basketball court at one end of the play area in Riverside Park to the court at the other end, where Tom Smits was to be found also shooting hoops by

himself in the loneliness of an August day, near the tunnel where the trains of that time could have their way on rails of steel. But it was thereafter for Tom Smits to come to him, calling and calling and then calling some more, seeking to break from the isolation his intellect could not protect him from. This being the same Tom Smits who had punched him in his face and all parts of his body with his words of mockery and scorn.

But then Luther saw that he had spoken too soon. Was there not also Efram Ellsberg, to whom he went when Sarah panic would strike him, that is, when she had gone away from him because of his excess? Let this too be entered into the record so accuracy could have its day.

And now there was Solomon Rhein. Luther had only known him to be a man of one voice, but now, since giving him his work number, he was hearing Solomon in many voices—Russian military officer, Godfather, Mexican bandito. Solomon Rhein was compelling Luther to turn his mind to the possibility of some peculiarity holding his friend in its grip. It would have been an odd but humorous quirk if the disguises were for Luther's ears only, but Solomon Rhein was also leaving messages for him in such names as Ben E. King and Doo Ron Ron. And so Luther reminded Solomon Rhein that these calls were coming to him at work, where frivolity of this kind was not appropriate. But to Luther's surprise, his words meant nothing. Three more messages followed, from *Going to the Chapel*, *I Will Follow*, and *Get On Up!*

Now Solomon Rhein had a Brown University-worthy brain, and he was seeking to apply it to the film industry with the hope of a niche for himself in the world of distribution. He did love the sounds of America, so it was not strange that he should want

to live in the persona of Ben E. King or James Brown. For this reason Luther did not go into all-out war over his friend's transgression, but he did keep it where it could be seen in his mind. Yes, he had a file on his friend now, and the evidence was mounting that something was amiss. Included in the file with the aliases was the Choate business, which Solomon Rhein was continuing with, not letting Luther be who he was supposed to be because Solomon Rhein was not able to be who he was supposed to be either. One had been barred from the Ivy League because of lack of aptitude, whereas the other had barred himself because of waywardness. Luther took the matter of Solomon Rhein to the ponder place, that he might have the basis for more fully understanding Solomon Rhein and offering the compassion he was crying out for.

But credit to those who credit deserve. Solomon Rhein had his AWACs in the air. He had his reconnaissance of himself going from many different angles so perspective could be king. He saw what the spirit gods had done in aligning him with the forces of darkness and admitted it freely. He acknowledged that he was taking Luther in a direction he didn't want to go and then laughed as a way of saying he also didn't care. So it was for Luther to put up stones in his heart against his friend even as he took his calls. And because he had his own self-reflection thing going, it was for him to say to Luther, in an altered tone tinged with equal parts umbrage and humor, "You don't call. You don't write," and because it was a statement, not a question, Luther did not feel obliged to reply.

*Celeste, I am afraid that, in spite of my big words, Dr. Rosner retains full visitation rights. Is it possible he is my God, the paragon of excellence against whom all others are to be measured? I live in the memory of his quiet way and the mock turtlenecks he would some days of the week wear with his jackets. I live in the suppleness of his nimble brain. I imagine myself navigating city streets as if driving a Volvo with quality heft and not a tin can economy Ford. Oh Celeste, the poverty of my being without him. Good ideas for stories will cease. All inspiration and freshness vanished forever. For such infidelity as I have shown must I be punished for the rest of my days. When, in torment, I reach out to Glanton, he says, "Therapy seeks to build up the ego. RoR asks us to surrender the ego. The disease will always attack to cover its own weakness." He tells me to rejoice, that I have the disease on its heels and reinforcements are on the way. And so, Celeste, I am the Continental Army about to deal a blow to those Brits and the filthy Hessians in their service. The reinforcements I am seeking are at the RoR meeting on Hudson Street, where I see on the wall the slogans "This Too Shall Pass" and "One Day at a Time" and as I head back home I hear the song "Hang on, Sloopy," strength now coming from all directions.*

Glanton said God didn't operate on Luther's schedule but on his own schedule, and that meant Luther had to wait even if he didn't like it. Luther brooded on this waiting business on a day when Rafta operated even more than usual from her control center and he came home feeling tired and empty. That evening he walked west along Houston Street. I will just follow the sun, Luther whispered, so he could not be heard, and follow it he did. At

Lafayette Street he stopped and inwardly saluted the rundown store of the Italians where more than once he had bought a veal and peppers sandwich and then kept on his way. By the time he reached Crosby Street his heart was calling to Celeste for the new life he could not have but he walked on by with the weight of his desire/longing to the cavernous basement of St. Anthony of Padua Church on Houston Street for the RoR meeting and sat himself in a folding chair so the message of recovery could come up through the seat and into him. The phone booth against the wall was calling to him to go to it and ring up Celeste, but he did not go to it. During the meeting he did get up for a cup of coffee and then got up again for a second so he could be braced for the night.

At the end of the meeting the chairperson for the second meeting asked him if he would stay and speak, and so he did. He told of his older sister Naomi singing “The Man Who Got Away” as his sister Rachel accompanied her on the upright piano in their parents’ bedroom and of the Chevrolet sign atop the meatpacking plant at One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street by the West Side Highway that signified the call of America as the song did and the aluminum-sided tabernacle in the Catskill Mountains with a dirt floor and raw pinewood benches and the hellfire and brimstone sermons by Pastor Chernenko in the night and the rubber-lipped girls he kissed that one summer of wildness and many other things, letting his words take him where they would.

Only a handful of people stayed for the second meeting, but it did not matter. He walked home feeling one with himself and as if his words did matter, at least those he spoke, and in spite of the cups of coffee, he fell fast asleep, there being nothing left in him for the night.

Glanton Gladwell had his moods. To make light of it, Babs called him Stormy Weather. Luther was aware of the soreness that could spread quickly through his mentor. For this reason he said the Serenity Prayer before picking up the phone and otherwise sought to condition himself for the Glanton experience because the image abounded of Luther's father saying "Do you want me to get up?" and in other ways manifesting himself as a force of terror. Thus, an apologetic, somewhat cringing manner was necessary when Luther called. "Am I getting you at the wrong time? Should I call later? Do you have a few minutes if I try to be brief?" He wanted Glanton to see his deformity, his sense of his own unworthiness. He wanted him to see what his father had done, that he had made him garbage in his own eyes. He wanted Glanton to see him beaten so he would feel no need to beat him with a stick. And so Glanton always took his calls. Though the threat was felt acutely by Luther, Glanton did not bring on any nuclear winter.

In fact, on the day he called and for the next week Glanton was unavailable, owing to the fasting retreat he had gone on, that he might finally be free from the toxins he had ingested that sparked his soreness and that could cause Babs to cower. Luther had some doubt about the efficacy of the treatment Glanton was undergoing; he did not have the holistic head that Glanton was showing. Though he would not say so, he saw the field as full of quacks and Quackenbushes who lacked the brain power and the discipline to earn a medical degree and mad hatters who had begun the countdown to the end of days.

It hurt him that Rafta seemed reluctant to turn manuscripts over to him. Possibly she judged him to be incompetent—he wouldn't have argued with her—but he sensed that an equal reason was fear. She was more comfortable with women. After all, she had coolly dispatched with Bruce Bill but was in mourning when Philomena Swangner gave notice.

When the discomfort of their connection became too much for him, he would simply call in sick, as he did at the beginning of the week. At the lunch hour he walked up to St. Mark's Place, where he turned east past the brownstone main building of Cooper Union and headed on the clean-swept street lined with walkups to a 1 pm meeting. The day was sunny and clear and peaceful, light pouring in through the high windows of the ground-floor meeting place. He had arrived in an alternate universe, a place he could only dream of, far from the tension of the workplace.

The speaker shared her anxiety over her daughter's departure for her first year at college. "I feel so empty, so completely barren. Even when my husband walked out, never to return, I did not feel so abandoned as I do now." She covered her face with both hands as she began weeping. Though he was impatient for the woman to talk about booze, he had been instructed to identify, not compare—if not with the facts of the speaker's story, then with his or her feelings. Hadn't he felt left? Those summers weeping for his mother at the Bible camps she had sent him off to, and those times Jane Thayer put the kibosh on him with ejection from her life, and Sarah too. He knew what a vacated space was, when the minute hand on the clock refused to move. But still, couldn't she talk a little about drinking? Wasn't that their real basis for identification, the one thing they had in common, in the context of an RoR meeting?



*Celeste, we must discover kindness, unearth it from its burial place. Why stay month after month and year after year with a boss who keeps me on because she inherited me? If a person is afraid of me, would the kind thing not be to leave? My very presence is an injury to Rafta. I am far from where I belong and she too is far from where she belongs with me on the premises. And what is more, the light of truth has begun to shine. I will try not to soar into exaggeration mode and simply say it is quite possible I have not been fair to Rafta. I accuse her of holding me back, which is the same accusation I once made of my mother, but this is to dwell in the land of the dinks. It is my own lack of ability that has held me back. I can never expect to be anything more than a mother's helper, as I lack the wherewithal to provide my own structure. There comes a point when one must get on with it and accept one's station, as I have said before.*

In dreamland he visited Dr. Rosner, that he might more fully explain his reason for leaving. But again he succumbed to dishonesty with his descent into vagueness. Mission unaccomplished.

If he could not be a do right man with Dr. Rosner, he could go back in time and try to address the harm he had caused Dr. Dressler at the Karen Horney Clinic. He put pen to paper and acknowledged that he had lived in the realm of smallness by not acquiescing to her request that he write a summary of his progress as he was nearing the end of his analysis. He did not say that his own meanness was the cause of his recalcitrance. And of

the fact that he had arrived at the clinic as an incipient alcoholic and left a full-blown one, he made no mention either. After all, he was not there to wander about on her side of the street but to focus on cleaning up his own side. Once again was he a man throwing the car into reverse so he could possibly go forward.

Now it happens that when the lost who would be found call out to those who have possibly fallen from where they were, a response is sure to come, should the contacted party still be among the living. Exactly that happened when he reached out to Dr. Dressler with his note of sincere regret. She arrived via the telephone at a time when Luther was just sitting down to dinner. It was Sarah who got on the line before fetching him, saying only "It's for you." Luther had not considered that if he called on the past, it might come calling on him. He had no thought to who the party might be on the line, and even if he did, it would not have included her, Dr. Dressler. Why? Because Dr. Dressler, as he remembered her, was dressed for the future, not the past, in the bright colors of extroversion that she wore, a different outfit for each session to assure her patients that she was a happening thing. He did not figure on forlornness, the dullness of the passing years.

"Is this Luther?"

"It is I," Luther said, summoning his mother for his response.

"This is Dr. Dressler. I received your kind note."

"I don't know what to say," he said, unable to reach across the years on the phone as he had with pen and paper.

"I have interrupted you. This is not a good time to speak."

“No. It is fine.”

“Are you a writer now? I look for your writings.”

“No, no. Nothing like that,” he said.

“You say in your note that you are a member of Rooms of Recovery. Is it successful? I have friends who do not care for it.”

“Oh, no. It is successful. But you have to care for your life for it to be so.”

“I see. I have intruded. I will go now.”

Before he could say anything, she had hung up.

“Who was that?” Sarah asked, as he returned to the table.

“Dr. Dressler, my analyst from the Karen Horney Clinic.”

“What did she want?”

“I wrote her a letter of amends.”

“Why? What did you do to her?”

“It’s what I didn’t do for her. She wanted me to write a brief report on my progress in the three years that I had been coming to the clinic. I think she wanted some positive feedback from me, as a patient, that she could show her supervisors. And I failed her. I didn’t do it.”

“She had other patients. Right?”

“True. But she did ask me.”

When tentativeness and apology ruled a woman’s voice, signifying a sense of abysmal self-worth, that was a sure sign she was in trouble. He knew when a “rescuing the perishing, care for the dying” situation presented itself. That was her real reason for

calling. She was not asking about Rooms of Recovery for her friends' sake. She was asking for herself. She had been using the "old-fashioned tranquilizer," vino, that she had recommended to him back in 1971, and it was beginning to take control of her life. The glad rags she wore weren't doing it for her anymore. She had the sadness of her ways and days to contend with, and the juice was more and more her answer. Once again, he had not come through for her.

*Celeste, we must weep for those we did not save. Did not express our love for. Did not. Did not. Eons must we set aside for such contrition, if it is to be called by its proper name.*

Because he did not swing into action. He did not reach down for a rescue action on Dr. Dressler. And as the weeks passed, his resolve weakened. He turned his attention elsewhere, sending his brother RoR materials so the hobo trail would not inevitably claim him for its own. And when Luke called him to say that he was getting something from those resources, Luther rejoiced in his heart and his mind and all parts of his being, even if some part of him suspected it would be love in vain.

The day was a bad one. Several times was Luther compelled to reach out to Glanton on the phone that he might not go mad and melt down on the premises. An author previously mentioned, Kaplan Acedit, was showing high odiousness content in all his parts. When could he expect the contract for a new book he had agreed to write? Could Luther send

him two copies of a previous book of his that Cromartie Wonders had published? Kaplan had long since figured out that Luther was intimidated by his big brain and Ivy League pedigree. When he sensed an attitude of resistance building in Luther, he said, “You’re lucky to have a job. You graduated from a college with no admission standards whatsoever, other than a high school diploma.” In this way did Kaplan Acredit wound Luther in all his parts and send him via the telephone to Glanton.

“I am on life support. The bastard pierced me to my core,” he cried.

“Sooner or later you’ll come home to yourself. The world is offering you no peace. You need to write out the pain of your resentment, what it affects in you, and your part in the difficulty. Your ego, your passivity, whatever it may be. And then you need to pray that he have the same love and joy and peace and happiness that you would wish for yourself.”

“I am hanging string material. That is what he said. He laid me bare.”

“In your defenselessness your safety lies.”

“I’m not his doormat, only I was his doormat.”

Luther did not do as Glanton suggested, not then, and not for some years. Instead he ran to Glanton, and ran to him some more, relying on his mentor to heal what had been broken and make things all all right in him. He ran to him like a wounded child to a parent. And in all those times, Glanton never raised up on him, never said, “Do not make me get up, or I might lose all control,” never said the words Luther’s father had spoken, though Luther never lost the fear that he would. I can use this fear, Luther

thought. I can use it as a challenge to push on through, so I do not have to live within its force field and stake out only the territory of nothingness as my own.

On his birthday did the staff have the nerve to sing “Happy Birthday” and present him with a cake and card, having no regard for the fact that he did not want love to enter the premises of Cromartie Wonders, as it only deepened his fear that he would be unable, in the end, to return it. Then he went home and Sarah too did it up right for him, with a special dinner and cake and gifts. Did she too not understand that right was wrong, that love had no business trying to come in the door where he was concerned, that one day he would be an island all his own, with no one on it, not even himself?

*Now, Celeste, a new art director arrived. Her name was Grambling Vorst, and she came to us from the prestigious publisher Random House, of whom there is no one higher.*

*Grambling Vorst did not play the way that Frieda Volcker had played. She was not looking for love in all the wrong places. In fact, she was not looking for love at all. She had gnarly ways and a hunger for power. She had not shown that face to Rafta or Florence Mith, the Pilgore children's books publisher; though you can be sure they had been scanning for signs of treachery.*

*Now a picture book, Johnny and the Jubilee Choir, was coming off press and Rafta assigned Grambling and me to ride the Long Island Railroad out to Westbury, Long Island, to keep an eye on the color to be sure it went where it was supposed to go.*

*“You don’t know anything, do you?” Grambling said, as the train moseyed past the Tudor buildings of Forest Hills.*

*“However do you mean?” We sat facing each other.*

*“I just have a feeling you’re empty-headed.”*

*“Your conclusion is unjustified by the facts. My head is robust with activity.”*

*“Well, that’s good to know,” she said, with high dubiousness content in her laugh. It was then that she dared to have her snipaholism showing. And it was there that I took the bait to show her my stuff, though if I sincerely wish to make a pledge to be honest to my dying days, let me say that the urge to project myself beyond my own borders was building as we stepped onto the train. And while a discourse on the tonalities of reproductive structure would have clearly been beyond me, should such a thing even exist, I could go to “White Line, Continue” and tell her of the approximate gains I was making with a new pathway for fiction and all of literature.*

*“Have you published anything so far?”*

*“Two stories saw their way into print, but many, many more things have been thrown straight into the street in most discourteous fashion,” Luther was forced to confess.*

*He had done it. He had heard the prompting of his ego to declare himself something more than the barren surface of his desk, even if the voice of reason told him he had nothing to prove to this woman with darkness in her face.*

*“Thrown into the street, eh? Must have been real winners. Real page turners.”*

*“Bombs bursting in the night. Too much for fragile psyches.”*

*"And what are you working on now?"*

*"A novel about the flight path to surrender. The erratic patterns on the way. "*

*"A novel is an ocean voyage. You are still on dry land."*

*"Is that right?" I recognized my total defeat and fell silent, resolved to say nothing more at all, but after a while couldn't restrain myself. "Why are you here?"*

*"Why do you think?"*

*"I really don't know."*

*"But you do, and you know you do," she said, yielding not a quarter inch. "I'm here to take."*

*"What is there to take?"*

*"As if you don't know that either, Mr. Lassitude. There's power to take, and people's dignity and sense of themselves. There is money to take and prestige and, more than anything, control."*

*"There are some strong women at the company who might have something to say," I replied, thinking of Rafta and Florence Mith, but Grambling just laughed in my face.*

*At the printing press she was no Ms. Geniality either. "The color is weak. Don't be giving me inferior work like this. I want the red and the green to jump, do you hear me?" she said to the rep., a Mr. Irizari.*

*Mr. Irizari did as he was told. He saw that he was in the presence of someone not to be fooled with. Four press sheets later Grambling finally put her initials on them.*



*“Don’t make me push this hard again for the quality I am seeking, or I will take my business elsewhere,” she said, bidding farewell to Mr. Irizari. Her singular pronouns were not lost on me.*

*Now, Celeste, the journey home was a long one, even though the ride was short. It can be that way when you are sitting with your conqueror. To that point I had not missed Frieda Volcker and Amanda Plessy, but now I did. In contrast with odious Grambling Vorst could I easily see their sterling qualities. It seemed to me even then that darkness, in the form of Grambling’s person, was coming over the land and that she had the fortitude and cunning to be the shape of things to come. Already was I thinking in terms of bygone days of sweetness, my days at Pilgore and Cromartie Wonders as part of a nostalgia-drenched past. My heart suddenly aligned with Rafta Blackning and Florence Mith and I saw children’s books in terms of the special world it had been, populated by dedicated souls who sincerely loved the genre and put it before whatever drive for personal power they might have.*

*Sometimes, Celeste, I wonder if it means anything that my mother wanted me to be good. Suppose, instead, at bedtime she had pressed her forehead to mine and willed me to take everything the world had to offer and all that it would withhold from me as well rather than ask me to be a sunbeam for Jesus? Or if my father could have put down his smacking hand and his threat of impending annihilation should we provoke him to get up and taken the time to press his forehead against mine and inject the power-driving ethos into me as fathers across the land are wont to do with their offspring. But the American dream, for my father, was a blur of icons, of statues of stalwarts in public*

*squares. It was streets like an endless carpet of safety free of blood for him to wander over. Well, we must raise up on this would have and could have stuff, stall it in its tracks and break all its bones so no forward motion is possible. We must be done with self-pity and accept that we have agency in our own lives.*

Now it happened that Augusta Johnby had a pen, too, and a piece of paper as well to write on, just as Luther had so he could send the missive that he did and which he aimed straight at her cold, cold heart. But she also had reserves of haughtiness and a state of mind that did not lend itself easily to graciousness or forgiveness. She lived in the trenches with her own festering acrimony, her correspondence having the scent of mustard gas. “You really need to retire from the world. You are hopelessly and haplessly transparent. Your jealousy, your ill will, are living, palpable things you cannot hide. You looked so exposed, so stricken. A man your age with no persona to mask his hurt should, for his own good, not be out and about in public. Your nakedness is painful to witness.”

With each sentence did she strike him in his very face till he could abide no more. “You must leave my house this very instant,” he cried out, and tore the letter into bits as he streaked for the street and the first receptacle he could find.

Dear Rafta,

Service is key. Where we serve is our business, but serve we must. In fact, Con Edison once had a slogan, “Dig we must for a greater New York,” and I am writing to you in the same spirit, that is, in the hope of a greater Cromartie

Wonders. I am not a slacker, a shirker, a shiftless soul, a goldbricker. I feel primed for action and, dare I say it, raring to go. But my desk is at times too empty for my conscience to bear. I suppose one could see it at such times as a runway cleared for takeoff or simply a space extolling its own sense of minimalist order, but that is not, alas, how I see it. I see forlornness, abandonment, desolation.

I await your verdict on how I am to proceed.

Sincerely yours,

Luther Garatdjian

“Only the dead know Brooklyn,” Luther said. “I didn’t say that. Thomas Wolfe did. Not Tom Wolfe, but Thomas Wolfe, North Carolina-born and of *Look Homeward, Angel* fame. His words have a rushing quality, like the wind. You might say he was in a hurry to get nowhere fast, having seen the cruel nature of the sun-scorched streets.”

Tim Terst looked up. Carola Aprile looked up. So too did Sarah Van Dine. Though he sat close, he was far away from them in his speech. They had circled the wagons so they might live in the realm of art—fine art. Impostors, nonmembers, were not encouraged. Carola and Tim’s loft had a hardy physique. The deal in Fort Greene, where box cutters and guns that blazed were de rigueur, was survival. The building was projections free—no cornices, balconies, ornaments. All had been shaved away so there would be nothing but vertical space greeting the would-be intruder. Not that they had any

swag, but they did have their lives to live for and the dream of many, an afterlife built on posthumous fame.

He was happy to be among them, not for himself. His words meant nothing to Carola and Tom. He understood that. His happiness was for Sarah. She needed the cushion that friends provided. Many people did. And they would be there for her whenever the future chose to present itself. They would be the sun to her darkness. For himself, he was a pilgrim passing through. He wasn't drawing on bravado. Sarah had said as much.

Outside the province of art they could sometimes roam.

"My mother promises to send me a credit card but never does," Carola Aprile said.

"My father is seventy-nine," said Tim Terst.

"Rock and roll is here to stay," Sarah said.

Tidbits they might be, but someone could build a life on them.

*Celeste, Glanton is my lifeline. His voice I must hear on the phone when anger seizes me and the prosecutorial urge is upon me because I have gotten the goods on them, them, those who would stall and stall and thwart and thwart and thwart me. My anger a blindness thing, and only he can help me see. Or when fear debilitates my very being and puts me in the cowering state that only he can bring me out of. About Rafta he says I should pray and pray and send love her way. "We must go within," he says.*

His mother had not forgotten him. She sent him a spice cake and a Bible and a photo of him at age two. There he was in Hannah's arms, on Broadway, with his mother standing by. Easter Sunday, 1949, was written on the back. His mother wanted him to know that he had been alive, and she with him, and Hannah as well, that their roots went deep through time, like the nerve of a tooth deep into the gum and down into the bone. She was saying that there was no way of telling where things ended and where they began and that infinity was a closed loop even if it looked open ended and would always lead to her. And he said, Where are you, Father? Are you there, too, taking the photo that does not include you? And then his mother spoke, as she always spoke, from her softness, into which he sank.

When Sarah was not living, she was dying, or her hair was. Sobbing came from the loft bed, where she had withdrawn. Her hair was more and more the texture of straw. There were the cramps she suffered from as well as part of her monthly cycle. He thought of his mother and the leg pain that would cause her to moan. The generational suffering of women was in his box head.

But then life summoned her. It was stronger than her hair, stronger than her fragile teeth. She heard the sun's call, that it wanted only to kiss her, and believed its every word. Her legs obeyed. She took the stairs, and Luther followed. Once again someone was singing, "It's a Big Wide Wonderful World," there among the derelicts. Fall was coming, and with it crisper air. Instinct required that the warmth from above be treasured. Along kinder streets the parked cars commanded his attention. A Toyota Celica,

in particular, caught his eye. Lime green. Edible. It offered to be his legs, his everything. From nowhere had this longing for a power extraneous to his person come.

“Suppose there is love in the rusted gate *and* the porcelain bowl,” Luther said.

“I fully understand,” Sarah replied.

“He takes what he wants, and will not rest until he gets it. Such is the dictate his big brain imposes on him,” Rafta said, of Kaplan Acredit, at the Japanese restaurant where she had gone with Luther for lunch. “But hard as it is, you must stand your ground with him, or he will shower you with a thousand other requests, or demands, as the case may be. He is difficult and relentless and programmed for success.”

“Yes, relentless is the word for him.” Luther paused, lest she take umbrage at his cherry picking of her descriptors. “Along with ‘difficult’ and ‘programmed for success,’” he added, letting caution be his guide. He then battened down his hatches to weather any funny looks she might feel warranted in sending his way, but she had none to deliver.

To the waiter Rafta said, “I will have your crab cakes, and if you would, a glass of white wine.”

“And I will have your chicken teriyaki, with the meat lengthily fired on so it is emphatically well done and no funny business can be going on within it.”

“Excuse, please?” said the waiter, bending humbly that he might better understand.

“He means that he would like the entrée well done.”

A look of gratitude for Rafta's successful intervention showed on the waiter's amiable face.

"And to drink?"

"I will make do with the water in my glass," Luther replied, feeling suddenly the previously denied strength of his biblical foundation.

"Now, about your request," Rafta began.

Seized with a sense of his own unworthiness, Luther sought to deliver a preemptive strike upon himself. "Believe me, I fully understand why it is you would wish to slay me."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Fundamentals. Depth of vision."

"You will need to do something about the level of your discourse."

"Yes. It is in flight as we speak."

"Are you not understanding?"

"The gate is gone? Only the lock remains? Is that it? The ultimate legacy of all great powers?"

"Will you please stop?"

"Nuncle and nullified."

"I will remember this performance."

*Celeste, "infamy, day of," I was about to add, but the outer limits of my own tolerance has been reached. It is not so much for us to parse each sentence in seeking to tally the moral decay that fuels this impertinence. It is not, in fact, to go in that direction*

*at all but to condemn, whole cloth, the fabrication that is the progeny of such turpitude. Once again do I assert my resolve to offer a corrective so each element of speech, spoken or written, shall be purposive and utterly and definitively to the point. As Americans, we have taken such clarity for granted and even assumed it is our national heritage to be plainspoken, but somewhere along the way, fudging and obfuscation and outright equivocation have come to have their say and, alas, their day, sullyng the minds of the many for the greed-driven gains of the few.*

*Here is what we can say, Celeste, with great assurance and simplicity. Fear had entered the heart of Luther upon leaving that note for Rafta. As she prepared to cut to the chase in the restaurant, that fear spiked. She was about to become an insurmountable and death-dealing presence. She was about to drop the ultimate truth bomb on him, that is, to verify what his mental tape had been saying all along. He was incompetent. He was asking for something he, unlike Bruce Bill and Philomena Swangner, hadn't earned. Cromartie Wonders was a business, not a charity, she would say.*

*But that was not the road she took. She acknowledged there was an imbalance in editorial responsibility. She would see what she could to correct the situation. Though money was tight, she would also see if a salary increase could be obtained for Luther. She was the picture of reasonableness. But a shadow formed in his mind in the aftermath of their meeting. She hadn't explained why there was an imbalance in the workload; she had only acknowledged its existence. That left open two possibilities: either the problem was her lack of faith in his ability or her continuing need for almost complete control.*



*Celeste, this file remains open. Investigation ongoing. More to be said whenever.*

When a camera got away from him, he wanted it back, in a new guise. The past too painful. Lost items. Given away items. The turning from hardware so he could simply live, unfettered from the filth he had accumulated. Mr. Hanging String sitting alone in a bare room with just his tissue, and even that too much, a virtual torment, after a while. He turned on the objects in his possession because they turned on him. Because they *possessed* him. Owned him. This was no joke. This was his life. The wild instability that showed itself *now and then*.

He would have to see if this was an awakening or a new demise.

He owned an Olympus. Japanese. Came in under the radar. There had been a man, a real man, one who shot photos destined not for his file cabinet but for the newspapers and magazines. On the front lines with film bandoliers across his broad chest. He had ditched his Leica. Less status maybe, but more result. So he had reported in *The Village Voice*, which tried to never give the truth a beating. Wow. A camera that didn't look as good but was as good, and even better. A camera he could carry around without excessive attention, unlike the Leica M5 black beauty he had essentially given away. The terrain of instability, of fetishes, of obsession. But now, now, he would have the nerve to get closer, risk the punch in the face or snappish reaction, and would not cut off the tops of people's heads. Hidden depths would be exposed. Their affect would come out with

hands up. He would combine the portraiture of August Sander with the black smoke urban grit of W. Eugene Smith.

*We need say nothing more about the camera, Celeste. We have ascertained the truth that the being behind the face the camera falls short of truly knowing. Photos, even those by the masters, vintage quality prints with subtle shades of gray and shocking whites and blacks, never fail to provoke in us a restlessness, a frantic degeneration into next and next and next, this restlessness being an admission that what we are seeking we cannot find therein.*

Kaplan Acedit was not done with Luther Garatdjian, however done with Kaplan Luther might be. Kaplan called to say he would be hand-delivering the galleys. He said it was important to touch base if he wished to continue making an impression. Luther suspected, and more than suspected, *knew* that he was a source of amusement to his more intelligent, more gifted tormentor. Kaplan Acedit had seen Luther's fear. He had seen the shame that shriveled him. Kaplan Acedit had seen Luther struggling not to be blown out of the room by his power. All this Luther understood; he was as capable of seeing Kaplan Acedit as Kaplan Acedit was capable of seeing him. Still, Kaplan Acedit's main motive was not to sport with Luther but to get the job done. He wanted Luther to hold off on setting the flaps copy and also on the dedication. Having left his wife, he was now involved with a new love and assessing the pros and cons of dedicating the work to her. In so doing Kaplan Acedit was instructing Luther. He was showing what the fortitude of excellence

was all about—to continuously drive forward on churning legs with hands out to snatch all that he could. He was saying that success meant more and more work, and only then could you drink your multiple sakes. All the while was Luther sensing that Kaplan Acedit was monitoring him for a case of the snits, forcing Luther to see and see some more his self-pitying victimhood and calling him out of it if he dared. Luther didn't know this at the time. He was to know only later that the people of Pilgore and Cromartie Wonders, whom he was seeking to savage and dissect, were his teachers, educating him in the ways of the world, and that he would have to fall down in love for them, and that if he dared to question why, the answer would be simple: within himself he lacked the tools to live effectively in the world. And Rafta would he have to love the most, she who had stalled him, *quit stalling me*, not with shopping lists as his mother had been slow to write, but with projects she kept to herself that prevented him from being the man he thought he should be and whose absence he believed locked him forever into the role of a hanging string. All this would he have to forgive her for and forgive himself for judging her for if he wished to live where sunlight could be found.

Kaplan Acedit wrapped his contrition in word power. He apologized for having been “waspish.” The image dazzled. A wasp was a person full of his own reserve, was New England church steeples, was Harvard and Yale. It was those who wore rep ties and khaki pants and went sock-less in their penny loafers. It was golden-haired and golden-skinned young men and women whose fathers walked with one hand in their pocket. Luther did not know the word apart from a socioeconomic status that was not his.

Not till the next day was he led by his own disquiet to consult a dictionary, and when he did, he was sent reeling, as once again he had failed the SAT by presuming to know but not knowing, whereas Kaplan Acredit had aced the test by grasping the difference between the nominative acronym and the lowercase adjective. For the rest of the day did Luther's entire being go on high alert over the awareness that men and women of high intelligence roamed the earth and the very premises of Cromartie Wonders. To the bathroom stall did he go seeking a retreat. To the tape dispenser did he go for added fortification for his desk. To God did he go for protection against the abounding forces who any minute would put the laughing thing on him.

It was not always morning in America for Rafta either. Some months the figures for the department were not good, and that would summon fear to her face and darkness to her spirit. But in those months when the figures broke free of the red, then would morning sunshine come even as she refrained from nodding her head in the manner of President Ronald Wilson Reagan, whom she scorned. She had other figures, of a personal nature, to examine, and these she found in the financial pages of the *New York Times*. It continued to be her way to arrive an hour early, to signify her marriage to the job, and in that time did she give herself the freedom to check the market results for the previous day, that she might find comfort and something more in the status of her investments. Because she had a marriage to her money too, and did not want its absence and the life of hardship that would bring. Let the fruit of her labor be magnified, Luther imagined her prayer to be. On those rare mornings when Luther also arrived early and saw her with the newspaper

in hand, she would quickly put it down, as her conscience was a severe guide committed to keeping the wholly undeserved word “slacker” from her person.

Now in this time, to Luther’s surprise, his name was not lost to the universe. He might be faceless in Gaza, but not in New York City. He had sent two stories to *Flame*, the literary magazine published by the City College of New York and under the editorial supervision of Dov Drosky, his mentor in the writing program. The stories were being considered for publication. He would learn within a month of their fate, the managing editor wrote, as they had to be reviewed by the editorial board. And so it was immediately apparent that he could not love his life unless this thing happened for him. Hope had been awakened, but with it terrible pain. The suspicion arose that Dov Drosky was only feigning receptivity to students at the school and alumni while reserving actual publication for those from a higher echelon of talent. Luther was willing to believe that he was only experiencing the tug of paranoia in maligning the motive of a generous and gifted man, but then another feeling arose and prevailed that kept him in misery. Within himself he lacked the torquing power to rise to the level of success. He could merely approach that point, and his manuscripts were infected with that lack as well, and close but no cigar, the Sisyphus thing, would be the inevitable result. Because words spoke the power of their masters, or originators, or the lack thereof, and his were shrieking “enervated,” “otiose,” “insipid.”

And yet, let him be beaten half to death with a spiked stick if he didn’t acknowledge that he had allowed the fantasy of success to be his, and with it elevation

above the low ground on which he stood and outfitted with the proper attire no other achievement could render.

It did not take a month, only a week, for the SASE, with the stories enclosed and a boilerplate rejection note, to be returned. At some point he began chuckling, only it was a black, mirthless kind, devoid of his mentor Glanton's heartiness.

*Celeste, as I write, I feel that I am moving past the age of stones and that the world is organizing a universal beating for my presence on it. I feel that perhaps I am not so much a hanging string as a ball of string, and that ball is unraveling, leaving my thinness, my inadequacy, progressively more exposed. I will continue to monitor the situation and provide updates when I can.*

There was life as he lived it and life as others did. A world-famous children's books author and illustrator, Leonardo Fuchsia, came to visit Gina Deductio, head of Pilgore's third children's books imprint, Carousel. He arrived old and with his humility showing and bowed to Gina Deductio before kissing her on both cheeks. The eminences from the adult trade world, including the Pilgore president, Peter Ben-Gurion, paid their respects as well to the author/illustrator of *Bunny Hop Hop*, *Fig Tree Newton*, and many other books that had brought joy to children around the globe in many different languages. Luther could only stare in wonder at the respect and admiration and love Leonardo Fuchsia generated in the gathering. Leonardo Fuchsia lived his life on the straight and narrow.

The sweetness of the ambience drove Luther away after a few minutes. He went from there to the darkness of the nearby lunch hour RoR meeting. A man named Gunther occupied the speaker's chair in front of the unused fireplace. He gave an account of brutalities committed in many different states and offered an explanation of his evil with an acronym of the word: *Everything Vile I Like*. The only reason he wasn't still behind bars was the man he had beaten and left for dead didn't die. He said the signposts were early, like the time as a child he tried to burn down the next-door neighbors' house by starting a fire with a magnifying glass. One Christmas, as a teenager, he gave his family a stereo set he had boosted from a department store.

"I come from good New England stock. Look at my forehead. High as the cliffs of Dover." He pulled back his brown locks. "I am ninety-ninth percentile all the way. All the Ivy League schools kissed my ass to gain my enrollment."

He was not like that now, Gunther said. He had the good looks of Ted Bundy. It was to be hoped he had been released from the serial murderer's savagery as well as a desire to drink.

For Sarah, she would not be denied the exit that she was seeking, no matter that her participation in the work world, especially with the luminous Carola Aprile, meant the real morning in America to Luther. Love lines had been opened to her, beyond the regard Carola held her in, by the staff. There was praise for her design sense and she even won a quick increase in her freelance pay rate as her hours also increased. It was astonishing the bacon she was bringing in and how hope was replacing fear in Luther's vision of the

future because of her robust contribution. But she was Bill Walton playing on bad bones so far as the condition of her mind, and so it should not have been unexpected that crying time would come again, rageful tears via a midtown phone booth one afternoon that she could not take another minute with the firm when only hours before she had greeted the morning with a smile. “I’m finished there. Finished. They have killed me. What more do you want?”

He cowered before her onslaught, as he had all those years before when she had stormed out of that West Village building and blew past him that summer afternoon, having quit after one day the job her mother had arranged for her. He felt guilty, shamed. He had no right to ask anything of her. He saw that he needed to let her go to the spaces her troubled mind was taking her. He could not contain her in the land of so-called health he had hoped for her to dwell in.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he was, for not remembering that there were repercussions for seeking orderliness, for asking of her what she could not give. How dare you ask me to be something, someone, I cannot be, she was saying, and had been saying all along.

But income was not the only issue, if he was to be honest. His commitment to the marriage was a day to day thing. Glanton had said it: “If you practice the principles of the program in all your affairs, the things that belong in your life will be there and the things that don’t will fall away.” Things presumably meant people, too. If Sarah had an exit she had been seeking, he reserved for himself the possibility of one as well. The light of Celeste had not diminished within him. He felt her calling him to a new life he had



gained a taste of, but how was he to leave a woman who could not take care of herself in the world? The voice of Dr. Rosner came to him. "Maybe she can't adjust to the work world. Maybe it's a developmental problem." Something like that he had said. And that thing Dr. Rosner said about being her table when Luther confessed his inadequacy in trying to build a table for her. But no one had said it more clearly than Sarah herself. "Someday you're going to take care of me." Hadn't she said that in the long ago? And hadn't he filled with pride and love at the thought of being needed when she did?

*Integrity came calling on Rafta, Celeste, as it did, in truth, every day. Let me tell the ghastly tale as it was. The murder of one of our own occurred, not on the premises or even the general vicinity, and there was Rafta fully prepared to honor the deceased. How did I know of her plan? Did she volunteer the information as a badge of her virtue? Not at all. Always did she hide her love under the cover of her flinty Englishness, and yet it came shining through.*

*His name was Craig Dumont, a member of our sales force, someone you would only see at our seasonal sales conferences. Celeste, he was young and buff, from all reports, and walked the gay walk, pursuing his pleasure in the night life of Greenwich Village. And it was there, on a cold night in early fall, with the moon precariously high, that his life was taken from him, a friend discovered the next day in the blood-stained studio apartment Craig Dumont had called home. Vigilantes fanned out in the neighborhood in the aftermath, sensing a lackadaisical effort by the police, but weeks passed and no suspect was to be named, let alone found. The perp trail was cold, Celeste.*

*It was cold.*

*But that legal justice be done was outside Rafta's domain. She had her own personal sense of justice to see to, and her whole being acceded to its shaping force.*

*"There is a memorial service for Craig Dumont that I must attend," she said to me, on her way out of the office. Nothing more did she say. Nothing more did she need to say. Her face was soberly cast, and in that moment I saw her big picture, that she was a part of Cromartie Wonders and Cromartie Wonders was a part of her and she was a part as well of Pilgore Press and it of her, and if so, then she was a part of every member, living and deceased, of the company. Her love lay in her belonging. It lay in her participation. It lay in her presence. She would have no part of apartness, of the laughing thing, the thing that afflicted me.*

*In this way, Celeste, was she offering moral instruction, as had, in the long ago, Gresham Dodger, my classmate at the Claremont School, back in the seventh grade. "We don't do that here. We don't do that here," he had shouted, over and over, after witnessing me belt an obnoxious classmate, as if to explain the mores of this new school at which my mother had enrolled me.*

*The lessons go on and on, Celeste. On and on. And so do we. Broad strokes are needed for the culmination/completion of a dream, and here I am lost in the minutiae of my life and that of others. But maybe it is all right to mosey, to stop and inspect heedless of time, on the chance that it does not exist.*

No, Glanton did not think it was a good idea for Luther to leave a memo with Rafta

stating his intention to end his employment with Cromartie Wonders. Had Luther never heard the saying that it was easier to find a job when you had a job than when you were without one?

“Are you sending out your resume?” Glanton asked.

“I can’t imagine anyone wanting me.”

“That’s not the kind of thinking that leads to success. Why don’t you take the action of inquiring and let go of the result?”

“I am so angry at that woman. She stalls me and stalls me and then stalls me some more. Always with her foot on my neck.”

“Maybe you have your foot on your own neck,” Glanton said. “As for anger, I had to surrender my right to it.”

“How do you do that?”

“How are we relieved of the obsession to drink alcohol?”

“We come to RoR meetings and the desire to drink is sooner or later lifted from us.”

“That’s right. There is no order of difficulty when it comes to miracles.”

“How you speak,” Luther said, precipitating some brief chuckling from Glanton.

“But don’t you ever get angry?”

“Only all the time. But I have stopped justifying it.”

“Righteous wrath is my theme song.”

“Well then, find another.”

“The things you say.”

One afternoon Luther stood at the entrance to Rafta's office with the design layout of a book jacket to show her. Grambling Vorst, the new art director, had left it with him, he explained. Rafta, who was seated at her desk, tried to speak but couldn't. It was like watching someone speaking on TV with the volume turned off. Rather than stop, she continued to seek her voice. Startled, Luther asked if he could get her some water, but she just waved him away. Sometime later, without explanation, Rafta came to his office and took the jacket layout. If the loss of her voice was a mystery, it was one for which he quickly provided an answer. No, there was no physical problem with her instrument. She had simply grown afraid of him.

She had sought to intimidate him with her anger, or the threat of it. That instantaneous transition from an all-out smile to utter coldness that he had seen should he or anyone make a faux pas. Those months and years of terror he lived with under her regime and still, at times, did. Like a cat with the sharpest of nails, she was. He had seen her kind before, had he not? Was there not Hannah slopping about the apartment with her hands chest high and hanging down, ready to assume, in an instant, correct smacking position? Now Rafta was the one being intimidated. Now she was the one cowering. How did it feel? And was it even intimidation? Was it cause for her to be rendered speechless that a man should stand at the threshold of her office?

*Celeste, I was not living the life of understanding but of judgment. I thought I was the big deal on Madonna Street, but all I was doing was stumping for a thumping. The next morning, I was in a production meeting with Rafta and Roller Carmona-Hickson. As*

*usual, Rafta was dominating the meeting with her wall-to-wall command of figures. My own uselessness was right there in front of me. Suddenly a sense of urgency compelled me to leave it behind and so I stood up and walked out. The lunch hour—my twelve noon lunch hour, not the 1 pm lunch hour of real executives with real work to do—was near, and so I headed for the RoR meeting a few blocks away. With every step, as I crossed Park Avenue and approached the meeting place’s dark and smelly basement suite, did I savor the savage delight I was experiencing from the riotous song of vengeance I was hearing between my ears. I was up to my old tricks. Once more was I disappearing at people. Once more was I demonstrating what power was.*

*Celeste, because you lose your voice once does not mean you lose it forever. Because you vanquish once does not mean you vanquish forever. We must not make these false assumptions lest a savage beating be our fate. I should have been on high alert as I returned to the office, as right there in the lobby stood Rafta. May I say that her love lights were not brightly shining? May I say that having chosen to separate from her once I was forced to do the same again, my desire for survival directing me to the elevator where she was not? But all I had gained was a temporary reprieve. One cannot live his life in an elevator. Sooner or later we must come out and receive the righteous counter-wrath that is due us. Now it was not for me to go to Rafta’s office but for her to come to mine, and her voice came with her, loud and clear for me to hear.*

*“What gives you the right to leave a meeting unannounced and unprovoked?” she demanded.*

*I had no answer for her, Celeste. Seeing it was so, she grew emboldened, offering*

*a warning that I not try to be bigger than I was, which caused me to withdraw deeper into the boundaries of my own self. I can assure you that her every utterance was accompanied by a look of extreme knowingness, an assertion that full and all-penetrating awareness was on the premises and operating to devastating effect. She was in a mode of utter hegemony, driven by extreme emotional revanchism, as the memory was surely strong in her of territory she had ceded to me with the conspicuous loss of her voice. But it was not enough for her to beat me. She had to make sure I stayed down. To clinch her victory, she brought in the heavy weaponry .*

*“Does the name Kaplan Acredit mean anything to you?”*

*“Of course it does. It means relentlessness and force of will. It means fathers who walk with one hand in the pocket of their suit pants. It means ....”*

*“I am not asking you to free associate. This is not a test. We are in a workplace. I need answers that approximate your intelligence, which, I regret to say, Kaplan was in fact questioning.”*

*“Excuse me?” I said, the paleness of death coming over me.*

*“Yes. He spoke unkindly of you. I was not pleased with him for his unwarranted complaint, nor was I in agreement that you lack the mental capacity to be a part of this department. And you must also know that I severely remonstrated with him for further aspersions he dared to cast.”*

*“Aspersions? Further?” I was helpless to resist additional knowledge.*

*“Please do not doltishly repeat my words after me when I have gone to some length to assure you that you are not a dolt. It is only this. He dared to say as well that*

*you are lazy and, as he put it, a shell of a human being. I assure you he paid a severe price in terms of the upbraiding he received for this besmirchment. May I suggest that you should know who your staunch defenders are before proceeding to attack them?"*

*She had entered the realm of the rhetorical, which was just as well. In that moment was Rafta Blackning none other than Smoking Joe Frazier, standing over laid out Muhammad Ali on the canvas he had been sent crashing to by Smoking Joe's thunderous left hook.*

*Triumphs do occur in life, Celeste. This we cannot deny. But aggression against our nation state will ultimately receive a response, a forceful one with the stamp of refined strategic thinking upon it. Over the next few weeks I was to make counter counter-feints, appearing suddenly at the threshold of her office as she sat at her desk with a few papers in hand, feigning a desire to discuss some matter with her. Always did these maneuvers have the desired effect of robbing her of the power of speech. Thus was I demonstrating that revanchism can work in more than one party. War is war and we must be willing and able to bang with the best of them.*

*Yes, I hear what you are thinking, Celeste. Your thought stream is audible and visible to me, as mine is to you. And I feel you as well, feel across time and space your dismay that in an age of supreme vanity I should willfully lend my voice to the vanity chorus. I hear you saying "Pull down that vanity, pull it down, I say." This I hear you saying as I hear the twittering of birds outside my window.*

Luther awoke one weekday morning to hear Sarah declare that she was a lesbian. Luther said it was not a problem as he was a lesbian, too. On the number 6 train he heard “Maggie’s Farm” playing in the confines of his head, but he was not Bob Dylan. He did not have the retentive parts in his own mind. He was Steady Freddy. He was Office Joe. He was Mr. Desk Full of Barrenness. Aboveground, he embraced the lights on Madison Avenue and called them his own. When Rafta passed him at his desk without a word, his thoughts turned to the Prague Spring, before the rumbling of tanks approaching the Czech border. His head hurt and the toilet stall offered little refuge. “Glanton,” he whispered into the phone, “the forces of darkness are gathering and my brother is on the verge of drinking, and there is the threat of militant mobilization in Rafta’s gait and silent scornfulness. What am I to do?”

“Go inside,” Glanton said.

“But I am inside,” Luther replied, prompting chuckle plenty in his mentor.

At the noon RoR meeting, the speaker referred to the fraud police and how they would soon discover that he was unworthy of his job and come to lead him away. Luther raised his hand to share. “I want to tell you there is hope. They came to me, too, and yet I am still here.”

When Luther returned home he did not pursue the lesbian question, now that Glanton was patrolling certain quarters of his mind. Glanton had told him to utilize, not analyze. Whatever that might mean, it had to mean something, and maybe nothing more than keeping thinking under house arrest, the mind being, according to Glanton, nothing more, in general, than a loose federation of lies well told that had only one purpose, to



instill fear and arouse anger. “Powerless means powerless,” Glanton also said, and reiterated that the intellect was the lowest form of mentation. “See the daily events of life as clouds scudding across the sky. TTSP. This too shall pass,” Glanton had added. Such a potpourri of sagacity Glanton and RoR were. Hard to keep it all together in his head. “Not in your head. In your heart. Your heart.” So Luther heard Glanton say, by way of correction, wherever he might be.

Luke was on the line. Luther listened to him not only with his ears. He recorded his sound *and* his meaning.

“I went out to Atlantic City with my old friend Jimmy. It was great. There was free booze everywhere but I didn’t touch a drop. Not one drop. That’s how powerful my awareness is.”

“So you had your vigilance soaring.”

“Why do you have to say things like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re making fun of me.”

“Are you going to meetings?”

“I go when I can. I’m not like you. I’m a family man. I have my two stepsons to take care of. And Rose needs looking after.”

“Then why do you go to Atlantic City? It’s people, places, and things, just like RoR says.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’re either going toward a drink or away from it. If we’re around booze without a good reason, then it begins to call to us. We lose our sober reference.”

“Listen to you. Didn’t I tell you I put my mind on those bottles and it was like they weren’t there?”

“But Luke, alcohol doesn’t play that way. It doesn’t. It’s like our basic text says, ‘There will come a time when we have no effective mental defense against the first drink. That defense must come from a Higher Power.’”

“What kind of shit are you talking? Why do you want to be getting into my business?”

Luther could see that if his brother did not have his vigilance soaring, he did have his soreness soaring. Luther saw that he had only himself to blame for that, and Luke saw it, too.

“Why the fuck do you always have to bring me down with your dreary safety talk? Don’t do this. Don’t do that. I’ve got a big dick. I go where I please. Look at you, all shriveled up and sick looking. You want to live behind a locked door, you do that. Me, I’m going out.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Luther said. “You are walking like a man, talking like a man, acting like a man. Just like Frankie Valli sang.”

“Oh, fuck you with all your bullshit.”

And so he hid his love away for Luke where he, Luther, could not find it. It wasn’t a mystery to him as to why. He couldn’t bear to be near someone positioning himself for death. He had inserted his fingers in Luke’s wounds for too long to be wanting to do it

now. And was it right that Luke, with his appetite for destruction, should wound him so? Was that not another reason to hide love away?

The next night he had an urge to call his brother in spite of their conversation the night before. But the voice thing was going on. “Don’t dial pain.” “Are you cruising for a bruising?” And yet the hymn “Rescue the Perishing” soon became loud in his ears and compelled him to reach for the phone.

“Hold on. Things aren’t good here,” Rose said, and put down the receiver. There was tension in her voice.

Off-line he heard Rose call for Luke and heard Luke say, “What the hell does he want?” as his footsteps drew nearer.

“Yeah, what?” Luke said.

“No what. I’m just calling to say hello.”

“No, you’re not. You’re calling to see if I’m drinking, and I am. Gonna buy a house. A big fucking house in the country. Away from all this shit. Know what I mean?”

“What country?”

“Why do you have to ask a question like that?”

“Why do you have to ask your question the way you did?”

“What question?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Don’t fuck with me. Just tell me.”

“Know what I mean? A truncated question missing a pronoun and auxiliary verb,

but a question nonetheless.”

“Oh, fuck you with your fucking bullshit. All you know is Mickey Mantle. That kind of shit.”

“Mickey Mantle isn’t shit.”

“You’re shit. A big steaming stinky load of it. I try to be nice to you and all I get is more of your crap.”

“Are you trying to be nice to me or nice to yourself with your drinking?”

“I’m not talking to you anymore.”

“You’ve got to put it down. It’s killing you.”

“Man, you’re tiresome. That’s what it is. You’re tiresome. Always got to be messing about in someone else’s business. Just because it beat you doesn’t mean it’s beating me. I’ve got my mind all over the bottle. All over it, you understand? My mind is in control of the bottle.”

Luther heard Luke swallow, the way Luke used to hear him as they spoke on the phone and the ice cubes rattled in his glass.

“It’s not the other way around?” Luther asked.

“You’ve got bad blood. You’ve got bad bones. You’re just a package of stinky, stinky skinny shit,” Luke said, and hung up, because sometimes Luke got up upon it with the truth.

Babs, Glanton’s wife, had healing powers. She could make you whole with a look, a touch, the sound of her voice. She too was a member of RoR and mentored RoR women

in all fifty states, with the exception of Idaho. “It’s all those starchy potatoes they eat. It makes them dull,” Glanton said, but Babs wasn’t into numbers. She had a prayer action going full-time, all the time, for Sarah. At first it made Luther uneasy that Babs should be on Sarah’s case full time, all the time, as she said. But everybody needed somebody to love and to be loved by, and if Babs was calling on the power of the universe to aid Sarah, then who was he, Luther, to object? Sarah did have Dr. Frodkey, of course, with his Ivy League medical degree and Fifth Avenue office, but he was focused on the regularities of life, latest model coffeemakers and the like. He didn’t extend to the edges, where Sarah seemed to live. “She is in orbit now. We must contact her where she is, not where we want her to be,” Babs said. “God has a long reach.”

Though he understood it as treachery to not love Glanton’s number one, Luther in truth did not much care for Babs. He blamed her reflexive laughter, so out of keeping with her solemnity face, and held onto that one time she stepped out from behind her laughter and said it was only Luther’s hair that kept him from looking older, as if she would callously take from him the one asset he had in an act and leave his blockhead exposed to the world for merciless ridicule. And she was convinced that Sarah was an alcoholic and belonged in RoR. Her assumption was ridiculous. Sarah had a sweet tooth, Luther said. She had a thing for Pepperidge Farm cookies and chocolate, but an alky was someone who drank alcoholically, and Sarah hardly drank at all. It mattered nothing to Babs that Luther might know a thing or two about Sarah’s drinking habits, given the fact that he lived with her. Babs came to the situation with her own special kind of knowingness.

“Kirsten Arnesen had a liking for chocolates, and look what happened to her.”

“Excuse me?” Luther said.

“*The Days of Wine and Roses*. Tell me you haven’t seen it.”

“OK. I get it. Jack Lemmon orders her an alcoholic drink that is flavored with chocolate.”

“A brandy alexander,” she said, putting her precision on him. “And what followed?”

“I know the story line. But so what? Sarah hasn’t graduated from chocolate cookies to brandy alexanders.”

“Have you heard of the yets, Luther?”

“Of course I’ve heard of the yets,” the yets being the bad things alcoholics hadn’t already experienced but inevitably would in the course of their drinking. Well, let Babs have her way with Sarah. What could she do to harm her? Take Sarah’s hair? Sarah was already losing it. Besides, Babs had her own hair, and too much of it.

Luther watched all of game five of the World Series, the Los Angeles Dodgers hosting the New York Yankees at Chavez Ravine. He was no longer in mourning for Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale and Maury Wills and Tommy “Brooklyn” Davis and Johnny “I don’t take shit from no none” Roseboro and the Chock Full O’Nuts mornings of summer where he would scan the box scores of the previous night’s games before heading down to Dead Man’s Hill to lie in the grass with Jane Thayer. He could live with Jerry Reuss on the mound and Ron “Penguin” Cey at third base and Steve “Am I not perfect” Garvey at

first base and Davey “I get after it” Lopes at second and Bill “all-American all the time” Russell at shortstop and Dusty “Don’t be fucking with me” Baker in left field. He simply had a monstrosity of love for Dodger blue, the team name on a slant across the front of the shirt with the number in heartbreaking red below and the white whiteness of the rest of the uniform, while the Yankees had nothing to say for themselves in their dull gray duds. Jerry Reuss came hard from the left side. He shut down big Dave Winfield. He shut down steady Willie Randolph. He held in check Reggie “fingers to his mouth” Jackson and permitted fiery Lou Piniella two dinky singles. Not even the audacity of Goose “I do have a mustache” Gossage beaning The Penguin could stop the Dodgers, for by then Pedro Guerrero and Steve Yeager had taken underweight Ron Guidry downtown, showing no respect at all for the treachery of his Louisiana lightning slider. They were bringing order where none had been.

*Now Celeste, right is right and wrong is wrong. They run on separate tracks and can never be interchangeable. Since his letter to Rafta critiquing my performance, Kaplan Acedit has only grown more intense. Having seen my proneness to error, he is actively seeking for more errors. What little confidence he had in me to begin with is entirely gone. And why not? Now he has found a whopper of an error. The point size for his book is too small. Grambling Vorst, the new art director with hegemony on her mind, reduced the text size after Frieda Volcker left. Why? She had to go and put her scent on the project, as on everything. She made the change without consulting me, and when I was faced with the fait accompli, I made no objection, in spite of my reservation. Kaplan*

*Acedit has called me to account for this blunder, and rightly so. There is no question but that I am now in free fall. Just as Philomena Swangner exposed me, so too has Kaplan Acedit. And just as her loss of confidence in me led to more and more mistakes, to the point that she withheld work from me, so will Rafta have cause to even further decrease the flow of work my way. It is a terrible thing when you cannot put the black and white blocks together to replicate the pattern in the illustration or assemble the parts of a puzzle to form an elephant. We must be able to see things, and if that vision is denied us by virtue of a meager endowment, then we are fated to fail. The world cannot have this. It cannot. It must ask you to go away, and to go away immediately if you are found lacking. And so, if life is one big intelligence test, and I am conspicuously failing, then must soreness abound in me so that, as when I was a child struggling with those blocks, I must tell it to go fuck itself and fuck itself good, that if I am bad, then I will be really bad, for that is what you willed for me, dear God, or why did you bother to make me? Because Kaplan Acedit has been doing some serious drilling. He has penetrated back to my SAT debacle. He has penetrated back to the sixth grade intelligence test. He has exposed and taken hold of my numbers and now holds them aloft in outright mockery for all to see.*

*He was not done with me, Celeste. He had one thing more to add, which was to mock me as the voice of authority. But something in Rafta's Englishness—the Magna Carta, I couldn't say—took her airborne and gave her the perspective, the higher wisdom, that elevation brings. In an act that astonished, she took me to her. No, she did not do that with the action of her mouth. She did not fire on Kaplan Acedit with that. She fired on him with the full power of a terse letter on official Cromartie Wonders stationery.*



*Go away from our door, she wrote simply but forcefully, and go away now. We will not be publishing any more of your work. She dispatched him with a power plus move that came from a place of deep offense to her sense of propriety.*

*And yet I had no cause for celebration, not with the shrapnel from his truth bombs embedded in me. More than that, where did I stand on the loyalty spectrum, now that she had, in effect, made herself my protector? What would a loyalty test about me reveal?*

*Just so you know, Celeste The Dodgers of Los Angeles have defeated the Yankees of New York City. The once mighty should never be allowed to fall too low nor must the currently mighty be allowed to go too high. Order and balance must be preserved, and propriety must ultimately prevail. It cannot be left to stand that a man who spells his given name "Graig," not "Craig," as does Yankee third baseman Graig Nettles, be continually rewarded for such impropriety. It is best for all that he be cast down, and cast down good, as he was.*

Solomon Rhein was fervent for success within the limits his life had placed on him. He would not divulge where the tickets to the opening game of the season for the New York Knicks and the New Jersey (formerly New York) Nets had come from. "I have my sources," he said, pulsating from his own energy source. Luther gave Solomon the mystery space that he needed. He did not wish to test his friend's abrasiveness anymore than he needed to. The Knicks still had Red "I am a man with little to say and say it well" Holzman at the helm. They had Bill "I square up with dignity to shoot" Cartwright at

center. They had Maurice “Staccato” Lucas at one forward and Toby “I can cradle the ball” Knight at the other. At one guard they had Micheal “That is not a typo” Ray Richardson, in whom Luther had invested much love because of his free-for-all style. At the other they had Paul “I was born in the sun” Westphal.

The Nets no longer had Julius “I can fly” Erving. They no longer had Larry “Special K” Kenon at the other forward position. But they did have Len “Banger” Elmore at center and Albert “I am so lost” King and Ray “Don’t you put your hands on me” Williams, formerly of the Knicks. All in all they looked like teams that weren’t going anywhere special.

“So how’s God? God doing OK today?” Solomon Rhein put this question to Luther. His mind had been in serious overdrive, sorting not through all the conversations he had had with Luther but the things Solomon had heard Luther share in RoR meetings, because Luther did not talk to Solomon Rhein one to one about God. He knew better, that Solomon Rhein would rain fire on him summoned by a historical grievance. Had not the Christians done their ransacking, unholy number during the Crusades? And what of the German gas chambers and ovens? What of Dachau and Buchenwald and Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and Mauthasen? Did those names not mean anything? Because Solomon Rhein had his feet on the ground. His tongue did not go lofty.

“God is doing well today,” Luther would only reply, thinking his attempt at humor would be seen by Solomon Rhein as the white flag of surrender.

“You fucking guy with your fucking bullshit,” Solomon Rhein said in his Solomon Rhein way, putting comic exasperation into his voice to make his response

something less than denunciation.

Then came the silence between them, there amid the noisy crowd. Luther turned in his mind to his own personal history. He said, if only to himself, I am in an arena where I have never been before in a part of New Jersey where I have never been, west of the Hudson River, where the #1, the #9, the #2 and # 3 subways can't reach me. Thus have I broken the mold, if only in a small way.

Lavoisier (Antoine-Laurent de) had a mind directed toward action. He was a master of the seen and unseen, that which had never been named and still was, and gave them all a frame in which they could live as the periodic table. He could smell silicon and oxygen, and took them from his head so they could be in the records of humankind. All in all, he did not strut, but was a stickler for the manners of the nobility he was born into, yet lived in a time when France had lost its own manners to a frenzy for blood. To the guillotine was he taken. His head the revolution removed because it could not more fully have his heart, though the excuse it gave was that he sold for profit the fouled tobacco they stuck in their pipes and smoked. Still, Lavoisier had the last laugh, from the empyrean where he still lives.

Rafta had requested that Luther report on a submitted manuscript about Lavoisier and his contributions to science as "the father of modern chemistry." Luther needed to be at his best, now that she had in effect sung "Stand by Your Man" in claiming him for her own in his struggle with Kaplan Acredit. He seemed to do all right. Her eyes did not leave their sockets, nor were there other manifestations of disapproval or disbelief about his

report. He walked out of her office alive, but not without internal warfare having erupted. Mr. James Jane had returned, wrathfully so, his English intellectual rigor offended that Luther should be allowed within a mile of the subject, chemistry, that Mr. James had high school mastery of. Irateness spewed from Mr. James's fish mouth while his forehead stood as a tower of haughty intellect.

"Don't be in my business," Luther answered back. "Just because your chemistry vacated the premises of my mind even as it was arriving, just because there was no storage space for neutrons and valences and the complications of the mole is no reason to hound me now. Did you add nomenclature to what was already there, or did you simply devour the periodic table whole and live off regurgitation ever since?" Luther had some froth of his own for Mr. James Jane.

Sameness had begun to afflict his days. There was work. There was RoR. There was Sarah. RoR he did not mind in the least. It was not a punishment meted out to him. No, no. It was the great blessing in his life. Each meeting was a new reality in the adventure and expansion of the spirit.

"Maybe you aren't ready for change. Maybe you couldn't handle it even if it came. You don't want to rise to the surface too quickly from the ocean depths and burst your lungs." This last Glanton had said before. The image of surfacing was a striking one. But suppose his supply of oxygen ran out before he reached the surface? Suppose he went to a watery grave?

"I need to know what to do about Sarah and my life."

“And you do know. You have to love Sarah and live your life.”

“How did you get to the place of knowingness?”

“You can’t know what you have until you try to give it away,” Glanton said.

“What’s the *it*?”

“The message of recovery.”

“My words don’t seem to go in the right way or the right order, no matter how I try to steer them.”

“Stop steering,” Glanton said, covering himself from top to bottom with the mantle of certitude.

Now there came a morning when Sarah had her love lights shining for Luther, without the gnarly impediment of profound resentment. How such animus came to be suspended he could not say, except to acknowledge that he was doing his best to be a do right man where Sarah was concerned, having the drive for perfection at his core in that regard. Only the night before she had turned on the *Dick “Little man with a big head” Cavett Show*. Luther was fast asleep in the loft bed while she watched the host’s interview with all-the-rage all-the-time author John Irving.

“Listening to him I was reminded of you,” Sarah said. Luther shook his head in amazement that she should compare him to an author with the structural mind of an engineer. The comparison brought him only sorrow, that Sarah should be so wide of the mark in her assessment of him. And sorrow too that God should have made him look intelligent and important when he wasn’t. Luther had sampled the writing in *The World*

*According to Garp* and seen that the novel was rife with sentences that contained a high degree of chunkiness, sentences wrought fine and built to survive the harshest New England winter. Everybody talking their Garp talk. John Irving could have his fame. Luther didn't want to take it away, he just didn't want to aid and abet it with the purchase of the man's book so he too would be considered a Garpista. He would wait for copies to appear on the shelves of the Strand Bookstore. He would wait for the man's fame to fade.

*Celeste, let me here acknowledge an omission, and further, take full responsibility for it. Sometimes we try to expedite the process, shorten the journey, by leaving out details in the naïve belief that no harm will come from their suppression. But keeping a lid on truth is a fruitless endeavor. Explosions that shatter both mind and body can be the consequence, unless, as has been noted, the individual is equipped with state of the art spaces for storage of toxic data, and we have a name for such people, do we not. Inevitably, all must be revealed. All, I say.*

*When I returned to RoR, it was not long before my conscience pricked me. Here I was underway with a recovery process, but my wife was ailing. Not only that, but I had contributed significantly to her suffering. At my meetings mention would sometimes be made of a program called Rooms of No Laughter, or RNL, a sort of sister program to RoR. The RNLers say that just as the alcoholic becomes obsessed with the bottle, so does the RNLer become obsessed with the alcoholic. The RNLers have what they call the "three Cs"—"I didn't cause alcoholism in my loved one, I can't control it, I can't cure it." Their preamble says, in part, "We become irritable and unreasonable without*

*knowing it and seek to force solutions.” While riotous laughter can frequently be heard coming from the RoR meetings, there is far less in the Al-Anon rooms. Thus its name. However, no one should say that the RNLers are joyless; they have been wounded by the alcoholics in their lives, be it a parent or a sibling or relative or significant other. Love is a universal dictate, but it cannot thrive on a sinking ship. RNLers are often enablers. They make excuses for the alcoholics in their lives and clean up their messes. In so doing they protect the alcoholics from the consequences of their actions, or inactions. In essence, they are permitting the alcoholics to behave like irresponsible children. The solution is to detach from the alcoholic. “Detach with love” is a frequent saying, but if that is not possible, RNLers are encouraged to “Detach with an axe.” No one is suggesting that members become axe wielders but only to detach by any means possible, within the bounds of the law, of course. Members are encouraged to keep the focus on themselves not as a way of encouraging self-centeredness but because of their tendency to focus on the alcoholics in their lives.*

*RNL, like RoR, is spiritual, not religious, but according to Sarah, it does have an unofficial saint, and a living one at that. Manfred, a diminutive man with a mischievous smile who always wears the same beige suit, is his name. Should anyone at the meeting begin to turn his or her attention to the alcoholic, Manfred will hold up a small mirror in which he ostentatiously examines his own face as a reminder to the offending party where to redirect his or her focus.*

*One night Sarah called the loft and asked if Manfred could come over and take a shower, as his shower fixture was broken. Over coffee with him at a nearby diner after*

*the meeting, he confessed to her that his body was crying out for an ablution. I did not raise up on the sainted one. I simply repeated her description of him as being a little man. His size being what it was, perhaps he could ablute in his bathroom sink or his kitchen sink. We were in the October cold now. Even in this season did the loft turn cool enough to make you shiver in your clothes, let alone naked. The bathroom, as has been described, was narrow and small, unnatural in its dimensions and lack of amenities. The shower stall itself was small. You banged into its sides as you turned. The water flow was erratic and there were no hooks on which to hang towels or the clothes you had shed, nor was there a mirror in which to stare as you brushed your wet hair. As for the tiles underfoot, they were old and coming loose and the light from above was dingy. The thought that filth and decrepitude and fevered rats were abounding came strongly when you stepped into that stall. Anarchy was once more out and about with dirty water trickling free of the stall's confines, and so, to have Manfred enter our home to free himself of his dirt in our shower—no, no, and no again.*

*Late into the night had she sat with him in that coffee shop, perhaps eating the cherry cheese Danishes I had so favored at one time. As the hours passed, I grew anxious. It brought great relief to hear from her. Was it possible she had her own state of longing going on, even if Manfred wasn't the one? Was it possible that she too wanted, down deep, to vacate the premises of our failing marriage? Was Manfred a sort of trial run? The winds of change can blow softly at first, softly, I say.*

Then it was sadness time again. Luke called and spoke with Sarah while Luther was out.



He wanted Luther to know that he was trying to get back to the meetings so he could once more have a toehold on sobriety. It hurt to hear of Luke struggling. Luther did not know whether to hold out hope for him or fall into despair, the kind that made him think of throwing dirt on certain family members, as if they were things of the past who needed to be removed from sight so he could live without the weight of them bearing down. The hymn “Rescue the Perishing” came into his mind to give him the instruction that he needed.

*Celeste, there is a further confession to be made if I am to avoid the firing squad preparing for my demise. A world of misunderstanding separates me from safety, and so I must begin to shed light before the bang-bang boys perform their fusillade. A life is at stake here, and if it is meaningless to the many, it is not meaningless to me.*

Glanton had a confession to make. No chuckle preceded or followed.

“Maybe I use God as I used to use booze and drugs.”

The earth beneath Luther’s feet was made to shake. Suppose he was doing something similar? Suppose he was like a child with an imaginary friend?

Luther went to the bookstore to get filled up. He bought the new Robert Stone novel, *A Flag for Sunrise*. He also bought the new issue of *Ploughshares* magazine because he knew it published quality stuff and it was best to keep his eye on what was happening so he would not be left behind. *Hall of Mirrors*, Stone’s first novel, had brightened his day with the rummy adventures of the main character and its exhilarating

prose. Luther couldn't be sure, but he had some idea that in the novel a boy got beaten to death with a baseball bat after offending another boy who did not feel good about himself. As Luther said, he couldn't be sure. What he was sure of was that he had to claim Robert Stone for his own and keep hope alive. That he was not the man of adventure and daring that Robert Stone had been, had not traveled all over the world like Robert Stone or done Vietnam during the war like Robert Stone did not matter, nor did it matter than he did not have Robert Stone's brain power or the torquing power he could give his words so they were in spinning motion on the page. Luther knew the people he had to stay close to so he could be real in his own life.

Another thing. Luther continued to practice his sharing at the RoR meetings so he could be seen and stay alive because it was not possible to stay quiet when so much was at stake. He needed the recognition that only being seen could bring, and when he was denied that by the group, he died many, many times only to live again.

It happened one night that he who had worn nuts and bolts in place of cufflinks in days of old had been chosen once again to lead the Saturday night meeting, as not only Luther but the entire group recognized the power of his bulging brow to marshal and organize the words he spoke into a compelling story of his fall and subsequent redemption sufficient to bring tears to Luther's eyes. After hearing such highs and lows, Luther had to get his hand up, but his spoken words on this night were a particularly wobbly forward pass. Listlessly to the floor did they fall, causing Cuff Links to assume a face of pained sadness, his own excellence not permitting him to tolerate anything less in

others.

And Glanton too, who was all love all the time, was communicating his disappointment with Luther. Luther could feel Glanton's pained thoughts streaming from his bulging brow that he should have a dull child on his hands.

Luther walked home that night with all the shaming elements in the universe in play. Into the wee hours did they continue their toxic assault, Luther seeking to find comfort in the half-words he summoned to his consciousness, seeking safety in knowing the full word and trusting that the universe didn't, so in this way he might have someplace to hide and feel safe.

In this time Luther put the universe on notice that it should not call Sarah a quitter, and to be very careful if it did. Why? Because RNL and Babs gave her the fortification she needed to get back in the work ring, as some years past, Dr. Rosner had given him the structure that he needed to begin to integrate into the white collar workforce. Though she had run from the company before, the director welcomed her back and she proceeded to do work on a heroic scale, outpacing even Carola Aprile with her energy and zeal. Her first day on the job she called to say she wouldn't be back before 1 a.m. because of a deadline.

"Then you are burning more than the midnight oil," Luther said, not in protest but in wonder, and restrained himself from calling her back because she had hung up before he could be sure all his words had reached her.

But not many days had passed before it was crying time in the rain, as on many,

many occasions had it been crying time for Luther when once more Bill Walton would hobble from the court with another serious injury and challenge the notion that Luther's love was not in vain. Love did not do you right. It did not do you wrong. It just did you up into the love state and left you there for your own edification with the multiplicity of events it had in store for you until you were found hanging out in the tree of bliss or rotting in the desert sands. In either case was instruction meted out as to the ways of life and if things got too much you could howl out your pain to the god of understanding and grace you had uncovered and discovered and he would comfort you with his sweet peace of surrender.

“I have had it with those people. I have had it with the whispering. Do you hear me? It is finished. Over,” she said into the phone.

And Luther did hear her. He heard her well and heard himself well, saying to himself that he must not go near this situation again. He must just step aside and hold his silence. He watched the October rain fall cold and relentless on the darkened Bowery. He would let the rain do the crying for him.

The next day Luther's mother called, directing the mournful tide of her life to wash over him. He was happy to hear from her.

“Have you seen or heard from Luke?” she asked.

“He is lost to the wind,” Luther replied.

“This is your brother of whom you speak.”

“I am only saying what you say.”

“What nonsense are you saying, that I would speak in such a way about my son?”

“But you do say it. You say of people that they come and go like the wind. All of America says it.”

“Do not approach me with your foolishness. Do not do it. My legs are on fire. I am in so much pain.”

“Have you spoken with the doctor? Can’t he do something for you?”

“They speak a language I do not understand. They say they can do nothing. Nothing.”

“You have me very worried now.”

“It is not for you to worry, my son. It is only for me to get off my feet. I will go now.”

In daylight too the rain came down, maintaining its heavy pounding of the dirty streets.

Glanton said there was a way for Luther to make an amend to his father and to his aunt.

“Some of the dead are living and some of the living are dead. The living not only have ears to hear but eyes to read with, or many of them do. To be on the safe side, write a letter to each and then read the letters aloud.”

Having been given a direction home, Luther sought to take it. He wrote:

Father, you were never a hanging string. Rather were you a menacing storm of strange and eastern origin. In my mind did I devalue you at an early age, saying I was the child of one parent, that being my mother. I did not want your hairiness or

your smacking hand upon me. These reservations are well known by the world by now, as many, many are the public places and indoor spaces where I have calumniated you by living entirely in your sins and none of your virtues. But this is changing now. I have exhausted Mommyland and the company of the dinks who can talk only of their mothers but never their fathers, other than in terms of odiousness. The earth being round, I had to run away before I could realize I was running toward. You are a destination now, and I am, whether quickly or slowly, approaching it through love and understanding. You will hear more from me as the years go by.

Auntie Eve, my raids on your apartment with key in hand from an early age, constitute my harm to you, in particular, those large bills I boosted from the envelopes on the floor of your locked closet, for which I also had a key. It was a violation of your space if not your trust, as that lock on your closet may have suggested you had little. But you should know that you were my North Star, my orientation point insofar as the direction I might wish to go. I admired your self-reliance, your independence—that you could live alone in that apartment and in the world at peace with yourself.

Now there was a red-haired man of menace who moved into the building next door. He said his name was Jameson by way of introduction.

“Not Jameson, like the Irish whiskey?” Luther said.

“I’m not Irish and I don’t drink,” Jameson said.

“But your hair is on fire and your face is freckled,” Luther said.

Jameson gave Luther an assessing stare, looking up from his shorter height. He was dressed recklessly for the fall cold, wearing only a flimsy top and having no need of a collar or a coat. He had the kind of thick neck that could display itself unsheathed with pride and a muscular, sculpted body. His animal heat would keep him warm.

“What else do you have for me?” Jameson said, his words receiving the backup of an amused smile.

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Who’s the woman I see you going into your building with?”

“That’s my wife. She’s an artist.”

“And you? Are you an artist, too?”

“I am an office worker.”

“An office worker?” Jameson repeated the words slowly, his amusement continuing.

“Yes, I bring home some bacon so we might live,” Luther replied.

Never mind the smile. Freckles was howling now.

“And what do you do?” Luther asked, ever so slightly challenging.

“What does it look like?” Jameson asked, summoning a sober mien as he pointed to the tool belt around his narrow waist.

Luther assessed the hammer, multiple wrenches and screwdrivers, a measuring

tape and pliers in his neighbor's belt. "Looks to me like you're packing from the stuff you got hanging."

"I got more stuff hanging than that."

Jimeson was surely not lying. He was wearing his faded jeans too well and had a bulge too big for Luther to cast any doubt on his assertion. Allowing a strategic mindset to guide him, he just let that last go on by so he could begin to go on his way and Jimeson could go on his.

But Luther did not need the filthy, filthy Eagles to be telling him there was a new kid in town. And if he did, that news got delivered the next time he saw Stuff Hanging because he was right there talking with Sarah outside the building just as Luther turned the corner on his way home from work, saying "I'll be seeing you" and winking—*winking*—before stepping away as Luther approached.

"What did he want?" Luther asked, as he and Sarah walked up the stairs to the loft.

"He said he had met you and wanted to introduce himself as an artist when he's not hanging sheetrock."

"That's what he wanted?"

"What does any man want?"

*Now Celeste, people come from east and west and north and south to express themselves.*

*One says, "Do not cast your pearls before swine" and "Tell no man"; another voices discontent with his job; there has been much talk of the fear of success, of people feeling*



*only something bad can follow something good in their lives; a suit and tie man spoke of international co-productions. But Celeste, through it all I have been bottom-dwelling, living with a sense of my own inadequacy and speculating how this one and that one do not accept me and are showing signs of underlying hostility, like the one who made a joke about my height that was less than funny. Does one have to be a little boy to be a children's books editor? And now Miss Redding, the zaftig secretary for our principal, Mr. Horst-Lehman, is reaching out to me to attend a homecoming reunion at the Claremont School. Whatever I say to please her, know that it is a foregone conclusion that even years after my ignoble defeat, there is little chance that I can summon the necessary humility to make an appearance. And yet, how I long to make that connection, to somehow make the correction so I can connect; in my heart I know that Diane Coleman and Robin Abel and John Edel and all the rest were the crème de la crème, as Miss Flowers, our seventh grade English teacher, would say, and that I will be striving to be worthy of them for the rest of my days, so deep is the wound of my failure and the perennial sense of ignominy that has followed. So what does it say about me that I cannot show my face at a high school reunion? Only that I have a long way to go in order to fully heal.*

*A degree of treachery has made an appearance in my mentality, Celeste. Our catalog man, Rostifer Jenkins, informed me the other day that he is considering giving a full page ad to some of our spring books. Though he did not explicitly instruct me to pass on this information to Rafta, it was surely understood that I should. But an attitude of*

*spitefulness overtook me. Does Rafta not have her secrets? Why, then, should I not have mine? Such disrespect cannot be countenanced forever, even by me. For a measure of sanity to ultimately prevail, I have but to ask and respond honestly to a few questions: Who retires at night with the weight of the department on her shoulders? Who is responsible for not only shaping the list but seeing that it is one that earns money for the company? Who is it that must draw on her vast knowledge of children's literature and market forces and trends before placing a manuscript under contract? Who must represent the department at conferences, conventions, and the like? Or, to put it another way, Luther Garatdjian, who does not get to hide in her office with the door closed and bits of scotch tape all over her desk? Primo honesty will free us all of the shackles we have placed on ourselves so we may stand in the sunlight of the spirit once more. Oh, hallelujah. (And only now am I turning to the dictionary that I might understand the precise meaning of the word, as not once in all my previous years has my ignorance in this matter occurred to me. Remember that every piece of knowledge we gain makes us stronger, Celeste.)*

*Not that I was fast with my inventory. It came later, much later, there being no pronto to be had in my consciousness at the time. But this you can be sure of. Malevolence, of whatever degree, will manifest in the body, and so it was inevitable that I should have an odor oh no moment, the fact of having showered and deodorized myself that morning of no consequence. And Rafta, having the feline power of smell, was on to me immediately.*

*"The stink of hostile intent is on you, as it often is. How could you not alert me to*

*the intention of Rostifer Jenkins to give extra space to some of our books? He was just here in my office with the catalog mechanicals. When I mentioned my surprise at not having been consulted, Rostifer said he had spoken with you, and fully expected that you would communicate his vision for the catalog. What is the meaning of your failure to communicate?"*

*"It is true. There was a failure. The channel got clogged. It was all gunked up. Your clarity has broken that impasse. I will work to make it clear so nothing of the kind happens again. Guards from the elite Vigilance Squadron will be posted to ensure a happier outcome."*

*Celeste, you can anticipate what I am about to confess, that nothing of the kind was offered by way of apology or explanation by me to Rafta.*

*"You must do better. You must be better," she said, and turned back to the catalog, by way of dismissing me.*

*Celeste, it may be that the land in which Rafta lived was one in which her heart would have broken should she have taken the step of finalizing me. It may have been she saw I had nowhere else to go, that the world was not calling to me and never would the way it had called to Bruce Bill.*

It happened that Kaplan Acedit was still not done with Luther, not if the air power armed with bunker buster bombs he unleashed to effect deep penetration of Luther's psyche meant anything. That very week did the formidable Alanis Kilano, his literary agent,

come calling via the telephone.

“I am afraid she is out of the office today,” Luther said, noting that even after he had identified himself Alanis Kilano had nothing for him but to request the higher ground of Rafta Blackning, saying without saying that she would not deal with Rafta’s minions, especially those of the incompetent kind.

“I will see that she gets the message,” Luther said, at which point Alanis Kilano furthered her point by hanging up without so much as a thank you. And so had the bunker busting begun, forcing Luther to the bathroom stall with aching eardrums from the blast. There he could summon no outrage, thinking, this is not a war crime but a just desert. Kaplan Acedit is determined to disintegrate this rat. Luther no longer had any quarrel with Kaplan Acedit. He had only fear of Kaplan Acedit’s resolve, and the intelligence behind it. When someone had the goods, that was that, and when someone didn’t have the goods, well, that was that too, and it was time for the latter to vacate the premises. Because truth was truth, and the fact that he was a lousy editor was there for him to see. Had not he broken the heart of J. Augustine Simone, the distinguished *New York Times* critic, with his hatchet job on the author’s style, back in Luther’s time with Mr. Dorf? Had not another of Dr. Dorf’s authors called Luther’s flap copy lurid? Truth bombs were being dropped. The explosions were constant.

But there were ground operations going on as well. Luther had managed to draw the Italian fire of John de la Questo, the production manager for Cromartie Wonders and Pilgore Children’s Books and nephew of Salvatore de la Questo, head of production for all Pilgore books and he who wore rings on all the fingers of his hands. Insecurity

showed greatly in his young face that his uncle's influence and power, not his own ability, might have secured him the position. Luther was understanding of John de la Questo's vulnerability. Luther sensed that shame over poor writing skills was the reason John never provided memos. For this reason, Luther was gentle with John. In protecting him, he was protecting some part of himself. But now Luther had transgressed, and it was for John de la Questo to tell him so, because in so doing, Luther had put his whole life in jeopardy.

"Luther, did you really tell the printer to send the jacket proof to Grambling Vorst instead of me? Why would you do that? I'm the production manager. She is the art director. I'm supposed to receive the proofs."

"You are right," Luther said, but John de la Questo was already moving away, having seen the weakness that led to the betrayal in Luther's face, saw, that is, that Grambling Vorst, odious though she might be, was already bending Luther to her will for power.

And now the time had come for a time out for the widening of the channel so truth could more fully run its course. The book for young readers Kaplan Acredit had written was a fine one, on the subject of John Muir, the naturalist and savior of Yosemite Valley, Sequoia National Park, and other places of great natural beauty. Because whatever Kaplan Acredit was showing of an unappealing nature, that character deficiency did not seep into his prose. The text he produced had high specific density going for it, every sentence an interlocking element in a strong structural foundation. You read a paragraph and felt the aura and polish of a great intelligence informing the work. Kaplan

Acredit did not have the hanging string gene, the lazy bones gene, but a gene that had the thoroughness of his own mind going for him, the kind of gene that had made America great. How hard it was for him to work with someone like Luther, who displayed the lax standards that went with his low intelligence.

The further problem was this: Luther had instructed the printer, in writing, to laminate the jacket cover. There it was in his cover memo. Unbeknownst to Luther, Rafta had said no, nix on that, no superfluties will this Kaplan Acredit receive for his wretched book. When John de la Questo brought this fact to the attention of Luther, he was beside himself with fear that extreme savagery would be his reward for being perceived as insubordinate.

*Now Celeste, The worst did not happen. No beating, no flogging, in public or private. The thing just passed on by and silence reigned. All it took was several pieces of scotch tape added to the kneehole of my desk. Oh happy day. Oh, such a happy day. But now, alas, I am in a crisis of a different kind. To ensure my safety, I have taken to writing once more by hand, as one who hears the air raid warnings learns to race toute de suite To the bomb shelter so nastiness of the pulverizing kind cannot be dropped upon him. Is there any choice in the matter, seeing that the shame police have gathered in full force to apprehend me for the monstrosity of egotistical ludicrousness I have created? In my wretched handwriting do I hide, until I can once more summon the courage to show my face in type and until, once more, those very same shame police have gone from my door.*

November let it be known that there would be no mercy shown by the coming winter. Even in late fall was the cold penetrating deep into his bones in the loft as well as in the streets and there was no use praying for mercy because his prayers would not be heard. On those days he summoned the will for his person to be dirt- and smell-free, he would emerge from the shower and his meager flesh would be covered with goose bumps before he had hurriedly dressed. The cold was a laughing thing in its own right as it froze all possibility of happiness right out of him. Because drafts came through all the windows, he bought plastic sheeting, which he cut to size, and stapled the edges to the window frames—many, many staples so the wind could try to bully the sheeting out of the way all it wanted but fail to fully gain the direct access to his flesh and bones and that of Sarah as well. He might not be able to build a proper table, but he could push back against the elements, even if only a little. And while it put a cloud of ugliness on the loft to have this sheeting, he did fill with satisfaction at a job well done. And yet, even with the increasing cold did fire threaten to incinerate Sarah and Luther, prompting him into action to mitigate against such an outcome. In his memory forever was the ghastly proof of what fire could do. Was there not that building of strength on Broadway flames had hollowed out so only the steel and masonry remained? Had he not seen how both heat and cold had come to make a mockery of that structure, icicles like giant jagged teeth hanging down from the bare beams?

And so Luther's vigilance took him to the hardware store.

“I want the finest smoke detector in the land. Can you give me the assistance that I need?”

The clerk had hardware store hardness on him. While locked onto Luther's eyes, he reached behind him for a box that he tossed on the counter.

“You have given truth to the saying ‘He has eyes in the back of his head.’”

Hardware store man yielded his silence to quote him the price in a gravelly voice.

That same day Luther installed the device, testing it not once but thrice to ensure it would not hold itself in the service of duplicity, and then thrice more and again thrice more, his ears enduring its compliant shrieks, so he could even better gauge its loyalty quotient and he could sleep the sleep of the vigilant if not the just that night and on all nights to come.

That week his mother called again. She said the fire was in her back now, depriving her of rest and casting her into a wilderness of suffering and pain that rendered the contemplation of Christ on the cross too real because she was experiencing a crucifixion, too. She had been lifted out of herself that she should speak this way, not in the self-righteous manner of Karl “The Nose” Malden in *On the Waterfront*, but with desperation leading her on. All was holy in that moment. All was fraught with peril. This was his mother and he had no answer for her worthy of the name.

*Now, Celeste, do I bang on your door and cry out in the night for understanding. Where to start but to declare that exactitude is a requirement for thoroughness to have its day, whether it is bridge building or self-examination. For peace to reign and the mantle of humility to be ours, we must see and name clearly the offense to others. In the matter of*



*Kaplan Acredit, I did bristle, just as he said, when errors were pointed out to me. I could never get on top of his John Muir manuscript sufficient to have the confidence to make substantive changes. I was not in the manuscript but on and around it, as I often am in life. I could not say move this here and that there, so I was relegated to the land of dinkdom with the insertion of a comma here and perhaps the addition of "that," serving as a conjunction, there. Dinkiness, sheer dinkiness, which he clearly saw. And so I gave in to my resentment and hardly cared to correct the mistakes he pointed out to me so woundingly. We must live in the reality of who we are. Lights must be turned on, the pitiless fluorescent ones, as we stand naked under them, in the chilled air of the doctor's examining room, and stare in the full-length mirror at our ectomorphic frame, and then ask the question, what right do we have to say a word? What right to step out of the shadows? What right but to sit hapless and bemused on the park bench signaling complete impotence so as to avoid the punch in the face that is otherwise coming. And yet, with all that, do I dare to deny that my emotional stance hardened into "Go jump in the lake," as it did in regard to Philomena Swangner when she began to drill down on me? After a time will people of intelligence discern the essence of others with lesser gifts. Did not Sarah's sister Claire come to place me in the same pod as the family maid, the babbleacious woman from Estonia? So too did Kaplan Acredit give me the status of a secretary. Let me here resolve before you, in my ignominious dinkiness, to be who I am and not seek to prevent myself from falling into that right-sized space.*

But it was not all one way. The seeds of his sense of superiority were contained within his low self-regard. If he was not fit for Cromartie Wonders one day, it was not fit

for him the next. I have been sentenced to hell by myself, he thought, on one particular day, reading a hearts and flowers novel by Sue Ellen Puckett Bryce, tentatively titled *Apple Blossoms for Jenny*. He saw in that moment that while he had the range and adaptability to be in children's books, even if it was a struggle, he could also operate in the world of adult books, an option he suspected Rafta Blackning and Florence Mith and Gina Deductio could not easily make. He had that to hang onto when Hanging String tried to come to town.

But the heavy bombing resumed. Call it carpet bombing, as annihilation was the goal. And call out Anatole Broyard, *New York Times* critic, and Bernard Malamud, short story writer supreme and novelist par excellence, as agents of Luther Garatdjian's extermination with their aerial assault. "Get your best invention going," Bernard Malamud said. Don't steal. Don't appropriate the experiences of others. Don't draw by the numbers. Don't be a slave to chronological time. Set yourself free. Be the corncob, as William Faulkner called himself. Feel the deliciousness of disguise, of hiding where you can't be found, of hiding in plain sight.

Question: *Luther, is that not what you have been trying to do all along, with your pieces of scotch tape and your tile tapping and mumbled mumbo-jumbo? Have you not all along been seeking safety? So what on earth possessed you to reveal every aspect of your life on paper? Do you suffer from Richard Milhous Nixon syndrome, RMN being that most secretive of men who nevertheless exposed himself on tapes he had to know were recording his every word? Do you have an explanation for me, Luther? Do you?*

Response: *I am answerable to the truth, not a higher truth or a lower truth, but simply the truth. And for this, thoroughness and order are required. It is essential that we fess up.*

Question: *So when all is said and done, you remain a Christian zealot seeking to avoid the eternal flames.*

Response: *I am my mother's son, yes, but are you suggesting I cannot go beyond her circumference? That she has me bound within the highest of walls? That even a potency like RoR cannot uproot the god of fear she passed on to me with a god of love personal, so very personal, to me?"*

Question: *I say no such thing. I simply ask...*

Response: *You watch your mouth. You just watch it.*

He kept track of his writing so it wouldn't get away. Every day he would come home to it, sometimes for hours, sometimes for fifteen minutes. He didn't want to be beaten on for not trying. Besides, the words kept coming, maybe not as rich as the oil beneath the sands in Saudi Arabia, but who was to say? The gods of taste and virtue who called themselves editors? Break down the walls, break them down, he said to the carburetor *and* the tinhorn sheriff.

Such a happy place was the RoR meeting at the Episcopal school on Hudson Street, where he had first come to RoR, and where the red sign with the silver letters RoR hanging from the low iron fence had plunged him deep, deep into the lake of shame that he should be seen by the general public to be one of those people, an *alcoholic*. The school grounds themselves happiness-inducing, having the quality of their origins in the

mother country, England. The navy blue blazers and charcoal gray pants worn by the boys and the blue jumpers worn by the girls made his heart sing for the childhood he had once known. Not that he saw any children, not at that time of day. But his elation at the meeting and his walk home along Bleecker Street faded into soreness that not a single sentence had he added to White Line, Continue or any of his other loves, that the day had done him dirty by sapping him as if he were nothing but a slave to its dictates and he had no insides to reconnoiter and tend to with his words. It didn't matter, it didn't matter at all that when he had a full day to sit at the typewriter he would often become dawdle-acious, passing the hours in a happy glow. No, no, that did not matter. The world had ruled him on this day and kept him from the gates of paradise and now he was too tired to make the journey. And Sarah, in her earnest and industrious bliss, all day all the time in her studio. No dawdleacious-ness in her. None at all. Stirring her turps with her brush in that old tin can, moving the plate through her press. The singleness of purpose she showed without so much as the mention of the word "God." Her divinity in her work.

But he got her back good the next night, got her back real good. Got his soreness all over her for not seeing him at first when she entered Robin's, the neighborhood restaurant on the Bowery where they frequently went, that is, pretended not to see him, seeking to make him even more invisible than he was. She giving him no choice but to cause her to storm out of the restaurant with some soreness of her own. Because no one had the right to make him invisible when everything in him cried out to make a loud sound in the universe. No one.

It happened one day that Rafta let it be known that Philomena Swanger was on her mind in such a way that Luther received complete confirmation that Philomena was also in her heart. Rafta expressed her concern that Philomena had not written or called to thank her for the copy of the novel that Philomena had worked on before leaving. A month had passed since Rafta had mailed her the novel, surely enough time for a response. As always, Luther had his listening devices intact for everything Rafta said and how she said it. Though it was not for him to try to hurt her, so clearly did he have the answer that he was obliged to blurt it so as to eradicate her perplexity on the spot.

“She is intent on a new life and doesn’t wish to look back. It is like that for all those who flee to California. They are transfixed by the golden rays. My sense is that she has left Cromartie Wonders behind.”

“That she would do so without even being able to acknowledge receipt of a book? How incredible,” Rafta said, and returned to her office, leaving Luther to ponder her affronted response. Immediately he understood. He had spoken his truest feelings, but not necessarily Philomena’s. He had confessed to Rafta his own longing for escape. Well, she could beat him with the stick of just deserts if she chose, though he was reasonably sure she wouldn’t. She was simply a human being who wanted the few relationships in her life, work-based or not, to mean something. He stood there abashed at his insensitivity to the fineness of her quality.

“A feeling of oneness with all that is in me and around me. That is what I am seeking,”

Luther declared to himself one morning in this time. “Enough of a little bit of me here, a

little bit of me there, a little bit of me everywhere.” Still was he hearing the voices of big Anatole Broyard and even bigger Bernard Malamud instructing him where to go with his mind and his attitude and his words if he didn’t anymore wish to be stealing from other people’s lives, as in the days of old he had stolen from his mother’s pocketbook. He stared at his pile of manuscripts, cowering in their file folders. “Show your faces of deceit. Show them now, partisans of disintegration that you are.” One he ripped up before calling Glanton.

“I have called my manuscripts as they deserve to be called—deceitful snakes, treacherous dogs. One I have torn to pieces that I may come together in wholeness and have divine accord with Sarah. In so doing I am acting my way into right thinking.”

“Or into the nuthouse,” Glanton said.

“How you speak,” Luther replied, as he often did to Glanton.

“No more of that activity today, or you may regret it tomorrow,” Glanton went on, before hanging up.

Glanton has given his words a definitive ring with the call’s abrupt termination, Luther could only think, then turned his mind to where his mentor might be coming from. Glanton was like the wind that way, surprising you from his new direction.

*Celeste, Miss Redding, the Claremont School secretary, has written me a note of sorrow and disappointment, that time should be passing without my presence in it. How long will you be a void in the universe, she calls out in her note, as if pain prompted a poetical strain in her person. I heard her to be saying that not only my time but hers and all of my*

*classmates was passing, that the process of disappearance would not be reversed. This is the same woman who once before called out from her depths, saying that I could do well on these standard exams, too, because in giving me hope she was giving hope to herself that she could be like the Diane Colemans and Robin Abels who read Paris Match and Albert Camus in French and were to prestigious colleges bound, because I was she and she was me. She saw that I wasn't likely to enter through the gates of paradise nor was she, and so the exhortation to me to give herself hope as well. I must pull myself out of this ongoing free fall, Celeste. We must never let pride remand us to the land of the negligible, should such a land even exist.*

*Celeste, on the heels of Miss Redding is the past calling to me. The longing arises for the superficialities, if not the substance, of order. A middle-aged white woman with a Fifth Avenue appearance stopped me on that same avenue and quietly asked me for a dollar that she might eat. Unlikely looking candidates for the street are everywhere, as are graffiti and whitewash on the windows of once flourishing stores. And that man in the White House, the man with the nodding head, so full of anger and Republican retribution against the poor for being poor. And now high school Republicans are proliferating. What world is this I have emerged from my drunkenness into, that these adolescents are already planning for their retirement? This new decade appears to be a radical break from and rejection of the excesses of the sixties and seventies. It is a world I hadn't expected to see and feel unprepared for. Life has gone on; our generation was not the defining one.*

He longs for the year 1960, the fresh faces of John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline, and their two young children. He longs for Camelot, for his boyhood, when he could walk about the city without the sense that irreversible blight was upon it.

That half-day of school he had on Friday. Standing on Fifth Avenue and Seventy-second Street waiting for the bus, with the peace of Central Park just across the street. Fifth Avenue ran in both directions in that time. Came home and changed out of his street clothes and headed in the direction of Scully's stoop and ran into Jimmy Riley as he turned the corner onto Amsterdam Avenue. Jimmy Riley saying, "Did you hear? Kennedy's been shot. He's dead" so that there could be no more innocence if there ever had been.

Now there was a man at the Saturday night meeting Luther felt no love for and who Luther sensed felt no love for him either, not in any sense of the word that Luther understood, though they were on holy ground. He saw this man Ralph as showing a full measure of inadequacy. His skin was too white and his face too pimpled and his big and irregular teeth pushed too hard against his fish mouth and he could not fully fill the clothes he wore, so that the name Bony Maroni got attached to him in Luther's mind though he well knew Bony Maroni to be a woman and one to be classified with the likes of Olive Oyl. And Luther was made aware of Ralph's poverty of spirit too, Ralph putting it out there in the open air of the meeting place, saying before the large gathering, "If I see a man with a girlfriend, I hate him. If I see someone with a better job than me, I hate him, too. The truth is that I don't wish people well. I pretend to, but I don't. 'Why don't I



have what they have?’ I say, and go all bitter.”

So it was that Luther saw that soreness reigned all over this man Ralph and that it was all soreness all the time for him, as it wasn't quite for Luther himself. Even so was RoR banging on Luther, rounding his thinking into shape, saying “If you can spot it, then you've got it,” and so, yes, Ralph was a kindred spirit of sorts. And yet, even so, this awareness did nothing to diminish Luther's dislike of him.

If order was a directive from the universe and he was required to follow it at home, that is, if the carpet had to be vacuumed and clothes put away and pillows fluffed and the kitchen counter kept clear, so too did order have to prevail at the RoR meetings, such that each meeting room had to be left in the same tidy condition as the group had found it on entering. In the case of the Saturday night meeting, that meant the chairs had to be folded flat and placed against the wall, so that those who entered afterward would not be stymied in their movements, and the coffee urn liberated from the used and so very depleted coffee grounds, and all manner of other things to ensure the word *order* could be justifiably applied to the space. That included rolling up the spiritual signs for the instruction and guidance of all who gathered, that they might understand that the one was a roadmap for peace through personal change sufficient to recover from alcoholism and the other was a set of principles for ensuring the preservation of the group. So Luther took extra care in rolling up the signs that he might fit them into the cardboard tubes made for their protection. He was only doing the small part he had been doing week after week to ensure that he had a group to come back to the following week because deeper and deeper did the word *home* grow within him in relation to this gathering: the smell of

brewed coffee, the faces grown familiar, the feeling of tranquility that came over him as he sat at those back-to-back meetings.

It should have been a small thing that Ralph came over to him as he was dealing with the shades, but Luther noticed that as Ralph approached he had his right hand in his right pocket, thus seeking to augment his stature in his own mind for the encounter to come. Then did Ralph enter chuckling mode as a means of summoning a smile of *knowing superiority* to his face, as he could not meet Luther as an equal, having the need instead to triumph.

“You’d have an easier time of it if you rolled the signs from the bottom up,” Ralph said, putting his faux expertise all over Luther, as if he had divined that his smug counsel would send Luther back to childhood and those blocks he had been unable to pattern properly under the watchful gaze of the psychologist.

“You just go on into the night,” Luther said to this Ralph. “You just go on into it and let it swallow you whole.”

“Hey, why do you want to talk to me that way?” Ralph said, his chuckle mode all fucked up now and his hand coming out of his pocket.

But Luther left Ralph there, to arrive at his own answer to his query, and went himself with his own fury into the night.

Glanton was crying in the enclave that was his house. Glanton was dying in the enclave that was his house. He had no protection from this reality. He was out in the open. He had only the Lord, though he did not call him that.

Luther heard his mentor crying and dying. The sound of it came in over the wire. Glanton had been rejected for a grant. The stories he had submitted to the slicks had gotten tossed into the street. Glanton cried out to God that all the world had given him was being taken away. Luther did not want to see Glanton driven down this way. Luther's own failure gulch was not quite adequate for two. The issue of excessive intimacy could arise. At the same time it was good for him to witness the hard slaps the high if not the mighty could receive, Glanton saying once again that nobody feels sorry for a successful man.

Luther put out an all-points bulletin for the apprehension and eradication of his distress. He did not want to see Glanton stand naked before him with his wife and two young children, all of them shivering and hungry in the relentless cold and whipping wind.

Even as he thought these things, the cold was upon him in the loft as well. For steam heat he had need of the Cromartie Wonders building, but if there was any notion that the beast of ingratitude would leave him be, it is to be noted that this state of appreciation for a job that protected him from the elements did prevail for some minutes but his will had the louder voice and soon he was back to a state of anguish for being on the wheel of misfortune, dissipating the best energy of his days battling with hegemonistic Rafta and the ur-hegemonistic art director Grambling Vorst and all the women with long knives who would have been intent on relieving him of his testicles if they thought he had any.

And his family. What state of normalcy could anyone hope to achieve there? In

dreamland did he hear his mother sing “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina,” but he had become wary of the twisted logic of the nocturnal world. Should his mother be asked to summon the stoicism to place a twenty-five pound turkey in the oven and hours later remove it? She was going to cook and set the table and clean up, as she always did? He stood indicted for sloth, as should they all for permitting such an outrage. Again his mind took him back to those unbearable scenes as a child when he would witness her weeping and the horror of her legs unsheathed from those rubber stockings to reveal shockingly blue-veined flesh that made his stomach flip. Was it any wonder that her focus was on the afterlife, given her dismal circumstances in the hovel she was forced to live in?

But then he had to dig himself free of the cascading rubble of recovered memory. He had to say out loud to the air that her circumstances were partially of her own making so that he might visit the sorrow gulch but not be wedded to it forever. To effect this freedom, he had to recall that when he was racked with anxiety as a child desperate to leave bible camp so he might save her from all her travails, it was she who had sent him away in the first place. He needed this understanding so he might stand up straight and not be back in the fetal position.

*Celeste, we were called to our separate families that Thanksgiving, as it was every Thanksgiving and Christmas. I came with my bad teeth but not so much of the boniness that had afflicted me my whole life. Since putting down the drink I had gained twenty pounds, and more were on the way. But in my heart of hearts, I remained a hanging string, you can rest assured, because on the local to Grand Central and then the shuttle*

*and then the West Side express to Ninety-sixth Street where I caught the West Side local to One Hundred Tenth Street, Cathedral Parkway, I was forced to realize all over again that I was the same rat in the same maze, that no head hunters had called me to them nor the military nor anyone anywhere, the world having a view in of my lowness and related to me accordingly.*

*Now we must bear witness to who was present and who was not, as while the roll may eventually be called up yonder, it is here on the ground that we must be accounted for. So it is that I will say that Hannah was present in her black raincoat and in a state of full vigilance in regard to the respect due to her son. And Moses was there in his young glory, his flesh filling out his jeans so well and the white T-shirt he wore in spite of the chill in the air.*

*“My son is going forward with his life. He will be entering college next year, and there is nothing you will do to deprive him. Do you hear me?”*

*“I do,” I said, brought to righteousness by my sister’s sternness.*

*“The football scouts have their eye on him. They say he has the makings of a pro.”*

*“That’s right,” Moses said. “I move it downfield. I get the job done.”*

*In that moment, Celeste, he struck the heroic pose of a quarterback about to sling the pigskin.*

*And Vera was there, in her Ivy League glory, and her husband Maury, with his passive sweetness. And Rachel was there, but only so she could say “Bye” and be off to her conflict-free aloneness zone. But Luke and Rose were not there because they were*

*occupying their own space and Luke was not seeing the need to see our mother. Coldness had come over him regarding her, Celeste. I cannot explain it but it was there, in that year, 1981; a strong, cold wind was blowing him far, far apart from her. I am not a prophet in these matters. I was simply there as a witness to the decline. And in saying what I do, I must also say that my brother was becoming a stranger to me, having gained the power to occupy a space I could not. Why? Because there is no love like mother love. It is far reaching to the ends of the globe and beyond, into the farthest reaches that your mind can cast you, in this world and the next. And Luke had shed that love. And Naomi was there but not there because she was in the spirit world and had the clearance to come and go as she saw fit. As for her daughter Jeanne, of the sullen face, she was not there because her mind had taken her body where it was best that it not go, and now she was not free to leave, being in the power of manhandling love, the only love she knew—on the streets of San Francisco, on the streets of Denver, Colorado, where not even the snows could return her to the purity she dreamt of, and other points in the country where neon lights were reflected in the chill night-time venue of crumbling rain-slicked streets and men trafficked in women and had them do what they willed them to do with the broomstick handle authority their charges trembled before. And in this brokenness and departed-ness and outright gone-ness did Mother say the grace that all others there were too abashed to say, because she had no never mind for abashment, she was one with her God and on this earth to evangelize for Him, to say write your fancy books and go to the farthest reaches of the moon as a steppingstone to greater explorations. Sooner or later will you come back to Him. But she did not do the sentences that had no beginning and*

*no end, the endless roller coaster sentences of my father when he blessed our meals or of Pastor Cohn and the other pastors who slapped their guilt-edged Bibles so well and who could pull on the name Jesus like stretch-worthy taffy in their disappearing word assaults on the senses. Celeste, Mother had her feet on this earth. She knew the time it took to baste and cook the turkey and prepare the stuffing and all the rest. She understood how quickly food can grow cold and that words, disappearing or not, cannot be eaten. So soon after did we sit down and dig in.*

*Celeste, the love we have for our families is like no other, though some of us have received greater barriers to that love than others, but is there not the saying, “The greater the need, the greater the grace”? Why else do we say, almost as a mantra, “Teach me to love” and then, over time, expand that to “Teach me to forgive, to love, to serve”? Because without the gift of forgiveness, there can be no love, there can only be the holding action of grievance and hate. Now all of this was available to me only in a fledgling way. Whatever amends I had made, whatever change in me had taken place, let it be clear and entered into the record of life that I still dwelt in the land of the dinky-dimensioned. There was no cosmic consciousness enabling me to look down from high above with love and compassion. Did I need any more evidence than my judgments of Hannah and her son and the forced equanimity seeking to conceal my fear and pain over Vera’s locked-in ascendancy to show me that?*

No war crimes tribunal had yet been formed. In anticipation he did long for a device to

calibrate the movement of his tongue so that the sound it made would be forever in the key of gentility, rendering his words suitable for every occasion, even when ruffians with bruised knuckles showed up, this after having been given a sidelong sizzle glance from Rafta, causing him to strongly suspect that he was guilty of rank offense.

In this time Sarah seemed to be leaning away from him and he felt the effect of her absence. Though not entirely sure, he suspected Babs might be laying the groundwork for revolution. Luther was aware of tendencies worldwide. Had not a pistolero sprayed the president and his entourage with bullets, managing to seriously wound the president himself as well as three others? Had not Egyptian soldiers turned on their very own, Anwar Sadat, and sent him forthwith into eternity without a moment's chance to say goodbye? Had the reggae man, Bob Marley, not been driven from his native island by the shadow of the gunman that not even the tossing of his dreadlocks could dispel? The world was but a bubbling cauldron of insurrection, a witch's brew of supreme malice, and perhaps so it had ever been. All Luther knew was to put listening devices on all his borders for possible troop movements, but how did you guard against the one lone-wolf assassin?

Well, he had a collection of Chekhov short stories to read. The master. Such economy. And a physician to boot. How on earth did he see to the depth he did? And what on earth would he have written about Luther and Sarah, should they not be too pitiful subjects for his pen? But no subject was too pitiful for him and Sarah surely wouldn't be. Chekhov would have a profound understanding of her inability to adapt to the world, and how and why it drove her to want a wretch like Luther. He would focus on



that time Sarah had gone with grave doubt about Luther to her mother as to his worthiness. What manner of man he might be to be so conspicuously lacking in manliness? Chekhov would seize masterfully on Luther's own expressions of insecurity as forcing the question upon her. Had they had seen *Don't Look Back*, the D. A. Pennebaker documentary about Bob Dylan, there at the New Yorker movie theater, on Eighty-eighth Street and Broadway, Bob Dylan's genius compelling Sarah to scream at Luther afterward, "He's a genius, a genius, and you're not even intelligent. All you have is your sensitivity." Because Bob Dylan had destroyed her soul, as the genius artist Lane had destroyed her soul, and so she had to, in her pain, destroy Luther's as well. Because Bob Dylan had that power to make your world not all right, to make his world the only world and you couldn't have it.

So maybe it was in the context of her Bob Dylan distress that she had gone to her mother for one of their talks, which could only be had in times of crisis, when she had nowhere else to turn. And yes, more than likely it was in this talk that she put forward the question as to what manner of man Luther was (no, she did not have access to the hanging string notion of him; he had not come into her awareness quite as such). The point is that she made plain her growing disappointment with the inferior quality of Luther's goods that had led her sister Claire to place him in the same pod with their Estonian maid. Lydia had no long knife for Luther on that day. She did not seek to usher him from the bounty of America back into the scarcity of his immigrant family origins. She did not consign him to the building of death where he had been raised. She did not do that. Instead she raised up on Sarah's ego so it would bring her down to the ground. This

she did by presenting Sarah with a new understanding of Luther so Sarah could live with the idea and the reality of him but also of herself, saying to her daughter, “You must understand. The arrogant ones are the truly hopeless. It’s the ones who are insecure and doubt themselves who have the most possibilities for growth.” She would have the face of full earnestness as she spoke. So Chekhov would note, while at the same time subtly pointing to her pomposity idling in the background. Sarah took the words of comfort her mother had given her back to Luther, as it was him in whom she most placed her trust, betray her as he might because of the dictate that drove him to knock on doors to see if they would open and also the dictate he had been given to ensure that every inch of his life would be covered and none of it lost to that nimble thief time. This too would Chekhov present in his special, genius way.

*Now Celeste, Luke was not as gone from my mother as I have made him out to be. In that regard I have gotten ahead of myself, something those of us who place a premium on order must not do. And so I will reintroduce that order by saying that the next day he resurrected himself in her life with an appearance. How do I know? Because he called me with a subtext message that he was of ongoing importance in family life. Specifically, he said that my mother had turned over to him a number of family photos going back to the early days of Luke and Vera and me on the planet. It was here he unleashed an aerial attack targeting my inner defenses. He said he had received, in addition, a photo of Sarah and me. He said these things with pride in his voice that my mother had chosen him to be entrusted with the family heritage, such as it was.*

*I was upset enough with mon frère's absconding that I called the Glanton hotline. He did not put his chuckle on me but at his oracular best did hit me with spiritual esoterica, saying "Nothing real can be threatened, nothing unreal exists, herein lies the peace of God." Though he was throwing me a slender thread in a raging sea, I took hold of it, because Glanton, I had come to notice, could magnify his content with his sound, which not everyone can do. Silenced on the photo front, I next sought to quell the urge to carp about Babs's hegemony-driven interest in Sarah, as I did not want to be the instigator of internecine warfare and for Glanton possibly to banish me from his life. And wouldn't you know, Celeste, but I began repeating his little saying, "Nothing real can be threatened, nothing unreal exists, herein lies the peace of God," and the issue was apparently dissolved from my mind, though it was to return with sudden fury in the days that followed.*

*As for my mother, it became apparent that she was launched on a divestiture. She was handing over the unmanageable legacy of her life—boxes and boxes of unframed, undated photos to the care of a future drifter, her son Luke. She had cause to be entering relinquishing mode, what with eternity looming.*

*But before we hie on out of here, let us recommit ourselves to our pledge of honesty and full thoroughness and start by acknowledging my mother's sometime attention to order. Was there not a framed photograph of her and my father sitting on a grassy hill, my father in shirt and tie and his suit jacket removed, and my mother in a dress? Was that photo not hanging in the dining room? And was there not a photo of Vera and Luke and me, she in a dress and he in a blue sailor suit and I in a white one, also on*

*the dining room wall? And so who am I to say that order was forever banned from the premises of the Garatdjians? And am I to dare to stare at the mote in my mother's eye while ignoring the beam in my own? Let us bear down hard on this infraction of the spirit and reclaim the path of righteousness by acknowledging that I—yes, I, I, I—was amassing equal unmanageability in my life and right there in my closet, with boxes of my own unframed, undated photos while showing not an iota of willingness to put them in order.*

*Glanton, from his domicile, continues to be on fire with recovery. He says he wants to see me firing on all cylinders as well. I do not understand the workings of a car and never have, but I catch his drift. He wants me to be in the jet stream of God so I can circle the globe with celerity and impunity from humankind. I am all for that. Is not a proclivity of many to stick out their foot and trip the rusher and perform other acts farther along on the continuum from kindness to nefariousness, acts too diabolical for us to even touch on here lest we activate even further the fever of malignity that is an unending curse in the world until we say "I" and not "you" and mean it when a tale of wrongdoing or wrong thinking begs to be told. All right. Avanti. I hear you cracking the whip to spur advancement, Celeste. And it is good that you are in the domain of time so much fatuity can be excluded, like the woman at the meeting who said she pooped from the cloud of her own etherealness with no consequence for those below, when you and I know better. Simply because we are inexorably moving into the embrace of love does not mean we are immune to being discovered in flagrante delicto in matters involving personal decorum.*

*Celeste, the manly ilk are rolling up their sleeves to pound into me the he-manliness that I lack. They are not in favor of the excess that I am showing. Always with the woman. Always running to the woman. Always desperate to tell her this or that piece of his peculiar nothingness. How long must we tolerate his gibberish, his folderol? Has the time for smacking and whacking not come? Yes, yes, Celeste, such is the thinking of some, if not all, of the manly ilk. But we are not intimidated. We thrive in the face of opposition. We—we—for once put on the laughing thing, for it is high time that we reveal our self and break on past those who would stand in our way.*

*Now there is the rocket's red glare and bombs bursting in air and all that whoop de doo celebrating combustion of one kind or another, but we are here to acknowledge another phenomenon, one visible to no one but the recipient himself and the god who engendered it. It is no secret that lebensraum is the goal of every drunk, to roll back the borders of a world too greedy for encroachment on his or her person state so he may dwell uninterrupted in the amniotic fluid of a mother's love.*

*This I can give you, a chronology, beginning with the doubt and despair that came to afflict me as I was walking home one weekday evening. Call it a sense of panic setting in that I had hit a glass ceiling and that RoR was affording me no more room for growth when, for close to two years, it had appeared to provide me with the vastness of the universe. No, no, Celeste, this was internal distress at its most severe, with the looming threat of a final descent that would remove me from existence.*

*Back in the loft I called Glanton, who was waiting for me with oracular brevity,*

saying, after I had poured out my pain in incoherent babble, "It is time to go within." This is not a fiction, Celeste. It warrants the attention of all those seeking the still point and desperate enough to accept the pathway to finding it. Back in my Hell's Kitchen days, in my early twenties, I read a quote to the effect that anxiety is in direct proportion to one's separation from God. At that time anxiety was ruling my life, the main source being Sarah's connection to the genius who dominated her art school. My only answer had been alcohol. But now I was without whatever medicinal effect it could provide. Glanton gave me a simple breath exercise: to sit with my spine straight in a hard-backed chair, one hand resting gently in the other, and with my eyes closed to focus on my breath: breathing in, breathing out.

I will leave it to others to determine whether, in the moment of Glanton making his offering to me, he momentarily paused, that is, whether fear did not present a flashing red light that he nevertheless hurtled past. Nevertheless the hesitation that I heard lingers in my memory, though without the same prominence as the epiphany that I personally experienced. As I may have said before, where God comes, so too appears the darkness, saying, This you must not share, this you must hold onto. Have I not told you of the day I sat in a lunch hour recovery meeting and thought, as I looked about the room at the rows of other people gathered, No, I don't want this. Go away, and go away now, so I can be alone with God and have him all to myself? Even in recovery does the dream of our own specialness continue. And so we must be on guard against this spiritual pride, this spiritual selfishness, that would keep others in darkness while we bask in the light, as in reality there is no light without these others.

*I did as I was told, Celeste. I did as the desperate are called upon to do. Full faith and trust in Glanton had been established. Already was Dr. Rosner in my rear view mirror. Fairly or unfairly, I saw him as having a belief only in the workings of the finite mind. And so I sat at the table I had peed on in a drunken stupor and, with eyes closed, tried to bring the focus back to my breath when it strayed. I began to feel myself pulled inward, as if I were leaving my surroundings behind. The irritability faded and a sense of peace came over me. Don't just do something. Sit there. The RoR people had been right. Recovery truly was an inside job. Those bottles I had drained, those bars I had sought out, those women I had chased, those fantasies of personal greatness I had embraced, when all along the thing I had been looking for was there within me, as I had glimpsed sometime earlier in my recovery. And now I had the means by which to call on that power to change how I saw and felt and acted to provide me not with sight, which I already had, but with vision. A channel had indeed been cleared to the higher power, and now, with the channel cleared, I had the ability to draw on that power. Where I went, this power went as well. It was fundamental to my—our—nature.*

*Not that I understood all, or much, of that initially. What those five minutes gave me was a point of orientation, as that six-pack of beer I had shared with Jerry Jones-Nobleonian at age fourteen in Riverside Park had given me a point of orientation in regard to alcohol. The experience had given me the direction I needed to come back to myself. And so the habit pattern of daily meditation began to establish itself.*

*Then there came the Saturday morning when I felt the weight, the burden, of the list of things I had given myself to do on that day. Having gotten a late start, I thought I*

would forego the now ten-minute session I had come to rely on. The Bowery, at its best, seldom looked clean, but as I stepped out on that gray late fall morning, the ugliness called attention to itself. There was the human wreckage of an open-mouthed derelict lying about in the cold on a garbage-strewn street and the crappy vista of old and rundown buildings in a city that was losing the will to take care of itself. “The world looks so dirty to me when I am not drinking,” I remembered Lee Remick saying, in one of the last scenes of *The Days of Wine and Roses*, and now the world was looking so dirty to me without my God contact. I made my rounds that morning—the shoe repair shop, *The Strand Bookstore*, the supermarket—with increasing discomfort, as if I were walking about with a large pebble in my shoe. Glanton laughed when I told him. “Meditation is the only drink you’re going to get in sobriety.” He was saying I was as dry as kindling without it and quite likely to go up in flames. I needed no further convincing than my experience that morning.

Celeste, there were to be explosions of bliss radiating throughout my being in those early sitting sessions, as if God had rolled out the welcome mat and was expressing his joy at our reunion. Chambers deeper and deeper within myself seemed to open on this inward journey. And this bliss was not restricted to the time I allotted to meditating, but continued on through all the hours of my days and nights. For two weeks was I alight with love, even in my dreams. There is no time like the present for joy unbounded. This we must state firmly, but this we must also state, and with added firmness, even at the risk of the posse of the righteous storming at us en masse: enough is enough. Have I made myself clear? The host of golden daffodils must not be allowed to surround us all day and



*all night, lest we become dizzy and deranged, as those who wander the rooms of the Uffizi and the Galleria dell Accademia in Florence lay themselves open to the Stendhal effect by virtue of their gorging on art. We must not be gluttonous for God nor drunk on God. We must not wear the visionary apparel of the illuminati but remain circumspect in our bearing so the word sober can be justly applied. So if I ask is it reasonable for a person to plead for a reprieve from bliss, we can trust that the world will respond with compassionate understanding, assuming that it is in possession of its marbles. Just so did I cry out one evening feeling that I had been brought to my breaking point. After all, one can only tolerate the whiteness of the blinding light so long, as one can an endlessly replayed rendition of "I Shot the Sheriff" before begging for mercy.*

*Now Celeste, it is one thing to assume that angels come from above when we speak from the point of view of our three-dimensional world, but they are already on the ground as well, and there was one speaking at my Saturday night meeting in this time of my bliss affliction. I will not tell you that he had the air of the beatific, as one might assume befits an angel. No, no, he was more a candidate for the odiousness hall of fame than any place among the seraphim, as he had a smile of smug certainty all about his face and a quiff like a thinned out forest and small, foxlike eyes that testified to the slyness of his nature. I was predisposed to expect words infected with his sleazy disposition and to one side or the other of truth, like a bowling bowl curving to the left or right of the head pin. But his words, to my surprise, flew from his tongue like a bowling ball that has no dilly-dally or roundabout or curving crap about it but just a straight on down the line mentality as it even accelerates into the head pin that sends all the other*

*pins flying for a ten-strike. On a trip to California he had gone straight for Capistrano, desperate to see the return of the swallows and expecting to count them by the thousands, being an obsessive sort. What a crushing disappointment that their advent was not heralded by a sky starkly darkened by the massiveness of their migration. In a moment of existential angst, he fell to his knees—so strong was his love for these swallows he had never set eyes on but felt to be the very expression of his soul. As he sank deeper and deeper into despair, a word came to him. Foxfire. Nothing more. Tentatively and with grave offense, he called out, “This is what you send me, God? Foxfire?” as if in place of manna the vilest, smelliest turd had plopped to earth from on high. “Foxfire? Foxfire?” he went on, in his querying, fully wrathful state. Soon the question mark was gone and he was shouting the word as if it were an affirmation of his being. The rise from misery to ecstasy was sudden. He found himself in a white light blinding him to everything but its own insistent reality. “I was in a state of joy unbounded to have been so gifted,” he said, activating my pomposity meter. Surely malignancy was informing that smile. In spite of my identification, I found myself wondering if Mr. Foxfire breath could be the anti-Christ? I had no secret intelligence on this, only my own intuition. Nevertheless, when I was alone and staggering about on the street, I too heard myself call out “Foxfire. Foxfire,” and would you not know it, the channel quickly ceased and my kundalini bliss was over. Now what have you done? What have you done? You have forsaken your pipeline to the higher power. Radical inefficiencies of thought have led you to this disaster. This is what happens when you take instruction from a fox. You get the fire. Comprenez-vous? But the chastisement was not in order, Celeste. It was not in order. This*

*was not New York Telephone. My service was not being cut off because I had stiffed Ma Bell. Nor had I stiffed the higher power, spiritually speaking. The contact was intact, intact I tell you. The next day, and all the days that followed, HP was on the line when I took my seat with my spine straight and dialed him up. And if he wasn't there for the same oppressive duration, he was there in the time of my sitting. His door opened. I entered his chamber, and then his deeper chambers, seeing as I went that the chambers were my own as well as his and that the world without end was within me. China was within me. Global expansion was within me. Multitudes were within me. All manner of dross was within me seeking its own reprocessing in the light of new understanding. Whole and complete was I rendered. In those times all self-pity was dissolved and I recognized the gifts I had received and could rejoice in my own abundance. Hanging string, gone. Man of low intelligence, gone. Squarehead, Boxhead, gone, gone. Him who has nothing and never will, gone. A chili dog and Philly cheese steak feast awaited me on each occasion. Now Celeste, it was to be different as time went on. God was too busy to be on the line every single day, giving me my dose of bliss, as if I were a spiritual addict craving his daily fix. Go on, get out of here before I break your bones in many different places. Love my people and in loving them you will love yourself. Let me here call on honesty as my guide. He didn't say exactly that. He would not break my bones but the world would if I failed to understand that the getting was in the giving. And so there was to come a time when I was no longer led into those recessed chambers, or so it seemed initially. At some point I began to understand that this was not so, that if I sat for a period and felt none of the old bliss, perhaps it was that I had simply become used to this elevated state of being.*

*Perhaps the miraculous had come to seem routine. And even if that was not the case, and I was truly blocked from what I had previously received, my job was still to seek, and how was one to seek without sitting? Celeste, we must rise up on our notions of what should and should not be. We must rise up on them that the truth may present itself, and what is that truth in this instance but to stay the course?*

*And to the dead, whether in life or in death, I would say only this: your time is not my time. You do not have it pushing and prodding you and causing you to fret. You have no tick-tock clocks you race against, no midnight hours that cause you to sweat. But that is not so with me. My learning curve is slow, as dullness occupies my bones and my brain. I went away from the breath that I had briefly found as a moaning teenager, as I had nothing but that slight experience to fragilely tether me to it. And so, for many years, the world had me and I had the world and no relief was to be had except for the comfort I could find in the bottle. But no more. No more.*

Glanton was not through with Luther. He dispatched him to the bookstore to purchase *Journey of Awakening*, a primer on meditation by Mr. Ram Dass. He had been born Richard Alpert to a powerful father who was a lawyer and businessman but he could not live in the world as his father did. He shunned suits such as his father wore and went about in the robes of the East and sought to have a mind of the East as well, a mind that would not occupy itself with imperious thoughts but acquiesce to peace and the four noble truths and all of that under the yew tree stuff. Luther sensed that he had run up against mentalities with the configuration of Richard Alpert before, men born in

opposition to their fathers and in need of shedding any identification they might have with them. Surely he had run to the other end of the earth to acquire the name Ram Dass, and though Luther might harbor a dark suspicion regarding the rationale for such a switcheroo, he was not about to get combustible over it. What he did go to Glanton with was why Glanton had told him to seek out a book by Rom Doss when his name was Ram Dass, because the one was an inflated sound worthy of the British and the other called for a pronunciation flat as a board. But Glanton was firm with Luther. He told him to go to God with his lunacy before commencing with his chuckling.

“The world is full of oysters. Oysters, I tell you, but where are the pearls?” Luther heard himself shout after getting off the phone.

When it got into substance, *Journey of Awakening* delivered the goods. An oyster with a perfect pearl. You could focus on your breath sitting. You could focus on your breath walking about or lying down. You could have your breath all day all the time.

But Glanton was not finished with his instruction.

“There is a meditation center called Abhayamudra. Go to it. Run to it. It has answers for you.”

The center was on Twentieth Street, off Second Avenue, and occupied an entire floor. A young man who called himself Dharma was assigned to Luther as a meditation instructor. Like Richard Alpert, he was a Westerner affecting the ways of a holy man from the East; at the same time he did not mean his adopted name or his white tunic of purity to conceal the reality that he was Max Bricknerhauf from the gritty streets of Brownsville, Brooklyn.

“This is your meditation cushion,” Dharma said, handing Luther a thin pad. “Everything comes up through the seat. You must keep it clean. If there is a spot, remove it promptly with a wet rag and a mild solution. You do not want dirt to impede the transmission.”

“No, I will practice maximum vigilance. My fight with dirt is ongoing,” Luther said, wishing to assert his mettle and his dedication.

Dharma had Luther sit on the cushion and made some adjustments so his shoulders were set straight, but it was love of a certain kind in vain.

“I cannot hold my position. The activity of my spine is too great. It is calling out for a chair,” Luther said.

Dharma offered no resistance. “That can be arranged.” He left the room and returned promptly with a straight-back chair.

“My spine is happy and I am happy, too,” Luther said. “By the way, I have seen the big Buddhas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I have kept my eye on them so their towering mass does not topple and crush me dead. Some are not as benign as they may appear. Malignancy is always waiting in the wings. The other thing I have noticed is that many of these Buddhas are porcine in the extreme, seemingly born with the feedbag on. Abstemiousness is clearly not their thing. A bunch of chow down Louies, if ever there were such. Thus, they might have collapsed even the sturdiest of chairs with their preposterous weight. It is possible that the tradition of sitting on the floor or a mat or a cushion was born of this necessity, the awareness having arrived that only the earth itself was capable of holding them.”

Dharma showed no apparent interest in engaging with Luther's prattle. Luther assumed he was at the focus stage of his life, meditation having stripped him of the need for verbosity, if ever it had been part of his nature. Luther had his doubts that it had been. Dharma looked to him like one who had been born wrapped in the silence.

"I am in God and God is in me," Luther said, after his first sitting at the center, giving Dharma the thumbs up. Dharma's response was a non-response. That was all right. It really was. Words were perhaps not necessary, even futile, for what they were passing through. A thought stream came to him: The age of amigos is over. But he went up against that thought stream with his heart as well as his mind. The link to humanity must not be broken. He must not hie himself away on the solitary road again.

*Now Celeste, this matter of meditation needs no cogitation from the likes of me. Still, my mind, or the host of feelings that pass for my mind, are calling on me to go back, far back, to the St. George Hotel, that flagship property in Brooklyn Heights, which I certainly have mentioned before. Maybe time serves to filter out the dross, with the understanding that all is ultimately dross for filtering out and that only love, content-less love, remains and endures. Gone the liner notes, gone the vinyl records and their smell as well when you remove them from their thick brown paper jackets. But while these memories remain, we are free to allow them to bend us to their will and take us back to what some would allege never was.*

*Once again, Celeste, I remember the high board and my lips turning blue and goosebumps covering my flesh in the cold chlorinated water, compelling me to climb out*

*of the pool and run for the mist-filled steam bath and the old men with breasts and droopy shorts. There I would sit among them on the soaked wooden benches resolved to absorb the steam heat and never leave, but then my skin would begin to wrinkle and itch and I would find myself driven from the bath by the heat as I had been driven from the pool by the coldness of the water. And was not meditation to become my refuge from a cold, cold world, a refuge in which I could experience a foretaste of eternity by floating in its amniotic fluid.*

As a child, when he left the steam bath he was done with the water for the night. The memory of uncontrollable shivering deterred him from going back in. But as an adult (the repugnance of that premature word) he had to go back to the world and relentless Kaplan Acedit, grabbing for this, grabbing for that. And where was Luther's kundalini holiness, his still center rapture, his incarnate divinity, then? Did not Kaplan Acedit again expose his hanging stringiness and make it conspicuous to one and all? Did not Kaplan Acedit leave him crumpled and forsaken on the floor?

He tried to keep himself erect in the world, to have his amour propre intact and at the ready so he could filter his words through its protective screen and be a playing it close to the vest Louie. But his words broke on through, as if he were powerless over the workings of his own mouth. Unable to speak intelligently about Kaplan Acedit's work, he began to talk about his own, saying that he had taken his young adult novel off the shelf and was trying to make progress with it.

“And Cromartie Wonders will publish your masterpiece?” Kaplan Acedit inquired.



Luther heard where Kaplan Acedit was coming from with his rancid words. He smelled the scorn, that of course no-talent and no-brains Luther would trade on his relationship with his employer to get his own book published while having played a part in getting Kaplan Acedit's books banned. So Luther said no, it had not occurred to him to submit his novel to Cromartie Wonders, and even if he did, he would have no inside track. But after Kaplan Acedit was gone from his face, he still was not gone from his mind, causing Luther to reach for the Scotch tape so he could add a bit here and a bit there to his desk and then to again stand in the bathroom stall with his forehead pressed against the tiles. For once more Kaplan Acedit had proved that he had Luther's number and that even when the number was not quite right, he would call it out loud and clear for all to hear because he was working on a resentment, having made Luther more than he was and less than he was.

And yet, once again, there was Glanton to pull Luther up on the battlefield of life and, with exhortation as his purpose, to say, with no trace of castigation in his voice, "Do not cast your pearls before swine," seeking to put the clothes back on that Luther had shed in letting Kaplan Acedit into his dream.

But this too should be included in Luther's book of life, that not a scrap be wasted, with this proviso: that not a scrap be wasted *that he was conscious of*, if even in its most blurry form. Her name was Arida Tanne, and she drew cartoons, simple line drawings, that spoke for themselves. Arida Tanne had a sympathetic accord with Luther that, like her drawings, needed no words. For an hour could they be in the silence together. It was as

difficult to say why such an affinity should exist as it was that instinctual antagonism should prevail with the likes of Kaplan Acedit. A kibbutz-centered Israeli for many years, she had battled the Arabs when they raised up on her native land. Her hair was black as oil, her skin desert-darkened. The roots of her holiness were there in her stark visage.

In this time Luther encountered, in the lunch hour recovery meeting near his place of work, a man named Dagwood sharing his experience, strength, and hope in front of the fireless fireplace in the basement suite of the brownstone where the meeting took place. The room smelled of food and the speaker had to compete with the cacophony of noises made by the munchers and crunchers and slurpers and gobblers and all those who, for reasons hostile or otherwise, masticated on the loud side. Then there were those who picked their teeth with their fingers or cleaned their teeth with a slow and vicious sucking sound Luther, for some reason, could never catch them in the act of. And, of course, there were the belchers and gas passers operating as well with impunity in the semidarkness.

Even so was it a place of genuine spiritual healing. It was here that vision replaced dreams and those who had fallen were gifted with sight and the voice that is great within us became large in their consciousness.

Dagwood's hair was parted down the middle, but unlike the cartoon character he did not present himself as a model of affable fecklessness. He acknowledged that he was a lewdness-driven stalker, with a compulsion to lick women in their private as well as public parts. He was praying for help with his obsession, but the help had not yet arrived.

Still, he had to hope that his lust might also be seen as like a tree of life, growing and developing as it could. “Don’t anyone try to climb my tree. You’ll be shot if you do,” Dagwood warned.

When it came to a show of hands, Morning Glow, a regular, shared. “How about we just shake your tree? You going to shoot us for that? Or suppose we just lean up against your tree? You going to big gun us for that, too?”

Dagwood, guided by a spirit of tolerance, let the woman speculate and ruminate. He said he was going to put on his aviator’s wings and fly on by the hypothetical.

It being December, Luther called upon himself to provide a greater line of defense against the growing cold than he had summoned in years past. He would get thermal protection from the arctic winds sure to blow, and for this he went to Hudson’s army-navy store on Thirteenth Street and Third Avenue and in the clutter found a pair of long johns that would do him up right, and had the foresight to buy a backup pair so that when one was receiving the cleansing action of the washer the other would be taking up its position on his person for righteous battle with the elements. And no one needed to know. Like the tape, it could be his secret.

On the way he passed the men’s porno palace theater, but he did not have to be driven there anymore by the blindness of lust. He did not have that sudden desperation, that sudden urge. He could just walk on by.

Now being aware of hatefulness in many of its guises, it came quickly to his attention

that Grambling Vorst was putting yet another power move on him. He had come to her office with the jacket mechanical for *Bunny and Her Bonbons* only to find the art director on the line in a maximum way, her conversation so seamless that she could not so much cup the receiver and say “Leave it on my desk” or “I will get back to you.” She had him in her power and now she had to fully negate his presence. “Just put that proposal in writing and I will be sure to review it. Be sure to send it to my attention... Yes, editing is a function I have an increasingly active role in. The change is needed. We are trying to consolidate by going with our best talent... Definitely hard to change an institution set in its ways... Right. Always.”

Because the conversation seemed only to be gaining momentum, he placed the mechanical on the chair and left and had a sit-down with himself in the bathroom stall.

Some hours later, as he stood waiting for the elevator, Grambling Vorst appeared.

“Did you want to say something to me?”

But before he could answer, Peter Ben-Gurion, the Pilgore president, arrived in his silk-suited raiment of power, and turned her to him as a flower to the sun.

“I’ve been hearing good things,” Peter Ben-Gurion said, in the intimate confines of the elevator.

“I’m trying. There’s a lot to overcome, but I’ll get there,” said Grambling Vorster.

“Overcome?” Peter Ben-Gurion spoke from haughtiness heights, where he so conspicuously lived, his cultivated voice seizing on all three syllables and giving them the emphasis they deserved.

“The challenge is to push past the inertia and challenge the old ways of thinking.”

“Well, keep me in the loop. I mean that.”

“Definitely,” she said, showing him the deference she would show no other. A woman with foul and oily waters, and a face puffed up with plotting.

The two were intense upon one another. They had the right stuff going on for this to be so in the company context. Luther sought to arrange an expression of amiable acceptance that they might not see a speck of the grave displeasure that he was feeling. All my life must I masquerade among the powerful rather than let my tongue hang out and indulge in riotous laughter. So he thought with fingers crossed, that they might not hear what he was thinking.

I need a change of scene from what the street provides, he also thought, and followed the downward slant of Madison Avenue one block south to Thirty-fourth Street, where he took refuge in the refinement of B. Altman and Co. He walked the wood floors, he grew dizzy at the smell of perfume and imagined the swish of the nylons on display on dazzling women’s shapely legs. Of handbags and gloves and jewelry and neckwear he had his eye fill as he headed onto Fifth Avenue and turned south again so that he could once again go and get filled up at the McDonald’s on the next block. He had himself a Big Mac. He had himself an order of fries. He came to his table with two packets of ketchup and two packets of salt, that he might have enough of the sodium and sugar that he craved, and he ate in his aloneness with the buzz of lunch hour life all around him and with a sense of safety and assurance that he was in a place of brand name quality, as he had been when Chock Full O’Nuts reigned supreme and in the time of Prexie’s, the hamburger with the college education. Many, many were the times that he rearranged his

face in the course of his meal that Grambling Vorst and Peter Ben-Gurion, who walked and talked so big, would not see how low they had sunk him on the grid of life and that he might have time to ascend in his mind as well as his face before reappearing to them and their ilk.

Now if sobriety was rearranging him, there was still the past to tell him who he had been, that he had not always been Mr. Hanging String or all the rest, that there had been times that alcohol had led him to do the laughing thing on others. That week the Donnell Library called him to it for a children's books reading, but he arrived only to learn the event had been canceled. While browsing the shelves, he ran into a woman from his City College days. She was a bit thicker in face and body, but it was her, Carrie Zimkowsky, more a friend of Efram Ellsberg and scale master Zach Zeckler, but one with whom he might have an affable two-minute conversation in Finley Cafeteria before going on his way. A woman, who, in spite of her attractiveness, had the power to neutralize his sexuality. She was an elementary school teacher now, having taken the requisite number of education credits for a license. How practical she had been in doing so, he could only think, and expressed his admiration. He said Efram Ellsberg had flown the big bird to San Francisco so he might be with his true love and that scale master Zach Zeckler had put down the scale and powered up and into medical school so he could rise to the level of his ability in the respectable world. As for him, he said he was making a living by being involved with words, and that anything beyond that might indeed be beyond him, if she knew what he meant. She said she didn't, having it in her heart and mind to go another

way than where he had been directing the conversation. And so she did, altering his course but in truth only aligning himself with his own truth, because in fact his words had been at variance with the direction his own mind and heart had been going. He had been swimming against the current of his own morality and drowning in the effort. She, saying to him, so as to bring it all back home, "You did something to me." Just those five words to ring his bell so that he might alter course. And he had been preparing all along, time-traveling back to an apartment on Riverside Drive in the dangerous Washington Heights of the 1970s and Sonia, whom he had met at one of Marge's writing groups. At Sonia's apartment one night they were smoking grass and drinking when the doorbell rang and there stood Carrie, who lived down the hall from Sonia. Luther was stoned and drunk and his coupling with Sonia put him on top of the world. Carrie, on the other hand, in her aloneness stood. And so, from his tentative place of confidence and strength, he taunted her, where previously modesty and restraint had been the norm in their interactions. And so, there in the Donnell Library, he was feeling the extreme discomfort over the barrier that his injury to her had caused.

*Now Celeste, in the moment I lacked the courage to fess up to Carrie Zimkowsky the exact nature of my wrongdoing, that I had taken liberties in my manner toward her. And so, I took myself away with my awkwardness showing, saying, "I will take your face with me. You can be sure of that." She, guided by the righteousness in her genes, and with her amour propre blazing, said, before I could leave, "You will take away more than that. Here is my number for when your memory is jogged, not that it isn't already." And with that we went away from each other. Celeste, we must think with God. That is a*

*truism. When we are thinking with fear, we are not thinking at all. In the state of contraction had I been as memory served to take me back to that earlier time even as Carrie Zimkowsky was meeting me there in her own mind. But the higher power had time to work on me and in me and through me in the succeeding days, to raise me up out of my posture of cowering dinkiness, that I might go further forward into my freedom from the surround-sound past and live more fully in the ever-expanding now.*

*An emphatic greeting awaited me when I dialed her number. "Sheila Zimkowsky here."*

*"And Luther Garatdjian here," I said, but could find no basis for dawdling in feeble levity. Nor did she, from the silence that she held.*

*And so I got down to it, saying what I couldn't on first encounter. She did not interrupt my word flow. She let it run its course.*

*"Thank you. I'm glad you're getting the help you need," she said, when I told her of the recovery process I was in, a process she would never have need of, as she was a right course woman all on her own.*

Now Glanton was seeking to inform Luther of the need to apply rigor to matters of the mouth.

"Say what you mean and mean what you say, and use no words that are not needed."

Even as Glanton spoke the words *radical effrontery* flashed in neon in Luther's consciousness, but Luther kept them where they could not be seen so Glanton did not



raise up on him with mockery.. The word “effrontery” in particular not the sort of sissified word that Glanton would associate with, as even in his shriveled state he retained at his core an American masculinity.

Now Glanton also emphasized the need to put each word not only to the true or false test but also to apply the assessments “healing” or “hurtful,” including to oneself. Should Luther say “I am hopeless” or “I am nothing but a pile of donkey dung” or “A hanging string was I born and a hanging string will I die,” he was making these states of being a reality in his own mind. He had effectively convinced himself of his all-around poverty.

“Words create their own reality. They have that power,” Glanton said.

Luther heard Glanton to be instructing him to be perspicacious, to assign guards to the portal that was his mouth, to impose rigorous standards for security clearance.

But a body will be a braying fool at times. It will rise up and spray the world with its folderol. So it was, at the winter sales conference, that when Jean Noble, Carousel children’s book editor with sometime bitterness on her breath, expressed an interest in hearing the adult books presentations, Luther let soreness be his guide in deriding the quality of some of the adult trade editors, leading Jean Noble to look askance at him. He had tried to pull down his betters and in so doing had exposed his smallness, and she had noticed, as he had noticed on those occasions when the smallness thing had been activated in her. And so, to the shame corner did he go, having attacked himself with his own words. Because no man in the place where he stood should cast aspersions on those who boldly stood in the world he hid from, those with the substance of their thick necks

and broad shoulders and bulging brows and power-packed privates. It was for him to accept that he was in the world of their understanding, not his own, and to position himself properly so absolute clarity would prevail and all would know that he was a man who could stay in the place that he had been assigned.

*Now Celeste, with Christmas coming, I thought to finally secure a ring for Sarah so she might know that we were one and all those who set eyes on that ring would also know. But nothing can come of nothing, as the saying goes. There was no heart for this endeavor, only the thought, and so it died where it had arisen. Sarah and I were lost to the world of man and wife. It was a world to which we could not even genuinely aspire. We needed to stay where we belonged, in the harbor of our childhood. There could be no dangerous crossings on the open seas.*

*In this time, we had a mayor, as you well remember, who did the preening thing, with his “How am I doing?” line backed by a self-satisfied smile, provoking the attention if not always the love of Gotham. Some monitoring of his words and actions had commenced, not because of his cocky, feisty manner, but because of an interview in which he confessed to having an average IQ but being smart enough to hire others with IQs of 170 and above. So the world could hurl stones at him all day long for being a crowing rooster but he was a man in the rightness zone with himself whatever vilification might be mounted against him, because he had the humility to reveal to the world what was, for me, the most shameful secret one could imagine, to be consigned from birth to live in the land of*

*the stupid. Celeste, he was saying he didn't know how to put the blocks together either. He was saying just that, and to the whole world. There he was, alongside his smiling braggadocio, revealing his intellectual lowness with aplomb and not defaulting into the land of self-castigation, the land of the hanging strings. He and I are bonded for life, I could only say to myself, after reading the interview.*

But on this particular day, there was no bond. There was only fractiousness leading to holy war, for Ed Koch was threatening his very existence on the island where Luther had been born to live and die.

“He is in the pocket of the real estate industry. He is seeking a gated community. All those with low earning power will have to leave. ‘Get out and get out now,’ he is saying, in his smiling Ed Koch way.” Because Luther had just read another piece on Ed Koch in which he shared his vision for the city. And now he was sharing his ire with Janet Proux, the department secretary, who did not let his fulmination interfere with her lunch.

“I eat with my mouth and listen with my ears,” she said, when he queried her as to the level of her attention, before resuming her devouring of a big, gloppy egg salad sandwich. As always, she had a whole operation going, bringing her big teeth into action while retracting her lips so as to keep them grease-free and avoiding the necessity of a wiping action to ensure they did not glisten for everyone to see. Because it did not matter whether it was December 1981 or wherever they were in time—appearances mattered.

But fear and trembling came to Luther as a result of his judgment sound, as Janet Proux was not the only one with ears to hear. Had it not occurred to him that Rafta

Blackning might be listening in from behind her closed office door and that she might have a different take on Gotham's mayor? If, in fact, the Koch man was seeking to cast the city's poor into the city's rivers and be done with the garbage before him, the stinking wretched mass of them, so cleanliness could have its day on the streets and in the parks and in all aspects of the city's being, Rafta Blackning would not be among the riffraff horde, not with the torquing power of her mind and her prescience in having done the deal. *What deal, Celeste? She dug down deep and claimed her Manhattan apartment for her own. She had the figures at hand to make her an owner, not a renter, so she could stay there forevermore. No more was she flinging money to the wind. She had equity now, equity being her word, a word I had known the meaning of but not enough to apply it to a real estate transaction.*

*Celeste, here was my fear in living color. Rafta Blackning, her listening devices intact, would consider my attack on the mayor an attack on her and judge my envy to be without a bottom or a top. She would also assume that I was assigning her the same heart of stone as I had the mayor and the real estate industry I had accused him of having sold out to in holding forth to Janet Proux. Because deep down I had been infected with my mother's fear. The face of the real estate industry, to me, was Mr. Slicked-Back Hair, Mr. Him Who Wears the Full-Length Leather Coats, Mr. Him Whose Voice Travels a Thousand Miles, Mr. I Can Have You Out in the Street Like This, the memory holding of my mother snapping her fingers to convey the speed with which he could eject our family from the apartment where we lived, leaving us to wander the city with our bundled possessions in the pouring rain. There can be no mercy where none exists, not in the men*

*with the hearts of stone, like Simon "Oil Can Harry" Weill, with the chop of mustache and big teeth and "foxed you" eyes. All of this must be understood, Celeste. All of it, so we can throw ourselves to the floor and call on the divinity within to perform the spiritual alchemy of transforming fear to love. This we must do with the understanding that minds join and bodies separate, that one mind can infiltrate and influence another through prayer. I will not tell you that this was my understanding at the time, Celeste. I will not do that. The rain of fear had to fall for many months and years, soaking me and chilling me deep into my bones and most private places, before this awareness came. I did not see that, in attacking Rafta Blackning with my loud sound, I had attacked myself, cast myself deeper into the pit of fear.*

*Now something else in the passing of days is this, Celeste. A sound, of my own manufacture, not from any radio or stereo, came to my ears, that being the song "Take Me Home, Country Road," and if I am not careful, it could take me over for the rest of my days. That would not be right, would it, to be stuck with John Denver and his sentimental offering in perpetuity when I have never been and never will be, in all likelihood, in the Mountain State. It is a state I will forever associate, as I have said before, with Jerry "Zeke from Cabin Creek" West, number 44 and All-American guard for the West Virginia Mountaineers.*

*We need to be faithful to our roots, wherever they are, so we are not blown about like papers in a windstorm. That may be why Glanton intuited he should call and encourage me to return to the meditation center. However, I do have to say that*

*dubiousness accompanied me as I entered Abhayamudra and did not go away when Dharma, my meditation instructor, kept fussing with my posture as I sat as straight as I could in a chair. We must remind ourselves, Celeste, that God does not come to us through technique but through willingness to receive him or grace or call it what you will. Someday the big brains may create a God algorithm, but that means is lacking in the here and now. The world continues to remember Martin Luther for his ninety-five theses, a protest against the sale of indulgences, which he posted on the doors of the churches in Wittenberg, Germany, but remembers him more for the schism those theses were a catalyst for; the tossing out of all the pomp and finery and hierarchy that stood between God and man and woman and child. We cannot buy God. We cannot dress for God. And it is not true that we can only draw God to us if our spine is at a perfect right angle to the floor. And so, once more, I bid adieu to Dharma and Abhayamudra, because God is present in an open field as much as within the walls of a church or temple or mosque, and so I ran from that center and into the streets of New York City, and where I went, God was, as he is for all of us, if only we would know it. Because as we affixed the nozzle of free-flowing alcohol to our mouths, so must we be free to breathe in God if we are to be sustained in this new, this second life. When I reported back to Glanton that I could not be to regimentation bound, he did not rain down fire on me but quietly acknowledged that he, like me, had his own way of doing things. Not once in this exchange was a chuckle to be heard, I should note, for this record I am committed to keeping.*

*Now, Celeste, Babs was continuing with her healing operation on Sarah's mind, that God*

*might have a clearer channel, but she lacked understanding of the undercurrents she was working against, undercurrents that kept Sarah in the dark place for long periods of time, and into which the light of reason, let alone of God, would not shine. Babs had taken to heart that God could and would if he were sought eradicate all manner of mental suffering, as had Glanton, who avoided the term “mental illness” in the conviction that all such affliction was spiritual in nature. He had direct experience with such a classification, having been consigned to a mental hospital with the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. The fact of his stay in such a facility was part of his story, which he shared when leading meetings, but my sense was that, unless I wished temerity to be my guide and to be rewarded with his rage, it was best to avoid the subject with him one to one. Because there were sensitive areas you did not probe him about without a reason. What struck me was that he had the necessities for a vision based on his moral nature. He let compassion shine where others were locked into the nomenclature of binding and demeaning diagnosis and the warehousing of allegedly afflicted souls in hellhole institutions such as where my sister Naomi and Glanton had landed. He was one with God and God was one with him, this God who, to Glanton’s understanding, had all power. But I was not Glanton and I was not Babs. I had the hope but not the faith that Babs, through God, could heal Sarah of the distortions her mind was prone to.*

Cinque was long since gone from the earth after his appropriation of Patty Hearst, but she remained, though not as the alluring figure she had been when in the rough care of the Symbionese Liberation Army. How long ago that seemed now, the terrifying jolt to the

established order of things that a woman of her pedigree could be abducted in a home invasion and ultimately appear to aid and abet her captors. Now here she was being interviewed by overly earnest Barbara Walters on national television. For Luther, the magnetic power was gone. She was older, and married. But for Sarah, the emotional charge was still there. How dare people vilify a woman who had been abducted, raped and in other ways physically and mentally abused. The world kept turning. The specialness of Patty Hearst. The specialness of Bill Walton. Only as she and he had been were they still fully alive for Luther.

Now a man who had intelligence in his face and in his words said, while leading a meeting, "If you want a parking space, get there early and God will see that you get one." He was setting members of the group straight with his facetiousness because some had been known to testify to demonstrations of God's grace with accounts of parking opportunities for their vehicles even in gridlocked parts of the city. The speaker wanted them to understand that God's real work was not as a parking attendant for their cars. He also wanted them to know that for some years in recovery, he had thought God would take care of his drinking problem and that he, Parker Joe Billy, would take care of the rest, thank you very much. But he had come to see that he had to turn his will and all facets of his life over to the care of God. And so he had. Now, in America as well as many other nations of the world, was recognition of his gifts being noted. God may not have given him a parking space, but he had seen fit to usher him into the big-time of life. Luther had the impulse to raise his hand and offer words of his own, terse words behind



whose esoteric origins he might hide. “White Line, Continue,” he just might have a mind to say, to put a dent in Parker Joe Billy’s countenance of confidence and self-satisfaction. Already his mind was working on ways he might out-spiritual the three name wonder. That seemed a lot easier than loving him for his gifts. Because nobody, in that venue, had a right to rise above him. Nobody.

*Now Celeste, Young Love was present, center front, for Parker Joe Billy’s lead. Pixie-cut blond hair, big blue eyes, long lashes, jeans shrink-wrapped around her long thin legs. And yet, for all her feminine assets, androgynous. Young Love with no love to give beyond all-consuming young love given with the prayer that she might continue into eternity the sun burning through the gray clouds that sought to darken Parker Joe Billy’s world. Two mutually shining stars, shining for each other and each other alone. Her need for him in all seasons established on her fretful, anxious face, sorrow lines revealing how long were the days and endless the nights when she was without him on those occasions the larger world called and called to him. Celeste, he was everything with the books he wrote and glowing reviews and prestigious awards he received and she was his abiding relief from the tensions of the world he had to move and live in.*

Luther knew a hanging string when he saw one, no matter the goods she was packing, and she did too. The mutual recognition caused her to flinch at the very sight of him. She did not need a mirror standing in her way, no mirror of credential-lacking nonentity-ness. None of the riches or the pedigrees of the world could Luther display.

Luther went away from that meeting with jaundiced eye and heart. Driven by need, Luther got himself to the St. Mark’s Bookstore, where he found a small shelf of

books written by Parker Joe Billy and in reading one of his poems was led to wear the apparel of his mind as if it were his own, so under the spell of his imaginative power was he before his ejection into the cold of longing and envy of the skill that PJB displayed on the page and the consummate woman-child he had claimed for his own. Saying, I have been in the place of debased misery before, where all my bones are showing for all the world to see. I have felt the wrath of this infection before, in sunlight and in darkness. Luther had no choice but to enter the private place and fall to his knees and rail at God for his all-bones-all-the-time nature and the ball and chain of envy he had been secured to since the beginning of his time and for not being fashioned like the man of substance and depth PBJ so clearly was.

*Sometimes, Celeste, and maybe often, we forget who we are, and allow our minds to drive us down to the depths of nothingness. That is why we need a surround-sound God telling us all day and night, every hour on the hour, who we really are if only we would know it. There can be no doubt that we are stingy with God. We apportion only a part of our minds to him. The rest we reserve for ourselves. But it is a fool's fractioning. Where does such mindless division get us? Where, Celeste, where, but into the sinkhole of depression and beaten there by the stick of comparison. This we do in pursuing a world that doesn't exist except in our sick minds. We must elevate beyond this cloud of opacity into the bliss zone of oneness.*

*Always, Celeste, always, is the new repeating itself with the brazen effrontery to claim*

*first-time status for that which has been circling the block for eons.*

Roller Carmona-Hickson's father, who was her everything, fell down dying but didn't die. To the hospital was he gotten just in time for life-saving devices and medications to do their thing. Into the valley of deep emotion was Roller plunged. Out of work she stayed so she could be by his side. As for Luther, he had the scornful thing going in his mind, the thing that said, So? So? He fell down dying but he didn't die, did he? My father fell down dying and he did die. Did I do the weeping, wailing thing? Did I put my life on hold for what had transpired? Did I call for a national day of mourning when my sister Naomi was found dead in the East River? Or did I seek to hover above death, so long as it was not my own, and put the laughing thing on all of it, saying, Let dirt be thrown on the bunch of them, that chaos be perished from the earth and order reign once again? Murderer. Psychopath. Sadist. Such names did Luther hear, in the voice of Dr. Dressler, back at the Karen Horney clinic. His callousness was on full display, to himself, at least, and he had nowhere to hide from it.

But the RoR people had said he could act as if, that is, he could act his way into right thinking, and so he looked at the sympathy and get well soon cards. Put off by the mawkish sentiments in the cards, he wrote a note of his own, simply saying, "Thinking of you in this difficult time." Because he was thinking of her, if not in the way one might expect. And in writing it, he felt a softening. Everyone, including Roller, deserved a father. He saw, not for the first time, that he was punishing her in his thoughts because she was in the image of his oldest sister, Hannah, she who held her hands high that they

might more quickly move into smacking position. He saw that malice aforethought in the minds of others was not cause for the very same posture in him. He saw and felt in that moment that he must walk erect upon the earth even if that perception was soon lost in a tsunami of more peevish tendencies.

Luther was no longer monitoring the movements of his brother, Luke, who came and went like the wind, as their mother would say. Luke had his list as to what he needed from the world and nada of what he needed from God or what God needed from him. He had no RoR meetings in his life, no sobriety in his life. But he did have a farm he had just bought in Canada for himself and Rose and the two boys. He was looking for a situation, an environment, where his life could be at hand and tethered to a purpose, but he was ignoring his primary purpose, which was to stay sober and help other drunks do the same. Luther did not flare up at Luke or suggest that his brother was living in the realm of improbability. He just said they had RoR meetings in Canada, too, though he might have to drive some distance to get to them. It was understood by now that he was little more than a nuisance in his brother's life.

“What meetings?”

“The don't drink meetings.”

“Oh, man. When are you going to retire that stuff? Don't do this. Don't do that.

All that cautious bullshit just because you're afraid to live life. Why do you always have to stick your foot out and try to trip me when I am on the runway preparing for takeoff?”

*Celeste, I didn't respond. I let it be a rhetorical question instead of saying,*

*“Maybe because your aircraft isn’t flight-worthy and will surely crash and burn.” I had to go with the reality that I had no power to save Luke, that in RoR there were those who got sober and their brothers and sisters and even their dogs got sober as part of a long lineage of sobriety to draw on and didn’t know what chaos was, whereas there were others who could not turn to an older sibling or a parent for support without them falling over and who had need of their own reason just to survive. It was for the former to play the cutesy-pie thing by being adorable little screw-ups realizing they had stable, wealthy parents or stable older siblings in the wings ready to bail them out with lifelines all around. For the Garatdjians, the hopeless helpless Garatdjians, there was nothing zilch nada; once down, they stayed down.*

Luther’s mother was on the line the following day, inquiring after her number one son. Luther was not withholding. He gave her what he knew, saying Luke had gone north of the border to work the land.

“What English is this you speak? Work what land?”

“He is going to start a new life as Mr. Green Jeans.”

“What ails you that you speak this way, my son?”

“Mother, he is planning to be a farmer.”

“A farmer, did you say?”

“That is what he said.”

“Does the boy not understand what farming is, that it is work like no other that will break the spirit of a lazybones in less than a day? You are up before dawn and in bed before dark. Is the boy wedded only to his own foolishness?”

Luther did for his mother what he had done for his brother, allowing the question to enter the contemplative peace of silence. But it was not right that it should be raining in his mother's life all day, all the time, and he did not know what to do with his sorrow for her but to live with it.

The rooms of recovery said it was about progress, not perfection, and that his measuring stick should be where he was now in comparison with where he was when he first came to RoR. He time-traveled a short distance to 1979, that long year in which he struggled and failed to get traction on sobriety. Luther remembered the fear, the complete incomprehension he felt watching Bruce Bill deliver a presentation in front of the sales force and his soft, soothing voice when all Luther wanted to do was hide under the table as day after day he lived with the overwhelming sense of his own inadequacy.

But he was not of that kind at the winter sales conference in 1981. He spoke with confidence and conviction of the books in his care, and even with humor, sufficient that he won the attention and the approval of the gathered. Not for the first time did he see that his strength drew in part from the relative timorousness of Rafta Blackning. As she stood before the gathered, her stage fright was evident in her quivering voice and rigid, rushed reading of her script. Honesty came calling and compelled him to admit that he had some histrionics going on, his extemporaneous delivery inviting comparison with the fact that Rafta could barely lift her eyes from her text. Even as his sense of elation swelled to an impossible level, he struggled to come down, realizing the shallow, even fatuous basis for his joy. He wasn't an actor. He wasn't an entertainer. He wasn't there to

put on a show but to advocate with solid information the sales force could use in their dealings with booksellers. Rafta may have been rattled, but her message was lucid and clear and useful. Luther's narcissistic flag could flap all day long, but it was clear, at least in his mind, that he was at the service of himself, whereas she was at the service of the books.

Neither flying high nor dwelling in the lower depths was where he wanted to be. Nix on over-elation and nix on depression. There was a middle zone he needed to get back to, and he hoped his breath would take him there.

Now reports were coming in of unrest in Poland that the Soviets might be provoked to crush and crush and crush some more with their low-slung, dark green tanks in the same way that they were seeking to crush and crush and crush some more the opposition to their will by the people of Afghanistan. But in Afghanistan the Soviets were being punched hard in the face, were they not? Coming in brave and jaunty and all that and leaving with broken body parts, if they got to leave at all. Maybe not all uprisings would end like the Hungarian Revolution or the Prague Spring. Now it was the Poles daring their puppet government to shoot them in the head and chest and back, daring it to call in the Soviets to come with their tanks and break their bones. Fear came to Luther again. Was it wisdom, as his mother would say, for the few to raise their voices to the mighty, who had stealth and guile and armed might, a fist of steel to pulverize those who had made it to get up, as his father had been made to get up in days of old?

Luther's sober birthday was in February, but already there in December was he thinking ahead to celebrating at his Saturday meeting so he could have the adulation of the group for sharing his narrative of who he had been before the drinking came and when it came and after it had left. In so doing would he shine brighter than the brightest star and all hearts and minds would belong to him and love would be a balm he could luxuriate in forever.

One day in this time he ran into a man named Rodechenko, whom he knew to be the chairperson of the Saturday meeting, and thus the person responsible for getting the speakers. So he thought to let Rodechenko know that his sober birthday was coming soon in the expectation that Rodechenko would give him a date right then and there to do his shining, but it was possible that Rodechenko was seeing him with his third eye and hearing him with his third ear, that he was seeing and hearing self-aggrandizement in the statement of fact that Luther had presented him with, and dared to say to Luther, with unctuousness as his guide, that the sober life was lived one day at a time and that it was important for Luther to return his sick but suffering self to the now. And Rodechenko got all audibly expansive with Luther as he spoke the word *now*, ballooning it to a size bigger than his very big head. And so Luther was made to feel as small as Rodechenko's fussed about word had been made big, Rodechenko having responded to Luther's intention and not the fact of his words as they had been strung together.

But it was not too long before Luther rallied strong. He was given to see that Rodechenko had hit him with a truth bomb in reminding him that RoR was about attraction, not promotion, and that RoR members should apply that principle to their own



comportment in the RoR rooms. And yet another understanding was needed for awareness to reign within him. His father entered his consciousness, not with his smacking hand held high, not with the terror-inducing menace of “Will you make me get up?” Not a hint of his father’s righteous wrath was on the scene in his mind. He was simply now remembering the men who lived for the Christ Jesus and their garage and the folding chairs they set out on the cement floor so they could testify to this miracle in their lives, and remembered too the folly train his father had boarded in leaving the church on Thirty-third Street where Pastor Cohn had preached his disappearing words but would not permit Luther’s father to speak his own to the congregation. And so he came to Astoria and the garage with the folding chairs. There he found the Christ Jesus men in their work boots and jeans and flannel shirts while he wore a Robert Hall suit of elegance (Robert Hall this season will show you the reason) and the wide tie that secured him to himself so that while he was of the Christ Jesus he could also be included in the world and not be apart from all its glitter. Remembering now not so much how his father was more a guest than one of them or how his father wept shortly after beginning his sermon but more that he had been driven there by the need to have a venue where he could utter his own disappearing words.

So once again was Luther finding the tie that bound him to his father. Didn’t he want to rain down ire on Rodechenko for depriving him of an opportunity to speak his words at the anniversary meeting in a couple of months? Did he not have the same self-importance as his father to assume that his words were so worthy of being heard over and above those of others? But then he did a hold on, wait, wait. Sure, he had witnessed his

father's tears, which had so mortified him as a child, but even more, he had heard the words that preceded them. *My dear precious wife*. Had they been tears of guilt, of remorse, for having been a rolling stone?

The ties that bind, Luther. The ties that bind.

Jane Thayer was not so far away that she could not find Luther, calling to him not from the place of love that they had known back when but with a request that he do for her father what she could not, that is, elevate him out of the unknown zone where he had lived his life so he could pass away and still be remembered for what he had left.

“Dad has written a children's book, *Hunky Dory*. It's in a comic book format. He has been working on it in his spare time for much of his life,” Jane Thayer said, from the Los Angeles office where she worked as a legal secretary while trying to catch a break as a singer in the mold of Linda Ronstadt, whom she liked because of the get up and go in her voice. Luther did not want to see Mr. Thayer. He did not want the gray face of death in front of him. He did not want the weight of Mr. Thayer's sadness and expectation upon him. Mr. Thayer belonged to an America that was no more. He belonged to the cobblestone street that ran past his tenement on One Hundred Twenty-Second Street, just west of Amsterdam Avenue. He belonged to the teenage love Luther had felt for his daughter. He belonged to the little Simca he had driven and the Hotel Commodore, on Forty-second Street, where he had worked as a printer. Luther did not want to be opening the vault of time to let Mr. Thayer into his life again. It did not feel in the normal course of things that Mr. Thayer should see him in his new incarnation.

“Sure. I guess I could do that,” Luther said, as if someone other than himself were speaking.

“That’s just great,” Jane Thayer said. “I have to believe this is Providence working in Dad’s life, you being in children’s books and he being a writer of children’s books.”

He never called Jane Thayer or wrote to her. There had been that one time, late in 1975, the day that he cried and cried without knowing why, that he picked up the phone in the Chinatown loft and reached out to her. But with that exception, it was she who sought him out in letters and with greeting cards and occasional phone calls, sufficient that she knew the circumstances of his life—where he lived and his marriage to Sarah and his place of work. Was she bored? Was she lonely? Had she not been able to find someone to fill her life since him? He had gotten used to the episodic contact, he supposed. She had moved on so quickly from him, with no grieving the end of their four-year relationship. Was that the difference? By comparison, it had taken him well over a year to heal. That whole freshman year in college, living in room 2C3, and trying to be good for Jane Thayer, waiting for her even as he knew, in spite of the pain, that she had done for him what he couldn’t do. She had left home, left Manhattan, left the United States, for Mexico City, and in so doing, had left him.

“I’ll be there, Old Sport. This is the break I have been looking for, a chink in the wall of malevolence erected to keep me in place. All it takes is one decent young man to turn the tide of evil and neglect we have to put up with in this world. Am I right, or am I right?”

That word *right*. It locked in place in Luther's mind. Mr. Thayer wanted to be right and Luther wanted to *do* right, taking his moral instruction from jukebox Aretha Franklin with her do right, woman, do right man sound. And doing right meant honoring those who came into his path, especially those like Mr. Thayer, whose peace of mind he had disturbed in those days of calling and calling his daughter so things could be all right and more than all right between them, and calling her even more when things manifestly weren't.

"You have given me a whole lot to think on, Mr. Thayer."

"Do that, Old Sport. Do that. Get your cogitation wheels going."

He was there at Cromartie Wonders the next morning. Not that Luther initially recognized the man who approached his office with a big, black portfolio, such as artists carry. There was no hair, gray or otherwise, with locks falling over his forehead. He was completely bald.

"Hair today, gone tomorrow," Mr. Thayer said, seeing Luther's uncontrollable fixation on his shiny scalp, and did some further observing of his own. "Say, is this your closet or your office?"

"It's my office," Luther said, taken aback.

"I'm a little disappointed. That's all, Old Sport. I thought your life would be a little more than this. A bare desk says a lot, you know. You get no points for neatness in the work world."

"No, I suppose not," Luther said, surrendering, if only temporarily, to the reality of having been found out.

Mr. Thayer was now displaying a look of shrewd appraisal.

“You’re a little nuts, aren’t you, in your quiet, repressed way?”

“How do you mean?”

“You sit in a tiny office all day with nothing to do. That’s what I mean.”

“Did you come here to make fun of me?”

“I’m just joshing you, Old Sport, that’s all. You can take a little ribbing in exchange for a masterpiece, can’t you?”

“I can’t say what I can and can’t take, but I guess I’ll find out if I spend any more time with you,” Luther said.

Mr. Thayer let out with a hoo-ha of laughter and even slapped his thigh.

“By God, that’s good, Old Sport. So damn good.” First Mr. Thayer channeled Gatsby, with his “Old Sport” stuff. Then there he was channeling the Fat Man, Sidney Greenstreet, in *The Maltese Falcon*, with extravagant laughter that brought tears to his eyes. It had also brought Rafta Blackning to the door of Luther’s office. The puffiness in her cheeks put Luther on notice that smack and whack might be coming for turning the staid office into a heehaw zone.

“Is everything all right here?”

“Mr. Thayer has walked out of the past to visit with me. He is my high school girlfriend’s father and he has brought the work of his heart to us for our approval.”

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Thayer,” Rafta said, but Luther sensed that what she said was not what she felt from the smile of forced geniality she showed.

“I hear Englishness in your voice, milady.”

“A Scot in fact,” she said, her laconism a warning that he was like a clumsy, affable pooch about to get raked by the cat with the arched back.

“You Brits with your distinctions. We Americans have a thing or two to show you about simplicity.”

“So I am seeing,” Rafta replied.

“The afterlife is calling to me, if you must know, and so the word *posterity* is large in my mind. We do have our legacy to consider, each of us. I was hoping Old Sport could help, but I see from his desk that he has something less than a robust function here at the company, so maybe you would be so kind as to, ahem, peruse the work.”

“Luther is a very important member of the department, and it is only admirable that he keeps a clean desk. You can be assured that we will review your work with great care. So nice to have met you.”

“And you as well, milady,” Mr. Thayer replied, as Rafta turned to leave.

Weariness now showed in his face, suggesting elements of attunement with her were seeping into his consciousness. “So, Old Sport, have I made a mess of things for you?”

“You are who you are, Mr. Thayer.”

“And you are who you are, Old Sport,” Mr. Thayer said.

“We’ll be in touch,” Luther said.

“I imagine you will.” Mr. Thayer sighed and walked off toward the elevators. He looked old and sad and frightened, like a man whose dream was over.

*Now Celeste, it is not an easy matter to accommodate the past into the present. I am, of course, speaking of Mr. Thayer, a sad jokester of a man who had either lacked the time or the inclination to examine his own life and how he was fitting himself into it and in its place offered nervous prattle. This is a judgment, of course, and perhaps a savage one, as we have no idea how he comported himself mentally by day and by night. He was raised in the Midwest, where it is a sign of bad manners to live in the spaces of the glum and despairing. His unspoken credo, and that of his ilk, was to put on a happy face, and is that not the song of America as well? Even the Rail Splitter himself lived for humor, did he not, and could crack wise with the best of them. But Celeste, we must remember that Mr. Thayer was inching toward eternity—did he not say so himself—and a sadness song of sorts had to be playing in counterpoint to “Put on a Happy Face” and “When You’re Smiling” and all of that to turn him toward the lugubrious. I don’t present this as a fact but as a thought leading to further surmise and speculation. Can it be a cheerful thing to contemplate leaving nothing behind but faded garments testifying to your total obscurity? We must find our harbor in the hearts of others. We must come out of our hiding places and unto others so that entrance can be made.*

*You would think that was the end, that battered and bruised, he would return to his home never to contact me again, especially after I followed up on our meeting with a note that we had reviewed his portfolio with interest but that the illustrations were not quite the right fit for our particular market—there was no story, merely comic book style balloons of odd and random dialogue. And yet, evidently, the puncturing of his dream was not enough. There was, abiding beneath the grandiosity, the human factor. There was*

*me, cipher or not, to draw him further forward into my life.*

*One Saturday afternoon he called from a phone booth. I could hear the noise of the street as he asked if he and his wife could visit. They were, he said, only a block away, in fact. Sullivan County, New York, is not quite a stone's throw from the Bowery, so some forethought likely had been given to this request. What was I to say? And so, within five minutes they were mounting the stairs to our second floor loft. Mrs. Thayer was still the thin woman I remembered, but her long black hair had turned gray and had been cut stylishly short. Dark glasses dominated her face, not for a movie star image, as I was to learn, but to protect her eyes. She was by now legally blind. The memory of a different set of stairs, at the rear of the tenement where they had lived, came to me, and of Mrs. Thayer approaching those stairs at the foot of which Jane Thayer and I stood necking. In the crook of her arm she held a brown bag. A bottle was the sole purchase in that bag. She had held out for as long as she could that day. Evening meant drinking time, that brown bag saying everything I needed to know, even as a teenager, speaking as it did to her loneliness, her wound.*

*Celeste I know what it means to say time is moving on, time is of the essence, etc., but people must be given their due, as must the circumstances in which they were situated. Is it possible that a gravitational force pulled Mr. Thayer toward me? Is it too much to suppose that he too was caught up in the romance of high school as lived vicariously through his daughter and me, and that, because he had broken Jane Thayer apart from me after my confession to her grandmother (she who said "God made the small town and the devil made the big city," she of the carrot juice she drank by the quart,*



*she with the radio dial tuned to droning Long John Nebel) that her granddaughter and I had gone all the way and continued to go all the way because once we had been there, it was the zone we had to go back to over and over, bringing pain and remorse to my brain, my heart, and all locations that I could not relieve. Did he now feel it was his obligation to put us back together, as if Mexico City, where Jane Thayer stayed with his brother and his brother's family had never happened, as if her blithe letters sprinkled with the names of boys she knew but wouldn't come out and say she was hooked up with had never happened, or that when she returned to New York briefly and took up with a neighborhood boy and invited me to witness her romance at a party she was throwing never happened?*

*Celeste, I would have had no reason to believe that was his game plan except that he had words for Sarah, words she didn't deserve and had done nothing to draw forth. Saying "Are you pregnant? You're looking very pregnant. Second trimester? Third trimester?" Because the pills had added weight to who she was and took away from who she was in so doing, took away her self-confidence, which she had never had in great measure.*

*"Why do you speak as you do, words sharp as scalpels flying from your mouth?" I was compelled to say.*

*"It's a fair question, Hon," Mrs. Thayer said, in her dulcet voice.*

*"I must be mad," he replied.*

*They were not long in their visit, Celeste. They had their own apparatuses for seeing and not seeing. They stayed only long enough to see the pain of time past and to*

*be convinced they were better off in time present as it was passing through and all around them.*

Though there was no pressure, neither by command or subtle directive, that Luther reward Glanton for gifting him with his wisdom, he placed his mentor and Babs at the top of his Christmas shopping list, along with Sarah and his mother, so he would not be entered in the record book as having done any of them wrong. He must ensure that Glanton understood that he was full-time in Luther's heart and mind in the holiday season if Luther did not wish to be flogged for ingratitude. Nor could Luther risk Babs turning her darkness fully against him, should she see that he had remembered Glanton but not her. And so, he and Sarah purchased a wall clock and a steam iron for them, and then Luther had to live with the fear that he had committed an impertinence in supplying them with household items, as if suggesting that he was making up for their lack. He did not fully understand that he was the gift, that no beating would be bestowed on him should he remember Glanton with a card and nothing more.

Now there was other stuff as well, flashes of illumination that appeared in the sky.

Rafta and Janet Proux, the department secretary with the retractable lips, were minding their own business at the Glass Kitten, where a lunch for Cromartie Wonders staff was taking place. Hearing Janet speak of pleasant memories related to the grade school she had attended, Luther could hardly wait for her to finish before saying that he had been expelled from an Episcopal grade school. The whole story, in a rushed voice, he

told, of tossing the rolls of toilet paper out the second floor window of the boys' bathroom at the nuns walking double file below. He had needed, in that moment, to match Janet's blandness with his own rowdiness. Once again he had opted for notoriety if he could not have fame. Rafta and Janet looked at him as if they had a miscreant in their midst.

"What a horrible story," Janet said.

"Indeed. Quite unfortunate and regrettable," Rafta affirmed, before seeking to climb uphill. "But you did pull yourself together thereafter, did you not?"

Here Luther could have cried, as it was so abundantly clear that, whatever the deficiencies stemming from her nervous disposition, Rafta was wedded to the path of success and affirming of a key element, decorum, which included respect for others and responsibility for one's words and actions, however short she might fall. He somewhat saw, in that moment, that she was instructing him as to the bounds of the acceptable.

*Celeste, we are on the path. Many are our teachers, sending up illuminating flares even as they stare at us with expressions of concern and doubt. Let us rejoice that this is so. Let us simply rejoice.*

Now there were some who had pomposity in their minds and in their hearts and etched in their faces who could not be permitted to walk the earth in such a manner, and one was Tom Trent, who went about with his nose in the air because he was All-American in his first and last name and had the round skull and gray hair of distinction and the relaxed manner of speaking, as if it were for him to appropriate all the time he needed, the

conviction being his that everyone in his midst hung on his every word. A slight smile of satisfaction he would display when he said something he considered witty or profound. Luther's sensors further ascertained that he had love for no man but himself, and put Tom Trent on notice that he was deserving of dismissal from the earth in how he looked and thought of him.

And there were other defectives who merited the corrective measure of Luther's glare and dismissive cast of mind. One, in particular, sought to exercise his authority and superiority over him. This one must go nameless, for as the assassin he sought to be, the cloak of anonymity he did not shed, even insofar as his first name. Failing to content himself with manifesting his pomposity, he had to inflict his noxious noise, as if Luther was not an independent nation but a vassal in the anonymous one's smug state. The odious one leaning into Luther with impunity and daring to correct him as to how he should go about sharing his experience, strength, and hope, *such as it was* (that last being the impudent one's phrase), leaving Luther no choice but to step back and make a cross of his arms that the vampire who had braved the daylight to drink his blood might now be driven from his sight.

*Celeste, studies have shown that anger is transferable, that the loud rumbling of discontent we seemingly reserve for one party in particular may, on closer examination, have a wider, even universal application, and that our real rage, with the puny armies we can muster, is at God for standing between us and supremacy. Drunks brook no interference with their imperious will. For this reason, we must not live in our own*

*smugness and should perhaps ban the term “spiritual progress” altogether, as such is the depth of the emotional turmoil that we must bring to light and the power of the castigation machine that assigns blame to all but our own person, long, long after we have mouthed the word “forgiveness” and sought to adopt it as a foundation principle for our lives. Why do I speak this way? Because it was in this time that I lashed out at my long gone father, referring to him as an “impostor of a man.” That I should speak of the man who, with my mother, was responsible for giving me life. We must not wear the garments of hate. It tears at our very skin, Celeste. And then to scald Glanton in the alleged privacy of my mind, to take umbrage when I came to the meeting bearing the gift of the clock and the steam iron and received in return a mammoth freight-train-long chuckle that filled his eyes with mirthful tears before he could stabilize and say, “Don’t let me forget them. That would be a rank insult.” The sense that he was wiping his feet on me, that he felt he could say whatever he wanted, was inflaming, on top of the large phone bills I could ill afford for all those long-distance calls to his home outside the city. So I had no choice but to savage him in my thoughts, lacking the understanding that he might have been feeling bad, even ashamed, to be accepting household gifts from the likes of me and lacked the means to reciprocate. Even so, his words and manner were objectionable, and offered a strong reminder that we must be wary of wandering onto the pomposity path ourselves, lest it give us the airs of All-American Tom Trent and all those who walk on the balls of their feet and one hand in their front pocket, essential but not exclusive clues to the nature and condition of the mind within.*

*And then there was more, Celeste. More bile. I railed at our savior’s birth, as it is*

*represented in our contemporary world. Consumerism is our new religion, and B. Altman is our true house of worship. I looked at the small gifts I was heavy laden with for the folks at Cromartie Wonders and was seized with an impulse to throw them into the street. I saw further in that moment my cravenness, my need to buy myself safe from attack, and that my rage at Glanton was really envy that he could be free of the seasonal malady that infected me.*

*Now, Celeste, our AWACS must be in the air at all times in full reconnoitering mode, as our blind spot is not only in regard to Christmas but can occur in any season of the year. Divine light must be shone to expose this dangerous darkness so it can be dispelled and banished from our midst, lest we forever be like the needle stuck in the worn groove of those records of old. And was I not just that in regard to Roller Carmona Hickson, so reflexively intent on driving her down, down for the audacity to be the office incarnation of my sister Hannah? Not only did I point out to Rafta that Roller was taking an excessive number of bereavement days following the death of her father but that on the days she showed up she was making mistakes.*

*“Is that so?” Rafta replied, placing my words in a suspect file and giving me no further receipt. In the silence that followed did she put the mirror before my face, showing me the treachery of my own mind that I could forget that Kaplan Acredit had been besmirching me for my own lackluster performance. And so there was nothing for me but to live in the pain my verbal incontinence had wrought, to feel it spread and occupy every cell of my being, and be driven by it to the bathroom stall with my forehead pressed to the tiles, to do the scotch tape thing in more secret places, to configure my*

*fingers that they might touch in strange but unnoticeable ways to the casual eye, and arrange my feet at odd angles equally unlikely to be noticed by the shame posse surrounding me, and pray to God that he might take me to better things.*

Now all manner of bombing runs were in progress in this time. A man with “Anonymous” stenciled on his broad forehead said, at a meeting of the sober drunks, “You radiate sensitivity,” causing Luther to turn red and be rendered speechless at this occupation of his being. And then there was Sarah giving him hard slap when he wandered, in tone and content, into the land of the pompous. Sarah saying, “Holding a job doesn’t qualify you for martyrdom,” because when pomposity did not afflict him, self-righteousness and self-pity did. And he did not yet fully grasp that he lacked the tools to perform the operation for their removal. He did not comprehend that he had elsewhere he must turn.

Then Katie Darl, the art director before Frieda Volcker, came calling. She was now Katie Darl Fowler, having married Chuck Fowler, of Texas, USA, so love could have a home in her and in him, though Luther couldn’t help but feel it was mostly so love could find its way in him. Her normalcy, the pull in her toward the manly men in the romance department and the stringent requirements they must meet for her to share her gifts with them, made Luther uneasy, as he understood that he was not on the right side of her ledger, but the tired flesh her face was showing made him uneasy too—call it sad—that a new and expanding truth was blossoming in her being that she was not quite ready for, and that would move her out of the Fowler province in which she was now dwelling,

because the state of Texas had geographical vastness on its side but aspects of a constricting consciousness she would need to shed. All this Luther understood as she stood with the two-year-old in her arms who was the product of her newfound union. She had come to show that the light of love could manifest in newborn flesh and blood as well as art, that she was a woman as well as a writer/illustrator of children's books. All that Katie Darl Fowler said that day on her brief visit Luther heard and received in a state of abashment, Katie Darl Fowler saying,

“I'm glad they finally did right by you with an office where you can hide yourself away when you need to and shelter from the harsher elements of the day.”

She had said the same thing to him on a previous visit because there was no other gift of recognition she could offer. She herself was in need of a man in his fullness, not his deficiency, to partner with for wholeness to be achieved. Still in her voice and manner was the suggestion that Rafta was not quite a do-right woman in her attitude and manner toward men. Rafta's dispatching with Bruce Bill had not been forgotten.

Love was at work in the Rooms of Recovery, saying that he was wanted and trusted. He was asked to chair the lunch hour meeting Forget About It, near his place of work. That meant he would get a speaker once a week for the meeting. Inclusion was everything. Through the one window in the basement of the brownstone could be seen the lower half of passersby on the sidewalk, most of them unaware that there below street level new resources for living were being found as drunks were untethered from the bottle and out of the darkness the bottle had led them into.



*Now Celeste, there is a song from my youth about how breaking up is so very hard to do. The singer, Neil Sedaka, was world famous at the time, and he sent shivers up and down my spine when he sang his song, which kept me in bondage for its duration. It was not like a Brahms lullaby. It roiled me rather than soothed me. Now, years later, it came back to me through an adaptation filter as "Showing Up Is Hard to Do." The sound of joy and pathos combined were still on the song, but the name change gave it a moral force. The higher power will use anything and anyone, including Neil Sedaka, born in Brooklyn, New York) to instruct and guide, and here he was, all these years later, challenging me as to my worth, as there was a party being held at Fujimora, a Japanese restaurant in the East Fifties, and I was in a do I dare, vacillating state of mind. Let it be said that this was in a time of greatness for Pilgore Press, Peter Ben-Gurion and Ellen Gruen and all those who could break bones and do the deal leading the company upward with movie tie-ins as well as bestsellers. New niches were being found every day to expand the gravy train, and is that not the genius of America that such miracles were ongoing? But the fear was on me, Celeste, enough that I began to hear another song from that time, "I'm Just a Lonely Boy," by the very great Paul Anka, who, like Neil Sedaka, was riding the vowel sound of his surname straight into immortality. And I heard Lesley Gore chime in, too, with "It's My Party" and how she would cry if she wanted to, and even though it was not my party and I was not Lesley Gore and it was not the early nineteen-sixties, the time had come for music to fill my head and facilitate the direction I was heading. But I rallied strong, Celeste, I did, with a prosaic but powerful mantra of*

*the program: "Suit up and show up." And though I was not wearing the glad rags of the powerful, like Peter Ben-Gurion, neither was I wearing the rags of sadness. Indeed, my bones were covered by the quality duds of B. Altman, in combination with the very great Barney's, of Seventeenth Street and Seventh Avenue. And so was vanquished, sent on its deceiving way, all elements of self-pity and ruinous self-image that would sequester me from life, as my mind had grown accustomed to believing it could so easily do. The light was beginning to enter now. Darkness could not have its way with my mind forevermore. It could visit but it could not stay. The light would manifest to disperse it back into its nothingness.*

*Now the party was what you might expect, the brave or the drunk or both doing the to and fro and side to side and the swivel hips and the finger snap and twirl thing; there were indeed some showing their back before once again giving you their face, but I did not fall under the spell of the loud sound, even with Donna Summer doing her "Bad Girl" number, as I had no lubricant capable of breaking me free of the giant mockery-filled eye looking on.*

*But I did have a newcomer to Pilgore Children's Books on fire with ire, to fill my ear with recrimination that her gifts were not being properly recognized or utilized by Florence Mith, the director, and in hearing her, could also hear, with some abashment, my own song of grievance against Rafta Blackning, my true holiday gift to take away after my hour there had passed.*

These were the gathered at the Garatdjian family dinner on Christmas Day: There were

Luther's niece Jeanne, daughter of Luther's deceased sister Naomi; there were Hannah and her son Moses, strapping in his jeans and T-shirt, his mother taking pride in his trim athletic figure and his scholarship status at SUNY Buffalo; there were Vera and her husband Maury, in the full and confident glory of their PhD status; there were Luke and Rose and her two boys, Jimmy and Joey; and there were Luther and Sarah.

But Rachel was not there. She stayed in her room on a floor high above where they sat, so she could remain inviolate from the pain she would otherwise experience. It was Jesus's day. That was all she needed to know. What better day, or night, for him to return than on this day? And she knew just where to look. He would not be coming through any door. Jesus wouldn't walk that way anymore. No, no. Jesus would fly down from that portion of the sky reserved for Heaven and enter through her window. But for that to happen she had to be single-minded in her purpose, meaning the banishment of adulterated interests. No books but the Bible. No TV. No radio. Just the silence in which to listen for his sound. And her window had to be open, despite the cold December air. It wouldn't do to have Jesus arrive in a shower of glass.

"Why is no one helping your mother? Why are we sitting back while she does all the work?" So it was for Rose to ask in the rapid fire way she had of speaking since the shooting. And then that brief laugh as punctuation. Then "I guess I shouldn't speak. I guess I should know my place. Right? A person should always know his place. Her place. Right?" Seeking confirmation because she had to backpedal from the place of certainty she could visit but not occupy, her sense of herself gone missing. "We need to be respectful in each other's homes. That's what homes are for, right?" More laughter.

“That’s what I was taught. Or something like that.” Seeking safety in words from the words she had first spoken so attack would not be imminent.

But too late, too late. There was ire now in Hannah’s face and its smoldering smell, seeking conflagration where none had been.

“You need to think before you speak, not as you are speaking,” Hannah said.

“You think?” Rose replied, and followed with another laugh burst. “Luke told me about you. He said you’re the fire woman. Is that true? Are you the fire woman? Do you mind my asking? The truth has to be found out. It shouldn’t be buried beneath fear and the threat of wrath. You know what I mean, Jelly Bean? Sorry, sorry. A little out of control here.” More laughter.

“I won’t be disrespected in my own home. I won’t be disrespected in front of my son.”

“Hey, Rose, maybe cool it a little,” Luke said, amused but also apprehensive.

“I’m doing the best I can. That’s all we can do, right?” More laughter. “I didn’t know this was your home. I thought it was your mother’s home. We should always respect mothers, don’t you think? Not that you aren’t a mother, too, Hannah. And me, too. I guess that means we should respect each other.”

“Rose, please,” Luke pleaded, while trying to hold his own laughter in check.

“OK. I’ll be good. You did warn me what can happen if she blows her stack. Don’t blow your stack. OK, Hannah? You’re very sensitive. Luke told me that. That’s a good thing, being sensitive. Right?”

“Man, Luke, you’ve got to rein your wife in. You can’t be giving her the green

light to motor mouth my mom with huge portions of disrespect. This is our home now. You're our guests. That's all you are."

"That's all we are?" Luke asked.

"You heard my son. Don't be disrespecting him either." So Hannah spoke.

"What is this I am hearing?" Mrs. Garatdjian said, on a return trip from the kitchen.

"It's nothing, Grandma. It's just some rude talk my mom and I are putting a stop to so we can have the peace the family needs."

"Ushtah. This we cannot have. Not on Christmas. Not on any day," Mrs. Garatdjian said.

"No. We cannot have this. Ushtah is the right word, if you're asking me. Not that you are. But tell me, Mrs. Garatdjian. Don't you want a little help? Don't you need a little help? All of us talking here in the living room doesn't put food on the table and food is what we're here for, isn't it? I think so, but what do I know, right? I just want to see you respected. That's all. Respect is an action, right? Talk is not respect. Talk is just talk. Respect is putting the food on the table. Am I repeating myself? I'll shut up now." So Rose spoke.

"You don't get to tell me what to do. I get to tell me what to do. Are you hearing me?" Hannah roared, from her place of growing soreness.

Rose cupped her ears. "Could you speak up, please? Just joking." Laughter. More laughter.

"This is so insulting. Mother, kick them out. Just kick them out."

“You’re right. I shouldn’t interfere. I’ve been bad. But I wasn’t insulting you. Really, I wasn’t. Luke says he used to call you ‘The Load.’ Did you know that? That’s not something I would ever say.” So Rose also said.

*Celeste, on this day Rose did present herself as an archangel of righteousness, seeking to correct in one sitting a defect that had had a long life and was systemic throughout the family. But the forces of repression rallied strong. Hannah’s currents ran silent and ran deep and were antithetical to the light, given the shame she carried. We could do worse than to take heed of the words of Peter and Gordon, the British singing duo of the nineteen-sixties, how they wouldn’t stay in a world without love. If that song was sappy, it was not sappy for its time. Its sound came with its own sincere reality, and time was needed before we could move beyond not what it was saying but how it was saying it. And in the same way Hannah needed more than what she was hearing from Rose before she could move beyond the place of sloth she occupied. Please note that Vera remained Hannah’s staunch ally because she and Hannah were born to run on the same track and Vera had to show loyalty for the love she had received from her oldest sister. Nor was it for my mother to give up the architecture of adversity that she had created, as service was her only perceived road to salvation. And so the fire came, a veritable fusillade, that drove Luke and Rose and her two boys from the apartment, as I had been driven the year before, as that was the dynamic we were dealing with, and soon thereafter, it was for Sarah and me to withdraw, as it had become a conclave for the forces of reaction.*

*Now we must always be on the lookout for infirmity of mind or insecurity in others, not for the purpose of exploiting it but so our compassion can pour forth. Just the other day was such an opportunity presented to us by our marketing director, Belton Borschwicki, The poor man lost in a thicket of ethnicity with that last name of his. He was a no-show at the birthday party Florence Mith and Rafta organized for him. As such, it was not a celebration of his excellence, which has been called into question many times, but of his birth, so he had no call to feel undeserving of their attention, as everyone merits acknowledgment of their natal day. And so Belton Borschwicki gave new meaning to the old saying, "Suppose we threw a party and no one showed up?" Because everyone did show up, everyone, that is, but the guest of honor himself. An APB was sent throughout the company. Offices and men's room stalls were checked, diligent children's books personnel seeking our man, but all to no avail. It was left to me, led on by intuitive guidance, to stand before a supply closet door and hear myself say, the words seemingly not my own, "Come out, come out, wherever you are," as if back in the arena of childhood, where surely Belton Borschwicki had sequestered himself, or more accurately, been sequestered by the unreasonable fears and conquering shame that beset him then as they did now, these agents of confinement having become faithful to his being and he to them through all the years. "Come out, I say, come out, or I am coming in." But so wedded to his seclusion was he that it was for me to do just that. I swung open the door and moved among the reams of paper, boxes of folders, bins with pens and pencils and other office supplies in the deep space till I came to a big cardboard box with an unsealed top. "Pop up, Jack in the Box Belton Borschwicki. Pop up," I said, and when he*

*was adamant in his refusal, I gave the box a kick and threatened, in a strong voice, that there would be more than that to follow. In this way did I hollow out his resistance and compel him to shed the surrogate womb he had been seeking.*

*“How did you know?” he asked, in a halting, quavering voice.*

*“Heart coordinate with head for happy result,” I said, channeling Charlie Chan.*

*“Please, please. You must not say a thing to anyone. I would lose my job, everything.”*

*“First thing first order of business here. Must say to me why you choose cardboard box when people waiting to appreciate you.”*

*“I was not feeling well...”*

*“Must not lie to primo fact finder on your sorry-assed case. You know popular singer Sam the Sham and his group the Pharoahs? You know Wooly Bully? Clue to begin in singer’s name.”*

*“I am a sham, an impostor. I didn’t graduate from high school. I am dyslexic. Addition and subtraction are the sum of my math skills. I have never read a book, let alone a children’s book, in my life. Can you even begin to understand the fakery I risk having exposed if I set foot in their midst?”*

*“Exposure begin with self. I go now and say nothing. But you stay here and get on knees. Ask God take you to better things. Do not do stupidity on me and ignore what I say.”*

*And so I left him, Celeste, shaky in the extreme as he began his confrontation with himself. We must pull off the mask of falseness where we find it, lest folly have its day.*



*And if it did not happen in quite this way, it happened nonetheless in the way that it could.*

*And there is this as well. At some point self-deprecation must cease so gravitas too can have its day, and I would like to claim some progress by noting that my vigilance is soaring in regard to what has been an ongoing problem, though even as I speak I hear those from the bludgeon corner and their hacking/whacking cohort and all those of the laying on of hands and instruments of destruction ilk gathering in rage-filled protest. You see what we are up against, Celeste, that even as I begin to address the problem, it infiltrates my words to grow itself even bigger. Nevertheless, I say here that we must also place under the most stringent house arrest the vanity that is the wellspring of such disparaging remarks. In fact, we must quarantine it, as if it were more lethal than the most virulent strain of the smallpox virus. The dictate of full disclosure is pressing on me here. I must now tell you what I have previously omitted, that at the Christmas dinner Sarah was shown a photo of me with Vera Severa and Luke as children and said my expression reminded her of Jean Paul Belmondo's, possibly the Belmondo in That Man from Rio, and though I had my doubts, they did not stop me from going public with her comment, my narcissism overrunning the fragile ramparts of my self-restraint. There, in an atmosphere of ire and outright fire, could I be seen calling attention to the wonder of myself as if my grotesque flat-headedness and hanging string-ness had never entered my consciousness. A hail of bullets must such preening be met with, that the corpse never be given life again.*

Luke was on the line. He was Luther's brother. That fact hadn't changed, nor had the need for communication, erratic as it might be. And however divergent the tracks each was running on might be, they were not at the point that silence was the only answer.

"Rose ran off on me, just like Brenda used to do. Women with their running off. Can you believe it? Just can't stop themselves. Just got to have that."

"Why?" Luke was showing his soreness, and how to approach his brother's troubled mind was a matter Luther was giving his full consideration to.

"Don't be giving me any of that why stuff? She just ran off."

"OK. But what were you doing when she ran off?"

"Partying." The word had high explosive content as Luke spoke it.

"Did you say partying?"

"That's right. Partying. You have a problem with that?"

"Let's just say it's a word that invites attention to itself."

"What kind of attention? Are you talking shit again?"

"You were partying with each other? You were wearing festive hats? You were animated in your conversation to signify how much you were grooving on each other? You were jumping up and down to show your happiness? Can you have a party with just two people?" Because even as he spoke, Luther could feel his own ire rising that such a word could verbify itself when it deserved to lie at his feet begging for mercy, given the smell of inanity, decadence, false gaiety, and hysteria on it.

"Listen, moron. We were at a nightclub."

“I see. So the whole place was grooving?”

“You need to just shut up with your bullshit. Just because you don’t know how to live doesn’t mean I don’t. Picking on this. Picking on that.”

“I was just asking.”

“You’re never just asking. All you do is talk and talk your bullshit and then run off, like the coward you are, and write about the family instead of confronting them.”

“This is true, Luke. I have died many deaths, as cowards are wont to do.”

“Right. Exactly. *Wont*. You need to get yourself a dick, man.”

“How you speak.”

“No, man. How *you* speak.”

“I am deeply chagrined.”

“Oh, fuck you, man. Just fuck you. I come to you in pain and this is what you do.”

“So talk to me.”

“Weren’t you even listening? She ran off on me.”

“Maybe you need to listen, Luke. Maybe you need to listen to Martha and the Vandellas instead of your own sound.”

“I am sending you a big punch in the face, asshole.”

“And I am sending you one of their best sounds, ‘Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide.’ And I am sending you The Rolling Stones’s ‘Time Is on My Side.’ Because, oh yes it is. You need to sit through your anxiety. You need to let it flow past you like the phantom river that it is.”

“What do you know about anything?”

“I know this. Where’s she going to go? She needs you and vice versa.”

“Here’s something you don’t know.”

“What’s that?”

“Moses has a high-powered rifle with a scope that can put someone who is blocks away in the cross-hairs. He went and got a permit for it. He talks of killing people.”

“People? Which people?”

“Just people.”

“Just people?”

“Don’t worry. He’s more likely to shoot me than you. I’m the one Hannah is angry with for Rose talking that way about her.”

“That’s my fear right there, that she controls him. He is her rifle.”

“He didn’t say anything about shooting either one of us.”

“He didn’t have to,” Luther said.

*Celeste, I went with my concern to Glanton, who kachunked me right good with some spiritual truth, that it might be an aid to my understanding. He said trying to bring a close family relation out of denial about his drinking is like trying to blow out a light bulb. As for Moses, he said that I must bless all my fear and anxiety and return it to the universe as love and pray that the high power’s will be done for him as for me.*

*“You have to understand that your roots are in God now. All your chips are on him.”*

The little talking-to took Luther back to that time, as a child, he lost all the grocery money his mother had given him at the bingo wheel in the basement of the

Church of Notre Dame, up on One Hundred Fourteenth Street and Morningside Drive, and the time Sean beat him senseless during a night of blackjack, and his aversion, ever since, of betting of any kind, even the purchase of a Lotto ticket. And yet, Glanton was right. All his chips were on God, or the higher power, or whatever God was.

“That means I could lose as well as win, doesn’t it?” Luther asked.

“The only thing you can lose is your unhappiness and your purposelessness,”

Glanton replied.

Always with the answers Glanton was, like Luther with his brother.

He said to the world that he loved his mother and was more than willing to sign affidavits to this effect, that his love might be part of the public record of humankind. But she came with a barrel full of sorrows and when she did, he could sometimes meet her with the smallness of his stature and his being and so sparks had to fly that she would place him behind her once more so he could not live his life *you’re stalling me quit stalling me* only to suffer the punishing effects of going against her goodness, as he did the afternoon she called with further anxiety about Rachel.

“You must have love in your heart for Rachel. You must let the Lord resurrect that love,” his mother said.

“It comes when it comes and goes when it goes,” he said, even as he spoke seeking to nail down his self-righteousness so it would not follow him about.

He went on to give himself further reason for regret, telling his mother that Luke and Rose had a fight on a night they had reserved for “partying,” though he kept that

particular word from her, as it would have smelled of all the worldliness that she decried, then lashed himself about the back and legs but spared his face, for the crime of divulging his brother's business, knowing that as he did her heart might leap at the news of Luke's contretemps with Rose, their mother being their mother and calling them constantly to her never distant shore to abide in her forever.

Rafta gave him air to read, a text rich with its own blankness, by a thrice-named one, Katie Fletcher Reisley. Luther sought to feast deeply on the text, but at no point did he feel that nutritional needs were being met any more than when chowing down on the poulets of Colonel Sanders. And so he wrote a report saying there was no there there, only hollyhocks and dandelions and the occasional marigold. "No further mercy can I bestow on this manuscript," he wrote.

"Do you understand where you are?" asked Rafta.

"I am at Cromartie Wonders, just up the block from the great B. Altman, where my mother bought me quality clothes for school."

"With all due respect to your mother and B. Altman and your childhood, I must ask you again. Do you know where you are?"

"I am at Cromartie Wonders, where confection builds on itself and gives us all tooth decay."

"I will have to deal with you," Rafta said, and took herself away.

*Now, Celeste, the savage ones are out with their sticks and stones and knives, and savage*

*are they for a party (that word) on my body for making prevarication the norm. But sometimes we must lie ourselves into the truth with visualization as the agent of that transformation. Tell me you understand. Tell me that you do.*

The speaker was off the ground, his head now touching the ceiling. From there he talked down to the gathered in a state of transcendent bliss. But there was one who was not having it.

“Don’t you be blabbing away to me from some phony mountaintop, you phony-assed yogi. Don’t you be doing that. You talk to me eye to eye or you don’t talk to me at all. You come on down now. You come on down, I say. You just come on down.”

Luther had his ears open to the woman’s indignation, and was grooving on the sound of it, because there was no high or low in RoR. All communication was on the horizontal or not at all.

“You put your head in the clouds or wherever you want. You stick it up your ass if that’s your thing. But I got to see you got your feet on the ground if I’m to have ears to hear. You be understanding me now? You be understanding, swami boy or whatever you are?” So she continued.

After the meeting did Luther give his phone number on a scrap of paper to a newcomer with the suggestion that he pick up the phone before he pick up the drink if he wanted to remain among the living. Because Luther was now more than ever intent on rescuing those who were perishing. And though there was in publication the very great *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*, by the very great Leonard Michaels, which Luther

held near and dear, he was obliged to adapt it to his own purpose, saying “I Will Save Them If I Can” before realizing the modification did not suffice and revising it to “The Higher Power Through Me Will Save Them or Not” because all was uncertainty in this world of flux and more flux.

Because he wanted to be a do-right man in a do-wrong world, Luther would write out a monthly check to Simon Weill, that his debt might be paid in full and Simon Weill could claim no ownership of any part of his being. I am paying my way to freedom and a new life with every small check I write, he told himself, and as he did, heard an attitude of superiority announce itself. Was he hearing what he thought he was hearing, that he would not have to follow in the path of his aunt and his mother and any other family members who held to the notion that Simon Weill was in truth Nick Nefarious, that deceit and cunning and sheer greed coated with a slick of grease was the essence of his being. With this perspective different from his family’s could Luther elevate into the right and proper place in his mind and not be bound to the victim mentality and any song that might call itself its anthem. At the same time he understood that his viewpoint might be considered a betrayal, given that his mother held to the opinion that Simon Weill was a of the family rodentia. But to what avail would a life of blame and recrimination get him? In that moment he saw the meaning of the verse of scripture from the Book of Romans, “For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ Our Lord.” Auntie Eve had not been pointing her finger at the robust intellectualism of the Columbia University community, or not primarily; rather, she had been bearing down on



The Slimester. Yes, he could take the store rents and rob them blind and do all his dirty deeds, but these “wages” he “earned” would send him directly to hell. No need to see him in court. They would turn the other cheek and be rewarded with Heaven and eternal life for taking the high road. Their approach, if true, tied in with everything he had written about his resentment against the God of his childhood, at Glanton’s suggestion. God wanted him to wear a hair shirt and stand on the sidelines of life jeering at those who were charting a successful path out there in the world. He was, in essence, to be antilife if he wanted any possibility of an eternity of bliss rather than the fires of damnation. And yet there was another voice, a small voice, that said his mother and aunt were right and that a stronger son, a real man, would have stood up for them, spoken out against Simon Weill, fulfilled his childhood yearning there on the cabin porch at Bible camp, trying to calculate the years he would need to become a lawyer and assert Garatdjian power over the bastard who had so tormented his family. Instead, he had become a worse thief than Simon Weill. If it was true that in fact Simon Weill was shady, he at least had stolen from someone else’s family, whereas Luther had stolen from his own, whatever the rationalizations he had applied to this activity.

But no, it would not do to vilify himself to the point of terminating his own existence. He went back to Glanton so his mind could once again be calibrated for the truth and he could go forward without torment accompanying his every step on the journey. Glanton was waiting for him with a certitude to match Luther’s and kachunked him steady with a directive to write out a check to The Slimester, and to stop calling him that because respect was due to all that creepy creped on the earth.

Luther continued to read so his mind could be expanded and not inhabit the small spaces of those meanly disposed or bound to superstition or whose thought patterns were dinky, contracted, or otherwise resting on a foundation of abysmal ignorance. He had, of course, as a negative example his sister Rachel, with her devotion to the Good Book only after an earlier thirst for knowledge. He truly feared a life devoted to munching on the rocks of Canaan and Judea and Samaria and all other territories of that biblical region. The book he was reading was by the very great Kingsley Amis, that he might learn more as to what humor was and how a Brit had come to be in possession of it in taking down the academic life as he then experienced it. The book gave him a happy glow and made it good to be alive, so unfailingly centered in the comic zone was the author.

But his new roots called to him as well. He did not sever them for *Lucky Jim*. He had not situated himself forever in the halls of Kingsley Amis's Oxford University. He called on Reggie R., from the ground floor meeting at the old Electric Circus building (where he had gone with his sister Vera in the loneliness time of his life after Jane Thayer had left him and no one new seemed close to arriving and he had only her, Vera, and entertained strongly that night after leaving the strobe-lit and joyless palace of sound the idea that he and she could live together and that in her he might have enough of femaleness and not need anything more to fill his emptiness) because Reggie R. had antecedents in time, he represented the excellence of the black men Luther had known, Ronnie and LeRoy at the BonTon Cleaners on One Hundred Twelfth Street and Broadway, and the others who had

been messed with, the color of their skin triggering a shaping, containing force against them at all hours of the day, including from him, *him*). And he had a humanity calling to him in his boyish, tentative face. And he had that name, Reggie, signifying that he could visit the land of the diminutive, that man-child status was his to claim. Oh, Luther didn't know. He thought the magic was in his almond-shaped eyes, his pitted skin, the stutter step rhythm of his words, how he was there and not there at the same time, how cloud formations took shape right in the room seeking to contain his syncopated speech as he warmed the close air with the rich history of blackness, this without frightening you half to death with maelstroms of blackness rage. Oh, he really didn't know. He had thought he could ride Reggie backward and forward in time to bigger statements of the truth as he was seeing it, but now he saw that such a thing would have to wait for a time of more and better understanding.

Luther was not standing still but on the conveyor belt of time, moving him forward even when he felt a state of stasis was obtaining. Because the Fat Lipped One was right when he holler sang "Time Is on My Side." Luther had only to try to live in the mentality that he was being delivered not into death but into the light, however he might be feeling on any given day. Because that was the function of RoR. but though that was his one basket, it did not mean he had only one egg in that basket. No, no, he had a multiplicity of eggs for it. If he had Reggie R., he also had Johnny B., for Johnny Boy, the real Johnny Boy who came before the Johnny Boy of *Mean Streets*. He had grown up on Mott Street and had the authenticity that came with killing in his blood and bearing, having served with

the Marines in Vietnam, and spoke from the place of agitation it had brought him, saying of the Vietcong that they were “pussies” but the NVA would stand and fight and fuck you up, speaking in just the way that Marty, the wounded medic, had back when they were both living with Roberto, Luther’s college roommate. Johnny did not have the stutter step rhythm of Reggie when he shared as to where he had been and what he had done before and since he came through the doors of RoR. He did not do the adagio of Reggie or put clouds in place. He spoke allegro, making a rat-a-tat sound with his words, while shifting on the balls of his feet. Luther could see that Johnny had an attachment to this sound, that it came from within his body and his mind and his experience, that it was both his metabolism and his mental state he was speaking from, so there could be no doubt as to its authenticity, as there could be no doubt of Reggie’s either. Both had the power to abolish such doubt from the room they spoke in about the cold and merciless rain they slept in when, homeless, they could find neither bridges nor abandoned buildings nor other places of refuge from the storm. And so Luther put them in his mind to have them there forever, as he had the medic Marty there forever, or for as long as they would last, because they had the unself-conscious veracity of their true selves showing, and that was an important thing to possess.

The New Year spoke to him as a chronicle of rain, not snow, the loft providing no secure shelter but serving as merely a thin membrane separating him from the reality of the street. The storms of his childhood were revisited, the sideways splattering of Broadway with windblown drops the size and shape of fishing sinkers and the metallic taste of that

rain he took into his mouth open to the offerings of those dark and dangerous skies. Then as now the rain not a time for rejoicing and never would it be so long as home was not a refuge but merely a flimsy line of trembling defense against it.

Driven by the inclemency he was witnessing, Luther called on Glanton, who informed him the atmosphere had been brought to tears and was only seeking to purge itself of the pollutants it had absorbed and not to take its actions personally, lest the subjective nature of his mind summon thunderstorms to all the provinces of his own being. Luther had no choice but to listen, because Glanton had the gift of courage in which to see things as they were. Had he not made the decision to leave his home when the sea called him from the Brooklyn shoreline as a teenager so he could witness how nature comported itself in open waters and survive its sometime turbulence? So let him be grateful to Glanton for giving him this buffer from the rain, if only temporarily, because Luther could not bet on anything said to him making a forever impression, not with his own mind operating as it did.

Now in this time did Moses call, possibly because he could not get enough of Luther as Luther was constituted in his mind, a mind that had been shaped by Hannah, big and dark and ever present in his consciousness as no other could be, having been a prime mover in his existence. Which wasn't to say that any of what he thought or Luther thought, for that matter, rode the rails of reality. He was not on the line to say hello, how are you, or anything of the kind, but to radiate his menacing power into Luther, saying,

“My mother says I have to watch you every second, that you have it in you to try

to deprive me of what is mine. So I have to ask you if that is true because I want to live in the ground rules of fairness.”

“I’m sorry, but what are you asking?” Luther could only protest haltingly.

“Are you saying you don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“How can I know what you haven’t told me?”

“Do I need to tell you what you already know?”

“That would help,” Luther said.

“Did I or did I not show you my Marine Corps enlistment papers? Did I or did I not tell you I have the goods to pass the physical?”

“Yes, I believe you did show me your enlistment papers and tell me of your goods.”

“Don’t get smart with me. I showed them to you out of respect. But now I have to ask if you have been respecting me or doing me dirty?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

After a sigh of weary exasperation, Moses said, “I’m going to keep you on course. I’m going to give you the fact, only one, so you have a guardrail to keep your wandering mind on the road. You dig?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, how’s this for exactly? Those papers are missing. Gone. Now do you understand?”

“You’re accusing me of taking your enlistment papers?”

Moses laughed indulgently. “Did I say I was accusing you or did I say that they

were missing?”

“That’s a mystery you present, for sure, but I cannot be a participant in this one, as I have no part to play.”

“My mom says you’re slippery, so I need to respect the sliding power of that slipperiness and let you slide away. But if I find evidence of something more than what you say, I’ll have to deal with you.”

“Yes, of course,” Luther blurted, allowing Moses to exit on this note of weakness without another word.

“I’ve got the thirst. I have to admit.” Luke was on the line following a booze-filled week, putting all the rain in his life on Luther.

“What are you going to do about it?” Luther asked.

“Just got to ride out the fever. That’s all.”

“I hope you’re alive when it does.” He could have done telephone hang up right then and there, but his love had not died. It was just living in a state of tiredness.

“Don’t be starting your self-righteous shit with me.”

Luther ignored his brother’s stop sign. “You’ve got to surrender your right to drink.”

“Surrender my right to what? Who talks that way?”

“My mentor Glanton talks just that way. He has many missiles on his ship.”

“Glanton? What kind of name is that?”

“Glanton is unique upon the earth. He can leap tall buildings in a single bound.”

“Do me a favor, Luther. Go get your head examined, will you?” Luke said, signing off before Luther could reply that his head was already receiving a massive focus from the RoR fellowship and the higher power.

*Because, Celeste, Luke was showing his intestinal fortitude in regard to facing the lower depths that were calling to him, or more likely in denial that anyone or anything was calling at all. Now there are those in the denigration chorus only too pleased to say that odiousness was having its day with me in my chat with mon frère, but let me say in response that we are obliged to let our light shine in all the dark corners where the illness is to be found and seek to revive the humanity that it would bury under its onslaught. If my technique is crude and clumsily hortatory, I must allow patience to be my guide as I seek to refine my outreach. Because God resides in the repulsive one as well as the charmer, and once the light is in us, we must shine it where we can.*

*But on the heels of this encounter came not smoke and smolder but the ferocity of a five-alarm fire on Houston and Broadway. Like a virulent cancer bringing a man in robust health to gauntness, the unchecked blaze left only the frame of the sturdy building that had once stood over the avenue, incinerating its occupants and much of its content. It also burned away, if only temporarily, all my earthly defenses, leaving me no rock to stand on but this, that God is God and has his existence in the fire and the rain and so I must place all my chips where they belong. I saw then that our only hope is to invest in the eternal lest we be enticed to peg our fortunes to the flux of ephemera.*

*But there was one who escaped the fire, as if he was of asbestos born. Not a hair*



*of his head was singed nor his flesh blistered though the flames consumed his every piece of clothing. You may recall, Celeste, my mention of a man named Jameson who wore his tool belt low slung on his hips, like the gunfighters of old, while boasting of another tool, quite massive, further down and now fully visible, a pendant baton supported by a big balls apparatus. The freckled piece of lewdness offered no explanation for his survival. It spoke for itself, saying he came from a different dimension, his red hair and ruddy complexion testifying to that.*

*We brought him upstairs, not as a mission of mercy. Even in his natal suit, he manifested an insouciant air that directed our thoughts away from the need for rescue, given that this was not someone of man or woman born. Though I have said as much before, I must repeat that there are those walking about who, in the most torrential downpour, remain untouched by the rain that drenches to the bone the rest of us and who meet the arctic cold with bare chests or the skimpiest of garments. These folks are to be noted as a reminder that the parade of humanity is not as it seems and reality may only be perceived from the still place, and with eyes closed. Let us simply say that a need arose from within Sarah and the naked one for mutual connection, with me assigned to be the uncomfortable but not unhappy observer. Let me be clear, Celeste. Jameson, notwithstanding his origin in the lowest depths, also represented the sun, or at least a ray of light and hope in my particular heart. Sarah had lived for years with my abuse and the painful places her ailing mind had brought her. And now, here was Jameson, with animal fervor, beaming his lust/love vibe at her while showing himself to also be equipped with antennae capable of sussing out the zeitgeist. For two hours did Sarah go on a feminist*

*rant against the patriarch, in whatever guise he might appear, encouraged by the signals of support His Lewdness sent out. She talked Betty Friedan. She talked Gloria Steinem. She talked Anais Nin. And then she spoke of those who would go nameless daring to denigrate the bonding of women as those who gather in the hills with their pots of baked beans. Even minus attribution did she manage to draw attention to me as the source and thus deepen their rapport. And yet retaliation did not have its way. My warplanes remained on the ground, as why would I seek to destroy those in process of developing a liaison that would lead to my liberation? With every passing second was it being brought to my attention that there was one out there who wanted her. She would not need to be alone. I would not be her table forever.*

*Now you know, Celeste, that my mother would often say, "The world has nothing that I want." With complete conviction would she utter these words. But try as I might I could not come to a place of understanding why she held to this conviction when we live in a world with its share of beauty and excitement and wonder. I did understand that her alternative, and the church's alternative as well, was God. This much was clear to me. But who would want to dwell in the domain of the dread-inspiring, he who could cast you into the eternal flames? For me the world was everything outside our chaotic apartment. Every morning did the streets call to me, their pull as strong as the gravitational force that ties us to the earth. To leave behind the tension and chaos and clutter and general shabbiness and to escape into the light was a dictate that could not be denied.*

*And now, years later, here I was on a Saturday morning feeling the power of that*

*dictate anew, not for the pursuit of a child's pleasure but to make inroads on my to-do list. And yet I sat, Celeste. I sat. I went inside, where only fleetingly I had ever thought to go in the time before RoR. And the miracle of my life followed me inside, or rose up to greet me, as if a great dredging apparatus was hauling it from my lowest depths. How is it we must discover and then rediscover this reality from one day to the next, as if we meet each day as emptied vessels in need of filling or batteries that require recharging on a daily basis.*

He could say what he wanted about the insides, but the outsides needed attention too in the way of adornment. The body was perhaps a onetime chance at a higher level of consciousness than the lower orders could attain. So what if he was doing as his father did, overdressing for a job that required little of himself and for which pants and a shirt with a collar would have sufficed. No added restraints were needed on his desires in this area. He understood the meaning of the word *prudence*. All he now was seeking was paraphernalia to defend the territory of the more vulnerable items he already owned: a garment bag and mothballs to check the destruction the fluttering ones could do to his wool jackets and sweaters and slacks so he would not have to experience again the distress of finding holes where none were supposed to be; and shoe trees so his oxblood loafers and wingtips, both black and brown, might keep their shape and not fall in on themselves like a mouth without teeth. Justification made itself present for all these purchases. Indeed, they were sorely needed if safety and preservation were to be valued.

And that vigilance and precaution had to be applied to everything—everything—

lest trouble find him in ways he would not care for and at times he was not expecting. In this regard, Rafta summoned him to review the contract for Kaplan Acedit's latest book. In particular, she needed to know the status of foreign rights. Now contracts were a big matter. They were not commas and apostrophes and dangling modifiers. They were the stuff of those with formidable minds, the equation solvers and those who understood the intricacies and ramifications of *pi*. Luther listened carefully with both ears, then wrote out the assignment and went trotting off *on his long legs* to Edith Conrad, she who held dominion over all contracts behind the beaded curtain that served in place of a door. He went with trepidation. There was no song in his heart, no lightness in his step. He was surfacing into dangerous territory, now that he had reentered the land of the grownups. None of these books for boys and girls. No picture book wonders. No stories and illustrations on the page to stand the test of time and make you weep for the morning glory childhood of your life. No, no, he had ushered himself into the ephemera of existence, the word salads of pundits and prophets and cosmeticians of the mind and spirit and body, the horror bent, the comic rifiers, the chunky ones and slim Jims, those who wrote in their own language and those who had their mothers do it for them. He knew where he was. He was in the land of those who could do the deal, those who could torque up, those who could stand and deliver and did not live with snowstorms in their heads. He walked the gauntlet of shame as best he could, the names Lackey, Momma's Boy, Failure Forever hurled his way with mocking and deadly intent, though his tormentors stayed out of sight. But now there was one, the one he most feared, Irene Strep, she who could do the rights deal on any continent and harbored contracts in the

deepest part of her mentality, right there in his path, and she said to him, with her breath fully vigorous on the air she could even command, “Luther, are you an apparition? Have you come back from the dead?” Luther was about to reply, “You could sort of say so” when Judith Everholt came from her office to sing her song of breathless incredulity even as Mr. Dorf happened by. Though he had seen Luther at a glance, Mr. Dorf had walk on by written all over his nipped and tucked face and was showing a gladiator’s strength in leaving behind the wreckage in his path, when Judith Everholt snagged him, saying, “Aren’t you even going to say hello to your previous assistant?” But Mr. Dorf had his antennae up for the mischief his antagonist was seeking to cause, and with pith as his guide, said, “Hello does not follow but precedes goodbye” and continued his walk on by. And this was only in the natural order of things, as Mr. Dorf had a son who was muscular in his intention toward the world, a son who could do the heavy lifting to get the job done, and so Mr. Dorf could have no truck with failure, seeing that to be exactly what Judith Everholt was putting on display.

So that, like a rat slithering down a hole did Luther flee from his adult tormentors to the lower level he had assigned himself, where he spent some time before the bathroom mirror seeking to arrange his face and pluck the would haves and could haves and should haves from his brain like the lice upon it that they were so he could present himself to Rafta with clarity emanating from his eyes and mouth and all parts pertinent and visible to her shrewd and scanning self. But his mind did not hold what he had tried to put there with his notes, and so, when he handed her the contract she gave him hard stare, she gave him bristle, as if he had handed her a smelly fish and was now vowing to

make of his life a permanent folly of dreams unrealized.

“Did I not ask you to check the contract for me?”

“Yes. I believe you did. It must have got jostled from my mind. I will rectify pronto,” he said, reaching for the contract, but she made a show of clutching it tightly to her chest, as if it must now be hers and hers alone.

*Celeste, I remain aware that exaggeration is not necessarily a pathway to wisdom and may indeed be a graveyard for the truth, but the tidal wave of emotion that pushes words forward as they come, frothy and foaming, is hard to resist.*

*Let us turn to a true ill, social in nature, not one that my mind is seeking to manufacture, and note that homelessness, while not at its peak, was increasingly visible on the streets of New York City, so that on a placid corner such as Fifth Avenue and Sixty-eighth Street, one might see Aunt Millie or Uncle Bob or any of the mainstays of American whiteness approach in the remnants of their middle class finery and ask, “Buddy, can you spare a dime?” though in language tailored to their own time. As to the forces compelling the rise of these urban drifters, what could it be other than the heartlessness of a country run amok on greed? And there were those in RoR suffering as well, if not entirely at the level of the street, enough that a ham on rye, hold the mustard, was becoming out of reach because the paychecks had ceased. One such was Nell. She came to the lunch hour meeting ringing the poverty bell loud for my ears only, saying she was not finding a job and no jobs were finding her. I did not say to her, “I gots mines. Now you gots to get your own, Bones.” I did not claim more selfishness than I possessed,*

*was not rife with negativity toward her. In fact, an abundance of understanding and empathy went out as to her circumstances, but the borderline between me and destitution was not great, and there was the shadow cast by my incapacitated sister Rachel and floundering Luke and “hands that smack” Hannah continuing to occupy the spaces of the home she was raised in because she could not leave and my deceased sister Naomi, for whom a paying job had been mostly a faraway thing. And there was my mother warning that Simon Weill could have us out on the street just like that, snapping her fingers as only she could, so while I stood on the ground of correctness in all that I said, I also sought reinforcement of my mentality, inwardly chanting “She has a higher power and I am not it. I do not have to fall down dying because I have a job.”*

*At that particular meeting I shared (yes, Philip Roth, “shared.” Put your scornful 170 IQ laughter on the word, as you did in one of your novels, but I see through your scorn to your fear.) that connections were coming to me strongly, that I was monitoring the situation in my mentality more and more, and while the landscape was not quite picturesque, awareness was growing, and did not awareness hold within itself the seeds of action? When I deviated from the straight line I had set myself by skipping classes in the eleventh grade, it led to outright truancy. And when I would torment Jane Thayer, accusing her of wanting other neighborhood boys instead of me, the self-abasement was something I could not stop. Whatever was set in motion, including my drinking, took on a life of its own.*

*Celeste, we must persevere, with the limited faculties we possess, to shed the light of understanding on our inner workings, and who but God can provide that illumination*

*that enables us to make our way forward? Avanti, Avanti, I say to myself now, as an incitement to the explorations that must continue.*

*A new beginning every twenty-four hours, Celeste. I am bracketing my day with love, starting with meditation and ending with the same. "My soul doth love to meditate," the proverb says, and I say too, so I can have sunlight in the sunlight hours and in the hours of darkness too, and should the darkness come in daylight hours because the spirit battery has run down, I can negate that darkness with a recharge. I send you this as an update on my mind and spirit, and while I hear the howls of the posse of the Exceeding Wrath, seeking to nail me to the nearest tree for the crime of outright pride, let them eat the miserable cake of their own making, as joy is not joy without expression.*

*We must bear witness. We must, allowing neither considerations of time nor image nor other worldly considerations to interfere. And where is that joy to be found? Must we trek to Nepal or sit at the Dalai Lama's feet or serve the poor and suffering in the former Calcutta, as Mother Teresa did? No and no and no. It is here in New York City and Secaucus, New Jersey, and Abilene, Kansas, and all points east and west and north and south within and without the borders of our continent. God is where we are, and that can never change.*

*Sarah is being cut off from her life. She is showing concern about the circulation in her arms. Her veins and arteries are showing signs of a blood blockade. Glanton, who has a malpractice suit going in his mind against the entire medical profession, speaks as if they*



*have no place on the planet. Null and void they are. Canceled from existence in his reality show. He has instructed me to direct her to a chiropractor, but the question for me is who are these monkeys who would manipulate the body as if it were a human pretzel and lack the mental wherewithal for MD status. Is it ever profitable to take direction from one infected with lingering resentment? And yet this is Glanton we are talking about, Celeste. Glanton!*

Now Barney's, on Seventeenth Street and Seventh Avenue, below which the IRT ran—the sidewalk vents offering proof should you be living in doubt—this Barney's had a way of calling to Luther in daylight hours, a stronger call than duty calling him to his desk. He did not know what Barney's had to offer him at these times, he simply knew that he must obey the urge and go and be there if only to say he had. But he returned in time for the going away party for one Sally Blaine, who had all the right facial features for the word “pretty” to be applied to her and also the word “pert.” She had the juice of something approaching insolence in her, a humor the medieval ones had not gotten around to naming. She belonged to Gina Deductio, head of Carousel Books, and Jean Noble, Carousel Books editor and slicer and dicer and mincer of those she wanted to reduce with her words or look or the tone in which she spoke. Sally Blaine was not one for Luther to play with, as she had a bit of the feral in her. You would have thought she was armored against assault, but on this day did Jean Noble choose to relive her glory days of excellence at Wellesley College and thought to ask what she had never thought to ask

before, that is, where Sally had chosen to get her higher education. The blood drained from Sally's face and with lowered eyes she murmured "Muhlenberg."

"Excuse me?" Jean Noble said, either baffled or inexplicably offended.

"Muhlenberg, in Pennsylvania," Sally offered.

"Well, that's too bad. I didn't know there was a college for the study of mules," Jean Noble said, adopting Cruelty as her middle name and causing Sally to tear from the room. A wound of Sally's kind was long-lasting, Luther understood. Before running off Sally turned immediately to him. The hard gloss was gone and full vulnerability was showing. Her eyes were only for Luther in that moment. They had known where to go for solace and commiseration. When it was necessary, and perhaps all along, she had recognized that Luther was a Muhlenberg sort of man as well, as indeed he was, that being one of the colleges that had accepted him. All the time could he feel that he was coming to an understanding of his life and the people in it as he pondered the seeming permanence of the past's shadow.

Now Grambling Vorst inserted her own brand of meanness into the day, though perhaps a kinder word was *thoughtlessness*. Accusation, by inference, flew from her horse tooth mouth. "Have you seen my wallet? It has gone missing," she said.

And Luther said right back, "Yes, five minutes ago it walked right past my desk and gave me a most insolent stare."

"You're not funny, Luther, and I suspect you never have been. Now have you seen my wallet?"

“Am I under oath?”

“You are.”

“The answer must still be no, but I do hope you find it,” because he did, in all truth, not want her or anyone to be deprived of such a possession, even someone who came to him, as she did, with a j'accuse mentality. Once again was he left to ponder the reach of the past, remembering the tiny sixth grade classmate who came with her enormous father in tow, the two of them also in accusatory mode outside the school, demanding that he return her pencil case when in fact he hadn't taken it, the assumption being that he belonged to a lower order who operated in a thieving fashion.

He had his docility to keep him in the workplace, such as Cromartie Wonders was for him. (Yes, he said docility because it could be a public feature of most of his days, whatever the balance might bring in the privacy of the loft. And yes, the righteousness posse could keep their so very vocal outrage to themselves and save it for their annual outrage convention. Frankly, they could do whatever they wanted, so long as they stayed away from him.) He could also, when money was tight, have hunger. And the hunger hurt. It did not place him where he wanted to be in his mind, the shortness of funds serving as a restriction on the outreach he would otherwise make to the food all around him. He saw himself as a squalling baby, a prisoner of elemental needs which as a seeming adult he could only wish to rise above.

On the subject of elements, there was a Frenchman, going back in time, who had his suspicions as to what matter really was and how an object—be it a chair or desk or the cane an old man walked with—had its constituent parts, undetectable to the naked eye but part of nature nonetheless. He knew what oxygen was before it had a name and how it was a part of every fire that had ever started, going back to our ancestors striking stones together in their caves. He had a high forehead as an indicator of his intelligence and wore a wig to stay in keeping with his times. Many of the hypotheses that he had about the physical world were proven true. But the French, in the time that he was living, had a passion for long knives to avenge the crimes of the ancien regime, and so the fact that he was mainly responsible for the periodic table of elements and the founder of modern chemistry could not save him from the guillotine for alleged complicity in wrongs against the people.

This was all eighteenth century stuff, but his life was not contained therein because of his fame. The twentieth century was keeping him alive with books of all kinds and Cromartie Wonders would soon be publishing one of their own, that is, if Luther would take to heart the meaning of pronto pronto avanti avanti, Rafta pressing him for quick delivery of prints of the man himself and his work. Luther was too anxious to ask why she should even care, given that it was a project she had inherited and placed no great value on. But then he had a breakthrough. He saw time flowing around him like a river he was chest deep in and yet could stand his ground in, to the extent that when she came to him with her daily query, he now began to respond in broken French:

“Compris, bien sur, mais tout la meme chose de jour a jour,” adding a French shrug a la Belmondo, as if to suggest his powerlessness.

Every day offered the same response, this resulting in a stalemate. He had found the crucible necessary for his growth. He had only to hope it wouldn't be for all time.

*Celeste, this infidelity to the truth. We will get it under control. There will come a time.*

*The RoR meetings continued to expose me. Always with my hand up, like a child desperate for attention and engaged in a goodness competition, a sweepstakes I deluded myself I might have a chance to win. After some meetings would come the tortured and obsessive replaying of what I had said and all the shame that went with it and the vow of hermetic silence that would follow and last until the next meeting, when again my hand would shoot up. And in truth, I did see and feel the silent scorn directed my way by those with more restraint, more balance, less neediness, those too involved with navigating the thickets of their own inner workings and with too many checks and balances on word gush to fall victim to the impulse that was claiming me. Every day was RoR showing me who I was and wasn't. Every day was it turning the tables on my life.*

*Celeste, heavy bombing is not just a function of the U.S. Air Force or the R.A.F. or any other power. The capacity for long- and short-range bombing exists in all of us, and for this reason we must curb our potency when it calls into question our sense of justice and fair play and the American Way. Of whom do I speak here? One who had written three*

*hundred children's books and earned sufficient royalties that her daily bread was not and never would be in doubt. And on whom did she bestow a massive tonnage of plop plop, so that he may never fully live again, accusing him of promoting immorality? A young'un who had the audacity to forego confection and write a YA novel of adolescent angst. And where did she do her dump but in School Library Journal, influential throughout the land. Never mind that the first-time author was my rival, in my mind, at least. Never mind that the reality was upon me how far I myself was from executing such an achievement. Never mind that I should have donkey dung status in my own eyes in relation to this newcomer entered into the circle of success. Never mind that I would forever be consigned to the corridors of foolishness. How dare this woman be the arbiter of right and wrong, the morality police, in the domain of the young? And yet one must tend to one's ire, Celeste, that it not live in us forever and foment the tumors that will be the end of us in these sacks of flesh and bone.*

The light of heaven is in the loft, blending with the crimson of her Harvard acceptance. Carola Aprile has come to visit. But heaven and hell are not to mix. Carola has the goods on me. I must not go where her nerve gas is. I must let the streets suck me to them and live in displaced fashion lest she taunt me, perhaps unwittingly, once more with *Oblomov*, the novel about which she inquired of me on behalf of her now ex-, Hunger Longing. Unforgotten is the understanding that came to her that reigning in me was the illegitimacy of a man who could read English but not do math. She must not fathom the power her presence can cause. Even here, on Thirty-third Street, catty-corner to the ghost of once

stately Penn Station, recoiling in the recesses of the former Automat, does she still find me. No matter. It is for me to regulate my own thoughts. But when hiding avails me nothing, what then? Let me walk as if I am not being seen. Let me sit as if I have never been slapped. And who is this I see? My father? My father has come? Always on Eighth Avenue do fathers appear. Always west of Macy's. Always to haunt the gone Robert Hall store for men's fashions. Always are they standing in their own meager elegance. Always is the surface, the superficial, stamped on them, as they dare not enter the premises of themselves. Father, I have witnessed your wandering way, your restless exploration of city streets. I am the ghost of your own ghost. Your void is the vastness I dwell in. There is no mystery to an aberrant consciousness pegged to its own instability awaiting the eternity it can only for the moment dream of.

*Luther Garatdjian. Letter to No One. January 1982*

Snow is falling. A purity campaign, futile as that might be. Can we not laugh at the yellow snow, the dirt that gathers on its hard crust? I am not the culprit. I know where the heavens are alleged to be. My eyes are not always on the elements. There is time for my eyes to find John Updike's newest, *Problems*, whose characters have a lot of sexual intercourse to perform so they can get through their days. I hear the sound of disillusion and deadness in the author's lively prose. I hear and see it lifting off the pages. And yet I understand that I could be wrong given the journey through it I have less than a quarter taken.

All that glitters is not gold? Is gold leaf gold? It is surely shining from the treatment the maintenance man high on a scaffold is giving it in the lobby of the Pilgore building. And there is another applying polish to the brass doors so they will sing their welcoming presence. The polish has a sweet smell and yet this is not confection in the air but a substance with the potential for deep penetration. The danger bell is ringing, prompting me to move through the lobby pronto, lest the fumes find me where I live.

*Other reinforcements are coming Sarah's way. An old friend from the Boston Museum School, Abigail Dickerson, has said she will soon be in Sarah's presence. The cosmos is responding to Sarah's need to counter the underlying falseness of my way toward her. Celeste, I remember Abigail Dickerson, not simply as a prominent New England politician's daughter, but as one whose bravery is well hidden behind her modest demeanor. Her body has turned on itself. Rashes cover great parts of it and inroads are being made against her organs. Such is the viciousness of lupus. But she is among the living and continues to allow stoicism to be her guide. A woman blond and with a surname that suggests her pedigree. A sweet peace comes over me thinking of them together. What is greater than friendship, which I am too selfish to cultivate, and who has this capacity more than Sarah? Yes, a genuine happiness that Sarah is not alone and that if I am not here forever, there will be someone to fill the void.*

*This sense of a cloud parting, as when I felt that Jane Thayer and I were stuck together only to hear her mention a new girlfriend and once again the sun was shining, this new friend being proof that I had not done permanent damage to her life.*



Now it was said in RoR that he could look into the past but he must not stare lest he meet a fate akin to that of Eurydice, the beloved of Orpheus, because hell was what he had been let out of, and he did not want to begin the reentry process. Still, he had had his life there, and so, if it called to him, could he not be respectful and see what was to be learned? It happened one morning that when he awoke he spoke aloud the name Dov Drosky, as if his thesis mentor had been with him through the night, and recalled the times he had humiliated himself by serving up hysterical slop in the course of completing the writing program. He thought further how Dov Drosky had a Harvard education and a full professorship at CCNY and was the founder of a prominent magazine devoted solely to fiction and had seemed at another level from him by virtue of the quality of his mind and the robust level of energy he brought to all his activities and by the power he exerted over him. Only now Luther was not cowering in the shame corner, driven there by mercilessly taunting memories. Rather, he was perceiving Dov Drosky hadn't really been so much better than him as a writer, if he was better at all. Maybe Dov Drosky had simply been less sick. Maybe Luther didn't have to be a hanging string forever.

*"I attack women because I am afraid I can't make it."* These words came to him in his meditation that same night. They were words that put him in the ponder place. They seemed to illuminate his whole world. Yes, and yes again, he could only think, recalling the joy he briefly experienced when the bus from Port Authority emerged from the Lincoln Tunnel and he was en route to the Rutgers Law School, in Newark, New Jersey.

How proud his mother would be. How proud Sarah would be that he was powering up to the next level. He would be walking and talking like a man. He would shed his identity as a parasite, as a thief, a man with an umbilical tie to the building and hence to his mother. But now, with Rafta, he was right back there with his mother. He was once more a boy, a boy who had been unable to go to law school and could not survive in the world of adult books. He had taken refuge in childhood by dropping down to Cromartie Wonders. He had put himself in the power of powerful, controlling women once more. Rafta was holding him back just as his mother had been holding him back, stalling him, just stalling him, always was she stalling him. It was right there for him to see.

The power of the mike is everything. This I must understand, Luther thought. The woman leading the meeting had no mike, it is true, but she had the floor and so commanded the attention of the gathered as she shared that her father's expressed desire was for her to sit on his lap as she had when she was a child. Luther was not wanting to compete with her when he was given the opportunity to share as well. He was only wanting to explain that he had a family of his own, including siblings on the destruction path. But after the meeting no one came to him. Their hearts were open only to her, the woman whose father wanted her to sit on his lap as she had when she was a girl. She had spoken from a place of hurt, while he had spoken from a need for attention. Luther saw that he had gone where he did not belong.

One afternoon Amanda Plessy, Frieda Volcker's onetime assistant, took a break from her Ivy League world to stop by Cromartie Wonders. Both she and Rafta were uncomfortable in each other's presence. So it seemed to Luther. In witnessing their unease could Luther grasp the ephemeral nature of work relationships. The common bond was the company and often nothing else.

"So, Luther, I hear the presentations you gave at the sales conference were fabulous," Amanda Plessy said, turning to him.

"Well, I hope that won't be the high point of my life," Luther said, remembering that praise to the face is outright disgrace and reflexively trying to counter with self-deprecation, only to realize that Rafta was within earshot and he had disclosed an aspiration to elevate above the station that life or fate had assigned him, trying to be better than he could be for the sake of appearances, the truth being he was only minimally qualified to be in the position he held. He had forsaken the cloak of humility. All he had needed to do was to say thank you.

But Amanda Plessy, it turned out, had come on a heavy bombing run, not to throw him a bone for his little presentations. She had come with a manuscript. She had come with illustrations. Rafta could be seen doing cartwheels up and down Madison Avenue at their excellence, while with chagrin Luther could only withdraw to his windowless office and, with the door closed, press his forehead against the wall. A woman with no writerly aspirations, or so she had said, had quietly outstripped him. I don't know what to do with you, God, he called out in his mind. I don't know what to do with this poison in my system. I do not know what to do with this boiling hot hatred for all you have not done

for me. Do you have a single thing to say? Must I punch you in the face repeatedly to get you to speak? Must I savage every aspect of your being? How dare you? How dare you? All this and more did he direct in his wrath at the vicious one always, always stalling and thwarting and thwarting and stalling him, just stalling and stalling and thwarting and thwarting, as if Luther was his plaything. So he went on until the peace of God could enter and return him to some semblance of his authentic self. Because God was not to be phony with. God was to be punched in the face and called out for his imagined vileness if Luther was to heal. So Luther believed. He could not get there with phony bologna piety. That would not do. If God was everything, then Luther must bring all aspects of his being to him to deal with as he would.

*Celeste, I have strayed beyond the bounds of decency. I have drawn on the cesspool region of my mind. There is no reason to say I haven't, and like a murderer with a conscience holding a bloody knife, I have nowhere to live but in the land of horror. What ails me? What ails me? I say to you in my mother's voice, as it is she whom I have besmirched, I who blather on and on how her love lit the way for me. What could provoke such a monstrous betrayal? What? And let me not hear that for dreams we are not responsible, that our unconscious is a wild land rife with unruly elements. In dreamland did she thwart me. The how and why was not for me to know. A bull dyke I called her. Can you believe? The woman who had given me life I spoke to in this unforgivable manner. No mitigating circumstance can I claim by saying I uttered this foulness halfheartedly, not with anything approaching vehemence. It was for my brother to restrain*

*me from jumping from the roof. Him I dispatched to apologize on my behalf, coward that I was.*

*The following day, in my waking state, did the punishment come. A metropolis is no guarantee of protection from the elements, and New York City is no exception. The pipes froze, denying us running water, as arctic blasts rattled our windows and caused the plastic sheeting over them to billow. Is it normal to go about one's dwelling with multilayer clothing and to blow on one's hands to regain flexibility? There was nothing to do but let helplessness reign while awaiting the plumber. Many times that day I asked what manner of man I was that I could not solve the problem myself? And, of course, the answer is the same manner of man who cannot make a simple table for his wife's studio. There are times, Celeste, that we must hang onto the lifeline that God is that we not suffer demise from our own self-hatred, for what is the reality here but that competency is all around me in the form of men who are real men. Oh, they may feign ineptitude and even declare some faux failure or other to preserve an image of modesty, but such is not possible should they even try. Always, always are they shown to have the necessities for success after their artful attempts to prove otherwise. Screw you, God. Just screw you. There. Now I have truly blasphemed. Now will my punishment be truly endless. That perdition not be mine, let me also say this: cancel, cancel, cancel.*

*Now another has come to apprehend me. Arida Tanne, a name I have already mentioned. Yes yes, it is an old story of mine. There is no justice on the earth, or justice is prevailing all day all the time. Either way the bombing runs have commenced. My air-raid shelter is*

*in ruins and my eardrums have been shattered. I stand in the rubble, not even bothering to shake my fist at the sky. Sabra Arida, whose independence was bred in her bones, has laid me low. She wears her skepticism on her dark and leathery skin. Her forte is the cartoon as she seeks a truth that dispenses with words, which are, she says, inimical to the truth, taking us away from its center to the deadness of the periphery. Words are the liar's domain. So she conveys wordlessly with full conviction. The end was in the beginning for me.*

*"I have been reading the great Saul Bellow. The Dean's December. I have been hoping to draw on his word strength that it may improve my own. His garden is a good one to wander in, all the reviewers say. And I bought it at B. Altman, where quality finds itself."*

*"And a review is what? You don't have your own mind?" Her sabra toughness shining through.*

*Like Kaplan Acedit, she has come to the conclusion that I am lazy and incompetent, that I have been faking my way in the workplace with the appearance and not the substance of intelligence. That is why Arida is on her own and I work for a scold.*

*A look of intense disappointment has come to Arida's face. The jacket for her book is not to her liking. Somehow I failed to send her the proof. And if for a minute I think I am reading something that is not there in her expression, she emerges briefly from her laconism.*

*"You are not who I thought you were. You are a weakling. You need to grow. Maybe this will happen when you stop depriving yourself of light."*

*As I say, a bombing run, savage in its extent.*

*Celeste, I am meditating in the daylight and at night so I can live in the peace that passes all understanding. Is it a heresy to say not that I am Jesus himself but the Christ? Is not this Christ, the Christ that was activated in him, potential in all of us? Tonight I have resolved that I must seek to be useful and not exploitative in my dealings with others, including here at home, where it is such a challenge. How ready am I to be cowed by the strong and to reflexively revile the infirm in mind if not in body, such as Sarah, who has borne the brunt of my alcoholism. I must make peace on all my borders, including with Sarah's sister Claire. My consciousness must be purged of all guilt I hold onto. It is clear what I must say. Let contrition reign for knocking on her door that night she said I could stay in the family's apartment after my own place was broken into. Is it not true that just as my apartment was invaded, so too did I seek to intrude on Claire, led as I was from Sarah's bed to her door, through which I called out in the dark for her to let me lie with her, to her great shock. What freedom is to be found in such bondage to the flesh? Was it something in the air that she herself was generating that I was picking up on, or my own madness? It can only be the latter, Claire being a woman of great restraint and propriety, not to mention loyalty to her sister. There is no one to blame for my own impulsiveness, but the family environment I grew up in was not strong on boundaries. In some way it contributed to my defenselessness against my own lust.*

*And I am seeing too my laziness, the inability to give a full effort on the job, to go that extra length. Not that this awareness helps the next morning, when apathy is too*

*much with me for work to be a possibility. I wake to the conviction that Cromartie Wonders is choking the life out of me. My principal relationship at the office is with a brittle scold. Timidity and sheer fecklessness have led me to be a dog on her leash.*

*Celeste, we must go within. The bombing runs are too severe to withstand without HP's aid. But the thing is this. Can I use God for my own ambition? Am I not doing that when I ask for a prose as sinewy as Thom McGuane's? Might I not as well ask for the rugged physique of Thom McGuane? Is HP not saying that I must live within the dimensions of my thinness and outside the gates of all glory for all time other than his own, meaning the peace and joy and love he offers, and that in him do I find my unending treasure? When will I cease being a mendicant? When will I go with the flow of the power for goodness and wave goodbye to cynicism and its cousins in the ditch of negativity? Learning to accept the limits of my meager nation. Is that what this is all about?*

*And that must go for money as well. If my wallet is thin, I must learn to live in line with its thinness. If a restaurant is too fancy for us, the waiter having an air of excessive formality and the appetizers priced higher than the burgers and fries we buy at our regular haunts, then I must deal with my people-pleasing and simply get up and leave. The world does not care about me, and so I must care about myself, and I have been finding that caring for others is a principal means of self-care. I must walk with Sarah out of that restaurant like the man I want to be and ignore the bondage that the world would impose. And is there not bondage in the very word restaurant itself? Is it not saying rest or want? Is that not the stark dilemma and threat it imposes? Are we not being*



*asked to embrace the lie the word itself contains? No, no, it is like the great Dionne Warwick sang. Just walk on by, or in this case, walk on out.*

*Last night I attended the Billingsgate meeting of RoR. Indeed I was asked to speak there. The meeting takes place in a Presbyterian church on Park Avenue. That's right, Celeste. The church is situated among the wealthy and the powerful, the crème de la crème. And some of them are at the meeting, because, as is said, alcoholism is an equal opportunity illness. Louie the Hammer, a longtime RoR, tells his down-and-out sponsees to come to Billingsgate and pick out a nice warm coat for themselves, though maybe he is merely joking, as moral rectitude can and will soften even the hardest heart and criminal mind that enters RoR. As I may have said before, when I tell my story I am not in flight from the reality of my life. I give the group precisely what I don't want them to see, that I am a number and a low number at that, and that every day this number presents itself to me. But I also tell them that I go on about my day and do the things I need to do to get the job done, and even if the job is not done, to act as if it is. I do not give them the cutesy pie version. I simply punch them in the face with the reality of my shit-canned family and my shit-canned life. I tell them everything I was ashamed to reveal so they will know they are not hearing from Sylvester Slyboots, the one who chronicles his abysmal failures only to end with his towering successes, an inevitable outcome given the brilliant gene pool he draws from and the stable and prosperous older siblings he can rely on to help pull him up when play-acting at failure grows tiresome. Yes, yes, ground I have surely been over before, I understand, and yet there is this need to get naked, utterly naked, before them*

*and dispense with the lies, the image, all of it. This must I say at the risk of repeating myself. I am a number, I say. I hang it around my neck right now for all to see, I say. I abused my wife. I have a meaningless job. The back of my head is missing. In the recovery part I say that I am in God and God is in me, once more drawing on Mickey in In the Night Kitchen. Nothing about a corner office, a six figure salary, a happy marriage and beautiful children. Nothing. Is it spiritual pride or the simple truth that leads me to share my introduction to and early experiences with meditation? What I see is many of them cannot relate.*

*Silence prevails for some minutes after I finish. There has been no laughter, No seeming mirth. Shame share grips me. I have bragged where humility was the order of the day. Though it is customary to thank the speaker after the meeting, only one person, an elderly woman, comes forward. "I couldn't hear a word you said, but I'm sure your message was powerful," she says, extending her tiny hand.*

*At home I try to write, but I have brought the group with me. They are all there, sitting in my head. I have no place to hide. They have penetrated my innermost chamber. What am I to do, dear God? What am I to do?*

Sarah was keeping her hope alive, having entered her prints in a competition down at Pratt University, in Brooklyn. She was trying to emerge from her own demise and not be mired in apocalypse now. There was no need, just for that day, to say "The horror! The horror!"

And hope, or its stepchild, was seeking to activate in Luther as well. “Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could” was alive and present in his mind. No no, not Julie Andrews singing softly in the night, though he had witnessed that back when. It was just a word prompting he had staring at the YA novel he had placed on a shelf.

“I must leave it there. It must not find me ever,” he said to Glanton, on the phone that same day.

“The answer will come, one day at a time. We cannot have tomorrow’s answer today,” he assured Luther.

“Yes, I suppose.” Who was this man he had put his faith in, this man with empty pockets.

“Don’t suppose. Repose.”

“What?” Luther said.

“RIG, Luther, RIG.”

“Excuse me?”

“Repose in God, Luther. Repose in God.” So Glanton said, before hanging up.

Luther was left to ponder the man. A sea change had occurred in Glanton’s life, first when he became famous for the novel he had written, and then even more famous for the second one. Glanton could walk where he went with the knowledge that he was rooted in posterity and that nothing could ever remove him from the world’s memory bank. He had ratcheted up into the top echelon. He did not have to speak. His books spoke for him. They were his certificate of excellence. But the present had begun to leave his premises sometime ago, with the lesser books that followed. And now there were no

books. Glanton was fading from the world and its memory into God, who lived within everyone's memory. It was only a matter of time before that memory came to them, and when it did, that would be the end of time as they had known it. Then the word *posterity* would have no meaning, nor would *generations past or present*. He saw in that moment where Glanton was going. He was going far away so he could be closer still. It was a strange business.

*Celeste, a milestone has been reached. No speculation. No rumination. True, I have been angry at work. True, I took umbrage that Rafta would see it as her function to check with the new personnel director, Maxie McGivney, about my vacation time rather than leave the matter to me. But my anger I treat as a curiosity to be observed and have not been examining causes and conditions for it. What am I saying? This could be a tombstone, not a milestone. I must see once again the shaping power of the past, the consequences of living in a matriarchal domain and not developing resources of my own. I must stare at this reality in all its sad aspect and remind myself that Rafta is not my mother and Cromartie Wonders is not the building in which I grew up, or failed to grow up. I must see and accept deeply the hanging string nature of my being and invest time in the explorations that will serve as a breakwater against these waves of prosecutorial incrimination that gain such force in my mind and that I seem powerless to resist once they gain momentum. I must find a way to anchor myself to my true self so I am not carried out to sea by these powerful riptides.*

*Wednesday has come, a day of lightness even in the cold and rain. Everywhere I go do I see the light and hear my mother give full pronunciation to the day's syllabic parts. Wednesday. No gliding. No eliding. A word that deserves the full due that my mother gives it. And new hope has entered me on this day in which the heavens shine so bright in my mind. An unborn cries out for a realized existence, though my shelves are filled with the stillborn. Existence is precious. Over and over do I hear this murmuring from the manuscript graveyard, and so I must try once again to see what can be done with the resources that are available to me. The light is everything, and I must be grateful for the rays that find me. Just this morning did I see on the street the body of a man covered with a blanket. He had leapt from the fifth floor window of his room in a seedy hotel only a few blocks from Pilgore Press. The hotel is on a side street where only the lonely and downtrodden are known to dwell. There was no light in this man. No light from family and friends. Even in daylight hours had darkness come to stay. Nothing but the abyss awaited him. He had lost the necessities for living. We must never ever get to that place, Celeste. We must give thanks that we are not there. This sunlight, these rays of hope, are what we count on.*

The lunch hour meeting has a name. It is called Forget About It. All manner of munching and crunching and slurping going on. The bathroom has a tub that cries out for scouring and the entire basement suite smells of mold. Am I repeating myself? Well then, let it be entered in the record that this is so. The rooms are dingy but a spirit of peace is palpable. We have found sanctuary. But I am not in my right mind today. Order is not prevailing.

My speaker did not show, and so I had to enlist someone present at the last minute to provide the lead. And then a man named Abednego called me from the room and had me listen to his tale of the dying cat he has had for years and the two dollars for cat food he needed so the animal could survive. The speaker finished her lead as I was responding to Abednego's plea with the money he had asked for, and so it was for someone else to step forward and see that the contribution baskets were passed at the break in order to pay the rent and other expenses. In the sharing part of the meeting, I raised my hand and sought to convey the horns of the dilemma on which I was stuck about the YA novel, but got tangled up in my own words and thoughts and had to stop.

A cold clear January light awaited me as I headed back across Park Avenue and the buildings of enduring order that lined it to the reality of my life at Cromartie Wonders. Nothing is forever, I told myself, and repeated the same information in the hope that it could penetrate and achieve the status of truth.

—From the journals of Luther Garatdjian

*There are times, Celeste, that we are afforded an opportunity to see things as they are, not as we want them to be. At such times the veil of denial lifts and even if it lowers itself again, that one glimpse remains rooted in our consciousness and will, over time, grow and we will inevitably be living in, not glimpsing, the fuller reality of our lives.*

*It happened that Sarah and I went for dinner with Carola Aprile and her husband, Tom Terst. As always, I was outside their circle of admiration and love through no desire for exclusion on their part. While Carola Aprile pulled out enormous canvases and Tom*

*Terst and Sarah had never been reluctant to show their work, I remained Mr. Hidden Away. Why would I show manuscripts that smelled so strongly of failure and defeat? Still, it did occur to me that Carola Aprile might, despite her intelligence, become a fellow denizen of the failure gulch and that possibly she too was a deluded soul. After all, the representational figures in her canvases were a poor and pale imitation of the masters of centuries past. They revealed her as an academic painter with no pulse for the present. Once again I sensed that she had attached herself to the sun god in marrying Tom Terst, and that she had done so in the hope that she could draw on his light as a power source that would elevate her into his echelon of success.*

*Tom Terst was big into science and technology as well as art. Like Carola Aprile, he could do his figures and elevate far above into the realm of higher mathematics. Algebraic formulae could he write backward and forward. His mind he had married to the future. His wind machines and mobiles were seen on beaches and in vacant lots and in front of tall buildings. Like an outdoor plant, they could not stand within the confines of a room. With such restriction would their metal fatigue into listlessness. What few knew was that they were Tom Terst's listening devices, his additional corps of ears for the divine. Tom Terst was small in body but big in mind, and from his mind did the bigness of his creations grow, their blades and extensions shifting and rotating in the wind. His heart had bigness in it, too. The glow of eternal goodness and fidelity to Carola Aprile was within it. Tom Terst had the power to make big men look up to him. He truly did. His bodhisattva properties precluded a relationship with lasciviousness. He did not give himself away to interested women simply because they offered themselves to him, though*

*many, many did. He understood the value of fidelity in itself, for the peace of mind it nurtured, but also for the magnification of his gift. In staying true to Carola Aprile was Tom Terst staying true to himself.*

*Why do I say this, Celeste? Because Tom Terst suddenly turned from the enclave of goodness the three of them had established, that small ring of right mindedness, and put his light on me, saying with no malice aforethought but only level-headed sincerity, "So what is your novel about?" Take that novel from your desk drawer. Take it from the shelf to which you have confined it. Come out from your hiding place. In such a manner was he speaking to me with his question and the bland goodness emanating from his face. He was only speaking for the universe. But in that moment I had been given to in fact come out and join their circle, I could not. The power was not in me to say that the novel was about a boy doomed to live in the reality of his low numbers, never to know the high board score empyrean of Carola Aprile and high-achieving Tom Terst. Not in front of Sarah could I say this either, she who was, in her way, a bastion of excellence. The universe is always calling us into it. Stand in your nakedness. You have nothing to fear. You are not alone in perfecting the art of concealment, but you have orchestrated your own loss. The numbers are nothing, nada, zilch. We are all one inhabiting discrete forms, whatever seeming vileness we perpetrate on each other and ourselves. But fear blocked me from stepping out to the calling universe. And so I had to die another death until the next opportunity for life arose. This is not fantasy. This is reality, spiritual reality.*

*"I don't know. I'm drawing a blank," I heard myself say, the words seeming to travel the distance between us in slow motion. You must understand. He had a standard*



*of excellence that did not recognize failure. It was not a matter of countenancing failure. He simply did not recognize it. And so he turned away from me, that he could be among his own kind, the language of failure not being his to know or to learn. Now Celeste, there is peace in finding one's own place, one's own level, one's own station, if only for one moment to stand outside the gates of excellence untainted by envy but relieved of the burden of seeking to be what it is beyond us to be. It hardly mattered when Carola Aprile, having seen me sink into silence and seeking to act as the good and gracious host, patronizingly inquired how my job was going. I answered dutifully, but with the cowed restraint permanently in place that her assessment of men lacking a math or scientific aptitude summoned when I was in her presence. Celeste, there comes a time when we must cease apologizing for the quality and quantity of our brain. We must simply let others run amok with their own inward preening and do our best to stay out of the destitution lane that they would place us in. I rearranged my face in accord with the slogan to "act as if" and reported that things were going swimmingly and immediately did she expedite her return to her own echelon. But Celeste, people with big minds can swim in the rank waters of deceit as well. Do not tell me that Carola Aprile did not have her flashes of envy. Do not tell me that she had not hitched herself to a rising star for no better reason than that she could then go along for the ride. I know you won't. Larceny lives where it cannot always be found. But perhaps something of more important moment occurred. In the quiet place did truth come to me. I did not belong with their kind anymore. Whatever kind I was, I wasn't theirs. It came to me as well that Sarah didn't really love me, that when I wasn't attacking her or otherwise causing pain, I provided a*

*bit of security and little else. A wife who didn't want to have children, who mocked pregnant women, calling them cows, who showed an active dislike of kids. A woman who felt no obligation to help support us. What was that about? All this absorption with art but no attention to practical matters. On what basis were we married, and for what purpose? I went to bed that night feeling sad, that I had seen something I didn't necessarily want to see.*

*We don't get away with these lies forever. Ultimately we must stand on the ground of honesty if we are not to sink into the abyss. And so, since this is a record of sorts, let us state and accept that I cut a poor masculine figure. Possessed of a weak and dependent nature, I relied on the security of the Van Dines' financial resources, even if I didn't really draw on them. Faced with the reality that Sarah had a disability that precluded her from being a stable member of the workforce, a man of more stable character and with a more enduring love would have accepted his marital circumstance and shouldered full responsibility for the financial and emotional well-being of his spouse. But clearly I didn't have those robust dimensions. How satisfying it is to leave behind the hyperbole and other forms of excess in favor of the unembellished expression of simple truths.*

*Celeste, about this domain of the ordinary, those deprived of life's most exquisite experiences, we must question this consignment. How does such a state of mind come about except through comparison? We look about at the ones who strut and posture and see only our own lack. Our spiritual batteries run down and we become prey to depression, our only compatriots the deformed and discarded. It is essential then that we sit and focus on our breath, that the hegemony-driven actors on the world's stage not*

*claim us for their fodder. There is another way of seeing things. In all this time I was calling on the higher power not only to stay sober but to give me the shift in perception that would lead to vision. Something wondrous had happened. The kundalini had been activated. Not that I could claim bodhisattva status. Whatever transcendent state I seemed to approach or achieve in my sittings, in the daily round I was prone to the old attitudes of envy, competitiveness, passive hostility, extreme insecurity, and all the rest. Still, it was progress worth noting in comparison with where I had been when I arrived at the doors of RoR, the only comparison it was suggested be made if I was to maintain a healthy perspective on my growth.*

*Glanton was on fire with program integrity when I voiced my new perception of my marriage. He directed me to write out my marital inventory and seek to live in the reality of the words that came forth. All manner of sternness was coming through the line at me. I felt the power of his years and the scope of his life in all that he said and didn't say. And yet the inventory was inconclusive. My marriage was beyond the reach of words. They would not untangle the knot, no matter how much I wrote. Only time and God could do that, and in that sense the biblical injunction "What God has joined let no man rend asunder" would be stood on its head. In its stead the passage would have to read, "What Luther has sought to join let God rend asunder." We must go where the higher power leads, Celeste. We must not be a slave to mindless literalism. We cannot expect to find our truth solely in texts transliterated centuries ago. Let us be dubious regarding words written in stone that may sink of their own weight. Everything is in flux and God is on the*

*line now with updates, revisions, and clarifications. He has drawn near. The times demand it.*

*Celeste, I have been on the line with Luke. Communication can be dangerous. Some things we are better off not knowing, like death threats from modern day ninjas or those carrying forward a more familial tradition of violence.*

*“He was kind of scary, to tell you the truth,” Luke said of Moses, who had visited with him. “I mean, he tells Rose’s twins, Joey and Jimmy, to get haircuts because they look like sissies. They’re beautiful, sensitive kids. What does he want, for them to look like Marines? Then he talks about straightening out the Iranians. Then he says he sometimes just has an urge to kill people.”*

*Fear took me over as I listened. My fate was once again my nephew’s to determine. Once again he was the extension of Hannah’s reign of terror, her pawn, her boy, her instrument of repression and destruction. All my history with her rose up before me. If ever there was a malignant force in the world, it was she. Was he not living proof of who she was? By their fruits you shall know them? He was her fruit, her bad seed. I could only imagine how she had infected him with a hostile attitude toward me and increased his sense of deprivation.*

*But it is imperative to rally strong in these instances. Never mind running to plead my case before the United Nations general assembly that a belligerent is threatening my tiny nation. Never mind the dinky doo of buttonholing strangers on the street and spewing my tale of terror. Rally strong, Luther. Rally strong. What is my part in all of this? Would*

*this bout of terror have visited my shore if I had not put my thoughts and feelings on paper; that is, made of my family fodder for the delusional dream of fame? But Celeste, there are rallies and then there are rallies. We must call on the light of fullest understanding and settle for nothing else, and that is love. We must love our fear until that fear is absorbed into the circle of love that calls to it.*

*But then there is this, that voice saying we are not in this world to please, that I am far harder on my main character than anyone else, that the highest calling is to be at the service of the truth, that the laborer is worthy of his hire and all the rest. But I felt dirty. I felt in the place where I have been before and since when practicing an infidelity to family and loved ones—straying from Sarah, embezzling from the building we managed, etc. My conscience is warning me that I have deviated from my own values or values I never had in the first place and thus sabotaged my chance for happiness. Love is not of two minds. Nor is it the two faces one is forced to wear when acting in discord with what he says. There is work to be done to close the gap, and harmony will only fully reign when that alignment is achieved. We must always be prepared to die, whether at the hands of a nephew with a mind out of alignment or a drunken motorist. Let me be grateful to Moses for bringing me to this state of terror. It is there that the truth can more fully reveal itself as to where my real reliance rests. Still, it is a lot to take in, that the son of my oldest sibling should be programmed for my ultimate destruction. And please, this is not an unfounded fear, given Luke's report that our nephew assembles his rifle at night and sits at his window looking down at passersby on Broadway through the crosshairs of the scope. I am reminded that all fear creates the opportunity for love, that is, sharpens*

*our awareness for its need, and that such love cannot always be generated by another, not even Glanton with the full power available to him. As if, by his silence he was kicking away an overly friendly dog, and so I did what I had begun learning to do. I sat in meditation and partway through the twenty minute session the wolves backed away from the door and I was enveloped in a sweet and protective love. The separation, for now, was dissolved, and though the barrier was sure to recreate itself, the way forward had been laid out for me. I had the choice of God or the world. Though, of course, maybe there was a middle way.*

At Now Is the Wow, an Asian woman named Kim Pao spoke one evening. She was infused with a happiness that couldn't contain itself but directed her outward to others. Whether it was true happiness or hysteria Luther couldn't say for sure, but he feared that at any moment she would dissolve into tears or plunge into the abyss of depression or both. Once again he was reminded of the program prompting him to seek the middle—not too high, not too low. He saw himself in Kim Pao, self-contained and even withdrawn at times, and at others like a balloon propelled by the air that is escaping in a zany flight path before falling to the ground. He could show the same kind of enthusiasm, that of the outsider who has finally been allowed inside the club. She was thinking her life was ahead of her, that love would enter now that she had been released from the bottle. There would be the man of her dreams, or the man beyond her wildest dream. But it would not be that kind of love that she would meet. She was too damaged. The only love she would come to know was self-love and the love of God.

*There are things I have failed to mention in this ill-begotten narrative. Don't ask me why. Sloppiness? Indifference? Who can say? This writing thing has been, fundamentally, a form of endlessly protracted therapy. The quantum of words I write each day leave me feeling peaceful, contented. My elation, my satisfaction with the day's work, are only manifestations of delusion, as the work is going nowhere but into a pile of other unpublished papers. So as it was in the beginning, when Dr. Dressler encouraged me to keep a journal, to the very present, with brief and fleeting exceptions, I daily find myself frantic to sit at my desk and return to my center, which has slipped away in the night, and only words can bring me there. Only words—now, in conjunction with prayer and meditation--can leach the poison from me and keep me from the downward spiral into self-loathing.*

*I fear I have left something out, and if I haven't, then it is still worth the risk of repetition to say it again. Sarah and I do have children, a beautiful boy and transfixing girl who serves as a heating pad on cold winter nights. No, I am not talking pedophilia here. I am talking Fenimore and Kitty Dog. No, I cannot call them progeny. They are adopted, and sired or not, show no particular filial devotion, though the need for love compels Sarah and I to say they do. Kitty Dog goes on complex maneuvers worthy of the Prussian military in daylight and in darkness and so has earned a title. Captain Kitty Dog she is. And the love that cannot speak its name but through distortion compels me to address Fenimore as Fensimore. CKD is a Siamese with a strain of Chihuahua in her dark and*

*bulging eyes, and feistiness lives in her mentality. Fensimore has a light gray coat with white markings and is as gentle as his name. Like a tumbling tumbleweed were they when we brought CKD home. Over and over for the length of the Chinatown loft did he roll with her clutched to him in a burst of uncontrollable joy to now have a companion. All manner of sweet emotion do I direct their way in the privacy of my being. I had come some way in my nature from the days of Roberto and his fallen cat with his leaking guts (horrible, horrible) and the killing of those chipmunks at Camp.*

*The impulse toward violence was still there in me, however, Celeste. So I must have suspected. Because what would it mean to bring children into the world only to find that you had no more love for them than you had for yourself. Because if you were no good, tainted, what good could your offspring be? And suppose you discovered that the judgments you made your whole life about Hannah for her tongue-between-thick-lips smacking ways turned out to be yours as well against your own flesh and blood, the fear that in moments of frustration you would strike them and the self-hatred would compel you to strike them again and again, because once you started you could not stop, as in those European days and weeks with Sarah in the summer of 1970? This truth that abides dormant in us we must bring out if ever we are to tear down the mask of phoniness and accept that we are murderer and lover all in one. There is, of course, no “we” here. I am talking solely of myself. You possess a gentle nature and were born with the moral compass that I appear to be missing. Still, even with you, the mask of people-pleasing amiability had to be pulled from your face. Your pent-up fury and outrage had to be summoned. What revolution can there be without change? But that is for another time.*



Arida Tanne, whose body retained desert heat even in a colder clime and who had, Luther was led to suspect, a cat's sandpaper tongue, called to thank him for the balance of her advance. Signals were being sent as she spoke. Perhaps his receptors had failed him in the past or this was a new development. Why did he say so? Because for the first time the question arose that possibly she wanted something more and was bringing sabra love lust to his door. But he saw her leathery skin. He saw the historical density of her complex tradition even as he heard the silence of intimacy daring him to open his door and know her. A dark session awaited him if he crossed that line. No, no, he must neither knock on doors nor open his own. He was sober now. He must not go down the drinking road, though the pernicious words *There is no morality where there are no police* sought to assert themselves. As if in opposition the words *No, but the women of darkness are, and we must not go to them anymore* were bidding for a presence.

*Celeste, to say that there are approximations of the truth is to say that a batter who has whiffed came close to hitting the ball. But you and I are not here to whiff. Nor are we here to do the downtown thing and then circle the bases in slow and ostentatious fashion, as that would only invite from the disrespected pitcher chin music of the most serious kind. We must be straightforward and dignified even when exploring the more abysmal subjects. But enough with the prologue. Enough. I have lied, lied. The YA novel came down from the shelf a month ago and I sought to finish it. The day came when the last word was written and I summoned what courage I could and read what I had wrought.*

*Never before had the suicide hotline assigned a caller to a persona non grata list before. I was indeed history in the making, burning up the wire. A horror show of self-delusion was right before me on those pages. And to think that there had been days when I had thought I was doing what had never before been done, that I had hit one clear over the roof of Yankee Stadium and then performed a slow, outrageous stutter step around the bases to a thunderous ovation. So it is only inevitable that as high as we have gone with excess, so must we spiral down to the bottom. Bloviation. Imprecision. Infelicity of expression. More backstory than forward motion. Lack of detail. Twenty characters too many. And, of course, the whole painting by the numbers thing. If it had actually happened, then it must be recorded on the page as such. And so, to be a slave to the "truth" while ignoring the higher truth that imagination can deliver. Such fecklessness. As with that ineptly built table for Sarah, so too with literature.*

*Celeste, this not a time for war but for peace. However, I don't get the chance to choose the circumstances of daily existence. I did not put Viv Bean, the Cromartie Wonders freelance reader, on this planet. I had no part in fashioning her existence. I am not a bespoke tailor of humankind. Yet here she is loving me not and being the proud and current representative of the opposition. The lonely streets of Brooklyn has she walked in all kinds of weather. Abandoned warehouses and blighted buildings have been renamed after her. Structures for empathetic understanding of the likes of me are not in place in her mentality nor are they on order.*

*Viv Bean is an analyst of human behavior as well, though not a necessarily*

*accurate one. She seeks to drill down deep, inveighing now against those who crack their knuckles in defiance of all societal norms. She does not protest against the offense to their joints or focus on the disturbing sound itself but simply declares the sound to be an expression of hostility.*

*To show that she is a part of humanity, she confesses to getting lost quite easily. Road maps are a particular challenge. I trot out a Trotskyism. That time in London he lost his way and called this tendency his topographical cretinism. Have I said this before? If so, forgive me.*

*"Oh that's good. Real good. Makes losing your way acceptable. And you can sound intelligent even if you aren't. Some people need that covering. Like people who look better in their clothes than they do without. I would think you're one of them."*

*She may be the captive of her own hostility, but here she is not off the mark, having seen through to my pretense and laid bare in her cruel way not only my mental but physical deficiency, leaving me nowhere to hide. For the rest of the day I see my tired flesh, my protruding breasts, and odd chest declivity. I see all that she has seen.*

*But we do rally strong, Celeste. No one can say we don't. You can push a ball down in the water but once released, it floats back to the surface. We have buoyancy, or some of us do. We don't stay on Perdition Road forever.*

Robert Stone is of Conrad's kind and Graham Greene's kind, and yet he walks across the page as his own man. Luther is in the realm he belongs in now, reading *A Flag for Sunrise* as he lies in bed. No activation of the acute self-consciousness and uncertainty he

experiences in the world of children's books, which smells of the grade school classrooms and drowns him in memories of those awkward early years. Why does he give himself to Robert Stone but not to John Irving? Because he is of Robert Stone's kind, if only in a far lesser way. Because Robert Stone has been soiled by life in a way that New England John Irving hasn't and never will be.

But now it is time to get down from the loft bed and to fly above them both, to be untethered from the earth and from the word spoken, written, or read. The time has come for meditation and prayer so words cannot keep him where he does not belong.

A murderer is in our midst, or he has flown to Kansas or parts unknown. But he was there on Great Jones Street to stab a loft dweller to death and drop his corpse out a window and into a back alley. "You are next" was the message he left in the victim's blood on a wall of the loft. The world is not normal. It has entered into its own darkness, whatever Mr. Knowing Nod wants to say about it being morning in America. And even if it is, murder can be committed in daylight hours as well.

*I am aware of what Mr. Ernest Hemingway said of Mr. John O'Hara, that he was always beating out bunts, but that is no way to talk to a lady or anyone. I am not calling John O'Hara a lady, but Mr. Hemingway was suggesting as much. He was imposing his masculine bulk on O'Hara and feminizing him. It was for Mr. Hemingway to carry a big stick to the plate and to carry that big stick to all places beyond the ballpark. I see nothing wrong with a bunt if it gets me to first base, but now when the impulse visits me*

*to lay one down the line, instead I place the idea in my loose-leaf binder solely for story ideas, so I can come to them after I have launched one with a downtown swing.*

*Bruce Bill, I am coming with my YA-YA novel. Downtown swing it is not, but not a bunt either. Call it Line a Double, Sam, I'm the Ice Cream Man.*

*I spread myself thin, Celeste. I do. I indulge in literary promiscuity. Instead of sinking into a relationship with the text and living with it, I run to another lover in the guise of a new idea for a story or novel. I am full of initial enthusiasm until the same barrier faces me over and over again, my superficiality, my inability to penetrate the surface and get to the heart of the matter. Now it is "Luke and His Thing for Elvis" that has distracted me, because Luke will forever be wedded to the King in my mind. Page after page I write, recalling the King's electrifying Ed Sullivan Show performance and how the rain penetrated my childhood window and further rotted the sill on a "Love Me Tender" night and how approximations of glory and unearned sorrow went wherever his sound was heard, and how Luke wore his hair in a duck's ass and kept it in place with Wildroot and sought to banish the angry red pustules and fill in facial craters with mega-applications of PhisoHex and how Luke became a street corner man because he didn't have the torquing power that Elvis had and how he played "Don't Be Cruel" while out of control drunk one night. A recitation of memories with no real forward motion, no narrative pulse, just a narrator emotionally distant in his makeup charting his brother's decline and hoping to profit from it with literary recognition.*

*This is not for your ears, Celeste. It is not. I will not sully you with filth. It is but a dredging operation from the past that I may someday be free of filth as well. So it is simply me in conversation with myself. Luther, I say, that party you went to thrown by a friend of Vera's, actually her friend's older sister; Vera being a classmate of the younger sibling. The room you took that younger sister into. The shock, the revulsion, that a glimpse of her dirty underpants caused you. The horror of it. And Luke, in a perspicacious moment, saying, "You want things fast." He seeing, Vera seeing, the whole world seeing my concupiscence.*

*Rafta has taken her cue from 1010 Wins. All news, all the time becomes all anxiety, all the time. Celeste, planes and rockets have engine thrust, and I must have the same. The times demand it. I call on the divine this minute to give me the elevation that I am seeking in meditation, so that I am looking down, not across, or not looking at all but simply find myself transported into a cloud cover of bliss. Oh, for that road free of potholes, traffic tie-ups, tollbooths, that magical pathway running parallel to the clogged, bumpy one the horde herd has to rely on. Oh, if that were only so.*

*Celeste, it is true that I am seeking to make small improvements in the rut my life force has led me to. But we must strive to preserve order if we don't want our bathroom to be the narrow space between two parked cars on a desolate street and the hard and filthy cement of a rat-traversed subway platform to be our bed and the police officer's*

*nightstick to be our alarm clock. Let our cataclysm alert be unceasing, as it is closer to us than we can possibly know. The homeless that we see in increasing numbers are but multipliers of an alternate reality moving closer to our own. They present to us not a vision of naught but the fact of it. Indigence has reduced them to a focus on the essentials, food and rest and shelter from the elements. Their presence on the avenue, Fifth Avenue, keeps us in the straitjacket of fear and acceptance of meagerness. But if we must know our place, we must also know our potential. Small opportunities for understanding present themselves every day. Alertness is the key. Just today one of Rafta's castaways, a manuscript she spoke of with disdain as she placed it in my care, received a ten thousand dollar advance from a notable weekly reader series. Even as I write this do I hear the Rolling Stones singing "That's How Strong My Love Is". Why? Because love did enter into my care of this flawed and wounded orphan, and I would like to think I actualized its potential. Thus did the fat-lipped one endlessly primping his mop top flood my consciousness with his song, telling me to get on stage, metaphorically speaking, and strut my stuff, that each of us has dimensions unexplored because of fear.*

*And yes, Celeste, I fully understand a beating most savage is in order for referring to the songster as I do.*

*Celeste, this is important, not in the way of a late-breaking development but as a story old as sin itself, and because I have borne witness to it in myself before, let me revisit the matter with renewed urgency as Chagrin is now the homeland in which I have sentenced*

*myself to dwell. Once again have I been on the judgment throne that Roller Carmona-Dixon should be out of the office, sickness being her excuse. Once again is the machinery of castigation in full operation. Malingerer, layabout, queen of snooze—these are some of the little endearments I have attached to her size extra-large person. Where is the compassion, Celeste? Where is it? A woman child who cannot leave home and for whom home comes before work. What about it, Luther? What about you? Do you not have limitations of your own to focus on? Were you not just speaking of the fear that has held you back? Let the real exploration begin. Let it begin with Mr. Phony Baloney himself. Let the gentle hand of understanding lead us from our posture of fulminating self-righteousness.*

That whizzing sound, the distinct sound of poison-dipped arrows flying through the Manhattan air. When the quivers had been emptied, his back resembled a human pin cushion. Slings and arrows very much in his mind as he staggered to the phone.

“Glanton, I am bleeding profusely. I am drowning in my own blood as it floods my throat,” Luther said, recounting the horrors of the day: the caustic tongues, the evil eyes, the cold shoulders. But Glanton did not open his heart to him on this night. He did not breathe life into Luther with an “I know how you feel” statement of empathy. He did smack-a-billy. He did forearm shiv. He did tough love with the goal of reconstituting Luther’s brain and his entire apparatus of perception.

“People are people. Get used to it,” he said. He then more cryptically added, “Do not be a dime store cowboy,” before signing off. Such signature hard slap from the master



of it. **Stopped here**

*Celeste, there were other disturbances in this time. Agita was deriving from many sources. A man at the Now Is the Wow meeting took issue with me.*

*“You are here for your alcoholism and yet you speak about everything but—the challenges in your marriage, your nonexistent writing career, the job that instead of being grateful for you disparage. When are you going to right your ship?” he queried, in a state of rage.*

*Because he was of the beastly kind and easily capable, in his parlance, of throwing me a beating, as he might have said, I did not query him right back as to why he couldn't or wouldn't button his lip and when we might hope for this to happen? Just as I was aggrieved at the world, so was he aggrieved at me. Grievance is grievance, and has to be tended to, whether it is dire ire at a sharer such as I or at the malevolence of fate. Still, it pains me to note the saturation bombing of his face that went on in my mind in the aftermath of his hot breath lecture. This is not normalcy, I had to believe, imagining such pulverization of the man. I see my difficulties with women, the yoke of dominance they have cast over me, and now the lifelong process of reversing that reality. But I must also right my ship of state in regard to men. I must enter into their company with more ease.*

But then it was hold on, Harry, just hold on, time. Because the world had turned on its axis in the night and minds along with it. At the lunch hour, as he stood waiting for the elevator at Pilgore Press, was Luther suddenly brought up short by what presented itself

as the paramount question for all time for him personally. Had he wrecked Sarah's life by asking her to leave Boston? Well, had he? An answer was imperative to the question, adding to his fear, as now everything seemed to be on the line. Who are you, prosecuting assailant, that you would come to me in such a bold and high stakes way? On what basis do I stand accused? With these queries did he fire back and the answer allow itself to emerge from the shadows and end its malingering. And what was that answer? What? Sarah's mother had called that she might be in touch with her daughter, who was still boycotting her existence, and Sarah had taken umbrage at her mother's tone of voice. By subtleties of intonation was her mother sending signals of disapproval. Sarah calling Luther at work to say, in the aftermath, "Why did you bring me here to this zone of familial toxicity, with radiation levels off the chart? So I could be a pawn in my mother's malicious game? So I could lose my hair? So I could flounder?" Luther staggered out onto Madison Avenue, seeking to steady himself, when he heard these words: "Abolish guilt from your premises. Abolish now the merely meaningless masquerading as meaningful. Be ruthless in your uprooting." With both ears did Luther hear this imperative, and gave a sigh of relief and gratitude for the exhortation. The path had been cleared on memory lane. "Well, are we going to live together or not?" Once again did he hear Sarah's distressed voice saying, in effect, "Do you still want me? Because no one else does." Because that is what she had been saying on that day back when she was still in Boston that she had made the call, even if those were not her exact words. She had no place in her genius lover's life or with his friends. He could provide no answer, not a shred of commitment. She had found him emotionally vacant. But Luther, emotionally

erratic as he was, could. Compassion came to him that she should have to feel so unwanted, as she had when, still a child, she had gone to bed with the boy upstairs only to have him tell her she was sick and ask her to leave. He could understand being unwanted. And look what he had done by taking up with Celeste. He had made Sarah feel even more undesirable, and at a time when her mental instability appeared to be growing. Still, she had put herself at risk by not taking steps to manage her own life better. Or her disability had put her at risk. And was she not responsible for her relationship with her mother and her entire family? Luther saw that their time of taking refuge from their nemeses in each other might be coming to an end.

*Celeste, atom bombs are dropping all around, with the hydrogen kind threatening to follow. None have detonated yet, but the threat of annihilation is great. Is this end of days scenario for real? Meanwhile I took the step of turning over my YA-YA novel to Bruce Bill, who sat above the skyline in a glass-enclosed tower to the stars. Sunshine was abundant, the plant-filled interior requiring no artificial light. I had no choice but to bow down to Bruce Bill's aura of magnificence. Bruce Bill signaled with his pointed finger where I was to leave the manuscript as he did a many thou deal on the phone. I complied and turned to leave. We know the place that has been assigned us in the world. Obsequiousness takes us by the hand and leads us there. All the while was our failure history being written into the record book. There is no use lying about our predilection for baking on the pavement on a dog day afternoon even in the late stages of winter. I headed for the McDonalds on Thirty-Eighth Street and Second Avenue, as that was where*

*I belonged now and forever. I called on my mother but she was long gone so far as availability was concerned. Not that a man should need his mother to sit with him and his fries and his burgers and watch as he eats with his fingers. I was sure to sprinkle plenty of salt on the fare and coat them with ketchup. At the next table a man wiped his face in the pages of the New York Post. He was looking for more than it could give him and I understood. Poor nutritional fare is all around us, if only we could see through to the truth. It is a life's work to elevate above the quotidian. And yes, Maya had me in her power. The death agony was upon me. I saw in that moment that Bruce Bill would reject me, that I would have no place in his glass tower, that I, like millions and billions, would go through this life unheard if not unseen. I had opened the door to myself. I had exposed all my ugliness so the repudiation journey might continue, as needed, till I had learned my place, to own up to the reality that I had been trying to capitalize on infirmity, and so long as I did, the world would turn me away. I saw my weightlessness amid the preposterous density throughout the globe. Even the grass had weight, but I was without substance. I had no energy for this life. All I was good for was gobbling in a fast food joint with all the other rootless souls.*

*Outside a cab pulled up. The hackie came inside with his cigar box and his young and stupid face of coolness that soon would show the signs of age and his head full of preposterous notions of who he was on the path of becoming, not understanding that his path was the path of nothingness. He too was here to get filled up, so he too could believe for the moment that he had some weight to impose on the world.*

Now are my AWACs once more in the air. A nation state, however small, must defend itself. Yes, the power of God, for sure, but armed might as well. Luke has been living in his malice again, aided and abetted by the drink. He has sought to smite me with his fear-tipped word darts. He cannot help himself. In the darkness that has come over him, malignity sparks fly from every pore as he sits centrally located in his misery.

“Moses is going to get you. He says it’s his life’s mission. He says he is a missile poised at your very heart and that maximum pain is the goal,” Luke said.

“Why do you tell me this?” Luther asked.

“Because vino is truth serum. You could use a little yourself.”

Once again Moses had visited with Luke, and spoke about the administration of true justice, justice that dealt with root causes, not symptoms. Moses had given the matter much consideration.

“Thank you for nothing,” Luther said.

“You’re welcome.”

“Why do you call your brother?” Sarah asked. Luther had told Sarah about the high alert status he was now in as a result of hearing about Moses from Luke.

“He’s my brother,” Luther said.

“So?”

“So you call Claire.”

“I wouldn’t if she scared me half to death.”

Sarah was speaking truth. There must be some part of me that wants to bring in

the rain, Luther could only think, in unspoken answer to her question.

Decline had a numbing effect. The farther down siblings slid, the less will he could summon to care. Hopelessness, or fate, was written into the lives of some, and it would not do to try to mitigate his brother's ill will, to pass it off as merely the drunk in him speaking. An added reason not to care.

Now Luther, in his interactions with himself, never sought to ask why he gave himself away when circumstances called for a self-contained vessel. His mind took him back to Alexander Hamilton Hall, on the campus of Columbia University, where he had sat for the SAT. Gabbling like a fool beforehand at high board score Ogden Connifer, who had not a word for him, so intent was he on avoiding any energy leaks. And what happened? What? Luther's word storm vanished but his board scores remained, their staying power indelible. But coming current, Glanton was not of that kind, having strict rules for his own existence. Sternness had been bred into his character. So when Luther came to him, saying he was bleeding of a self-inflicted chest wound, Glanton was ready with hard slap.

“Speak English, and concisely.”

“I fessed up,” Luther said, seeking compliance via contraction so as not to summon Glanton's ire.

“You fessed up what?”

“My business.”

“What business? You don't have any business.”

“Bruce Bill business. My YA novel to him. I told my boss.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It just came out.”

“Nothing just comes out. Get off the phone and answer the question in writing.”

So Luther hung up and put pen to paper. Why had he told Rafta about turning over his YA-YA to Bruce Bill? When he had finished, he called Glanton.

“I wanted to be important before I was rendered unimportant.”

“Good. You learned something about yourself.”

“Only what I have always known, that what goes up must come down.”

“Now go back and ask yourself in writing why it’s not a good idea to mix your personal and work life.”

Once again Luther did as he had been instructed, and thereafter dialed Glanton with the hope that his mentor would get on the line and be proud of what his guiding light had wrought.

“Because oil and water do not mix. The oil can get set on fire even with water all around, and it could be a while before the fire burns itself out. It can only mean that Rafta is the water and I am the oil and time is on her side. Or I am the water and she is the oil. I really am not sure. Glanton, are you there?” But Glanton was not there. He had vacated the premises of his phone. It was all right. Luther could hope and pray that Glanton had heard what he needed to hear.

*Celeste, wolves have teeth. Whether howling or in a state of silence is this so. And Hannah had her weaponry for tearing flesh asunder, whatever state or condition life*

*found her. Of this she was reminding me when she came around to calling. We must understand that fear was her first, though not her only love, as her question barked at me conveyed.*

*“Where is the building lease?”*

*Her question resounding like a puzzling accusation. “I have no idea. Why do you ask?”*

*“Don’t get personal. Are you trying to deprive me and my son? Well, are you?”*

*“But I don’t know what you are talking about. And what good would an old lease be to you anyway?”*

*“Don’t lie to me. My life is at stake.”*

*In that moment I understood. I truly did. She was the second coming of Roberto. Her life’s goal was to secure the apartment for herself when my mother passed on, and for some reason she believed that the lease for Auntie Eve’s management of the building, though long since canceled, would contain a clause securing the family’s permanent claim to the apartment and any protections against eviction. She could only believe that for some reason I might want to thwart her, that I might even want the apartment for myself. What her fear wouldn’t let her understand was that none of her remaining siblings, and definitely not me, wanted to live there. It was hard enough to even visit. We regarded it as a scene of trauma. I saw that she regarded the apartment as her birthright, her reward for a stunted life, for having her wings clipped so she couldn’t fly away. And what was her son’s reward for having his wings clipped by her? He would get to live with her.*



*You would think I was in the shambles of my life to write about my family like this, Celeste, when all that should be heard from me is not a single, solitary word but rather the unending sound of love as smooth as glass. One way or another we shall get there, get beyond the this and that of everything and nothing, to the silence of bliss. What we have experienced only briefly will we experience unendingly in eternity.*

They were coming from all directions: the sorrowful, the deceitful, the penurious, the unjust, the meek, the arrogant, the radical, the conformist, those with the capacity to solve complex equations on the fly and the so-called dunces, the lewd and those who lingered behind the lines of false or improbable decency. And now it was time for Mr. Student Radical, Mr. Hands to His Long Black Hair, from CCNY circa 1968, with his Frank Zappa mustache, a man taken hard to the ground by the harsh directives of his will, which would negate all that came within his sight. Saying, back then, from the summit his intelligence had taken him to, "This place is nothing but a cheap factory," speaking of CCNY, where he too was enrolled. A young man with an old face who had the courage or the arrogance to live outside the norm but never, within earshot of Luther, shared his vision for the common good. And why would he, being a young man constituted to live in the rubble of his own making. Luther Garatdjian was not a flame thrower. He did not wish to burn down the house and then hope for something better to rise from its ashes.

If Luther thought he would see the man again and possibly hear his story, he was mistaken. The man came and went. Where he went Luther had no idea. All Luther knew

was that he himself must remain locked in tight. He must stay the course, as at CCNY, and get his degree. Not that any degree would be conferred, but he would have lived and died sober. Alcohol was the great leveler, the great reducer, and there was great power in surrendering to that reality.

*Celeste, the tribunal for retribution is in session; I have been brought before the gray and stern eminences in their black robes peering down from the bench. The sight of me has aroused them to a state of high dudgeon. And, in truth, I have brought myself. So what is it now, you say to me, for even with someone such as yourself, blessed as you are with aspects of the divine, there are limitations. And so I respond, calling on the supreme power of the universe, who offers reassurance that, yes, we must go back in order to go forward, and that this backward look must be done with renewed intensity if we are to see, truly see, that the lilac gardens were not where we truly lived, emotionally speaking. Our former darkness must be called to the light of the day if it is to be expunged and we are to live with a measure of humility for the increments of change at work in us. Let it be entered in the public record that all aspects of my family live in me, from my intemperate father to smack and whack Hannah to my lost deceased sister Naomi. All of them, Celeste. All of them. Though I may have done so before, I present exhibit #1: Sarah Van Dine, August 1970. "Why do you stand under the blistering noontime sun outside the Prado in a long-sleeved black top? Speak." But the battered young woman does not speak. She does not tell of the bruises the long sleeves hide. And so I present exhibit #2: A Barcelona hotel room. Hard slaps are heard. A hand striking flesh. Not once, not twice,*

*but many times, with full savagery. "Who has done this to you, Sarah Van Dine? Who? Who is the monster that would strike you with an open hand repeatedly in the face? Who? Tell us that we may lay hands on him, that we may strip him naked and shackle him in a public square for the full revulsion of the populace." But we get nothing from her. Nothing. And yet we don't need her testimony, Celeste. We know who that culprit is. Seize him and shake him that his phoniness may be under house arrest forevermore. Seize him, I say.*

*Celeste, I often feel as if my life is a holding action, that I am in some interim period before my real life can begin. At other times I convince myself that Sarah and I can stay together and make a real life. But now clarity has come in a surprising way. A rapprochement as significant as that between America and mainland China may be taking place. At the very least it promises a greater intimacy than détente. Sarah is to meet with her mother today. To my surprise, I am in great fear over this development. And what, specifically, is the fear? That newfound closeness with her mother—the healing of her ancient enmity—will remove Sarah from my sphere of influence. With the regaining of a real mother, why then would Sarah need the mother in me? I see myself displaced and wandering listlessly around the Central Park Zoo eating peanuts. I feel like a man recovering from a long illness, and when I look in a mirror, I see someone sickly and weak and hopelessly isolated from his true identity, though that may make no sense, given my pronouncements about my new rootedness in God. And now this self-castigation is continuing into the night: unmanly, brittle, cosseted by women, lazy, etc.*

*I will keep you posted, Celeste. Late-breaking developments have become the norm.*

People are drinking, says Mona, a RoR member. Two of her friends have relapsed.

Another member raises his hand. “SLIP means ‘sobriety loses its priority.’” “Oh, shut up,” Mona says, taking offense at his unctuous tone, if not his message. Luther had never heard anyone shushed in RoR before.

People willing him to fail. Thwarting him, just thwarting him. So he could feel when given tasks that he feared were beyond his ability to successfully complete. And it all went back to being unable to replicate the pattern of the blocks that psychologist had shown him...Luther saying, “I have to accept that writing is my life. That being so, I must put in the hours. Discouragement is something I will have to endure and overcome.”

But war. Always there is the threat of war. Mutually assured destruction. A man in RoR saying, “Woman-hating man seeking a man-hating woman to share a life of misery with.” A sardonic man. A man living on the fumes of the past. A man who once had a love and now had her no more and so, with his mustache intact and his diabetes flourishing, he had his debacle, his wound, to share with the group, which absorbed his pain and loved him as the woman who had left couldn’t, loved him with a collective love. Was that what it had become with Rafta? Woman-hating man and man-hating woman? The things she did were infractions on justice. Snatching a memo out of his hand because he had been slow to articulate its content. Later he went to her. What choice did he have? Her action had

suggested what she really thought of him, that he was a dolt, as were all men really. He could not let that stand. He lacked the spiritual sustenance for such acceptance. Was he still a child at the mercy of his tormenting older sisters that he should absorb such abuse?

“Please. You must not. I cannot permit myself to be treated in such a way,” he said, a quiver in his voice. She nodding her head in seeming acquiescence, her eyes holding steady on his face and saying something different.

I am not a racist. I am race-conscious. Filling with rage when the black man followed behind as Luther entered the restroom of the New York Public Library. Thinking he has come to do mayhem violence on my mind and body and soul. Implacable he is in his will to punish my supposed whiteness for its existence. The man clothed in a dirty white shirt and baggy pants with a shiny seat held up by a rope belt and indifferent to the clatter his boots were making on the marble floor. The hardness of the streets in his face. Lost brilliance possibly contained in his blackness, musical riffs and literary passages floating free in his mind, this possible in the split second Luther could see beyond his fear. Retreating to a stall, where he anxiously peed with his ears alert. But there was nothing, nothing, when he emerged, no knife, no box cutter, just the man naked to the waist and bent over the sink giving himself a sponge bath. Not the first time Luther had been wrong and not the last. His occluded sight.

But Luther could go to the reading room and read. He was not Mr. Swivel Head. He was not at the mercy of attractive women, as in times past, at least on this day. This is what peace and serenity means, he thought, there at the table with the green-shaded

lamps.

“You were no innocent. In fact, you were sort of an animal, flying into rages and throwing things. There were times I thought you were trying to kill me,” Luke said, in what had become one of his weekly bombing runs. That life should have shunted Luther onto one track and his brother onto another. Luke seeming to slide further into chaos each day. Unable to find work. His drinking his only job. Rose, even with her infirmity, his source of stability. He had helped her get on disability, and now he was depending on her income as well. The shame of that. Their father had not been a breadwinner either. His little job as a cashier. Luther growing up knowing they would be on the street if it wasn't for their aunt and the building she had once owned and later managed. A voice from the past, Luigi, the furniture upholsterer with a shop in the basement of the building, saying, “Oh, what a bunch of bums you a gonna be when you a grow up.” Sicilian Luigi had seen the bum thing in him and his brother, Luther remembered, the bum de la bum thing. That time he told them not to sit on the newly upholstered armchair with their dirty pants and Luther sat in the chair anyway. The frying pan Luigi had hit him over the head with. No good son um a bitch bum, Luigi screaming.

Well, OK. Luther knew what he had come from. He knew what a hall of shame was and where to find it.

*Now Celeste, I have never taken an oath of office, as I have yet to be inaugurated and the day is unlikely to come when I will be. But I did take a marriage vow, that day down at*

*City Hall some years ago, which I quickly broke, by vacating the emotional premises of matrimony in exchange for an obsession for you. But now I stand on terra firma, the mica schist of Manhattan, when I flatly declare, "I don't drink no matter what." This one sentence manifesto I stated to Glanton just today. And he did not, in response, say, "Good for you. What do you want, a medal?" He did not slather me with mockery. He said only this: "You better say that, or I'll have Guido come and break your legs." Glanton was here simply deploying Glantonesque humor to mitigate the uncomfortable earnestness of my statement, as he often did, seeing the reality that I gave new meaning to the word "sincerity" when on the line with him. But Celeste, let me here take a stand with the estimable Soren Kierkegaard, author of Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing, who gave me the courage to wear my conviction proudly. The truth is that my line of defense against the first drink was nonexistent for many years, and that early on in my RoR experience, I had reached for alcohol though I knew it was not a good idea because if I didn't, those around me at the gathering would suspect I was an alcoholic. I placed their opinion of me, real or imagined, ahead of my own life, you could say. It must never happen again, Celeste. Never.*

*Order is not prevailing in this city that I love, Celeste. More and more are people being reminded with signage as to matters of etiquette and decorum and basic human decency. No, you may not poop and urinate in the middle of the street. No, you may not drop a gob of phlegm onto the subway platform. No, the tracks are not a garbage disposal site. Evidently, a new sign is needed for subway car windows, as several of them in the car I'm*

*riding in have been shattered.*

*Even in the corridors of supposed refinement is order not prevailing. Did I not just compliment the worker for the carpeting he has laid down here at Pilgore Press, and did he not say, his words ablaze with disgust, "Let's see how long it lasts. Got a bunch of slobes in this building. Throw all kinds of crap on the floor"?*

*If I have not said it before, the broom is the first line of defense against insanity. We must sweep. We must vacuum. We must pick up. Order. Order. Order.*

*Celeste, I am building a bomb shelter for maximum protection from the assault that will be forthcoming should my YA YA novel ever see what Sylvia Plath calls "the ritual of print." The load that Hannah will drop could well disperse me into eternity. I must pray for better understanding that the things I seek are not necessarily the things I need. To trade vileness, and badly written vileness at that, about my family for a bit of fleeting recognition. So hard to find a hiding place from shame. So hard.*

Once again was it necessary to put austerity measures in place, with a focus on one thing in particular, that being the long-distance calls he made to Glanton. It was as if Luther couldn't get enough of the man regardless of what Glanton said or or didn't say, and as always, his phone bill showed it. But his will proved ineffective. He had run to Jane Thayer. He had run to Sarah Van Dine. But he had never run to a man, other than Dr. Rosner. Had he run to his father? Would his father not have smacked him hard if he did, and then smacked him even harder as insurance against Luther forgetting? But that was it,



wasn't it? Glanton, even with his gruffness and at his most chucklesque, represented deferred receipt of the love his father's brittle temperament prevented him from giving. How was Luther to budget for something like that? How was he to put an austerity measure on that?

Luther had his meditation and his prayer. Morning and night he had those. No one could take away his breath without taking away his life, and then his worries would be over, or just beginning, however that was to be. And he had the spiritual longings of Walker Percy as distilled into his novel *The Second Coming*. But Luther wasn't fooled. Walker Percy had the sheer forehead that produced Farrar, Straus & Giroux quality prose, but in tackling the ineffable, his writing could only be an approximation of the truth, as the schizophrenic's word salads could only be an approximation of poetry. No, no, Luther would have to follow his breath, not the flawed instincts of a master storyteller.

And he had his Bible and a book on Buddhism and big Thomas Merton and his *Waters of Siloe* and *Bread in the Wilderness*. All of this he had and all of it was neti neti, but his breath was not neti neti and no one should dare to say it was.

*Celeste, more rapprochement on the home front, and who can say what it means? Are the clouds parting or gathering? Sarah is signaling reconciliation with her father. She is turning the corner on this matter of love, possibly with the help of Babs, Glanton's wife. And what is it that she is seeing? Possibly, the beginning of the end of the ego's dictatorial reign. She has begun to consider the idea that her father does not deserve*

*punishment for not loving her alone. As I must make peace with Vera Severa's ascendancy in the family, so too must Sarah acknowledge that Claire is to be recognized as a member of the family of nations.*

*Celeste, the clouds are parting. They are parting. The groundwork for change is being laid. We must be patient. We must await the incremental outcome.*

*What is this writing thing, Celeste? Is the act of writing merely a pacifier for an otherwise squalling baby? My days at work are not good. I am filled with the meaninglessness for me personally of Sue Ann Sally Jones and Betsy Fuller Gladstone and all the other icons of juvenile America and yet as well of the pain I experience at not even approximating their standards of excellence. I have no way forward. No writing project coheres. I am stuck with only this job that strips me bare of any illusions, any hope, a project might provide me. What then is writing but a form of prayer, a reprieve from the reality of my inconsequence.*

*Glanton says there are times when he cries because he is unable to get started on writing projects. It has been a year since he last wrote. He says that maybe he is not supposed to be writing now. It may be his energy needs to be directed elsewhere.*

The image of Glanton crying while sitting at his typewriter was important for Luther. The low might seldom be brought high and the high might seldom be brought low, but it was good for him to see when the latter happened. No, schadenfreude was not operating here, he assured himself. The visual image brought him to the question of God's will, which all

had to bow to ultimately in order to survive. And if Glanton was doing that and not simply powering on in a self-defeating way, maybe he could do the same. Because who told him, Luther Garatdjian, that he had to be a writer in the first place? Had he not come to it as the last possible avenue for achieving greatness, and who had ever said he had to be great but his own ego?

Now, it was not clear to Luther that Glanton had ever heard the song “Try a Little Tenderness.” Otis Redding would not likely be in Glanton’s music hall of fame with Frank Sinatra and Billie Holliday. Glanton was not of a generation that would embrace him. And so that song could not possibly be in his mind or approaching it when the subject of Sarah’s birthday came up and the card she had received from Claire, the only personal touch being “Love, Claire,” after the printed birthday message. Glanton cut right to the chase.

“Sarah took umbrage at her sister’s terseness,” Luther said, noting that Sarah’s attempt at rapprochement may have reached its limit.

“Never mind her umbrage. Sarah needs to deal with her resentments. They will destroy her if she doesn’t.” Glanton then did telephone hang-up so his words could have concentrated power in Luther’s mind and avoid dilution by any blather barrage Luther might summon.

At all times, and in all kinds of weather, was Glanton guided in his actions.

Luther was not one to hide his love away in RoR, even if it came across as a mishigas of inchoate hoey when he raised his hand to share. As much as he did try to learn to listen

and listen to learn, he was impatient for the opportunity for his own moment. And though he whiffed with each and every plate appearance and was overcome with excruciating shame share compelling him to a vow of hermetic silence from then on, by the next day there he was with his hand wildly waving for the speaker's attention, that the death of non-recognition not await him. Always, always, in his mind did he acknowledge the greatest, most profound piece of literature ever written, the ubiquitous graffiti of yore, "Gilhoey was here," only now it was "Luther G. was here." Because measures had to be taken, lest the evanescent action of time have its way and poof him from the earth's collective memory.

*Celeste, Sarah turned thirty-two yesterday. I gave her The Women's Room, by Marilyn French; The Edible Woman, by Margaret Atwood; and The Awakening, by Kate Chopin. Paperbacks, not one hardcover, but she was not minding. I was only seeking to anchor her to her vision of the "fucking pricks," that she might be true to the spark of brilliance in a life that seems to have so much defeat, and I include myself among the losses she has had to incur. And next week, when I receive my paycheck and can afford to, I will buy her the frames she had asked for. Her work is her life. Without it she cannot live, and I will not be an agent of her demise.*

*And yes, I brought home pastries and a rose. I am not without feeling for what I have done, and still may.*

No, I must talk to him as if he is a friend, with no thou and thy, as I am not back in olden

times. I must come current with my life, and God must meet me where I am without the formality of a jacket and tie, let alone a suit. Though we are only on the verge of spring, I see him in a madras shirt and a sun hat and shades. His khakis are loose-fitting, as befits a man who has no insecurity as to his bulk or lack thereof. Or maybe he is that sparrow on the wing or the pigeon cooing on the fire escape. But for sure he is not the rat that just crossed my path. Or is he?

I say I need him to keep me safe from alcohol and mood-changing chemicals. I ask him to direct my thinking in all ways. I ask him to teach me to forgive, to love, to serve. I ask him to reconnoiter the premises of my mind for any deficiencies and to remove them immediately.

In this way did Luther seek to take stock of where he was so he might have a future to go to.

Solomon Rhein would be commanding center stage. He was speaking at the Now Is the Wow group in SoHo that Monday evening. Never mind that hundreds and even thousands would also be carrying the message at their own groups in the metro New York area. Solomon was the one and he could live in the fantasy of sparking the ardor of the black-clad female artists of SoHo.

Once again, Luther realized that Solomon had sunk his emotional hooks in him with his “You don’t call. You don’t write” shtick, summoning to mind the stereotypical guilt-inducing Jewish mother. Comic it might be, but that didn’t mean unfelt. Once again was Solomon Rhein calling Luther out for forcing him to be the one to pick up the phone.

And now he was, in essence, saying, “Will you dare to disrespect me once again? Will you make me hate you all the way to the gates of hell? Well, will you?” Luther heard the anger and the hurt behind it in his friend’s communication. Solomon Rhein’s father had checked out on him, and now it was for Solomon to be keenly aware of those did the same by failing to recognize him and offer the respect that was due. “Do they not know who I am?” Luther heard Solomon Rhein screaming, because the ego could grow large in the loneliness and isolation the illness sought to impose.

Once again, Luther was struck by the absence of levity, so in contrast with his interpersonal manner, in Solomon’s lead. He rushed his words, as if a stopwatch was on him and every last detail had to be crammed into his narrative before his time ran out. His face was a mask of seriousness. He is insecure, Luther once again noted. He would be king but knows he isn’t. And he noted too that Solomon said alcohol and drugs were the same, but they weren’t the same. Alcoholism and drug addiction were two different illnesses, and it wasn’t a good idea to blur the line, not in Luther’s estimation.

Luther had been hoping to stay home that night and write before he heard from Solomon Rhein. After the meeting, he hoped to still get some writing done, but fell asleep in his chair. The day had violated him. Time had violated him. He was all torn up that his life should belong to Cromartie Wonders and Solomon Rhein. Then and there he decided that the next day would be for him, just him.

But the morning came, and in his meditation thinking of a different order that said “Jamais, jamais,” in the scolding voice of his high school French teacher Mlle.

Gallimard, and the voice of his mother, saying, “Foolish boy,” and the voice of Mr. Horst-

Lehman, the high school principal, saying “Someday you will have to develop a stronger spine,” Luther absorbing the rebuke from the principal for his decision to withdraw from the school in the middle of his junior year. And soon he was hearing the universe rebuking him, saying did he want to make the same mistake again? Did he not understand what Cromartie Wonders and publishing, in general, were, that they were the world that he had run from, they were the bright light of day he had thrown away for the darkness when he dropped out of the Claremont School? Did he want to fall behind in his work as he had in his studies so he had no choice and thus inflict another grievous wound on himself? Well, did he, or would he stand and deliver by suiting up and showing up? There could be no more disappearing acts, no more addition by subtraction. Get out that door, Luther. Get out that door, the voice said. Because now he had a voice beyond his own voice.

He arrived forty-five minutes late, with a profuse apology for his tardiness. But no flogging commenced; not so much as a disapproving look was offered. No, he could not change the past, but he could learn from it. He lived that morning in a surrendered state, grateful, so very grateful, for his escape from the trap of withdrawal.

But the afternoon was different. A punch in the face awaited him, and he had done much to administer it to himself. There was a luncheon that day. He hadn't forgotten. In fact, it was a reason in itself to take the day off. But now there, among all those bonding with each other at the gathering, he was once more at a loss as to how to connect. Initially, he was saved by the speech delivered by the guest speaker. There could be no socializing during the monotony of her talk about the bright future of children's books,

but afterward, the gathered found each other. As in the game of musical chairs, he was the odd person out, and that awareness seemed to take over every cell of his being. If he had any doubt that he looked stricken, Rafta confirmed it. There were frequent displays of asperity, but she was not unkind or unfeeling. She came to him and asked if he was all right. Fine. He was just fine, he said, unable to confess the darkness that had come over him. Well, good, Rafta said, and putting that behind her said she had someone she wanted him to meet.

He supposed it was a meeting, if you could call standing there barely able to speak or smile, in front of another star children's books editor, the great Bebe Winslow, with ten Caldecott medal winners and eight Newberry medal winners, although she couldn't have been any older than him.

"So nice meeting you," Bebe said.

Seeing him lost within himself, Rafta spoke for him. "Luther has written a YA novel, about which he is very excited. It is now with Bruce Bill at Delacorte. Is that not right, Luther?"

Yes. He supposed so.

"Well, you just send it along to me if Bruce Bill is out of his mind and turns it down," Bebe said. He wasn't of her kind and ill-suited for the field he was in. Surely Bebe was seeing as much.

Having dispatched with him, she turned to Rafta, as wasn't that what such a luncheon was for, women and considerably fewer men with a passion for children's literature and a commitment to shaping great lists getting together to talk shop? Well,



wasn't it?

*Celeste, there is no order without restraint. We must pull hard on the reins of the wild horse within us. Deserving urgent attention is this telephone-itis. The phone is not an extension of my arm. It has its own life. And yet I reach for it and dial Glanton unthinkingly at the slightest instance of discomfort. What have I created here but a monstrous dependency. I reach for Glanton as reflexively as I once did for the bottle. But am I to really believe that I would reach for the bottle if I didn't reach for him so compulsively? I am leaning too heavily on this man, for that is all he is, a man. I must try to lean on God.*

*Vigilance must also apply to sudden impulses toward generosity. Just yesterday I was prepared to make a gift of my "extra" portable typewriter to the Van Dines. Today I am afflicted with enraged thoughts about them for having the resources to be "nice." At the very least I must postpone these urges till the next day when they come over me. As for my tongue, what can I say? Molten lava continues to flow from the volcano, with no dormancy date in view.*

*Now, Celeste, my mind is visited by an old phone number. It flashes in red neon in my mind: Academy 2-5955. The number is that of my childhood friend Jerry Jones-Nobleonian. He it was with whom I shared my first six-pack of beer the day following the arrival of Jane Thayer in my life. It could be a signal from the beyond, where he has gone, as a reminder that we are not done yet and may never be. That red neon, by the*

*way, shone in the night above the pharmacy on the corner opposite my family's building. If I haven't told you already, it contained one word, "Prescriptions," and I recall my pride when one day, still quite young, I realized I could spell the word from memory.*

*When I say "from the beyond," I should make clear that Jerry Jones-Nobleonian is gone. He was found dead in one of the flophouses down here on the Bowery with gangrene in both legs. He had the softness of spring in him when we first met. I felt him just that way when he passed on by, and so I had no choice but to run after him as he headed for the "welfare hotel" down the block and tell him to come back so he could be in my life. And he did. He did.*

*Celeste, he had a black father, a G.I. who served in combat in World War II. His mother was Estonian, a refugee. He had a sister, Lisa, who became a prostitute and was found dead from an overdose in a dumpster. His father drove a cab. His mother stared into store windows, transfixed by the abundance of America.*

*Jerry had wiry black hair and beautiful skin the color of copper, only it was marred by big pink blotches stemming from an allergic reaction to penicillin. He lived quietly with the disfigurement, as I did with the flatness of the back of my head.*

*He added the name Nobleonian, saying his father was not his real father, that his real father had been "runned over" by a Soviet tank. I too was in denial about my father, not that he was my real father but that he existed as a father at all. We had similar vulnerabilities that enabled us to be comfortable with each other.*

*I am only saying what I have said before, but the phone number shining brightly in my mind summoned me back, and so I had to go.*

The past has an air force all its own. Its bombing runs are frequent. Incoming missiles abound. The surrounding area set ablaze. Buildings in ruins. But one learns a measure of detachment. In the course of a workday thoughts came to him of the first instance of physical abuse of Sarah, there in the kitchen at Camp. Efram Ellenberg and the Scale Master and company had arrived. The Scale Master leering at Sarah. Sarah responding. All too clear in what direction that connection was going. Luther's fear, his insecurity, when she said she would be driving SM up the mountain to show him the lean-to. SM taking her, Camp, everything away from him. The thing of value is the thing of value. To have it all vanish from him. And so the slap, and the next one. The line crossed that he swore never to cross, not with Sarah, as he had with Jane Thayer.

And wonders, could the same happen with Rafta? Could his hand strike out at her puffed cheek, right there in the workplace, after she had sought to smite him with her wounding words? Could such insanity have a place in his current life?

It comes to his mind, not as part of the bombing campaign, that at times Sarah wanted to leave him. Did she herself not say that he didn't measure up, that rather than being blessed with intelligence, he had been afflicted with hypersensitivity? And were not some of these instances opportunities to meet her with similar candor and say yes, maybe that would be for the best? Instead, he chose to view these challenges to the relationship as recklessly destructive rather than as forthright appraisals. In so doing did he conceal his own doubts. And what had he wrought with his so-called steadfastness? They were older now. She was mentally more infirm and more greatly dependent on him.

He had sealed himself in for the long run. Now it would be betrayal to leave her. Or would it?

Glanton was fast and emphatic with his responses. He did not live in the land of equivocation. No dawdle dancing, no hemming and hawing. So when Luther laid out his fear for inspection, expressing his concern that fewer calls to Glanton would result in a diminishment of his commitment to recovery, Glanton once again ka-chunked him hard with his conviction, saying that quite the opposite would happen, that in fact Luther would only become more involved with recovery. Because Glanton did not play in the way that some others did, those who wore money belts and not the simpler kind to keep their pants up. He did not say, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, and I will make them weak and slavishly dependent." He was saying to Luther, "You have been awakened to that power within you, and that power will only grow stronger as you lean on it for understanding." I must commit to memory what Glanton has just said, Luther said out loud. I must tether it to the understand and remember post here in my mind so it cannot go away.

*Celeste, Ella Fitzgerald can sing "What a Difference a Day Makes" every day, and the opening line will always ring true, whatever the rest of the song signifies. Only two days later was I on the line with Glanton, presenting myself as a cowering weakling awaiting Bruce Bill's verdict on my ya-ya novel, if it could even be called that. Reaching out to a master of the fictional realm about my puny literary effort, my terror overriding my*

*commitment to depend on Glanton less. Seeking shelter from the coming storm, I was, and the annihilation it would bring. Glanton was sick that day. The fact was he had been struggling with a virus for over a week, but the prospect of the comfort of his love, gruff or otherwise, was too much for me to resist. On this day I heard impatience and maybe disgust at my lack of consideration, but he remained faithful to his role as mentor and dismissed my idea of withdrawing the novel as a means of preempting rejection as a disservice to myself. “We take an action and let go of the result. Stop trying to exercise control.”*

*“Sometimes I feel that I am not doing this RoR thing right.”*

*Celeste, Glanton truly warmed my heart with his response. He rallied strong on my behalf, saying I had been diligent about embracing recovery over the past year and that there were times when he too felt he had not been sufficiently diligent. In fact there have been times when he has felt he was a RoR fraud.*

*“I want a report card from God every day. I can’t bear being out of contact—conscious contact—with a higher power. The art of living is what I have to work on.”*

*Celeste, Glanton might be waiting on his report card from God, but I had received mine, and for the rest of the day the walls could not contain me. I wanted to burst through them to a place big enough for the glow within me to expand to its proper dimensions. Finally I just sat in a chair and wept. My father has come home to me. These words came to me. Then there was a moment of doubt and new words arrived. I have come home to my father. I did not cogitate on the matter. I had no resources for doing so. I simply sought to return quickly to the joy.*

The thought came to Luther as he headed for work that his whole life had been about trying to make those who had more than him feel guilty, including and perhaps especially Sarah and her family. Hadn't he railed at her when she was in art school about her privileged trust fund life? Hadn't he, for a time, gone about in a state of maximum peeve at Camp, that the Van Dines should have a 900-acre estate in the Catskills and the resources to live life on a higher plane than most could imagine? And had he not aired his discontents with Rafta as to responsibility and compensation? From now on he would bind himself to silence, search out a new meaning for the word *humility* and live by its exacting definition.

That morning Rafta gave Luther a pass to a movie about intergalactic warfare he had no desire to see. Rafta did not go to movie theaters. She lived only for the world of opera. Luther put on his face of falseness, offering a smile of delight to complement his expression of deep thanks, and spent the next few hours in an agony of indecision as to whether he could or should tell her of his decision to skip the movie. He understood that his attendance at the film would likely be a matter of no consequence to Rafta. Even so did he find it a challenge, and a frightening one at that, to tell her that he had reconsidered, so desperate was he to avoid any possibility of inviting her displeasure. She must be placated at all costs. Never mind that he had clashed with her before. She had done him a kindness in giving him the pass, and now he would be returning it. Though improbable, her cheeks might swell in anger, and then he would be destroyed for the day. And yet he went forward.

“I completely understand. A ridiculous film, I am sure,” she said, when he came to her. No puffed cheeks. No peeve in sight.

*Celeste, falsehoods abound. Who would deny it? But the wings of truth are now on sale. Forget that. They are being handed out for free on every street corner. Mine are strapped on and am flapping away.*

A battle was being fought. No, not the Civil War, and yet a war within him between the higher powers and his will, which said he must stay in at the lunch hour and use that time to write, so he might put on paper the requisite number of words for peace of mind. But RoR was calling to him, calling to say, “Come out of your aloneness. Come and have the new spirit strengthened in you,” and so he ran, he ran on his long legs, to the dark suite of rooms in the basement of the brownstone called Forget About It, so the healing that he was desperate for could continue. And at that very meeting Amanda G. spoke, saying, “If you are debating whether to go to a meeting, get your ass in gear and just go. Smart feet is where it’s at. Smart feet save lives.” So Amanda G. spoke, and so Luther listened. He had been in that very room at the beginning of his journey. He remembered the pain and the despair and the ache of longing for Celeste and the pain that she should have a life of SoHo gallery glamour and he should have this, a dark, smelly room in some basement with strangers he hated even if he didn’t know them. And now he was running, running on those long legs to that very room. He had found his sanctuary from the storm.

*Celeste, my anger is too much for me, like molten lava flowing from a volcano. This*

*soreness shows in my face and my demeanor. It does reveal itself. And why is it now reigning? Arida Tanne, sabra extraordinaire and artist beyond the need for words, has submitted the dummies of two picture books. Rafta asked me if I would care to work on them, but before doing so let me know exactly where she thought the problems lay. You must understand, Celeste. Her words are not windblown. They have weight and substance and linger long in the mind. Because she is in the highest echelon with her intelligence, they have shaping power. What I am saying is that they bind me to her will and reduce me to little more than her functionary. Angry at her directive manner and regarding it as interference, I heard myself wanting to tell her to work on the projects herself. And my smallness was reigning as well. Why should Arida Tanne receive contract after contract while my manuscripts were dismissed by publishers as so much garbage? No money to pay bills, let alone take a real vacation, and no one was paying for Sarah's work either. But my real distress was that Arida Tanne had witnessed my incompetence. I had nothing I could give her in terms of editorial input. So she had concluded already, and now I was to "assist" her with my nothingness on not one but two of her forthcoming books?*

*Another hot summer would soon arrive. Hot sidewalks. Hot loft. No place to go. Just the confines of that window-less office day after day, where even with the door closed and tape abounding on the desk, humiliation found me.*

*Celeste, attitude adjustment is a daily task. A transformation was needed to move me out of the envy zone and to relinquish my sense of entitlement. Could I really believe that someone with my small gifts should be freed from the nine to five world? A day for a doubleheader, no doubt. First Forget About It and then Now Is the Wow. Saturation*



*bombing of my discontent. A day for being among my tribe, that I might come to a better understanding of who I am, a drunk who had lost his way.*

For four consecutive days Luther did no writing. His anger returned. How abundantly clear it was that Rafta was driven by greed. She wanted Arida Tanne's projects for herself, and she saw that Luther saw as much. Once again he was left with the understanding that she did not want him to have a vital part in the department. And he saw that would never change because he recognized that he didn't deserve a more vital part in the department and Rafta did as well. Yes, there was prayer and there was meditation, but his salvation also lay with writing. Any two or three people on the street might have more talent than he possessed, but if he was to be saved from himself, then he must put words on paper. He must leach the poison of self-hate from him, however pathetic the outcome might be. As it was in the beginning, writing continued to be a form of therapy, of self-healing. He could read and read, he could listen endlessly to Yankee baseball, but they could not bring him the peace he was seeking. At times they were nothing more than a form of sloth. If self-inflicted violence was not to be upon him, he must continue.

Speakers at RoR meetings generally spoke for twenty minutes to half an hour. That was plenty, in Luther's estimation. Put a muzzle on them after their lead, Luther suggested, at his home group's business meeting. No need for them to make their little comments after each person shared from the floor. Only after the meeting did he remember that woman

leading the meeting at the Now Is the Wow group, the one who asked if he had a mentor when he raised his hand at the break and said he had been drinking and who told him to get a mentor when he said he didn't. Wasn't that what they called cross-talk? And hadn't her directive possibly saved his life? Maybe he should sit on his convictions before speaking. Maybe he should just be quiet. Not that he could be.

Opportunities for forgiveness abounded. There was the birthday party that the department organized for Roller Carmona-Hickson, only she did not show. Nowhere was she to be found. And with good reason. She had fled the premises. Underneath her gruffness there was shame. She was not worthy of attention, of love. Nothing she received would be genuine. People would only be going through the motions. At first Luther rode the high horse of judgment. What an ingrate. What a victim of her own self-centeredness.

But time brought him closer. She was like him. She was an obese hanging string and he was a skinny hanging string. They were alike in their sense of personal worthlessness.

There was trouble looming in paradise but the angels were not crying. Glanton spoke in celebration of his twelfth sober birthday and let it be known that the family would be moving when the lease on their house expired. Maybe Virginia. Maybe North Carolina. He wasn't sure. Research was ongoing. Luther was ready with a plant for him. A *dracaena marginata*. Spiky. And well suited for transplanting, like Glanton and his family. For Luther, the only transplanting was the ongoing process of putting down roots in new soil, spiritually speaking. As for geographic change, he suspected that he was

rooted to the streets of New York City.

*The permanence of impermanence is arriving in my consciousness, Celeste. My mother called to say she lives only for Rachel, that she cannot abide leaving this earth without the certainty that her third daughter will be taken care of. It is possible that she carries some guilt over Rachel's affliction, her religious psychosis or whatever is causing her dysfunction, her apartness from the world. Did she fail to give Rachel the time and consideration she needed when Rachel was a child tugging at her apron strings? In any case, she is tacitly acknowledging that the ties that bind do not exist between her children, that we are not equipped financially or in terms of character to be our brother's or sister's keepers. Am I supporting Rachel? Is bottle-bound Luke? Is "no one deprives me and my son" Hannah able to extend beyond her own chronic sense of deprivation? Not likely. Only Vera is a possibility. Here, we must move beyond the peeve that keeps us dinky and grow the arms of magnanimity to ensure the embrace of justice. We must give Vera her due, as it was she who primarily made the funeral arrangements for my father and Auntie Eve and my sister Naomi. And it is Vera who satisfied all the tedious paperwork requirements for Rachel to be eligible for Social Security disability, which provides a monthly check, however meager the amount.*

*Now Celeste, we must not cry ourselves to the point of extinction, nor drown in our mother's tears from long ago. But without a father, whom I had dismissed in oedipal fury,*

*to throw me a lifeline, I am in just such peril, remembering, as I do my careworn mother, then in her sixties, showing up at parents meetings with those snooty and fashionable young parents, or weeping, just weeping, over the failure of her children. In no time can I find myself chin high in those tears and swimming for my life.*

*Such are the travails of the oedipal son, but this is no SOS for a mission of mercy. There are tools that equip us to deal, and one of them is the slogan "This Too Shall Pass." Waters rise and waters recede, at least in this part of the world that I am currently inhabiting.*

*Celeste, this theme of survival is essential. Like it or not, it is very possible we do not have an endless succession of lives in which to be perfected. We cannot say, well, in my next incarnation my handwriting will vastly improve. We must live with what we have and hold our head up high in spite of repeated failure. Walk like a man, Frankie Valli sings to me still, from Exhortation Central. And that is the thing, too. We must take our inspiration from whence it comes, from the holler heads as well as Beethoven, as truth is truth and lies are lies.*

*This very minute am I visited by memories of my sister Vera taunting me for my homesickness at bible camp. Momma's boy. Sissy. So she pronounced me, finding me curled in a fetal position separation from my mother had wrought. And over and over again that image would enter my mind of her doing her slow mother walk up the rutted and rocky dirt path to take me away so I could reclaim my specialness.*

*But I am suffering no homesickness in this moment. I am in the eternal flow, a space without walls, where coming and going do not exist. The now is the wow. It is*

*where it's at.*

John de la Questo, production manager, children's books, and nephew of Salvatore de la Questo, capo for all Pilgore imprint books, stopped by Luther's desk and laid a truth bomb on him. "I thought you were moody, but Roller takes the cake. Is the woman mental or what? Why does she have to cause such agita?"

"Did something happen?"

"I ask her if Rafta is here and she says, 'Does it look like she's here?' in this mean voice. And so I say to her, 'Roller, why do you have to talk like that?' and she says, 'Why you got to talk like you do? Why don't you go sit yourself down and think about that?' I mean, I go to the other departments and people are pleasant. With you guys I don't know what to expect."

Luther did not grow defensive. He took what John de la Questo said to heart. He too had felt the sting of Roller's surliness and Rafta's temper and in that moment was able to recognize and appreciate the affable nature that John maintained.

"I'm sorry she was rude to you. I've experienced it myself. A dark cloud rolls over her. And I'll try to be more careful in how I speak and act as well," Luther heard himself say.

"I'm not trying to find fault."

"No need to explain. You said what needed to be said."

"I like the both of you. Really. And Rafta, too. You're good people."

"John, it's OK. Really, it's OK."

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Because the earth had a way of moving under John’s feet. He had no guarantee of terra firma. Luther saw what John saw, that words could trigger earthquakes. John was not an insensate being. He was not a member of blockhead nation, which seemed to be how Rafta saw him.

*Celeste, let honesty serve as my guide, with the prayer that it will lead me forward. Apathy rules my days at work. Scotch tape is everywhere the eye can’t easily see, as a legacy of my distraction. One hour after another do I pass the time reading trashy manuscripts and trying to do other work that is wholly uninteresting. Is it possible I am in a coffin, not an office? What is the meaning that I am in a room without a view? Am I to forget that life is all around me and I am not in it?*

*Celeste, Sarah’s father has come and gone. He paid his visit to her while I was at work, and that is just as well, for his presence, unmitigated by the addition of Lydia, would only have highlighted the struggle between us for her mind and heart and soul. How else, but in terms of competition, can I explain the dissection of his words, as she related them to me?*

*Glanton has been at pains to explain the dynamic of what he considers the ongoing struggle between my lower and higher self. The former, he suggests, relies on inductive thinking. If I am bad, then the next person must be bad as well. He says Sarah*

*and I must do everything we can to break this pattern of scrutinizing her parents' every utterance for the sole purpose of judging their motives. Once again do I hear the words of Dr. Dressler; those many years ago now. "Join us." These suspicions. These judgments. They serve only to separate. After speaking with Glanton, what can I feel but weariness with my own sickness?*

The truth, or more correctly, a truth, was coming to Luther from all directions, including dreamland. Along a subway platform he walked with Sarah. Wherever he walked was irrelevant, as he existed solely in the domain of chagrin for his berating of Sarah in a fit of ill temper. An urgent need to pee led him to a public bathroom crowded with men masturbating amid a swarm of insects. In a state of decrepitude were these men. Even so, one reached out to grab him by the arm in a steely grip and declared, "You're mine." And yet was Luther able to break away and just barely get back to Sarah.

A dream informing him what awaited him on the darker side of the moon.

And the past calling to him as a reminder of where he had been and what he had been made of. A memory of stealing from his mother's red leather bag, and when caught, a sense of unbearable shame but no real remorse. *How once the idea entered his mind he could think of nothing but the money in that bag.*

*"Does it sound familiar, Luther? Well does it?"*

In spite of resolutions and prayer, his monitoring of Roller Carmona-Hickson continued.

When she was out the first day of the workweek, judgment worked its way from his heart to his mouth. Saying to Janet Proux, "Roller really doesn't make much of an effort to get here. I guess there is some good programming on TV today." Saying that and feeling the hurt to his heart and his head and into the extremities of his body. And yet he could deal with the pain. The pleasure, the savage pleasure. The payoff still too great to cease and desist.

*Celeste, I am under pressure to examine old ideas and be willing to let go of those injurious to myself and to others. And so I am trying. When I began to drink on a daily basis, I thought that whatever character inadequacies I had would be more than compensated for by the accomplishments I envisioned for myself. If I could be successful, then I didn't need to be good. In fact, being good might jeopardize my chances of being successful. Sexual adventures would enrich my talent. So I believed.*

*A related belief was that there was no such thing as personal growth, and those who spoke in such a pretentious manner deserved to be stoned. By age twenty-one you were locked into the character that you had, so why not just shut the hell up and drink?.*

*And now the National Guard has been called up to defend my person against current ideas. And what are they? Rafta is against me. She laughs because we rent a loft while she can afford to own an apartment. She laughs because I am ineligible for a credit card and gloats at my poverty. She laughs because I have not succeeded as a writer. She purposely withholds work from me so I will feel bad about myself in my job. She gets to work early so she can feel superior to me and all those who arrive later. She is*



*observant and critical of my every move.*

*We are excavating, Celeste. We are unearthing.*

Almost as a mantra was Luther hearing in the RoR meetings the saying, “Sugar is a drug.” And why not? Just that Saturday morning he ate, for breakfast, two big brownies, and staggered about the loft sufficiently discombobulated that he had to return to bed for a two-hour snooze to be free of the excess he had inflicted on himself. Even when he awoke did he remain in an altered state for some hours. He thought of his father, and the insulin needle he would place in the metal sterilizer, and the daily injection in his meager thigh. And those diabetic comas he would lapse into that would require hospitalization. And yet, with all that the illness inflicted on him, his father would plead for an extra teaspoon of sugar in his morning coffee. And, of course, the amputation of part of his leg when gangrene set in after a small cut on his foot. And ultimately, the stroke during one of his diabetic comas that cost him his life. Luther’s mother asking Luther if he was going to the bathroom a lot, fearful that Luther would develop the same problem. Sugar was a drug? Maybe, and maybe not, but he would be more careful. No more two-Brownie breakfasts. That was for sure.

*Celeste, Bruno Bettelheim has been banging on me. He tried his best to turn out all the lights in my house and keep me in the dark for the rest of my days. (That a man of refinement should have such a first name.) He said there is no afterlife, there is only the memory of us through what we have left behind. Thus would he relegate me to Trotsky’s*

*dustbin of history, forgotten in life and surely in death, as my rejected manuscripts lie strewn all over the streets of Manhattan and in parts beyond. To not be seen is to die. And now there will be no do-over, no wheel of karma, no reincarnation, no eternity. His article on Freud suggests that such a concept is total bunkum. In this state of darkness did I call Glanton, however, and from his place of certitude did he declare holy war on The Brunster, saying his ego prompts him to write on subjects he knows nothing about, being the prisoner of his intellect that he is, and that of course there is a God.*

*Celeste, Glanton is not my God, but he can be my lifeline to God. All respect and fidelity are due him.*

At times Luther could see that love was not at the door, at least not the world's love. But he had not made his peace that the love that was available to him, the love of God, was sufficient for his life, in spite of all that had befallen him in charting his own course and not allowing a power greater than himself to infiltrate and influence his thinking, his actions, and his attitudes.

He left work an hour early. Zach Zeckler, former drug dealer and drug addict and now a physician, was on his mind, not in his new, but in his previous incarnation as the CCNY scale master, weighing out his goods before offering them for sale. Luther would himself be a scale master with the two-pound scale he purchased, along with envelopes, scissors, stamps of varying classes, and a first and fourth class stamper and ink pad. His babies would be sent out into the world in systematic fashion. A new day had come. He would be organized for success. *The world that he wanted would want him.*

And yet he was part of a universe that was always putting him in its context and thus in his place. And in that universe was the bible, and those words ascribed to Jesus, “Many are called but few are chosen.” The following day was he made to see once more that he was among the many who had been called but still and perhaps forever among the unchosen. In that universe was Rafta, who passed along a letter from an author whose first book she had published, a novel which, in manuscript form, Luther had not cared for, but whose quality she had discerned. And now, in gratitude for the showers of blessings he had received following the novel’s release—agents were besieging him and film rights were being sold and an auction was being established for paperback rights, and job offers were pouring in, etc.—he was effusive in his praise for Rafta for changing his life.

*Celeste, we must not punch God in the face. We must not bring him to the ground for further savaging. Such violence must never be our calling. We must spare him disfigurement, but if denied our sticks and stones and worse, we must be free to berate him, to call him out for his vileness and cruelty and unspeakable neglect and fully drain the reservoir of recrimination that we may come to the place of surrender, the place of sweet peace informed by intense gratitude for being alive and growing in the way that he would have us grow. I am not there, Celeste. Obviously. But I see the direction I need to go.*

*And yes, I do understand that I have been “must-ing” all over the place.*

Carola Aprile and Tom Terst came to visit. Laudatory exclamations poured forth from them about the quality of Sarah’s work. Luther pondered the nature of praise even as they

effused, its ephemeral nature and the veracity quotient of it. Would they be so generous if a quid pro quo was not in place, what with Sarah praising their work as well? Suppose they were asked to appraise the work with no knowledge of its creator? Where he was going with his mind he couldn't say, though he suspected he was the prisoner of outside the circle of love thinking. How painful it remained, no matter how he sought to adjust his face and his mind, to feel less than others and to re-experience the wound of judgments made, such as Carola Aprile's about men who couldn't do math. How humiliating, after two years of recovery, to have moments when he still was nothing more than a hanging string.

"Are you all right?" Carola Aprile asked.

"Of course," Luther said. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you look stricken."

"Oh, no, no. I am ebullient upon the waves of life," Luther blurted, in panicked defense against her facial scrutiny.

"You are what?"

"I am A-OK. That is all I mean to say."

"How are you really, Luther? What have you been up to?" Carola Aprile sought to completely overrun his ramparts with her solicitous inquiry.

"Well, we're both working hard, Sarah and I, so how bad can it be?"

Carola Aprile did not go any further with her word troops. She put a rein on them.

But the next morning Sarah was full of ire and fire.

"Don't you dare patronize me. Do you hear?"

“Patronize you how?” Befuddlement was in his face as in his mind.

“You know how. Feeling the need to vouch for me. Saying I had been working hard.”

“I was speaking for both of us.”

“I can’t speak for myself?”

She was telling him she still had her sizzlepop. She was telling him that she was still a pressure cooker, and words were the heat that could make her lid blow. Only when he was at work and at a distance from her could he see that, in her mind, he had shamed her. What she had heard him say was that she was working hard in spite of having quit the job that Carola Aprile had served her up on a platter. Her anger was an expression of her guilt and her shame for not being an equal partner.

*The bombing runs have resumed, and my ack-ack guns are still on order, leaving me at the mercy of the air campaign. The ordnance is ear-splitting. I am shell-shocked. I am naked for one and all to see and laid out on a bier amid my own ruins. There is not enough scotch tape to save me this time. And here come the fraud police to lead me away, all fifty thousand of them. Oh Lord, no, no.*

*What is the problem? What ails you? I hear my mother say.*

*How about a lifelong defense against some simple truths? That I am lazy and unfit for employment.*

“Is that really necessary? Is it not your book?” So Rafta spoke to Luther.

Grambling Vorst, the art director, had come to her with the dummy. And why had she

come to Rafta with the dummy? Because Luther could find no way to improve it and so had turned to Grambling, thinking there would be no consequence for his ineptness, that the book would now be left in the hands of the women to process. How does that look, Luther? How? And how does it look that Rafta subsequently scolds you for proofreading errors you made on another project?

*Celeste, Glanton says I must get to work on or before 9 am each morning. He tells me to initiate a love affair with my job and to put myself on a service basis in going about my workday. Life is drilling down deep and shattering me at my core. Deafening, deafening, is the sound of the pneumatic drill. Beyond words is the pain. From the ground as well as the air does the assault come. See yourself as you are. See it, see it, see it. So I hear the shouts from above as I lie prone.*

*And now Glanton is directing me to further explore, in writing, my concept of a power greater than myself. And what is there to write but this: "The power that is greater than me is time, as it has the power to deliver me into death, passing the meaningless way station called False Hope en route. Even Glanton has turned on me.*

For Janet Proux, the department secretary, snack time was all the time. Such was Luther's careful assessment of her. Always with her mouth going was she. A few broccoli florets here, half a tuna fish sandwich there, a brownie bon bon for good cheer. She ate neatly, and with proper etiquette, dabbing her retractable lips with a napkin should a morsel touch them. Her technique with sandwiches was nibbleacious---always she moved about the entire perimeter with small, delicate bites before moving in, a methodical strategy for

weakening the delectable's resistance to her encroachment. The strategy applied to all foods on her daily menu. Slow but steady. In this way could she hide her gluttony. Excitement coupled with judgment the endless action of her mouth engendered, but puzzlement as well. Where was the bulk that such enormous consumption should produce? Roughly thirty, she remained a slender woman. Clearly, she was out of control. She was with food as he had been with alcohol.

He thought of his sister Hannah. She was as clandestine with her eating as Janet was out in the open. A closet eater Hannah was, as there were closet drinkers. As a child, he would wander out of bed in the night through the dark apartment and find her parked on a small stool in front of the refrigerator devouring the contents, like those porcupines at camp with equally nocturnal eating habits. He liked food as well, but not to that degree. Janet and Hannah were born with a fork in their hand. He had been born with a glass.

*Celeste, fireworks were reported at the Guggenheim Museum just today. The reporter on the scene was herself the initiator. Her mother had come to join her at the spiral-ramped wonder. The symbolism was not lost on her, how the two of them go round and round in the same cycle of recrimination followed by awkward reconciliation. Among the witnesses to the tempest were Manet and Gauguin and Bonnard and Picasso. Umbrage did the initiator take at some of her mother's words, given the viciousness of their hidden meanings and diabolical power to multiply like the most aggressive cancer cells. The weariness I feel on reporting this is beyond your imagining. Her mind has placed her in a*

*kind of hell, and while this is clearly so, I must ask what my mind has done to me as well and whether there is truth to the saying, "A mind can be a terrible thing to have," given where my own has taken me at times. Knowing this to be so, is there any recourse for those such as me but to seek to surrender at deeper and deeper levels to this power I have embraced?*

But he was talking about moments in time, snapshots and not the totality. To the matter of his writing she brought tensor lamp intensity, saying, "The writing is fine, but where is the structure? Where is the setting?" Good art. Good writing. She knew about both.

But it wasn't enough. He turned to Glanton with a lament about his lack of imaginative power.

"It ain't necessarily so. So the song says and so I say. If you go over your writing, you will see that is not really the case."

Luther tried to take comfort from Glanton's support, but was it not a strange business for a man to assert something about the quality of another man's writing without having seen a single sentence he wrote. The phrase "love from afar" came to Luther, though he could not bring it fully into context with the conversation that had preceded it. He sought to let the words live separate and apart, as if toxic and deserving of quarantine, lest a powerful illness in the guise of truth take him down and never allow him back up.

*Celeste, my conscience is becoming my guide. For the past several weeks I have not been streaking over to Forget About It, the lunch hour RoR meeting near my place of work. At*



*least not every day. I am trying to rely more and more on evening meetings so I can be present and accounted for here at Cromartie Wonders. We all have a deep down desire to be steadfast and true and of one mind.*

*Then an author with three names came to the office and Rafta asked me to sit in on the meeting with her. I knew all three of her names but little more and so could contribute nothing to the discussion and heard myself on the verge of screaming out, "I know nothing and am nothing but a flat stretch of bypassed country road." An intense longing came over me to be among my own kind at Forget About It. But RoR is not the bottle. I cannot use it to blot out existence. As I have heard and said many times, I must learn to be in the world, if not of the world. And so, though Three Names beat on me with her New England hauteur and asperity and superciliousness, I weathered her storm and got through the rest of the day, if in debilitated fashion, and staggered to an evening meeting at Now Is the Wow, where I could sit in peace with my nothingness and be restored.*

*On my way home through the flourishing streets of SoHo, the small shops bright as candy, and the grit of the decrepit Bowery I heard my brother call to me from afar. Once more the childhood hymn "Rescue the Perishing" filled my ears and so I called back to him on the phone, saying "Brother of mine," thus seeking to erase the time that had passed and distance that had grown.*

*And he said, "What's with you?" reining in my impulse toward love. Luke put the conversation, such as it was, on a factual basis. "I'm on Antabuse," he went on. "No way I'm going to drink on that. Three days it has been. Three days."*

*“And who’s counting? Right?”*

*“What do you mean, ‘Who’s counting?’ I’m counting.”*

*“Exactly.”*

*“What the fuck are you talking about?”*

*“Are you going to meetings?”*

*“None of your business. But no, I’m not.”*

*“Why not?”*

*“Because I don’t need them. I’ve got my mind working for me.”*

*“What your mind is doing is tracking every minute of every hour of every day that you don’t drink. Even when you don’t drink, you think about it. That’s the mental obsession.”*

*“So?”*

*“So that’s the power of the illness. It’s almost impossible to beat this thing alone. Someday soon the Antabuse will ‘prove’ to you that you don’t need to drink and you’ll stop taking it and go back to the bottle, or you’ll drink on top of the Antabuse and be sick as hell.”*

*“I’m tired of your shit.”*

*Celeste, I didn’t say I was tired of his. It wasn’t for me to talk to my brother like that. It just wasn’t. There are lines we must not cross with those we love or once loved or for whom our love has not been awakened or reawakened. We do so only at our peril. Nor did I say that my brother was cruising for a bruising, an expression I would not use in the worst of my times.*

*And now there is this, Celeste. You have it on my word that one day Lamentation Louie will be no more, and that I will live in the light of the eternal rays. But that day has not yet come. For now I perceive myself poorly dressed. My pants are a baggy and shapeless garment on my gaunt person. My shirt is wrinkled and stained. My jacket is threadbare, my shoes are scuffed, and my head remains unrelentingly flat. This morning I discovered hairs to be sprouting from my ears. And now the essence of my manufactured self is about to be tossed into the street by Bruce Bill, editor extraordinaire. Is there a fire escape to take me from the flames which seek to incinerate me? Am I the tinderbox and have I set myself on fire with disfiguring ambition? Why cannot I walk on this earth without the odor of abnormality upon me?*

*These questions have no meaning in the realm of forever, but I am not within range of that threshold. I am here on the ground, weeping that there should exist rich experience but no ability to place it on the page in fictional form. A multitude of typewriters have brought me nothing but failure. Why am I here? I ask myself. Why should I be possessed of no talent to match my ambition? These last few days I have wanted to quit life. I'm tired of wandering about this earth.*

*Yes, of course it is all blah blah blah, this ritual of abasement but a precursor to surrender. We have said this before and will no doubt need to say it again. Even as I speak I feel the sweet peace that defies description coming over me. There is a tingle as I fill up from within. What are these tears now flowing, that they should be tears of joy and not anguish? What is it that sad rags have been replaced by glad rags? Ooh wah ooh*

*wah ooh wah.*

*No, Celeste, it was not the Cuban missile crisis. There was no parity to speak of and thus no standoff. Bruce Bill had all the weaponry he needed with that one word "no." And though at times some memory came to me of the confidence I had often experienced when in the act of writing the document and the writing appeared to be going well, those times were fleeting and I was left in the vastly more numerous poverty centers of my still afflicted and easily overrun mind. My suffering continues from day to day as Bruce Bill delays a decision. And so I am calling on the now to take me this very instant and wrap me in its eternal bliss.*

*Celeste, the critic Edmund Wilson has taken from his quiver an arrow seeking and now finding its home in my burst heart. It is for critics and all those bent on setting up impediments to the general happiness of others to shoot such arrows straight and true in their attempt to augment life with death. It is a peculiar addition by subtraction, or maybe it is simple horticulture, a brutal weeding that the literary garden may grow and grow with flowers bright and glorious. In any event, he has brought posthumous death to Rudyard Kipling, of all people, saying of him that his fiction lacks dramatization of fundamental conflict because the author could never bring himself to face one. And so here do you find me lying supine and spread-eagled, an arrow deep in my breast, for what he said of the Englishman he spoke of me as well. Cowardice rules my writing as it does my life.*

At Luther's Friday evening meeting, which belatedly will be called Stepping Up to Life, a man named Rupert sat in the speaker's chair. His deep-set eyes and bushy eyebrows and high forehead gave promise of the chiseled words he spoke. He was a man of power who had been brought low by the drink and now was alienated from family and friends.

Before he even began his lead, Luther recognized him from the news. And Luther recognized him even further at the close of the meeting when the gathered formed a circle and held hands and said the Serenity Prayer, as it was the speaker's hand Luther held.

A man knows when his hand is being held too tight and when a message of desire is flowing through the other's hand, a message of desire supported by the intense whisper after the prayer that the two go for coffee. A man knows when sexual hunger grips the other who is still quite new to recovery and in a state of loneliness and estrangement. A man knows when the nature of the other's problem, in addition to alcoholism, is that he is married to a woman with whom he has had children but is in fact married to his desire for those of his own sex. A man knows when he must not be part of the other's menu for the day, that he must not serve as a morsel for the other's consumption. A man just knows.

Luther thinking, a change is coming. Because it hasn't doesn't mean it won't. Glanton the change, and imminent too. Glanton the love of his life whom he must now replace with a phone number here, a phone number there? To live in perpetuity in the desolation of his longing on a street the sun never finds?

"I have trouble calling people I don't really know," Luther said.

“I have the same problem,” Glanton said, warming Luther with his candid response. Glanton was not all about the chuckle, all about the laughing thing. He had goodness at his core.

There was a public library, called the Ottendorfer, right there on Second Avenue and Eighth Street. From the library Luther borrowed a novel, *The Rector of Justin*, by an author named Louis Auchincloss, whom Luther would not have bothered with did he not come on the high recommendation of Gore Vidal, who could spank you hard with his words and leave you shaken as to the merits of your own person. Gore Vidal had merit on his face and all his parts. He showed himself to be a man not beholden to anyone, least of

all the sissy horde-herd of the academy, of which he had never been a part. Louis Auchincloss, like him, was a man of the world, a Wall Street executive who understood life beyond the ivy-covered walls. He did not hide out with paperback books and highly impressionable young men and women. He got the job done, at the office and at the typewriter. Luther, in borrowing the book, was seeking to avail himself of the independent spirit that Gore Vidal manifested in his oeuvre and his life. Not that Luther read *The Rector of Justin*. Not that he got far into its pages, not with one day coming after the next and new life arriving.

*Celeste, I am in the weeds. Too often do I write and write without looking back, a wasteful and mindless activity.*

*And now, today, I met with Bruce Bill at a Mexican restaurant. He did not knock*

*me to the ground and punch me in the face. He broke not a single bone in my body. He simply said my YA YA novel was not a YA YA novel but an adult novel and should be submitted as such. He said he liked the writing a great deal and gave me the names of several agents he respects.*

*Celeste, I visited the bridges of New York City afterward. I had to go to them. I did not jump. I just had to see that they were there. My mind was in a commotion but in all of that there was an argument being made for the continuation of my life.*

*But there is more, Celeste. There is more. I cannot live in the realm of words when action is occurring on the ground. Once again is Sarah frightened of the streets and stores and all aspects of New York City. Once more is she cowering in the loft, having heard assessing and assailing commentary by passersby and grocery clerks as to her worth. Even now does she sit in a chair with her hands over her ears, as if such futile action can stop the rumination mill her mind has become. I am not there with her brain. I am not where it has taken her, or failed to take her. I cannot bring her to the place of safety.*

*And now there is this, Celeste. Glanton has sung me a love song. "You're a youngster. You have years of sober living ahead of you to do all the things you want to do, and with conscious contact with God." Is that not a love song? Is it not?*

Luke had a song as well, a song of denial. For Luther it was the song of death.

"I haven't had a drink in two days. Two days," Luke said.

“That’s good,” Luther replied.

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What more should I say?”

“How about that it is great? How about acknowledging the power of my mind to beat this thing?”

“Why should I do that?”

“Are you fucking with me again?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Something’s going on with you. What is it?”

“I just don’t have the same confidence that two days without alcohol means a whole lot.”

“Why do you have to go and say that?”

“Because before I got sober I could stop for a couple of days or even a week sometimes. But it seemed that every minute of every hour of every day I wasn’t drinking I was aware of the fact that I wasn’t drinking.”

“So?”

“That’s the power of alcohol over alcoholics. Even when we’re not drinking, we are thinking about alcohol. When we come to RoR and participate in our own recovery, the obsession is lifted. We are placed in a position of neutrality toward alcohol.”

“Oh, man. That’s the problem with you. You’re weak in your mind and your body.”

“Surrender to win.”



“What?”

“Surrender to win.”

“What kind of shit are you talking now?”

“Come to the meetings and find out.”

“Oh, fuck you, man. Just fuck you.”

Luther found a place for pondering in his study under the loft bed and sat with himself. Was he sounding like Newton the know-it-all with his brother, and in so doing driving Luke further and further from RoR? Was he simply stoking the fires of Luke’s arrogance? Was he contributing to his brother’s demise? But he had grown up listening to his brother’s lies and rationalizations, not wanting to hurt Luke or provoke his wrath. Maybe going along with his B.S. about drinking would only hasten his destruction. Maybe he was “planting a seed,” as he heard it said in RoR, by speaking to Luke about the nature of the malady. Or maybe it didn’t matter what he said or didn’t say. He thought of all the warnings and talking-to’s he had received about his drinking and how little effect they had had on him. Maybe it was just a matter of grace. Was it not said that if everyone who needed RoR came, meetings would have to be held in Yankee Stadium? Maybe it was just time to let go and let the higher power do his or her or its thing.

*Celeste, whether she is in sickness or in health do I fight with her. Tonight it was over money. Her mental malady offers no permanent restraining influence. I am living in the ghost of a marriage. We have abandoned each other and yet go through the motions. The simple truth is that I do not want to carry her. I cannot serve as her table. I cannot and*

*will not let myself be deformed by the posture of meek acceptance of my fate this relationship requires. And no, I will not divulge the unkindness I have spoken. It can have no place in my history beyond vague allusion to it and no place in eternity either.*

The stereo given to them by the Van Dines made a loud humming sound when the record played. Luther sought to abolish the noise forever by purchasing a new cartridge and installing it. Now he put the Doors album on the turntable so he could Luther dance in his aloneness to “Light My Fire,” Sarah being out with Carola Aprile, but the humming was more wretchedly loud than before, thwarting him in his desire to go higher and higher on the vocals of monster man Jim Morrison and the mystery acid rock of his band. Desperate for escape, he turned to the radio and settled for Creedence Clearwater and “Bad Moon Rising.” Many others followed. Weary, he collapsed on the lofa bed and sank into his reality. He had a record player he could not repair. He had a marriage he could not repair. He lay with that for a while in the stillness.

The ads said that they had found their jobs through the *New York Times*. They did not say that they had found their jobs at the *New York Times*. Luther set out to do just that with a cover letter and his resume, such as it was. I can do much if you will only love me, he thought to say, in the moment of exhilaration in which he wrote. So many doors suddenly flying open to him, at least in his imagination, on the sun-drenched day. Copy editing. That meant correct grammar and usage. That meant the distinction between hyphens and em dashes and en dashes. It meant subject-verb agreement. It meant spelling out numbers

or using figures. It meant scrutinizing words in their individuality and in relation to others. It meant the chain of being from which copy flowed must be infection free. He would be out of the sandbox and the pain of childhood and an instant adult. He could walk among the many with his head held high. No one would do a double take and say, "You work where?" He could step out of the nursery and have an identity that did not bring him shame. Why? Because the *New York Times* was the *New York Times* and nothing more needed to be said. Of course it was a behemoth and grayness would attach to him for the rest of his days. And life would be nothing more than a passing show with the ephemera of the copy he worked on. There were not too many who read back issues of the *New York Times*. Well, it was for him to place his ruminating under house arrest and just do what RoR said about taking the action and letting go of the result.

*Celeste, I am back to gnashing my teeth. As close as I come with my writing, I'm still going nowhere. The door continues to slam shut on me or never open in the first place. My disappointment and anger have led to paranoia. I look around and imagine I see people publishing and succeeding effortlessly, as if it is their birthright to succeed, something they have to think of or work toward no more than breathing. And as they move forward they pity me for being stuck in the same place. I imagine myself so transparently dejected that by my appearance alone I invite pity.*

Luther was not without understanding that each face had its own arsenal of expressions, and that smiling was one of them. Some were infectious and caused him to break out in a

smile of his own. But then there were others that seemed to originate in a darker place and left him affronted or frightened or even with soreness reigning in every part of his being, as it came to be in the case of Roller Carmona-Hickson. That being so, a full exploration was required that he might be certain he had justice on his side and was deserving of the righteous anger that often accompanied it.

In an effort to improve his faculties, Luther had sworn off coffee. No more heaping tablespoons of Maxwell House instant or Taster's Choice instant in a mug of boiling water so he could jumpstart his day and have his head in the right position. No, no, no. He was reversing the trend toward decline. No more going to bed wired for sound, the phrase he used for the jittery state of being he found himself in each night after ten cups of joe. No, no, and again no. If his heart was to be aflutter, let it be with love, not caffeine. Already had he done holy war on tar and nicotine and other ghastly impurities, ridding himself of his last flip-top box of Marlboros with the powerful mantra "Every second of every minute of every hour of every day I do not take a drag, my lungs are clearing. And every second of every minute, etc., that I do not take a drag is the hold of this pernicious addiction on me weakening." So was it that the fingers that held his cigs shed their yellow stain and normalcy returned to both his insides and his outsides. And from there could he extend his holy war to the coffee that had been such a companion to his smokes that his system might be regulated into desires approaching normalcy.

Yes, his scalp tightened on him, the blood vessels that the caffeine had dilated now constricting, and the diminishing drug sought to punish him with a two-day headache, showing itself for what it was, a scorched earth destroyer of the first order.

But Luther had his breath and his mind to deal with it now. The mongoose had hold of the cobra, whose poison was of no avail.

Now, at Cromartie Wonders, there had been no need of his Taster's Choice or Maxwell House instant. Rafta, with hallmark efficiency and mindfulness of the common welfare, had brought in a coffee maker, so all in the department could draw from it and be strong and alert in their day. Since she was first on the scene and in need of her morning joe, in spite of her Englishness, she gave it to herself to brew the first pot; it was for others to replenish the pot should they come upon it empty. But, and this was a big but, no randomness must be permitted as to the end of day chore of washing the pot so it could be regular and ready for use the next morning. That would not do. Since Janet Proux, the department secretary, was a devourer but not a drinker of coffee, she was exempted from the chore. That left only Roller Carmona-Hickson and Luther for cleanup detail in a system of rotation they strictly adhered to until, that is, Roller took it upon herself to bring her own coffee, and said to Luther, though not to Rafta, that she would no longer be a party to the end of day cleanup. *Celeste, I am not a man of honor but I am a man of fear and can even say, when lucidity is reigning, that I am capable of a measure of propriety. Now it seemed for me a sad business that Rafta who, despite her Englishness chose coffee over tea, should have to start her day preparing the coffee and end her day cleaning the pot. Whatever shortcomings of disposition she possessed, her hours were filled with industry and purpose, as she sought to drive Cromartie Wonders forward while I busied myself with my Scotch tape and whatnot. And God knows, Roller had her hours of endless indolence between minor tasks. Did I wish for Rafta to cast an*

*eye made peevish by our withdrawal of responsibility for the coffee pot cleanup? Did I wish for her to acknowledge and accept what she had already perceived, that we were wastrels of the first order and thus turn her scorn upon us? Wisdom was not to be found therein. Raising my scrupulosity to its highest level, I resolved to continue the ablution of the coffee pot on my own. In addition, to ease any suffering it might bring for Rafta to see, toward end of day, when she came for her second and final cuppa joe, that precious little of the brew had been consumed, I would twice daily fill my mug to the rim and empty it into the bathroom sink, being sure to rinse away all evidence of its fate from the basin. Humility is expressed in our actions as well as by our attitudes, Celeste, and nothing in the workday gave me a greater sense of usefulness than tending to that pot, so it might be clean and shiny and at the ready for the following day. And may I add that it ultimately warmed my heart to see a woman of English refinement such as Rafta embrace the American-ness of a cuppa joe. Having a foreigner, an outstanding foreigner, in our city is akin, for me, to having a friend into the apartment where order did not rule when I was growing up. There is, though not to the same degree, the fear that my city and my country, as was the case with that apartment, will be found sadly and egregiously wanting, and so these signs of approval are definitely heartening, though I can never fully escape my anxiousness that the approval is tentative and quite subject to withdrawal.*

*But life is a constant turning. We cannot see what is around the corner until we are around it. Such vision is denied to all but the most extraordinary of us. Just this evening, Celeste, as I carried the coffee pot to the men's room, I came upon Roller Carmona-Hickson, and her smirk was of a size to burst the bounds of her face, as if to*

*say, what a sap you are, what a weak-minded people-pleaser and flunky of the first order.*

*What a menial!*

*That word order, Celeste. In this moment of crisis brought on by Roller's facial assault on my senses, I seized on it, though in another context, that of providing me the direction I needed so I could get my bearings. I sought my refuge in the men's room where, staring into the mirror as I soaped and rinsed the wretched pot, I remonstrated silently with Roller for her perversity in foregoing the fine coffee Rafta made every morning for her own paid-for brew. But my mind could not remain on that plane. Soon obliterating all attempts at logic, it led me into the fire of resentment. I was quickly ablaze with indignation, and the match that set the inferno going was that smirk. Roller Carmona-Hickson had finally found a way to be above me. How does it feel, white boy, to be a servant to your master?*

*Strangely, I did not stay there in that mental space. The weekend before I had gotten a haircut, and now I was noticing in the mirror that one of my sideburns appeared to be longer than the other. Clearly the left one was above the lobe and the right one below. Was it possible that Roller's smirk was reserved for my poor grooming? But no, how could that be? Would she not have beamed her malignity at me earlier in the week for my oversight? There are times, Celeste, when we must allow logic to be our guide.*

*Now I found myself humming. An old Bob Dylan song came to me about you go your way and I'll go mine, as if the snarling one had been summoned from the depths of my unconscious to be my spiritual adviser. All help that truly merits the name we must accept, regardless of the source, Celeste. We don't always know our angels from our*

*demons in this mixed-up world, and confusion reigns all the more when our minds are closed. To be locked down in our certainty is to swim with bowling balls chained to our ankles.*

*Cruel and unworthy thoughts came to me. To make washing the coffee pot appealing to Roller once more, I could suggest that she regard it as a skill to place on her resume, along with chronic tardiness and illiteracy. But decency prevailed, or was it simply that business of focusing on the mote in my sister's eye while ignoring the beam in my own? Further, I was given pause by the wonder of Rafta's unyielding acceptance of Roller, and what I might learn from her example. There are those who, even with their mix of good and bad, are placed on our path to move us to a higher plane, and in the give and take of living life on life's terms I had to recognize that Rafta had moral instruction to convey through action and attitude.*

*Besides, Celeste, did I not end each prayer with the reflexive plea that God teach me how to love? And even if that prayer had no specific place of origin within me, could anyone assert it was from outside my own borders?*

Warfare broke out at Forget About It at the lunch hour one day during the workweek, and just as Luther was sitting down at the table in the dining area beyond the meeting space to enjoy a container of delicious pea soup with bits of ham. Oh happiness, oh joy, that had been until the fireworks began. A young woman with dirty blond hair and a face fully frazzled entered and snapped at Giselle, who made and served the sandwiches, to bring her a tuna on rye and to make it snappy.



“We don’t talk to each other that way here,” Giselle said.

“What’s that you say? You’re whore of a mother doesn’t talk that way?” the young woman replied, intent on showing she had a mouth on her.

“Learn some manners. And take a bath, while you’re at it,” Giselle said, having firepower of her own.

“Keep taking your Thorazine, baby. Keep taking your Thorazine,” the young woman shouted, in such a state of dudgeon that she gnashed her teeth.

“I don’t want you here. Go into the meeting,” Giselle said, placing her authority on the young woman.

“Keep taking your Thorazine, baby,” the woman said, continuing to raise up on Giselle.

But Giselle had the capacity to raise up on her as well, saying, “I don’t take Thorazine. You take it for me.”

Now that tore it, as Luther had heard Fred MacMurray say to Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*. The woman fled out into the street.

At a nearby table sat several suited Babbitts, who too had been chowing down, though on the fare of Giselle, not the deli soup Luther had brought in. Money men of the hard-driving kind. “Nuts...sick...emotionally deranged...” he heard them say, from the throne of hypocrisy on which they sat, blind and unfeeling to the emotional pain the woman had been in.

A voice of righteousness was sounding loud in Luther’s head, a voice that shouted “Who are you calling sick, you who came foul from your mother’s womb before

receiving the grace of RoR?" even as he held his silence.

*Celeste, intemperateness is my name, but before I continue, let me first preempt the chorus of middle roaders I sense gathering who would try to lasso me from the fringe and drag me into the center of the pack. This I would do so truth can have its way and be free from the fetters of the mitigating ones who would extenuate themselves into eternity.*

*Things were calm at home until Carola Aprile called. She needed a slide of one of Sarah's prints. In fact the slide was overdue. But Sarah had not taken the roll of slide film to be developed, and now her inclusion in the show Carola was curating was in jeopardy. So I gleaned from the conversation I was overhearing. And so I did what I do so very well. I remonstrated with Sarah, which I hadn't the courage to do with the suited men at Forget About It earlier in the day, as even middle class office functionaries are equipped with fists to beat the likes of me senseless should I confront them with my dudgeon. Let us tell it like it is. I am a coward who trembles at the thought of open conflict with men but is ready, behind a closed door, to lambaste a virtually defenseless woman. It started with the simple rhetorical question, "Won't you do anything?" I had bought the slide film she requested, but then she failed to follow through and get the roll processed. From there it escalated to "You won't lift a finger to help us. Not one finger. You won't even develop a roll of film, let alone take a job." Then I further crossed the line. I began to call her names, ugly names. Destructive fury was having its way, and self-destructive fury as well. I deprive you by not simply saying the names, but I'm afraid of where it would take me to relive the obscenity of my tongue as it was then. You might go so far as to say it was a*

*form of verbal murder. I was killing her, and also killing the better part of me, and I could feel as much even as I ranted.*

*I will not detail the depth of remorse I was plunged into, or the numerous expressions of that remorse that followed the next day, nor will I note the resolution I made to myself and to Sarah to never speak such words again or further note the meaninglessness of such a resolution. And yet, at the time, I didn't consider the situation hopeless. When I began to pull out of my depression and the groveling displays of contrition eased, I was able to take comfort in the fact that there were periods of peace and acceptance between us, and that strife was not the norm. What I couldn't accept was that the cycles were basic to my nature, and that the bouts of fury, the constraints that I felt the marriage placed on me, would never moderate but only grow worse.*

Luther decided, in this time, that if ever he was to chronicle the discoveries he had made over a lifetime, that the matter of ostracism would be high on his list, including its surprising existence in the least likely places. RoR was not Ellis Island, with its poor and huddled masses, but it did receive in large numbers those who had considered themselves different and outcasts of one kind or another. Ilsa, the black roots of her blond hair showing, was leading the meeting. Savage is when you are allowed to speak and emote for half an hour as you tell your story, from childhood through to recovery, and then deny another the opportunity for a brief share of his own by ignoring his raised hand and calling on those just to the right and left of him and those just behind and in front to make the point that he is not wanted. But Luther was not defeated by such malice aforethought.

He did not even see it as such. Rather, he chose to be flattered by her avoidance of him—it signified an admission on her part that he was having a powerful effect, even if a negative one, and that possibly he reminded her of brothers who had done her wrong or lovers or husbands who had perpetrated an injustice. Luther sought to put the light of his understanding on her with a steady gaze, and saw that she was seeing him as well though her eyes were not upon him, so that it might be more accurate to say that she was feeling him. At meeting's end, he stood in line to thank the speaker, as it had been suggested to him that he never leave a meeting without doing so, a member's story being a gift to the fellowship, and so was it not a rudeness to withhold thanks for that gift, whether it resonated with him or not? And so he gave her the handshake that she was entitled to and the thanks she was entitled to, and then, when she said, "I'm so sorry I didn't get a chance to call on you," he raised up on her only slightly, saying, "Why would you apologize for exercising your right to choose whom you wish to hear from?" and while this thought-out question did not break her face into many parts, it summoned perplexity and abashment where none had been. And so, though she had permitted him no words at the meeting, he could leave with the hope that these might live in her mind as a question she would struggle to answer when all the other words had faded. Because he had a viciousness of his own, and as with all writers and would-be writers, a desire and an outright need for the last word, if not the first.

Now if Forget About It had its flouters of the law, those who came through its doors with a history of full and chronic defiance of societal norms, it also had those who walked the

beat and drove in cruisers for the preservation of order and authority, within department guidelines, to apply their nightsticks to the heads and bodies of the unruly ones and even guns should their own mortality become an issue. Bob the policeman was in the speaker's chair that day, and spoke the masculine language of his culture. If Prufrock chose to measure out his life with coffee spoons, that was his affair, but for Bob the measure was an accumulation of car wrecks. In this way, and this way only, could he tell his story. A smashup here, a smashup there, all involving alcohol, and resulting in suspension from the force. Of the human wreckage, the harm to himself and others, he could not speak. He was only in the speaker's chair at an RoR meeting because of a few bad bouts with the bottle. In a few months his case would be reviewed and his gun and badge returned to him and he would be back on the beat. Luther saw that Bob had blond hair and big white teeth and skin that had to be kissed only once by the sun to tan forever. Luther further saw that the force of his character was melded with metal and sensed that he was submitting but not surrendering. But though he was not of Bob's kind in terms of character and personality and affect, lacking his carapace of hardness, Luther saw that he was of Bob's kind in terms of alcoholism, that denial had lived in him to the degree it was manifesting now in Bob when Luther was himself in the first year of recovery. How could Luther say otherwise after recalling how, at ninety days sober, he had led a meeting for the first time and got only so far as the pain of his childhood and teenage years, barely touching on the role of alcohol in his life? So no, he had no business seeking to elevate above policeman Bob, though everything in him wanted to live in the differences. Everything.

*Celeste, it was not for me to forget Peter Van Dine's scornful response when I mentioned to him that, while I was in publishing, I didn't really know proofreader's symbols. What ails you? I even now hear him say, channeling my mother's idiom. What ails you that you cannot learn skills basic to the work you are paid to do? May I be permitted to express some pride that from the depths of shame I was able to rebound to a sense of mastery of these previously intimidating marks, and that, though I did not strut or assume an air of pomposity, a legitimate sense of satisfaction came over me that I had gained the means for bringing a fuller sense of order to the manuscripts in my care. And yet, I am also obliged to report that, like the slip that shows beneath the hem of a woman's dress, thus marring even her most resplendent attire, a trace of unsightly pride showed in my correspondence, specifically the memos I would write to my boss, Rafta. Because she lived in the language and was word perfect in what she wrote as well as what she spoke, it was imperative that all my powers of vigilance be brought to every sentence. Now when a blemish would appear in the initial draft, I was faced with a dilemma. Was I to use white out, a liquid that left a pasty trail on the paper; or was I to dare to mock the exigencies of time itself, the true master of us all until and unless the higher power steps in to lead us back to the ever expanding now, by tearing up the memo and starting all over again? Of course, there was an alternative, that being to use the transposition symbol to bring the disordered letters into their rightful order in each error-marred word that they might sit unremarked upon on the page and give no offense to the eye. For over a year I proceeded with this option, and may I be beaten ceaselessly and without remorse*

*if I say that a small swell of pride, perhaps detectable only to me, was felt as I made the mark with ink. However, vigilance will have its day, if not sooner, then later. For while I could bask in the glow of Rafta's imagined admiration for my copyediting prowess with this tad I had placed on display for her before the awareness began to spread in my consciousness like a stain from a wine spill on one's shirt that these signs were meant for copy bound for print, not interoffice memos; only a fool of the first order would deploy them in his pathetic quest for recognition, a quest Rafta had surely and quietly, in her tactful way, discerned and added to her mental dossier on me.*

*And this, too, Celeste. As it was in the beginning, so it is now. Sarah will be participating in a demonstration in support of nuclear disarmament today and Carola Aprile will be joining her. Was it not yesterday that Sarah attended an anti-Vietnam War rally in Central Park, only on that occasion it was Pam Becker she had at her side. Sarah's social consciousness is always soaring, whatever the vicissitudes of her mental state, while it is for me to struggle against the hegemony of self.*

*And now this, too, that we may remain fully abreast of the news, including that of the late-breaking variety. Glanton and Babs are vacating their current premises in Darien, Connecticut, and heading for Woodstock, Vermont. It is my understanding that one night, on the radio, the emotion-rich voice of Frank Sinatra as he sang "Moonlight in Vermont" came to him and Glanton has not been the same since. The two are paired in my mind, Celeste. Both came from humble proletarian origins, and while exceedingly bright, went on to drop out of high school, having within the seeds of a higher calling*

*academia could have no part in. They were men faithful to their mental makeup. And, of course, their future success had a predictor not simply by virtue of the endowment between their ears but that between their legs. Their thinness meant nothing to the women they encountered; it was more than compensated for by the women's perception of the big cojones the two were packing and the testosterone power that exuded from their entire beings.*

Luther sought to be an obedient disciple, faithful not only to Glanton in his actions but in his thoughts, allowing no judgments of his mentor to have a home in his head. He was aware of the possible father figure Glanton represented, given their age difference, and did not live in the gulch of negativity in his thoughts about him, unlike with his own father. Yes, Glanton had his chuckle plenty going a little too often for Luther's taste, and yes, Glanton could bruise him with curtness, but any infections to Luther's brain in regard to Glanton were quickly eliminated by the power of love. He lived to please Glanton and for the happy glow that came from being in supremely right relation to his mentor.

(Reader, please be reminded that Glanton had a mentor of his own and again of what he often said, that his partial purpose was to make himself increasingly unnecessary.)

And so, when Glanton suggested that Luther take another look at his marriage with written inventory, Luther did exactly that, placed the four typewritten pages in the mail, and sent them off, then followed two days later with a phone call to apologize for



the inadequacy of the writing only to be even more ashamed that he had been revealed as so nakedly needy for approval, compelling Glanton to respond with the forceful assertion that the writing was in fact quite literate. The level of humiliation he could sink to seemed bottomless and extreme, even for a drunk, a man out of balance with himself. Where is my amour propre? Luther called out. Why does it vanish when I am in the power zone of Glanton? And the answer came. Because Glanton was the father, and before the father he must always prostrate himself, lest the father whack him dead should he get a whiff of insurrection. Luther gave his face an inspection that same day. He made no effort to rearrange it. He just gave it his attention, so it might know that he was *watching*.

*Now Celeste, we all have our day of reckoning. It does not seem to matter our origins, whether the fiery blasts from the fulminators I received or the gentler waves of liberalism that Sarah was exposed to. The smacking hand awaits. It awaits, I say. A caveat. This insight is not the product of expert analysis but simply that of simple observation. A meltdown has been upon Sarah and may be the result of her work with Babs, who has been encouraging her to dig down deep and then deeper still. Babs is a believer in the power of God, and would banish false healers to remote corners of the earth, where they might practice their healing arts on permafrost or desert sands. It is quite understandable. The surgery performed on Glanton left him a shell of the robustly healthy young man he had been. Why would he not write off the medical industry as a consequence and embrace a more holistic approach? Why else would he say, purposely disregarding correct grammar, "If you want to get worser, go see a doctor"? And why not*

*include doctors of the mind as well? Were they not also part of the scam? And why would the intensity of his vision not extend to his life's partner? And was I too not in their orbit now? The problem for Sarah was that she was in free fall into her past. She was staring, not looking. Endless her tears that she had pulled down the underpants of her deceased sister Lenore and inflicted similar humiliations on Claire in a child's naked quest for supremacy. And had I not too thought, when I had the upper hand through surprise, that I could keep it forever only to live in cowering fear when my attempt at hegemony was shredded and sleeping giants such as Vera awoke and "stole" the professional identity I had assumed would be mine. There is no natural affinity with life on life's terms for those fashioned like Sarah and myself. We must be led by karmic blows into a state of reasonableness. Only, in Sarah's case, the danger is that she will be stuck in the darkness, and that would be a cruelty beyond measure if her mind were to become and remain a living hell.*

Luther was not at the place of unconditional love in this time, nor would he ever fully be. There were those who dwelt in exalted realms, while his life was lived low on the ladder, as he sometimes perceived it. And so schadenfreude had a place in his heart and was activated by Sarah's report that Carole Aprile was sorely aggrieved that Tom Terst was taking minimal assumption of responsibility for household chores and their finances. A happy day it was to learn that Carola Aprile had entered the land of peeve in regard to Tom Terst and to further learn that smallness was fueling her soreness that Tom Terst should dwell on an aesthetic plane and relegate the more mundane aspects of life to her.

Luther's dissatisfaction with his marriage seemed to ease hearing of these grumbings by Carola Aprile. Maybe he and Sarah were doing better than he had thought. Maybe they were doing just fine.

Luther had been thinking. Odious as he might be and nemesis that he was, Kaplan Acedit was in fact a master of the deal and furtherance of himself. However others might see him, he had his ship in order. That being so, perhaps Luther should find the humility to submit his YA YA manuscript to him, Kaplan Acedit, for his review and appraisal, because if he couldn't edit Kaplan Acedit properly, maybe Kaplan Acedit would be able to righteously edit him.

But Glanton kachunked him when Luther offered his plan for inspection. No, Glanton did not give him chuckle plenty. Instead, he gave him curiosity soaked in sorrow, saying only, "Sometimes I wonder about you. I really do, that you would think it all right to do such a thing to yourself."

In this way did Glanton seek to rally all forces for the restoration of sanity in Luther Garatdjian's mind.

It has been noted before that Sarah was partial to the past, as she understood it to be. No current actress could hold a candle to Bette Davis and Tolstoy was top shelf with his nonpareil excellence. Her heart was with that which was dying or had vanished from the globe. The cobblestone streets of SoHo and the meatpacking district to the north called to her, as did the old shops along Canal Street. She, like her father, was partial to what had

gone before.

Luther, too, was in mourning for what was. Did he not wake just the night before still delirious from his dream of viewing Ebbets Field from an elevated subway platform and the nimbus of light the ballpark was bathed in? Were his insides not screaming that he was almost there with his heart's long-held desire?

When they arrived at the West Side Highway, Sarah commenced to weep. With no explanation for her tears forthcoming, Luther was compelled to inquire what their cause might be.

“Are you blind to all that is around you and all that is not?” Her words were but a brief interruption in her tears.

“What is that you speak of?” Luther asked.

“The highway is gone. Gone. All that is left are the steel supports.”

He had eyes to see as well. He had only been seeking confirmation for what he already knew, that her tears had been triggered by those who placed roadway improvement over an antiquated artifact.

The river called to them. That hadn't been taken away, and both Luther and Sarah said they would like to see someone try, though they would not put it past a power driver like Robert Moses to macadamize the river in the ongoing war of the country against nature. As confirmation of the heedlessness of man regarding all he had wrought, they watched as a man in a small boat with an outboard motor received a big bag of food from a second man on the pier, who then joined him in the boat for an afternoon repast. He and Sarah watched as the filthy ones chowed down on burgers and franks in the bobbing boat,

tossing the aluminum foil wrappings into the polluted water to join the condoms and whatnot floating about.

“All is lost,” Sarah cried out. “All.”

An artist she might be, but she was also a prophet, a Cassandra, of the coming doom.

*Celeste, on a hot June day our refrigerator has up and died, and shows no will to return to this life. For our meat and milk and butter and eggs, there is no refuge but the drain or the garbage can. And for Sarah and me, there is no refuge from the pain of indigence that places such a staple of domestic existence beyond our present reach. In a shameful display of intemperateness, I lashed out at Sarah for her lack of employment once again. How cruel to demand of a woman who suffers from a mental disability not of her making (Are you listening, Babs?) that she participate in the workplace. Would I ask a man or woman bound to a wheelchair to walk or a blind person to see? But what is the point in telling you once again of the depths of remorse into which I was plunged when another attack is sure to follow? And what is to be made of a man, if I can even apply such a word to myself, who demands of a woman that she help provide for them because he lacks the vigor and fortitude to do so on his own, as countless husbands do? Am I not still that cowering child hiding behind my mother's skirt when the marauding bandito Simon Weill enters the lobby of that building we presumably managed? Is not manliness something I fear and loathe because I cannot possibly attain it? Do I not still, on some level, expect women to provide for me? Can I ever be anything more than Mother's little helper?*

*Now, several days have passed and Sarah has gone to the winning side. She has contacted her mother, who has put a check in the mail so we can have the needed appliance. This largesse from a woman who posed the question, possibly rhetorical, "How long will we have to take care of you?" as I was reaching the depths of my alcoholism. And here she is, some years later, still providing us with aid. (I will not suggest that the party she was really addressing was her husband. I will not do that, though deeper indigence than what I have known might attach to him were he cut loose from the mother ship, as his resistance to the world as it is is even greater than mine. I say this knowing he is cut from a finer cloth and has magical properties that accrue to those with the physical endowment he possesses, as what is so is so.)*

Luther prayed in full earnestness that his self-righteous anger would be lifted from him, that never again would he rail at Sarah for not being more in the world and helping them to make ends meet. He prayed to be like the Ron Dougs of the world, those with a chop of mustache who could shoulder financial responsibility not only for themselves but for their wives and their children. He prayed to no longer be a monster of effeteness and fecklessness, for whom the slightest obstacle, such as a broken refrigerator, appeared to be a mountainous obstacle. "I beg of you, God, to give me the fortitude I am lacking and to expunge that voice of my mother's that says, 'I work. Why don't they?'" And yet, like a toothache sufferer who gains a sudden respite from his pain, he couldn't be sure that the pain wouldn't return.

Earlier, Luther had referenced a professional writer but sought to strip him of his dignity with names such as “Wide Stance” and “Mr. Big Balls,” because no one, in Luther’s estimation, had the right to such seemingly effortless success and the occupation of such physical space when sitting in a meeting of RoR. But now he would do him right, as justice—giving a man his *just* deserts—was a principle, too. His name was Roderick Hound, and he had emerged from the bottle to become the premier writer of espionage thrillers in America, and all respect all the time was due him for his achievement. This he received from critics and an adoring and worldwide fan base.

And there Roderick Hound was, in a tiny storefront where RoR meetings were held frequently each day. Come and Get It was its name. Roderick’s wide stance had gotten wider still, so now he effectively occupied three chairs, the one he was sitting in and those to his immediate left and right because of the lebensraum his massive legs cried out for. It was fully impressed on Luther that he was in the presence of a giant among men; he was left to wonder that anyone should have such a spectacular physical and mental endowment.

Luther had put himself on a procrustean bed, spiritually speaking, that he might, in his thoughts and in his face, give Roderick Hound all the respect due him, though there were rumors here and there that he had done the dirty to a former RoR girlfriend, trying to appropriate possessions that were not his but hers, when their breakup came, and that he was not above stiffing those who provided services for him. Luther put all that aside when he went to him after the meeting.

“Roderick, if I may ask, how many drafts do you put your manuscripts through?”

Two? Three? More?” Luther asked, having prayed for humility to be his guide. How cold and gray Roderick’s eyes were, as if they were made of steel, Luther thought, as he posed his question.

“One,” Roderick Hound answered, and walked on by. Luther had asked a question, and Roderick had answered, and that, in Roderick’s world, was that, though for Luther, the response and the flat, dismissive tone, had the feel of a putdown. The stretch was over. Roderick was once again Big Balls, Wide Stance, and whatever other term might apply to his aggrandizing appropriation of the world’s spaces.

*Celeste, darkness came to me, asking if I was its friend, and if not, why not? It was only there to show me the truth of my life, that I was plumbing the depths of nothingness, that I was in minus zero territory, and yet had a way to go before reaching the nadir. It asked for my fidelity, equating commitment with manhood. I could not argue. I could not speak, not there, in the swirling blackness.*

*You ask for the genesis of this blackness. I suppose it was my ya ya novel that Bruce Bill says is not a ya ya novel. I became bothered that I could not even do the dinky, could not even beat out a bunt by submitting a novel in that lesser, to make a judgment, category. And any consolation I had taken in being told I had written the draft of an adult novel, albeit about a teenage boy, was rendered meaningless by my fear of returning to it, because surely I would fail in that effort as I had with the YA draft. My flesh was tainted. My mind was tainted. I should have been dropped in a tank with a shoal of piranha who would strip me to my bones.*



*Then God came calling. He did, Celeste, he did. He asked me if I was willing to remain sober if I never became a writer; if nothing I committed to paper ever saw the ritual of print, as Sylvia Plath called it. Yes, I said. Yes. I saw that the two had nothing to do with each other. There was no link, no conditionality. In one hand was my sobriety. In the other were the situations in my life. The two were separate and apart.*

*The same applied, I was led to see, with regard to money. If I was always to struggle to pay my bills, then so be it. That would have to be all right, too. The one essential was that I live sober and die sober.*

Sarah could speak truth when it was upon her to do so. The rumination mill might be working overtime for days and months, but she reserved for herself the ability to see accurately in matters close to home. And so when she told him, with the offhand laconism needed to penetrate to his core, that he had been hiding, he had no choice but to come out with his hands up and acknowledge her fathoming of the recesses of his being. She was, of course, referring to what was near and dear to his heart, his writing, understanding that, as she was most alive with brush in hand, so too was he when sitting at the typewriter. What she didn't say was that he had reason to hide. His work, in his moments of realism, was not good. It fell below the level of acceptable for publication not only in the quality of the writing but also in content and the absence of structure. One needed to be able to arrange the blocks in the correct pattern, to discern patterns, and if one couldn't do that with IQ test blocks, then how was one to do it in his novels? And yet, the truth tsunami that struck and left him wasted in the ruins of his fantasy life was

but a visitation. Once again did he hear the anthem-like words of Samuel Beckett to the effect that he couldn't go on, he must go on, he would go on as the initial step in fortifying his bones and rallying strong.

On that very day did Luther Garatdjian lay out seventeen dollars for a copy of the *International Directory of Small Presses and Little Magazines* and with his right hand on the thick paperback volume itself resolve to saturate the outlets therein with submissions of his work, that is, to widen his circle so someone out there might love him as he was on the paper he wrote on and not simply receive the hammer blows from those holding themselves in steadfast opposition to his literary existence.

*Now Celeste, it is true that Dylan sang of an artist who didn't look back and how she could paint the daytime black, but in Sarah's case she does look back and that is why she paints the daytime black and the night in darker tones than that. An exaggerated sense of importance for the death of her sister Lenore has more and more gripped her over the years. Logic, as I would apply it, cannot be brought to this matter. My particular light of reason cannot be shone into her darkness. I must leave it to Dr. Frodkey to impact the powerful currents that inform her existence.*

As he tried to pacify his own being, Sarah would borrow his fire and breathe it directly in his face. Whether timed or not, her explosion came on Independence Day, and sent him to the floor, where he lay for the entire morning. From his supine position he had a glimpse of the fear that drove her ire. The nature of her attack was against all rooms of recovery

and all that was espoused in them. But really, it wasn't about them as such either so much as about her fear of the people who inhabited these rooms.

That afternoon they took a walk down to SoHo to free themselves of their own minds. It did them some good to be out among the wandering crowds and to gain the perspective the presence of other people could bring. When they returned they could both appreciate the newfound harmony of their existence as a pair. But as soon as that word appeared on his mental screen, Luther recoiled. He wasn't a pair. He had never been a pair. As a pair he was diminished. He was a nation under himself and flying his own flag. Always would this be so.

Evidently, the universe was listening, though it was difficult, in fact impossible, to determine exactly what it had heard, and whether an event in the middle of that same night was in reprisal for something either of them had said or thought. All Luther knew was that he awoke in the darkness to an explosion of fireworks followed by the sound of glass shattering on the pavement. As he feared, the pane in the window of the room next to Sarah's studio had been blown out and now their surrender to the darkest forces of the night had been signaled. Already could he feel the menacing vibe of madmen coalescing on the very street below, having received their RSVPs to execute a twin beheading. And so, there was nothing to do but position himself in a chair by that shattered window that he might be the first line of resistance to the evil they would impose. He owed Sarah that much, did he not, to be aware that the darkness was not their friend and vigilance must be soaring if they were both to live.

Debilitated by fatigue, he showed up at the glazier the next morning only to return

when the pane he brought home fell short of the size required to fill the frame. All gnashing of the teeth that he performed was done out of sight of the glazier, before whom he stood in full and grateful subservience to his skill. "I am simply a pauvre petit." These words came to him as he waited for the second pane of glass and gave him the strength to endure. This time the fit was snug, and though the putty he applied was in excess of the norm, it provided the holding action required to assure that order had been restored, and Luther could weep tears of tentative gratitude that an incremental gain in his credibility as a man had been achieved. Nothing would or should erase the debacle of the failed table he had built for Sarah, but he would take his victories where he could. And if he would wake in dread during the night for a succession of days that any moment he would hear more shattering of glass, it did not happen. It did not. Every second of every minute of every hour of every day that passed the putty hardened in its resolve to keep that glass in place and protect Sarah and him from the torment of termination segments of the population would inflict.

From afar came a letter from Glanton requesting that Luther visualize him singing "This Little Light of Mine" and use the visual to show fear the door and ignite and maintain a resolve to stress God and spirituality in the meeting places of RoR. Luther tried to follow through but soon found himself singing the hymn from his childhood days in Sunday school. Then he went a step further and added "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam" so he could double or at least maximize the fortification Glanton was encouraging. And as he sang Luther was pulled back to the tabernacle and the wainscoted walls of the

passageway through which the children walked to the large room where Sunday school was held and he remembered the white sailor suit he wore and the blue one worn by Luke and Vera's white dress and the wall rack in that hallway that held the small envelopes for contributions to support the worldwide ministry of the roving missionaries for the Christ Jesus, that God's only begotten son not be forsaken and forgotten but shine as a light within each and every one, black, and yellow, red and white, all precious in his sight, and he remembered Sister Henry and the mystery door she walked through to be with him, and Sister Judith, and how with scrubbed faces they preached the gospel born amid the ancient rocks of Judea and Canaan and all the rest and he wondered where time had gone that he should be right there dozing on the hard bench before going to the Whelan's around the corner on Ninth Avenue to get filled up on an ice cream sundae topped with a maraschino cherry with his brother and sister. As if he had never left. As if his heart would always be there with his mother present in his being.

These are the publications that punched him in the face in the month of July: Agni Review with its quick, one week rejection of "Brooklyn-Bound" and # Magazine, to which he submitted a bunt titled "Landem and Cooper." And the *New York Times* threw his article "Summer Interlude" into the street. He had no revenge in his heart. He understood when justice was being served. At the same time he was not in a sunbeam state of mind, once again reviling God for fashioning him as he had, with no thought to presenting him with the necessities to achieve fame and fortune.

*Celeste, a brief update, if I may. It is possible there is trouble in paradise. Since her spat with Babs, I have had the uneasy feeling that Glanton holds a grievance against Sarah. I sense a slight reserve in his manner toward me that wasn't there before. Wariness is understandable when one's pet dog suddenly snaps at her master. But Sarah is not owned by Babs, and perhaps it is my fault if she gained that impression by my quite toadying manner when face to face with Glanton or on the phone with him. Always must I impart my reverence for him, not because he demands such exaggerated devotion, but because of my own unreasonable fear of his wrath if I don't. It may be I have infected him, and Babs, by extension, with this consistent display of obsequiousness. Let it be understood that adults as well as children can be spoiled. In any event, I am vibrating like a tuning fork. Such is my state should I perceive anything remotely approaching disharmony with Glanton. For this reason must I double up on my outreach to God, as his is the realm in which emotional balance is to be obtained.*

*Then too I must be on full alert regarding the past, as it as well claims visitation rights. Just last night it was calling to me in a dream. There I was in the building where I was raised, where I found myself in bondage to my sister Vera and to Jane Thayer, or, more accurately, a bondage they could not quite succeed in establishing. I roamed from room to room in desperate search of a phone from which to call Sarah, who more and more as the dream progressed emerged as my lifeline. The panic I felt when I could not find the vital tool I will leave to your imagination.*

*And because the spiritual dictate is that goodness must ultimately reign in all parts of my being, today after work I took myself to St. Vincent's Hospital to visit*

*Grambling Vorst, our warfare-waging art director, who underwent surgery for a tumor on her neck, thankfully benign, and was bandaged in that area so I did not have to witness the surgeon's handiwork. Grambling has unneeded weight in her face, which her malignant disposition pulls toward the floor. She asserted that she keeps a mental dossier on the various editors and their shortcomings.*

*"I would keep one on you, but you aren't really an editor, are you? You're a cipher. There's no one at home in you," she said, flashing a knowing smile. Strange that a mind so disordered by its hate should be so organized in its effort to build on it. But she will find she is building on quicksand, and in an environment of her own making that grows steadily more toxic. A person might think that this first fruit of her effort that sprouted on her neck would be a warning about the toxin she is working with, but she is wedded unwaveringly to her singleness of purpose.*

*Celeste, the time has come to be fully accurate in my reporting. Let me start by saying, here in the month of July, that bombs may have been bursting in mid-air but the one with the utmost personal significance has exploded right here on the ground. As a result, Sarah has been physically separated from my life. She is still among the living. Indeed, she is dwelling with Carola Aprile and Tom Terst down in Brooklyn.*

*Glanton is a prophet of a certain kind. Did he not say to me, back when, that if I practiced spiritual principles, or tried to, that the things that are meant to be in my life will be in my life and the things that aren't will fall away? And was I not walking along past Madison Square Park on a tranquil workday evening just weeks ago when,*

*seemingly out of nowhere, the realization came to me that my marriage was over, leaving me stunned but also excited. A new chapter of my life had begun with this wondrous release. There was no pain. There were no tears. Not at that moment. Merely gratitude that the knot I couldn't untie with the limited powers of my own mind God had simply dissolved by directing my energies not to the problem but to the answer; the meetings of RoR and the Steps of RoR and service gladly rendered to RoR. In getting me out of my own way instead of into a headlong assault on the issue, he had been able to do his work.*

*At the same time Glanton did not endorse my epiphany. "We don't break up a marriage on the basis of a revelation on our way home," he said. He was, at least for the time being, an advocate of the status quo, not an agent for change. One is fine with the flag of revolution so long as it is not at his doorstep. As he was later to acknowledge, the impending dissolution of my marriage he understood immediately to have ramifications for his own. He could put his chuckle on me all he cared to, but I was a mirror of the discontents in his own marriage, perhaps not those of Glanton himself so much as those of Babs.*

*Now, Celeste, you and I both know that I went to great lengths to erect defenses against my sometimes uncivil tongue. But no defense is fully foolproof, and obviously, mine was quite porous. Within a month of Glanton's dismissal of my epiphany, I was banging on Sarah once more with words barbed enough to do violence to her soul as well as mine. Seized with frustration that we were still struggling to make ends meet, I had allowed the savage judgment that she suffered not so much from a disability as a sense of entitlement—the same judgment I made about her father—to call her a name I am aghast*



*to admit, a word so cruel and demeaning to the dignity of her person that surely I deserve to be beaten to extinction for having uttered it. I am sorry for this delay, Celeste, but there is territory I balk at revisiting, as even hindsight does not cushion me from the shock. A three-letter word reserved, at the time, for those who lived on the street below our loft, those who held out their filthy hands for change. That will have to do, Celeste. I will have to leave the rest to you.*

As if she had received a physical blow, she recoiled. Her face turned livid. All the more menacingly because it was done with eerie calmness, she slid open a cabinet drawer. From it she took a knife, a big knife for carving meats.

“Where do you want it, you skinny prick?” She held the knife steady in front of her. He was in a corner, his back to the heater, and didn’t dare move. He had no doubt she would lunge at him if he did.

“I’m sorry,” he said, seeking to keep fear out of his voice.

“Sorry? Sorry? Sorry for what? For your years and years of abuse?”

“I haven’t been a good person. I have tried, but I’m not.”

“Just stay away from me, or this is what you will get. Do you hear me?” She waved the knife as if to be clear he understood. “When you are asleep, in the shower, with your back turned, this is what is awaiting you. Are you listening?”

“I am,” he said.

She took the knife with her into her studio. She took it into the bathroom. She took it up the ladder to the loft bed and slept with it by her side.

With nowhere to go, Luther made a bed for himself on the carpet, listening

nervously for any movement from above. Her anger was feeding on itself, he feared. With that one word he had tipped her over the edge. But she had always been a sound sleeper, and on this night she was as well, in spite of her fury.

It was all Glanton's fault. There in the dark Luther saw so clearly that simple truth. If only he stopped speaking with Glanton. Where was the normalcy in sharing marital matters with him? All it did was unsettle Luther to talk about his conflicts with Sarah. From now on he would shut the hell up. He would not breathe a word, as his mother would say. No more making his life an open book. The book was now closed.

But his nocturnal resolve dissolved in the morning light. From his office he called Glanton and told him of the events of the past day, including the name he had called Sarah.

"You two shouldn't be under the same roof. People wind up in the morgue living in these conditions," he said.

Of course. What Glanton said was obvious, even if it hadn't occurred to Luther before he spoke to him. What had he been thinking in deciding to be close-mouthed with his mentor? And what was obvious to Glanton was also obvious to Sarah. When Luther returned home, there was a note on the dining table, with the carving knife as a paperweight. "Gone to Brooklyn. Staying with Carola and Tom."

*Now Celeste, a manly man has features all his own that distinguish him from the lesser ones of his sex, and these I clearly lacked. So it will be no surprise to you that Sarah was the one to leave, though it plunges me into the pit of shame to confess as much, the truth*

*being that I had no resources beyond my twice a month paycheck. It may be that subconsciously I saw Sarah as on loan to me from her family, that is, as someone still umbilically tied to them by her financial reliance, and with a plan to continue that reliance until the end of her days. They owed her that. Call it reparations, call it what you will, they had broken her and so it was their responsibility to pay for that brokenness. Furthermore, if the man in whose image she was made had a free ride, why shouldn't she? Such was her thinking, I have to believe, based on statements she had made. And even in her state of seeming brokenness, she managed to exist on a higher plane socially than I could hope to approximate. In Carola Aprile, she had a long-term friend to turn to. But where were mine? There were none. And as for family support, what could I hope for there? No, I had to stay put.*

Luther had his normal functions to perform, if he wanted normalcy to prevail, but now he had additional ones, such as grocery shopping and preparing meals. He understood that he was a master at pouring liquids into glasses and cups and drinking from bottles, but food was another matter. Still, he had his memory intact, and so, when he visited the A & P on LaGuardia Place, he knew to direct his cart to the aisle with Ronzoni spaghetti (because Ronzoni *was* so sono buoni) and Ragu spaghetti sauce and Kraft extra sharp cheddar cheese and Levi's real Jewish rye bread and tomatoes and lettuce from the produce bin and Kraft French dressing and Skippy peanut butter and a can of Progresso minestrone soup. Items such as these would ensure that he was within the range of American normalcy.

But the store was awash in light he could not hide from. No shadows were to be found in those aisles. At thirty-four, a month shy of thirty-five, he felt old. He felt unattractive. Just the previous day he had been shocked to see hairs sprouting from his ears, which he quickly removed with scissors and a tweezer. Order was not prevailing. He got home with his purchases, which he left on the counter, and collapsed on the lofa bed, where he began to cry. Much as he had fantasized about being free of the marriage, fifteen years was a long time. And look what he had done. He had ejected her out into the world, where she could function even less than him. This he had done even if she was the one who decided to leave. Who did such a thing to a woman suffering from mental illness? And why had she left? Because he had convinced her that she was worthless, always harping in his unmanly way on the fact that she didn't have a job and then uttering that three-letter bomb of a word.

He fell asleep for several hours. When he awoke the loft was dark. The alarm clock said 3:20 am. He went back down the ladder and to the bathroom. From the refrigerator he took the half gallon container of milk and filled a glass. He then cut a big piece of the cheddar cheese he had purchased and put it on a plate with four slices of rye bread. First he would take a bite of cheese and then a big bite of bread and then another big bite of bread before taking another bite of cheese until it was all gone. You didn't cook pasta in the middle of the night. That wasn't normal. And heating soup wasn't normal. Not in the middle of the night. Cold food was normal. Food out of a jar, like the peanut butter, which he had a couple of tablespoons of after the cheese and bread and milk were gone, was normal. Then he brushed his teeth, because that too was within the

parameters of normalcy. Normal was on his mind. The maintenance of normalcy.

Everything depended on that.

He fell into the weekend with order the priority. There could be no normalcy without order. He had the carpet to vacuum. He had dirty dishes to liberate from the sink. He had the toilet bowl to scrub and clothes to hang and plants to water. He had the windows to wash that light might enter. He had the garbage to remove and an empty bag to place in the bin. He had his own ablutions to tend to and heard the strong dictate that his face be groomed for proper presentation to the world. There was nothing he could do with the studio portion of the loft. That was Sarah's domain. It had the stamp of unruliness right there on the paint-splattered floor and the cluttered table surfaces and the scattered canvases and sculptures in various stages of completion. Order did not go where artists lived. Her studio would have to remain a wilderness unto itself.

Then the afternoon came and called him to himself, as clouds obscured the sun. Down he went, his energy all spent. After some time the phone rang. It was his mother. Luke was on her mind. As from the bottom of a well he spoke. No, he had not heard from Luke. He would tell her when he did.

“Are you normal today, son? You don't sound like your normal self.”

“I achieved normalcy this morning,” he said.

“What is that you say?”

“I'm OK,” he said.

And he was OK. It lifted his spirits to speak with his mother, careworn though she was. And it lifted his spirits even more to step out of the loft that evening and attend his

back-to-back RoR meetings. That was all he needed, to be among the living and reminded of his primary purpose in this life.

*Now Celeste, others called to me in this time. Not only did I have people to speak with but I had places to go. I was somebody this world had a memory of and not a vanishing ghost, no tumbling tumbleweed on the set of a Roy Rogers episode. The following day Sarah's mother called me from Camp and asked me to come up. Oh, she knew about Sarah's departure from the loft, Sarah having told her, but she saw no reason why the plan Sarah and I had made to spend a week with her parents at Camp should be altered by the fact that Sarah, for reasons of her own, would not be coming. After all, I was a part of the family, too, Lydia assured me.*

*I will tell you the truth, Celeste. That word family set me to trembling. It had the ghost of days and years past upon it. It had sorrow and betrayal upon it. It had pain beyond reckoning upon it. These were people I loved, as was the world they had accepted me into. And now I would be coming to them even as I was leaving them. Where was the sorrow cliff that I could speed toward to end the pain of this charade of normalcy?*

*And yet, the next morning, I was down at gate thirty-seven at the Port Authority Terminal boarding the Trailways bus bound for Oneonta.*

*Now, Celeste, it is not for me to say whether Peter Van Dine was ever under the sway of teen dream Bobby Vinton singing "Sealed with a Kiss," though it is doubtful, or that he saw the men of Italian descent with their kissing ways of other men in The Godfather, but whether he knew it or not, he was signaling with the kiss on the cheek that*

*awaited me when I got off the bus in Phoenicia not so much hello as farewell, or that is how I see it now.*

*He had bought a new car to replace the VW, a Cadillac De Ville. The Caddy had long since been trimmed down. The fins had been shed as functionality replaced opulence, but the car was still regal on the road and Peter could drive with his head held high. It was not a car to diminish him, not like the VW Golf had been. In all ways did Peter fly the flag of America, apostate though he was. He was of America born and mined its history seeking for its soul, and if he found imperium and greed behind the mission statement of honor and principle in the republic's foundation documents, then it was for him to cry out in a true act of patriotism, having pledged himself to honesty and honor.*

As Luther was leaving, someone new was being added to the family. Her name was Mara, a petite girl with a winning smile but fire below. She and Jeffrey had been wed in England, where they had met at university. Peter's only son had been lost to him while overseas, and now he and Lydia were intent on keeping him close to home. Down the hollow road a small house had been built for the newlyweds. Peter and Lydia had paid for its construction, and now their summer project was to see to the interior. Luther received their enthusiasm for their labor with hidden doubt bordering on conviction that this was folly of the first order, the kind of enabling on a grander scale than what he had witnessed in his family of origin and doomed to failure. In that sense, Luther saw a family dynamic that could breed only failure, not success, in that Peter and Lydia were doing for Jeffrey what he couldn't do for himself, and that they knew he couldn't do for himself. And Luther was not alone in what he saw. Mara saw it as well. Of that Luther was sure.

“My husband is more comfortable with a beer in his hand than a hammer. Have you not noticed?” she said to Luther on the terrace, where they were alone together. She spoke with an Irish lilt, being Dublin born. And before he could reply, she went on. “A paragon of energy with his hours spent over morning coffee and the daily newspaper. A human dynamo is he.” All this while maintaining her smile. A pert girl with a fever for newness. Was it that that had brought her to America?

Later he heard from Lydia, in her understated way, that Mara’s explorations had extended to Phoenicia, where she was seen hanging out with the local young men. “She doesn’t come from wealth, and can’t relate easily to it,” Lydia said, by way of explanation. As to what she was doing with those young men, that was left unsaid.

Luther sensed danger coming from different directions. Yes, he was taken aback by the suddenness of his marital blowout, and understood that he must wear, if not a mournful countenance, at the very least an expression that reflected the stressed circumstances of this new development so significant to his life. And when one day passed to the next and Lydia said she had been on the line with Sarah and that Sarah was possibly thinking of coming back to the marriage bed, it was everything for Luther not to scream out, “No, no, a thousand times, no,” for whatever gown of sorrow he wore for show, it was as nothing to the radiance within, that liberation should have found its way to him or vice versa. It was the Fourth of July and Bastille Day to the nth degree. It was the Full Tilt Boogie Band marching down Main Street in every town and city in America. It was the glory of the sun burning all the darkness and depression from his life. It was the aspidistra flowering in all seasons. His acting skills, small though they were, must be



fully employed.

Aggravating the situation was Mara herself. She possessed the dark, alluring power of a vixen, and despite his best efforts, had drawn him quickly into her force field, so that, even when she was not present, she in fact was living large in his mind. Feeding the fantasy was the pornographic image of Jeffrey entering petite Mara with his horse cock, being generously endowed like his father, as Sarah had told Luther sometime before.

*Celeste, there was a mood I would sink into at Camp under the best of circumstances. I wanted the property to be real for me, but it was often a sad fantasy land, possibly because I had the expectation that it would serve as a haven from my responsibilities, an attitude that can only lead to unhappiness, as happiness requires me to meet my responsibilities. But that was not the case on this visit. I was no longer seeking to make it my safety net. If anything, I was seeing it as a barrier to my growth, a symbol of unhealthy dependency, as the building had been for members of my family. It was not my place; it was theirs. I was just a visitor and their words, their world, seemed as if they were reaching me from a different time.*

*They were kind enough to offer me the use of the VW Golf, which was now their second car, to drive to Woodstock for an RoR meeting. It was clear to me as I headed down Route 28 where my dependency had gone. I was now in the care of RoR, not Sarah or the Van Dines. My life seemed one of infinite possibility, not in terms of worldly success but internal growth. Wherever I went, I had the assurance of connection with other members.*

*That evening, seeing I was a visitor and desirous of someone new to the group to lead the meeting, the chairperson asked if I would care to speak. I quickly said yes, as I was always happy and eager for the opportunity to stand at the front of the room and be the center of attention. A spiritual path RoR offers, but once again let me say that spiritual pride is waiting for me and I have been trying to shed its embrace for all the years that have followed.*

*Celeste, the meeting had its angry moments when a group member spoke from the floor in denunciation of me. I had acknowledged my marital separation and my full intention of moving forward into a new life without my wife. Evidently, he was to his marriage bound and cut from more steadfast cloth. He shouted that he would be damned if he would ditch his wife now that he was sober after all he had put her through and that if I had a real program of recovery, I would stay the course as well. It meant nothing to him that I had shared Glanton's wisdom that if I practiced RoR principles in all areas of my life, that the people and things that belonged in my life would stay in my life and those that didn't would fall away. That, to the young man, was spiritual gibberish. "There is one book above all others and that is the Bible, and does Jesus not say, 'What God has joined let no man rend asunder'?" There are many of us wedded to ancient texts, Celeste, texts that demand dogged adherence to the written word over practical experience as it has formed over years and centuries and millennia. My words, or Glanton's, were as nothing, in comparison with those from the young man's source. He did not conclude by saying he would see me in hell, as clearly we were not headed in the same direction. But at no point did the group devolve into singing "Blessed Assurance," or some such. The*

*recognition was there in the body that we had no religious affiliation but were seeking guidance from the spirit of the universe in the ever expanding now.*

*The young man was neither Switchblade Sammy nor Pummeling Pete. He did not confront me face to face after the meeting with his ire but took it wherever he was headed on his lonesome and self-righteousness filled path.*

*A woman with a more pleasant disposition awaited me outside the church where the meeting was held. She too had recently separated from her spouse and empathized with my struggle. She said her name was Abigail and that she was living just outside town. She seemed in that moment like a gift from the universe, and was it for me to deny such a gift? I suggested we meet later in the week at the same meeting place and she agreed.*

*Celeste, we know that light entering his soul was the medium of change in Saul of Tarsus on that road to Damascus, back in the days of rocks and more rocks, when all was hard, and I have already mentioned to you the epiphanies that came to me on my own little journey, but now there was another one, an epiphany of sound, listening on the car radio to Bruce Springsteen do "Born to Run." For four minutes plus was I in a state of delirium, seeking the higher reaches of the stars in my painful ecstasy. Such was my state when the four minutes plus was up that I had to pull over to the side of the road. A speed ball had coursed through my system and now I was in need of another hit. Once again had I felt the power of my alcoholic nature seeking to take me to realms and levels I could not get to without it;, a Dionysian, not a contemplative sound, so the recording was, one that brought me not in harmony with the universe but into a separate and fragmented and*

*self-exalting space. I could have the rush or I could have the steadfast path, but not both. I had lived my life with the holler heads, and now I had to be wary of that call. How painful to struggle back from the sphere of the gods to the ordinary. I put the car in gear once more and drove on with the radio off.*

*Celeste, for the next two days did Abigail live in my consciousness, not as the light of love that you have always been, but perhaps as a symbol of the freedom that awaited me in my new life, where the adventure of sex, of figuratively knocking on doors, would be available to me once more, now that the marriage bed had been shed. And yet, as one day passed into the next, the image of Abigail began to change, or perhaps I acknowledged what I saw from the start, that her physical qualities might serve as an ultimate impediment to my desire. She was a blond woman with thickness in her middle and in her legs, and fuzz was manifest above her top lip that was yet too faint to be called a mustache even as it was approaching critical mass. In any case, it served as a deterrent to my equanimity, let alone my ardor, to contemplate.*

*You will say, rightly, that Abigail was not inventorying, to the same degree, my physical attributes: my thinness, the missing part of my head, the less than grand penis that she intuited from my meager frame and slender thumbs. And that was probably true. I will concede the superficiality inherent in relying so overwhelmingly on appearances, but a man cannot go where he cannot go, especially when he has an oldest sister with much meat on her bones and a smacking hand. For the moment, trust that what ultimately led me away from Abigail was not judgment but physical aversion that I could not defeat, at least not without the aid of alcohol. By Thursday, the day of our*

*rendezvous, I could no more contemplate lying with Abigail than I could eating a slab of cooked liver, the smell of which is enough to cause me to flee.*

*And so, when next I arrived for the meeting, trepidation followed me into the room, so convinced was I that Abigail would meet my reticence with disgust, or worse. But my explanation won the day. She was full of understanding when I simply told her that I hadn't realized I wasn't in any way ready to engage with other women outside my marriage. But soon the victory was snatched from me. I had told a lie, a white lie, a pale blue lie, a lie of whatever description. I had sought refuge in generalization to avoid a gross insult to her personhood and thereafter had to wrestle my compunction to the ground and tie it to the nearest tree, so single-minded was it in its quest to undo me. My prevailing answer to it was that I am not on this earth to do more harm than I have, and if harm must be done, let it be done to me and not the other.*

*At the same time there is a limbo status that is to be endured when a love goes wrong if that love is aborted and not at its natural end. But it is best to stay in place and not get ahead of ourselves if order is to prevail.*

*The next morning I took my walk down the hollow road, not having come to the time when fear of coyotes and wolves and bobcats and rabid raccoons would restrict me solely to paths that had been paved. I heard the murmur of the brook alongside, though only after a considerable distance, a murmur that grew stronger and soon assumed primacy over the workings of my own mind. It seemed to be speaking a language all its own, constant and eternal, and though it was loud to the level of a low din, the sound was peaceful and inspiring of harmony in all those who had grown attuned. Listen, listen, it*

*seemed to be saying. Listen to all that is around you as you move on.*

*But pockets of disharmony do abound, and Camp was not exempt, even on the idyllic summer day that followed, with the sun at its brightest in a richly blue sky. There, as I returned, sat Jeffrey solemn-faced on the front porch, where I too had indulged my darkness in all kinds of weather. As I was to learn later, there had been a row. Jeffrey had raised his voice to Peter. He was feeling injured, small. He and I were brothers in pain. The injustice of having been born inadequate to the tasks of living in the manly way of those more greatly endowed. We are not talking now of the equipment down below, though that in itself would have been worth a starting point for a meditation. Was Jeffrey's sad state not sufficient proof that physical abundance alone did not ensure happiness in this world, as Glanton's literary success, the product of his significant talent, had proven to be time-sensitive in their beneficent effect?*

One afternoon Peter took Luther on a trail hike. With his cartographer's mind, Peter laid out their itinerary up Glide Mountain, but for Luther it was only one step after another up the narrow path, dappled sunlight accompanying them to resting points at ledges offering a view of the wooded terrain far below. Luther was fragile in Peter's company, feeling the pain of his coming betrayal. That it should have to be this way. At the highest point Peter spoke.

"I'm a failure as a father. It's there for everyone to see," he said, tapping his Winston free of ash.

"No," Luther said, almost as a cry.

"Don't ever have children." Peter went on, as if he hadn't heard.

That evening Peter pulled a family album from the shelf. There were aerial photographs of bombing missions over Germany. He spoke of the ack-ack fire that was a constant hazard. There was a yellowed newspaper report of his return home from military service. Peter was telling him he had been a man, a young man among other young men with a common purpose, which was to prevail, but not at the expense of survival. There was a photo of the flight crew and the talk among them, after their thirtieth and most harrowing mission in the B-52, of refusing any further bombing runs or even fleeing to Switzerland. He was saying that the war had shattered him, deepened his mistrust of organizations, of anything other than the solitary man alone with his own mind to think and act in his own best interest. And yet he could also say of the Germans, "They were all complicit. All of them. The master race. Really. Some quite ugly specimens among them." He was putting pain into Luther's heart and mind with every word he spoke in revealing the depth of his substance and at the same time leading Luther into the trap of invidious comparison, for where had Luther been at a comparable age? He had been Swiss-cheesing his brain with speed and loitering with intent in bars and being physically and mentally unqualified for military service.

Lydia and Peter felt obliged to see him off the next day. To the end of the hollow road they drove him, then determined to stand outside the car and maintain a vigil for the bus on the long straightaway. A dog was barking ceaselessly outside the trailer in the declivity by the side of the road. The rusting white trailer seemed, as he could see it through the trees, to be the same one that had always been there, as a reminder that the Catskills, in its essence, was hardscrabble terrain with its roots in poverty, an extension of

Appalachia. That barking a warning to Luther that he would be hounded for the rest of his days for his abandonment. The presence of Peter and Lydia served to signify they knew without knowing that a change had come. To the end, they had been faithful to him as he had chosen not to be to them, in coming to see him cross to the other side of the road. From his window seat he was obliged to look out and see, not to his surprise, that they had remained. Even as he smiled and waved a feeling of rage filled him that they would not let him go, or let him go easily, but as the bus pulled away, his pain began to ease. He could hope, that people, like objects, grew smaller, as distance was achieved.

*Celeste, I am back with you. Not that I have ever left. Here is where things stand, from the mundane to late-breaking developments. Firstly, Glanton was exceeding wrath with me that, in a moment of pain and afflicted with the mental distortion that can visit, I laid responsibility for leaving the marriage at his feet. Because words are his livelihood, he was obliged to set the record straight with the blunt statement that I was seeking to put my words in his mouth and that I must never do that again.*

*The image remains of Peter and his brave crew mates sitting on their helmets should flak from the ack-ack guns pierce the aircraft's underbelly and do grievous harm to their bottoms and beyond. The dread of such invasion one can easily imagine.*

*While at Camp I sought to break new ground with a manuscript tentatively titled "Broken Resolutions." I'm not sure what, if any, application the title has to the work, which essentially charts the decline of the main character in the course of an enduring obsession for Bill Walton, the UCLA All-American basketball player. I wrote in longhand*



*to avoid the embarrassment of the clack clack of the typewriter, not wanting to appear in competition with Peter, who has a studio adjacent to the guest house. How hidden I have been with the Van Dines, fearing to show them any of my writings or even my photographs, lest their judgments destroy me. In reality, they couldn't destroy me. I am too desperate for destruction to have its way for the simple reason that I do not write for fame or fortune but for the satiety and the hum of peace the daily quantum of words on a page bring, as it is essential to maintain my chi, my still point, call it what you will, that place arrived at after which the world can take me where it does for the balance of the day.*

*The zigzag pattern of life continues, Celeste, and I have my recording devices on it, you can be sure, but to what avail? It is only this. With Glanton, the threat of irascibility is constant, except for his bouts of chuckling, but he rarely breathes fire, as he did the other day. On the other hand, harshness, brought on by years of our living together, has come to claim a greater frequency in Sarah's communications with me. And yet yesterday, at the end of a twenty-minute phone conversation, she said, "I know I've been giving you a hard time. It's all gas." This blunt statement sent me reeling to the far end of the loft and back. What could she have meant and where in her did such an utterance originate? Does she wear a mask? Does she inhabit different personas? Is the laughing thing in her, that she can distance herself with amusement from all she says and does? But if I am to be honest, there was also the unfortunate use of the word gas, which conjures in me the unfortunate and unpleasant association with effluvia emanating from down below.*

*The truth is, Celeste, that Sarah found a love of her own, and in our own backyard. It should not have come as a surprise to me that it would be Tool Belt Jameson, he with the satyr's gleam and the stuff of magic his big bulge promised. And so the "It's all gas" comment became explicable when I saw her entering the next building with the hulk. She had her revenge. She had gotten even. She once more felt wanted by the universe. That being so, she could cut me some slack. It was a good thing that she had the hulk. He lifted, if only temporarily, the burden of guilt I carried. I say "temporarily" because it wasn't a love that was destined to last. It wasn't a love at all. He had his big bulge but little else; his life was about lusting after what others had and then withdrawing within himself when his fantasy turned to rot.*

*I claim no prophetic powers, only a degree of common sense. By the end of the week she was at Camp, having left Jameson and his life built for one. This I know not from any sleuthing but owing to a late night phone call from Sarah. She was in full rumination mode as to what her father and mother meant by "they said this" or "they said that" or what a mannerism of her mother's might signify. Was her mother discarding her with the ostentatious way she tapped ash from her cigarette? To Sarah, word and gesture combined for but one message: we don't want you anymore; you are a millstone around our necks. Celeste, it has to be a bitter disappointment for parents when their progeny lack the wings to fly, and yet a person has reason to ask why then were they themselves building a cottage just down the road from the main house for Jeffrey and his caustic mate? Here one must summon the will, or pray for the grace, to perform the aerodynamic wonder of flight oneself. One must elevate to a space where such queries*

*yield to the peace that comes from understanding and acceptance. The war was over, if I would have it so. Sarah did telephone hang up on me that night, as Marge on the line had done, back when. And did I need to resurrect long deceased Joseph, he who had been shed of his coat of many colors, to interpret the dream I had that night, as that pharaoh of old summoned him to do? Was it not for me to apply the light of reason I myself could summon to this dream in which a monster on the other end of the line snarled and then roared? Was it not telling me, like the one of many years before, in which I was surrounded by wild boars primed to tear me apart, that Sarah has an illness too, which I am best separated from?*

Despite domestic upheaval, Luther continued to apply monitoring devices to his ongoing situation with Rafta. He had a life to lead and to build. He did not want, in old age, to be ransacking memory for where that life had gone and the identity of the thief who had taken it from him. His monitoring devices were two good eyes and two good ears, and he needed no more. Summoned to her office, he stood as she discussed with him the fall list only to witness her lose her voice in mid-sentence. Having his mind present, he stepped back, thinking to fetch water for her, only to discover that as he neared the door her voice returned. Assuming the crisis was over, he moved closer only to witness the same phenomenon. Once again was she mouthing words with no sound emerging. Clearly, her larynx had closed up. This time he let reason be his guide and rushed out the door and returned with a cup of water. But as he approached Rafta began frantically waving him back. Luther began to understand that he, not a parched throat or betraying larynx, was

the agent of her distress. From that point on did he maintain a proper distance back by the door, so her discourse could continue. And continue it did, as if nothing odd had happened.

But the episode was one for Luther's mental filing cabinet. After all, her speechlessness was a stark admission of her fear of him. How else was he to regard the phenomenon? And if true, then his concern that she was seeking to contain and control him was vindicated. What a price to pay for a job, having to feel he had to disappear, or be as much of a nonentity as possible. A cipher. A nobody. An apologist for his own existence. A self-centered way of looking at things, he could see, as Rafta surely hadn't chosen to lose her voice, hadn't wished for the fear that someone with his feeble stature as a male could inspire such dread. She was a good woman, not some malevolent creature. Perhaps she had been conditioned to be afraid of men. Perhaps she had a father who, like his own, had ruled the house with his hand. Luther had no access to her mind or the heart of her being.

*Celeste, I found myself thinking of my would-be friend Sean and how, though he never meant me well, I continued to see him, conditioned as I was to the merits of punishment for those such as I. But there is no one comparable in my life these days. Certainly not Rafta. She does not mean me harm in the least. Indeed, she is a woman who lives by high principle and whose conscience is her guide. It is only her fear that contracts her at times, as it does so many of us. I have been around her long enough that at the core of my being is enduring respect for her.*

*Sarah called me today from Camp, her parents having returned to the city for a fall and winter of culture. She isn't quite alone. Jeffrey and Mara are just down the road, but they are, for the most part, in separate worlds. She says that Mara is possessed and harmful rays stream from her glittering eyes.*

*The Grand Union, down on LaGuardia Place, remains a challenge for me. Once again a feeling of failure and loneliness came over me. Wandering the aisles stocked with food products, I see how little I know how to take care of myself. A man lacking in kitchen fundamentals, who gets by with pasta and spaghetti sauce poured from a jar and heated in a pot. Cereal, peanut butter and jelly, rye bread, cans of soup, a head of lettuce and tomato, French dressing, milk, are the other provisions I take away.*

*And on my salary I can barely pay the rent each month. I have taken to paying with two checks, one mailed on the fifteenth and the other on the last day of the month. Really, the fear of the street has come to be upon me, living paycheck to paycheck as I do, and without the added support we received from Sarah's parents.*

*I am the bum, Celeste, not Sarah. I am the bum de la bum. So I call myself in the privacy of the loft and in the privacy of my mind. A man soon to be thirty-five with no wife and no prospects in a loft the life has gone out of.*

That night he attended a double RoR meeting. Afterward he went to the diner on the corner with several members of the group. One was a pretty woman in spite of her faint blond mustache whom he was lonely for after she rebuffed his offer to walk her home. She was in need of her own space, she explained. At that point he realized he had become one of the hungry hounds at the meeting he had previously pitied, those middle-

aged unfortunates starved for female companionship on a Saturday night. That old feeling of hopeless apartness was back, of being lost within himself with no possibility of a new connection.

But a man named Lion came to his aid the next night at the Now Is the Wow meeting. Lion asked if Luther would serve as his mentor. Since the separation from Sarah, Luther was interacting more with the fellowship in order to fill the void created by her absence. He considered it providential that Lion had approached him. Luther had begun to wonder, now that he was over two years sober, whether anyone would ask that he serve as a mentor. And what better time than right then, when loneliness and a sense of futility were building towers in his brain. Luther had only one question.

“You must tell me. Is it Lion as in ‘Roar, Lion, roar,’ or is it ‘Why you lyin’ son of a bitch’? Out with it.”

“It’s whatever you want it to be, mon frère. It’s whatever you dig. Don’t get locked in, mon. Don’t do that. Travel the open road. Live for bifurcation. Straddle both roads and piss on them, one and then the other, if you feel like it. Let your dick swing, mon frère. Let it swing. Be the cojones king, for crying out loud. What are we here for? We’re sober, baby. We’re sober.”

Lion, if in fact that was the correct spelling of his name, took Luther to his place to listen to some sounds. This was before the word “boundaries” had some application for Luther to personal relationship as well as property. He was not, after all, a friend of Lion but a mentor, or as much of one as he could be at two and a half years sober. And wouldn’t you know, but the first and only sound Lion played for him was holler head Jim

Morrison and the Doors doing “Light My Fire.” Halfway through the anthem to lust did Luther have the sensation that he was being pulled out of the second floor window overlooking Seventh Avenue and across the street to the Last Call Tavern to quaff some serious suds. He stopped the record in its tracks.

After apologizing for his seeming impoliteness, Luther said, “Don’t you see? When RoR says we would be wise to avoid people, places, and things, this album is such a thing, summoning the memory of whiskey swigging nights with the girls with long legs. It brings that life back home to me and loosens my commitment to the sober path.”

Luther then told Lion about the party he had attended in Brooklyn with Sarah early on in recovery. A small apartment packed with artists, many of whom were lighting up. How fragile and tenuous his little beachhead on sobriety seemed as the smoke drifted his way, how drab in comparison with the life of booze and drugs and sex he had left behind, and how he had to leave that party, because that too had proven to be a people, place, and thing.

“That’s deep, man. That’s deep,” Lion said.

Luther wondered if Lion might be skating on the plane of insincerity. But Luther had said what he needed to say. He had told Lion what he himself needed to hear.

Now Lion had a feline face, what with those glittering cat’s eyes, prompting Luther to imagine the whiskers that were not there. But he had no idea how that would come into play in the short time that Lion remained a part of his life. Luther was seeking longevity with Lion, but the illness in his new acquaintance was at threat level. Lion had a living to make, and the only work he knew was behind the stick. In fact, he was the

barkeep at Last Call five nights a week. Worse, within a week Lion was asserting his right to drink nonalcoholic beer.

“Nonalcoholic beer is for non-alcoholics. It has a small amount of alcohol in it. Do you want to risk arousing the beast in you?”

“Cojones, mon frere. Cojones,” Lion replied.

Luther understood that it would be futile to try to wrestle Lion into sanity. When next Lion called, it was to hear him say, “I’ve just come from the movie *Gandhi*. Man, I am flying, flying. I feel so spiritual I am sure I can drink.”

It did not matter that Luther said Gandhi’s spiritual status did not depend on alcohol. Lion lacked the ears to hear. He had only his own cojones, and the “Fuck you” delivered in a roar on the following call some days later before he promptly hung up. He evidently had gone from nonalcoholic beer to the harder stuff. The shock of the roar coming through the line without warning reverberated in Luther throughout the night, but by morning he was steady again. He had learned something, something he could file away and keep. It was treasure, nothing more, nothing less.

*Now, Celeste, if Lion was gone in the physical sense from the premises of my life, there were others who came forward, their strange, destructive, lonely paths somehow leading them to me. One such was rob small, who dispensed with capitals for his first and last name to minimize his visibility, possessed as he was of the notion that the more the eyes of others were on you or even the representations of you, the less of you there was. To be visible was to be threatened with slow, imperceptible, but inevitable annihilation. About*



*this there could be no argument with rob small. And it wasn't the eyes of others only. His eyes as well had the power of eradication. This I found out when I suggested to him that he read the RoR basic text, Release: The Road to Recovery, which had helped free millions from the darkness of alcoholism. A wall of resistance did he erect, saying "No, no. I mustn't do that. The text is too precious to me to bear using it up. My eyes will suck every last word from the pages until they are blank, and then I will have nothing, nothing. No, I must save it so it will always be with me." Then from me he also fled, citing the eviscerating capacity of my own eyes, heightened by my familiarity with him.*

*rob small had a great truth to share, Celeste. He showed me an aspect of myself. Did I too not save myself by going at half speed through life, holding myself aloof in the workplace by giving only the minimum required to get by? Was I not preserving myself for the illusion of bigger things instead of being where my feet were? And had that not been so from the very beginning? What had happened following my discovery of reading and the pleasure to be derived from it while sitting as a young child in a wicker chair in the shabby living room of my family's home? The joy of seeing as well the accompanying illustration in color of the organ grinder and his monkey and the red brick wall and the green tree that towered over it? And was that joy not unbounded? Did I not flee the quotidian, the horror of that shabbiness, the horror of older siblings bringing children into the world and being unable to take care of them, the horror of my father's smacking hand and the smacking hand of Hannah and of Naomi and the treachery of Rachel and Luke and the tears of my mother and all the rest by slipping deeper into that fictional world? No, I jumped up and ran out the door and into the street. Later, I would come*

*back to it later. And what did I do instead? I ran around the block. And then I ran around the block again and lost myself in the outdoors, thinking I will return to that story, I will return to that book and all the books I have put down. I was a child unsettled in himself, a child acting from prompts he didn't and still doesn't understand. What I had just abandoned was so good that I needed to savor the little of it I had sampled. Celeste, I needed to stop before the finish line, as if there is ever a finish line. I had to save myself for I do not know what. I had to meet Rob Small to better understand this.*

*There was one other in this time, a man at the outer limits of life and struggling heroically against the demons that would keep him at the cold, cold margins. His name was Switchblade Johnny or Cut Man. Some just called him Slice. Highly combustible, he was given a good deal of space. Those lacking the emotional intelligence to read him often paid the price.*

*"I don't be talking to your stupid fucking face," he said, when I approached him at Now Is the Wow.*

*"Why is that?" I asked.*

*"Don't make me hurt you," he said.*

*But I pushed past. I heard his loneliness. I saw the wound behind the blaze of fury in his eyes. Why wouldn't I? It was there to see.*

*"Here is my number. If you're thinking of a drink or simply need someone to talk to, you can always call me."*

*"You not hear me say I not talk to your stupid face?"*

*I heard his language of scorn and dismissal and threat. It is an attitude I am*

*familiar with, that of dependent independence. In essence, it was merely the laughable posturing that I too had adopted when I was new to RoR, claiming as I did in a less belligerent manner that I was “unreachable” to some stranger in the next seat, a man too bored by my ludicrous assertion to even bother with a response.*

*And so it was inevitable that Slice would call me and express his love as hate. “I fuck you in your fucking face, stupid man,” he might say, or his language of abuse would veer into poetry, as when he said, “I fuck your ducks into eternity.” Whatever, molten lava flowed from his volcano. It might be years, even centuries, before it became inactive, but in RoR there is a saying, “Give time time,” and over the length of six months Slice began to soften. A merchant seaman on leave for a medical issue, he told me of his mother, who would tie him, as a child, to a radiator and beat him with the buckle end of a belt and later sent him screaming to the hospital with third degree burns after pressing a hot iron to his chest. As many as three times a day would he call me, often with confessions of near explosions with strangers on the street. I did wonder where he was headed, saddled as he was with a fury-driven temperament.*

*The question, in reality, never got answered, at least fully. One day I did not hear from him and then another day and still another passed without him on the line. And so I reached out to Slice, though the RoR protocol is generally for the newer person to contact the mentor. After many rings, Slice answered. Before I could finish identifying myself, he said, “My disease don’t want me to talk to you” and hung up. Even at the time, I sensed that there would be no more contact with Slice, that he had slammed the door shut, not only on me, but on his own life. In dramatic fashion he did what countless others have*

*done in rejecting recovery and leaving RoR. It is what it is.*

Luther shared in the rooms of RoR that he and Sarah had separated, while leaving out the matter of his assaulting tongue and the knife that Sarah had pulled. Not everything needed to be aired with the group. Some things were better left to be spoken about with one's mentor.

An older woman invited him to the diner afterward. She had a high stake in knowingness.

"You lost your sister, not your wife," she said, after they had taken a booth.

"I'm sorry?" Luther said.

"You heard me."

"How would you presume to know such a thing?"

"It's written on your face."

"I don't think I want to talk to you," he said.

"You already have," she said.

He left without ordering but was not deterred from inviting himself for coffee after the Now is the Wow meeting on Sunday night. While he sat in the West Village café with several other young men and women, the realization came to him that the women were no different from the men, that is, they wanted sex and more sex, but only with the more attractive members of the male species, which did not include him. They were on the same pleasure cruise that he had been on. The illusion of easy availability of women seemed to disappear in that moment. The young women sitting across the table from him

and talking among themselves were, in geographical terms, on another continent.

Celeste had been in his thoughts all the while, but now she came into sharper focus, not as an option but as an answer—the answer.

*Celeste, with Glanton so far away I made a decision to seek a new mentor, one with whom I could now and then do the face to face so he could discern any deceitfulness in my bearing if not in my voice and bring it to my attention, as it was my ongoing resolve to keep the illness arrested by giving it little room to operate and to grow. In a letter to Glanton I stated my intention, and in fact had his blessing, as he had suggested prior to his departure that I find someone local to serve as a guide. In fact he named two candidates, who, alas, did not meet my unspecified and undetermined criteria.*

*But before I go on, let me confess that this particular episode may be in the nature of a great escape, for more logically, I would have expanded on you as the answer I had just mentioned. But just the thought of encountering you directly and not as the recipient of a narrative of events preceding our reconnection fills me with fear. Will there be anything to say? Or will there be too much to say and will I not know how to say it? Will I be forced to reveal the less than godlike treatment you received from me? Will my manifest warts draw what few readers I am likely to have from these pages? Of this you can be sure. I will find a way. My courage will be screwed to the sticking post. In the meantime let me invoke that RoR saying, Give Time Time.*

*Here I am back, back, Celeste, and here you are as well, standing in the dimensions of*

*your own personal eternity. I have come to you. You have not come to me. All the minutiae of my life have I put aside for this moment to arrive. But the moment is fleeting. It goes here. It goes there. Still, elements are in place for love to root deeper in my being there in the whiteness of the loft you maintain. Your artifacts are all around but do not hide you. You are standing there on the white floor, the space's preeminent feature with your short and curly black hair and your smiling eyes. Those figures, those wood carvings. You have veered away from painting. Thayer Brookley, the owner of the gallery where you exhibit, says you have pulled a Brancusi on him, personalizing the direction you have been called to go while still seeking to shape you to his will. But not entirely have you abandoned painting. The figures have been brought to vivid life with the colors you have applied, shocking red and blinding yellow and midnight blue. In fact, you hold one in your hand and in the other a delicate brush.*

*The fantasy has become reality. But is it enough. Is there anything to connect us, now that my drunkenness has been arrested? All I have to offer you is my recovery. I am sober now. I do not come drunk and tearing through the streets to you as I did those years ago. More than three and half years have passed. If I want proof of that, little Mia, your daughter, comes rushing to your side. Little she may still be, but she is not an infant. Indeed, she is now six years old and stares up at me with curious eyes as she holds her mother's leg.*

*"Loose Her, Momma? Loose Her?"*

*"Yes, Luther," you say.*

*Off Mia runs, with her sprite's energy. She has seen enough. And I have stayed*

*long enough. For now, anyway.*

A woman at RoR read his palm. “This long line says you are creative. This branching line says you are strong-willed. This parallel line says you will receive recognition.” She came with the wind and left with the wind.

Sarah said, “You are effete. You have no masculine tendencies except for your anger. And Babs says I should have my own apartment.”

*Celeste, there is a man whom my sometime friend Solomon Rhein calls an angel. His name is Ned Fletcher and smiling is natural to his face. Solomon says he has certifiable intellectual properties and always delivers the goods as his mentor. Why he should say anything to me about Ned Fletcher is that I have told him of Glanton’s latest move. Solomon is saying that if Ned Fletcher is right for him, then he would also be right for me. RoR is a fellowship of the spirit, I have been telling myself. Our minds join, not our bodies. All this by way of justifying the status quo, that is, Glanton remaining as my mentor. But there are myths, or are they verities, and one is that the absence of face to face contact with a mentor can result in relapse.*

*In any case, crying time has come again, and if I am channeling the very great Ray Charles in saying so, that doesn’t make it any less so. It has been a day of rain out there, and it has been raining beaucoup from my eyes all day as well. Sarah, Glanton. Who can say? People, attachments, whatever are being washed out of my being. And in*

*the aftermath have I swung into action with a call to Ned Fletcher, a man whom I have never said a word to, and asked him to be my new mentor, but not before writing to Glanton telling him of the action I have since taken. Murderer, destroyer of all that is good and holy. So must I thrash myself for seeing to it that I stay alive.*

*But nothing is forever save for God and love and eternity. Let us bind ourselves to that reality, that our declarations of this or that have no meaning in relation to this greater truth, that because I say something is so doesn't make it so where my heart is concerned, as it is for my heart to have the final word.*

Because she sensed he was leaving, she tried to call him back. That was how he understood Lydia's phone call to him that evening. The power of change was in a way an awful power. It caused injury to those unprepared for it. It felt to Luther like a great tearing away was taking place, like suddenly living in a house without the walls that had once bound you to it. She was calling to invite him to Camp for the Labor Day weekend, but it was not for him to go where he had already left. Evidently, they had not received his postcard saying he would not be up. He gave her the same reason over the phone as he had written. He needed to center himself in the city and stick to familiar routines. Lydia was too polite to ask what could be more familiar than Camp after all those years. She let him go, and even as she did, he was sensing that she saw that he meant more than she had perhaps thought he did. And yet he had to be careful not to go down the road of thinking that he was punishing them with his absence. There was no punishment. There was only dissolution of the bond, and the sadness that went with it. Because whatever he



might mean to her and them, his sense was that they meant a whole lot more to him and that they were securely lodged in his being for easy transport.

I will not, I will not, I will not something, I will not let her call wreck my life. I will not die on the cross of sorrow. I will not crucify myself. I will rein in my ego and make myself no bigger than I am. I will not let this be the expiration date for my life. In this way did he talk to himself in the aftermath of Lydia's call and lay in a ball with his hands over his head as memory and regret had its way with him in the night.

*Celeste, years later we saw the movie Blue Velvet, with the very great Isabella Rossellini and the very great Laura Dern and the madman Dennis Hopper. It featured the luscious song of 1963 vintage and of the same name, as sung by Bobby Vinton. You were at another level that immunized you from the sentimental sound of the "Mr. Lonely" man and the Everly Brothers and all those who would conspire with their melodic voices to enslave you to Murray the K and his swinging soiree. For this I envy you, as addiction can take many forms, including of the ear. I have previously postured, positioning myself as a scorner of the holler heads, as I have derisively referred to all performers in the pop world. But the truth is that I lived and died with them, or with many of them. The sound of the Coasters singing "Charlie Brown" or Elvis doing "Hound Dog" and "Love Me Tender" and all the rest electrified my entire being. I was their captive. It is only in older age that I have gained some distance from the pull of such music. The fantasies of heroics and of being number one in all the universe while under their spell are of shorter duration and the urge to gorge on pop has grown more infrequent. But why would one*

want to make of this infatuation an issue? Because the tyranny of false emotion must always be suspect, lest we be softened where strength needs to abide. And what deep truth are we to ascertain from "Love, love me do," other than we have denied ourselves access to the airwaves of the afflatus. Our antennae must always and forever be attuned to the divine, however infrequent the transmission. Of course there is also the possibility that Bobby Vinton and the Everly Brothers and all the rest are the divine, proving that life is in us and around us. I am only here to say the things I need to say in the moment I say them.

The point is that when I came to you next, it was in the night, as Dennis Hopper came to Isabella Rossellini, and under the cover of darkness we resumed our old way. Circumspection must have a place here. Not everything need be out in the open. The folly of even the most extreme exhibitionist can reach its limit if he is to survive. Let me simply say that my hunger was no more or less than your own. I cannot speak for you, but I starved myself to arrive at this moment, and yet I came more gently, if as needily. Your treasure was your open receiving of me.

And yet, from the start, anxiety was introduced. I couldn't complete what I had started. And so there was the fear of losing you before I had even won you, and with each failure the pressure to succeed only grew and worked against any possibility of success. My future depended on my pathetic organ, and it was failing me.

Adding to the pressure was the sudden conviction that I had found in you the woman I wanted to grow old with. As I may have mentioned, there was a woman in my childhood, Mrs. Kindelberger, to whom my mother would have me run, on my long legs, before school with a plate of pancakes and lingonberries, as love was in my mother's

*heart for this gentle woman. Already would she be at her easel on the floor above, paintbrush in hand. A watercolorist she was, and her framed paintings of rural scenes hung alongside the verses of scripture in our lobby, and if holiness is an appreciation of the sanctity of life, then her artwork was imbued with it.*

*Celeste, you are not a watercolorist. You paint with oils. (How little I feel the right to trespass on your life with these words, and yet where else am I to go, as all roads lead back to you?) And now that you have taken up carving, you apply your brushes to these small figures as well. In my family's apartment is a hand-carved wooden bowl, painted with faded earth colors, a keepsake my mother brought from the Old Country, and so you are tied to Mrs. Kindelberger and my mother and my past through your artistry. In my mind is this so. Is it then surprising that the thought should seize hold of me that you are the woman I wish to grow old with, a thought that never came near to appearing in my mind in regard to Sarah? That you should now be my past, my present, and my future?*

If he was to be on the road to rectitude, the past had to be laid to rest. But would it ever? An amend was owed to Tom Smits, his friend from the Claremont School. And so he wrote him a letter acknowledging his wrongdoing in threatening suicide should Tom continue to reach out to him, this following Tom's discovery of where Luther and his family lived. Luther remembered well the mix of pain and glee he experienced dropping that letter in the corner mailbox. Tom would read it and know what a shame master he had been, shaming Luther about his board scores, about his life.

The letter served its purpose. Luther never heard from Tom Smits again. But Tom

Smits lived in his mind. There was not a day that passed in which he did not think about the brutal cleavage in their relationship the letter had effected. In separating himself from Tom Smits, he had separated himself from an entire segment of the population. He had said he was not fit to be in the company of those in the high board realm, those with the foreheads as sheer as the cliffs of Dover or those, equally potent, with the bulging brow of Beethoven.

Luther sent the letter of amends to Tom Smits's mother. He had found her name in the white pages and saw that she was still living at the same address. Some days later he received a phone call. Tom Smits was on the line. He happened to be in New York visiting with his mother when the letter arrived. He said he would be right down to see Luther. He didn't give Luther a chance to say no, and in fact, Luther would not have said no, as by now he had enough staying power in his own life that he did not have to run from Tom Smits or from anyone of Tom Smits's echelon.

In his eagerness Tom Smits had cabbied from the Upper West Side down to the Bowery loft. His hair was longer than the Claremont School had permitted, and he had grown a beard, but he was recognizable, especially from his small, hard eyes as the fully grown version of the boy Luther had once known. Like Luther, he had been a skinny kid, but with a bigger frame, and that frame now carried an abundance of weight. Never someone to dwell on his appearance, he wore scuffed shoes and pants a size too big, and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his flannel shirt. Fastidiousness was not in his nature. His mind was turned to other things. He was now a professor of Oriental Languages at the University of California at Berkeley, having mastered Chinese in its various dialects as

well as Japanese and Korean. Luther should not have been surprised. Even back then, Tom had shown an interest in otherness, including the East, as if he could not be entirely happy in a white man's world.

Tom showed no curiosity about the loft. He had no comments, critical or otherwise, to make. He simply seemed genuinely eager to see Luther, whom he placed in a powerful bear hug. And if he was not someone to cling to his personal history, being too much of the world for that, the memory of Luther's letter nevertheless maintained a place of prominence in his mind. If not, why then, when directness led Luther to bring up the annihilating correspondence, would Tom blurt, "Yes, that letter. What was that about?" the voice that uttered the question qualitatively different in its eagerness, as if after so many years light could be shed. This hunger on Tom's part was impactful, saying as it did that in fact the letter was a mystery and that Tom truly was in the dark as to Luther's motive when wasn't it so nakedly clear, notwithstanding the terseness of the letter, what the motive had to be, that Tom had beaten him in all ways that mattered to a boy, or a man for that matter, and was too obvious to bear mentioning?

"Your existence had become a reproach to me. You had beaten me, or so it seemed."

"Beaten you how?"

Here Luther stiffened. How dense could his former friend, who had mocked Luther for his board scores, be? Or was Tom seeking simply to humiliate him further.

"My low score on the SAT. The fact that I would be going to a public college living off its past reputation and not an elite school such as yourself."

“But there are other things in life.”

Luther allowed Tom’s statement to stand alone and exposed. “There were other things. How my family lived. The condition of the apartment and the difficulties some of my siblings experienced.” There was his father, and the lie Tom’s university father had practically forced him into by demanding to know how Luther’s father made a living.

“Are you serious? Do you know the things that went on in my family? That my father would get blotto and stick his foot through the TV screen? The terror of him we lived with? And leaving my mother for the college girls he taught and regularly screwed?”

Luther hadn’t known, not about the drunkenness and the outbursts. About the sexual activity Tom had told him. With the new revelation Luther realized the limits his own mind had placed on him. All he had known was that he saw, and what was that but the perception of excellence all around him at the Claremont School that left him alone and insecure and frightened. It meant less that Tom should say Luther was popular among the other students. In fact, it meant nothing at all. How much could it mean when he had been invited to a single party in all four years of high school.

“Hey, look, do you have any grass?”

“I’m sorry but I don’t do drugs or drink anymore.”

“That’s too bad. Look, I have to be going,” Tom said, and so he did, after another bear hug. How hard and unyielding Tom’s body felt. Somehow, it was understood that he would not see Tom again. He had offered too little for Tom to hold onto. That had to be all right. It had to be, he thought, as downstairs, he watched Tom jump into a cab and take

off.

*Celeste, a story like this, barebones as it is, has meaning. It takes me back to old pain and the nature of my life, that I should esteem in you what I did not have in myself. Not, of course, your womanhood, through there have been many times when I have imagined myself in the female role sexually, and I must confess these imaginings of receiving a man, of being overpowered by a man, brought a great thrill. We need not deny ourselves such mental explorations or be ashamed when they occur, as we have many selves within our one self. No, shallow as it may be, what I looked for was the innate intelligence you possessed that could arrange the blocks and guide your number 2 pencil to the correct answer on the multiple choice questions on the SAT. To have been invited within the walls of the academy only to spurn it for art school showed yourself to be far above the status seekers of that time. The paperback books of America you could read on the side. In short, I sought to gain self-esteem for myself through association.*

*I came to you that same night with the need to lose myself in you and leave Tom behind, if only for the time being. Another image came to me, from long ago. Connections between past and present strengthen ties to ensure they bind, whether the image recalled is of Mrs. Kindelberger at her easel or the older daughter of the hosiery store owner around the corner from my family's building, he who spoke with a silver-tongued French accent as he removed the stockings from their slender boxes and held the apparel delicately in his open hand for inspection. As I may have mentioned sometime earlier, I had a great hunger for this older daughter, even as a child, she whose dark eyes sparkled with the mystery of her sex as yours do now, but it was her plain and pudgy younger*

*sister, not her, who came to me in that time and washed my hair in the sink in the small bathroom between my parents' room and the one I shared with my brother, that bathroom being directly above the store where her father handled women's undergarments with such grace. Let me note that it was not a bathroom with origins in disuse. How could it be, when Broadway was right below when one was relieving his bladder or emptying his bowels? Could anything be more the stuff of dreams than that, to be pooping just a floor above the flow of pedestrians to and fro unbeknownst to them, and living with the thrill of safety from their scrutinizing ways. But disorder will make severe inroads on pleasure. This is almost axiomatic. And here I must confess to chaos untold, boxes piled high with who knew what in the shower. An unsightly sight, Celeste. Unsightly. But to go on. Sometimes I will wonder about that father, and that older daughter and the garments he supplied her with and the provinces of her body he may have explored. But never mind these rancid thoughts. Know only that finally, past and present have conjoined and that now I am with you and her in the circularity of time.*

Luther had an innate understanding that a man must feel received by a woman but also that a woman must feel received by a man as well, and because he wanted to be a do right man, to step free of the Lunacy, Inc. image Celeste in all likelihood held of him, he thought the time had come for him to bring her into his life and not for all time be simply stepping into hers. To that end, and in preparation, he relied on his mother's wisdom, recalling her partiality to ground chuck, and as a worthy companion to this primo beef purchased Arnold buns for their promised softness and ability to take the heat of sizzling meat. And if Bird's Eye frozen peas could be good enough for his mother, they too could



be good enough for him. And, of course, he had seltzer aplenty and as a taste treat Pepperidge Farm chocolate chip cookies and Breyer's vanilla ice cream, because Breyer's was an ice cream he could count on going back to Dixie cup days.

*Celeste, you arrived in a state of hunger; but not for the plain and humble fare I served up. The word "wonderful" you offered frequently in keeping your inner critic well hidden. In some way you were a match for me in the fear department. Your real need was not to serve as a food critic but to ascertain where you stood vis a vis Sarah in regard to her work, and so you spent much time in her studio examining the prints she had made and her paintings and sculptures. "She is a real artist," you said quietly, when you emerged. Whether she was a good artist you left unsaid.*

*Celeste, I walked on rubber legs, on clouds of foam. I called on sunlight to show itself in the dark and it did. I called on bliss to be my companion into eternity and it promised it would. No statute of limitations did the universe dare threaten to place on my happiness.*

In this time Luther met a young man, Will, of strong manufacture and wiry hair as short as his name. His body parts were aces, which may have explained the attraction of women to him that he should have had ten girlfriends in the past five years, each of the relationships ending after six or so months.

"Did they discern that you had a heart of stone or was it they who had such a heart or did you both come from a place of hardness?" Luther was led to ask.

"Maybe it was none of the above. Maybe it was just life," Will said, and there the

conversation ended,

Luther's dead aunt, Auntie Eve, came into the picture in dreamland. No rhyme or reason as to the timing. The message she sought to convey, Luther could only imagine, was her eternalness. As in a grainy black and white newsreel, she was seen walking down Broadway happy and free, leaving behind the building she had once owned and now managed. Her peaceful, contented expression spoke of her happiness, her freedom. Stores of a bygone time were still there: the Henry Kirby photo studio, the Orange Grove, the Robin Bell restaurant, even the kosher deli that smelled so very good as you passed it, even if they were not in the order they in reality appeared. She wore her long coat and a hat and carried her pocketbook on her arm. She was alone, as she was always alone, and guided by her strength. It could only have been Sunday morning, from the stillness of the streets. Happy to be on her way to church she was, happy to be on her way to the Lord, who was always with her, who made her strong in her aloneness, so very strong, the thing Luther admired most about her.

*Celeste, I have not always been careful about that which I desire. Due diligence has been lacking. That is what I am trying to say. (Even with the sky as my canvas, some economy is advisable.) Her name was Bette Laine and she had come to my attention as a literary agent open to literary fiction as well as children's literature. The fact that she had a Brooklyn, not a Manhattan, address suggested to me that she had not yet reached the top tier and might be hungrier than some others for new authors to represent. There was the*

*fact, too, that she was young and just starting out. And so, in a moment of confidence, I sent her some sample pages of White Line, Continue and a story with the title "The Double Spaces of Paradise" because action, not passivity, makes the world go round. To my surprise, and chagrin, the material was returned to me within a week with a boilerplate rejection to which she had not even added her signature. This rebuff was most instructive. Though it left me virtually catatonic for the better part of the day and activated every last prerecorded message of personal unworthiness in my internal sound system, the song "I Only Have Eyes for You" at some point came strongly to mind and I saw everything, everything, if I may channel Glanton. What I mean is that I can convince myself that there are those who have eyes for me, not exclusively, but sufficient to tell them everything they need to know, without so much as having laid eyes upon me, and among these rare ones I came to include Bette Laine.*

*Now this is an awkward thing to confess, Celeste, but on these premises is an editorial assistant with our primo children's books imprint, Carousel Books, and its leader, Gina Deductio. Her name is Rosa Sanguero, and she is a flaming young presence from south of the border with a degree from Vassar College. And though she is ablaze with dark beauty and men fall down dying at her feet as adoration societies form in all the boroughs and outlying counties, I saw none of this. I saw only that her astonishing assets were compromised by a birthmark that ran in a jagged line down the left side of her face and neck and wherever else her clothing might conceal, leaving open the possibility that she would find me worthy of her amour. This line of thinking is not good, any more than inferring from the fact that Bette Laine has a Brooklyn address improves*

*the odds that she would see talent in me others more centrally located wouldn't. Rosa did not give me hard smack when I encroached on her airspace, but she effectively grounded my aircraft when a caballero of equal beauty came calling on her at the office. Celeste, to be right sized does not mean to be pint sized, but it does mean for me to learn to walk and talk and present myself in the dimensions that have been given me if I am to have any measure of happiness.*

*There was a time when the stationery stores of New York City offered a world of intoxication. To inhale the smell of paper, ink, glue, whatever forces were commingling for such cumulative potency left me reeling, and none more than the Columbia University Bookstore on Broadway just a short distance from the mall and the Teacher's College Bookstore at 120<sup>th</sup> Street and Amsterdam Avenue. The Parker T-Ball Jotters would strengthen me and the Paper Mates would provide auxiliary support, and there was no counting the number of Number 2 Eberhard Faber pencils I needed for my armamentarium. Every notebook promised the beginning of new order in my life, but the writing implements and the paper on which they were deployed could not compensate for the hand that held these tools or the chaos they left to reign on each and every page, thus making a mockery of the very idea of elegance. But there is another kind of order, and that is the order that the full and unvarnished truth can deliver, not for the sake of salvation but simple accountability. This addiction to things. Is it possible the true holy ones stand before us on street corners in all kinds of weather divested of all earthly possessions but the rags on their filthy bodies and the begging bowls they hold out to us?*

*Are their prayers not more genuine than ours, in that they are driven by need? Is it possible that in extremism the truth of our lives is to be found and that we maintain a colossal fiction by idling in neutral?*

A woman spoke out of the side of her mouth. Her platform was the park bench on which she stood. The September day was warm, as if fall were a fiction. She had big news. She said she was the victim of a sibling bond with her brother. She said that emotionally she had never outgrown this bond and that the physical manifestation was in her face. Thus, at age thirty-five, she had the look of a teenage girl. She said she was Quentin Compson's sister Caddie come back to life, and that they were all welcome to a glimpse of her muddy drawers as she climbed the tree beside her. Luther stole away, as if from a fleshly manifestation of his own mind come to life.

Though the pills of America had been many in Luther's life, beginning with the Phenobarbital his mother would give him with the warning to lie still so they could take effect back when he was a teenager and Jane Thayer had tormenting sway over him those times she went away with other boys, where he now stood was in opposition to them, whether Haldol, Artane, Thorazine, Valium, Librium, Elavil, or any of the others that the doctors of America had called on to sedate his mental turbulence sufficient that he could be among those with the freedom to walk about beyond locked wards. He did not understand at this time that it was for him to bow down in gratitude to the pharmacological genius that resulted in these life-improving medications; his focus had

turned to that period early on in RoR when he was on 200 mg. of Elavil per day and would periodically pick up a drink, proving to him in hindsight that Elavil had been a pharmacological solution, not the spiritual solution that was required as a defense against the first drink. Had Ringle, his first mentor, not said that pills loosened his commitment to sobriety? And did not Luther take that message to heart thereafter in RoR, treating as heretics against the true faith those who relied on medications to lift their spirit or allay their anxiety or whatever and, in so doing, making those medications their higher power? Did he not succumb to the prevailing orthodoxy, the conceit, that what turned out to be the right course for him must also be the right course for others? He meant no harm. He was merely coming from a place of fear, fear that he would be plunged back into that world and lose his recovery should he endorse, tacitly or vocally, these and other medications for any and all who spoke of their need for them. Even therapy itself had become a heresy, once he had left Dr. Rosner so he might be more fully reliant on God and the fellowship and the program of recovery. To ensure that the dinky have no part in this narrative but only the unvarnished truth, the full dimension of the savage, backward, and even hypocritical mindset that came to afflict him had to be acknowledged.

Furthermore, let one and all be assured that the dinky did not hold dominion into perpetuity and that the legions in the service of fear and misguidedness ultimately had their day of reckoning and dissolved like the darkest of clouds before a powerful sun.

There did come the day that the light of proper understanding was given to Luther, and while specifics cannot be gone into now if order is to be preserved, let this assurance be entered into the record as well.

Luther was not fully done with Mona nor she with him. There was the telephone. There were the airwaves. There were the workings of their minds.

“What a crazy world. If I only had three hundred dollars, I could paint,” she said.

“I don’t have it to give you,” Luther replied.

“I had jobs. Remember? Remember? But I got killed. Four goddamn times at least did I get killed,” she said, before doing telephone hang up.

That weekend, in dreamland, Luther journeyed to Spanish Harlem. No, it was not the Spanish Harlem of Ben E. King. No rose was growing that he could see. The day was cold and from gate-free windows he saw the cold, cold rain sweeping the streets but bringing no cleanliness to them. Would-be intruders patiently awaited nightfall, when they could come with knives and do their stabbing thing. If there was to be shuteye, it could only be the one eye. This if he wanted to live.

*Celeste, we do not need Joseph of old for the interpretation of this dream either. You had your artistic solitude, but you could not help but be integrated into the life of the world. Its people were calling to you that weekend, which you and Mia spent with the parents of Mia’s girlfriend at their country home. This was not an anomaly. All doors all the time were flung open to you by the wicked and the just. The by invitation only sign was not to be seen. And the week before an adoration circle had formed around you at the party you attended. You called to tell me of your affection for me even as you noted a bulldog of a*

*man slaving with lust who was following you from room to room. You were not seeking to set the alarm bells ringing in me, but ring they did and I was driven to call back later that same night and rebuke you for injecting such anxiety into me. Then was it necessary to beat myself senseless for showing my anger for the first time, fearing that in so doing I would drive you back to the slaving one, as did not anger cast me in the image of the smacking one, he who had been made to get up and lose all control?*

*Celeste, acknowledgment is in order. The dream was telling me that my state of mind was a cold rain on harsh streets in an atmosphere of menace without you. You, as Mona before you, had become the thing of value in my life. It was even possible that I had gone from the pan into the fire. No, it doesn't sit right for me to say that last. In recompense, a savage beating of myself has ensued. Its purpose is to teach me to be faithful to the light. And that light is in you. I know it is."*

In this time a man named Snake asked Luther to serve as his mentor and it was not for Luther to say no. Snake had taken a tumble on Wall Street because of his drinking and walked the streets alone and slept alone, the premises of his life having been vacated by one and all. For Luther, if order was to prevail, he needed to deal with first things first, and the first thing was how Snake had come by such a name.

"My father gave it to me because I had a way, from early on, of slipping and sliding out of everything, or trying to. My birth name is Cedric. Cedric Carlson."

"I see. And are you still slipping and sliding, and if I may add, slithering?" Luther asked.



“Not really,” was all Snake would say about that.

“So you would say that you’re an upright and do right man today?”

“Probably not in those words,” Snake said.

“I see,” Luther said, not knowing what else to say.

“In fact, I may get rid of Snake altogether,” Snake offered.

“Really? And what new identity would you then claim?”

“How about Switchblade Sammy?”

“And why...” Luther was brought to a halt by the sight before him.

In his hand Snake held a knife with an eight-inch blade he had just the moment before sprung free by depressing a button in the middle of the green handle. Switchblade Sammy let his knife do the talking, accompanying it with a smile of supreme satisfaction at the surprise he had sprung and the intimidation it had clearly evoked.

But Luther rallied strong. “Switchblade Sammy, I see you wear argyle socks and an argyle sweater and penny loafers. And while your black hair is slicked back and you wear a thin and dangerous-looking mustache, I do not see you as a sinister Sicilian or Ghetto Gus or Snake or Switchblade Sammy.”

“That is your problem, not mine,” Switchblade replied.

Not to be deterred, Luther went on. “You’re riding the subway. You’re in the last car and it is empty. Slice and Dice and I Puts Holes in Big Men’s Chests get on. They are not phony bologna mean streets but the real deal. They say, ‘Honky mother f’ing white boy, turn your shit loose. Turn it all loose.’ What are you going to do then?”

Switchblade called attention to his knife by waving it.

“Are you prepared to use that knife, Switchblade? If you’re not, maybe you need to think about retiring it. Because there are men wandering about with a sense they have nothing to lose who will take that knife from you and shove it up your butt.”

“I’m the real deal, too,” Switchblade said, but his voice was subdued as he folded the blade back into its handle.

*Celeste, I hear the dogs of war barking not a far distance from here. I hear the nature of their discontent in the sound their outrage takes. They are a reminder to me that embellishment, while part of the fabric of American existence, is what I am pledged to resist. But there are times when moderation will not usher in the new freedom we are seeking and lines of extravagance need be laid out if we are to reach this desired place, or so recklessness has led me to believe.*

*Celeste, it was not long before Snake and I parted ways. I did not initiate the separation. It was forced upon me. Evidently, he had a great liking for tiramisu, and even acknowledged the considerable alcohol content in it, but finished the serving and then requested a second serving and a third, which he quickly polished off. I told him that knowingly consuming alcohol, whatever the quantity, and in his case it was considerable, did not, as I saw it, constitute sobriety. I would be happy to continue working with him, but only if he changed his sobriety date. When he balked, I suggested that he was trying to build a new life on a foundation of quicksand. He replied with dismissiveness, and I have not heard from him since. But he left me no choice. If tiramisu laced with alcohol is OK for Snake, then it would have to be for me as well, and so I would be placing my own*

*recovery at risk. Let Snake find someone in the fellowship, if he can, who embraces his dubious conception of sobriety. And let this person be the one to bury him.*

*One thing more about Snake. He mentioned having seen you on Spring Street. To be honest, I didn't like hearing your name from his lips, as I perceive a man such as Snake to be full of lascivious intent and I am programmed to fear most men as rivals for your heart. It will sound mean to say, but he has a sullyng effect on everything he touches, whether physically or with his words. A man does own his face, Celeste, and his suggests an enduring residence in the underbelly of the universe. And yet he is in my daily prayers, that their sudsing action may have a cleansing effect on my own mind in terms of the judgments I render if not on his own particular character.*

Now some might say that the action of Luther Garatdjian's mind on the truth of certain situations was, at best, questionable, thus making the testimony of the other party, when in fact there was another party and not simply Luther on a solo mission through his life, worthy of close attention. And so it will be given. Celeste said, "I'm becoming so involved with you. The two things I'm interested in are your writing and your sex life."

Luther had been leaving stories for her to read, stories with no dramatic tension. But she liked them, so she said, and her approval gave him a happy glow.

Celeste did not happen in a void. She had two parents and an older sister. Her mother and her sister she adored. It was full strength love and affection of the unyielding kind. Her father was a dark spot she could not go too near in her mind nor with her words. "My father is not who people think he is," she would say, with no elaboration

forthcoming when Luther would express some curiosity about how and why he was as she said. She would simply drift off to a space where she was not reachable.

Though Celeste had an affable demeanor, she early on expressed an attitude of defiance. In her one year at Carnegie-Mellon, any sign of a lecture breath mentality in her male teachers would result in ostentatious burial of her face in the *New York Times*. She had no patience with those men who spoke the universal language of pomposity. And evidently there were enough of them that she left Pittsburgh after one year, having no need of the beaten path that others felt compelled to follow. One reason was that her artistic star was leading her on. The other was her inclusion in the will of her wealthy aunt, Beatrice, whose favorite she had been.

Her aunt's death, while it saddened her, also was of benefit in that it gave her the means to stay out of the workplace. Not that she was opposed to making her own way in the world; rather, her concern was that employment that required her supervision by a boss—a male boss—meant that she would have to do his bidding, not only in office hours but beyond, should he be of that kind. And so her world became a studio on Amsterdam Avenue and an apartment further downtown, and each day she spent long hours at the easel. At this time she found the love of her young life, a miniature French poodle named Molly, Celeste having a feel for animals that went beyond the ordinary.

But Celeste had no need to be in the workplace to appear in the monitoring devices of young men. There was one, a CPA with a mustache, who had seen her in her youthful glory at Carnegie-Mellon and fell down dying at her knees owing to her unrequited love. From pity more than ardor did she marry this man, who went by the

name Manfred Mantiko.

*Celeste, with every word do I feel my betrayal, that I should lay open your life as well as my own on the page. Is there a word other than thievery for this appropriation of your experience? There are not enough beatings a man can receive for such a misdeed. But does not a greater punishment await me for forgoing the commitment to paper of a naked account of my life, and what can that account be without those who lived within my sphere or I in theirs? Are we not joined by our experience into eternity? Did the man not sing in High Noon "Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darling," over and over again, and would this consignment of us to oblivion not be the grossest act of forsaking? Yes, my pen, so to speak, is wobbly, but I will call on the great spirit to give it strength and spine and stamina, but most of all honesty, that it may be my veracity pledged guide going forward.*

Election Day came that first Tuesday in November. The office was closed but Forget About It was open for business, so to speak, and would stay open so long as there were drunks crying out from their depths for wine and more wine. Luther had arranged for a speaker. Her name was Geeta. Luther didn't know what kind of name that was, and he made it his business not to ask, as he had received enough inquiries about his surname to know what that could be like. A name could just be a name, after all.

Geeta had no use for Luther. Such was Luther's feeling anyway, but he did not have to do the dinky, getting only speakers he personally had a liking for. He could elevate sufficient to consider the need of the group to hear a strong message, and such a

message Geeta had shown she could deliver. Nor did Luther have an ulterior motive, as Geeta, though attractive, was also married. And let it be said that Geeta lived up to his expectation of her. She told what it was like to fall and be resurrected in an admirable and compelling way.

Afterward Luther mopped the floor, as that was a new duty assigned to the chairs of meetings. And if at first he balked at the thought of the task, he went forward step by step, his attitude adjusting with each swab of the mop. He was moving a muscle and changing a thought.

The day was warm for early November, and Luther walked and walked to the polling station down on Mott Street, where he voted so that the man who nodded his empty head so well did not gain any more power through Congress to take away from the poor and give to the rich, which was all he wanted to do, as Luther understood it. He did not like a man who was bad-intentioned in his bones and with a smile that could not hide the punishing mentality I've got mine, you've got to get your own, Bones.

*Celeste, the Indian summer day was one for memories. In Little Italy were there boys on the street playing stickball and I stood by the high brick wall sectioning off a graveyard and called for the organ grinder and his monkey I had seen by such a wall in that picture book from my childhood. When I could, I stepped into the Little Italy Restoration Club, where a sober and respectful countenance was due if a beating wasn't to commence at the terminating hands of Vince and Sal, who stood at their posts of vigilance. And I gave one and all what they wanted, that they might not know the nature and direction of my thoughts. Here, I believe, is where my communication with my father*

*lay. He had known, even with his volatile nature, how to survive and was directing me from the beyond, to always be crossing the street, so to speak, when faced with the embodiment of danger; as represented by those with slicked back hair and leather jackets and patterned knit shirts buttoned at the top.*

*At home I received a call from Sarah. She showed no rage. Rather, she seemed at peace with our separation. New possibilities were opening up for her. She would stay among the living only if her parents footed the bill for her new existence. Reparations were in order, she was once again saying. She said further that Mara, Jeffrey's wife, had left him. Jeffrey was alone now in the cottage. Evidently, there had been a trailer in the mix. A German hound had followed her to America, his amour still having a pulse, and with him she had fled God knew where.*

After speaking with Sarah, Luther studied himself in the mirror above the sink for some time. Then he took a second mirror from the bathroom wall so he could see himself in profile. He was not chagrined at what he saw, as he had been back when as a child he went about with a crew-cut and his head was conspicuously missing a part. Then he put on a Jackson Browne album, *Late for the Sky*, because an urge came over him to soar, to be number one in all the universe, as when out walking he was suddenly Muhammad Ali firing jabs into the face of Smoking Joe Frazier while dancing around him in tasseled boxing shoes or Roger Maris launching screamers into the upper right field deck. But now it was not Muhammad Ali. Now it was Bill Walton Luther was entering into because Jackson Browne reminded him of California and California could only remind Luther of Bill Walton, though he did not know why. If California had a color, it was the color of

dusk, a golden dusk that New York could never have and Bill Walton was returning to professional basketball after a long absence and photographers clicked away as he came onto the court and he looked beautiful and was loved by all and played brilliantly and the adoration was going to be endless, as if he were the embodiment of all that a person should be or could dream of being.

Luther had told himself it would be one and done, that he would not turn the Jackson Browne album over, but he could not hold to the promise he had made to himself any more than he could limit himself to one drink back when alcohol was part of his life. What he saw, not for the first or last time, was that the soar could not be interrupted. It had to have a life of its own. So he flipped over the album that he might continue to live in his mind elsewhere than where he was with his feet, a man in his mid-thirties with a broken marriage and a job that could not engage his mind or imagination or heart. And let it be entered into the record of life that while the music fueled his fantasy, he had no ability to retain the lyrics or even make sense of them as they were being sung. He did not have a mind fitted to commit the words of Jackson Browne, or any singer, to memory. Let it also be said that, to Luther's mind, there was a rubbish content to these lyrics he was incapable of retaining, that there was a qualitative difference to the words of a songwriter than those of a poet. A streak of sentimentality was showing, like a stain on an otherwise immaculate shirt, and wild pseudo-poetic extravagance of language could provide no cover.

In this time Luther experienced a fantasy along similar lines, only he remained in his own



body. No superstar occupied his mental landscape and there was no real elevation. In fact, he was scheduled for interment. No, he hadn't deceased himself. Death had simply come calling, and in the aftermath the awareness that he had been loved grew and grew. If, in fact, the reverie was equally narcissistic as the previous one, it was missing the element of Luther being number one in the entire universe. Yes, self-love was present, but hadn't Luther seen that sign at Forget About It, the RoR meeting, that read, "Let us love you until you learn to love yourself"? Why couldn't he just take satisfaction in the real possibility that the message of hope was proving true? Was it not significant that those who professed to love him and mourned his departure were RoR members, and was it not appropriate, given that the fellowship was anonymous, that they were faceless? Who was to say he wasn't turning a corner? Who indeed?

*Celeste, I told you of my excessive self-involvement and wondered out loud if there was any way to write about it even as I acknowledged my struggle with ambition beyond my reach. You wore a velvet glove on your artist's hands. I won't say I saw it, but it was there, in your voice, as you said, "You will have to accept inwardly that you are a writer and represent yourself as such. Otherwise you will die. Be patient."*

There was a vestibule and then steps leading to Celeste, many steps, before you could reach her. But she was there when you arrived. She did not stand at the top of those stairs in a robe, with a satyr only a foot behind her, as in that time before. She did not send Luther reeling back out into the night.

That order might prevail, here, in ascending order, are the owner and his family

and the tenants who lived below Celeste and her daughter, Mia, as well as the occupations that gave them sustenance in this world: There was Tunji Rahman, an African American drummer with many bands of note, and his white wife, by way of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Jasmine Free, and their two young daughters, Ameena and Sweet Thing; Frederick Solomon Smart, a dealer in antiquarian books with a girth that spoke of his acquisitive nature in regard to more than literature; Winfred Paley and Tamiko Oji, dancers of the first order and lovers, too. This much Luther ascertained in the initial stages of his coming and going, with more to be revealed.

There was that Adonis of a boy who put Luther in his place back in grade school when Luther blurted that he had a superiority complex. His manner of flattening Luther was simply to say, in a quiet and matter-of-fact voice, “You have nothing to feel superior about.” It wasn’t the whole truth that Luther’s boast and his subsequent striving were an attempt to compensate for the low regard he held himself in, but that remained a prevailing line of thinking; nothing had as yet reduced let alone erased it from his consciousness. His only resource was to pray for a measure of humility, that he might be right sized and be grateful for the gifts, meager as they might seem, that he had been given. And for periods of time, after such prayer, he could find peace, but its duration was a day at best. Even that powerful period of grace he had experienced after reading his inventory to Glanton, the sense that he was all right and had always been all right, that the colleges that had accepted him were fine colleges and he didn’t need to be more than he was, passed after a short time.

He was intimidated by Celeste and her circle of friends, with their Yale and Harvard and Swarthmore and Oberlin and degrees, and the high board score land both she and these friends dwelt in. When he confessed his shame to Celeste that he had not been admitted to such prestigious schools, it remained a mystery to him that she should say, "None of that matters. Good schools have not prevented me from feeling bad about myself," but heeled in his memory as treasure that she said it.

*Celeste, I am in over my head. I have gone where I do not belong. The very idea of a man of my worth trying to match up with a woman of your status. Does it come as any surprise that I now pick on you and escalate to verbal abuse? Behind it all is fear, of course, fear that you will find me lacking, that your friends will turn you against me. Your financial independence, and the freedom it gives you to devote your day to your art, is a torment. What kind of love is this that I should use your life to diminish my own, contrasting your mornings and afternoons in your studio with mine here at Cromartie Wonders in the service of a scold? Is this love or a competition that I have entered into? I find myself wanting to punish you for my own unhappiness. Now you will go to your therapist, Mme. Gilot, and report on my bad temper and she will tell you to look elsewhere for the love I cannot give you, and then it will be for me to sing along with Ray Charles that it is crying time again, you're going to leave me. Is that not the script for this time and for all time, that I should be denied the America of my dreams that you have come to represent as Sarah once represented? And am I to punish myself for seeking that dream in the body, the flesh, when RoR is telling me to elevate, elevate, into the life of the*

*spirit? Is it any wonder, then, that morning and night I pray to be taught how to love?*

*Celeste, we all need a way of life, and punishment has been mine: punishing my mother by not eating for her failure to remember my name; punishing my father for his violence by my absence from his life; punishing my family for not being better than it was by disappearing on all of them. The vengeance that is mine, all mine.*

*Celeste, you have taken on sickness beyond your reckoning by allowing me into your world. I expect you to make me high and keep me high, and when you don't, I must die and die and die some more. My need for approval has risen to a record level. When you said this last story I showed you was interesting, my day and my life were done, destroyed with just that one kiss-of-death word. My immediate assumption was that you would peremptorily dismiss me.*

*My existence is in poor contrast to your own. While the filthy ones delight in tossing my manuscripts into the street, gallery owners pursue you and you often can't be bothered to return their calls. Did you not tell me just today that Arvid Nilsson, your principal dealer, is fuming because you have not kept in touch with him? Are you even aware that other artists beg gallery owners to come to their studios? Will you gloat when I come to you tonight? Will you preen? Will you mock me with your superiority? Will you see the greenness of my envy? Will you see the infection to my love that I bring with my tainted flesh?*

So that strength could be his, Luther assembled the following: gold leaf spandrel. Jeweled crown. Marbled lobby. Frescoed vault. Italian gold leaf statue. Silver flatware. Posture-

pedic mattress. Dead-bolt lock. Dining table of teak veneer with solid edge and solid teak legs. Imported Berber broadloom. Whey-faced. Curds and whey. Whited sepulcher. Wickiup.

Now there was one in RoR who said her love was on offer to him, that always was he is in her mind and heart as a paragon of excellence she could not envision in the crude mate she had disposed of. Her name was Nell Nodding, and she came in and out of his sight in the round of meetings they both made, and when she laid bare the ardor that fueled her obsession, he recoiled, as he had no appetite for the destruction she might wreak nor the aesthetic deficiency she presented. She was a woman-child driven wild by the abuse meted out to her, the banging of her head repeatedly by her father and other forms of bashing from subsequent beaux that led to a permanent grimace and other deficiencies to her face.

Now Luther, in this time and for all time in his recovery, was sworn to uphold the truth and nothing but the truth. Yes, he understood that there were those with aspirations to or careers established in the performance arena who used their time in the RoR spotlight to try out their one-liners or live in the land of excessive emotion, but Luther was not a performer and did not consider it his job to entertain or have the room in stitches. He understood that he lacked the comedian's sense of timing and any attempt to be funny would inevitably fall flat. The worst thing he could do to himself was to try for laughs. The truth he had sworn himself to uphold was the truth of his own nature and the constancy of his low esteem, that quantifying element that told him daily that he was a

low number and qualified for only hanging string status. Did he not have an obligation to present this voice, with its unending whispering to him day and night to take himself to the shame corner and stand there till further notice? And did he not have the further right to say that the voice, while constant, was lower in volume than it had previously been, and for that relative freedom full credit had to go to RoR?

In exactly such a mode was Luther the night he spoke at a meeting where Nell Nodding was also present. And what did he witness when he touched on the SAT and his miserable performance but her immediate flight from the room, for she had no choice but to run, run for her life, run from the shattered image of who she had thought he was, run from the truth of him revealed. And it was all right. It was all all right, for if love was to have its way, it could not be in a fictional setting. It had to come to where he truly lived. Yes, he heard John Lennon sing “The Dream Is Over” that very night, but it was Nell Nodding’s dream, as never again did she stand before him fanning herself with her hand to suggest the heat she was in over who she thought him to be. He was doing a clear out of the illusionists, those who would live in the land of elevation, and what was left would be what was left.

*And so it continued, Celeste. In your world could I seldom find my bearings. What is more painful than for the one you profess to love to see your face green with envy at the news that Arvid Nilsson is wilder about your work than ever and will sell your little carvings like hotcakes. Your paintings, your sculptures, all of it he wants in his gallery. He instructs you to buy new clothes for Amy and yourself and to buy a new sofa as well.*

*He is telling you to decorate yourself and the loft for the world that will be coming to you more and more. He says finding your work in all the clutter is like going on a treasure hunt. He is telling you to come out of hiding, to rise to the full measure of your stature so that the world will want to possess not only your art but you, as the two go together in the mind of the world. Your image must be raised; it must receive a high gloss.*

Arvid Nilsson is a man of the sun. He lives for its rays on his deeply bronzed skin. Sweden, where he was born, was not big enough to hold him. His father, who amassed a fortune as the premier publisher in Sweden, spent many hours with his forehead pressed against that of his only son, imbuing him with the male hardness and the will needed to succeed. A blond sun god had been born to him, his father saw. Education was a mere formality. Though Arvid barely cracked a book, he met all entrance requirements for Harvard University, comprehensive knowledge abounding in his genes. His motto, since childhood: "Let's do the deal."

Arvid had a beautiful wife, equally blond, named Ilsa. They had two beautiful children, Birgitta and Maja. Their blondness, and the whiteness of their teeth, were more blinding than a desert sun. This is nothing less than true. In Arvid's case, beauty was mixed with power, sleek and pulsating power.

If Arvid was a sun god, Luther felt, by comparison, that he had been consigned once more to darkness, where his desire to punish could hold dominion. He must punish Celeste for Arvid's visit, for the party she would be going to the next day, and ultimately for breathing. He must punish her for being in the power of Arvid Nilsson and for being available for the doors that he would open for her and the social circuit that would

become her world. He must punish her for being receptive to life. He must withhold himself from her now that she had shown she did not need him. How had he not known? Had she not lived without him before? Had she not ejected him from her life without a thought? There is no woman on the face of this earth who can love me, as I am not a man. I am just Luther with the funny last name and the low-paying job and the unpublished manuscripts. I am Luther, the mess maker. I am Luther, who does not understand who he is and what he has to give. Such were the thoughts that rose to his consciousness, not for the first time.

*Now, Celeste, there was one who had come into your life about whom you expressed great ambivalence, as there had been interlopers aplenty in your delicate and refined garden, and I myself might have been among them, which I say as one who whirs about the pole of self-castigation while crying out "Flagellation forever." Betty Ann Sue Sue was her name. Full of Southern joviality was it, surely a host of golden daffodils impressing itself upon your consciousness. But it was not a name that could stand alone. It had a body attached, and while that body, and that mind, which deceived itself that it was not separate and apart from the entity that purported to house it, had some semblance of the sun emanating from them, and a coiffure that did not allow for a hair out of place in its need for perfection, there was darkness in the guise of impermeability in her being. Her name itself was like a long freight of short names with a backward and forward motion that left you stalled at the railroad crossing for hours mounting toward eternity.*



*Mary Ann Sue Sue had a mind capable of acing any test. She had a Yale University degree to accompany the bonhomie that informed her entrepreneurial spirit and yielded a spacious co-op in Tribeca and a house she made her home in her stand-alone life in defiance of Dusty Springfield and Bert Bacharach, because for her a house was a home whether she turned the key and someone was there or not. On the ground of effervescent solitude she stood except for those breakout evenings when liquor summoned a longing otherwise repressed and called men to her bed, as that night with the Barcelona-born Spaniard, Francisco Gonzalez del Rio, who did his homeland proud, being one of its premier artists.*

Luther was with Celeste and Mary Ann Sue Sue and the Spaniard the night that the latter two partnered, and could see, looking back as they all left the SoHo bistro, the two of them trailing behind and the unsteady gait her alcohol consumption had inflicted on her. But he also saw the love lights shining in her mascara-framed eyes, the happy glow of anticipated pleasure the Spaniard would provide. For that one night would she be unrivaled in love.

*None of this matters, Celeste. All of it oblique fodder for the dustbin. This I understand. The denouncement chorus seeking to trumpet the word "bloviator" from the four corners of the earth, as if they have hegemony on truth with their one word dismissals. Laugh at those who do not live in the currents of love, who do not allow those currents to take them where it will, and instead adhere to the miserable parsimony of confining structure.*

Mary Ann sought to make of the Spaniard her project and to give him his rightful home here in America, that home being not for his corpus but his art, much of it mural-sized canvases of displaced objects floating in the ether. Specifically, could she put in a word with Arvid Nilsson on his behalf? It was all right. He was European, with preposterousness in his being, a sense of entitlement, his art being his entrée to the treasures of the world, sexual and material. Such a savage blow was struck when Arvid Nilsson, employing his inverted English after reviewing The Spaniard's slides, said, "For you no deal I do," going on to say that the Spaniard spoke in the language of cliché in his vast canvases. "Art to travel do I need," he explained. All the Spaniard was offering him was buckets of wind. Indignation took the Spaniard out the glass doors and onto West Broadway. His spirit trammeled, he had only Mary Ann for consolation now. But is it such a bad thing for a conquistador to taste the ashes of defeat once in his lifetime? Can it not be the road to salvation by triggering a prolonged meditation on the hold the world has on us, Luther could only wonder? He derived no happiness from Arvid Nilsson's brutal rebuff of the Spaniard. Not at all. If anything, he wished for the Spaniard pathways to the glory he was seeking—the fame, the honor—should other, more spiritual, resources not be available to him.

To Mary Ann's credit, she did not leave the Spaniard to wander the rejecting streets of New York City. She took him not only to her bed but to her heart, while knowing full well he had a constellation of family and mistresses back in Espagne. Meanwhile Celeste was drawing a bead on Mary Ann Sue Sue, having the mind to do so. It was becoming apparent to her that Mary Ann didn't see her. Not only that. She was

configured not to see her. Celeste's physical being she saw, but not the work Celeste lived for. Never a word did Celeste hear, good or bad, about her art from Mary Ann, for whom it was all Spaniard all the time. A form of invisibility Mary Ann imposed on Celeste. From extreme frustration as well as simple curiosity, Celeste was led to approach the border of inquiry, but afraid it would be perceived as remonstrance, would then pull back. If it was a slight, possibly the slight was unconscious, Celeste was led to speculate, in seeking to cast the light of understanding on this woman she would not go so far as to designate a friend.

Whether Mary Ann had power of insight into herself cannot be said, but she was a woman of the world, globally interconnected and admirably self-sufficient and capable of forearm shiv with the brothers in the hardball industry in which she was well established. She existed, in brief, on the plane of maturity, and did not allow childhood dreams to block her from the plane of reality. In so doing she lived life on its terms and always had; no one would dare call her a recluse set apart from its norms.

And exactly that did she see in Luther, a man with a tendency toward the solitary realm. With preternatural perception did she intuit that he had been born to a "Come to Jesus" mother," a mother who would say "The world has nothing that I want" and ultimately take it to heart as his own.

"Beware of his proclivities," Celeste reported her as saying, after having met Luther only once, causing Celeste to query her as to what on earth her cryptic comment could possibly mean. From there she related Mary Ann's meaning to Luther, with laughter to accompany the expanded comment and so signify its ludicrousness.

“She says you have the look and manner of one in excessively early retirement from the world, and that the remedy is for the two of us to see more people.”

Luther was aghast that his social deformity should be laid out with such precision. No parties, no real friends. No high school prom, going back in time. No spin the bottle parties back in grade school. Just a boy throwing rocks at the trains of America in the railroad tunnel of his childhood that served as his playground.

*Celeste, I made you cry that night. I was about to say you weren't used to the likes of me, but that is not quite true. Your first husband, Manfred Mantiko, had been within the bounds of circumspection in how he related to you. But he came with a containment policy, seeking your confinement within wifely bounds while he hopped from bed to bed. Then would he come with weeping confessions, begging your forgiveness, and so compelled you to perform sock-eye on him that he might better understand where you stood in the matter of philandering, which was that his expeditions beyond the marriage bed were of no consequence to you.*

*Your second husband, Peter, had rapaciousness in his genes and at times would mete out meanness. Snippiness, and worse, would ultimately, after the blandishments, fly from his tongue, you were to learn.*

*Unable to master the give and take of office life, he had gotten himself blackballed from the advertising world in which he had rapidly risen. His grandiose notions of himself as an artist left him living with his feet off the ground and dependent on others for shelter and sustenance.*

*He first met you while staying in the apartment adjoining the one where you and*

*Manfred lived. From Manfred, whom he had befriended, Peter had learned of your inheritance. There was some capacity for love in Peter, but along with that there was cold calculation. You represented a finish line in Peter's calculating mind. With flattery and promises of present and future bliss, he enticed you away from Manfred and secured your tie to him with a quick pregnancy.*

*Celeste, if ever you displayed a heart of stone, it was when Manfred tracked you down on Shelter Island, where Peter had led you, and on his knees and weeping begged for your return. Yes, he had whispered to friends when you left the room that you were an heiress and yes, an art dealer at the time said you would ultimately have to leave Manfred if you wanted to grow as an artist—the truth of that assertion we will never know—but you were strangely unmoved by his tears. What was Manfred Mankito's real crime? Was it that he, like Peter, sought you out as a security blanket, and as with Peter, had a wandering nature? Or that his heart was truly with you, despite his wanderlust? Was it that you could not abide? No, you refrained from sock-eye for him daring to importune you with his tears and words, but you did meet his distress with indifference. There were lines that could not be crossed with you. It was never a crime, as Manfred was to learn, to be distant; the real crime was to dare to be close, as closeness put your life in danger.*

Luther had a happiness he had not known for some time. It came from where his love was born anew. He came to Celeste with goodness in his heart and sex in his loins and saw no conflict in the two. With the mind that he had and the fear that he had was he still seeking

a shared life, and did that not mean the sharing of his body as well? The many steps to her top floor loft were not an impediment. There was a price to be paid for pleasure, and did not the arduousness of the climb bring virtue to his legs? Were those stairs not a poor man's gym, as he came to say? And was not goodness, or the desire for it, ruling his every day, even when dinkiness took hold and shrank his proportions so he might, in some degree, be an instrument of the illness that had him speak with peeve and rancor to Celeste while depriving him of the courage to simply say he was afraid?

Solomon Rhein remained the friend he could be to Luther, even as he sought love in the Manhattan RoR venues where he could hope to find it. His speech could be caustic, but he did not have a heart of stone. Once again did he come to Luther with an extra ticket to a Knicks game, and while vicariousness was not upon Luther as it had been, still he went so he could have the company of Solomon, who did not entirely give Luther a free ride for the evening. Although he had received the tickets compliments of a client, he still expected Luther to pay for the evening's nosh, which was only as it should be. At the deli, Luther chowed down on a pastrami on rye, going heavy with the mustard, and blanketed his French fries with ketchup, and was left to wonder out loud why his fries had a quality of airiness to them, prompting mockery from Solomon for not only the use of the word "airiness" but for questioning the substance of the fries, as Solomon was big on the bounty of America and all that it gave to its children, and even took a shine to Ronald "Watch Me Nod My Head So Well" Reagan, as he had a Republican heart in Democratic New York. Sufficiently severe were his reservations about the Democratic machine and

its entrenched power that he equated it with the one party oppressiveness of the Soviet Union.

For the record Solomon on that night had a corned beef on rye, not to stake out his individuality, but because it was where his appetite led him.

Now a second remonstrance did Solomon direct at Luther that evening when Luther was led to once more wonder aloud, this time as the Knicks cheerleaders took the court at halftime with much of themselves showing. Was it possible, he asked, that these young women were being ruined by this public display? Could they be comfortable being the object of lust of many of the men in the stands? Had they been led to step beyond the bounds of propriety? The response of Solomon was quick, succinct, and rhetorical, he saying, "Could you be a little more presumptuous?" In so doing was he seeking to drive it home to Luther that he must find his proper place in the universe, that is, to understand at depth where he ended and others began so he did not overrun his own borders but be a quiet and peaceable nation unto himself.

Luther did not believe it would be prudent to reach into family history so that Solomon might have more understanding as to where he was coming from, because he sensed a churning level of activity in Solomon's mind. The acoustics were not good for low volume explanations, and if Luther was to draw on his mother, as he had initially been prompted to do, would that not be a blunder of the first order? Was it not possible that Solomon would bark an insult profound from his chthonic depth (that word chthonic from Luther's reading of dictionary-educated Henry Miller, he who was too busy and restless in his life for advanced formal schooling). But what Luther couldn't say to

Solomon, in the throes of perpetual mental ferment, he could safely say to the universe, that his father, being something of a wanderer from the marriage bed, had in a state of gross delusion taken Luther's mother to a burlesque show, thus inviting her to witness young women shed their outer garments as men ogled them. While she did not judge Luther's father for being off his moral moorings, she did approach the women in the show, saying, "Do you not know that you don't have to do this, that you can go in prayer and ask of Jesus the power and the strength to leave this abominable scene that you may walk upright on the path of righteousness for all your days to come. Have only one master. Let that be the Lord." So she had told Luther some years before. But she had gone no further. She offered no speculation about his father's appetites even as Luther intuited that if he would seek to wheedle sugar for his coffee at the breakfast table in spite of his diabetes, there might also be an appetite for other sweets the world had to offer despite the harm it might bring to his soul. Had Luther, back in childhood, not seen his father smoking a stogie on Broadway and stared in a state of shock that his father had ways of being it had been beyond Luther to imagine? But these women had appetites of their own, if only for food and for shelter, whatever else their lower natures called them to. They did not jeer or hiss. His mother had too much earnestness to invite such scorn. Instead they simply stared at her, feigning incomprehension, or so Luther chose to believe, not wishing to imagine his mother being mocked. Nor would he allow her to be mocked now by placing this incident from the past before the sometimes sharp-tongued Solomon Rhein.



*Celeste, people understand when you are not of their caliber. Certainly Mary Ann Sue Sue perceived right away that I lacked a mind equal to yours. She saw too that we were not on equal footing socially. Essentially, she was cautioning you not to be drawn into my sphere of solitude but to remain a member of the family of nations. After all, the world, recognizing your gifts, had opened itself to you with delegations from the art world and society at large. The night of the basketball game I went to with Solomon, you were at an arts club, on the invitation of the owner, a personal friend. You had, in truth, the social stature and allure of a twentieth century Isabel Archer. The light in you was felt as well as perceived. You had the ability to make others feel good about themselves when in your presence. Though you were a star, you remained accessible. Often I felt defenseless, overwhelmed, by your social, intellectual, and artistic assets. As with my mother, your love had to be proven over and over again. Punishment had to be meted out for not missing me terribly while you were at the arts club that night. It would not do for you to say that you had a great time, how wonderful it had been to be among your friends and to show your face to me all aglow with happiness. My emotional makeup was incomprehensible to you, that I would be driven to fury if I sensed I was not indispensable. And so I had to make you cry with my vengeful silence. We were far from equal partners. In the aftermath there was great remorse for inflicting my emotional wounds on you. I was told the power of prayer was strong, but really, despite my good intentions, I made little progress in ending the cycle of attack followed by contrition.*

Would Sarah survive? Never far from his consciousness was the fear that he would

receive a call that she had been found dead. He had no disguised wish that she die; he was simply afraid that she would. And why wouldn't he? He had set a defenseless woman out into the world. He had abandoned her so he might find happiness with Celeste. A recurring image of blood splattered on a wall would cause him to shudder. Then one afternoon the call came at his workplace. Lydia was on the line. No, Sarah was not dead. In fact, she was not injured at all. But while staying at camp she had passed out on sleeping pills and driven the family jeep off the road and crashed it into a storefront. Several people on their way into the store had to scatter to avoid being hit. She was now in the psychiatric ward of a Kingston hospital. Without insurance the cost of her stay would be astronomical. Was it possible that she was still covered by Luther's insurance?

He was shaken by the news, but also by Lydia's tone. A hint of reproach, even disgust, in her voice, or was he imagining it? And yet, hearing her pain, her fear, he also realized he was not hearing either, not in a manner that led to even a modicum of empathy. What he heard and *saw* was the laughing thing, that laughing laughing thing that was in him, if it wasn't entirely him, the thing that was not a part of what was all around him. Saw it through all its history back to childhood. But did she hear it? Did she see it, that some part of him took pleasure in her distress? *Oh you who are phony in all your postures, wake up to the reality of what the human heart is in its range from vileness to the sublime and the guises the face must present if that heart is to practice the art of concealment.* Luther sought, in spite of these currents, to effect an attitude of caring, saying rightly to himself that it was only the illness manifesting, and that light could not exist without the darkness as well. In fact, he was able to rally strong. Having gathered

his wits about him, he dispensed with excess gab and presented Lydia with facts, pure facts. He gave her the name of his insurance company, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and the policy number, and said firmly that the coverage should include Sarah as they were still married.

And yet, in the aftermath of her call, his callousness, his sadism, was there before him, principally the unspeakable cruelty he showed in the aftermath of Lenore's suicide. There was the five hundred dollars Lydia had gifted him with for staying with the family after her youngest daughter's death. A strange gift, to be sure, but one she had meant to go to for therapy sessions, not to squander on a motorcycle. And yet the delight he took in showing off his steed to her as she walked shakily with a family friend along Riverside Drive. She couldn't control him; that is what he wanted to show. How could he amend such behavior? How? Where did such cruelty come from?

*Celeste, I wanted to show her that I was aware since early on that the world had its share of pain and that I had my share of pain and now she too would have her pain. I wanted to show my anger and defiance in the face of death. I wanted to show that she was not the supreme ruler of the universe and that I was beyond her control.*

*Let me add, Celeste, that the rally continued. Once again was Lydia on the line several months later. Once again did the call come to me at work. But on this occasion there was no subtle reproach. No sad rags was she wearing. The whopping bill they had received from the hospital for Sarah's two-month stay in the psychiatric ward of the Kingston hospital? Paid in full by the insurance company. The tidal wave hadn't hit. And for this she was genuinely grateful. And yet, was this not the same woman who, following*

*Lenore's death, referred to me as a parasite and after my phone call in the night declaring that Sarah was dead screamed at me, "How long are we going to have to take care of you?" No, Celeste, the tidal wave of debt was on me, and forever, I was afraid. The big sticks would be waiting for me in the afterlife. There would be many lined up to exact their revenge. So I could only fear.*

Now Luther was compelled to be on full alert lest he be found wanting by Celeste in any of the qualities of a man fit to be her companion, because in addition to Mary Ann Sue Sue she had formidable friends with the necessities for the highest levels of achievement. She had Gretchen Green, her friend from childhood, who could do science and math and music as well as the paperback books, and was already an assistant professor of biochemistry at Columbia University. The very mention of her name set Luther to trembling, that this woman should live on such an intellectual plane that she not only attended an Ivy League school but now taught at one. What was he to do? Where was he to hide? Now he had heard members of RoR say, "God does not make junk," but the slogan or mantra or whatever it was gave him no comfort because all he could see and hear was the unfriendly word "junk."

Too many were the others in Gretchen's echelon of excellence to name at that point, though Luther promised a roll call of their names at some undetermined date. For now he had a matter of complete urgency.

"What is the holy grail? Do you know?" Celeste asked.

"The holy grail? Something to do with King Arthur and the Knights of the

Roundtable, I think.”

“But what is it?”

“I think it was something they were looking for.”

“I know that,” she said, with some impatience. In that moment pain found him. She had seen his ignorance. Worse, she had seen him try to cover up that ignorance. Once again his pride had made a demand on him to be more than he was. Furious that he had failed, he had to punish both himself and her with sullenness that made her cry.

When she asked some days later if they could be together that evening, as little Mia would be staying with her father at their country home, he said it wasn't possible. Luther had taken to sometimes staying late at the office to do his own writing. And though he had promised himself and her there would be no repetition of bad temper, her disappointment once again proved a trigger for his anger. He had been less than perfect in her eyes. Surely his selfishness had turned her against him forever. Two bad days followed.

*Celeste, the drinking was behind me, but my emotional nature was another story. Like molten lava from an active volcano it could sometimes seem. The restraint was not there. The pause button had not been located. You had me on a tightrope. Rather, I had me on a tightrope. One misstep meant a plunge to my death, and all the time was I plunging.*

Runners crossed finish lines. Sprinters in the one hundred yard and four hundred forty-yard dash, milers. Many, many had he seen break the tape. And now, someday, maybe

soon, he himself would be crossing the finish line and breaking the tape, so to speak. Marriage. That would be the finish line. That would mean he had won, that he had crossed the line into safety. She, Celeste, would be his shelter from the storm of uncertainty that afflicted his days. A radiant future awaited him. The possibility was there.

Celeste's husband, Peter, was not far away. In fact, he too was a loft dweller, over on Crosby Street, and living with his partner, Truck, whom he had left the marriage bed for. Luther felt safe in saying that Peter had a wiliness thing going on. Peter took great pride in being an artist, a great one. He fancied himself a genius, and comported himself accordingly, with a manner of great confidence and scorn for those who were not on his plane of excellence. For some time the workplace had absorbed him. Just a year or two out of art school, he had become the creative director of a big ad agency and then had moved on to another, having earned a reputation for ingenuity within the industry. But he had wildness in his bones and ballooning grandiosity in his brain and a drive to express himself beyond the confines of the commercial world, and so he took the leap, depending on the kindness and generosity of friends. Yes, he could do bad things, but he was not a bad person. So his circle reasoned. And even if there was an element of roguishness, it came at them devoid of menace and even playfully.

Luther did not have full respect for Peter. He was aware of the high level of his intelligence and creativity, but what sort of man married a woman less for love than for her money while hiding from her his gay orientation? Yes, Luther was a steady Freddy office drudge with Scotch tape all over his desk, and yes, he lived in the land of indolence

for many of the hours that he took up physical space at Cromartie Wonders, but he did pay his own way and he was getting right with himself and the world and the great spirit. Were not two measures of a man his willingness to pay his way in the world and share his body with the one he professed to love? And was he not doing both now even if he hadn't always in his time with Sarah? And while he understood that it was not proper to occupy the space of self-righteousness, he took pride in being with Celeste as a mate and making ends meet, though he often had to struggle to do so.

*Now Celeste, John Lennon was singing to me in this time, even after Mark David Chapman had sent him to the other side. Singing "Instant Karma." How I would need to recognize my brothers and stop laughing in the face of love. He knew. He just knew. Stop the mockery. Stop it, he said. Write about plants. Feed the homeless. But stop the onslaught of your self-righteousness. You are piling up a mountainous debt that you will be paying off in perpetuity. The men with the big sticks are here waiting for you, and the women as well, waiting to smash your bones in many, many places and do all the other things with implements of their savage justice that you have done to them with your besmirching words. Do you think they have not seen and heard what you have done? Do you think your visibility is so slight that they aren't monitoring your every movement and every sound? Talking his John Lennon talk, he was, as if I could ever be like him. JohnLennon's words had pulled him along and what resistance could I have to the words that pulled me along? Did they not rule my existence, coming from whatever source they did? Were they not my means of existence?*

Events moved quickly. Sarah did not stay forever in the psychiatric ward of that Kingston hospital. She had a life force. She had vigor and vitality. She had a calling, same as it ever was, to be an artist. On her release, her parents conceded to the reality that their second daughter was of this world but not as others might be, and drew on their resources to buy her an apartment in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, where she could live out her life securely. Sarah was very much in the image of her father, who too had held himself apart from a world that sought only to menace him, a world he wasn't made for either. They had complied with Sarah's demand for reparations, having left her defenseless against the demands of daily living. Luther was relieved. The burden had been lifted.

But not entirely. There was still the legal knot. Sarah was amenable to divorce. She had quickly adapted to her new circumstances. Freedom was not just another word for nothing left to lose. Freedom was freedom, for her. She was, in some way, the same person who had suggested a contract before moving in with him that would clearly state her rights. Even if that contract was never drawn up, she was alert to the dictates of patriarchal power.

Luther had retained a divorce lawyer, Donna DeVoe, who worked out of her apartment on Carmine Street, in the West Village. Let it be noted that the street had a great deal of order. Tidiness and modest building scale and trees ruled the day on this particular street and provided Luther with a sense of peace and harmony. If the hard edges of Catholicism were in sight owing to the church of that faith at the corner, this was not a matter of concern to him. The church had a history that antedated his own and so



represented stability and endurance in a world full of transient forms.

Let it be said that Luther did not find Donna DeVoe through his own research but as a referral from Amos Osley, a fellow member of RoR with whom he had no affinity, each sharing a passive resistance to the other that was insufficient to prevent them from connection on the most superficial of levels. Luther was not wishing for Amos Osley's sudden demise or for debilitating afflictions to befall him. He was not wishing that Amos Osley awaken one morning with a missing limb. Luther was not of that kind regarding the man. Quite simply, he had a reservation, that was all. More honestly, since we will not go the route of falsehood here, he had a resentment. Amos Osley, Luther saw, was an appropriator, a caller of women unto him, and should they not come, he would make it his business to get next to them, confident that proximity would render his prey defenseless against his sex vibe. This he did with a pasty face and balding pate and middle age girth and dull denim duds in need of washing and glasses uglier than glasses need to be. Tall, short, thin or with flab abounding, young or old, he took them on and entered them with his filth, leaving Luther to wonder why Amos Osley should be such a magnet and he was not. And let it also be noted that Amos Osley had brain power beyond the ordinary that he could enter the big leagues with a business of his own as a freelance designer. Luther spent much time pondering a state of affairs that saw him as a steady Freddy office worker with scotch tape all over his desk and a boss who gave him periodic hard slap while Amos Osley and his ilk should live free with no boss to contain them. Then did he pray once again that his life of comparison be behind him that he too might live free, regardless of his circumstances.

Whether Amos Osley felt or smelled or otherwise sensed Luther's antipathy, he came through for Luther with his referral, having himself sought out the service of Donna DeVoe for rendering asunder his own matrimonial bond. She did not beat Luther senseless when he acknowledged adultery and mental cruelty as grounds for the divorce. It was for him to administer the punishment in the wave of shame that came over him.

*Sarah had new realities to contend with. Even in the summer heat was a cold wind rushing relentlessly at her. Her co-op apartment was a haven, but she could not live within its confines forever. Grocery shopping, laundry, a visit with an occasional friend, sessions with Dr. Frodkey, the simple need to stretch her legs, etc., all of which entailed interaction, if only peripheral, with people. When she arrived for a joint meeting with Donna DeVoe, having no lawyer of her own, wads of tissue paper stuffed in her ears were conspicuous, and so he was led to inquire as to their purpose.*

*"To block out what the fucking pricks are saying to and about me. And I have this if they fuck with me," she added, the long blade of a gravity knife sliding free of its handle as she held the weapon toward the floor.*

*While I blanched, understanding also emerged. I remembered her near confrontation with a police officer back in Boston after misperceiving his conversation with a young person on the street as a hostile encounter; her furious demand that he lower his voice, lest the two men seated across the room in the San Juan restaurant overhear them; and other instances of what was clearly paranoia. Sarah was surrendering to the grip of her malady as I had surrendered to the fact of my alcoholism. Once again I saw that my problem was a simple one that required letting go of the bottle*

*and the adoption of a new way of life while her condition was considerably more complex.*

*Celeste, there are those who swell with pride at their longevity as couples or accept the fact of it with humble gratitude, or take a stance somewhere between the two. But longevity is not everything. More important is that we grow in understanding of who we are. Sarah and I had done our best with what we had. It may not have looked like much to others, but we loved each other as we could. Now we had been set on different paths.*

Peter, Celeste's husband, had love in his life. He had Truck. He also had Celeste and Mia and their love. And though he had no love for Luther, ordinary in intellect and with no physical attributes to light his fire, he nonetheless had no further antics to perform for him. He did not reach for a giant squash as a prop to represent his priapic power. He did not in any way go juvenile and obvious and small on or about Luther. He merely said to Celeste, when it became known to him that Luther had been out and about her premises and she his, "I have led you into sin by leaving you for Truck and the expression of wildness in my loins for my own kind." Being Catholic in his roots, he was led to say that. But then he rose to an elevation beyond the smallness of his physical dimensions. A new spirit found him, or perhaps it had been there all along. "Don't hold back. Give this new man everything." This Peter did say because he too was enveloped in the force field of Celeste's love, which directed him, in this instance, on the path of goodness. He was giving back to her, who had given so much to him.

That fall, Celeste flew to Santo Domingo for a quick divorce. Though he had abandoned her, the divorce was by mutual consent. He did not leave with nothing. He had grown accustomed to a life of leisure. By this time, the work world had long since become a thing of the past for him, and if he showed the talent for success as an artist, he lacked the drive and the discipline. He was unstable, erratic, with wild mood swings that took him on buying binges and drinking binges and general craziness. Alternations between grandiosity and cowering inferiority were common. Celeste, or her resources, must remain his lifeline.

*Celeste, sirens are sounding, shrill and unceasing, a warning that your bombers are in the air and that a merciless pounding awaits me. I have gone where I do not belong. The garden of mercy you created for Peter I have oafishly stumbled into, without a shred of understanding as to its delicate origins in tolerance and compassion and love. I am exposed, in spite of this veneer of civility, as an American primitive, a chest beater, a seeker of triumph to check a lifetime of losing. You can forgive many things, but judgment of others is not one of them. You see that I have, in regard to Peter, assumed a posture of superiority because I can meet you in bed as a man and he no longer can or will, and because I hold down a job while Peter has ridden the wave of his flamboyant grandiosity into a life of dependent independence. What I overlook is that he has legions of friends unfazed by the reptilian coldness that informs his predatory nature. But there I go again. And now the bombing has commenced and I must flee for my life to my underground bunker, where judgment inevitably drives me.*

Several times Celeste had mentioned the country house, the purchase of which was Peter's idea but required Celeste's financial resources. Once again would Luther have the opportunity to go north, a truer north than the northwest he had been led to by Sarah. But he must not focus on north or a house in the country or any of that lest the beast of uncontrollable anxiety be awakened and aroused over the fear that Celeste would ultimately succumb to Peter's unconscionable greed. Several times she had let it be known that Peter was aggressively seeking to receive the property as a condition for a divorce settlement. Celeste, however, proved unyielding. Peter would be guaranteed a certain sum to live on but she had a core of firmness where the house was concerned that Peter's relentlessly grasping nature could not break. And so, on that battleground, she dealt her now ex- a resounding and fully merited defeat.

But Luther's struggle did not end there. As once with Sarah, the concept of a finish line was now manifesting. Had there not been a time, back when, that he envisioned a life of happiness and even bliss once Sarah graduated from art school and gave up Boston and returned to New York? He did not go there in his mind. His life was now in front of him, not behind him; there would now be days of endless sunshine. Already was he in a state of bliss to have so much—Celeste, Mia, all of it. And yet it could all be gone with one faux pas. And what then? The disaster of perpetual darkness. Celeste must not see how eager he was for this new finish line. Simply by association he had been elevated above his steady Freddy office worker status, but the one thing that could bring him down was her sense of his neediness. Already had she made that clear with her revulsion at those who showed excessive dependence. Love required a degree of

distance. He must be very careful.

*Now Celeste, there was one in RoR who was committed to a life of peeve. He lived with a sense of his own deprivation, having been raised without a father by a mother indifferent to his need for love. Though irony required him to go by the adopted name Effervescence, in fact injury and malice were in an ongoing battle for control of his face. Do I dare to tell you this and in so doing risk the forfeit of your love? Will this constitute betrayal in your mind as it does in some part of mine? Will you banish me to the darkness, to the seedy hotel room and the perpetually cold rain? Already do I hear the vibration of your bombers in the distance. Already do I hear the vibration of your out-casting wrath.*

*Mia was seven at the time. You had a route home with her from the school on West Third Street down along Sixth Avenue to Prince Street, where you would stop at the Korean grocery and the meat store on the other side and lastly, at the liquor store for a bottle of vodka, which you would place in Mia's knapsack. No concealment was intended. Laden with other purchases, you allowed practicality to serve as your guide. When I came to you in the night, you would have a couple of screwdrivers, only now you were drinking alone, and the bottle would not be practically empty, as it was back in the time of my imbibing. The bottle did not call to me. No craving or even desire was activated by the sight of you with glass in hand. I was, as had been promised, in a neutral space in regard to alcohol. Sober, I could see the effect those drinks had. They changed you. You weren't tipsy. They provided you with a happy glow. And yet something was amiss, and you mustn't put it in my mind that I was influenced by The Zombies, whom you*

would never have heard of anyway, so captivated by classical music were you. No, their song "She's Not There" was not summoned to my mind. No musical prompt was needed for me to understand that you were gone from me, and perhaps, with hindsight, gone from yourself under the anesthetic of alcohol.

Now do not tell me that I got repulsive, oppressive, in this time of courtship. The gods of restraint and detachment were looking out for me. I set no alarm bells ringing and had no cause to, as no excessive reliance on the bottle was in evidence. The difference, however, was that, as the song says, you were not there. Clear and bright as your eyes were, I felt that I had been left, abandoned. You had been removed from me. On those evenings I came to understand what drove Sarah to say, over and over, that I was not with her when I drank, that I became a stranger to her, as you were to me on those nighttime occasions.

I must try to focus now, as there are no markers for this part of the journey and memory is not calling to me as it once did, my age being what it is. The retrieval system has become worn and there is no place to send for replacement parts. These things happen to the best of us, which I decidedly am not. (By the way, that word decidedly I associate with Peter Van Dine, who came to me in a dream just the other night. A tree on their country property had been cleaved by a bolt of lightning. Half the tree lay there on the lawn, its life force gone. A black man wandered about, casual in his stride and with no apparent connection to me or anyone or anything about him. It is possible he was me, me as I was and continue to be, a pilgrim with his mooring more in God than in God's people. The image comes of a memorable analogy in a Saul Bellow novel in which a

woman's hairpin is likened to a trolley pole connected to the electrified overhead cable.

Do not ask me which specific novel. Again the diminished retrieval system.

But now Effervescence comes to me, mocking with his malignancy the very image of some bubbly carbonated beverage. (Effervescence, with your transparent ill will, you are me, and if I have said this before, I say it again.) In this time, Celeste, you allowed candor to lead you forward, a candor that originated at a depth beyond your or anyone's ability to reckon, and in that one moment you expressed your bias for health. Some months before, during one of our squabbles, you screamed at me, "You want me to be a real person, and I can't be." I had never explicitly said any such thing, but your intelligence enabled you to articulate what I could not.

So it was that you began to accompany me to the Saturday night meeting, which I will now call *For the Life of Me*, as everything as every person deserves a name and not the cruel, forsaking anonymity of thing or him or her. We must bring out into the open that which needs openness to live, and were you not doing just that? Were you too not saying, "For the life of me" or, more accurately, "For the life in me"?

Let us be clear: The meeting was frequented, as I have said before, by middle-aged men quite familiar with the old standard "Saturday Night Is the Loneliest Night of the Week." Many, single or divorced, came with the expectation of finding love, as there were women in that same age range and younger in attendance who too had heard that same song, sung by Sinatra in his swinging way, perhaps not knowing that the love they were seeking was buried there within themselves and for themselves first before they could begin to realistically hope to find it in another.



*Among those single or divorced men present was He Who Had Substituted Nuts and Bolts for Cufflinks when dressing for work in his drinking days. With a look that shouted out his loneliness did he stare at you, Celeste, as did a number of the others whom loneliness had similarly claimed. A shiver, induced by recognition, passed through me. The only thing between me and those men was you, Celeste. But that moment passed. An internal rally occurred. I was younger than them by ten years. Grayness had not found me. I would never suffer their forlorn path, never have their sad, defeated eyes or lost souls. Somehow, I would always be young, younger than my years. Was that not the trajectory of my recovery? Had not the man of sometime rebuke and wrath and mockery sung that he had been so much older then and yet was younger than that now?*

*The room had two seating areas, separated by the speaker's table. Across that divide, and facing us was Effervescence, projecting his fevered malevolence. Desperate as I was to avoid him, he sought me out at the break, and sought to entangle me in the burning strands of peeve that sprung from him.*

*"You work fast, don't you?"*

*"Meaning what?"*

*"You're just separated and now you're here with another woman? Don't you think you should give it a rest for a while?"*

*"Give what a rest?"*

*Now, Celeste, did he take his malice to another, a nonverbal, level. Vulgarity of vulgarities, he curled his stubby fingers and thumb into an "O" and with his hand by his crotch several times made a back and forth stroking motion. And though generally the*

*gesture would be understood to represent masturbation, let us accept that here he meant coitus. His facial expression I will not try to describe except that it too reached a whole new level of repulsiveness, as did his laughter. And though I walked away, he had passed through my gates, and so I took him with me.*

*At the same time, if salvation is to be mine—and that is always in question—I must get real and eliminate the dinky doo. No more filling the air with yip yap about the malignancy of Joy Incarnate. No more buttonholing acquaintances (friends I do not have) as to how he did this or did that or said this or said that. Let me rein in my own vileness. Let me hold myself to account for it. And so I call on the power of the universe to answer me this: “Who is Effervescence to me and why has he taken up residence in my mind? Speak, and speak now.” I will not waylay you with his gasbag preliminaries. Even God needs a good editor. (And yourself? I hear you say.) To the gist we will go: “He is your own love gone wrong. He is the ditch of negativity to which you are drawn.”*

In the fall the loft was sold. He asked no more for the fixtures than he had paid in the summer of 1976, when he was desperate to elevate above his station as the prime tenant of that one bedroom apartment on East Sixth Street, off Avenue A, a space not suitable for the kind of lift his love for himself and Sarah Van Dine was needing. A woman came calling, and spoke on behalf of her boyfriend, who could not be present. She had aspirations to be an artist, as did her mate, and they had been diplomaed by a university arts program to believe that they could be. Luther was not there to put up caution signs, let along roadblocks, to anyone’s pathway to the future. This was America, and he still

heard it singing.

By now it was understood that he would move in with Celeste. An unstoppable momentum was carrying them forward, in spite of his apprehension that he would be found grossly unworthy in her midst, that the light illuminating her would have no access to his darkness. He heard the words tainted flesh, tainted mind, tainted soul and sought to eject them from his mind, and when they showed their staying power, he bombarded them with a mantra he had learned, Feelings Are Not Facts, and as the bombardment continued, he switched to the acronym FANF, the very repetition of which will keep fear at bay.

Half of the fixtures fee he received he gave to Sarah. It seemed the least he could do. By now she was established in the Brooklyn coop her parents had bought for her and had their guarantee of monthly support so she could live her life free of the treachery of the workplace. Because not everybody is meant to live in the world in the same way, and only money or its lack says they should and so she could stare out her window and say, to those passing below, Hah, now you cannot touch me. She was an artist and was faithful to her canvases and her sculptures and her prints. She had her senses reporting to her and that was all she asked for, that and Van Morrison.

And let this be part of the record as well. Celeste remained dubious that Luther's break with Sarah was final. Her doubt that he had entered a new chapter of his life was a source of frustration. Could she not see that the long chapter with Sarah was over, and that the epiphany he had experienced that evening walking home from work was as transformational as Saul being blinded by the light on the road to Damascus? The sale of

the fixtures and the new occupants' signature on the lease were the necessary proof of his resolve.

Mia stood as a pixie sentinel on the stairs the day he moved in. As he approached with one box after another, she would flee back up to the loft, her shrieks signaling his impending arrival. She was, in his mind, a challenge. Perhaps, over time, he could win her over. The thing was to be patient.

But at night, in the stillness, her fears surfaced and took control. As Luther lay with Celeste in the dark, Mia would call out from her bed at the other end of the loft, "I love you, Mommy. Don't die, Mommy." Celeste was love itself for Mia, her only lifeline, what with her father having left and now a stranger sharing her mother's bed. So Luther understood. But when, night after night, those cries continued until Mia fell asleep, Luther began to hear them not simply as a measure of her pain at seeming displacement but resistance to the interloper.

In daylight hours Mia's resistance took another form. Only to her mother would she speak. Luther sought to elevate above the exclusion, but he had his vulnerable moments when he had to struggle to keep his anger in check. He remembered Auntie Eve, his mother's older sister, entering the apartment as the family sat at breakfast and pulling Luther's mother into the living room, where she spoke in Swedish to her, a language his father had no knowledge of. Mia was a child, but she knew how to hurt. As Luther at an early age had learned to hurt, having resolved to stay beyond his father's reach.

Luther had fears of his own. He was about nothing if he was not about fears. He

was fear central, in his mind. The loft lacked air conditioning, Celeste not being one for what she deemed unnecessary appliances, especially those that put undue stress on the power grid, which had faltered once too often. She had a mind that could soar above her own needs. A sense of civic duty she displayed. From the start was she on to the ways of Him Who Nodded His Head So Well when he dared to say, “Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem.” She saw him for the front he was for the men in suits who wanted to put a price tag on the water we drink and the air we breathe and make speech itself into a commodity. She saw the shallowness, the empty-headedness, behind his vaunted conviction and the ruined infrastructure that would result. She saw the social atomization and shrinking of the human spirit that would also follow from his “I’ve got mines, Bones, you gots to gets your own” pseudo-philosophy. She saw the evil intent that even he, in his mindlessness, could not see. She saw that a terrorist lurked behind his conservative image.

But national politics was not Luther’s concern at that moment as he lay in bed with Celeste. The big gate-less window looking out on the street had been left open. What Celeste considered an attempt to bring some cooling to the loft Luther perceived as an invitation to the Richard Specks and Ted Bundys and other mayhem murderers to enter in the night and do their depraved thing. That Luther’s vigilance was soaring—that he had all his AWACs in the air—did not, alas, draw a rave review from Celeste. Once woken, she had great difficulty getting back to sleep, while Luther slept the sleep of the just, however undeserving he might be.

“What on earth do you think you are doing?” Celeste inquired, seeing Luther

pacing back and forth.

Honesty being the coin of his realm, he replied, “I am cogitating on a unilateral action to allay the dangers of the menacing street. But now that you are awake, maybe we can have a meeting of the minds as to the danger that an open window poses.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your crossness stings me. It abolishes my freedom of action. That said, the window must at least be lowered. As it stands, it is positively shouting to the mayhem men of stealth. Do you not remember that even do-right Jesus said he would come as a thief in the night? How then to stop those of a lower order from doing the same?”

“Please stop your foolishness.” Celeste was part of an orderly household; sleep was a crucial element for that order. In that moment Luther remembered his mother’s cry, “Do you want my night to be sleepless?” and those nights when he would find her at the kitchen table pacifying herself with readings from the Good Book.

*Celeste, I have been giving attention to my dreams recently, slight as my remembrance of most of them are. I keep a pad by my bed, and when woken by my bladder, I train myself to focus as intently as possible on the dream before consciousness takes me far away.*

*Why? I want to believe that consciousness is ongoing and that these nighttime journeys are a preview of life as disembodied beings. And yet, why should I care, one way or another? Suppose there is an afterlife, and it is dominated by ghouls and other agents of darkness, making the realm even more hellish than what we have here? Why be greedy?*

*Why not settle for annihilation, no, extinction? Why not let the end be the end? Since*

*when has consciousness done me any good? There seems to be a tarnish on everything I look back on. Why not blackness, the void?*

*In some of our childhood street games we would call for a do-over if there had been an infraction of some kind. I have some uncomfortable memories of those early days of living together. I was afraid of Mia, and this she would see with the piercing clarity that children possess. Mia mama Mia, I would call out in joy at seeing her, and though the name would turn her petulant, I persisted, thinking what, that time would win her over and that her annoyance was feigned? It was for me to understand, as time went by, that she was possessed of a high-powered and ordering mind, and that my perversion of her name did not meet any standard for humor she had reached at her young age. I was but a grown man being unattractively silly and displaying the poverty level I was at in terms of gifts for her. At the same time, I did bring home picture books. Being the kinds of books I had not been exposed to greatly as a child, I felt on shaky ground, as if I were but a delivery person who could offer her nothing more than the physical book itself, which in my mind became potentially incriminating evidence of my ignorance of the field in which I drew a salary. You, and you alone, had the privilege of reading to her at night from those books. My place, one of distance, had been well established by then.*

*Then there were the photographs I dared to hang in the vestibule so one had to notice, coming or going. Photography still had a hold on me, but so did my fear of being punched in the face should I be caught seeking to snap the shutter on an interesting soul in transit on the street. Inanimate objects were safer, such as the building across the street that housed a metalwork shop. And, of course, photos of you and Mia, which I hung in my*

*little gallery. The vanity of it. All of them in cheap plastic frames with cardboard backing to keep the photos in place. My tacky little gallery, there in a loft devoted to fine art, art from one who could draw a pure line, you whose gift flowed from your hand onto the canvas or the carving and not from snapping a shutter. What I am saying is that, in posting the photos, I was clearly showing my subordination to you, staking out my pedestrian place in your palace of art. Well, what are we to do but let forgiveness reign. Let us toll those compassion bells for ourselves as well as others, Celeste, let us live as if drifting through a dreamscape.*

*As I have said many times before, knowing one's place in the world is essential. One must always maintain an attitude of skepticism toward those who clamor for this and that and assert in so doing that they have been denied their rightful status. One must bring nuanced understanding to Frankie Valli's edict to "Walk Like a Man" and not allow rigidity to lead him into a fool's graveyard. Walk like the man you are, not the man you want to be or think you should be. Walk according to your station. If you are a sniveling coward, walk hugging the wall. If you have takeout power in both fists, then you must strut your stuff. Well, I will go no further with this, seeing I am on shaky ground. And a dark doubt arises. Is it possible that all my life I have been counseling others, in my mind, to stay in place because I have stayed in place, that is, been fearful, to step beyond the status that perhaps I, and I alone, have assigned to me? Is it possible that I have, since childhood, been listening to the limiting voice of my illness and, in a perverse way, rejoicing in it?*

*Quantum leaps we make, Celeste, with obscurity the final destination. My point is*



*only this: these signs of grievance are but indicators of a spiritual malady. One must recognize a drunk, dry or wet, when one hears a whiny song of lamentation, and yet the solution is quite simple. Mental health is only one broomstick and dustpan away, if my experience is to mean anything. And add to these antidotes, so powerful in their humble utility, the sponge and the mop and the pail of water; the formidable Janitor in the Drum, Ajax the foaming cleanser, nonpareil Joy dishwashing detergent, and my very favorite, lemon-scented ammonia. Here you have, at very little cost, the full armamentarium for the war on dirt and disorder, and all were needed in the domicile I had entered.*

*Celeste, Ahab had his white whale and I had your white floor, in full rebellion against that whiteness. If I couldn't return the floor to the pristine state it had once known, I could still cause it to sparkle before the luster was once again lost in the tread of feet. Nothing is forever, other than eternity. It is for us to accept that a holding action suffices. The bathroom, being the site of much activity, also lost some of its whiteness in the average two-week cycle, and so, rallying behind the quiet chant of a deodorant of the same name, if not quite the same spelling, I would repeat over and over Odor Oh No in dealing with the unsightly stains and the smell. The toilet with full vigor I attacked with a double punch of Ajax the foaming cleanser and a capful of ammonia that freshness might reign once more.*

*Now there were territories in that loft that had gone unexplored. Specifically, I am speaking of the loft bed above your studio, which had become a storage area. There I found a moth-eaten rug and a chair with torn upholstery and piles of paper. Their removal was quite called for. And so, with the purging, cleansing action brought to bear,*

*the space was liberated. But liberated for whom, Celeste? For me, there being nowhere else in the loft for my typewriter and desk. And so, there I was the next day right above you in your studio sitting at my IBM Selectric. After a while I became aware of a subtle vibration when I struck the keys and grew worried that it was affecting your concentration. Then too, there was the fact that while you could sit for hours on your stool carving away, a hallmark of your professionalism, I couldn't go ten minutes without springing up to pace. And then there was the matter of my faulty plumbing, the problem worsened by the diuretic of caffeine supplied by the vat of coffee I drank each day. At some point you had had enough of my shuttle to and from the bathroom and to and from the kitchen with mug in hand.*

*"Must you be so mobile?" That was your question to me.*

*Shamed to my core, I hit on a partial solution, a large plastic bowl in which to relieve myself. Celeste, I would share with you, if I may, the art of peeing quietly that I sought to master. The three essentials for success are as follows: 1. Hold the bowl close to my thing. 2. Do not direct my stream toward the bottom of the bowl, as that will only raise the decibel level. Rather, direct it down the side of the bowl. 3. This is crucial. Regulate the stream as best I can. To allow a full-on whiz is to court detection.*

*Celeste, I was literally on top of you, and that cannot be emphasized enough. What saved the situation, I suppose, is that I continued with my job. Now I was no longer catching the subway at Bleecker Street but at Spring Street, the station one stop south. I had a lot to fit into my life. There was prayer and meditation. There was work. There was the obligatory—for me, obligatory—RoR meeting every day, lest I become a captive of*

*the bottle once again. There was my writing. My writing. How disgustingly inane and self-important that can sound to me. Why not say my affliction, my curse, my delusion, my escape? In the beginning was the word, my ass. In the beginning, and ever since, torment and more torment and wasted year upon wasted year. But no, no. Cease the savagery, I say to myself, and honor the calling. If I lacked your manifest gifts, I nevertheless was driven by the same need. Just as you sought refuge in your studio, I sought it at my typewriter. Perhaps the greatest responsibility was that I was now a family man, and there I am afraid that I fell considerably short. While I was grateful for a job that enabled me to pay my own way though life, especially after the disastrous experience at the building and the misappropriation of funds for all those years—my identity rested on being a writer, but more than that, an author. I was in need of that validation, that suit that would render me decent in the world. And so a bad thing happened, a very bad thing. I lost my pose of amiability and the beast appeared. Oh, it was in check on the subway and on the streets, where the men of violence could be triggered by nothing more than a wrong look, and certainly in the workplace; however, I had only to cross the threshold into the loft for the beast to appear. Silent, my face frozen with anger, I would walk right past you and Mia, everything in me screaming to punish you for the success and independence that had been denied me, the very same vindictiveness I had brought to bear in my years with Sarah. Love from afar was one thing, love up close another. I was showing you my illness, my anger sickness, and how far I had to go on this journey. But you learned quickly. Because of Mia's young age, you put dinner on early. You saw that food was the needed calmativie, that I was, in effect, a squalling baby seeking*

*pacification. To what extent I didn't quite gauge for some years. "You do all this cooking but you yourself barely eat," I noted. If you ate at all, it was generally what we left on the plate—a piece of meat or a leafy vegetable, or a potato. And though bedlam could reign over most of the loft, if a morsel of food was left in the kitchen sink, your concern was out of all proportion. Was I eager to attract vermin? That was a question you posed.*

*Now Celeste, questions as to true urgency are for a mind greater than mine. I can only tell you what constitutes urgency for me is that the bottle was posturing. What bottle? You rightly ask. The vodka bottle. And it would be a denial of truth itself to reduce its action to posturing, as its form had become protean with a bias toward slinkiness and a mouth streaming lewd suggestiveness to support it. "I know you want your mouth on mine," it whispered, blowing a gentle stream of hot breath into my ear. "We cannot have this," I retorted, with great vehemence speaking my mother's words. And did I not also say, there in the night, "I put my foot down"? as she herself would. And did not you, roused from slumber, ask the essential question, "What is wrong with you?" But great things can come from upheaval, and you yourself were a party to this discovery. That night I disclosed to you the crisis that had been slowly building, as on nights prior your vodka bottle had become luminous in the dark. So long as it remained stationary on the counter, I could struggle for a kind of *modus vivendi*. But now that it had grown legs, the situation was infinitely more grave. Celeste, you surprised me with your generosity. Alcoholism was not your battle, though you attended a weekly meeting with me. Your dependency on the bottle was of a different kind. It was your defense against a painful truth, as we were*

*later to discover. And yet you acquiesced to my request that the loft be an alcohol-free zone. While I did not fall down dying in response to your sacrifice, I did remain grateful.*

*Celeste, you were an animal lover extraordinaire. There was no exaggerating your path-breaking connectivity with our four-legged friends, the canines and the felines, who existed in relative harmony, even on the master bed, where they sought closeness with you through the hours of darkness. It must be said that your deep rapport was achieved through touch, through stare, through whispered communications of the most sensitive nature. There were the two cats, Mordo, a muscular tabby, and Glide, a sinewy Siamese, and your miniature French poodle, Chanson, so named because she often, you said, brought song to your heart. But the song you had begun to hear was an evening song. Chanson still had her spurts of manic scampering about, including dazzling maneuvers when feeding time approached, but they were far outnumbered by stretches of listlessness followed by an increasing state of disorientation. Around and around in circles would she go. Did you not say, over and over, "Poor little thing?" Is it not inevitably that way for all of us? Was she not teaching us a thing or two about the aging process by seeking to acclimate us to the evening song we too would someday hear, more and more, as shadows deepened? Though you did not entirely care for Frank Sinatra, did you not embrace his melancholy song "It was a Very Good Year"?*

*Oh, such pain, when we are in the grip of memory, Celeste. Let us return to the now, if only for a moment, so we get our bearings in the one authentic reality beyond the vale of tears this life would seek to impose on us, before voyaging back in time once again, for let us always remember that a celestial space is ours to inhabit and the holy*

*instant is all that is needed to deliver us there.*

*If I may say, Celeste, and it doubtless takes more delicacy than I possess to say it, you have a touch of your mother's coldness, as I was to see when I finally met her. What I mean is that while your heart was eternally with Chanson, you were also akin, dare I make the comparison, to the thug chef at the deli where I bought my soup each workday, soup so tasty that it made my heart sing. Did he not wear one of those white sanitary caps made of paper, and had he not with magic marker written on it, all caps, the one-word imperative "NEXT," as if the sworn enemy of verbal excess. You yourself were wonderfully voluble, so please understand that verbal generosity was not where your similarity with Soup Man lay. Rather, it was in the formidably forward-looking mentality he placed on display with his terse and silent command. You had your period of mourning—many, many were the tears you shed, and in their shedding did you convey your full and unyielding commitment to the memory of Chanson in the afterlife as strongly as you did to her in this one. You were, as I am your witness, an exemplar of the wisdom in the lyrics of that Girl Scout song, "Make new friends but keep the old./One is silver, the other gold."*

*Your relationship to the animal world was not to be underestimated, Celeste. The domesticated creatures were the spark of life for you. Spirit love is one thing, but to have a love of one's own, in the flesh, had early on become a necessary condition for your existence, given the suspect nature of many creatures of your own species.*

*No one should ever doubt your decision-making abilities, Celeste. Like the rest of us, a period of vacillation may have to be gone through, but always do you emerge with*

*firmness and resolve. When that time came, you were able to put sentiment behind you. One never wants to see that which is so animate rendered lifeless by a fatal injection. But the point is that you rallied strong. Within two weeks we were at the rescue pound with Mia. Among the unfortunate creatures with imploring gazes seeking the love we all crave, whether consciously or not, was a black and tan coon hound with a long snout and soulful eyes who came alive at the sight of you. Thrown into a state of delirious anticipation was he, as if the master of his dreams had arrived. He had none of the petite elegance of Chanson but raised up on his hind legs and sought to press his narrow head through the bars that he might be nearer to you. A neurotic, unruly simpleton of a dog he seemed to me, and yet within a few minutes he was leashed and in the car with us, where he vomited all over the back seat and on Mia, who seemed to detest him from the start. Rufus, as you instantly named him (with no intention to rhyme him with doofus, an informal word that had no place in your vocabulary), then put on the brakes as we approached the front door of our building, and showed the balkiness of a mule as we tried to mount the stairs with him. At the door to the loft itself he lay flat on his stomach, his ears back and his eyes wild with fright. Several minutes did it take to coax him forward over the threshold, and only then with the enticement of doggie bon bons, left over from the time of Chanson. As you quickly learned, any morsel of food was better left on the floor for him than in your hand if you did not wish to feel the bite of his sharp teeth. This stunning display of trepidation, coupled with the vomiting and massive bombing run of diarrhea he went on once inside, quickly established in our minds the magnitude of his trauma. We both saw him as the wounded creature that he was, that he*

*should find safety in a cage and naked terror outside it, and his manifest distress only strengthened your ardor. For Mia, however, Rufus, like me, was not indigenous to the scene. The two of us were outsiders, interlopers, and paired as wretched rivals for your affection in her mind.*

*Celeste, the assertion that I was in over my head will get no argument from me. But a man is required to expose himself in the light of day. He cannot forever live in the shadows. Let this period be established in my mind, if no other, as one of accelerated emergence from those shadows. Or, if not, let this text be the retroactive exposure of myself that I could not effect at that time. Fling open these doors, Luther. Disengage them from their jambs. Let the flood of mockery evaporate before your eyes. Give no consent to the shame so abundantly stored in your being. Take instruction, Luther, from M. C. Hammer, not quite incarnate in that specific time, and his all-powerful injunction “Can’t touch this.” Take from all avatars for your reconstruction.*

*But now we can move from matters of the mind to events on the ground, where we are established in daily living.*

Luke was not on the premises nor was he standing in the shadows and yet signals were arriving daily heralding his approach, including fleeting appearances in Luther’s dreams. Then there he was on the line, beckoning Luther to come to Astoria, Queens, where he and Rose had a flat, to see their newborn. Luke and Rose had tied the knot, in his desire to consolidate what he had found in her. So Luther and Celeste drove out over the Fifty-



ninth Street Bridge to meet them on a night that Mia was staying with her father. Luther could not see down from the car to the inky water below the old and neglected bridge but traversing it brought sharply into mind the powers of darkness that had led his sister Naomi to those waters and their staggering indifference in bringing on her demise and could only imagine the matter-of-factness of the toughened harbor patrol crew who brought her bloated body on board, with no understanding that she had been a Judy Garland manqué, had sung arias in her cracking voice in the lobby of the building, had said *you just watch your mouth. My husband is a real man and will straighten you out* from the place of darkness that she could come. And yes, he heard in his head Simon and Garfunkel singing their “Bridge Over Troubled Water” but then heard Simon bragging on a talk show that he could do a lot of things better than David Eisenhower, an immodest statement that lingered in Luther’s mind and left him feeling uncomfortable about Simon ever after.

The apartment was on the ground floor of a tenement across from a warehouse on a long and forlorn street. Dingy, with bare walls and tired linoleum floors and battered furniture. “A house without love,” Celeste called it afterward. Over the racket of oldies but goodies blasting from the radio, Luke spoke nonstop about the house in the country they would soon be purchasing so they could leave behind the rat trap they were in. He was loud and very drunk on vodka, and when he wasn’t pressing Luther’s cheeks he was pushing a drink on him. The twins, now adolescents, looked embarrassed, and in the crib lay the infant, Jason, somehow sleeping through all the madness. And there was Rose, smilingly apologetic and stripped of all self-esteem by a lifetime of abuse

and battering, saying "I'm not a good hostess, as you can see." Saying too, "I used to be funny."

*Now Celeste, though you were shaken by the spectacle of my inebriated brother and the squalor in which the family lived, you did not pull the plug on me. Instead, you brought a level of understanding of the illness to the situation, your own family having been touched by the problem. As has been noted, your aunt Tilda came to live in servitude to the bottle until her premature death. But what caught my attention was the fact that Luke spoke almost exclusively to you, as if I was not there. In observing my brother, I was reminded that I, like him, inhabit the land of the dinks, that our bond of servitude is to women. I was also reminded that ties of blood are as likely to breed enmity as affection, and that lasciviousness is loyal only to itself. On and on about that blasted country house he went, with time also given to the KKK operating in Far Rockaway and the cheaper grade of steel in new products such as cars, motorcycles, and cameras. A man seeking for bygone days rather than embrace the future.*

*The Band, a collection of musicians out of Woodstock, New York, in the 1960s will not mean anything to you, nor will their song "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." They cultivated the sound of backwoods cusses who maybe bathed and changed their britches once every fortnight. I am calling them back to life because of my mother and a line in that particular song, "They never should have taken the very best." There are those who have a lineage of treachery and deceit, and those for whom probity is the*

*ground they stand on. And there are those who stand in the gray area between. The lyric refers to Robert E. Lee, the gray fox of the South, who time and again confounded the more abundant and better supplied Army of the North. And what would the gray fox have to do with the gray eminence, whom my mother was to me? She too was the very best and she too was taken, not to the courthouse in Appomattox but to the abyss that slander imposes, her surrender not of an army but of her dignity. My brother dared to call my mother, whom I deified as love itself, a prescription drug addict. With that one verbal blast did he set my head spinning and threaten the very wall of sanctity around her.*

*Celeste, the archetype for good and evil is lost to me. I cannot retrieve it from the mishmash of early Greeks and Romans as I learned about them in my ninth grade literature course, there in the ground-floor classroom of the brownstone building in the west nineties here in Manhattan. Fidelity to the record of my own life, not those bill-boarded as worthy of commitment to historical memory, could fully grab my attention. There was not enough of me to sink into otherness, to say, as Faulkner did of his place in his own fiction, "I was the corncob pipe." Once more, Celeste, order must be made to rule with ironing board flatness so we can chart the course of both the virtuous and the varmint. Awareness of the darkness and the light came to me when I was quite young. Hannah of the smacking hand and Naomi of the blistering tongue, though natural enemies, aligned themselves against my mother and, with the weapons in hand they held, challenged her with these words, "Come on Mother. Take a drink. Stop being a saint." In that moment was it clear to me that they were intent on taking the very best and leading her into infection by the lower spirit their bodies and minds served as host to. The*

*weapons they held in hand were glasses of wine, and more of the same remained in the big bottle on the table.*

*“Do my words mean nothing to you? Have I not repeated the proverb, ‘Wine is a mocker; strong drink is ‘raging’? Have I not told you of finding my poor father passed out in the snow and smashing the bottle he drank from against the rocks, as my mother instructed, and dragging him into the warmth of our home before the cold claimed him?” With these words did she rebuke her own daughters, but they held firm to their own intent, saying as one, as if they had rehearsed, “Oh, come on now. Stop being a saint.”*

*“A saint, do you say? There are no saints in the religion we are blessed with, my children, only seekers. I call on the two of you to seek the kingdom of God, lest you be lost forever.” And with this sound rebuke did she leave the room and leave them to their lost-ness, as did I, sensing the fury spawned by their thwarted will would now be directed at me.*

*“That’s right, little flathead momma’s boy, you had better skedaddle,” Naomi called out as I fled.*

*Where had my mother gotten such strength to resist? From prayer, Celeste. Prayer was the pasture in which she roamed all hours of the day, with the Lord as her shepherd. That being so, the tricks and wiles and fraudulence of the worldly ones were fully exposed to her sight and she could maintain her humble posture of certitude. Divine light enabled her to see more than she said. Only when those sisters were in full retreat from that light and I had drained the last dregs from that bottle could I relax my*

*strenuous vigil and ensure the preservation of my mother as a mighty fortress.*

*But now Luke was ascendant in my mind, purporting, as he did, to have an angle of vision on my mother I had been denied, possibly owing to his earlier arrival on this earth. It astonished me that he would have such a place of malignancy within him from which to make such an assertion. And yet I could not quite treat him in my mind as an apostate. If he was speaking from the lower depths, was it possible that my mother had something to do with him being there? The image of her locked closet came strongly to my mind, there in the hallway of our family's apartment, where the sight of Hannah's pudenda, her robe having fallen open, sent me crashing through the walls and into the street when I was still a child. The closet was defended with a lock, to which only she had a key, and that lock likely spoke to earlier incidents of trespass among my older siblings, as in that off-limits space were amber prescription bottles secured by me at her behest to "run on your long legs to the pharmacy so my night will not be sleepless." My mother was not an open book. She had her private places where it was necessary to go, and not only to the Lord.*

*Celeste, I have already told you that, in my mother's view, Naomi was the cause of Rachel heading down the perdition path by introducing her to diet pills and tranquilizers that the doctors prescribed because they could not give her the love and spiritual direction that she needed. In my time, I have seen thin people develop the wide body, but nothing as dramatic as what befell Naomi, who in her last years inflated like a big balloon and became a monologist focused on her own approaching demise. Even the moon went dark in the presence of her, so downcast was it by her fey manner.*

*The truth meter need always be on, Celeste, if honesty is to have its day in the sun. I say this because when my mother would assign blame to Naomi for Rachel's fall, I would question the veracity of her claim, if only in my mind. Even as a child, her explanation sounded off, as if, for once, I was hearing a false note from my mother. Her other utterances had the ring of conviction, far out as they might seem, such as that we were living in the last days or that Jesus would come like a thief in the night.*

*Let us be clear, Celeste. My mother suffered physically. Her legs, afflicted with varicose veins, were a horror to witness. Does Luke think for a minute that I have forgotten that miserable summer night I came back by bus from the Mickey Owen baseball camp in Springfield, Missouri, to find her moaning in pain, her bare legs like mangled meat and bluish where they were not a screaming red? Does he ever consider the genuineness of her suffering, that in my absence she would surrender herself to surgery to relieve the intolerable pain only to experience pain that was greater? Deprived of sleep by the post-surgery fire in her legs, she then had to endure the burden of my return, made necessary by my acute homesickness, the words "momma's boy" sounding in my ears. That she should have a child such as this—a torment to her and to all concerned. How was she to maintain herself when her sleep was stolen from her by intolerable pain unless she had access to anesthetic medications? Are we barbarians of the first degree that we should abandon all empathy? Whether it was codeine or sleeping pills or both, was she not simply seeking surcease from this world of suffering so she could be present for her daytime life with the undiminished vitality we should all aspire to?*

*And here is a question that we need to pose to ourselves, as the universe may not be inclined to answer it for us. How is that we allow ourselves to be tangled up in the assertions of others and seek with great desperation and resolve to refute what requires no refutation rather than let those words just walk on by, as the great Dionne Warwick instructed, in another context, in a time long ago.*

*If you will allow me a possibly repetitive reminiscence, there were several girls of high spirits in the same grade who would gather themselves after lunch and sing songs from Broadway musicals they had seen with their parents, musicals I had no names for then or now. All that remains is the memory of their exuberance and the terror that forbade me from entering that room for fear that their singing would cease and their taunts begin. They were my real mythology, the world in all its sparkling beauty still inaccessible because of the religion I had been born into, a religion that cast a dark shadow of impermanence over this life. I must not go any further with this line of thought and succumb to the power of the past, of the creature Sean, with the mammoth head, cruelly called Hammerhead by the neighborhood kids, and the access he gave me to my one and only Broadway musical, “Stop the World! I Want to Get Off,” and my mother’s warning when he first came calling—as if I were a girl he was asking out—that he was outside the realm of the normal and certain to be trouble. Yes, of course, the memory of her begging me not to forsake my homework for this strange creature who had the appearance of a full-grown man, not the adolescent boy he was. And how the song from that musical, “What Kind of Fool Am I?” as sung by Anthony Newley, is etched in my consciousness,*

*as is the taxi ride home in the cab hailed by Sean, the staggered lights of Amsterdam Avenue, and the sudden pain and regret I would feel as we drove past the street where the school was located, the awareness awakened that my homework was incomplete and I was in danger of falling behind, as I had at my previous school. Sean, who later beat me unconscious. A bad influence, possibly, but not evil. And Naomi, whom my mother said was a corrupting influence on Rachel but never accusing her of being downright evil.*

*And now Luke, speaking as he did of our mother. Evil? No. Far short of that. At the other end, bearer of an unbearable truth, render of the veil beyond which we—I—could not see? The image of that locked closet in the hallway off the kitchen, leading to the bathroom and the two bedrooms, returns, and the shelf on which she kept her amber prescription bottles. Celeste, there is a danger in seeing too far. It can leave us in a state of ruin as well as liberation. And someone, was it Luke, saying Dr. Edelbaum, the family doctor, refused to refill her prescription for codeine. Was it possible she was not there for all those years, that we had been speaking to the medication, not her, as Sarah had been speaking to the bottle, not me, for all those years?*

In this time Solomon Rhein raised up on Luther with his mouth, displaying a vehement cynicism that left Luther speechless and the streets flowing with bile.

“When you are done with her, you will go on to her daughter,” Solomon Rhein dared to say. Though he was not a complete mystery, he did have places within him that were not easily fathomed. But Luther too, to his surprise, had a place within him that was not easily fathomed, but which he came to following Solomon Rhein’s



regrettable utterance. That place was moral outrage. Luther was offended beyond recall that Solomon Rhein would take the liberty of speaking about his future wife and stepdaughter in such a manner. It is true he went to Glanton with his grievance and it is true that Glanton said he needn't be a doormat, only confirming what Luther had already grasped, and so Luther said to Solomon Rhein that if he wanted to remain a friend, he must not speak in such a manner ever again. Solomon Rhein showed no contrition. In fact, he met Luther's delayed response with silence. Perhaps it was meant to send a message that he reserved certain rights to himself. If so, his brazenness was more than Luther could countenance. How could a friend think it was permissible to offend him in such a crude manner?

*Celeste, I had done no parenting, nor had I expected to, but evidently the prospect of a second marriage and a stepdaughter had awakened in me parental instincts that had lain dormant. To forgive is one thing, but to forget another, and so I resolved to maintain a passive defense against Solomon Rhein, that is, if our connection was to continue, then he would have to call me. In fact, it had been that way ever since we met, so possibly there had been a reservation in my mind about him prior to the egregious transgression.*

*But I was too quick to paint Solomon Rhein forever black. From somewhere in his Brooklyn-ness, decency arose and he stood upright with a phone call saying he was wrong, wrong to speak in such a way and that he valued our friendship and wanted to put his mistake behind him. Now Celeste, this is something for us both to understand—it is not for me to serve as the course correction for someone's nature, and certainly not for*

*someone as mentally agile as Solomon Rhein, and so it was everything for me not to fall down dying that I had been the cause of such an alteration, albeit temporary. It is for us to ponder any action that would result in the displacement of a somewhat jeering nature even fleetingly by solemnity.*

*Celeste, many are they who have come from the land of pomposity. Indeed I too have journeyed to and from this well-populated region. Oh, the vileness I assumed it was my right to spew on a questioning, superior soul such as you, in taking advantage of the confidence available to me through RoR to speak from on high. Let us arrive at the place of reality, so called, that language does not wish to go. Let us strap it tight to the how and why and when and where and who so it cannot elevate above the realm of the quotidian. Because frankly, matter-of-factness has been in short supply. Everywhere do we hear the urgent dictate to break on through to the other side in the mad rush to escape all that is earthly, as if no beauty is to be found here. For this phoniness you have my deepest apology, and for every lecture breath utterance I have ever made and dared to direct at you. For this my sorrow knows no bounds.*

*OK. We are at the Tiffany Diner, just west of Seventh Avenue and the Village Cigars tobacco shop on the corner. We have come from the RoR meeting in the warren of streets farther west where the speaker introduced himself as a drunk, not an alcoholic, saying of the former word that you couldn't perfume it up, and in so doing inflated his status as a true down and outer back in his days tethered to the bottle. All excess must be forgiven as we come together in unity and abolish for the hour the loneliness of the*

*alcoholic and convert it to aloneness, in the best sense of the word, all-one-ness, as I have doubtless said before. I, too, it being a Friday night, was at the apex of my confidence and dared to say to you that I could offer no guarantee, that if you went back to drinking and found you couldn't control your intake, that it might pose a problem. What problem? You asked. Alcohol, I said, might come between us. And why did I say what I did? Because I believed denial of the illness was strong in you. In so doing I was making my love conditional. I was also diagnosing you as an alcoholic, when RoR expressly states that alcoholism is a self-diagnosed illness. Many, many are the lashes that must be dealt me for such a transgression.*

Now Luther had a pragmatic plan for the development of his own fortitude, and that was to weather any storm, no matter the ferocity of the elements. Thunder and lightning there might be, and torrential rains and beastly heat and numbing cold, but he would not cut and run. He would not do with Glanton what he had done with his father. He would not fly off into the nutrition-lacking space of distance and call such apartness wisdom. He would not go grandiose, as his mentality urged him to do, and contemplate himself as Muhammad Ali putting aside his dance routine after a few rounds and moving to the middle of the ring to bang with the intrepid butcher from Philadelphia, Smoking Joe. No, no. He would be sober and serene in his decision, as it was not for the purpose of combat but advancement of his own mentality to recognize a father figure and the do-over opportunity that had been presented to him in the form of Glanton. Because for sure Glanton came with high irascibility content. It did not take much to imagine Glanton as

the master of the snit and the power of the peeve, should his illness lead him there. But Luther had also to acknowledge that not once had Glanton said, “Will you make me get up? Are you here to aggravate me?” Even so, as a precaution, did Luther say the Serenity Prayer before dialing, as added strength was needed for the voice-to-voice as much as the face-to-face.

Luther shared with Glanton his own soreness and said it was like lava flowing from an active volcano. He said Celeste did not stand up to him; instead, she cried, as his mother had cried when he was a child. Luther said it wasn't a fair fight and that a woman's tears would always prove victorious.

“Then maybe it's your responsibility not to bring her to that place but to express yourself in a more reasonable manner.” Glanton did not ka-chunk Luther with his response, nor did he stroke him with a solicitous feather.

“You are right,” Luther could only acknowledge. The silence that ensued was not a comfortable one. He couldn't help but sense something sulfurous, the discharge of low grade peeve into the atmosphere, prompting the query, “Do my phone calls bother you?”

“No,” Glanton replied, with hoarfrost on the monosyllable.

And yet it was not entirely coldness that Glanton was conveying. For many months had he been visiting the crying place over the departure of Babs, his heart shredded, not simply broken. Now the tears had all been shed. He had moved back to Los Angeles, but his real home was the state of bleakness he endured, day in and day out, all about him a vista of deadness. He had no income and was in poor health. The love and

kindness of RoR members saw him through. He was taken in by a friend. Contributions of money and food and clothing were made. The RoR community knew and loved Glanton. They looked after him.

*Celeste, Glanton had knowledge of the morning in America man who nodded his head so well, engendering the rapture of many who wanted only to sing "Happy Days Are Here Again," as that was the America they loved and cherished. And I too loved that America. Often have I stood outside the Plaza Hotel waiting for Cary Grant to flee its premises with the two dastardly thugs in full pursuit or demanded the appearance of a New York Central twin diesel passenger train on the Hudson River Line. I have called on the Rock Island Line and the Erie Lackawanna to resurrect themselves. I have called on the missing to rise from the grave that I might address them more directly. But the dead are dead and cannot be resuscitated in their old form. They must come to us as new entities. The train has become a tree and the elephant an ant. Who knows? And America. America has become a vice, and that vice is greed. The mourning of America. Such was Glanton's vision.*

*"Call me a welfare cheat," Glanton said, for he did have to turn to assistance from the state.*

*And yet, Celeste, he wasn't simply addressing himself mockingly to cold-hearted right wingers, those who cried out that real Americans pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps and that the poor had only themselves to blame for being poor. He was, let us be truthful, addressing himself to me, understanding, as he did, that I was the child of Republican parents and, in particular, a mother who was wont to say, "I work.*

*Why don't they?" of the blacks in what we called the two welfare hotels down the street or scoffing at the elderly women in our building "afraid of a little dirt," as she put it. He saw into my conflicted heart. He saw what being a steady Freddy office worker was doing to me. He saw the judgment that would visit my mind at times, a judgment that said, "I work. Why doesn't he?" But not, of course, without putting aside his grave sternness for a mammoth Glanton chuckle, as if to laugh knowingly and dismissively at the folly of all the chuckleheads who inhabited this land from sea to shining sea, including me.*

*Glanton did not know from the Supremes. He did not know "Baby, baby, where did our love go?" sung to a thumping beat. But he had other music in his repertoire to fit with Babs's departure and the agony it did not initiate but served to escalate. Celeste, when we have landed on the hard rock of reality, only then can some of us break open and begin to examine what forces within and external to us have wrought that we were in such a place of emotional dependency to begin with. Over and over would Glanton play "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," as Frank Sinatra, not the Supremes, was his ideal. This period was a crucial time in his development, and was to be of enormous help to me when you and I were to have our issues down the road.*

The light of understanding was only partially in Luther at this time. He asked himself if he was being too hard on Glanton, given the dire circumstances his mentor faced as a middle-aged man with ruined health and meager resources, a writing block with stubborn staying power, and dependence on the kindness of others for shelter. Would it be too much to expect Glanton to transcend his difficulties and be there for him in a

warm way? Was it possible that low-grade peeve was manifesting in Glanton that Luther had love and resources in his life while both were absent now from his? But in fact love was not absent from Glanton's life. Had he not said that the real purpose of relationship was for men and women to give each other sufficient pain that they had no choice but to find a higher power?

Well, it was not for Luther to worry his mind about. His job was to persevere and meet Glanton's headwinds with resolve. Material abundance was not what had drawn Luther to Glanton in the first place; answers were. And those he continued to have, in abundance.

For the sake of transparency, something of significance in the life of Luther Garatdjian transpired early in the year 1984. He was let go, terminated, axed, vaminoso'd, told to take it on the lam, shown the door, excavated, evacuated from his position of nothingness. This elimination of him from the premises of Cromartie Wonders occurred shortly after moving in with Celeste. This was not in reprisal by Rafta for manifestly having new love in his life, though it must be stated that Rafta had knowledge of his abandonment of old love, saying at one point, "I know you are having problems in your marriage," with knowingness showing in her face and evident in her voice, because knowingness is knowingness and announces itself as such. And she knew of the arrival of new love from the joy abounding in Luther's face, as he too had the capacity to express more than one kind of emotion.

*Celeste, the factual is where we need to be, as hyperbole can have a*

*corrosive effect. I am resolved to stay on the ground from here on, and will do my best to follow through. Rafta was the messenger bearing glad tidings of great joy, and that is a statement purely in the realm of the factual as my liberation banner began to fly immediately on hearing her statement, "I am sorry to report that the decision was made from above to let you go." (From above, Celeste? From above? That could only be the French kiss man, Peter Ben-Gurion, he who could blow smoke from his mouth and suck it in a continuous stream through his ample nostrils. Well, the worthy had no business being with the unworthy. Wheat was to be separated from the chaff.) Not that Rafta realized as much. Cromartie Wonders was her world, while I was but a pilgrim passing through, albeit a pilgrim who took his sweet time in doing so. So my joy derived from the fact that Cromartie Wonders was doing for me what I could not do for myself, as all imagination seemed to be lacking in me to alter my course in the direction of a more suitable path. Justice is to be applied to everyone, Celeste, everyone, and so it is only proper to note the full earnestness of Rafta's expression and the depth of her caring. Empathy she was not without, this being a woman who attended the opera faithfully and wept in the dark in response to arias driven by suffering and tragedy. She had a heart that registered emotion, I am saying, and at no time was this more evident than when she added, "You will receive severance and are eligible for unemployment benefits, but frankly, you were screwed. Management has let you go two weeks before you were to be vested." But let me pay some attention to my own face, and assure you that I wore an expression of manifest concern that only those most blessed with the power of perception would have dared to assert was a false front, and should they do so, be more than worthy of a gold star.*



It was significant that one should come to him that day and say, “You are a good person. A good person.” Florence Mith, the editor in chief of Pilgore Books spoke those words, and a question formed in his mind whether the repetition was for reinforcement of her point of view or simply owing to the possibility that she had nothing else to say. Sensing that she was speaking from the depth of her being, he had no cause to raise up on her and say, as Jesus did, “Why calleth thou me good?” No query followed her offering, but that word “good” did have staying power and within an hour he had determined that Florence Mith was both expressing her point of view and had nothing more to add. Deeper and deeper in his understanding did her use of the word “good” settle. Not intelligent. Not dedicated. Not imaginative. Sort of on a par with “interesting.” In his new incarnation he was good, or better than he had been, but that was not the same as capable. Rafta had kept him on because of his “goodness.” On the basis of his skill he never would have been hired. So Florence Mith was saying. It was all right. It really was. Fatalities occurred every day, on highways and byways and in all sorts of venues, but here he was among the living. Oh, the ego might try to rise again, like the aberrational South, and have him assume proportions beyond his size, but marks had been inflicted, not only by words addressed to him, but by bodily changes. For example, ear hair. There it was, a thin dark spike sticking three inches out of his left ear. And good manners preclude any discussion of the thicket edging out of both nostrils. No, no, he had to accept that he was a walk on by person, as, in another context, the great Dionne Warwick had sung about back in a year that meant something to his life.

*Now Celeste, let candor be my guide once more, that excellence of the spirit, if not the body or the mind, not be denied me. Let me acknowledge that under the overpowering influence of the ego, my behavior was less than exemplary those last few months. Having seen, in regard to sales conferences, that my words and my actions were not in accord, that in fact trickery and duplicity and all the rest had become my domain, Rafta pressed me hard for written presentations and my signature attesting that I would not so much as change a word. She had had enough of my ad-libbing buffoonery. But America has its own peculiar heritage, and that includes the song "Don't Fence Me In," and it was playing loud in my ears when she came to me with her asperity showing. And so I tossed away the scripts, with my signature to adhere to the text, and once again let fly in rhapsodic tones about The Story of Your Mouth and Donnie's Daffy Day and When Turtles Danced. And as those words flew, I saw the deleterious effect on Rafta, the imprecations she sought and failed to give voice to, in essence miming one exceeding wrath, and rejoiced in her bottled up fury and the mockery I was again making of her reign of terror. But let me be clear. Can there be any justification for such insubordination, even if I was only seeking to affirm the American way, which is to be affronted by tyranny in all its manifestations?*

*In this time, you may recall, I did not run to the fire or the water. From both extremes I stayed away, merely allowing my feelings to escalate to the point that I was stretched like a canvas from one end of Manhattan to the other, with the words "misery" and "shame" written large and luminous for the populace to see. Needing some refreshment of your*

*memory, you ask what brought this on. Nothing more than my past meeting up with my future so no present, no peace, was allowed to exist. All was polluted in the air space I inhabited. The facts are these, lest you think I am the air I speak of. Wound Tight, your best friend from elementary school, came with her beau, Just Deserts, a federal prosecutor known for convictions that came with eons of incarceration. Wound Tight had a degree from Dartmouth and Just Deserts from Harvard and Harvard Law School, giving him a double scoop of excellence with which to start each day. Because it was winter and the gas heater warmed us inadequately, I wore a red scarf not only for comfort but to say for me what I was afraid to say, that I was a man with a certain panache. For the entire evening did I allow the scarf to represent me, repositioning it at intervals for better clarity and to introduce in the minds of our astronomically high board score guests doubt and confusion as to where I was coming from and to combat the constancy of their manifest intelligence, a force field so powerful as to obliterate me from the planet. What choice did I have but to meet it with my own sort of constancy, flimsy as it might be perceived to be?*

*Now Just Deserts had firepower, an arsenal of fearsome weaponry, that being a temperament allowing him to go where others would not dare to verbally tread. Because if truth was not his entire mission, power was, and so he sought hegemony over me from the start, saying, when he heard the words laid off and and my experience of standing on the unemployment insurance line for the very first time on that very day, he fired off a single penetrating round that he might lay me out cold on the floor forevermore, saying in a penetrating nasal tone that he had surely practiced for his courtroom dramas, “And*

*you would take it?" serving me with a little shame shower with the implication of his query, as if to suggest that I would be little more than a welfare queen if I did. But we have had many such drenchings, have we not, Celeste, only to have the sun emerge to dry us thoroughly, right down to our bones. And if I did not have the presence of mind to respond with wit in the moment, if I could only offer abashment and a look of sheepish defeat, I had my scarf, my red scarf, which I tightened around my neck, signifying that blood and the red-hot anger that causes it to be shed, were now part of the scene. Sometimes, Celeste, it is for us to step back and let others—whether things or persons—speak in our stead. And as the very great and sometimes inscrutable Course in Miracles says, in our defenselessness our safety lies. We don't have to have the final word; in our beings we are the final word.*

*Wound Tight and Just Deserts were charged particles incapable of bonding, at least with each other. It is possible she was chasing what she did not really want or capable of receiving. And yet, like many of us, she had for a time her dream of partnership and so was indulging in show and tell, so wanting you to see the great catch she had landed. But she was on the combustible side and Just Deserts, with his litigious mindset, was prone to providing the verbal spark to set her off. From her bed, with fire on her breath, would she eject Just Deserts in the middle of the night and hurl his legal briefs, his writs and torts and whatnot, down at his fleeing form from her window. No ground would she leave for him in her court of appeal. Some of us are not to the family way born. As it was written that I would be childless, so too did I discern the same fate for Wound Tight, the word "Auntie" written large upon her forehead. Wound Tight was*

*on a mission to the stars with her aptitude for excellence, and for that journey to continue, she was compelled to travel light.*

No one came calling for Luther in this time, and in truth, he did not a lot of calling himself. There was one named Least, however, who defied his name only in terms of his logorrhea. Least had a talent for calling Luther from the small space he occupied on Mulberry Street just as Luther was dozing off. Pulled from imminent slumber, Luther would feel duty bound to answer, as Least had asked that he be his RoR mentor and the old hymn “Rescue the Perishing” being never far from his mind, how was he to say no? Duty bound he also was to listen to every word spoken for insights as to the whereabouts of the caller’s mind. Least, however, was like an endless train moseying past a railroad crossing but lacking the fascination the insignia-covered freight cars displayed. Unable to take any more, Luther cried out, “You have been talking nonstop for twenty minutes. Are you aware of that?” “I know,” Least replied after a ten-second pause and then resumed his meandering blather. Having no other recourse, Luther did telephone hang up, and could only wonder if Least would even notice.

Every day he continued to tap out his quota of words, seeking to surround his experience so it could not get away and to make it real to himself if to no one else. When he found that his vessel was empty, he would wander about, while all morning and into the afternoon would Celeste remain in her studio, turning out one small carved masterpiece after another. Her work ethic was an irritant, exposing him as a slacker.

Competition entered the picture. Every day did she appear in the winner's circle while he was consigned to hanging his head. Her industry got his soreness going.

During one such wandering, he came upon a butcher block slab of golden wood and had it delivered. That same day did he purchase two filing cabinets on which to balance the board so that now, if he swiveled right, he had his typewriter on its stand on which to tap out words, while if he turned to his left, the pen or pencil of his choosing in the glass container on his desk would be his writing implement for that day. Because a person wanted to have all tools at hand when the need for words expressed itself.

Though he made a daily if perfunctory search of the New York Times classifieds, the old feeling was returning that fitness might be lacking for a place in the work world. Yet one day he came upon a classified that had a friendly vibe to it and his whole being filled with light as the slogan "I found my job through the New York *Times*" seized his mind. This ad is calling me home, he thought, and so he submitted his resume.

Within a week, he received an invitation for an interview. In jacket and tie, he entered a glass and steel building that was the national office of Girls Our Future, or GOF for a sit-down with Rose D'Annunzio, of whom he inquired whether her ancestry included her namesake Gabriel D'Annunzio, a leading figure following the Risorgimento. Rose D'Annunzio looked at him with incomprehension, and so Luther was sure he had blown the interview. But nothing of the kind ensued. Rose showed herself focused on the task at hand. Not once did she show an iota of interest in digression or dilly-dally of any sort.

“What would you say, at a cocktail party, if people asked you about your employment?”

“I am abstemious, not by nature but by divine grace, and so I do not believe I would ever be at a cocktail party. But at any gathering of socially minded people, and I am not quite of that kind, I would simply say I was honored to be part of the family of humankind and, more specifically, to be engaged in the mission of this great organization.” A feeling of nobility filled Luther to be saying these words. Fortified by the earnestness in his tone, he was able to withstand the degree of dubiousness in Rose’s countenance. But she was not done.

“You have a master’s degree, I see. Why is it you are not teaching?”

“The life of the mind is for others to reveal in a classroom setting. I lean in the American way toward the practical, the tangible. Too many have been the word salads thrown out for consumption by the young. I do not want my words flying here and there in the ether. I want them on paper, where I can see and keep an eye on them. I am not in opposition to those who are called to pedagogy. I just cannot be among their flock. I must follow the dictates of my own kind.”

“Your own kind?”

“The doers of the world.”

*In all this time, Celeste, a great weeping was going on in me. Why? Because, in a strange way, I had met my own kind in Rose D’Annunzio and in the organization she represented, both having, at their core, palpable shame about themselves, which manifested in a sense of inferiority and unworthiness in the queries Rose posed. Because*

*what was Rose signifying but her doubt not that I was worthy of the organization but whether the organization was worthy of me? Let us be clear. The woman was speaking as an apologist.*

*One encounters this shame, here and there, not only in people or even organizations but entire nations, their collective heads bowed and faces turned to the wall. As evidence, I enter into the record a woman on a moseying train bound from Lisbon to the Algarve. Yes, this is a bit out of the chronology essential for order to maintain itself, but I will run the risk that anarchy will not reign as a consequence. An old woman she was, who spontaneously, there in the compartment we shared, said with full conviction that Portugal, post-Salazar, had no need to rise because it had never fallen and that it had the finest doctors in all the world, bar none. I believe she had been waiting for the time and place for her assertion, and could now sit proudly in her seat, with all manner of hauteur showing in her posture and her face. We do not know where such assertions come from, Celeste, whether from above or below, from well regarded nature preserves or once mighty rivers or whatever, but clearly the seeds of discontent are everywhere that the rightful status of nation-states as well as individuals is not properly recognized.*

If Luther had any doubts about his perceptions, Rose's third question fully dispelled them. "How will you feel about working with people whose strong suit is not the written word, people who may have trouble expressing themselves on paper?" Here was the even fuller flower of Luther's compassion allowed to blossom. Many more unseen tears did he shed.



“I will work with them as they are. I will be kind and caring with the vulnerabilities of others. As you may know, there is a great cry for literacy in this country, beginning with the question ‘Why is it that Johnny can’t read?’ and that extends to writing as well. Shame comes to own some of us early on. We fall behind and are afraid to ask for the help we need, and so the ignorance is compounded. As adults we feel compelled to hide this deficiency. But the reality is that grammar and correct usage are often the domain of the mediocre, the cases of arrested development who never grow beyond an eighth grade mentality. We are the ones who can spell diphtheria while unable to solve the most basic quadratic equation and run from chemistry and physics as from a five-alarm fire. This I say by way of declaring that no preening, no haughtiness, no superciliousness, no condescension, will be permitted on the premises. If I may be so personal, let me say that I am my mother’s son and no one has been more acknowledging of those who live in the higher reaches of the intellect than her. No one. Each and every day does she start by declaring that this one or that one has a very fine mind. Humbly does my mother walk on this earth, though she contains multitudes within her and provinces of her own mind are beyond description. My partial inheritance from her is my acute awareness of my lowness in this sphere, and its place is kept by dismal performances on the only tests that matter, so you can be assured that I will know where I stand should I be gifted with employment at your organization.”

*Celeste, it remained within the realm of astonishment that the question wasn’t whether I was good enough for the org. but whether the org. was good enough for me.*

A week later he was called back for a second interview. Rose led him to a small conference room. Soon a diminutive woman with a shy smile entered, whom Rose introduced as Miss, not Ms., Carmelli, before withdrawing. Luther sat across from her at the long conference table, on which he had placed a small stack of children's books he had edited and written jacket copy for. Miss Carmelli's big, shining eyes, set in such a narrow face, gave her the appearance of a creature from the insect family.

Miss Carmelli showed no curiosity about the books or his life at Cromartie Wonders. She talked in a raspy voice about the heavy workload soon to descend on the Publications Department she headed and the lack of support she had been receiving from the organization. Her voice rose. She became visibly agitated. Lack of understanding was a major problem she faced as a publishing professional in an organization whose primary focus was not on books but on services to girls. No one upstairs really understood the pressure she was under. The higher-ups simply did not grasp what went into putting a book together. A bunch of dolts were drawing fat paychecks for doing nothing but sitting on their cans and reading the *New York Times* behind closed doors. They simply handed you a document and expected that magically it would appear printed and bound the next week.

“There are people here who just think it's about fun and games at the old school yard. A day at the beach is what this place is for them. There are people in America making a lot of money who don't know what it is to work. All they want to do is sit in meetings and discuss big ideas and be too big for their britches. For crying out loud, they

should show respect to the people who are getting the job done and bringing home the bacon. Give me a break, ladies. Give me a break.”

Miss Carmelli was talking to someone. Luther just didn't know if it was to him. Still, something must have gone right, because the next day he received a phone call from Rose D'Annunzio telling him to report for work the following week.

*Celeste, my years in book publishing had given me an identity. In spite of all I may have said, through association I derived a sense of being among the elect the way a butler might come to believe he is a cut above the rest through his service relationship to a wealthy and distinguished family. Every man has the right to feel he is better than the next, and then spend the rest of his life finding out he isn't.*

At Pilgore Press there had been offices and secretaries or editorial assistants sitting outside them at those battleship gray metal desks. But at GoA, the elevator opened and Luther stepped out, accompanied by Rose, onto a floor covered with raspberry-colored carpeting. Before him lay a huge space filled with a maze of beige cubicles, each with a nameplate to identify the occupant. Harsh fluorescent lighting shone down from the ceiling fixtures onto the scene of sequestration below.

Rose led him to the other end of the floor and turned Luther over to Miss Carmelli, who occupied not a corner office but a corner cubicle, more spacious than most of the others. Miss Carmelli then showed him the tiny cubicle with his nameplate already on it before introducing him to the rest of the Publications staff.

“So what do you think of the Snorkster?” a short, rotund woman asked that morning. Her name was Felicia Marcos. Luther felt the force of her confrontational manner and was introduced as well to her tendency to assign nicknames.

“The who?”

“Snorky. Miss Carmelli.”

“She seems very nice.”

“You hear that, Karen? He says the Snork sounds nice.”

“What are you doing interviewing the poor guy? He just got here,” Karen Raven said. Like Felicia, she was a member of the department.

“I’m a writer who is trained to look for the story. That’s what I’m doing.”

“Oh, right, I forgot,” Karen said, shooting Luther an is-this-woman-to-be-believed look.

“What about the Toad? Have you met the Toad yet?”

“She’s talking about Fiona Pelfrey, who is Snorky’s confidante,” Karen said.

“Fiona’s a complete toad. All day long she kisses the Snorkster’s ass,” Felicia said.

“Well no, I haven’t met her,” Luther replied.

“What kind of name is that, Garatdjian? You look like a Jew, but that’s no Jewish name,” Felicia said, reading my name off the nameplate.

“Felicia, what kind of way is that to talk to someone you’ve just met? What’s wrong with you, anyway?” Karen said.

They were a pair. Luther could see that this was an act they had been refining for some time.

“Let the man speak. I’m a writer, and writers need to get to the bottom of things.”

“It’s an Armenian name,” Luther said.

“All right, there you go. Important information. So does your father hang rugs on the wall? Do you hate the Turks? Black people in this country haven’t forgotten what White folks did to them. We may never forget. We know a thing or two about hatred and how it can color you, no pun intended. You’re not a racist, are you?” Felicia was the child of a Filipino father and a black mother, Luther was to learn, and powerfully identified with black people and all people of color.

“Felicia, you really need to stop this,” Karen said, an admonition Luther suspected she had spoken before in response to Felicia’s excesses and that would, Karen had to know, only goad Felicia to say more. Karen a red-haired woman with a gash for a mouth and legs disproportionately short for her body. The impression formed of two young women somewhat young for their age, which Luther guessed to be their mid-thirties, about the same as his.

“No more than you, I wouldn’t think.”

“Did you hear that, Karen? He called a woman of color a racist.”

“Don’t mind her,” Karen said. “She hasn’t had her breakfast.”

It was to be a job with a lot of down time, as he learned in those first few weeks. Miss Carmelli—he could not bring himself to call her Snorky—suggested that he familiarize himself with the department’s publishing history and the org culture by

reading through its many publications. There were, of course, handbooks for girls, with camping activities and outdoor education, but the org also published resources for the numerous regional councils it chartered on topics from fundraising to property management to governance. GoA had a lot going on, as befit a national org that owned an entire building in midtown Manhattan, flew its own flag alongside that of the red, white, and blue, and employed a workforce of four hundred fifty people.

How lucky. He was in a job that would require little more than languishing in his cubicle—a job that wasn't really a job but more of an office away from home in which to do his own work. He became intensely happy with his good fortune and altogether, a sense grew in him that he was where he was supposed to be.

*Celeste, there had been a woman named Miss Nickles—Miss Nelly Nickles—who lived in room 4C3 when I was a child. She was old and frail and solitary, and when Vera and I went to visit, she would reach into a large mayonnaise jar filled with pennies and count out ten for each of us. Somehow, in my mind, she became linked with Miss Carmelli by her fragility and the same shy way she smiled. I had come home to my childhood through Miss Carmelli in the same way that I had come home to my childhood through my identification of you with Miss Kindelberger, the watercolorist to whom I delivered pancakes with lingonberries made by my mother.*

After sitting in his cubicle for a couple of weeks, Miss Carmelli called him into her office to say she had an important assignment. He was to proofread a text that had come down from the office of the national board of directors. The task did seem like an

inconvenience, as it pulled him away from his writing, but he went through the material quickly and returned the document to Miss Carmelli, as instructed.

With the assignment behind him, he returned to White Line, Continue, but he was not engaged with it for ten minutes before Miss Carmelli came to him. A look of severity had replaced her smile, and she spoke in a tone of amazed indignation.

“Holy crud. There is one mistake after another in this copy,” she said in a loud voice, placing the text right in front of him. Her marks, in green ink, were all over the pages. Spacing and alignment problems, as well as typos. She let him absorb the proof of his incompetence before hitting him with the coup de grace.

“If I had known you were going to do this kind of work, I never would have hired you.” She then turned and left him to himself.

*We are talking here of Miss Carmelli, not simply shy and diffident but at times peculiarly vociferous, thinking back to the interview, and now showing herself as formidable, a master of organization and detail, and the possessor of superb skills not only in writing and editing but the heavy work of book production and design. She was also blessed with a simple grasp of the concept of service. Her day in the office started early and ended late, a schedule which did not prevent her from availing herself of the cultural events of the city. She held season tickets at the Met and often took in concerts at Carnegie Hall as well as Broadway shows. Her curiosity drove her to buy books by the cartload at Barnes and Noble. A seasoned traveler, she had visited many of the great cities of the world.*

Miss Carmelli's words stung. She was Philomena Swangner all over again, an older Philomena. Desperate, he sought out Rafta. A strange thing to go to a scold to be cured of the lash of a scold. *Don't go where you don't belong, Luther. Don't go.* His neediness gave him something to talk about. Without it, what was there, now that he was gone from Cromartie Wonders. He took from her what he could in the assurance that he had been a good worker and gave her, in return, the admission that he was an alcoholic who had found an answer for his problem. A look of distress came over Rafta at this revelation about his drinking, prompting Luther to fear that he had made a great mistake, akin to one sharing that he is an ax murderer. To his surprise, she confided to him her concern about a dear friend's increasing reliance on alcohol.

*But I took it too far, Celeste. The God thing got hold of me. I bore witness to all he higher power had done for me and she blanched. Please understand: I was addressing myself to a private person, an Englishwoman of considerable reserve. Regarding this second disclosure, she could only offer me her silence.*

Luther was at the org for only several weeks when Miss Carmelli organized a staff outing to a design and production company in South Jersey. The small group gathered at Penn Station for the train ride, at their own expense, down to Philadelphia's 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station. The day trip summoned the feeling of intoxication that can accompany even a modest trip, and on pulling into the station in Philadelphia, there was the beauty of the main concourse, with its decorated ceiling and marble floor, which triggered a sad awareness



of what the senseless destruction of the original Pennsylvania Station had cost his own city.

A thing of consequence happened as they waited for the company representative to take them by small van on the last leg of their trip. Luther wandered off across the concourse in the direction of a phone booth, a sudden impulse to call Celeste having come over him. In that moment he felt torn between two masters—the woman he lived with and who had his heart and the woman, Miss Carmelli, for whom he worked. Amid the hundreds of scurrying travelers, he felt the burning sensation of her eyes on his back as he moved, seemingly in slow motion, toward the phone booth, the thought occurring to him that he was not only conspicuously betraying her but in some way *showing her up*. By his action he was saying, “You may think you’re important with this little outing, and you may have supervisory power over me, but I have things you can only dream about.”

*Celeste, you must understand that I have spent a lifetime setting myself apart. It is not a tendency that ends quickly.*

And yet, even in this worrisome spotlight, real or imagined, he was happy to connect with Celeste.

The company was situated in an industrial park in downtrodden Camden, New Jersey. The reality of decline was everywhere: piles of uncollected garbage, abandoned buildings, idle men hanging about on broken sidewalks at 10 a.m. Everywhere a mood of sullen anger. The park, with its patch of grass and newly planted trees and sparkling structures, stood as a pocket of order amid the encircling blight. (This is in the time when whitewash and “for rent” signs were ubiquitous in our city.)

*Celeste, we were given a tour of the facility: designers and typesetters at the controls of state-of-the-art equipment that summoned a dread I could trace to grade school, a sinking sense back then that I would never master the complexities of long division and thus be left behind now manifesting as a fear that the future held no place for those like me, built as I was for smaller things—paper, pencils, erasers, sentences—than the consoles that lined the walls of the workrooms.*

*Lunch was served in a windowless conference room. Miss Carmelli sat alone at the far end of the long table, virtually hidden behind a stack of proofs, which she busied herself with checking as the rest of us ate. It occurred to me that the material in front of her was the true staple of her diet, the thing that made her big and strong beyond her size. It also struck me that she was afraid of us. In that moment a feeling of sadness came over me and my heart went out to her.*

*“Father, an accounting of my life with Celeste will be difficult. I am with her now in spirit if not in body, and what is a body after all, as one gets older but a thing more and more in need of repair as it slowly runs down. From the highest perspective love never dies, and the pilot light of love still burns within me regarding her. It can feel like a betrayal of trust to make a record of one’s personal life. Is there not a punishment for such a thing awaiting me, as punishment awaits me for committing parents and family to paper as well? And will that punishment not come in the afterlife, where I will have to pay for such a grievous wrong? Once again, what kind of man is it who cannot live his life without seeking to report on it? May I hear from you about this?”*

*“Love yourself, Luther. Simply love yourself. This is your life. Live it and live it well. Do not fall under the paralyzing influence of superstitious dread. Recognize that the prohibition is more a fear of failure than of anything else. And remember too that Mommy is gone and has been for the longest time. Do not hold a vigil for the dead, dear Luther. Move on, and move on now. Act for yourself in the existential void that has been created.”*

And then the day inevitably came when her parents learned that their daughter was living with a man who was not her husband. Inevitably, Luther would have to meet them. But how could such a thing be? Her father was an able businessman, a powerful figure even with his recent retirement. Her mother was a brilliant writer with many books to her name. Where could Luther hide when they shone their light of inspection on him?

In this time Celeste said to Luther, “My father is not who you think he is.” Her statement was not emphatic. The air did not ring with her words. No alteration of the environment occurred. Nor was anything more forthcoming when he asked her what she meant.

“Just that,” Celeste said, her vagueness having no chance for permanence in his mind.

There was a man in this time. His name was Nathan Sbar. A bald head and a satyr’s gleam and a powerful sense of who he was were what he offered to your eye and mind. Like all the world he was on the lookout for excellence, and when he saw it in Celeste he made it a point to try to claim her for his own. And yet, despite his

lasciviousness, he never approached Celeste with overt carnality. He it was who barked at her, with a sense of proprietary power, “Does your father know about this man?” In earshot of Luther was Nathan Sbar as he spoke those words on his way out of the loft, leaving no time for a response to what he had made a polluting rhetorical question. Then and there did Luther resolve to remove the satyr from consideration for his affection.

But the day did come when Celeste brought Luther to meet her parents at their penthouse apartment overlooking Riverside Drive, with a full and glorious view of the Hudson River. Her mother gushed to Celeste, “He’s handsome.” Her father received him favorably as well. Both were relieved that she was out of her marriage to Peter, whom they essentially saw as a depraved hustler. With her former husband as the only basis for comparison, Luther could do no wrong.

The living room was vast. The colors were warm, but the room felt cold and unused, like a showroom they simply visited in transit. Their life was in the kitchen and their separate bedrooms and the den, where they served hors d’oeuvres, including thin, delicious slices of salmon from Zabar’s up on Broadway. The room was wrapped around with books, mostly hardbound, on shelves from floor to ceiling, and featured a display of shells under glass on the coffee table.

From the start Luther felt more comfortable with Celeste’s Old World father, Rolf, than her intellectually gifted mother, Iris, who was possessed of real ability in the hard sciences and mathematics as well as literature. She even had musical ability, having won a scholarship to Juilliard for her violin virtuosity.

Iris asked about his family. He told her that his father had died but that his mother was still among the living.

“Do you come from a large family?” she asked.

“Well, yes,” he said.

“How many siblings?”

“I have a brother and four sisters. Actually, one deceased herself, or so we have been led to believe, but owing to the apathy of the family, not a thing has been done to get to the bottom of the matter.”

“I’m sorry. Deceased herself?”

“It was a place of filth that still has an existence on an island in a river that equals it in filth. The wolves put in with the lambs, and some of those wolves not patients but staff with lasciviousness showing in their faces, in their minds, and the very words from their lewd mouths.”

“How strange. I don’t know what to say. Where is this place and what is it exactly?”

“Manhattan State Hospital, out there on Ward’s Island. You can see it in all its sealed off nature rising to the height of the Triborough Bridge as you cross the East River.”

“And you say your sister possibly deceased herself, meaning she committed suicide?”

“She walked into water where people should not go if they do not want mouthfuls of fecal matter and treacherous currents to deal with and to meet up with the many, many sleeping with the fishes down below.”

“With no reason she drowned herself?”

“That is the thing, is it not? We all have our day of infamy, except for the truly virtuous, and hit me hard with a stick if ever I say I am among them. That is the day when our apathy, our indifference, is on display for *us* to see, whether others do or not. She called to say she was being beaten, mercilessly so, by the predators on the ward, even after she had given them what money she had and her cigarettes. She was pleading with the family to get her out, and for me to be the messenger of mercy.”

“And what did you do?”

“I went that night to the bar and listened to the great Freddy Fender sing ‘Wasted Days and Wasted Nights’ and ‘Before the Last Teardrop Falls’ while loathing the bartender, Mr. He Who Moves His Long Straight Hair From His Face So Gently.”

“So you let your sister die there. Is that what you are telling us?” Rolf asked, sternness in his voice.

For hors d’oeuvres delicate slices of salmon on crisp bread had been offered, along with black olives. Feeling his strength, Luther replied, “Let the judgment be rendered.”

“And you say you have a brother?” Iris asked, perhaps seeking to move Luther free of the mire his own words had created.

“Yes, I do. We share the same flesh, if that is any way to say it.”

“And what does your brother do?”

“He is involved with real estate.”

“He sells real estate here in the city?”

“Not exactly. He lives in real estate.”

“What kind of real estate would that be?”

“He lives in an apartment out in Astoria, Queens, but he is determined to move into a house in the country.”

“Astonishing. And what about your sisters?”

“My youngest is a university professor.”

“And where does she teach?”

“At FIT.”

Iris looked puzzled. “FIT?”

“The Fashion Institute of Technology. It is here in New York City.”

“And what does she teach?”

“English.”

“English is taught at a fashion institute?”

“They read Charles Dickens even as they learn to sew. I once took an acting class and the teacher said you can’t learn to swim the English Channel by reading Proust, but there are some in this world who refuse to believe him.”

“Completely astonishing. And what about the other two?”

“One is a legal secretary and the other is a religious thinker.”

“A religious thinker?”

“Yes. She thinks a lot about God.”

“Well, what exactly does she think about God?”

“That he exists. She is awaiting the arrival of his son. She believes that he will come as a thief in the night, as the Bible says.”

“And does she write and publish articles and books on this subject?”

“Rachel has arrived at a place where books are not important. That wasn’t always so. As a child I remember staring in amazement at the sea of books the floor of her room had become.”

“Reading is not important?”

“The progression of her mind has been in the direction of the one book—the good book.”

“The Bible?”

“Yes. The King James Version.”

“Amazing.”

“It’s where her life has come to. She wasn’t always that way. You might say she was positively worldly, to use a pejorative we would hear in the church in which I was raised applied to those who were too much in the embrace of this realm. And Rachel was very much such a person in those years. She applied henna to her hair, shaped it in a formidable and hostile duck’s ass, wore those I-can-see-you-but-you-can’t-see-me sunglasses, and drank to excess and yet, when my father died suddenly of a stroke, she changed on a dime. She was no longer on the bottle and has not touched alcohol since.



She was seeking redemption, like Prince Hal in *Henry IV*, part one, who no longer wants to be seen as a wastrel but would rather, like Hotspur, be the theme of honor's tongue."

Silence ensued. Rolf, with his fixed gaze, seemed to be summoning extraordinary powers of perception by which to fit Luther into his frame of comprehension. His expression was neither friendly nor unfriendly but simply focused.

*Celeste, torment awaited me in the aftermath. Outwardly I was OK, but inwardly I was stricken, simply horrified by my performance. The shame engulfed me like a tidal wave that I had exposed my family to these accomplished people in this way. And it wasn't even my family. It was that I had exposed myself and dared to presume that they could have an interest in someone like me. Once again I was seeing myself through the imagined eyes of others, people who were my betters, people who would put the laughing thing on me, just laugh and laugh that someone such as I would even dare to show up in their midst. A man is supposed to have some protection against such feelings, but they poured in on me intensely, so that all I could do was utter nonsense syllables as a way of blocking them until the shame fever could run its course and reach for a roll of scotch tape, applying bits to secret places where I too might find a sense of privacy and escape their gaze.*

*And at my new workplace I was not without resources either. In the lavatory could I not place the smallest of nicks in the stall and, to double my insurance, touch it ritualistically, so no one could ever ever find me? And in my cube, for that is what I was now, Cubicle Man, with a view down on the avenue, did I not have a feature denied me at Cromartie, to compensate and more for the lack of a door to close? Was there not a hinge*

*joining one panel to another, and was there not a space in that joined panel through which I could see into the corridor, enabling me to witness those passing by from the neck down? Most deliciously, were they not unable to see me? Such joy was it given me to have this office perk that it was necessary to conceal it from one and all with a mask of serious purpose. And if some would judge me the most frivolous of men for seizing on such a paltry delight, well what are we to do but walk on by, as the great one advised in that Central Park concert of many years ago? Antidotes are needed for this inner turmoil, and we must find them as we can, tailored to our individual situations. But they are always there. Always.*

*Even so, challenges are to be faced as best we can when we are called out of hiding, and life did exactly that so it might continue to have its way, as it does for you and all of us. Your father, Rolf Rolm, summoned me to him for lunch in midtown Manhattan.*

*I will tell you that, on my way to meet Mr. Rolm, crying time came over me as I passed beyond the information booth on the concourse in Grand Central Terminal. And I will tell you too that it was crying time as I had never experienced it before (and was to experience once again, but that is for later, later). Right there, amid that segment of humanity that rushes to their trains or loiters at noon seeking for the terminal to transport them into a yesteryear where Cary Grant meets Eve Marie-Sainte for pullman car nights, shamelessly did I fall to my knees weeping, shame having no power over grief. And what was that grief? It was Peter. It was Lydia. It was Claire and Sarah and Jeffrey and Camp and all that had been and all they had given and the abuse and grief I had given them. In abandoning Sarah I had abandoned the family that had taken me in. I had*

*coldly executed them, walking out on one life with one family and now starting another with a second family. Lost to me they were in all but memory. Because Peter had studied history, and now he was part of my history, as were they all. Because as soon as a part of your life becomes history, you can walk back into it but you cannot stay. There I rested until the cold clarity of a nightstick tapping the marble floor awakened me once more to the exigencies of time.*

Luther stepped off the street and to the other side of a heavy door into the exclusive Century Club, where he was greeted by an elderly black man in a tuxedo, who had him sign the guest book before he proceeded up the marble staircase to the floor above. On the walls were paintings in oil of men of power and prominence. He entered the spacious and ornate dining room and assumed his place at a linen-covered table, where Mr. Rolm was already seated.

Celeste spoke of her father, albeit in vague terms, as if he was a terror, but she was referring back to a different time and place, when she was a child and he was at the height of his powers. The man I sat across from, who wrote out our order with the fountain pen he held in his shaking, liver-spotted hand, was not a publishing dynamo but a retiree with ebbing powers and Parkinson's Disease whose calendar was suddenly blank. Time had defanged him. The relationships that had been established through his work life had not survived the transition. He was not needed anymore. The waves of his hand and the nods he exchanged in that exclusive, wood-paneled dining room with men from his professional life were the only vestiges of contact that remained. They existed for each other only in memory; nothing of substance remained. It was that Luther was

seeing as he sat with his shrunken future father-in-law in his expensive and now ill-fitting silk suit, the insubstantiality and impermanence of power and prestige. And despite all his talk of his own ambition and the drive that had enabled him to successfully transplant himself to this new country, the sense Luther had was that he was sitting across the table from an exquisitely lonely man.

“Celeste tells me that you have a job. Is that so?”

“I bring home some bacon,” Luther said, seeking to stay on the path of truth.

“What?”

“I am in the employ of GoA.”

“What is GoA?”

“It is the end of America as we know it, an organization for the empowerment of girls so they may slay the beast of patriarchy.”

“That is their mission statement?”

“I would say it is my interpretation. Stealth must be an element for its future success.”

“And what are you doing in such an organization?”

“I am their token male. I am cover for their true cause.”

“What do you do for them?”

“I do their words.”

“What does that mean?”

“They write the words and I keep my eye on what they have written. I see if there is a disturbance in them that needs fixing.”

“You are an editor. Is that what you are saying?”

“I believe so.”

“You will use it as a steppingstone to a real job, one with real responsibilities,”

Rolf said. Luther was not affronted. Rolf was only saying what Luther himself thought.

And yet even then Luther sensed he had come home, that the torquing action would remain absent as a means of elevating above his current station.

*Celeste, your father was a septuagenarian at this time but undefeated by his age.*

*Through midtown traffic had he ridden his bicycle, with prudence, not audacity, as his guide. There was no jousting with trucks and buses, nor a conception beyond the practical as to his purpose. He was a point A to point B man, nothing more, nothing less, and rooted in Old World ways, his memory committed to the cobblestone streets of Berlin he traversed on his two-wheeler back in the time when he was young and storm clouds were barely on the horizon.*

Now, on leaving Rolf Rolm, Luther was wobbly. On Fifth Avenue he did some talking to himself, not in a loud fashion that would draw the eye of the public to him, but vocalizations only he could hear from the back of his throat with his lips closed. He started with Albigensian Crusade and sought added comfort from an old standby of equal syllabic strength, Honduran economy, this so he could calm the chaos in his mind. And of course he gave himself a good sit when back in his cube, with special attention paid to the

tiny opening in the hinged section through which he could see those passing by in the aisle without them seeing him.

It happened that largesse was part of Rolf Rolm's mentality, especially in older age. Having the contacts that he did, and seeing Luther in such a humble position, Rolf had the desire to raise him up. To that end Rolf arranged a meeting with Gloria Gent, an executive with the Book of the Month Club. There were a lot of books under consideration by BOMC for their imprint that needed their words looked at even after those same words had been looked at by others before the judgment had been made that they were word worthy.

"I see here your background is in children's books with Cromartie Wonders. You do understand that we deal primarily with adult books," Ms. Gent said.

"That is true, but children have their ears, if not their eyes, attuned to adults from their very conception. They are listening."

"What is your point?"

"I really don't know. But I did have an adult life at Pilgore Press before descending into childhood. A man or woman can go to both places, and is the better for it, in my estimation, even if my experience at Cromartie was not an entirely happy one."

Later he would blame the failure of the interview on nepotism, even if he wasn't a relative of Rolf Rolm. The shadow of favoritism had been cast, and with it undeserved elevation of Luther. No, no. That would not do. A person had to be aligned with his

station in life. He had to be the size he was if he was to have any chance of walking truly tall. And so listlessness overcame him. His chi had simply gone missing.

*Celeste, a Saturday, Sunday, and Monday without anger, or no great amount of it. I am making myself known to the world, having sent out a story to The New Yorker last week. And now here is a character in an Ann Beattie story instructing me to "be specific," and so I will try before once again I forget. The story was titled "The Office Visit."*

*But specific about what?*

*Celeste, in this time you decided to rule your own roost with the simple declaration, "I can control my drinking. I want to drink on social occasions." It was not for me to share, in that moment, my fear that I would lose you to the bottle, that it would reclaim its position on the kitchen counter and once more glow in the dark, as it had before I requested its removal. Denial would become a factor in our lives as you drank alcoholically every night. Conceivably, years and years of drunkenness lay ahead. And of course the fear that if you picked up alcohol you would do other things to injure us further. You were telling me to not fence you in. You were telling me that my words meant nothing in the face of your desire. You were telling me that you had a greater love than any you might have for me.*

*And yes, another fear, that you were drawn more to women than to men and that they would claim you for their own. And if they didn't claim you for their own, then the menfolk would. Many men would do such claiming.*

*And so I made threats. If this doesn't stop or that doesn't stop I am leaving. And each time I didn't carry out my threat I felt myself weakened in your eyes and so I would come at you with increased anger the next time, but to no avail. Celeste, I had no emotion but anger to offer. No refinement of understanding, no nuance, existed in me.*

*But now the Committee to Ensure Justice has arrived to demand that I acknowledge instances of kindness and affection and yes, even love, but they will go away shortly, as they always do.*

Luther loved Mia in the way that he could. "Mia mamma Mia," he would exclaim, in a burst of joy at the very sight of her. But she was not won over by his exuberant silliness. Instead she held to a posture of displeasure, as if to say, who is this oaf that has entered our garden? Luther understood that he must allow her to reject him until the day that she didn't and that a posture was just a posture, a wall of defense she had against any fracturing or diminution of the love she held in her heart for her father. Luther further understood that constancy was the key.

The caning had come loose on the set of chairs he had brought to his new address, and when the furniture repair man mentioned the cost for repairing them, and Celeste agreed, it was for Mia to say, "Why do we have to pay?" In this way was Mia letting Luther know that she was casting a discerning eye on what was hers and her mother's and what wasn't, and that a dividing line was a dividing line.



Whether it was the Bowery loft or the SoHo loft Luther was faithful to his coffee mug, though now it was tea that he was drinking because the coffee, which he drank black, had been punishing his stomach. But twelve cups of caffeinated tea was no easier on him than twelve cups of joe, and so, deprived of sleep one night, he said this punishment of my body must stop. He said it out loud, as an affirmation that the universe would confirm and support, but to the consternation, call it outrage, of Celeste, a light sleeper. And so now he had the misery of his abused stomach plus the consequence of his lack of thoughtfulness in regard to Celeste. Because, if the truth was to be told, he was not as protective of her sleep as he should have been, and it was for Celeste to educate him to the reality that she did not appreciate being woken by such intrusions as a nocturnal affirmation or a gentle rubbing of her back, no matter how loving he thought the latter might be. Was it too much to think before he acted? These things he took to heart, as it was his single-most desire to please her, however much he might act to the contrary when the illness aspect of his being flared.

Because he had been born with a mug in his hand, and because he feared it might be an infectious illness communicable to the one he loved most, he was relieved that Celeste maintained her professional discipline, giving her all to the work at hand, hour after hour, and that she did not adopt the distraction of the mug way of life, with the fuss of boiling water, disposing of the tea bag, and all the rest. Because to be with a woman was to aspire upward, to be more than he otherwise could be in the solitude of his mug-ness.

And if he was monitoring Celeste in that particular matter, he was monitoring himself in the matter of emotion. I have not let my soreness reign today, he would say, when sleep was about to call. He had not made his anger to get up, as his father before him had done. And then the day would come when the anger did get up and he would be cast down, down, for abusing the one he loved, and he would do the investigation he could, with the limited powers of self-analysis that he possessed. Was he unconsciously, or not so unconsciously, demanding the same things for himself that she had in her life? The same success, the same free time to gain that success? Was the relationship less about love than competition? Was it her educational background and success—her Carnegie-Mellon acceptance, her galleries, her certified status as an artist, her pedigree that he coveted?

Many days and nights did Luther live in the darkness of his worthlessness, the conviction that his only value was in relation to Celeste. He found corners and closets to hide in, many of them, before the light once more could shine through.

Now Luther had been developing reservations about Ned Fletcher, the man he asked to mentor him when Glanton Gladwell left his more local premises for the beyond. Yes, Ned Fletcher walked like a man and talked like a man, but he did so with a face that had passed beyond amiability to meekness, as if life had beat the starch out of him and now all that was left was a wan smile. Though his girlfriend Blessed attested to his acumen, citing the business manuals he had written, this had no sway in Luther's mind. Ned

Fletcher had not risen to the stature of program strength, not as Luther saw it. Ned Fletcher had no relationship with God. All talk of God was hooey to him. Ned Fletcher believed in the group; he believed in the “we-ness” of the program. Ned Fletcher kept it simple. And yet he was accessible, and a gentle comfort when Luther came to him in distress that Celeste and the world were about to leave him all alone because it was visible to them that he did not have the resources to stand up straight. It was not Ned Fletcher whom he doubted; it was himself. And yet the voice of doubt persisted; Luther might try to like Ned Fletcher, but he loved Glanton. And he did not take it kindly that Ned Fletcher had risen out of his meekness to say of Glanton that he was opinionated. No, no, the fire was in Glanton, the fire of conviction. Ned Fletcher would be wise to leave that word “opinionated” by the side of the road to perish of the neglect it so fully deserved.

Now Ned Fletcher came with Blessed for a visit, and it was for Luther to see that neither Ned Fletcher nor Blessed could ever have as their habitat a loft and that they required a smaller space where order could more easily be preserved. Surely the two of them placed a premium on tidiness. And how was it that Luther could presume to see such a thing about Ned Fletcher and Blessed? Because the tandem of Chanson and Rufus, the poodle and the coon hound of the manor, exacerbated their discomfort, and should you demand the why and wherefore of such a conclusion, it is right there before you in the manner, habitual, both Ned Fletcher and Blessed had of picking hairs shed on their garments by Rufus, if not Chanson, both of whom were seeking the love and affection it is only in their nature to give as well. Thus, if the amorousness of the canines was on

display, so too was the fastidious nature of the guests. And because Luther had his listening devices intact, he could later access the back and forth of Ned Fletcher's and Blessed's converse centering on the menagerie kept by Celeste, the gist of it being were they not grateful that they themselves were free of such unnecessary accessories to their lives? Were they not grateful that tidiness was central to their lives?

*Celeste, what I am saying is that all luster had been removed from their lives that they might walk the streets of New York City with a full measure of humility, and it is for me to further say that their homeliness was disturbing, as the world was still in me and I in it and with full resolution was seeking the fruits thereof. Renunciation regarding alcohol and drugs, yes, but in other matters I had come to conquer, that is, when I was not shivering with fear. But the absence of HGC—high God content—was an even greater disturbance. That Ned Fletcher exuded meekness profound was secondary, in my benighted mind, to the conspicuous absence of “God talk.” How could a man who did not testify to the power of God be mineral rich in spirituality? And so I swung into action. With no heaviness in my heart, no iota of remorse, did I seek to dispatch him forthwith with a succinct letter of dismissal for the absence of avowal.*

*After finishing, I was seized with the desire to call Glanton. In that moment understanding came to me that the letter was less about divestment than about attachment and that I couldn't have the latter without the former. Oneness with Glanton was the driving force behind my communication with Ned Fletcher. A divided heart was a broken heart.*

*“Glanton, I am in the process of taking an action for the fostering of unity,” I said that evening, and proceeded to fully explain. But my words did not sway him.*

*“How would you feel if you received a letter like that?”*

*There was no chuckle to follow his words. This was not a chuckling matter, he seemed to be saying. And so I was cast down once more and left by Glanton to see more deeply that I must not lean to my own understanding if I wanted to remotely resemble a human being.*

*New lessons for living. That is what we are about in this new day. Yes we are. And we have our infantry aligned for the fight we must fight, as you know. That fight within ourselves.*

Now a man came calling. *And if you say, why now this, now that, I will say why not and your silence will last forever.* His name was Federico Thwart and he showed himself with a fixed and unsmiling stare. Whatever he was showing or not, he was a Harvard man and arrived at the loft with a broom in hand that had a customized grip.

“I am here for your filth. It is what I live for,” Federico said.

Luther was well acquainted with at least the title of Proust’s novel, *Guermantes Way*, and in that moment the title came to him, and he said to himself, I have just heard Federico’s way, and so gave Federico the respect that he was due, strange as his assertion might have been. Federico was a high board score man who prepped those less gifted for the SAT, so they too could walk through the door to life. But he also had darkness in his big head, and in the big brain his big head housed, and made no attempt to hide his

wounded state of being. His humility was not a pose but a means for survival. He had no choice but to live outside the fences of the so-called normal, and you must not think that judgments born of anger and envy did not form, that he should walk about in ballooning khakis and worn sneakers, and that from malice as well as flawed insight he didn't speak, when within a week, he said, "How does it feel to be living with a child bride?"

*Celeste, I felt the presence of God today. This in zip code 10001, here in lower Manhattan. Joy abounding. I took to the streets, that I might return to the scene of my crime, this in February weather. There, in Chinatown, at Hong Fat I had a beef noodle dish, a custard, and a can of Sprite. At the library on East Broadway I ordered two books on writing fiction by Roderick Hound, he with the big thighs who spreads his legs so well, that I might learn from an alleged master. And a novel by Andre Dubus, The Times Are Never So Bad, that I might be fortified in my writing endeavors. The words paradigm of success came to me, but I could attach no meaning and so returned them to the sea, or wherever they had arrived from. Speaking of which, lying on beds of ice were fresh porgies, fresh smelts, whiting, fresh octopus, red snapper, fresh sea bass, mackerel, tile fish, fresh smelts, king fish, fresh squid. The brain power of the Chinese comes from the sea. So the voice said to me. On the steps of the Tombs, at 100 Centre Street, stood a police officer with his squawk box. Whatever was being communicated had to be important from the crackle accompanying the words spoken.*

Luther had grown up with Clint Eastwood. He had seen him rustle up some grub on chuck wagon outings and deal death to varmints in episodes of *Rawhide* before reappearing astride a horse in a poncho in spaghetti westerns and then migrating back to Hollywood. And though he sensed he should not admire Clint's bang bang way in *Magnum Force* and all the elements of power he accrued to himself, Luther, like others, was drawn along by the singleness of purpose and vision in big Clint's pursuit of vigilante justice. Because a big gun was a big gun with all that it represented. And big words were big words, regardless of the tightness of the mouth that spoke them. And were bigger words ever spoken than those by big Clint—"A man's got to know his limitations"—this after dispatching the dirty cop to the afterlife?

Because there was one who menaced their SoHo nights with a loud sound shooting straight up from the street level whence it came. The raucousness of good times rolling, a jamboree of jazz emanating from the Lust of Life club, owned and operated by its chef, Billy Joe Bojangle, who in his kitchen whites could himself be heard making the loud sound in angry disputation with those who brought complaint against him, as if heedless of the death-dealing spirits that could be aroused and drawn to noises in the dark. Lying in bed with Beloved, Luther felt his ire rising that BillyJoe Bojangle should be showing no respect for the creatures of the day, those called back to consciousness by the light after a night of rest.

*"Celeste, I showed some restraint. I did not swing directly into action. The tumult the second night was what drove me downstairs to Billy Joe Bojangle's domain. Over the sound of a sustained drum solo I asked for silence or even moderation to rule his scene,*

*But Billy Joe barked at me over his ample mustache, driving me back on myself with his wall of resistance. Despite his muscular physique, I sensed he was not a fighter, all his energy going into high decibel verbal expression, and that he was a man who would lean to his own understanding, not that from a man of meager substance.*

*Unbeknownst to me, Tunji Rahman, our landlord, was the drum master that night, his solos a complicated endeavor to add to the mysteries of the dark. So Billy Joe said. Music is its own magical sphere, claiming its freedom with every note, and better left to others than the likes of me.*

*The next night there came a loud knocking on our door. Tunji Rahman had shown up with the sole purpose of giving me a facial I would not forget.*

*“You just a fool, an uptight fool, in the land of the artists playing loose with everything but their own truth. All you got is the truth of your own rigidity, not allowing a black man’s drums to speak to you. Celeste here, she my lady love in the spirit in which I speak. She know what it mean to go with the flow while you lost on the motherfucking riverbank afraid to get wet and dig what downstream mean. All this coming to the river but never going in. You crack me up, white boy. You truly do.” And to authenticate his claim, he did some of his cracking up.*

*Celeste, there can be no disputing Tunji Rahman’s need for the vehemence of his expression, as the very color of his skin spoke to the dominance the white man had sought and succeeded in inflicting him through the centuries. And now for a white man to impose himself on the black man’s turf and seek to set himself up as ruler, confiner, repressor.*

*Tunji Rahman was not playing that way.*



*You and Mia were witnesses to his beatdown, to his stripping me of any power I might have thought to claim so he could be the only man before your eyes. And even if, for many centuries, I died and died, it was for me to understand where he was coming from.*

*(Celeste, there is no speaking to the texture of the love we knew there in the dark. That must explain itself out of sight and no words are needed.)*

There was another who drummed, though with his feet, not with his hands, and who gave a private performance for Luther shortly thereafter. Winfred Paley, too, had a tendency to be loud in the night, though not with his own sound. With Tamiko Oji away, he would be called out by his loneliness to the bars to seek the company he could find and return home drunk and shed of his possessions, including his keys, requiring him to ring our bell with an insistence that could not be ignored. Tall and pale and trim and strong, he made no apology for his intrusion into our lives but simply asked for access to the loft so he could descend the fire escape and gain entrance to his own place. When, for the third time in a month tLuther and Celeste and Mia were woken, Luther confronted Winfred, who responded with rapid footwork. Like pistons his boots slammed into the wood floor in a display of threatening power, Winfred saying this is what I will do to your face and all parts of your body should you continue. And so Luther gave him abhayamudra, his right hand held at shoulder level with palm out, as he had seen the buddhas do at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, so Winfred could know that Luther meant him no harm and cease and desist with his stomp machine.

Winfred Paley was gone before Luther had hardly arrived. Tamiko Oji, his lover or roommate and emphatically his admirer as a fellow dancer, was a heartbreak witness to his decline, for while his body remained strong, an affliction of his mind took him where it was better that he not go. Tamiko Oji indeed spoke from a place of sorrow that Winfred Paley should suffer a fall from professional eminence because of his malady and now be in the care of an institution. Luther saw her tears and saw that they were real, saw, that is, that she was not the reflexively emoting kind. Luther saw too the range of excellence that was abounding there in SoHo in a variety of arts and that Tamiko Oji put a piercing glance of dismissal on him, seeing in the way she would that he, Luther, was not extraordinary in any of the ways that mattered to her. That glance of dismissal from Tamiko Oji Luther was able to put to good use, because any glance that reconciled him to his ordinariness had to be acceptable if a measure of humility was to be his goal, even as the voice that was great or said that it was great within him had other notions for his destiny, because even at the age he had come to did he know he must expand his life beyond any limiting borders before he was sequestered in the earth or dispersed as ashes to the universe lest intolerable loneliness be his inheritance for eternity.

But do not think that it was all weighted against Luther and that he had been driven down forever by the likes of Tunji Rahman and Winfred Paley and any facial that Tamiko Oji could muster, because the night came when he was summoned not by the drums of Tunji Rahman or to witness the staccato stepping of Winfred Paley, his toned legs serving as powerful pistons, but of an all too human cry. Roused from slumber by the ringing phone,

Luther picked up the receiver to hear Frederick Solomon Smart, the antiquarian book dealer and remaining tenant reveal his more than worried mind with an urgent plea that he come quickly, lest in his solitude Frederick be perished with a heart attack. Within minutes and with full concern was Luther by Frederick's side, administering to Frederick's need for comfort and reassurance with all the benevolent attention that he could summon. But before a diagnosis, let alone a prognosis, could be offered, Luther needed to be found worthy of full disclosure by Frederick of his most recent consumption of food and drink, and therein lay both the problem and the answer. A big bowl of guacamole had Frederick devoured. Three servings of chilaquiles and five fiery tacos had he also gobbled, with mucho cerveza to keep it all moving.

“You may be a victim of your own gluttony. At what time did this feeding frenzy end?”

“An hour ago.” Frederick said he had fled to the emergency room three times in the recent past, driven by a fear that he was suffering a heart attack, and did not want to earn the reputation of the boy who cried wolf.

Luther suggested that he stay upright for an hour and let gravity do its work rather than lie down and suffer. Luther laid it out plain to Frederick Solomon Smart. He said it was one thing to be a bag of bones, a hanging string of nothingness in the wind, and another to be a tub of lard, a fatness butterball of girth unchecked, but that the latter was more likely to fall moribund and that if he wanted to stay among the living he must call on the powers that be to give him the restraint he lacked, and that such restraint would

likely not be found so long as he was operating on his lonesome. He said there was a program for those such as Frederick where he would find support.

Luther said good night, as his work was done and there was no basis for a rapport beyond his emergency visit, given that Frederick Solomon Smart existed in a higher echelon, one that drew him into complicated business arrangements that required a discerning judgment for him to survive. In short, he had the weight of full responsibility; he was not the kind to sit in a cube at an empty desk staring through the wee spaces of a hinge for movement of passersby in the corridor when he had a man's work to perform.

Now in this time Glanton placed a malediction on New York City. Previously he would read to Luther the weather report for the Los Angeles area. While the entire Northeast was in the grip of a winter storm La La Land was experiencing temperatures in the low seventies, with little humidity. Long lingering chuckling would follow, but because honesty was fundamental to his nature Glanton also confessed that New York City was where it was at and everywhere else *was just camping out*, words that had no choice but to be memorable. But on this day that Luther called, darkness was reigning in Glanton's mind and he was raining it down on Gotham. The city would soon be hit with a *totally* devastating earthquake that would level the tallest tower and the lowest tenement alike. All would be laid waste and survivors would be few. Rats would feed on the dead and dying and the criminal underclass would rise up and hold marauding sway. The entire city would have to be bulldozed and built anew, should anyone care to bother.

Luther was too paralyzed by fear to ask questions. It was not his way to doubt Glanton, but now, for his own survival, he had to question him in his mind for dooming Celeste and Mia and himself and the entire city. Who spoke with such certitude, and based on what? Only the terribly insecure could express such unfounded conviction. Ned Fletcher had been right, and understating it, to say that Glanton was opinionated. But then, suppose Glanton was coming from an insecure place equally open to doubt about other matters, including God? Suppose he was delusional? Did he not say things of dubious validity, such as attributing his rages to allergic reactions to smells and food and the like? But no, Glanton was Luther's guy, chuckle and all, the guy he had left Harvard-educated Dr. Rosner for. Was it not Glanton who said the function of a mentor was to serve as a guide, help the one he is mentoring improve his conscious contact with the higher power, and then make himself increasingly unnecessary? Luther would now simply have to live with the anxiety Glanton had caused that someday the earth would move beneath his feet and the Empire State Building would collapse upon him. And he would live with it. He had his breath to see him through. But in the newspaper next morning was a small article about a fault line at the bottom of the Hudson River and a criss-crossing fault line running west to east along One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street. The article was not projecting a cataclysm of the kind that Glanton, with the vengeance of the Old Testament God, had prophesied, but the reality was that New York City had its own San Andreas Fault and the Big One could be on its way. And that same night did Luther hear a hellish kind of chuckling coming from the West Coast, as if in punishment for being a doubting Thomas as to the high fidelity of Glanton's words to the truth. Then did

Luther hear the wretched lyric “nowhere to run, nowhere to hide,” and though he could not say whence it came he understood it was meant for his ears only.

There came the day, some months after living with Celeste, that he and she decided to marry, respect being due to the institution insofar as Mia was concerned, though Mia, if asked, might have said, no, no, do not do that Mommy, even though her mother was now divorced from Peter. Although there had been some small signs of thawing, Mia was still in the jamais, jamais rejectionist phase of her connection with the strange man who had entered her life. And he was strange, with his irregular features and peculiar manner of speaking, at least with her, exclaiming “Mia, mamma mia,” whether from joy or nervousness or both, on seeing her.

*Now Celeste, there had been a rapprochement with my sister Vera. No longer was she of the mind to say, as she had, “Mother, kick him out,” and to call me a rip-off artist as she filled with self-righteous rage. I had since confessed to my envy of her professional success and my disappearances in attending neither her graduation from the great Columbia University nor her wedding. Rather than be the good older brother, I had behaved as one in the realm of the dink. But now she was opening her door to us. She was inviting us to a get-together a week before we were to be married. And so we went, and though it will not go down in history as a date that will live in infamy, trouble plenty was imminent from the time we set foot in Vera’s West End apartment and memory will stay faithful to all that could have transpired on that night. Let me say that among the*

*innocent, they being my mother and Vera and her husband Maury, and of course, yourself and young Mia, there was one who, while at the threshold of abominable guilt, did not cross over into that dismal sphere. And why, why, did he not cross over; you may ask? Would it be for me to forget whence I came and leave all vigilance behind so the heinous deed could easily be committed? And yet it did catch me by surprise that Moses, Hannah's only child, was from the start not simply conversing with but birddogging you from room to room. Wherever you sought your escape did he follow, in the full flower of oedipal frenzy. He had met his prey and was now in a ravenous state. If we are to live in the higher realm, there can be no phoniness abounding. What we spot is what we got. Moses' predatory intent, while apparent to me, would likely not have been to someone such as Maury, whose mind is not polluted with carnality. You yourself were made uncomfortable by his attention, but you would not go so far as to say you were afraid of him.*

So that history would not repeat itself, Luther came prepared to City Hall, he and Celeste having gone to Tiffany's, where they selected wedding bands, hers being quite a bit thicker than his. No, there had been no marriage proposal on his knees. No, he had not, over a candlelit dinner, presented her with a diamond wedding ring she would treasure forever. He did not know from wedding rings. He did not know from ceremony. He was of the people, the Horn and Hardart's Automat people, the Chock Full O'Nuts people, the park people, the people who went through life alone except for the women they could find to be with them. He did not do the complexity of friendship. He did not have the

time or the energy or the generosity or interest for that. He did not care. He just did not care. He was done with caring. Caring was all he was taught growing up. He must care for this one, that one. In that way he was his father's son. Where he went, he went alone with his coffee—now tea—and cherry cheese danishes and his baseball and basketball box scores. And yet wept, wept, over standards like "I've Got You Under My Skin" and "Gloomy Sunday." He knew the meaning and power of connection, and the longing for it. But there was room for only one other.

Now Luther's mother did not come, nor did Hannah or Rachel or Vera or Maury or any others from his side of life. Nor did Darlene Love sing "Today I Met the Boy I'm Gonna Marry." There was no walking up the aisle any which way nor preliminaries like a bridal shower or bachelor's party where the men who would be men would gather for ribaldry galore. No, no, to that as well. There was only the grayness of the Municipal Building far downtown, where he and Celeste waited for Wound Tight, who arrived glowing with the news of her high-level appointment to the city planing board. Luther could find no way to bridge the gap between Wound Tight and him, given her high echelon board status and now certifiable in her excellence as a "commish." He felt her coldness toward him in her bones, her secret contempt. It wasn't for him to think another's thoughts, but he felt it, and felt the tawdriness, the sheer mediocrity of his life, was somehow on full display on that dreary gray day and what had he done, he had made a horrible mistake, gone where he did not belong, in situating himself among these high achievers. Living within the confines of your scorn is beyond my capacity to endure. These words came to him begging for expression if only he would dare to cross



the line and take the action necessary to end his cowering before Wound Tight's excellence.

The wedding ceremony was performed in the same sterile room, with a civil servant presiding. Now if he could only go home and sit by himself in a corner. How ugly everything was, how hopeless. I was never meant to marry. It is a gross blow to my pride to be hitched, to wear this band. I have injured, mutilated myself. A lifetime of sadness awaits me. These words came to him as well. He had nothing to say to Wound Tight at the brunch that followed. He simply listened as Celeste and her lifelong friend chattered on.

“Are you all right?” Wound Tight felt obliged to ask.

“I am simply awaiting my departure.”

“Your departure?”

“From this life that is too close to me and my business. I need a little more distance than I have been receiving. The world is too much with me and all of that.”

Wound Tight was gentle with Luther. She intuited his lack, and made allowance for it, for she was a model of tact keenly attuned to social nuance. In this way did she make great progress with her fellows and enjoy the camaraderie that ensured she would survive her blowup with Just Deserts, he of the sharply prosecutorial mind. And to Luther's credit, he had no desire to attempt a fathoming of her morality with lust leading him on.

“This is a big day for you,” Wound Tight said.

“And for you. You have gotten a job and Celeste and I have gained each other, if that is any way to speak. There is a world of meaning in the two, though I will not even attempt to guess what it is. I am entirely without the confidence that comes to me when I am typing out my words. This I do know, however. When the sun is shining, I am better with my life. There is a sadness to the cobblestones as well we see outside the window in this light. They hold within them the history of strife and struggle in these parts. They are alive with their own memories, and like us, are susceptible to changes in the weather. Do you not think that they too have heard Billie Holiday sing ‘Gloomy Sunday?’ Or danced ecstatically to Bessie Smith singing ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band’? All around us is inanimate nation, and respect must be paid.”

“Interesting,” Wound Tight said, before turning her attention to Celeste.

*Celeste, we both accept that a sense of community is necessary for world order, and with your encouragement, I was able to rally strong and break free of the cowering mentality that would have me pasting scotch tape to my desk and peering through cracks in a cubicle wall. There would no hiding in plain sight at the reception your parents planned for us. And yet no sooner had we set foot inside the club where the reception was held than Hannah came to me and whispered ferociously, held in check from going to the loud sound only by the strangers around her, “They have deprived my son. You stand here all happy without a single thought as to what they have done to him.”*

*“What who has done to him?”*

*“Do not get personal with me. Do not do that.”*

*And so she had her ire going, her primary gift being the guilt and misplaced sense of responsibility she wished to burden me with, and that was a gift she had been giving since I was a child.*

*The following day it was for my mother to say, "Moses is in jail. He is accused of raping a girl. Hannah is beside herself."*

Moses had come calling on Alison, a girl from his acting class, for a first date. She had seen that he had award-winning ways, especially in the looks department, and he was easy to talk to and eager to please. And so he came to her apartment and off they went to a local restaurant for fine dining and fine conversation, enjoying each other's company in the way that young people with a possibly budding romance will. At dinner's end Moses did the courtly thing and walked her home and would have said good night then and there but he had left his knapsack upstairs and would she mind if he came up and got it. And because they had a good vibe going between them, she said sure, come on up and get your knapsack, because it was his knapsack and might have some essentials he would not want to do without. Once inside he took out a bag of weed. Maybe she would like to smoke some with him and maybe they could kick back and listen to some tunes and get real mellow. All this he said to Alison, but it didn't sit right with her. She was tired after a day of work and needed to go to bed. She said no, not tonight, and he said why not tonight? And she said because I don't want to and he said you don't have to be talking to me in that tone of voice and she said I'm not talking to you in any tone of voice. I just want you to go and he said there you go with that tone of voice again and she said please

just go and he said, mimicking her, please don't go and she said please go or I will call the police and he said just like a fucking bitch to do that, drop a dime on me and for nothing which was when she bolted for the door and he said, after grabbing her hard, where you going, little girl? To Mommy? To Daddy? I'm your mommy. I'm your daddy and so it went, Moses asserting himself the way a man needed to when all a woman wanted to do was drop a dime on him for no reason.

*Celeste, my mother was there but not there. Increasingly, she was living with the Lord. Where else could she go, at eighty years old, with one of her children expired and another in the grip of religious psychosis and another on the fast track to extinction? Only Vera was commendable to her sight, with the degree of normalcy she manifested in her flesh and bones and mind. After all, she had a husband who was not only smart but good, even if, in his own way, he too was one to vacate the premises, with his addiction to marijuana and movies, and with not a critical bone in his body as to the merit of what he was seeing on the screen. Intelligent people can be like that, Celeste, as you surely know from your own experience. Though their minds can hold great complexities, they will find a pathway through to simplicity, while ordinary minds such as mine can be mired in muddle town or find themselves prisoners of toxic ideas. Only the light can dissolve that muck and mire and toxicity and show us the path forward. We are stumbling about in the dark without that light, Celeste. There can be no doubt about it, no matter the finery we wear or the affectations we display or the postures we assume. Sooner or later must our own inner fraud police apprehend us and place us in lockdown for spiritual renewal if we are to*

*have any chance at true success. In short, we must rise up and put the laughing thing on those who have assumed it was their given right to put the laughing thing on us. As for my mother, she put the laughing thing on no one, righteousness precluding such a display. And if I have just said that she cast a scornful eye on some of her children, that is pure balderdash—yes, you heard right, balderdash. She did not see in the light of my understanding but of her own. From her had we come, and so it was not possible for her to see us as we saw her. We were competing for her, but what need had she to compete with us? Like Glanton with his disciples such as me, she had the freedom to do chuckle plenty. But there was one on whom she could not practice such chuckle, whether in abundance or stintingly. No, no, whether mother or father or the man on the street, you did not put any kind of chuckle on Hannah. Her ire was too close to the surface. Even if she was laughing uproariously one minute, fury could manifest the next. She, more than any other, had internalized the value of my father's threat to be made to get up. Hannah was always being made to get up, that is, get her anger to rise up, whether sitting or standing did not matter. The exegesis of family ruin lies in an understanding of that anger, Celeste, with which she claimed ownership of us, as if she herself were the God of the Old Testament. But what was the purpose of that anger other than to remind us, collectively and individually, of what we had done to her and the reparations that were due? It mattered little that I was born many years after her. None of it mattered. She lived in expectation of compensation for wounds inflicted: the man who came and went and left her with a son; her breast cancer; the regions that her mind traveled to as a result of her pain. But there was one she could not go against, with words or otherwise, that one being*

*God, lest he strike her dead, the other being my father, who even from the grave had the power of life and death over her, and we will not go there, to the unsavory place. We are not be found where we do not belong.*

Celeste had survived a close call at Vera's party. That was the import of the disclosure to Luther about the arrest of his nephew Moses. If Moses had been alone with her, Luther would now be in a different life. At best, his marriage would have been postponed. More than likely it would have been canceled. He himself would have been shunned by Celeste and her family. The reach of Hannah would have proven to be great, given her malign power over her son to serve as her instrument of revenge. Or Celeste might even be dead. He remembered his mother's words about Moses some years before. He had not been a normal boy. There was something wrong with him. So she had said. Luther had laughed and said there was great emotional disturbance in him as well. No, she had said flatly. There is no comparison to be made. He is seriously ill, she said, in a way so emphatic that Luther did not inquire what it was she had seen in Moses to lead to such a strong statement.

*Celeste, we see the critics circling. We hear them practicing their one-liners. The longer the work, the shorter the dismissal. We hear the savagery that drives their pith. But they will not leave us for dead. The laughing thing we will turn on them; its duration, in our goodness and mercy, will be for something less than eternity.*

A honeymoon was in order, and though trepidation followed Luther onto the plane that would fly Celeste and Mia and him to San Francisco, that December, he worked overtime to hide that fear, burying himself in a biography of trustbuster supreme Theodore Roosevelt, who by his vigor and intellectual prowess, was deserving of every page the author, Edmund Morris, wrote. The fact that the aircraft was the suspect and increasingly treacherous DC-7 only increased his mental effort to keep it aloft even as he read.

The underground garage at their hotel was a torment to him, as in its desolate spaces he anticipated the appearance of their remorseless executioner, who would fire his pistol freely till all three fell dead. And if it did not happen, if no murderer appeared from any of the columns or from behind a parked car, it was only because his vigilance was soaring, as it had on the transcontinental flight.

Because Luther had no great understanding of a child's needs, Mia was put in an adjoining room of their suite. And though that suite had a door giving her access to their room, her cries were loud in the night and a torment without ceasing to their ears. Here the brilliance of Glanton showed itself. Called upon to adjudicate the dilemma, he offered the wisdom of Solomon in a voice that, while quiet, showed traces of judgment around its edges, as if in wonderment that Luther's rigidity should have been the obstacle it was to Luther arriving at the solution himself. In fidelity to a true and honest and thorough accounting, it must be noted that Glanton had in this time no love to call his own, other than Babs, who remained his wife even as she lived separately and with a succession of

female lovers. And while Glanton had Luther's full trust, love being love and always finding its way back wherever it might stray, in one matter Luther did remain dubious. How could Gladwell profess that he and Babs had an unconditional love for each other? All Luther could see was that the woman had run off on him.

"Don't die, Mommy. Don't die. Love you, Mommy." So did Mia cry out on that San Francisco night, but Luther was not dissuaded from believing that she still would find room in her heart for him even as he remembered his own fears that his mother might instantly perish from the earth.

*Now Celeste, it was not Mia's fears that you were monitoring so much as my own, which felt to you like a restricting net had been cast over both of you. Such a surprise it turned out to be, that all along your own monitoring devices had been set to such a high level that with one utterance akin to a flick of the wrist, one concise and devastating statement, could you definitively and irrevocably render me worthy of eradication from existence. I had to that time not experienced the smiting powers you were gathering for that one good clean blow.*

Luther had come equipped with a camera as well as a pen, that life as it was being lived on the West Coast should not be lost to his memory. The camera was a good one, a Nikon F3, with semiautomatic exposure control so Luther would not have to fuss with a Weston light meter and be a slave to the zone system and all of that. He could rely on the camera to give him the absolute blacks and whites and all the gradations in between that would make his photos stand out as did those of the masters, like W. Eugene Smith, and he could focus on shooting, just shooting, capturing, just capturing.



Now it happened that San Francisco had its share of churches, and that from one of the more majestic ones came a man older in years wearing his Sunday finest. He had no need for doodad garb but wore instead a lightweight black suit and a white shirt with a silver tie and had his gray hair combed straight back so his full and serious face could be fully revealed. Though short, he cast a commanding presence and had no mind for the face police daring to surprise attack with the imperative that he smile, as he did not do smiles on order. He was clearly an omertà man, locked into his silence and when called upon to break it, a man of a few words only. So formidable was his face that he dared you to be in its presence, and yet Luther closed the distance. He did not flinch before his toxic gaze, nor was he buffeted by the hostile stare of the woman escorting him, she a head taller. Luther stood strong and clicked, and his bones were not broken for doing so. His camera was not snatched and smashed. No devastation was performed on him.

They walked the Embarcadero and boarded a ferry to Alcatraz, of which it was said that only the most notorious had been sequestered there to reflect on their misdeeds, the suffering they had brought to those who survived their iniquity, and the premature perishing they had brought to others, allowing no time to say goodbye to loved ones or otherwise tie up loose ends. He was thinking especially of Al “I smash your head like a pumpkin with my big bat” Capone, who got his just deserts for deceasing one and then another and another as if humanity was as disposable as snowflakes. As they voyaged forth, Luther saw that the cold and waxy-looking waters were rough and remorseless and so he had need to bring special powers to bear on them and bring them to the level of stillness he was seeking in himself. Inside the prison compound the silenced and ghostly

cellblocks spoke to the austerity measures needed to survive and the iron bars spoke to the hardness of men without women. On foot as on the ferry, Luther saw that the water was possessed of an adamant resolve to take down all those foolish enough to attempt traversing its currents to reach the shore.

Now Celeste, we ventured north. No city could lock us in when green was so nearby and calling, specifically Muir Woods. Like Trust Buster Teddy, John Muir was a champion of the great outdoors and allowed neither grizzly nor mountain lion nor wily coyote to stand in his path. For some reason he had advanced understanding of their predatory predilection that rendered him safe. The key was in accepting there was no perfection in this world, only need. Never had a man been more triumphant in finding an outer correspondence to his inner spaciousness.

Once we entered the woods we lay down on the side of the trail. Yes, the redwoods were tall beyond description, but our bodies and minds, including hyperactive Mia's, were focused on the joys of decompression from city living. A fog rolled in off the Pacific Ocean, but this was no noir landscape. This was simply nature. And yet nature could hold us only so long. We were city dwellers, not explorers of the forests and woodlands of America.

Soon we were back in San Francisco, zigzagging down Lombard Street and walking the streets of Haight-Ashbury, where my runaway thirteen-year-old niece Jeanne had sought refuge in the smoke-filled sixties. The Haight meant nothing to you, Celeste, rooted in your own excellence as you were and rendered impervious to the rock and roll sixties by your immersion in classical music. Thus, you were free of the residual

vulnerability to the call of a time I seemed rooted in, as if by acid rock and acid itself, this longing for something left behind. There is something to be said for pure intelligence as a deterrent to the affliction of nostalgia.

*The Golden West was a state of mind, the land of the eternal sun. Who would say the same of the Atlantic Coast? California was, though he came in the early seventies, Bill Walton and that dazzling blue and gold of the UCLA Bruins. It was Patty Hearst in her SLA time. It had been that way since childhood, since the time of Tall Tommy, the building handyman, and the avocado farm in Southern California he promised to take Luke and me to when he finished up his secret mission for the government; it was Zorro and Vertigo, and later Bullitt. It was endless play and intrigue in the golden haze. And yes it was the hill sloping down down to the buildings where people had their lives and the Negro couple lying in the short grass looking back up, he saying to Mr. Robert motherfucking Frank with his motherfucking white man camera what the motherfuck you be looking at Mr. motherfucking white man spying on us with your white man shit trying to put it all over me and her get the fuck out of here before I break your motherfucking bones every last motherfucking one of them spoke the power of his Negro—as he was then called—stare.*

*We headed down the Pacific Coast Highway for Christmas in Carmel with gifts we wrapped and packed for opening before leaving New York City. Surely they are an expression of love and take on importance in the moment to the point at times that we feel we have put our selves on the line with our offerings, but now they are gone from my memory, as I am sure they are from yours. What I do remember is that while the seaside*

*did not call to me, the local RoR meeting did. My fixation on getting to meetings as often as possible was not in abeyance on the trip, my reasoning being this: while I am on a honeymoon, my illness never is. But yes, I hear you, Celeste. There is a line between soaring vigilance and all of that and superstitious dread, and the latter was afflicting me in those still early years of my recovery. Step on a crack and break my mother's back became miss a meeting for a day or two or three and you will be struck drunk. You saw that fear was driving me on that day, and yet it is also true that there is no bad reason for going to a meeting. We must try to carry on with no self-savagery. Just for the record, this was before the time big Clint Eastwood, he who could squint like nobody's business astride his steed, would take the reins of government in this small seaside city, having been the people's choice for mayor.*

Big Sur gave them no reason to stop. Henry Miller had removed himself from the world, but if he was still around, it would likely be in that community, where he had lived an as an older man. For many years he had great meaning for Luther, beginning with the Rosy Crucifixion series. For Luther as a teenager, the trilogy had been more pornography than But now Henry Miller had no meaning for Luther, and even less for Celeste. Never mind Lydia Van Dine dismissing him for the absence of plot and structure. There was no way to transplant Henry Miller from the streets of Paris to California. He belonged to another time in Luther's life, as did Fitzgerald and Dostoyevsky and Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser. He didn't dare say the same about Leo Tolstoy or Ernest Hemingway, nor about Faulkner. Maybe resurfacing in America, and in a hippie bastion, is what did it. Some hiddenness was necessary to maintain the mystique. At some point Henry Miller

had evolved or devolved from author to human being. He had been emptied out, exorcised of his demons. His quantum of words had been met. Such depletion was actually admirable. Luther could only imagine the freedom that came from having nothing more to say.

*Celeste, in San Luis Obispo was a railroad yard behind the RoR meeting place, and though the tracks called to me with great and persuasive strength, I held onto my seat, as if it were the bottle calling with its false promise of untold dreams to be fully realized should I follow. As I have mentioned, Gertrude Stein, in her knowingness, had set me wise as to the allure of the rails for men such as me, men who saw themselves as hanging strings seeking the proximity to power provided by sights such as, through the window, I was witnessing now, a Union Pacific road switcher doing its shunting thing. Back and forth it went in its intrepid way, showing that proud gray and yellow and red coloring sufficient to make a person delirious, hauling boxcars and gondola cars and refrigerated cars and flatbed cars, just doing its job of assembly for the long haul freight that would be pulling out that night.*

*There is no age requirement for sorrow, as we all know, and little Mia had her moment when we made a restroom stop and bought a soda for her at the adjoining store. They could offer us neither can nor bottle, only a jumbo-sized container, and it set her to weeping when we had her leave it behind rather than risk a spill in the backseat, because for some reason the store could also not provide a lid. The question is whether we could have exercised more patience. Was she a slow sipper? Was she drinking from the cup to make it last for the day? These are questions we cannot answer. What we can say is that*

*she was fierce in her determination that the container receive maximum respect. The container, was for her, virtually a living thing. And now it was to be abandoned? For that reason depositing the container in a trash bin would be a cruelty beyond measure. We must leave it there on the pavement where the light of day could find it and so hope could remain alive that a kind soul would happen by and take it for his or her own. Even with the great compromise, as I said, there was weeping and wailing in the backseat for the next stretch of miles.*

*Hearts get broken, Celeste. They get broken.*

*My education (never mind the factoids in the biography of Big Stick Teddy. Just never mind them.) continued at the Santa Barbara zoo, where I was put on alert as to the primal force of nature and reminded that my vigilance must always be soaring. With my back turned to the cage, I heard a roar of such power that it traveled from my toes up through the top of my skull. I had only to turn to see that a full grown tiger was at the bars, and if its first message hadn't been enough, it was now delivering that same message to my face, and in so doing showed off its dagger sharp canines. Here was all ferocity, all the time with no sliver of mercy in the beast's makeup. He was in fact a tiger burning bright in daylight and carrying the message to faites attention, as that scold of a French teacher Mlle. Gallimard back when I was in high school used to say.*

*Now Celeste, the sun had its eye on us, or so I would like to believe; it had our back and our face. A constant presence during the day, even in darkness it ensured a comforting softness. And yet there was trouble in paradise. Do not get me wrong. Our flag still flew, and the republic for which it stands still stood, but there was a shaking in*

*its collective knee. On a downtown subway in New York City, the number 2, on which I had been a faithful rider my entire life and regarded it as a symbol of order, from its rattan seats and overhead fans to red cars that dazzled, there had been a shooting, not by someone who would have been seen as the usual shoot em boy run run, but a man who wore propriety on his face while his heart was stoked with fear bordering on terror that what had happened to him once would happen again, that those of a violent disposition inclined to step out of their lane into his would do so again, And here it was repeating itself, though the approach was different, extortionist threats couched in soft voices and smiles from a group of four young males, blocking him off from view of the other passengers in the car.*

Luther had not met Bernhard Goetz. He would not have been part of Bernhard Goetz's electronics genius world had they met. He did not have Bernhard Goetz's high IQ power. No, no, no. He would have been a walk on by in Bernhard Goetz's life. But he had sufficient understanding of Bernhard Goetz to walk in his shoes, if only for a while. Luther too could imagine his own omnipotence. No need to do the dinky thing and lie about that when many were multiple facets of human mentality that operated in his being. Did he too not have turn the tables fantasies? Did he too not do savage things with strange new powers he found himself with in his fantasies? Did he not break the bones of those who surrounded him with their big teeth and big muscles and big, big laughing thing? Did he not rejoice that one who prepared to carve him with a Bowie knife should scream in pain when his hair suddenly burst into flames? Or that the grinning fool who served as an accomplice should fall to the ground in agony when his kneecap

mysteriously flew off? Or that a third fled in terror when his right eye popped free of its socket? All of them exclaiming, somewhat more crudely, “What manner of man is this that he should have such power?” before fingers and more significant body parts began to depart their persons and they were nothing but nothing to behold?

Had Luther too not witnessed the growth of a criminal underclass, the yo bro brigades that sought domination as an answer to their own fears or simply because it was in their heedless natures to impose their power? Did not everything trace back to scenes from his childhood, those endless bicycle caravans of summer, young black men migrating from Harlem to the Upper West Side to hook up with relatives in the two single room occupancy hotels—welfare hotels, as they were then called—and quickly finding reason to beat on the white boys of the neighborhood, LeRoy saying to Luke, “You call me something, white boy motherfucker? You call me something?” Saying this, and Luke saying, “No, no, I didn’t say anything,” so LeRoy could say, “Motherfucking white boy calling me a liar,” before punching Luke in the mouth, this not even in the heat of summer but with snow on the ground that Luke could fall down onto and stain its whiteness with his blood. The image of his fallen, beaten brother there for Luther to see as to what the world really was, conflict in the home and outside the home, so you had to walk with quietness in your mind and manner with monitoring devices active if you did not want to be heedless like Luke, with no strategy for dealing with the danger all around. Because there was Winston too and Butch and Lamar and all the rest and neither Luke nor Luther were like Paddy Maldanelli, the super’s son on One Hundred Fourteenth Street, they could not call out the Negroes in the welfare hotel on that block and break



their faces and have his own face broken, that being the story of Paddy Maldanelli, breaking the faces of the Negroes on One Hundred Fourteenth Street and having his own face broken after they had broken the face of his kid brother Johnny Maldanelli, because Paddy Maldanelli had some Negro-ness in him too, as it was called then, had it despite his Irish mother and Italian father, had some of that “I ain’t playing with you. Do I motherfucking look like I’m playing with you, motherfucker?” in him, the whole world having an I ain’t playing with you mind as far as Luther could see.

So all of this Luther had to ponder as he made his way southward to Los Angeles, calling on his vigilance to soar and keep Celeste and Mia and him safe from the agitation always latent and now triggered throughout the land, because a ripple was a ripple but could go on and on to have a life of its own.

*We were fortunate, I have to believe, on our journey to the City of Angels, where we would see Glanton. According to my monitoring devices Glanton’s soreness was no longer reigning. What could not be said was that he had all his ducks in a row; however, the kindness of strangers—friends we have only just met or have yet to meet, the wide wonderful world of RoR being full of them—had brought him an apartment and a place of employment. He was now teaching writing at a big-time university. Had he not said, with great wistfulness, how he wished for a job with a steady paycheck when he was here in the New York area? Glanton was a truth teller. Had he not also said any city in America other than New York was just camping out and that his sole reason for migrating back to LA was to shield his bones from frigid East Coast winter weather. And no, there was no prevarication when, simply to annoy me, he would read the forecast for Lala land*

*weather, seventy degrees and not a cloud in the sky and zero humidity when Gotham was enduring icy January blasts, such unsolicited information only serving to get his chuckle going.*

*As Melville could go on and on about whales, we too have our areas of expertise and may give ourselves, with humility as our guide, license to share a bit of our findings about the fathers who reign over us, regardless of their height or weight or current status as to alive or deceased. Did Glanton not reign supreme in my consciousness in part because of his anger sickness, though it was possibly not much greater than my own? Is it not the anticipation of it that most affects us? And is it not a truism that when the anger sickness of the less afflicted one meets with the anger sickness of the father, then must the lesser one's be in remission, that is, be a cowering thing and only fully manifest in the presence of those for whom placidity is the norm, but only until and unless my anger sickness brings theirs to the fore. Because anger sickness will call to anger sickness, except when it is in the presence of anger sickness supreme, the father, the progenitor, of "Are you trying to aggravate me so I will be made to get up and lose all control?"*

*Savagery, willful obstruction of justice, malicious intent to denigrate, and other varieties of malefaction too numerous to mention are not relegated to the souls of the damned but fester in corporate boardrooms and the halls of government, local, state, and federal. Facts on the ground show that edicts were issued coincident with our arrival in the greater Los Angeles area calling for the launching of a campaign to post a massive number of misdirection street signs, replacing all those that kept faith with the public as to their accuracy, and for the sole intent of thwarting me in my endeavor to perform point*

*A to point B driving from our hotel to Glanton's apartment in West Hollywood and keep in check the psychosis that afflicts so many when they take their position behind the wheel.*

*So let it be entered in the record of life that Glanton was exemplary in all his actions that long last weekend of our honeymoon and that it was I who fell short in my comportment, at least in those initial hours, extreme self-recrimination leading me clear of my mind when I was reduced to driving around in circles, with Celeste and Mia bearing witness to my incompetence and hearing me spew my viciousness at the malefactors for their roadway signage malfeasance.*

Celeste said nothing on that day to make Luther feel more incompetent than he already felt. By then Luther was back in childhood with the black and white blocks he hadn't been able to assemble as per the illustrations. Because navigation was intelligence, was it not, the ability to see three-dimensionally, to do something more than rely on the position of the sun for direction?

*Now Celeste, Glanton was of sound mind but infirm of body. This has been established as a certainty many times over. And yet no one could say of his head that it was a lesser thing. Perfect in its roundness, Glanton's cranium had only to be seen for anyone to recognize the brain power it must store. And there is no need to assert that phrenology is in disrepute as an exact science, or a science at all, because the eye can see what tests will surely verify, who has the goods and who doesn't. The reality of his diminished body, which a true sawbones who fully earned his name had at when Glanton was nineteen and robust of physique, involved a number of ribs being removed and an*

*experimental medication administered that permanently atrophied his muscles. All this has been reported, but cannot be repeated enough, and if Glanton decides to have at me in the next world because his perfectionist self is less than pleased with my reportage, I can only do what I can do with what I have been given. Glanton had been a young man with a full appetite for the world, but now an injustice had been rained down on him, whether by the powers above or those more innately dedicated to malevolence down below. His life of manly vigor gone, Glanton sought to dull the pain with the needle and the drink.*

*His stride was slow and purposeful as we ascended to the Griffith Observatory. Intrepid he was in his forward motion, now and then spraying inside his mouth with an inhalant to give him the needed boost. From our vantage point above was a panoramic view of lighted urban sprawl in a desert setting, and as I looked out my ardor for Tinseltown began to fade. It had the feel of impermanence to it, a lot of bright lights holding off the darkness.*

*The next day we motored down the freeway to Anaheim to visit Disneyland in our rental car. His son Bobby came along, as he had to the Griffith Observatory the night before. Glanton may have been meager in body but he had his potency, his motility. His boys could swim upstream. Possibly his ability to breed was a source of pride for him. And why not?*

*In any case, with all the love, tough or otherwise, that Glanton showed, he could on occasion set aside his maxim "the truth without love is an attack" with wounding words, whether that was his intention or not. In a private moment, I expressed my*

*ambivalence about having a child of our marriage, sensing that you, Celeste, were worn out by parenting and, for selfish reasons, I was concerned about the demands on my own time a child would place on me, prompting Glanton to reply, "Now you see how little self-regard you have for yourself." It felt like he had dealt me a punch to the chest, and I did find myself wondering how one human being could take the liberty of speaking to another in such a way. The same way you took speaking to Sarah, the answer came sooner rather than later. And yet the feeling lingered that he had beaten me senseless, and worse, that he knew it and was now inwardly gloating. Over and over I was forced to ask myself if my concern for you was false solicitude? Would the same be true of anyone with my reservations about having children? Never was I able to say that he had spoken falsely. And so the truth had to remain the truth, even though the love was absent. (And should you think I alone was focused on this matter, were there not the very great Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway singing to that very point with their stirring rendition of "Where Is the Love?" Do not think that America was, in this time, without the eyes and heart to see and feel.)*

*Celeste, you did not care for Disneyland. The theme park was saccharine and overpriced, an American confectioning of the fairy tales of the Grimm's Brothers and Hans Christian Anderson. And the long lines made for a day of standing and waiting for bland adventure in an oppressively controlled environment. It was American fabrication and revisionism, seeking to shield us from the reality of carnivorous wildlife, devouring both animal and human flesh. Mia had no complaints, nor did Bobby or Glanton. But they hadn't grown up steeped in culture, as you had. Nor had I.*

*Returning to L.A., we passed a Denny's Restaurant, with its California red and yellow beckoning, and my heart leapt up at the prospect of eating the food of America, but Bobby spoke for both his father and himself, saying "We can do a little better than that," as if to counter any unspoken elitism of ours with a little of their own, and if I had any doubt of who he was representing, Glanton dispelled the notion with his signature chuckle plenty. He was letting us know that father and son were a team and possessed the monitoring devices to read our thoughts and respond to them accordingly. Following their show of power, we said goodbye and headed back home.*

In this time did Moses rally strong with the power of his appeal that justice be done and travesties of justice be banished from the earth. Even from the confines of hellhole Riker's Island could he be heard, and those hearing his cry responded in great numbers. There was Alicia Jones and Frederic Carlton and Miscellany Galt and many, many others, for Moses had person power. He did not go friendless through this life but drew legions to his side, and now, with the conviction key in which he spoke of the outrage inflicted on him by Alison Alter dropping a dime on him for no reason other than her inability to be his lady love or anyone else's, quickly gained from his supporters the bail money to wage war on a legal system bent on doing him wrong. Basking in the sunshine of their love did Moses seem to grow even stronger in his denial of any harm done to Alison Alter.

But he had an opposing voice to contend with in the person of lead prosecutor Alastair Rightly, who did not have it in his temperament to match the vociferous tone of Moses or his equally vociferous lawyer, Bolton Flambo, Jr. Over the course of a month,

calmly and patiently he laid out the case against Moses. Naked except for a T-shirt Alison Alter had fled her apartment at 3:20 am and dashed across the street to a phone booth and dialed 911. The police quickly responded and found her hysterical in the phone booth and, some minutes later, discovered Moses passed out in her bed. The knapsack left behind had been a ruse to get back to Alison Alter's apartment. A period of roughly six hours had passed since his return. When questioned on the witness stand Moses could give no explanation for the bruises on her face and neck and arms, or for the injuries a hospital examination showed to her genital area. Sure, he had passed out, but that was only after a night of good loving.

Prosecutor Rightly had a face in partial shadow, and yet did the light find him. It was there upon and within him for all to see. Physically small but large in stature he quickly grew; soon one and all were vowing to emulate his slow, deliberate movements. Never has a person trained in the law reached for a document on the plaintiff's table with such gentle care as he did in order to be certain of his facts when addressing the jurors so his words could correlate with the justice he was seeking to pursue. Prosecutor Rightly's sway was definitely holding sway, or at least Luther prayed, as now it was in his mind that there would be no stopping Moses should the law not do so.

Counselor Flambo had no compactness in his body or his words. Tall and gangly, with a large, unsightly bald spot in the midst of an otherwise full head of hair, he seemed to rely on generalities and Moses' personal history more than evidence that would exonerate his client and so gave the appearance of being unprepared. He cited, for example, the absence of a father in Moses' life, in spite of which he had become a star

football player at a prestigious high school and gained entrance to an excellent college. Counselor Flambo's defense of Moses was as threadbare as the suit he wore.

And yet Luther could not help but wonder if even a more competent lawyer would be able to make an adequate and plausible defense, given the nature of Counselor Flambo's client, who likely took the art of concealment to the same level with his defender as he did on the witness stand being questioned by Prosecutor Rightly or when Luther himself sought to talk with him. "The bitch got strange. That's all it was. She dropped a dime on me as thanks for all the good loving I gave her...What do you mean, what did we talk about in her apartment? What lovers talk about when they're in love. That's all. Why do you want to be getting all personal with me about my private stuff? Do you hear me doing that with you?"

"So you were just there, and it happened that Ms. Alter decided to inflict bruises to her face and neck and do injury to herself elsewhere and then run half naked into the street and dial 911?"

"People do stuff. Some got some kind of sickness going on in their minds. Like you. You got a sickness determined to do wrong by me. The world can be like that. You need to accept some reality."

Hannah had a mother's love for her son, a blind love. She spoke of the calculated nastiness of Prosecutor Rightly. When Luther's mother asked if Luther could possibly have done anything to be in this circumstance, Hannah grew enraged. Luther's mother was not permitted to call her son a liar. No one was permitted to call him that. Was that



clear? Because Hannah, like her son, did “Don’t be getting personal on me.” That was their truth.

*Now Celeste, they also did the menacing stare. Moses turned and did it and then Hannah turned and did it, and so the stare would have a greater impact, they turned at the same time and did it, though they were sitting far apart, Moses at the defense table and Hannah in the gallery, so Luther could know who and what he was dealing with.*

*But this, too, Celeste. Hannah and Moses, individually and as a tandem, could do the menacing stare with the message of death upon it, but the wheels of justice were turning and the loud sound of belligerent toughness coming from Moses with his meager defense against the charge of forcible compulsion inevitably turned to a bewildered wail of pain when the verdict was rendered by the jury and a sentence meted out by the judge, and throughout the land and onto the seas and beyond those seas was the cry heard of one whose words and those of his lawyer had done nothing to prevent him from being buried alive for the next five years of his life.*

*And now, Luther Garatdjian, safe and secure as you might wish to think you are with your nephew behind bars, the question must be asked as to what you are guilty of? Is it lack of compassion, intolerance, sheer exploitation of your own kin? Is there something not right with you that on a day of sunshine you record the unfortunate path of a young man’s life with a “he received his just deserts” mentality? And what’s that we hear you dare to say, that records must be kept and order is only order if it is preserved? Have you lost your right mind, Luther Garatdjian, and have you ever been in possession of it? And have you considered the punishment that awaits you in eternity for such a gross*

*transgression not only against Moses and Hannah but your whole family? Can you imagine the big sticks already at the ready for your eternal pummeling? And what's that we now hear you saying, Luther Garatdjian? That we can kiss your smelly and unholy ass? You watch your mouth, boy. You just watch it.*

Now it happened that in the environs of the GoA building there was a RoR meeting at the lunch hour where Luther could go and refresh his mind and spirit. The meeting was in the basement of a very modern church. Unlike Forget About It, with its low tavern atmosphere, Up and Coming drew the Armani suits men who power-stroked their well-oiled hair straight back and knew from birth because it was in their genes how to do the deal, for RoR was not only for the very low but all those who came with the thirst that would not stop upon them, so that when Luther was apprehensive of appearing in the brightly lit rooms with his lesser garb it was for him to remember that they too had known what it was to hug a toilet bowl and cry out for mercy to the god they had forsaken or to their mind never known, as if to realize in those moments of agony he had been there all along, and even so not anticipating that to draw only sober breaths they would have to stay close to that power for the rest of their days.

There were women in that room, too. Do not fault Luther for coming to that fact second and not first. Do not be of that picayune mindset, as he has already mentioned many such members once afflicted with the necessity of glug glug as well.

Though Luther was grateful for the small amount of weight that he had gained in sobriety, he did not take his newfound substance for granted. Always there was the fear

that he might return to the hanging string days of old, and in truth, there was the chronic problem of the weightlessness of his mind if not his corpus to still contend with on some days, and so he brought both body and mind to these RoR meetings, as well as a store-bought sandwich of America, often ham and cheese, with two packets of mustard to meet his need for added flavor.

And at home Celeste would serve the pork sausages of America, or the lamb chops of America, or fish from whatever stream or river or ocean they were netted or hooked, with a nourishing vegetable or two, for all of which he reserved the childish accolade “yummy yum yum,” even as he spoke aware that such utterance brought him no closer to little Mia, who had the furious strategies of her young mind to keep the interloper at bay, he whose silent rage on returning from work had, with a bit of food in him, turned to silliness.

*And yet, Celeste, the day arrived, when en route to Up and Coming, a great revulsion arose in me regarding the meats of America and I saw I must not go near the ham and cheese sandwiches only the day before I had so clearly loved. Was I really no more to devour them, as I had since childhood? What was this thing moving me away from such deliciousness to a salad bar where I heaped into a styrofoam carton kidney beans and alfalfa sprouts and shredded carrots and baby tomatoes and sliced beets, with chunks of soy-drenched tofu for protein fortification, all on a bed of spinach leaves?*

*Let me say that in this period of withdrawal from the beef and pork of America there came an afternoon when I felt faint, a weak word, for sure, when, in truth, I felt that the life force was leaving me and that within minutes I would surely die. It happened that*

*there was a fruit stand nearby, and in desperation I grabbed a Macintosh apple and devoured it down to its core right there in front of the astonished but also outraged vendor, with every bite that disappearing life force returning. Like a deflating balloon that suddenly begins to fill again was I, and with that replenishment came a surge of gratitude that compelled me to shower the gruff man with kisses and, more to his liking, an excess of dollars from my wallet.*

*Celeste, we say the things we need to say, evanescent as our words may be, whether on paper or thin air, so order, or the illusion of it, may be ours for the moment, eternity paying no never mind to our narrative dictates.*

There was one who went by the name Snelton who kept a fixed eye and frenzied mind on Luther as Luther partook of his lunch hour meal at Up and Coming. Snelton was a tall, rangy man with a smiling face and a loud sound sort of voice, as if, even in addressing Luther one to one, he was addressing the multitudes as well. Though Luther could see that his manner of eating, or eating at all, greatly disturbed Snelton and that Snelton was trying valiantly to keep himself together and not fly into a denunciation, the man's evident discomfort was not a source of pain or even concern. In fact, Snelton's distress was a source of pleasure to Luther. Seeking to add to it, Luther would ostentatiously lick his plastic fork and smack his lips and dab with a paper napkin delicately at his lips shiny from salad dressing oil.

"I don't have the words to express how much I loathe you for that disgusting performance," Snelton said, as much to the gathered as to Luther after the meeting, corroborating the antipathy Luther was certain he was evoking in the man.

“Yes, I could see the fire from your ire in your eyes all throughout the meeting,” Luther said. “I understood that you were burning.”

*Celeste, I understood even more that Snelton was, in spite of the power in his tall lanky frame, something of a dink, quite in line with his name, and that internal restraints would keep his big hands from my person.*

*More than anything, let me say here that the fire from his ire that appeared in Snelton’s eyes was also in yours not because I was eating but because, at dinner, I did not call out for “More Park’s sausages, Ma,” as did the boy in the TV ad of yore. In fact, I called out for no pork sausages, having brought my resolution into the home and declared it to you. We are talking here of food, Celeste, on which you had trained the endless complexity of your intellect to bear, all edibles under the sun being subject to your multi-angled consideration. I had encroached on your domain, balked at receiving one of the primary gifts you felt you had to offer, as it was your way to serve little Mia and me generously while denying yourself, your dinner mainly consisting of that which had been left over on our plates.*

“Have you gone crazier than you already were?”

*So you spoke to me, Celeste, and no amount of explanation could lessen the hurt that I had inflicted. For this I am truly sorry. And yet the future had come to me. I had not come to it, and what is one to do when such a moment arrives but greet it with acceptance? Truth offered in such a gentle yet emphatic way, like a persistent breeze on one’s face, can summon no denial. And have we not learned that to stand one’s ground is a gift in itself. You were in the vanguard in most things, and this I freely and gratefully*

*acknowledge, and yet I had a few things to offer as well. Must I be beaten with a stick for saying as much?*

*“What? What did you have to offer?” I can hear you saying now.*

*“Liberation from nicotine,” I reply. You were smoking unfiltered Camels when I arrived, and had been for some years. And yet within a year your lungs were being freed of tar and nicotine and the loft became a smoke-free zone.*

*But where is the gain in tooting one’s horn? One can search high and low and not find it, and so let me abandon this fruitless path I have unfortunately wandered onto with a genuine apology for having done so. I am not comfortable with such self-assertion. Let self-abnegation instead be my guide, and if that not be right either, let the higher powers guide me in all my ways.*

*Celeste, the words finish line came to me when we married. That much has already been established and I do not wish repetition to be my final destination so I will move on.*

*Day after day I rode the buses and subways of New York City and walked its streets. The capacity to leave for any length of time was lacking. In the past the unearthly beauty of Camp, the Van Dine estate, would call to me for a few days, as would Boston, which I was obliged to visit because of Sarah, especially those times when she was drifting and my presence was needed to keep our love alive. But then, with spring, was a venture into new territory made. Here are some facts and nothing less. We took the Henry Hudson Parkway true north, with no deviation west over the alluring and majestic George Washington Bridge. Our perseverance brought us to the Saw Mill River Parkway,*

*built for cars of an earlier time and the less savage speeds they took the parkway's small radius curves, and treacherous for those behind the wheel of the beasts now on the road, those whose vigilance does not soar and instead slyly allow themselves, feigning distraction, to avert their eyes when those eyes should be front and center; for they are a danger not only to themselves but to those in their care.*

*Well, enough. Perhaps we can come back to this when we have more facts on the ground or within its general vicinity. Celeste, early in our journey we passed the hamlet Chappaqua, where in its history I remain a footnote. Somewhere in the police ledger will my name possibly be found, as there was a time when I was improper in my mind and reckless in my behavior and the norms of society, with none of the vigilance soaring that I seek now to bring to each and every moment. A summer night in the lostness of my youth. Fourteen, and playing Ringolevio with the boys of Amsterdam Avenue, Fatso Scully and the itty bitty wittle one and all the rest when who should come along but my brother, Luke, with his schoolmate Thomas Browder Browley, of the Browley clan of Chappaqua, New York, which I knew not but which was calling to them, Thomas Browder Browley because it was his home and Luke because, like me, the north called to us like south never would.*

*Celeste, this was in the time of the great Dusty Springfield, who captured my mind and my heart with "A House Is Not a Home," a song when she sang it that made me sad beyond seeming recall.*

*We took to the road, thumbing a ride on the Henry Hudson Parkway and another on the Saw Mill that took us closer to our destination, only to find ourselves on a long*

*and lonely stretch of side road on which the occasional car appeared, the driver showing no affinity for three teenage hitchhikers appearing out of the darkness in the glare of the headlights and so speeding on by lest death come to him via strangers in the night, this before Truman Capote put in the mind of the country in *In Cold Blood* what killers could do when they maximized their effort. There on the shoulder we came upon a sawhorse, which I dragged out across the road to see how ceaseless would be the rampaging of any vehicle that came upon it, or whether the driver would place concern about his property over any fear of what the dark could summon. The first vehicle to come along screeched to a halt and the driver jumped out ripping the soft spring air with his profanity. He had a face with pummeling intent but the power of pedigree had its way when he spotted Thomas Browder Browley, of the Browder family, as Thomas's father was an airline executive of the highest echelon, and so he drove us to the Browder home.*

*Now Celeste, I did not attempt to sing or bring to Thomas Browder Browley's attention the song of the great Dusty Springfield, but while the house had the furnishings of the wealthy and the tasteful, it did not have the mother or the father, walking with one hand in his pocket, or brothers or sisters or grandparents or pets that would constitute a house truly being a home. And there were no rich roasts in the fridge or even cold cuts. Even the cupboard was bare, except for an unopened jar of Skippy peanut butter, which we quickly scraped clean.*

*In the morning they were gone, where to I could not say. And so I walked and walked past elegant houses with well-tended lawns until an officer of the law stopped his cruiser and had me get in. I told him the truth, that I was a guest in the house of Thomas*



*Browder Browley, but drew no response with this information, nor did my words do anything to change his impassive expression. At this point did I hear my mother say, "Do my words mean nothing?" words I dared not say to the solemn-faced officer of the law.*

*He took me to the station house, where he called the Lincoln Hall Reformatory to ascertain if I was a juvenile delinquent on the lam. This officer of the law was only doing his job by being as thorough as possible, so he could continue to wear his uniform and receive a paycheck and eat the doughnuts and cheeseburgers of America. He wasn't trying to frighten me. All he wanted was to check if I needed a corrective to my mentality sufficient that I could be part of the society he belonged to and walk about with the code of conduct he was so proud of in himself, for he knew what the blessings were for being on the right side of the law and the consequences for being to the other side. But Lincoln Hall had no one of my name or description ("He's all skin and bones and has a flat head") missing from the facility, so the officer showed his kindness by driving me to the station and purchasing a ticket for me on a train bound for New York City.*

*Now Celeste, having been in the Tombs here in New York City and the New Haven Detention Center for Men, and having been somewhat misguided in my youth, I can see how easily I, or anyone, can go wrong and live on the dark side of life and not be the sunbeam for Jesus my mother wanted me to be. And so, even though I was released, I felt branded by that officer of the law as juvenile delinquent material. The words "unfit" and "dirty" came to my tired mind on that journey home.*

*The Taconic gave us no trouble. We saw well in advance vehicles moseying up to the road from the various access points like alligators sliding off a riverbank and into the*

*flow. Thus, they knew we were not the kind to make trouble with, that it would be a wild delusion of their sick minds to even think such a thing. They would just have to save their mayhem pathway through life for others. Along the way the names of the towns we passed stood as markers on our journey: Hawthorne and Brewster and Sleepy Hollow and Pleasantville (so all-American) and Briarcliff Manor and Yorktown Heights and Mahopac and Carmel and Cold Spring and Fishkill and Hopewell Junction, but none had more meaning for me than the sign for Exit 19, Bull's Head Road, for it signified that we were closing in on our final destination.*

*Now there is something I am hesitant to raise but must do so if transparency is to be achieved. The fact that requires acknowledging is that I transgressed. It might not be seen as such in another family, but it is possible, as I may have said before, that I had gone where I did not belong in reentering your life. Mia's resistance was overt. Her remoteness was that of a child frightened by the rupturing of her world and the appearance of this strange interloper with his clumsy, obvious efforts to win her over. Your resistance was more hidden. It hadn't previously met with the right conditions to come to the fore. You were still at the place of not recognizing your anger or, even if you did, accepting that it might be legitimate. But now I was on the scene, and my insecurity was a destabilizing influence on the status quo. My only purpose in your life, seen from one point of view, was to bring your fire, your rage, fully into your consciousness because what, ultimately, is a man for but to aid in the revolution of women by drawing that fury forth and then walking, alone and discarded, through his remaining years, his whole life purpose being nothing more than to correct the historical imbalance, injustice,*

*systematically even if unconsciously inflicted on womankind? These ideas come over time, and only after much suffering, and surely they began to germinate in you seeing me at the wheel when it was not my car and not my second home that we were driving to?*

*Through the screen door of the kitchen could be seen an oak tree, its trunk massive and branches greatly extended, and behind it a shad tree that scheduled its bloom for early spring, while lilac bushes fronting the garage were biding their time, saving their purple flowers for later in the season. The garage, of ugly cinder block construction, stood parallel to the house. Atop it sat an apartment of shingled wood with a peaked roof. A set of stairs with a rickety banister and rotting steps led up the apartment, a habitable space with a gorgeous view of the sloping hill and down toward the road. A barn of weathered wood in a state of dilapidation, some of its side windows broken, stood opposite and at a distance from the house.*

*It was there, in front of the shed, that we parked the Ford Futura, and it was there, as you emerged from the vehicle, that you made your prescient observation, saying “Who is this president that takes from the poor to give to the rich, such as me?” For you showed an acute social conscience. It was there in your genes, both your parents believing in socialism as it was practiced in some countries. And I was there to take in and be affected by what you had to say about this president who nodded his head so well while keeping his hair in place.*

*Celeste, we could turn our attention to the fauna of the region, the deer and raccoons and garden hose-partial porcupines that visited the seven and a half acre property, but it might be more prudent to cast our eye on humankind, especially those*

*disinclined to favor our existence. Such was Knut Knutsen, who opened the screen door and walked in without knocking or notice of any kind. We can only assume he had his own listening devices attuned to our arrival and, hearing us drive up from his house down the road, was led by his loneliness to come running, glass in hand and glassy-eyed. Despite the robust physique he proudly displayed in tight-fitting jeans and T-shirt, he was a glug glug machine tethered to the bottle and each night was an "I've Been Lonely Too Long" and "Tears on My Pillow" experience for him.*

*"Hello, Knut. How are you?" you said in your silky voice, but he did not go the route of civil communication any more than Hitler went the route of conciliation at Munich in 1938. Rather, he continued with his arrogant imperialism, bolstered by his beefcake appearance, as if he were surly Paul Newman as he showed himself in the movie Hud. In full appropriation mode, he reached down for Mia's half eaten ham and cheese sandwich and did a quick devouring.*

*"Refill my glass, Gargoyle," he said to me when he could speak.*

*"Water, tea, and coffee is all we have," I said.*

*"You see these walls, this floor. There will be blood on all of them. Your blood."*

*Celeste, Knut had a mind made for madness, or driven to it.*

*"That wouldn't be good for you or me," I managed to say.*

*"Where did you find the gargoyle?" he turned and said to you.*

*"It's good to see you, Knut," you went on, with no hint of irony. Still, it must be clear that Knut was driven off not by our bland friendliness but his need to refresh his drink. The thirst was upon him in a big way, as he was just another dime a dozen Louie*

*boozehound flexing his muscles even as he became more and more of a bottle baby. And so I put him on my prayer list that night, envisioning how he and I could find the common ground and walk the friendship path together. Now Celeste, isn't taming the beast what people like us attempt to do, deluding ourselves that we can be the ones to win over the beast so he does not apply his annihilating powers to our bones?*

*Celeste, before we go any further, we must turn our attention to the cowardly chorus that has gathered to sing in the key of cynical one sentence dismissal. You know the ones I am talking about, those who live to criticize but never do for themselves. Already we have received word of their smirking for my saying that a daily prayer session for Knut Knutsen is in order, but we are beyond their realm of disbelief. We are high-flying birds with an aerial view. The whole, or more whole, picture is emerging. And so let them exhaust themselves with their laughing thing and fall down dying in the weeds.*

*Now we cannot be certain that Knut knew of the "In Crowd" song so very popular twenty years before, but it was clear that in and out were circulating in his afflicted mind ever since he met your ex, Peter, and his crew, including his lover Truck and two close friends, the poet Come and Go and the writer Hodgins H.Hodginsly. These were all men of gayness substance centered in their identity, while Knut was rooted solely in perplexity and pain. He showed himself no match for their wit nor could he break the code of their relaxed communication. He became a stuttering, rage-filled child in their tormenting company. And then they were gone, taking with them his hope for some lighter spirit as release or even respite from loneliness and fury.*

*(Celeste, this was all before the renunciation, the rain. We will get to that. Your time is coming. Is it not apparent that it is already happening?)*

*We were never to visit Knut's house or witness the manner of his domestic life. What we understood was that he was rooted to Round Lake Road and the community and, most of all, to the property where he was raised and which we now owned and occupied as weekenders and only for two seasons and part of a third. Did it not gall him to see us gone more than present from his birthplace, knowing that even in our absence it was not his to use? This we can say. He lived somewhere at the bottom of the hill along Round Lake Road and we lived at the top.*

*Now Knut Knutsen had been lonely too long, as the hideously named Young Rascals sang, but he was not alone. He had kin in the immediate surroundings. Displaced they were by the influx of those with big checkbooks who had discovered the treasures of northern Dutchess County, but not gone. Also on the road below, and near to the vehicles passing by with potentially sinister intent, lived the matriarch, a rotund woman with a grievance profound behind the babble she smilingly delivered. Let it further be noted that she had a strategy fit for her own mind. If her son could come when darkness fell, she would arrive in the light of day, not as a bellicose nation, but trudging slowly up the rutted driveway and presenting herself with a gentle knock at the screen door.*

*"I planted that tree thirty years ago, in memory of my first born and stillborn son. I planted it out of grief. You're still too young and privileged to know grief like those of us who put our hands deep in the soil. If you don't know the earth, you don't know anything. I don't expect you have any admission price for my looking, do you," she went on,*

*bending us to her will, just standing there resolute and calm in her delivery with her wide-brimmed floppy hat shielding her from the toxic sun. Because she knew what below meant and all it was sending up but also what above meant and all it was sending down.*

*“Of course you can, Mrs. Knutsen,” you said, in the most agreeable of voices, and as a healing balm for the aggrieved widow, for her husband was gone some years from the earth, unable to take any more of her ways, I am led to say, though here I readily admit I know not whereof I speak, as no one, no one, should dare to assume he or she is an authority on the relationship of one with another. Complexities abound, and only the partners are privy to the secret pathways of communication that have been established. And so it is with us, Celeste, lest others get the notion to place their laughing thing upon us.*

*“Then I’ll just go on and do that, before you change your mind,” said Mrs. Knutsen, placing us on alert that no regions of her mind had been pacified by our efforts, and to anticipate further grievance-fueled aggrandizement. She wasn’t five steps headed toward that tree before she turned back to us.*

*“That apartment up there over the garage? That’s where our boys lived, when they reached adolescence and their energy was too much for the walls of our small house to contain. Muscular boys, with rough and tumble intentions. Not the kind to live in their heads, like city folks.” So she spoke, leaving out the “you” so as not to cast direct aspersions. We had had enough of her and she of us. We didn’t tell her to go and stand before that tree or tell her not to. We left it up to her. As if it made a difference anyway, given her mind to do whatever she wanted. And we had the presence of mind not to watch*

*her either, sensing as we did that a spell might result from just such viewing, with serious repercussions, and not knowing if it already had.*

*Then there was the silent one. Silent but not subordinate, as he too lived on an incline, the same as ours, in a house that too overlooked the road and obscured in all seasons but fall and winter by deciduous trees. There was no looking down at him, only looking across for a distant view. We could feel his stern stoicism emanating through the air. He was not born into silence but driven to it. The kind who peered from behind a slightly parted but never fully open curtain. So our research showed, Celeste. He did not have to play the sad song "A House Is Not a Home," as he had a family function, with a wife and two children, whom he loved with his silent love. Guided by his genes, which blessed him with an excellent spatial sense, he put holes in the ground, bringing heavy machinery into a state of obedience through force of will, so on foundations strong he could build houses that made their owners proud. We were to ask him through his wife at the end of that first season to mow our unruly meadow, and when we next looked it had been given a close shave gratis but we were led to know in succeeding seasons there would be no more shavings of our meadow, gratis or otherwise. In that way was he American, seeking to stand us up straight and eradicate from our beings the febleness and dependency that would lead us to such a request. His name, by the way, was Dag. Dag Knutsen.*

*The heart of the matter. The heart of the matter. So you hear it said over and over, even as it is fled from. Such tough terrain to traverse must be why. I am struggling, this*



*very minute, to get where I need to go, as the billowing fog regarding the Knutsen clan will attest, if the phrase a strict accounting is to mean anything.*

*Now Celeste, there was a man, a strange man. No matter his guise of neutrality, he radiated lewd intent, such being a permanent feature of his face. With grave doubts about his own ability, he sought security through marriage and found himself with a house that was his home and love growing all around and in him. But fear, and worse, took hold when the hammer came down hard on his dream of literary success, smashing it to smithereens, and now there was not the warmth of love but a cold cold place even to his bones. His short novel *Broken Resolutions*, which was to be his entree to the world and represented the sum total of his worth, the heart of who he was, had been flung from the window by uncaring publishers to lie scattered on the street and run over repeatedly and savagely by rampaging and remorseless vehicles. He was exposed, with nowhere to hide, not as his love's equal but an impostor who had failed and failed again—the Stanford-Binet IQ test taken in sixth grade, the SAT, even his road test. And so he gave voice to his internal dialogue. He was nothing but a hanging string. He was nothing but a horse-shit desperado deserving of nothing less than a beating into nothingness by callous men with iron bars. Back and forth from the bedroom to the kitchen he shuttled as he chanted, seeking refuge in the chant from himself.*

*But let us not be intimidated or manipulated into unwarranted compassion and call his behavior the phony antics, the histrionics, that it was. Let us strip him even further than he was of the delusion of giftedness he sought to cling to with the rightful rejection of his worthless novella and do so with a cold analysis of this pretense of*

*emotional imbalance so we may enter a painfully won paradise of truth: he was beating the world to the punch, only vocalizing what it had unanimously judged him worthy of, the sole purpose of his existence being to unleash the laughing thing at himself full volume all day and all through the night for all time. Did the world too not need a reason to live beyond the pastrami on rye or orgasm at the end of a hard and stressful day? Was not chronic and mocking laughter one of its primary rewards, as it was for the strange man? Was there not a collusion going on?*

*Now it is true that Strange Man's wife and stepdaughter took it on the lam when he was led to his emotional fireworks. After all, he might feel unfettered, unleashed and even unhinged, as he had been in his booze-filled days, but while it was understood by the wife that he was engaged in a form of solipsism that precluded any real recognition of others, she and her daughter had lives they had to live on the ground. As the hours of their absence grew, so too did his awareness that the rejection of his novella hadn't driven them away but his behavior had, and his mother's words, "Where is the rhyme and reason in this?" came to him. Was it not inevitable, he now saw, that amiable as his wife might be in her affect, that she held the same clobber power as all beautiful women hold, the power to reduce a man to an anxious child staring at the door and awaiting Momma's return?*

*Once there had been such a man expressing his vulnerability and helplessness in such a manner, it being the only way he could.*

Now there was, in this time, simultaneous with his own hire, a woman on the scene at GoA named Blanche Givenchy, who brought the light of her excellence and own special kind of love to the org., for Miss Carmelli (never Ms.) was intent on the fortification of the Publications Department for the task that was soon to be at hand, the major org initiative that was already in the works from the Program Department. Though Luther was Miss Carmelli's first choice, she was quick to see that Blanche Givenchy had the editing goods that he demonstrably lacked, given the fiasco of his first major editing assignment that led to the verbal warning he received.

Let it be noted, before another word is spoken about Blanche Givenchy, that Luther had discovered Miss Carmelli had special powers of her own. In plain sight would she metamorphose into a bee-like creature and perform aerial reconnaissance of the entire floor. Mercifully, the whirring of her wings signaled her impending arrival. Thus could Luther prepare himself to look busier than he was.

As for Blanche, the love that she was seeking was of a carnal nature. This she let Luther know up front.

"That wedding band doesn't stop me," she said.

"I'm sorry?" Luther responded.

"All marriage means is you are pre-certified."

"Hey, wait a minute."

"No, you wait a minute. Love is my domain. I am an authority on it."

"Well, good for you," Luther said.

"That's a witty response," she replied, and Luther could only laugh in agreement.

“Don’t you want to get married?”

“I detest marriage.”

“That’s a strong statement.”

“It is a commitment to unhappiness.”

“The single life holds no risk of unhappiness?”

“Freedom is always preferable to slavery.”

“Wow. You have an answer for everything.”

“I have an answer for you.”

She was from Omaha, Nebraska, where her father was the manager of a supermarket. She had come to New York for the anonymity it offered relative to a smaller city. Her editing skills were recognized by many companies she had served as a freelancer, and she was intent on maintaining at least some of those contacts in spite of the security of a salary as a staff person.

“So you say,” Luther replied.

“We should go for lunch sometime soon,” she said.

“I don’t do lunch.”

“You are pretty skinny.”

“What I mean is that I use my lunch hour for other things in addition to eating.”

“Are you a bit mental?” Blanche laughed.

“That’s a possibility,” Luther said.

“My kind of guy,” Blanche said, and laughed again.

Luther took himself away. He was not exactly offended but he was not at ease either. Frankness had its place, but he had given himself body and soul to Celeste, in a way that he couldn't with Sarah, for whatever reason. The idea of someone seeking to drive a wedge between them he viewed as a threat.

There were others in the org whom he also grew to be wary of. Studies were showing that malefactors could abound in any environment, even those for good, as in GoA good. Now sharing the space on the floor with Publications was Media Maxima, a department headed by the fierce one, she who buried bodies where they fell and stashed them in the ceiling, too, Ms. Maeve McAdoon. Deep Sixer, Felicia Marcos called her, for the savagery of her disposal system. That she had aggrandizing tendencies and sought nothing less than complete domination had come to be common knowledge, thus prompting Miss Carmelli to extend her aerial surveillance to cover the entire floor, lest there be a surprise attack. Young for a department head, she was smooth in her communication with the org's leadership team ("Make way for the leadership team. Make way.") Maeve understood power and how to connect with it, while Luther only knew to try to neutralize her with amiable meekness when in her general vicinity lest she turn him to a pillar of salt like Lot's wife.

Now Maeve had in her employ as her right hand person a woman who displayed equal fierceness in her face and in her manner but who also had hunger in her eyes and lust in her lower parts and who went by the name Gretchen Grune. She was no study in diplomacy or the art of gentle persuasion but came at you full bore with the force of her will, her eyes saying what her tongue had no need to the day Luther saw her peering at

him over the top of her cubicle wall. Such a moment of naked truth was it that it electrified his entire nation, as if a lightning bolt had struck. In that instant he saw his oldest sister Hannah, saw her as he had when still a child with her robe open and nothing underneath. The shock that struck him then was the same as now, for Gretchen Grune had the same anger sickness as did Hannah. And so his heart closed against Gretchen Grune, adamantly and forever, that she would dare to try to take him away from the one he loved and sequester him in her cold and pitiless world. Once again did the great Dusty Springfield come to his ears with her fine distinction between a house and a home. What might not be poetry to others was just that to him. Jamais, jamais, he heard himself say. People, there are people in this life who don't belong in yours. Do not let them in. Do not do that. Rush to that door and bar it and bar it good, as if your life depended on it, because it does.

*And yet, Celeste, even as I speak in this manner, and in a voice so full of castigation and self-righteousness, with my shunning mechanism operating at full capacity, so must I say, only to myself, Stop it! Stop it this very minute! These individuals are not for you to demise. No one conspires for your downfall as you do. Do not go dinky on the world. Did not the Fab Four sing I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together ooh kucha koo? Again, apprehend your own dinky and place a cease and desist order on it. Let it for all time be known that if you can spot it you've got it. Elevate, Luther, elevate, and weep for those walled off from love who must cast, as you formerly did, the ogling eye, those such as Blanche Givenchy and Gretchen Grune, those with whom you do not belong.*

*And yet why do I now hear the name Philip Roth loud in my ears, he of the orderly file cabinets and one novel per year? And what is this connection being made between him and Blanche Givenchy? Celeste, it is for me to settle down and not be a flibbertigibbet with my words, not make a monstrous and indigestible word salad of them. I must refrain from putting full energy into every vague thought that comes to me. But here it is, since I have begun. When you are in the high echelon, when you stand at 170 on the IQ scale, as do both Blanche Givenchy and Philip Roth, then morality is a course to set and not have set for them. And the course they set was the aloneness course, outside the confines of matrimony, which both shunned as a prison of one's own making.*

*Well, we will leave it for now to those who make ethics and morality their first love and are in possession of the most discerning minds to hold forth on the subject. But lest we forget, there was a man named Henry David Thoreau, committed to a life of solitude with nature as his retreat. And there was Jesus too. But, again, let me not wander any farther into territory it is not for me to fathom.*

There was a third editor, Mary Terrezi, and she came with a wounded heart, having fallen into the limbo land of marital separation owing to the perfidy of her husband, an ill-conceived creature who had not kept faith with the vows he had taken. But Mary Terrezi was resolute in her determination not to abandon her life. With no children of the marriage to look after, she was free to *party hard*, as she put it, down in Washington, DC, the previous weekend. Now Luther's mind and emotions were called to attention by those two words. In fact, a feeling of great sadness overcame him that Mary Terrezi, a woman in her early thirties, should resort to the language of excess and not stay

within the orderly confines of normalcy in her speech, for *party hard* meant bars and booze and debauchery in the company of strangers, the world that Luther himself had left behind. Mary Terrezi had too much stability in her demeanor for such talk. He saw that she had violated her own nature; she was tarnishing her amour propre. And now she was bringing her newly adopted party hard ethos to the office. Did he not hear her speak the words “hang out” and “get down” in the same sentence directed to him? Was she not, confined within the gates of smiling sorrow, offering herself to him? Was she not speaking from below the waist? Luther further saw that it was only his unavailability due to the matrimonial state that Mary Terrezi and company should be awakened to a desire for him. But he did not say to her that she had too much stability in her bearing for such talk. Because Luther had no wish to be perceived as Fuddy Duddy number one or the second coming of Dudley Do Right even if he was to the path of matrimony and his wedding vows bound. All he could say, with a smile of regret, was that it was best for him not to go down that road, however tempting it might be.

*Mendacity itself. Running dog of deceit. Do I not deserve such epithets, Celeste, seeing that, wedding ring or not, I was still married to my prurience? If, in my drunkenness, I would have slept with anyone animate, in sobriety I had begun to gain more selective vision. A woman with overabundant flesh or who had a mustache or legs too short for her body or wideness in her seat was simply manifesting barriers to arousal.*

*If we are to be as comprehensive as memory will allow, there is one other, Agustina Sepulveda, who put herself forward in a bold way. A young Chilean woman, she would not so much say my name but exclaim it on seeing me. The glow on her face and*



*nervous laughter and general animation seemed to convey her interest as well. My restraint was not merely summoned by matrimonial but metallic consideration; while beauty was apparent in her being, her open-mouthed laugh revealed the glint of a bridge. The sight of it made me shudder, as it would when I saw the same in my father's oral cavity. And so heart and head and all that was within me ruled against her. And yes yes, you needn't tell me that a chorus of the righteous has already formed to loudly chant a denouncement of my shallowness with the predetermined decision that I should be beaten into unconsciousness with their sticks.*

*Now Celeste, hierarchy abounded at the org, so heavy with titles, and one that called for a corner office was senior director, the occupant on our floor being Risa Harken. Her door was often closed and her visibility was sufficiently rare that staff reported Risa sightings, as if she were a UFO. It was understood that no business was to be done with her after 2 pm, by which time she would be crocked and incommunicado. Sometime later, when I came to her with a grievance against Miss Carmelli, she gave me her home number and said she would welcome a call from me on any matter. In her shame-filled expression did I hear loneliness. (There were wounded souls at the org, Celeste, as there are everywhere. There was Jimmy Jones, who came to work in dungarees and sneakers and a long-sleeved blue worksheet to hide the track marks on his arms and who once OD'd in a bathroom stall. There was Palmetto O'Brien, who showed up some days in a wine-stained T-shirt and had no discernible function in the Publications Department but to smile amiably and seldom speak.)*

*Temptation called outside the org as well. There was Isadora Drayton, the former secretary at Cromartie Wonders, whom I ran into as I was stepping out at the lunch hour. She was unemployed and had fallen back on her family's wealth. Would I come over for a drink after work? There was none of the derisive laughter she had been free with back at Cromartie. But I felt her loneliness and felt too no power attaching to her calling. Even if I had been sufficiently tempted to step out of the matrimonial bond, did I not know that extracurricular sex brought about the real danger of drinking, as now I would have no anesthetic to blot out, if only temporarily, my conscience? Did I want one such as Isadora Drayton to lead me down the perdition path so that I might lose not only my marriage but my life? Did I want to be one of those I would see in the RoR meetings who "wanted to want" to stop drinking after a relapse but couldn't?*

*Now Celeste, reconnaissance was not simply the domain of Miss Carmelli. Felicia Marcos, she of the tart tongue, apparently had monitoring devices of her own that were capable of capturing not merely facts on the ground but the rarer ability to discern one's essence through the illuminating power of dreams. Thus did she come to me, with brazen assertion masquerading as puzzlement.*

*"So tell me, Luther, how is it we see you eating salads at lunch and know you only as a reserved whitebread soul? Why did you not tell us that there is another dimension to your being?"*

*"I am large, I contain multitudes, as do you. What is newsworthy about that?"*

*“I’m the one asking the questions. How is it that I saw you with my very own eyes sitting on the curb outside the org the other day with a Snickers Bar in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. When your mouth wasn’t occupied guzzling the wine and gobbling the Snickers Bar, profanity directed at passersby streamed from it. How do you explain that?”*

*“I’ll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours. So the master said. Or maybe the dream was yours and just about you.”*

*“You calling a woman of color, of refinement and supreme dignity, a drunk, white boy?”*

*“I wouldn’t think so.”*

*“‘I wouldn’t think so.’ Trying to skate by with that pale-assed white boy language.”*

*“Indeed,” Luther said, and laughed.*

*“And don’t fucking ‘indeed’ me either, punk ass.”*

*Felicia was a force of her own making. She blew on a big trumpet to herald her presence, fearing no one else would. The threat of being unseen being too much for her; the sound she made was not always joyful.*

*There was one who was not unseen but had all power to make the gathered rise when she walked into a room, and to whom Miss Carmelli bowed, and that one was Hilda Bachweiss, the org CEO. “Holy crud. The woman can silence a room like nobody’s business.” Hilda had great respect for Miss Carmelli as well. Miss Carmelli had earned that respect with her dedication; it was well known that she was the first to arrive in the*

*morning and often the last to leave. "Hilda Bachweiss knows the score. She knows where it is at," Miss Carmelli said, referring to the fact that GoA was essentially lily white, a membership profile that was unsustainable given the demographic direction of the country. The org was membership driven. There was a number the org was expected to meet with each new plan. Throughout the country, in every state, there were councils chartered by the national organization, and every several years that charter was subject to review. The org provided publications on CEO/board relations, fundraising, property management, governance, and a slew of other matters. Every three years the National Council met to retain the current CEO or replace her. Indeed (that word again, Celeste), the org owed its existence to a charter from the United States Congress. The size of the org and its name recognition throughout the country probably should have meant more to me than it did, but in truth my mind was often elsewhere.*

In a cubicle next to Luther, and twice its size, sat Marge Whelan, who could be counted on to blow a gasket each pay day. "All these bums in this country looking for a handout and the government taking from me to give it to them," she would fume. Sometimes she would laugh bitterly, maniacal laughter that would go on for a while, as if life was so twisted and cruel and unfair that she had no choice. Luther understood to stay away from his big and quite older neighbor lest she lacerate him with her sharp tongue. Life had been unkind to her, Luther could only imagine, that she affected such an attitude of disdain for the fools around her. She had the look of a leftover from another time, of someone who had stayed too long because she had no way of getting out. She also had

the voice and the complexion of a hard drinker. He could imagine her on the bottle and her pills every night, as he had been on the bottle and on his pills.

*(Celeste, is it time to call it a day? Is the evidence not now in? A little this and a little that. A great number of discrete parts with no coherent whole, no pattern. Do you not hear the savage ones as they gather near? Give us a pattern, give us a structure. Put a foundation beneath this monstrosity, they say, reaching for their quivers, the arrow to pierce the heart with pointed and curt dismissal. That is what they live for, is it not?)*

On the other side of his cubicle sat Fiona Beasley, an older woman who was Miss Carmelli's first hire. Miss Carmelli was everything to Fiona Beasley, who was perceived by some to be a toady for the rapt attention she gave to Miss Carmelli's every word and the reverential expression she displayed in her presence. She and Blanche Givenchy also had a rapport, Fiona laughing at Blanche's telling of some outrageous escapade. Fiona didn't talk of herself with Miss Carmelli or Blanche or anyone at the org. The rent-controlled apartment she had lived in for years, despite all manner of harassment from her landlord, was her haven. There she closed the door on the world except as it came to her through the TV. Luther imagined her eating the Korean salads she favored as she sat in front of the set feasting on prime time offerings. What love she had she gave to Miss Carmelli, over whom she towered; like Blanche, she was quite tall. If that love was fully reciprocated, Luther couldn't say after hearing Miss Carmelli's shocking assertion that Fiona Beasley was dead inside—shocking not because it was untrue but because Miss Carmelli had said as much of her loyal lieutenant. "She has an amazing knowledge of art

history, but she doesn't share it or anything with anyone. It is as if she has lost interest in the world."

Miss Carmelli herself had not lost interest in the world. She did not zone out on alcohol, as Marge Whelan did, or TV, as did Fiona. Opera, poetry readings at the 92nd Street Y, Broadway and off-Broadway shows, travels to foreign lands, the fiction and nonfiction books she devoured, lectures at the city's museums on everything from Cezanne to Byzantine architecture. And Miss Carmelli did not simply escape into some rarefied realm but was conscious of what was happening on the street.

"People have stopped caring," she said, a remark all the more penetrating in Luther's psyche because it was so offhand. Clearly Miss Carmelli had not stopped caring, and that included about her staff. She remembered their birthdays with gifts and cards. And they remembered hers. She seemed—the org seemed—to be calling him back to a time he could not quite remember. He was comfortable here, and more than comfortable. He felt that he had come home. He had not forgotten his experiences out in the cold, the Checker cabs he had driven and the public restrooms he had relied on and prayed he wouldn't be turned away from as he stepped inside their doors with his cigar box in hand containing the night's take and desperate to relieve himself. Yes, he had a cushy job. Yes, there was a lot of idleness owing to a padded staff, but he wasn't about to protest. Idleness was a way of life, at least for him, in the workplace.

Glanton was a health master. He had to be, given his partially ruined infrastructure. He did not claim ownership of his health, but his dismissal of doctors was longstanding

owing to what they had wrought upon him in seeking to remedy his tuberculosis. And so he had two words for Luther: bone meal. He said it would enhance Luther's overall bone mass and particularly do wonders for his spine, this in response to the injury that had hospitalized him and his doctor's determination that he was meager in that strategic area of his body as in his overall substance.

And now Glanton had a supplement for his mind as well. It was called lecithin and would boost Luther's memory and mental alertness. Glanton told Luther to purchase a bottle and also a B-complex vitamin, a multi-mineral capsule as well as a host of other supplements so, from head to toe, he would be functioning at a primo level. A transformation of mind and body was underway, Luther was certain in the first few days of his new regimen, but soon his mind grew troubled. How could he be sure he wasn't using these pills and capsules to get high? Glanton did not savage him when Luther voiced his concern. He did not unleash his chuckle plenty. He just said, "A mind can be a terrible thing to have." But the storm grew stronger, despite Glanton's words. On the street Luther would have to hold onto a lamppost as if some terrible force was suctioning him into the bar he had just passed. Normalcy was no longer abounding between his ears. At Now Is the Wow he cried out for assistance lest the same force pull him across the street and into another low tavern, and though it shamed him to disrupt the meeting, what choice did he have if he was to continue upon the earth as a sober being? For many days and months did this torment continue unrelentingly. Should he take the supplements? Should he stop? Did it even matter? Had he not already lost his sobriety? But he didn't

stop, and one morning he awoke and the affliction had passed. It had just gone where such afflictions of the mind go.

*Now Celeste, as you know, I was the token male in the publications department at the org, but I was not the token male in the org itself. Here and there were sightings of others as well, including dapper **Leander Chatwick**, who was not to be seen without his bowtie and well tailored suits and jackets. As American as Philadelphia Cream Cheese, Mr. Chatwick nevertheless affected an English accent. He served as the head of the graphics department, and so was in frequent contact with Miss Carmelli, and dare I say it, brought out the very worst in her. For some reason never clear to me, Miss Carmelli was engaged in a vendetta. One might think Mr. Chatwick could temper her fury with the Broadway show tunes he was fond of singing in what, to my ears, was his fine baritone voice, especially “The Street Where You Live.” Did she think he was mocking her with the sung declaration of love that it should only magnify the ire in her fire? Life has its mysteries, Celeste, but I was on the case, undeterred by her vehemence, as when she exploded, “Holy crud! May the man boil in oil.” And though she gave no reason for her outburst, Mr. Chatwick himself offered a sizable clue when he remarked, “A strange woman Miss Carmelli is, with a most implacable will,” saying these words within earshot of me and in no apparent context, as if on occasion he was driven to musing about her ongoing wrath.*

In truth, Miss Carmelli was never to get along with any of the graphics directors who succeeded Mr. Chatwick. Each of them deserved to be boiled in oil. It did seem unfair that she would seek to drive reasonably competent people from their jobs, and so I



had to wonder if she wasn't, fundamentally, a hegemonist who wanted to bring all production matters under her control. For years, she remained the editor, designer, and production overseer of *GoA Girl*, the org's monthly magazine, which went out to the entire membership. Time and again she resisted the suggestion that she let go of the reins and work with a team. But she was adamant that all facets of the job required a minimum of twenty-five years of experience. In essence, she was declaring her ownership of the position. There was no one out there qualified to replace her. No one was, or would ever be, as qualified as her. The image of her at the printing plant in Camden, New Jersey, came back to me. Once again I saw her at that conference table with a towering set of proofs while the rest of us sat at the other end having lunch. Her work was her daily bread.

In this time a man named Love entered Luther's life. His real name was Krishna but he had the effect of love on Luther, whom he asked to be his guide through the RoR program of recovery. Krishna spoke of his Ivy League education and his high position as an executive in high finance, of the second home in Saratoga, and the Fifth Avenue duplex, all of which he had lost. He was now living in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and showed no ambition to reclaim the wealth that had once been his.

Luther gave his all to Krishna. Once a week would they meet at a coffee shop and read the basic text of RoR, each taking turns, with special attention paid to the mental state of the alcoholic preceding the first drink that would send him off on another binge, the truth being that the alcoholic had no effective mental defense against the first drink. A

spiritual defense was required to obtain and maintain sobriety. The information was fairly basic, but Krishna was a repeater; he had been in RoR before and then relapsed. Luther was insistent that they build from the ground up. “We wouldn’t try to build a house on quicksand, would we? We need the terra firma that only a spiritual experience can provide.”

“You are excellent teacher. You are most wonderful,” Krishna exclaimed. Try as Luther might to deflect attention from himself, the blandishments continued, and it did come to Luther’s mind that Krishna might be hiding some less exalted image of him behind all the word fluff. Several times a week he would see Krishna at neighborhood meetings, but then a full week passed and Luther had neither seen nor heard from him. Several times Luther called but the phone rang and rang. Another week passed and still no Krishna. When he reached out to the fellowship, the response was that maybe Krishna was on the bottle again. For some reason it pained Luther beyond belief to hear such a suggestion. Others he had worked with had picked up a drink and he hadn’t been rattled to the degree he now was. Krishna had a hold on him he could not explain.

After two weeks Krishna surfaced. “My head. My head,” he moaned into the phone.

“Have you been drinking, Krishna? Are you hung over?”

“My head. My head,” Krishna repeated, as if he hadn’t heard.

A week later he resurfaced in the meetings. Luther took Krishna at his word that he had not been drinking and that Krishna had simply been afflicted with a mysterious ailment. But a pattern developed—three more times the long disappearance, the

unexplained head pain, and finally, his reemergence in the RoR meetings. Even so, Luther's trust remained steadfast, despite the doubt expressed by others. Such doubts were unfounded, Luther was certain. Krishna was not drinking. He was as sober as Luther. If he had been drinking, he wouldn't have been able to stop. Then came the fourth disappearance, including the two weeks of silence before Krishna picked up the phone. This time Krishna did not talk about his head. "I need help," he said. "I need you to take me to the hospital."

Luther raced from the loft and rode the L train out to Greenpoint. Through the partially open door, he saw Krishna sitting on the floor against the wall of the barely furnished apartment in only his underwear. His face had not seen a razor in days nor his hair a comb. The smell of vomit was strong and strewn about were empty vodka bottles. Luther remained in the doorway, unable to bring himself to enter. He felt disoriented seeing Krishna as he had never seen him before. The scene felt threatening him. Had he not been cautioned that an active drunk would get him drunk quicker than he would get him sober, and on such calls to bring a sober buddy or two. How had he forgotten such a cardinal suggestion? He turned and fled, reproaching himself for cowardice and selfishness in not helping Krishna gain admission to the detox ward at the nearby hospital. He wasn't the white knight he had thought himself to be. He wasn't that at all. He had left a sick and suffering man behind. He would have to live with that shameful reality.

But the mystery was solved. Krishna would disappear for a week because he was detoxing in some hospital ward and couldn't use the phone even if one was available to

him, given his depleted condition. And his headaches? He had been hung over, pure and simple.

There were those who used RoR as a control on their drinking. The detox ward or a rehab, if they could afford it, gave them a sufficient reprieve from the bottle to reclaim their health and soon they were well enough to drink, only they were not well at all. It was only that they could not bring into their consciousness with sufficient force the horrors brought on by their previous bouts with the bottle. Luther had not gone to a detox. He had come to RoR off the street, having been given medications by Dr. Rosner to ease his withdrawal.

*Now Celeste, no vicious ones came forward with their savagery well intact to give me the thrashing I deserved for abandoning Krishna. Night and day they did not party on my body (yes, yes, obscenely pronouncing the word par-TAY), inviting kith and kin to bear witness and even join in. And indeed Krishna did return to the rooms. I was left to go to the ponder place and wonder if possibly Luke had a role to play here, with Krishna being his stand-in, as to why I had become so emotionally involved with Krishna. Once again did the title of that short story collection come to me, I Would Save Them If I Could, and the great old hymn "Rescue the Perishing," from my days at Bible camp.*

One day I mentioned the name "Blanche," in passing, to Krishna and witnessed the shock to his system, as if he had stepped on a live wire. "A woman of great tallness and for pleasure she lives? And who flies to bars like moth to flame?" So he responded when he had stabilized.

*That hymn “Rescue the Perishing” I did not sing as I went to her but it filled my whole being. That can happen, Celeste. It can. Things can fill our whole being. Isn't that what is meant when in the Gospels Mary says, “My soul doth magnify the Lord”? And where is this Lord magnified but in our beings, and never more so than when we reach out to those who are still suffering. We do our best, Celeste. What else can we do? We say our daily prayers, asking for HP's guidance and a measure of humility and get on with it.*

*But there are those who lack the ears to hear, as I at one time lacked those ears myself. For this reason did Blanche Givenchy rebuff me soundly.*

*“Are you calling me a lush?”*

*I had said no such thing. Merely had I told her I was a member of RoR and explained its purpose. Should she wish to attend a meeting with me, I would be available. Celeste, let me be clear: we are sowers of seeds, and sometimes they fall on fallow ground; there is not always a harvest for us to reap. Given my serious doubt of the efficacy of my action in regard to Blanche Givenchy, I was in no condition a week later to take hearing “What a Difference a Day Makes,” as sung by the great Ella Fitzgerald, to be the indicator that my little seed was bearing fruit, for later that very day did Blanche Givenchy seek me out in my cube, with no harshness or rebuff showing, and say, “Yeah, OK, take me to your stupid meeting.” Is it not something that alcohol should be our only enforcer, beating us into a state of reasonableness, that is, those of us able to recognize we've been beaten before the grave claims us?*

*Now Celeste, On the Path was the group's name, and there we sat in folding chairs in the clean, well-lighted, and ample space amid men and women in business attire and all well groomed, as this was an office crowd summoned by the corporations of America to do right by them. Dressed and groomed for prosperity were they. And with her beside me I closed my eyes and prayed that RoR would work its magic on Blanche Givenchy by melting away her ramparts of intellectual opposition, for rescue the perishing must be a driving dictate for all of us being saved by RoR from a living death till the final one should come.*

*Among the gathered was Ned Munster, a public relations executive and the author of many novels. Ned Munster was with the word and the word was with him, and for this reason he placed a premium on wit so that his sharing would shine not only with the excellence of his insights but also with humor. Celeste, it may be right and just that an illness dependent on repetition—what is more repetitious than the act of drinking?—should compel some repetition in recovery. Not a week went by that Ned Munster was not heard to say, “Beauty shall be admired, but pain shall be obeyed.”*

With Ned Munster's excellence went a measure of meanness. Wit, not sincerity, being the measure of a man, Ned Munster became the arbiter of excellence. “Surely you have more wit than that,” he said after another of Luther's earnest shares, going “surely” on him and casting Luther down below the bar he had set. But Luther had his own monitoring device going. With it he measured the anger sickness afflicting Ned Munster, and found it quite high.

Now there was another at On the Path named George though Luther also silently addressed him as Gorge for all the bulk in a business suit he was showing. Still, no animus would Luther have been holding if George hadn't sat his fatness on him. Luther had a sponsee, Milton, who twice in one week teased the disease by inadvertently swallowing a mouthful of an alcoholic drink, then balked when Luther suggested that he change his sobriety date. Did Milton not know to smell the drink first? Had he not identified the taste as scotch in one case and gin in the other when the alcohol was in his mouth and then spit it out, as RoR wisdom and simple common sense suggested? What was the big deal? Milton replied. Sure, he had gotten a buzz, but he hadn't gotten drunk. The illness has a long memory, Luther countered. Somewhere down the road Milton might convince himself that since the obsession hadn't been sparked by the two accidental sips, maybe it would be safe to drink after all. Maybe he wasn't an alcoholic. Milton dismissed Luther's concerns as nonsense, at which point Luther suggested that he find a sponsor who was accepting of his idea of sobriety. Luther then went to Glanton, who assured him he had done the right thing in letting Milton go. In fact, Glanton said the sponsee had given Luther no choice because if Luther accepted the sponsee's loose understanding of sobriety as being all right for the sponsee, then he was accepting that same loose understanding for himself, and placing his own recovery at risk.

But because George was not only big in his body and big in the estimation of the On the Path group, and always spoke with *knowingness* and *assurance* in his booming voice, Luther was drawn to him. Luther sought to double down on the rightness of his action concerning Milton by going to big George for further reassurance about the

rightness of his decision to let go of Milton. But George wasn't having it. He stepped hard on Luther's face and all parts of his body and his mind, saying "You're just wanting to knock the man down," and tried to staple the words to Luther's brain but Luther managed to scurry away.

*Celeste, comprehensiveness is everything, and so we must call on memory to serve us if we are to achieve it. There were others at On the Path. There was Barton T., who wore only the finest silk suits and slicked his hair so that it shone and even in winter showed himself to have been darkly kissed by the sun. And there was Kyle L., who while vertically limited, was big in his teeth, and who, when he chaired the meetings, sought out only the blondest of speakers under thirty who weighed no more than one hundred pounds, with most of it in their chests, as one female member put it. And there was Dalton K., who spoke incessantly of the racing tapes he suffered from as a newcomer, his manner of describing the mental agitation that had afflicted him. And there was Jester Jim, for whom it was essential that seriousness be banished from the presence of his mouth. And there was Halcyon Q. and Jennings F. and Maybeline W. and Forest G. And Celestine L. And many, many others streaming in from east and west and north and south that they might drink of the waters of sobriety.*

*Now there were those among the legions who, while they drank from the waters of sobriety, went about with their chests puffed out as necessary indicators of their own excellence, and who had to be among their own kind on those days that their own kind chose to go elsewhere, those days being two, Tuesday and Thursday, when they would gather at another nearby meeting, Plug in the Jug, and on those days the light was not*



*absent but diminished at On the Path, for star power had been lost. Because even in RoR, there are those who, despite the leveling power of alcohol, remain status seekers, those on a party circuit of which only their own kind are a part. And it was all right to be in this space now rendered lackluster, and feel a sense of peace to be without the social seekers and to accept the constant nature of my own solitariness. Because I was there for the meeting and nothing else, and so it had always been.*

*And while the chorus of naysayers gather and their voices grow loud in denouncing the uselessness of my endeavor to gather up time, we go on, Celeste, or I go on, for order is everything, the items on the shelves neatly arranged for future reference, so we can live in a looping continuum and not be consigned to floating in the outer space of darkness and oblivion.*

*There was one who had been part of my sober life since its inception, if only at the periphery. Her name was Wolfna Dyner and she had a tale of mistreatment beyond the ordinary, for every day of her childhood and adolescence could she count on her father smashing her head against the wall of the the family's house in the Midwest, and her mother was powerless to intercede, unless she wanted an even more grievous pounding. Wolfa was married to a man who had hardness in his face but not in his manner. But one day she cast him aside. She had awoken to his unfitness for her life, she said, and one day sometime later stood in front of me with legs spread at On the Path and, while fanning her hand as if to cool herself down, declared herself to having a "wicked obsession" for me, a confession that left me staring at her dumbly, and so, with nothing from me to build on but my silence, she took herself away. She was no one I was physically or otherwise*

*attracted to, Celeste. That is only the truth. Some months later I was given the opportunity to lead the meeting at Now Is the Wow, and Wolfna Dyner was there in the front row. Because I was obliged to let honesty be my guide and not go dinky with a public relations campaign to inflate my image, and because it is suggested that we are as sick as our secrets, I let it be known that I had "failed" the SAT and felt branded for life by this failure. Further allowing Mr. Dylan to also be my guide, I had one less secret to conceal. I threw in my flat head and my status as a hanging string, and in so doing have reason to believe I caused Wolfna Dyner to flee the room, and in hasty fashion, for in the telling I can only believe I shattered any illusions she may have had about me. And, truth to tell, she confessed as much to me. Yes indeed, her ardor had waned, she said. I was now in her own personal dustbin of history.*

*Celeste, a man can dinky down or rise up from dinkydom so it does not become his new hometown. The choice is his, and so it was with me as well. Had I not been doing the dink on this one and that one, as you have been too courteous to point out, and to what purpose, in general, other than to establish my superiority? And what has been the result? Only this. In a flash I wanted all those occupying the other seats in On the Path to vacate the premises. Why? Would it shock you to hear that I suddenly wished to be alone with God, to have him all to myself? In that moment did I seem to perceive my selfishness and the monstrosity of it. Was I saying all others could perish in a sea of alcohol while I was the only one pulled into the lifeboat? Was my intuition some years before that Glanton only reluctantly shared his practice of meditation merely a projection of my own possessiveness? And that attacking "bye" fired off by Rachel when, for the briefest time,*

*we were in the same room together, as if she could not remain, in spite of her bonding with Jesus. Was it not an indicator of the same sort of possessiveness that I was showing a proclivity for? Fear and shame took me over. For the first time I was seeing my illness at depth. Here I was in a fellowship presumably joined in common purpose with my brothers and sisters, without whom I would have no recovery, and underneath my pose of wishing them well and that they stay sober was a competitive streak that left me caring not in the least. And yet there had been Krishna, whom I wanted only the best for before I abandoned him.*

Miracles are commonplace in RoR, and Blanche Givenchy was one of them. Her attendance at On the Path became regular and not a week went by that she did not express her joy at being sober. But there came a turning six months down the road, and it occurred when, to the ears of Blanche Givenchy, came the word “God” as a piercing instrument, whether from others in the meeting in a sharing mode or as seen on the shade hanging on the wall at every meeting with the qualifying words *as we understood Him*. Her soreness only grew, till the day came when she rose from her seat and pulled the shade from the wall and stomped on it before she could be restrained and escorted from the room. No apology did she make for her action. No understanding or acceptance did she show that atheists and agnostics in significant numbers were members of the fellowship—that the entire spectrum from belief to disbelief were represented.

In this time the great Dire Straits instrumental “Going Home” came to Luther’s attention and would some evenings claim him for its own. Sitting in his studio, he would listen

over and over, wanting it to take him higher and higher following an opportunity to lead a RoR meeting. Was he not seeking to preserve the high from the attention that had come to him from group members? Was he not seeking to be not one among many but one above the many? Was “Going Home” not so very similar to his first experiment with alcohol at age fourteen, this after walking Jane Thayer home and kissing her the night before? Had the beer not also been a desired means to preserve and enhance the sense of elation, to go over the moon to points far above and then farther still?

He took this awareness to Glanton, who said, “The ego never dies,” making time for his words but even more for his chuckle.

*Now Celeste, all this means is that we must keep our vigilance soaring, lest drunkenness claim and reduce us in our bogus state of exaltation, its sole purpose but to set us up for the fall and our final demise.*

*Now there was one who had the light of love in him, even if it was found to be alloyed with other elements. His name was MacDuff and he came to America by way of Canada and the science it gave him. This did not mean his biochemistry got in the way of his alcoholism, which ran right through it and took him from the lab at Rockefeller University to the bottle gangs on the Bowery, where with filthy rags they threatened to wash the pristine windshields of fancy cars stopped for the light at East Houston Street to force the drivers of these luxury vehicles into fork it over Louies. But MacDuff had an ascendant gear in recovery as well. He powered up into the owner of a biotech consulting firm with a staff of fifty. Because he was strong in his scientific mind and strong in his*

*spoken word about RoR, I was drawn to him, Celeste, and made the same mistake as I had in asking Ned Fletcher to be my sponsor, in light of Glanton's further flight from Massachusetts to Los Angeles. Once again was I in conflict, fearing I was a do wrong sort of person in regard to Glanton, a Mr. Duplicity, and though reason was not on my side, my concern was that Glanton would cry me a river if he discovered the nature of my disloyalty. Celeste, the light of logic does not shine bright in the minds of one and all. It was not for me to understand at depth that Glanton had left me, not vice versa, and that he had done so without apology or concern for my well being. Am I saying that I was, with this denial, protecting myself from the knowledge that he was Mr. Heart of Stone? Not at all. Not at all. Glanton was edified as to the ways of normal being so he could go about the business of his life without worry and regret. His concern was with himself so he could say mission accomplished as he stepped into the winner's circle and not dawdle dance about fueled by a misplaced sense of responsibility.*

*"Quite the sprite," MacDuff said, on first seeing Mia. And surely she was that, racing about as if on wings. Some days later he called with a request. He would like to have Mia for the day. He would take her to a movie and the zoo and maybe the Museum of Natural History. He would show her a great time. In a way, Celeste, I was grateful for his request. I had wondered if it would be possible for me to have parental instincts for a child who was not my own biologically, but his request affirmed that I did, and deeply so, because it was met by a sense of moral outrage.*

*In this time of MacDuff, I had been rereading the great David Copperfield, and though I saw kindness at the core of MacDuff's being, when I read of James Steerforth's*

*betrayal of David Copperfield by running off with Little Em'ly, a feeling of great terror came over me. The terror summoned not an image of Steerforth but of MacDuff, as if, in that moment, an entire format of duplicity had been revealed to me, one that called for him to run off not only with little Mia but you as well, and essentially run off with my life. The terror was akin to waking from a nightmare in the darkness.*

*For several weeks I found it impossible to pick up the phone and call him with the personal matters that a sponsee confides in his sponsor. Though it may sound like a harsh and summary dismissal, all contact with him was broken off for a month, leaving him in a state of perplexity, as he expressed when my connection with him resumed. Whether his perplexity remained I cannot say, when I could offer no explanation for my withdrawal.*

Mia was in Luther's heart. It could feel that his heart was overflowing with love for her, making his presence with her alone at times unbearable. Because love was a fragile thing. It could expose itself and leave him full of shame knowing that she had seen how hard he was trying to summon love in her to meet his own. Tossing a big rubber ball back and forth with her in the narrow vestibule of the loft, he feared that at any moment she would stop and go on to other things, having exhausted his possibilities in perceiving a man who could offer a child nothing more than a rubber ball as a means to connect with her.

Mia had a mind that took her beyond, took her the extra mile into true intelligence. She had The Beatles in her mind, this interest coming not from Luther but from Rodney Stillson, her father's new and forever more lover, a Southern man who had his tunes to share. But whatever Rodney Stillson knew, he didn't know what Mia was to

know, with that extra gear that could take her where he was unable to go. It was not enough to take an emotional bath in the sound of *Rubber Soul* but to commit the sounds to memory so she could play them back for further examination long after the record stopped and tease out the individual voices of the Fab Four so she could hear them not only harmonizing but separate and distinct. This was John and that was Paul but really, it was John. He was where her infatuation lived. Because he had the wit that made him hers. Not that George and Ringo were lesser, or maybe they were, and even Paul. John's humor was the indicator of his intelligence. This she understood. George could not get there with his darkly serious handsomeness and the narrowness of his face nor Paul either, with his conventional good looks. And Ringo was akin to a pet dog, and to be treated as such.

Mia took to horses as well as the Beatles. She could not be separated from the tiny toy figure of Mister Ed, the talking horse, and her heart belonged to Southlands, a stretch of farmland overlooking the Hudson just outside of Rhinebeck. She was keen to learn the finer points of riding, such as dressage, and entered junior competitions wearing breeches and a jacket and a helmet. When she was not on a horse, she was tending to them in their stables, doing whatever chores were permitted her. Her interest went beyond riding and being with the animals. She had a need to know the anatomy, from the crest and withers down to the fetlock and pastern. A bit small for her age, she had a powerful and inquiring mind.

She also had a strong will. One morning Luther and Celeste awoke to find her missing. She and her bicycle were gone from the house and the property. No note had she

left. In a state of high anxiety, they drove several miles to Southlands, where they found Mia tending to the horses. No apology did she make for her unannounced departure, nor would she heed their concerns for her safety as an eight-year-old bicycling on heavily trafficked Route 9. Her once concession, grudgingly made, was that yes, she would leave a note should the urge come over her again.

Seeking a permanent home, fear continued to find Luther. MacDuff would tell him to leave his marriage. Alternatively, he would claim Celeste and Mia for his own. And why would MacDuff go the evil and appropriating route? Because he was black with rage and envy that Luther should have a marriage and a child as well. Luther stood up to this fear and called it what it was, distrust bordering on paranoia. Luther saying, "I take a step in the direction of people and a voice says that they want to hurt me." He saw the pattern.

And at work there was more fear. A second warning from Miss Carmelli. More typos. More sloppy editing. Miss Carmelli's markings all over the hard copy. She was working overtime to destroy him. All the women were. Already had an immutable sentence been passed. Incompetent. *If I had known you were going to do this kind of work, I never would have hired you.* But no, no, it wasn't like the rebuke he had received in his early days at the org. All Miss Carmelli was asking was that he raise the level of his performance to where it had been at his annual performance review some months before. But the fear took on a life of its own. Not only would he lose his job but he would also drink. MacDuff directed Luther to an RoR meeting and suggested he share his fear of



relapsing. A feeling of shame when he did. A failure in the workplace and in RoR. No place to hide from himself.

*Celeste, I took my fear with me onto Block Island. Fear on the ferry from Point Judith, Rhode Island. No faith that the vessel would navigate the currents and reach the island. All those vehicles making the crossing. You read about passenger ferries sinking. Hundreds drowned. As on the plane trips, trying to hide my fear. Relying on the confidence of the crew casually going about their tasks to put me at relative ease. Though the day was sunny and mild, it would not be wise to relax my guard until land was in sight. That's when the trouble started, wasn't it? People getting all stupid in their cockiness, their loud, idiotic laughter a kind of dog whistle for the darkness to descend. People so sick in their hideous self-destructiveness. Wouldn't be me. No way. Keeping a watchful eye. Maintaining soaring vigilance.*

*Mia had brought along her friend Lotte, from The Netherlands. Couldn't be without her. Lotte large and plain. Went about with an impassive expression. Smiles few and far between. No internal sadness. Just European gravitas. An old soul. Quite a contrast with spritely Mia. In the car, driving to the house we had rented, Mia sassed me. Said "Oh shut up." Shattering to be humiliated like that. And yet I had been harsh in the way I told her to quiet down. But "Oh shut up," as if she had been waiting to say those words, to express her dislike and contempt for me, all along. And my pride doubly stung to be spoken to in that manner in front of Lotte, surely an unheard of breach of decorum in her world for a child to speak like that to an adult.*

*The storm that my vigilance kept at bay on the ferry unloaded on the island that night, Celeste, lightning bolts stabbing the soft belly of the ocean with remorseless consistency and sending the strong message that it would soon be coming for us. And when it didn't, the next day, there was my own personal lightning. If I couldn't hurl my bolts at Mia, then I could direct them at you. And why not? Were you not the source of her insurrection? Were you not at least complicit in her rudeness through endless indulgence, and if not, tacitly sympathetic that a daughter of yours could do what you couldn't, topple the patriarch with one well-timed retort?*

*And yet it was me. My fear would be my undoing. Celeste, a person can talk a good game about God, but fear at the level I was experiencing it allowed no room for the divine to operate. Faith that I would be held was entirely lacking, even in the matter of my physical sobriety. You were not conditioned for such verbal violence. So your mother said, when the first hint arrived that, despite my amiability in their presence, a more intemperate side was manifesting in the privacy of our home. Or was that my reason for being in your life, to summon the anger that was buried? Had you not said that you would mercilessly taunt your sister until she threatened to lay hands on you? Had you not said that I wanted you to be a real person and you couldn't? Must every revolution be a bloody spectacle, with shots fired and knives drawn? Is not the battle of the sexes the enduring battle? And was I not the oppressor and the agent for liberation in one? Oh, never mind the blithering idiot poses riding hard for their mindless forms of justice. The goal is not some dubious justice; it is freedom.*

*The storm having spent itself during the night and the sun now prevailing, I headed with Mia and Lotte for the nearby Mohegan Bluffs, the lower part steep enough to serve as a challenge even for Hotspur; in his imperiousness, to ride his steed on the perpendicular. Celeste, you stayed behind, saying you needed time to yourself. My verbal barrage had clearly battered you, and no amount of apology could erase the hurt and harm. I have to believe that by now my remorse meant nothing to you. As the balmy day followed the rageful night, so was my remorse to be followed by my personal storm. So you understood. It is a poor excuse, but I hadn't grown up in a home where civility was the norm. Boundaries were crossed, physical and verbal. Hard slap and verbal hatchets buried deep in the skull were the norm. And yet this time you would see to it that a price was paid. Not that vengeance was in your nature, save for the grievance you held against your father. Pain and despair were the motivating force s for the action you were to take.*

*Below the bluffs was no expanse of sand such as the state beaches offered, only a spit of land on which to set out our towels. Your descent, an hour later, of the steep set of wooden stairs that led to the bottom of the bluffs went unnoticed, as the ocean held my gaze. You entered my line of sight as you streaked past without a word and dove into the water, dispensing with any acclimation to its coldness. Farther and farther out you went, which raised my concern, as you were not a powerful swimmer. And when you disappeared from sight, my concern grew into alarm. By now I was in the water myself, waist deep. To my left came the shrieks of Mia and Lotte as the the modest waves broke over them, the two oblivious with their children's laughter of the unthinkable thing unfolding. We had the bluffs to ourselves. Not another bather in sight, nor a lifeguard.*

*Nothing but the endless and remorseless ocean to remind me of its reach and power. I called to you as if you were a child playing hide and seek and now were being summoned home. The absurdity of it. But notice, if you will, that I didn't swim out in search of you. A coward dies a thousand times and all that. Yes, I could easily say to what purpose would it have been, given my poor swimming skills and the fact that without glasses I couldn't see clearly beyond a few feet. But once again we must run over the dinky and leave it for dead under the heavy tread of truth. The same fate was awaiting me out there, whether it was a shark or a strong and treacherous current imposing its will and sapping the strength to resist from your slender body. In a flash I saw it all—Mia learning that her mother was lost at sea and the hatred of me that would consume her for causing her mother's death; the inquiry, which would lay bare my abuse of you; the loathing for me of your parents and sister and all your friends. A loss there would be no recovery from, for either Mia, your family and friends, or me.*

*But the dire scenario playing out in my mind ceased abruptly, dissolved by the sight of you dragging yourself toward the shore. And yet, any joy I experienced was soon followed by anger at your reckless plunge into the water. "A riptide," you gasped. "I was about to give in when it released me." And later, true confession. "I had wanted to die," putting me on notice that you had in your arsenal the final and annihilating weapon.*

They returned to the country some weeks later only to find that the crawl space held six inches of rainwater. The circumstance was calling on Luther for manly action. Open-mouthed, he stared at the sump pump, pondering the very name. The pump just sat there like the little lump of nothingness it was with no intention of reforming its passive

way anymore than it did of yielding the origin of that stump of a word *sump*. That would be for a dictionary to do. Nervously Luther looked about. The thing wasn't fueled by the ether. It ran on electric power and he was standing up to his ankles in water and was he to be another statistic, a foolish man electrocuted in the basement of his wife's home? He took refuge above and sought out Celeste.

*Celeste, we were supporting the local economy by calling on outside help. You placed no burden of expectation on me to be a Mr. Fix-It. And so we summoned **Mr. Fergus Welby**, the suffix of his name a telltale indicator of his Englishness, however deep his family's roots in America. Surely he would get the job done so the house would not rot from beneath with mold spreading throughout. And he did. He performed his mechanical wizardry*

*Often now I would stare out the window of the apartment above the garage at the expanse of lawn and the wilder parts beyond and wonder how I had gotten there and was I placing this miracle in jeopardy because of my intemperateness. So much fear, Celeste. So much fear, in spite of prayer and meditation. If not about losing my job, then my marriage would fail or someone like MacDuff would take you away. You saw more than you said. Maybe we all do. Later you would comment on this fear with what I heard as contempt. In my own way I saw the problem. Financial resources, a property, a SoHo loft, had done nothing to increase my sense of security. The higher power was showing me the problem, Celeste. Too much reliance on people and material assets. I needed to turn within. But we mustn't do the silliness thing, Celeste, and boast of overnight success that*

*is not there. We mustn't. Fear is in our DNA. There is a path we must walk. There is pain we must experience and endure. We do not let go easily.*

*I would give you stories or parts of my longer manuscripts to read and would bask for the rest of the day in your inevitable approval, which it was obvious I craved. The stories were thin and poorly crafted things and would never find their way to publication and didn't deserve to. Writing remained what it had been when I started out in that Hell's Kitchen apartment, a form of therapy. The talent was not there, nor was the hard work needed to boost the work beyond the level of mediocrity. Later I would realize that were I John Updike or Philip Roth or Richard Yates coming to you with golden prose, it would not have been sufficient to save me from eviction from the marriage bed. Things run their course, Celeste. The goal is not longevity; the goal is to be awake in one's life and not sleepwalk through it, numbed by routine. Let others celebrate their golden or diamond anniversaries and all that.*

*That night you did what mothers do, Celeste. You spent time with your daughter while I went off to my RoR meeting, in the grip of a dread that to join you instead would begin the erosion of the habit pattern of meetings I had developed. Miss a meeting here, miss a meeting there, and sooner or later I would be blowing off meetings more and more regularly until I wasn't going at all. Wasn't that the way relapse happened? RoR members becoming complacent. Thinking they had a lock on sobriety. Fewer and fewer meetings and before you knew it they were well enough to drink. Some made it back. Many didn't. Fear wasn't at all bad in regard to alcohol; it could serve as a motivating factor to stay on the straight and narrow.*

*I feel my tone has changed in addressing you. More matter of fact. A voice says something is amiss, that the narrative has grown even duller than it was, and that I need to bring it back to some degree of life. But that is proving difficult. We are in a different place now, where caution and sobriety are needed, as this now is about us and recognition must be paid to the danger of misspeaking and losing the force field of your love.*

*The stretch of road leading to the rehab had special meaning for me. The greenery on either side and the occasional house along the way and the small cemetery behind a fieldstone wall. An atmosphere of rustic beauty and stillness verging on holy. A life I had been given, not earned. A readymade life. And I was failing in it. Sarah's words came back to me: "You don't deserve to live with anyone." A car not my own. A house not my own. A daughter not my own.*

*At the meeting, which I was asked to lead, I spoke of my father, and how, according to my mother, he couldn't handle stress. The cosmic joke was that I was just like him. This is territory I have gone over, but it was hitting me with renewed force. He had needed a woman to bring him in from the cold and so had I. Two women, in fact—Sarah, whom I had left, and then you. He had spent his evening in church and away from his family, as I was doing at RoR. He had brought about his demise with sugar. And I had been on my way to doing the same with alcohol. He was an outsider. I too was an outsider. From the floor a man named Tim spoke. He had been fired from six jobs in recovery. Sobriety was in one hand and everything else was a situation subject to change in the other hand. Celeste, he was bullish on the sober path and on himself and I heard*

*him to be saying that failure had been banished from all the provinces of his mind and so could not manifest in his life. He was a do right can do man. Though I frowned on positivity and certainty of his kind, I resolved to make a frontal attack on my negativity by accentuating the positive, as the song says. Did I not get to work on time and was I not learning to do the best I could? Did I not attend RoR meetings faithfully? Did I not seek out newcomers and extend myself to them? Did I not contribute at home? Did I not visit with my mother regularly and was I not affectionate with her and did I not try to help her financially?*

*Celeste, I had no affection for Miss Carmelli in this time, as she had locked the gates to her love and banned me from its premises. I regarded her as unkind and hurtful in a calculating way and as a woman who believed in punishment. Only long after could I acknowledge that it took one to know one and do a frontal attack on the dinky and own up to the part I had played. There had been a major project, after which I coasted. She had fears of her own, mainly that my carelessness would place her own position in jeopardy. My fear about the loss of my job was not her doing; my insecurity about my fitness for the world was my own.*

*“Quite the sprite,” MacDuff said, on first seeing Mia. And surely she was that, darting about as if on wings. Some days later he called with a request. He would like to have Mia for the day. He would take her to a movie and the zoo and maybe the Museum of Natural History. He would show her a great time. In a way, Celeste, I was grateful for his request. I had wondered if it would be possible for me to have parental instincts for a child who*



*was not my own biologically, but his request affirmed that I did, and deeply so, because it was met by a sense of moral outrage.*

*In this time of MacDuff, I had been rereading the great David Copperfield, and though I saw kindness at the core of MacDuff's being, when I read of James Steerforth's betrayal of David Copperfield by running off with Little Em'ly, a feeling of great terror came over me. The terror summoned not an image of Steerforth but of MacDuff, as if, in that moment, an entire format of duplicity had been revealed to me, one that called for him to run off not only with little Mia but you as well, and essentially run off with my life. The terror was akin to waking from a nightmare in the darkness.*

*For several weeks I found it impossible to pick up the phone and call him with the personal matters that a mentor generally expects to hear about. Though it may sound like a harsh and summary dismissal, all contact with him was broken off for a month, leaving him in a state of perplexity, as he expressed when my connection with him resumed. Whether his perplexity remained I cannot say, when I could offer no explanation for my withdrawal.*

*Celeste, it was a struggle to regain my emotional bearings at work. The terror that I would lose my job was a constant. I saw once again that insecurity was the problem; everything became a test of my competence. The truth cannot be a sometime thing, with miserly apportioning of it here and there, if we are to see the full picture. Totality of vision is the ultimate goal, so that we may walk on this earth as we are, not as we want to be. Did not Popeye set out this moral instruction for us when we were*

*children? Did he not say, over and over, repetition being essential for learning, “I yam what I yam and that’s all which I yam. I’m Popeye the sailor man”? And I yam what I yam as well, and yet fora true assessment of my substance would I not go to God, that he might say, “Luther, know that you are my perfect child.” Rather would I lean to my own understanding, looking to my left and my right so sadness born of comparison could saturate my being, for down the aisle a ways sat Blanche Givenchy, who tore every manuscript to bits that she might put it together in a more satisfactory way.*

Luther asked Blanche if she had read Hemingway’s story “Big Two-Hearted River” and she said if she had, she didn’t remember, prompting Luther to say if she had read it, she would remember, not everything, but the trout, the trout she would remember, and how Nick Adams came to see the big one at the bottom of the river by staring and staring. Because that was what Blanche was doing when she stared and stared at the pages of a new manuscript. She was penetrating to the depth of it. And that was why Miss Carmelli held her in such high regard, saying Blanche could be at the top of any publishing company. There was nothing for Luther to dispute in Miss Carmelli’s glowing estimation of Blanche’s gift. He held her in the same high regard. He didn’t have to go and try to make her smaller than she was. Quality was quality.

*Once again the mold came to mind—not breaking the mold, mine or anyone else’s. In despair, I found myself thinking “God is love,” and while some might say that is trite or simply delusional, that is their affair. Because if negative thoughts are surely followed by negative feelings, is it not reasonable that positive thoughts should trigger positive feelings?*

Fear was a constant, offering daily evidence of his inadequacy: the swimming test out to the raft he failed at some other Bible camp, this one in the Adirondacks; the studio off Riverside Drive he gave up on when his anxiety about the rent became too great; and now the fear that he would give up on sobriety, the illness saying he was fast out of the blocks but that it would catch up with him.

From Miss Carmelli's point of view, the starting point for the warning was his mistakes, followed by his failure to show the proper contrition or a satisfactory explanation. Never mind that mistakes were mistakes. What was he to do? Wear a hair shirt? A further aggravation, again from her point of view, was that he had the impudence to point out her mistakes, highlighting in red the typos in the current issue of the org magazine, for which Miss Carmelli was the editor, causing her to wish to boil him in oil for suggesting that a double standard was operating and further stating that he would consent to a publishing course only if she would take it with him. Otherwise, only in her dreams would he do such a thing. **(NB—his mother's death. NB-Celeste, we look in vain for a finish line.)** So you might say that he had, even with his fear and insecurity, his haughtiness going on. But he also had the bathroom stall, and the fortifying power of the higher power to draw on within the stall's confines, saying "Dear God, of myself I am nothing, a weak and helpless man. I need your care and protection in all areas of my life, including from the metamorphosing Carmelli woman, ready to stick me repeatedly with her proboscis," for had not Glanton instructed him that a man was someone who could humble himself before God? And so he walked about the org premises with his head held high, that Miss Carmelli could not gloat at seeing him in a state of fears and tears. For

with her little sayings, like “There’s more than one way to skin a cat,” was she not showing her gloating mentality? Far below, on the avenue, the cars and trucks and buses and all the motor vehicles of New York City were doing their ceaselessly rushing thing, the world having its business to contend with while Luther had his.

Miss Carmelli was first in and last out, as had been Rafta, that she might set an example of high service to the org. She had no truck with dilly dally, shilly shally; no, no, she was all business all the time. But she also had her relationship to the world, and would often travel to a foreign land for her annual vacation, as she did that fall, with her trip to Paris, France, that she might visit the Louvre and the other great museums of the city. Miss Carmelli had great appreciation for art, and had attended many lectures at the Metropolitan Museum, that she might penetrate the mysteries of a Rembrandt or a Vermeer or a Van Gogh. The last she pronounced Van Gock, that she might reference the master as he himself introduced himself in his day. Miss Carmelli was respectful of the wonderful diversity the world offered, and nowhere was that appreciation more evident than in her insistence on pronouncing a name properly, that is, as the French would. And so it was always Le Musee de Louvre, and not The Louvre. She would not seek to impose her Americanness when visiting countries where English was not the main language. “Une tasse de the,” she might say, with the aid of her guidebook, to at least make an effort to converse in the native language. So Luther grudgingly accepted that they had in common their resistance to cultural imperiousness and arrogance.

He found, on her return, that she had left a postcard of the Champs Elysées all aglitter at night and a bookmark on his desk. Before thanking her for the gifts, as

politeness dictated, he sought to arrange his face so any lingering hurt or prieve would not be evident. But the grievance broke through his meager defense. "I do feel I am being harassed because I am a man," he turned and said, as he was leaving. Miss Carmelli did not respond, and her silence grew more meaningful and ominous when, a moment later, she walked purposefully down the aisle to the office of Risa Harken, her boss, and closed the door. Miss Carmelli had offered him a peace offering and he had spurned it. She would be thinking that she had some genuine sickness on her hands that her employee should be in a state of high dudgeon long after the warning had been issued. Briefly, there had been another staff member who would rap on his cubicle wall and that of others with the sharp warning not to mess with her, possibly a woman suffering from a dangerous persecution complex, and she was gone within two weeks. Would Miss Carmelli not present him to Risa Harken in the same light? Would it not be just a matter of time before the other shoe dropped? Before a final offering from Miss Carmelli was waiting on his desk, this one a sealed envelope containing his dismissal notice? Had he not been warned early on in recovery that he could mouth off in RoR but he had better learn to zip it in the workplace if he wanted to keep his job.

Glanton did not do chuckle plenty when Luther came calling this time. Glanton wasn't playing. He just laid it on the line, saying in effect that Luther had a pattern of ire and fire in the workplace and the home and was Luther willing to release from his anger sickness and his need for the last word? Was Luther entirely ready to be released from his vindictiveness? Luther said he was. Then Luther would have to see his part and pray for

the willingness to amend the harm he had done to Miss Carmelli and the org with his sloppy work.

“I am not born to perfection. I yam as I yam,” Luther replied.

“Stop your horse shit and do as I say if you want to keep your job,” Glanton said, before doing telephone hangup, Glanton saying without saying that he didn’t do debating with the likes of him. Luther then scribbled his vile thoughts about Miss Carmelli on the page that the poison and the blow she had dealt his pride might be leached from his system and prayed for the willingness for his soreness to be lifted so he could see her not as a crow with a high vindictiveness quotient of her own but in the higher power’s light. The following day, when the spirit so moved him, Luther went to Miss Carmelli and shared his transformation of thought and attitude and that he was now able, more than ever, to be where his feet were that he might be fully present in mind and body for the tasks at hand, taking them one at a time so his attention would not be scattered. To that end, he would remove any item not essential to the manuscript before him from the surface of his desk. “The light is in me. This you will see if you do not now believe.”

“Just go and do your job,” Miss Carmelli said, so he might be removed from her sight pronto.

His niece Jeanne’s resurrection continued, she too remaining sober in RoR. She had received a call from Luther’s mother that distressed her. Jeanne’s father, Chuck, had come to the family’s apartment and wouldn’t leave. Mrs. Garatdjian was asking that Jeanne come and take him away. She didn’t say she wanted to be rescued from the drunken man,

but she didn't need to say so. And Jeanne didn't say she couldn't deal with her father but she didn't need to say so. Luther told Jeanne to go to an RoR meeting and sit in the front row and raise her hand and go for coffee with group members afterward. He told her to stick with the winners, that she wasn't responsible for Luther's mother or her father and that she should take care of herself, though afterward Luther wondered at the merit of the the suggestion he had made. Old anger had held him in its grip, the battles he had fought as a child with his mother, demanding that Naomi, Jeanne's mother, and Chuck be booted from the room they lived in rent-free in the building, neither of them having jobs.

Chuck's drunken rants and Naomi's pill-pill-fueled histrionics in the lobby shouldn't be allowed. Why was she not protecting him from such behavior, particularly when the two of them turned their attention to him with taunts and name-calling. And always there was her maddening response. "You don't know what it is to be a mother with children you love and care for." What Luther had known, even as a child, without having the words, was that love and care were not being practiced with Naomi and Chuck, and with his oldest sister Hannah, for that matter; in their place were dependency and weakness being fostered. She had been placing her love and care for them before the love and care she was supposed to be giving him. "Kick them out. Kick them all out," he would scream, after Naomi had hit or taunted him or Hannah had given him several of her smacks. But then there was the other voice, the voice that said he was cold and unfeeling, as Naomi had accused him of being. And there was his mother love, the love that obliterated history and legitimate grievance and left only remorse and sorrow that he would be so callous as

to leave her, and at her elderly age, with Jeanne's alcoholic father. Yes, indeed, where was his compassion?

*Now Celeste, the statement "All women are lesbians at heart" will not stand in this or any other times, but what else could I have meant when I challenged Sarah to run off into the hills to join the women with their simmering pots of baked beans. The nonsense in the statement, from the assertion of the universality of lesbianism to reducing the culinary skill of women to heating beans over an open fire was not lost even on me. Word salad-making at its worst, even for the likes of me. And yet it spoke to me of my fear that women as well as men would claim you for their own. Just yesterday did not a woman with the name **Brazen** stamped on her forehead demand of me your full name and phone number, having seen you with me at an RoR meeting, and saying so matter-of-factly that she wanted to get next to you? As if she, like any man, could sweep me out of the way. Celeste, I had the presence of mind to stall, but even so, I met her aggression not with outrage but gross discomfort, for I did not have the wherewithal to recognize my rights, let alone situate myself within them. All through this brief encounter was her name, blazoned on her forehead, flashing neon red. And then, of course, there was Sarah, speaking from within her knowingness, saying after I had brought you and her together at Hermione's party, "Can you not see that she is a lesbian?" We say what we say, some of our words fixed in time and others consigned to oblivion as soon as spoken.*

*Celeste, it can seem that I am rushing myself toward a cliff, or some agent within me is fomenting trouble. Glanton says fear is a form of prayer and that we bring about that which we fear. My fear now is that is that I have been taken over and about of*



*control. The cedar waxwings and robins and the few other birds I can name will soon take flight and it is only a matter of time before I too make an exit out the door, an unwanted one of nightmare proportions, exile from paradise because my emotional nature remains combustible, regardless of the buddha breaths I seek to draw and exhale in meditation. Clearly is a perversity operating in my person.*

*We can never take lightly the ire in fire, remorseless in its need to reduce all to ash. There was no flame, only smoke pouring from the fireplace and quickly filling the house, leading me to call to Mia to open the front door for ventilation. There may have been crossness, born of fear, in my voice provoking her to say, under her breath, but not so soothe voce that I couldn't hear, "Oh, shut up," and so I followed my imperative to her with bellowing, leading Mia to run from the house screaming "I hate this." And those three words said it all. So direct, so concise, so honest.*

*Celeste, Mia's girlfriend Nina was with us for the weekend, and you felt terrible that she should have to witness this domestic turmoil. Having reverted to my state of high dudgeon that Mia would not afford me a modicum of respect, I sought the cooling element of an RoR meeting but caught fire all over again on my return, seeing you and Mia and Nina chatting at the kitchen table, as if the three of you were there for the sole purpose of reminding me that only smoke could fill the house when I was present and only laughter when I left. That night did I resurrect my lesbian nation rhetoric and your planned flight to the hills for the baked beans that would be served steaming hot. I then retreated to the apartment over the garage where I spent the night waiting in vain for the sounds of your feet on the steps, as I would for Sarah's back when, but there were no*

*footsteps, as you were not Sarah and did not play that way. In the darkness did I have to confront the reality of your relief at my absence, your stunning indifference. What defense could I have against a partner who did not care? Such awareness that I needed you and you had little if no need of me being intolerable, I sought to leap over it with a forced attitude of forgiveness I would be unable to sustain that I might rejoin you. The bedroom door was open to me, as was the marriage bed, and so I entered, and there was the intimacy that followed, our bodies remaining in harmony when our minds were not.*

Luther turned thirty-nine that September, and though neither rhyme nor reason would have it, Mia said to him, “You don’t look more than twenty-six.” It was not Mia’s way to call attention to anything about Luther other than his bad moods and anger, and so he could not help but be touched and even allowed himself to think that maybe she had more room in her life for him than he had come to believe. There was something kind and generous in her observation, though it was cause for wonder how a ten-year-old could distinguish between thirty-nine and twenty-six. But why not? Could she not distinguish between a Honda Accord and a Nissan Sentra at a glance? Did this not prove her distinguishing power? Well, whatever, it went to his heart that she should share such a thing.

And there was Miss Carmelli with a little something waiting for him when he arrived for work. No, no. Not a punch supreme in the face delivered via a note of dismissal but a birthday card and an elegantly wrapped gift, which he tore through to find a solidly built nutcracker. A gift meister she was, for sure. Luther saying to the universe,

“Could I please contemplate what people do for me instead of forever dwelling on what they do to me?”

As if it was so easy. Just a little prayer here. Just a little prayer there. Just a little meditation here. Just a little meditation there. Just a little telling himself this and telling himself that, like:

- Must ask God daily for restraint;
- Must see that judgment is bad stuff with real consequences for me and others.
- Must see that being Mr. Home Repair Man Supreme would not make a man a man.

Luther must-ing all over himself.

Because what reigned supreme and had a life of its own was his anger sickness, his soreness at Celeste for not wanting to be pregnant by him, he who was not good enough in the genes department to have a baby by, a baby that no mother could love, not with its ugliness and dullness of mind. Soreness too that she didn't feel the need to explain. Luther pushing, in his mind, for something he didn't even want.

*Now Celeste, there was one named To-nee at the Friday night RoR meeting you attended with me. Yes, he spelled his name just that way to further remove himself from the brutal regime his father had sought to impose, To-Nee forced to flee the family home at age thirteen and live by his wits on the streets of Manchester at age thirteen. To-Nee with his sour Englishness going on and coming across as snide and superior and mocking. To-Nee with a greater natural endowment that I saw would, over time, overcome the harsh*

*patriarchy he had been subjected to and those years of familial deprivation. To-Nee a sleeping giant, his superciliousness notwithstanding. A containment policy of no avail against his progress. How had my effort to check Vera Severa's progress back when worked out? Well, Luther? Well? Because although To-Nee had arrived at the doors of RoR from hobo hell, having spent his last year on the Bowery with the bottle gang drinkers who lived in the fog of their alcohol-saturated brains, he quickly, in recovery, mastered complex computer programs and soon headed the tech support team at a major corporation, then let it all go so he could nourish his starved mind with the paperback and hardbound books of America and accumulate A's at Hunter College en route to a full graduate school scholarship at the very great Yale University where he could turn his attention not to excavating the ruins of his life but of entire civilizations. To-Nee saying to the group that he had an IQ in the highest percentile and later repeating this information to me privately with a keen focus on my expression, as he could sense he had me on the run. Celeste, let me here say I hear the impatience you share with those riding hard on the righteousness trail to bring an end to my ceaseless droning on but what would life be if I did not have something to attach my mind to in the ongoing project of self-denigration? We seek our pleasure, perverse or otherwise, where we can. Yes, I was all over To-Nee's business instead of my own and only belatedly sought to bridge the gap with a prayer that To-Nee have the same happiness I wished for myself to more fully internalize the walk on by, just walk on by instruction of the great Dionne Warwick, which she had gifted me with that magical summer evening in Central Park in 1965.*

*The instruction may never end, Celeste. Lessons must be learned over and over.*

***Amberfit Kingsley** was new to the Friday group. His solid dimensions included the housing for a giant brain that had gained him a degree from Harvard and a doctorate from that same university. Those at the summit will find each other, we are told, and so it was with To-Nee and Amberfit. This connection was nothing to go to the United Nations about, but when it became known to me that Amberfit was on mood-changing medications, I went to To-Nee and expressed my concern. After all, the group had elected Amberfit as the chairperson of the meeting but had he passed the purity test? Was he truly sober? I was, as I have said, slow to embrace the tolerance of RoR and RoR members regarding doctor prescribed mood-changing medications. My own experience was the lens through which I saw the matter, the fact being that I had drunk again while on those medications. To-Nee heard me out, said "Thank you for sharing," and hung up the phone. I had gone to the hardware store for doughnuts, as the saying goes, but the lesson was bracing. Once again was I compelled to see my insecurity, fear, and poverty of spirit in seeking to interfere in the lives of others. It is all right, Celeste. It is all all right.*

*Let me set aside the gibberish and speak plainly (no, no, you with your brief but sharp words of dismissal, do not think to seize on that word "gibberish." Know that your movements are fully monitored). We cannot continue to live in contempt of the gifts God has given us. Nor can we live in fear and envy of the gifts others have received but seek to do justice by acknowledging their gifts readily. Let us take refuge in gratitude and seek in earnest for a measure of humility in our daily prayers if we are to have any hope of the*

*serenity that derives from embracing the walk on by, just walk on by of the great Dionne Warwick. Heartfelt blessings to you, To-Nee, and to you, Amberfit Kingsley.*

*That said, there is also this, that truth may not be bound by the limits of time and space and revelation can, unfettered, be shared and even trumpeted, in accord with the American quest for the highest good. There are those times when the fog of confusion lifts and sight is restored, when the undergirding of difference is exposed for what it is. A philosopher from another century now speaks to us in real time, saying only this: those who would deny the existence of God are those who despair of ever finding him.*

*Now there was a woman at the Friday evening meeting who had recently lost her father and was in mourning, her only solace being the conviction that he was with God in the afterlife. Following the meeting To-Nee opined that the mental institutions were filled to overflowing with men and women who embraced such fairy tales. For To-Nee, time was his god, and in that moment of hearing him disparage the woman's faith I understood his sourness, his meanness, the absence of joy in his demeanor.*

Luther could talk about this. He could talk about that. He could try to live in the land of utterance, but the words that soothed could turn to those that burned. Again and again did he have his soreness going on—a waxing and waning forest fire, it was—demanding of Celeste what she wouldn't or couldn't give him even as, in his heart, even as, in his heart, he understood that for various reasons, a new addition to the family would be a burden on her and a responsibility he himself did not wish to assume or have the capacity of assuming.

“You have a child,” Glanton said, encouraging Luther to open his eyes. But Luther continued to run through the stop sign, demanding of Celeste the sense of wholeness he couldn’t give himself and punishing himself in seeking to punish her, saying he would not go to the country with her and Wound Tight, Celeste’s weekend guest. Wound Tight’s Yale-ness too much for him, her success too much for him—an architect being one who could do the math and see three dimensionally and all the rest. Her clarity in recognizing him as the deficient man he was and for whom Celeste had lowered her standards in allowing him into her life, this too too much for him. To live with those knowing steel-gray eyes on him for the entire time. Unbearable. Intolerable, no matter how humble and self-effacing he tried to be. Torture, total torture. And so did he live in the dinky, his soreness all over him with all the remorse that was to follow, the cycle unending.

*Celeste, here it is, the final word, or penultimate communication, or at least what should be one of those, the point where you feel the nadir has been reached and you can come out in the open and fess up that it is over and should have been over a long time ago and possibly never have begun, that what was truly called for was to be as hermetically sealed as a rock, that point when you say what have I done with my life, a question essentially rhetorical because you already know and have known for a long time, decades upon decades of knowing, and yet you pushed on.*

*Now Celeste, violence of the verbal kind should not be the first order of any day, nor the last. Let it be banished from the premises of my mouth as well as my mind for all*

*hours of the day. And let the judgment that drives the soreness be banished from my being.*

And let this also be entered into the record. Luther remembering not for the first time nor the last, as if it held some key to understanding, the game of sorts in which he came upon his older brother having gained the element of surprise, Luke noting the arrogant confidence when he had that advantage. Luther saying I am doing the same with poor To-Nee as I did with my brother back in childhood. I am feeling my strength with God as my element of surprise. For shame, for shame.

*Now Celeste, there was in RoR one who went by the name East Side Jim, and after reconnoitering his substance I was left to decidedly conclude he was a man given to putting on airs and wrapping himself in preppiness with his Oxford shirts and rep ties and argyle socks and penny loafers, and that he sought a cultivated tone to give his words more meaning than they merited. No, no, he did not walk with one hand in his pocket as the men of power and influence in the 1950s did but he did have a Brooks Brothers face.*

ESJ chaired the 12:30 pm beginners meeting and would invite only members of the RoR elite to lead the meeting. For this and his attempts, in his imperious manner, to get next to the attractive women in the room, did Luther mainly dislike him. Every morning did Luther imagine ESJ waking up to Dobie Gray singing "I'm With the In Crowd." This is a man who does not like me. I am not of his quality. And I do not like him. So Luther thought, believing ESJ would never choose him to lead the meeting. So Luther said, I am going to give up all this monitoring and just walk on by ESJ. And I am



going to walk on by all those in RoR who, like ESJ, seek above all else to claim others of requisite worth for their own. Because by now he was seeing that with all the talk of how sober drunks in RoR struggled against isolation, there was social bonding, while he remained habituated to his solitary ways. But there was also this, Glanton having said, when Luther came to him with some concern about his apartness, “Be your solitary self. Leave yourself alone.”

Mia was in Luther’s heart, making his presence with her alone at times unbearable. Because love was a fragile thing. It could expose itself and leave him full of shame knowing that she had seen how hard he was trying to summon love in her to meet his own. Tossing a big rubber ball back and forth with her in the narrow vestibule of the loft, he feared that at any moment she would stop and go on to other things, having exhausted his possibilities in perceiving him as the sort of man who could offer a child nothing more than a rubber ball as a means to connect with her.

She had a mind that took her the extra mile into true intelligence. There was her interest in the Beatles, sparked not by Luther but by **Rodney “Red” Stillson**, her father’s new and forever more lover, a Southern man who had his tunes to share. But whatever Rodney Stillson knew, he didn’t know what Mia was to know, her mental capacity taking her where he was unable to go. An emotional bath in *Rubber Soul* was not enough; she needed to commit the sounds to memory so she could play them back for further examination long after the record stopped and tease out the individual voices of the Fab Four so she could hear them not only harmonizing but separate and distinct. This was John and that was Paul but really, it was John. He was where her infatuation lived.

Because he had the wit that won her. Not that George and Ringo were lesser, or maybe they were, and even Paul. John's humor was the indicator of his intelligence. This she understood. George could not get there with his darkly serious handsomeness and the narrowness of his face nor Paul either, with his conventional good looks. And Ringo was akin to a pet dog, and to

And horses as well as the Beatles. She could not be separated from the tiny toy figure of Mister Ed, the talking horse, and her heart belonged to Southlands, a stretch of farmland overlooking the Hudson down the road from Rhinebeck. She was keen to learn the finer points of riding, such as dressage, and entered junior competitions wearing breeches and a jacket and a helmet. When she was not on a horse, she was in the stables, doing whatever chores were permitted her. Her interest went beyond riding and being with the animals. She had a need to know the parts of a horse, from crest and withers down to fetlock and pastern. A bit small for her age, she had a powerful and inquiring mind.

She also had a strong will. One morning Luther and Celeste awoke to find her missing. She and her bicycle were gone from the house and the property. No note had she left. In a state of high anxiety, they drove several miles to Southlands, where they found Mia busy in the horse stables. No apology did she make for her unannounced departure, nor would she heed their concerns for her safety as an eight-year-old bicycling on heavily trafficked Route 9. Her one concession, grudgingly made, was that yes, she would leave a note should the urge come over her again.

There were to be other flareups with Mia. Seeing her water a plant with no saucer beneath it, Luther called attention to the puddle forming on the floor. Though he spoke to her in a gentle manner, she turned and said she didn't have to listen him. Once again did Luther feel stung. He hadn't been harsh, only mildly instructive. Why couldn't Celeste instill a basic respect for adults in her child? Mia didn't respond in that fresh manner to her mother. But Luther wasn't Mia's mother. He wasn't even her father. He was her stepfather. What did he really know about the mother-daughter bond, other than it was unbreakable. And maybe Mia was benefiting from Celeste's laissez-faire approach. Maybe Mia was being permitted to find her own answers and chart her own course of development.

Not that he could reason himself free of anger. Not that he ever would. Anger demanding the last word. His pride demanding the last word. He once again accused Celeste of slyly fomenting rebellion in Mia and encouraging disrespect, Mia being her surrogate for the fury Celeste herself could not yet summon. So that to the wounds inflicted by Mia's dismissive words were added the wound he inflicted on himself in attacking Celeste. Only the next night could he profusely apologize for making her cry, crying time for a woman being dying time for him, going back to his mother. He swept and washed the kitchen floor, seeking outer as well as inner order. He took inventory and saw the nature of his wrong. He relied too heavily on people, mainly women, for his emotional needs.

*Now Celeste, my appreciation was great for being a small part of our planet. But I had no affinity with horses, given the realm of knowingness they lived in. I was an open book to any equine I encountered, swaybacked or upright in its gait. In an instant did they make a full appraisal of my person and had no need to linger long with their steady, solemn gaze. A person whose measure has been taken cannot tolerate too much knowingness, not when the affect of the knowing party is one of unrelenting boredom. One sees the steed shoo a fly with one casual flick of his tail as a reminder of his own dismissal. These equines have been in our shoes and in our minds and have long since moved on to become terribly evolved creatures. So it was for me to cede this territory to Mia, with her child's wonder and resolve, and find my meaning at a new meeting I had discovered, called Only the Lonely, in what was then the Pan Am Building. There, in the cafeteria, one flight up on the escalator, did we gather every weekday at 5:30 pm, in the hush of early evening, sequestered from the rush hour crowd. Now Celeste, a man named Shelly, well groomed and with expensively cut gray hair and a tailored suit, was there to greet me. A garmento, he had lost his way but now was living the good life. Though it was not the Horn and Hardart Automat of old, strongly did my father also present himself to me at this meeting. I was settling into him or he was settling into me. Either way, a connection was being made.*

*Once upon a time the meeting had been held in the bowels of Grand Central Terminal, which the building rose above, and was attended mainly by alcoholic railroad men who had traded in the bottle for a cup of joe. Celeste, whatever the location, and whether railroad workers or garmentos or steady Freddy office workers such as myself,*

*we were those coming out of the darkness and into the light. Sometimes, amid all the yip yap dispensed by the human tongue, and in the face of those equipped solely with the laughing thing, we must yield to the simple truth of being out of the bottle and into life, as what does salvation really mean but to come home to ourselves, from whom we have been estranged so long?*

*Now Celeste, we were not restricted to quarters. The resources were available for mobility, that is, we could take to the air as well as the road when circumstances permitted, though fiscal prudence was a constant practice. Our first trip abroad was driven by expedience as well as the prospect of adventure. No one but a masochist wishes to be present at a construction site when it happens to be one's own home. It would not do to go about wearing a protective mask when renovation on a significant scale is in the works, and so we vacated the premises for several weeks.*

*Celeste, you were not one to in all cases discard the old for the new. You were not above wearing thrift store apparel that had survived the test of time. Nor did you bother with expensive hair salons. What I am saying is that you showed no investment in your natural beauty. You were not sighted running through the cobblestone streets of SoHo in spandex or on a treadmill at a fancy fitness center. You cut your own hair and even threadbare garments could not conceal your allure. You simply imposed on the eyes of others a style of your own.*

*"But do we really need such things? I like our kitchen and our bathroom," you said, though the stove was old and grimy and the refrigerator was taxed to adequately cool. It is a mistake not to listen to that quiet voice of reservation and ignore the line of*

*thinking that goes with it, the quiet voice that is really saying who is this man, newly arrived, who would overhaul my living space? Only your capacity for reason and open mindedness served as a counterweight to indignation.*

*Ouch, Rob Ouch, was our man. Contractor. Designer. Master of the toolkit. We had not yet learned the simple rule of thumb. An estimate of time and expense, to be accurate, must be doubled, and even then be in doubt. Rob Ouch was not one to talk out of the side of his mouth, but his words did not come at you straight either.*

*Not meaning to be rude, but driven by curiosity, I queried him as to his absurd surname, seeking to restrain myself from laughter as I spoke, lest he smite me. An adopted name, he replied, given to him by a client pained by the size of the bill he had been presented with. "Never mind Grouch. Let your name forevermore be Ouch." So the aggrieved man named him.*

*But let us leave Rob Grouch, or Ouch, or whatever his name might be, Celeste, he who renamed our beloved pooch Yikes owing to Rufus's friendly if excitable manner, and move on to Alpine bliss, with a strong emphasis on the safety precautions, namely, soaring vigilance, that I put in place lest distraction lead us into oblivion. Indeed, two incidents, traumatic in nature, diminished whatever bliss the experience summoned. Just last night the thought of committing the first of the incidents to paper brought on waves of terror. We had rented a Ford Sierra and, seeking a break from the main road, began our ascent of a steep and narrow incline with no shoulders or guardrails. The farther we climbed my unease grew that we had turned onto the perdition trail. Our Ford was a stick shift, and the possibility that switching gears might be a problem more than with an*

*automatic transmission grew enormous in my mind as I glanced down at the abyss. What if, in the process of downshifting, the engine stalled out? Would we roll backward over the side before I could restart the engine? The words "sudden death" took on new meaning even as you and Mia chatted, unaware of the horror scenario unfolding that now gripped me. I saw once again, this time starkly illuminated, the illegitimate nature of my existence, a man who could not even pass his road test at the steering wheel of this mobile tin can daring to assume responsibility for the precious human cargo in his care. A wife abuser, a thief, an alcoholic imposing himself on a gifted woman and her gifted daughter. A credential-less man with meager resources and substandard masculinity. I saw it, Celeste. I saw it all in that moment of crisis.*

*More fear rose in me on seeing our chalet, a subdivided resort lodging. One carelessly tossed match and the fragile wooden structure would quickly become an inferno.*

*The mountains looked odd, denuded. They rose as an enormous gray mass, and summoned an image of an elephant's hide. I had never seen such stretches of baldness on a mountain. Was that its natural state or had rapacious humans stripped it of whatever growth there had been? You took the lead on our hikes. So heavy my legs felt. I was resigned to trailing far behind when instantly, it seemed, I found another gear. Soon I was tearing ahead of you and Mia and did not wear my newfound power humbly. My lunacy was there for you to see. "I am America born. I leap the tallest mountain at a single bound." So I spoke in my foolishness, and you responded in full distress, and appropriately so, for boasting and other manifestations of pridefulness were not to your*

*liking, Celeste. At the time I would have been hard pressed to explain the difference between a crevice and a crevasse, which, I learned, is a deep opening covered over by snow, but you were fully knowledgeable. You had visited the French Alps as a child with your family and were astonished when your father, during a hike, suddenly disappeared as he walked ahead of you. Only the strenuous efforts of mountain guides in the vicinity brought about his rescue.*

*Celeste, life has its consequences. The karmic wheel turns and turns. Mortality begins to loom. Hints of the eternal await us on our journey. Such was the crevasse your father encountered on that outing. What I am saying you have no need to ask about because you know. What does it mean that no feeling of fear or concern came over you at this abrupt vanishing and that, instead, your heart lifted up, as if a boulder had been weighing upon it? My father is not who you think he is.*

*My faux heroics continued. I seemed to revert to childhood behavior, full of a confidence that was later eroded by the failures I met with. This cocky exuberance went unchecked in spite of the unhappiness it brought you. There was joy to be found in being uncontrollable. I stayed far ahead while, like a child, never losing sight of you and Mia. Dependently independent. I managed to start a minor rock slide on an unforgiving slope. The point was to keep myself in your eyes. Perhaps I would find a way into Mia's heart with my clownishness.*

*If I showed my capacity for recklessness, I also displayed—let us call it by its proper name—outright cowardice. As the sun began to dip, we headed down a wide dirt path. A ski lift came in view. We had only to follow it. But darkness was coming fast, and*



*with it, the bears and the wolves, having picked up our scent, and the temperature was falling and no one was in sight. No one. No one. Viciously had they vanished. Without a flashlight we would be lost to the darkness and all the terror and suffering it would bring. Once again I was led to walk ahead, this time not brimming with narcissistic confidence but driven by fear that quickly reached an intolerable level. Now I made a point of being out of your sight so you would not witness me tearing down the trail at breakneck speed. Because, Celeste, the darkness was coming, the bears and wolves were coming, viciousness was coming. Even the trail revealed its cruelty, continually expanding to block my progress. Celeste, I abandoned you and a child, leaving you to fend for yourselves in the oncoming darkness.*

*The French are unto themselves in their self-loathing. They hold master classes beginning with the very young. Studies show the inevitable consequence of such self-disdain is a universal disdain of others. Nowhere was this more on display than at the local prefecture. With my high school French did I lay out the gravity of the situation you and Mia faced. Yes, perplexity showed on their faces, though I suspected the lack of alacrity in their collective response had more to do with sloth than incomprehension of the peril you both were facing. Inevitably were they galvanized into action, driven by my tone of urgency, and showed the utmost reliance on me to lead them on. Yet even as we began our ascent in a van equipped with all manner of equipment for mountain emergencies, did you and Mia appear, chatting as you ambled down the path. Not at the time or ever since have you spoken with me about my hysteria, and this owes to your kindness and tolerance, some deeper understanding than I can hope to possess. I was not*

*banned from the marriage bed. There was no ostracism, except that which I inflicted on myself. But the French, also over the centuries, have cultivated and refined disdain, taking it to new levels. Such was the case in the twilight of that day. Even as my heart lifted at the sight of you and Mia in casual conversation was it pierced many thousands of times by the subtle and synchronized glances of contempt directed my way before they drove off. Thus began many nights and days of penitential flogging of myself on the terrace of our suite. Even when the temperature dipped did I sit in only my underwear calling on the universe to disintegrate me so I could be separated forever from my torturing mind.*

Life went on for Luther. He was not to unhappiness wed. He did not reach out to doom and gloom, though the predisposition to darkness might be assumed to have been set in childhood, given the fire-filled sermons of the pastor and his mother's living in the last days warnings. He had learned, in RoR, to take life in small increments. One day, one hour, one minute, one breath at a time. He had slowed time down so it was not his master. He had slowed his mind down, though it was not exactly agile to begin with. Meditation had done that for him. He was in the moment, where his feet were, except when he wasn't. He was no junior holy man. He did not walk on water, nor was he willing to try, as swimming was not his strong suit. But he had received a gift, a profound spiritual gift. God had come to him, uninvited, unsought, seemingly without his consent. He had come to him quietly in that RoR meeting on Astor Place and rearranged his settings. That had to mean something. Had he not, in a state of spiritual intoxication, gone babble-acious,

bending the ears of the Van Dines about this newfound resource? Where I am now is not where I will be in an hour, he would try to remind himself, when fear was upon him. And yet, after the mountain debacle he was plunged into despair. The event had stripped him of any rationale for self-exaltation. For days he could find no reason to go on. Showing his face to Celeste and Mia was unbearable.

On the return trip the headwinds were fierce and the Douglas DC-10—so very treacherous—had carnage on its mind. Twice it pulled back from landing for reasons neither the pilot and co-pilot or crew would divulge, but Luther had no need for what would only be their dubious explanation; he understood that it was only his unyielding vigilance that had bent the plane to his will.

There was no order to be found in disorder, and Luther did not have the internal bearings to navigate chaos. A pristine and remodeled kitchen with gleaming new appliances was not laid out before them. The project was barely half done and plaster dust covered every surface and lay as a coating over the floor. It was to be a month before they were rid of Ouch, and by then he had asked for double the money they had agreed to pay. After much haggling a compromise was reached, but two weeks later he was back asking for a business loan, not from Luther himself, who had picked up the phone. “Let me speak with the man of the house,” Rob Ouch said, adding mockery to his aggressiveness. “You know,” he added, “the one who holds the purse strings, not the apron strings.” Hearing Celeste on the line with Rob Ouch, Luther felt pushed aside. He saw that Rob Ouch was seeking to injure him with his venom. Rob Ouch had seen

through the Luther's thinness. How did Luther know this? How? How? Rob Ouch had a wife of his own, and Rob Ouch, who was able to break the mold and able to break his wife's mold by getting her with child, had a baby of his own, and thought to assign Luther his place on the grid by mentioning that the baby was colicky, and then, seeing the look of vulnerability that came over Luther, thought to further ask, because he had perceived his opening, if Luther happened to know what the word colicky meant, because Rob Ouch saw that Luther, in the poverty of his being, would be the sort to assume the word meant angry when it didn't mean that at all and had the satisfaction of seeing Luther freeze and in that moment of freezing did Rob Ouch counter with a full look of knowingness. Having reduced him in this manner, Rob Ouch was now free to simply sweeping him aside.

Celeste had no love lost for Rob Ouch for ruining the aesthetic of the loft and holding them up for more money and yet wavered in the face of his long and manipulative entreaty, for Rob Ouch was a slow talker with an insidious manner. And while he was a man's man fully comfortable with the tools of his trade and the chaos he brought to other people's homes, he was also a boozehound. It was the same old fear. A real man could move Luther aside and claim Celeste for his own. Celeste's door was too open. *He himself had walked through it.* He must set the boundary that she herself couldn't. Luther went to the phone so he might drive Rob Ouch from her door. It would be for Rob Ouch to determine his own chosen speed. Luther spoke with fear-driven anger in his voice. He told Rob Ouch he must go away. He told Rob Ouch that he should go to RoR and treat his alcoholism if he did not want dissolution to be his perennial norm. He

said Rob Ouch must fend for himself. He did not call Rob Ouch Minnie the Moocher. He was just establishing how it would be. He would not allow Rob Ouch to taper on to Celeste, slug that he was. "Have you had a chance to look up *colicky* yet?" Rob Ouch inquired. And when Luther did not respond, Rob Ouch did telephone hang up, leaving Luther to die of the poison he had been infected with.

*Celeste, I was about to say I am confounded as to a way forward, but I have found new focus in the cars of America, though I cannot distinguish between a coupe and a sedan. As you know, I have had my eye on these vehicles for some time. Careful observation has proven that their ultimate intent should be brought to the attention of all, with detailed analysis down to their carburetors, catalytic convertors, and yes, their steel belted radials. And yet, you have led by example, no barriers to love existing to prevent you from recognizing these vehicles for their utility in delivering us from point A to point B. A quiet sense of purpose enables you to handle registration and insurance and inspection sticker and all the rest so you are right for the road. And, of course, the road test that you passed and I failed. Failed, Celeste, failed. Bottom dweller, stand on the sideline. Stand there, I say. Failure is wearying, Celeste. It denies one access to love. It means being wounded daily by the successes of others until one has elevated above the dinky through the grace and healing power of humility so he can see and accept his place in the universe.*

*Because I did not qualify for a credit card of my own, you requested one for me from your bank, with our charges to go on the same monthly statement, and it fortified my*

wallet and my being to now have access to this financial power Now you are someone who seeks full use from your possessions, be it a blouse or a vehicle, and frown on the very idea of planned obsolescence. And yet, Honest Abe, our Ford Futura, had reached its limit, as even you could see, stalling out at inopportune times or not starting at all. You had shown your love for America by buying American at a time of great change, when Made in Japan had come to mean the stamp of excellence—long since had its reputation for producing cheap goods passed—and Made in America carried far less cachet. But you also showed flexibility within your commitment to our country and assigned me the weighty task of buying a new car for the family, a responsibility I took up with some trepidation, as I did not know from cars. “‘All I have ever cared about is the Hudson River Line of the once glorious New York Central Railroad,’ I said to only the air in a state of supreme solitude.

But I got right on it, calling on the great Consumer Reports, partial to no one and fair to all, as my guide. There was the Nissan Sentra and the Toyota Corolla and the Honda Accord. But Subaru stood up straight. It had no need to lure your mind with coined modifiers or modifiers that mystified in the context used. Just as my mother advocated for normal food did I advocate for a normal name and a normal look in giving my heart to the Subaru station wagon, with its four doors to provide easy access for Mia and Rufus and its four-wheel drive, because we could count on the impediment of snow in the winter months or anticipate a circumstance when we might have to leave the paved road for the uncertainty of steep dirt paths, in the event of which we could bank on our Subaru to show its true grit.

*The car dealer was from a world not my own and practiced a verbal jiu-jitsu that left me clearly out of my depth. That can happen should we be prone to mistaking snake oil for the real deal, as the gullibility factor is easily discerned by those on the lookout for a mark. And there are legions of us from that tender land, Celeste, A vehicle will make a fool of anyone who gets behind the wheel. Soon will the notion arise that he is master of his universe, a power plenty soul dwelling in the realm of the psychotic while barely familiar with the content under the hood. The dealer, as I remember, had a paunch and receding hairline and prison pallor, having forsaken the sun in his pursuit of the dollar, a banner above him reading Bringing Home the Bacon. He had found the balm for his soul, with the narcotic of prime time TV for added support. "Take it for a test drive," he said, and so I did, working the stick shift with great ease. "Good stuff," I said, reporting back.*

A blizzard of papers confronted Luther. Terms and conditions in eight point type. Footnotes and cross-references and provisos, a handshake no longer enough to do the deal. Luther returned home triumphant. He shared with Celeste the meaning of forest green, for that was the color of the Subaru, not the drab black everywhere to be seen, how forest green brought him back to childhood and the high wooden fence of that very color separating Barnard College and the young women of excellence who made up its student body from Broadway and the soul-numbing spectacle of cars and buses and trucks that would not cease their comings and goings and the huge circular target on the lawn the young women of excellence could sling their arrows at in preparation for the warfare love would bring or that had already begun.

But time out for nature. Time out for love. While maintaining fidelity to order, brief sojourns off the main road were now and then needed. The oak tree twenty feet beyond the screen door was a magisterial presence, bringing the sweet side of nature to bear on them, this before a few tall trees went rogue, falling with their full weight on those beneath them, as a way of reminding one and all that their disposition was not endlessly gentle nor endlessly patient. The forsythia and the hawthorn and lilac bushes dabbed the landscape with their colors. The lawn would soon be in need of rejuvenating, with the crabgrass insurgency having already begun, but the very thought led Luther to stare into space and wonder if simplicity would hold the fort against the myriad of forces bent on decline. He remembered the lushness of Camp, including the dazzling green lawn, and Peter Van Dine with his mastery of the realm, and all that Luther had abandoned. But change had just come, without need of his consent, the way that death would just come, ready or not as he might be.

And yes, time out for love. Love in the night. In the darkness. It was nothing he wished to discuss beyond the confines of decency. Let it simply be said that they were sensitive to each other's touch and that this silent communication would only grow.

*Now Celeste, unlike my brother I was not born for the world of things, sensing from an early age they were an impediment to my happiness. My anguish over the nick on the frame of my ten speed, the anxiety and obsession caused by our Lionel Train set, later the accumulation of photo gear to no good purpose, and then my typewriter fixation, but that does not absolve me of the need for a right and respectful relationship with the world of*



*objects, including cars and trucks and all their other gas-powered cronies. A perverse inclination to elevate above humankind and the thingamajigs that humankind creates for its own comfort. Always with the specialness, Luther. Always having to set yourself apart. Bow down in gratitude, Luther, for all you have been given, Bow down, I say. Enough with all your dinky this and dinky that and endless attempts to paint people brown. Stop denying yourself the gift of life. Stop fighting it.*

Luther set out the next morning in Honest Abe. Many tears were shed by both Celeste and Mia, as this was Honest Abe's last run. The dealership had agreed to take Abe into its care, whatever that might mean. Luther had not questioned the dealer closely about this matter, as a means of protecting himself from possibly painful information, for by this time Luther was feeling Abe as Celeste and Mia did. A part of the family would now be gone. And was not Ford an esteemed American company and did not its founder, Henry Ford, represent the American spirit of innovation with his Model T and all that came after? Was he not right up there with the Wright brothers and Thomas Alva Edison? Men with vision and drive. But the Japanese were now eating America's lunch. Wasn't that the truth of it? Their designers were more accomplished than ours and their workers more skilled. History was hard. It put its hold on you. Locked you into its embrace.

With emotions running high, they gave Abe a reprieve. They would keep it on the property as a second car. Its utility had not been exhausted. And so Celeste drove him to the dealer. Luther hoped to return home trailing clouds of glory. Oh, it was not in the same league with his other fantasies—the rocket shot caroming off the right field frieze at Yankee Stadium or Bill Walton doing the reject, blocking every shot put up by the

opposing team. Still, was the opportunity not there to be seen in a new light and for love and admiration to be his from Celeste and Mia as the bearer of a great gift, even if one bought with Celeste's money? And yes, in that moment, Luther had his truth further revealed to him by the not entirely holler head Yardbirds recording of "For Your Love." There no escaping that love was all he was living for.

But the salesperson, who by now had a name, Mr. H. Carmody Wolferson, had performed some more of his invisible jiu jitsu. Luther was not at the wheel of a spanking new Subaru, with the smell of factory freshness upon it. He was driving a Subaru wagon with nine hundred eighty-seven miles and counting on the odometer and it was not forest green but uniformly white. Luther had no words for the jiu jitsu man. He had used Luther's own hunger against him. No words. No words whatsoever. He wouldn't talk about it. Couldn't talk about it. Merely directed himself to the shame corner forthwith.

Not that Celeste was one to scold. She allowed reason and mercy to be her guide. "It's a fine car," she said. The car was newish, even if it had been used as a demonstration model, and an improvement over Honest Abe, she said, after taking it for a short drive. Mia was not yet familiar with the real Honest Abe's words about charity for all. She did not take the high road that elevated Abe above all. "Mommy, why can't Luther do things right?" "Luther does many things right, Mia. He goes to work. He's reliable. He always comes home when he says he will." "But he's not very smart, the way that you are." "He knows his alphabet," Celeste said. "Everybody knows the alphabet." Mia laughed. "And he can walk and talk, too. What I mean is that Luther has basic knowledge and ability to draw on. Not everybody has that," Celeste added, as Mia went on with her laughing.

In this nineteen eighties time there were sunny days and event-filled nights that need no documentation. Elevators went up and down and planes took off and landed in the city of New York. The decade took on a glow with the passage of time, aided by (Fresh) Cream singing “Sunshine of Your Love,” though the holler heads were long gone from the scene. There was the Penny Whistle Toy Store on the corner of Spring and Greene and the metalwork shop across the street. There was *Blue Velvet*, with Isabel Rossellini and Laura Dern and Dennis “Madman” Hopper, he with the inhaler and amyl nitrate and brutal, domineering sexuality.

*Now Celeste, there was a couple who saw this movie, and they will go nameless. It was a movie they should have avoided, given the elements above it included. A drug the woman had experienced and all that went with it left him stranded outside her gates and in terror that he could lose her if he didn't follow down to where she had been. RoR, of which he was a member, had a prohibition against such mind and mood altering drugs, so he could not go there, but there were other influences that led him on that path. Was there not the time that he grabbed her wrist to prevent her, in a moment of frivolity, from dropping an ice cube down the back of his shirt? And though he unintentionally bent her wrist a little too hard, was this not eventful if not serendipitous? Did the pain not seem to excite her, and in that moment, did not an understanding pass between them? Then came the novel he read, a novel that will go title-less. A woman taken from one lover and claimed by another by virtue of his larger endowment. And so it began. Given the influences on him, the mechanics of the couple's lovemaking changed with his*

*introduction of a synthetic element. And then another. A momentum set in, powered by an all-consuming obsession.*

*Now Celeste, the fire department was not called to hose me down. My skin did not smolder from the prurience I was experiencing. No sirens sounding in the day or the night alerting one and all to a five-alarm blaze on my premises, but take no consolation from the absence of the hook and ladder brigade, for my premises were an inferno nonetheless, burning away all things extraneous to what had now become my life's purpose. A door had opened, and we had walked through it. More true for me than for you, who had gifted me with your body for more than the pleasure to be found there. You were intent on giving us a child of the marriage. For that purpose had I been dispatched to a urologist, Dr. Misporanza. Did his tests and studied analysis not show, as I have said before, that motility was lacking, that my boys were sluggish in the stream, confirming what I already knew, despite the evidence of two pregnancies, that I was not a breeder? And yet, it couldn't be fully certain that I was shooting blanks, there in the marriage bed, in this time when I was trying to get you with child. There must, however, be an asterisk next to that assertion. Say what Glanton might, that my reservation about a child of the marriage was a reflection of my low self-esteem, Luther's concern remained that Celeste might have exhausted her desire for motherhood with the birth of Mia, as well as the single parenting that had been forced upon her with Peter's departure. Luther anticipated anger, even fury, directed at him for ruining her life. And why not? What kind of baby could he expect, given his gene pool? A flat-headed little creature as unsightly as Mia was adorable? A baby too deformed for any mother to love, as he was born, with half his head*

missing? A child who tested poorly its brilliant mother should have to suffer with into her fifties, when, it could be hoped, he wasn't too mentally deficient to navigate in the world, her best energy directed to raising a dolt rather than perfecting her art? And was there not the impediment of his religious childhood, his mother declaring with traumatized regularity that they were living in the last days. Had not she, along with the pastor of the disappearing words, installed the god of fear in Luther so that a dark cloud hovered overhead, leaving him to look at parents with their offspring and wonder how they could think to bring children into a world in line for extinction? Did Luther have to say how relieved he was when Celeste's menstrual cycle began each month, giving them both a reprieve from the horror that would unfold and torpedo their lives? Was it not enough that he lived under the same roof with gifted Mia, as resistant to him as she was? But a final question: Did Luther have to tell you how he ruined things between him and Celeste with his ingratitude for the gift she was offering, the gift of enduring the discomfort of pregnancy and pain of a second childbirth? Yes, he had to report to you and the universe his ingratitude and selfishness and contempt for himself as well as all that Celeste was offering, and how it revealed itself at the Milan home when he said, in a moment of intolerable pain, "Well, OK, if I am a failure as a writer, do you think maybe we can at least have a baby?"

*In just such a hateful manner did I speak with you, Celeste, setting heaven and earth on fire with my rage. As if the gift you were offering was a mere consolation prize, if even that. Ill-tempered words have consequences, though I did not understand at the time that your gift was then withdrawn. A gift freely given was one thing; what you heard*

*was a demand for something I didn't even truly want or value. But there was also this: Peter had been acceptable for fatherhood; I was not. The resentment would ease and then surge anew, the wound reopened in the marriage bed, where I was obliged to be on my honor if physical intimacy was to be ours and pregnancy avoided.*

*An additional wound was your equally vehement response to my idea for investing a small portion of my very modest salary. Money was power, a lesson you may have learned from your father. I feel now that you regarded my setting aside even the most modest amount for the future as a move toward independence. It doesn't seem likely that the falloff in my financial contribution was the issue, as a small diversion of funds would have been meaningless. The disparity in our incomes had been laid bare when we visited your accountant about filing a joint tax return early in our marriage. Your portfolio was considerable, whereas I had no assets, as the accountant noted with evident surprise. He went so far as to encourage me to have a small portfolio of my own. Altogether the visit was a bit uncomfortable, to see my meager resources laid bare before his eyes and yours.*

*Now Celeste, we must turn our attention elsewhere for the moment. A delegation of the righteous is slowly approaching, drawing strength from their numbers as the cowardly are known to do. All are practiced in the art of one-sentence or even one word dismissal, this tsk tsk brigade. The briefer the better, the crueler, to their way of thinking. Silence, of course, is their ultimate rebuff, a silence heard loud and clear throughout the universe. They will do as they will, these who dwell in the realm of probity, and surely will rebuke me for my self-indulgence. But order is order, and accounting is accounting, and one goes with the other if we are to be thorough in getting our ducks in a row. So*

*while others chronicle fantastic worlds in which men clad in armor ride drunk into battle on weary donkeys, and children leapfrog the moon on unseen sources of power, our cosmos is in our one self magnified into all others. We are in the business of amalgamation, Celeste. That is our destiny. Let us stay the course.*

Many, many were the days and nights of lightning and thunder. Seeing the heavens in a state, Luther understood something of great significance was going on, but he had no research team to deploy and, in any case, the heavens were impossible to fathom. I am at a loss, he said, seeking to accept his powerlessness, but fear found him anyway. This fear is surely coming from above, Luther could only think, even entertaining the notion that Jehovah the god of jealousy and righteous wrath had been forced to get up, not suspecting that the true source of his fear was his partner in the marriage bed, for Celeste was in a state of inner turmoil and the heavens were merely in solidarity with her distress. She would wake him and throw her arms around him and he would feel her trembling like a fragile branch in a storm and fear that she would suffer a stroke. She was going to die. Nothing else would she say. For all the nights of her terror did this lightning and thunder continue, as if the heavens were united in signaling to oblivious Luther that things were amiss in his world if only he would know it.

*Celeste, it was Glanton who provided the needed light. With his usual brevity and the complete absence of a single chuckle did he direct me to purchase a certain book and to read the chapter for partners of loved ones suffering from the problem the text addressed. The chapter did not present a rosy picture of the future for these partners. Essentially, it said stay if you can, but it's understandable if you don't because for periods*

*of time, often lengthy, you will feel you are on desolation row. When I gave you the book, Celeste, you gasped and said “No” and quickly slid it under the sofa, as if, in doing so, you could bury your secret and continue to fully withhold, from yourself if not from me, the meaning of your oft repeated statement, “My father is not who you think he is.” Unable to stay away for long, you would retrieve the book, hold it, and then slide it back into its hiding place. Within a week you were acclimated sufficiently to your newly exposed reality to begin reading the text.*

*At this time you were still with the Frenchwoman, Mme. Gilot, about whom I was less than respectful, instead showing an unreservedly hostile attitude toward her and all those in the field of psychotherapy, so invested in RoR had I become. Perhaps I was influenced by the dismissive attitude of Glanton toward such practitioners. “Some of the sickest egos in the world are shrinks,” he once remarked. But there was also my own forgetfulness and lack of appreciation for the simple fact that without Dr. Rosner’s intervention, I might have run straight off the cliff. It was for me to remember that it was only his suggestion that brought me to RoR initially and only his virtual ultimatum that I return a year after my relapse that saved me. In any case, you were offended by my remarks about Mme. Gilot, and do not regard my pointing out that you shared your own reservations about her as justification for my insensitivity and thoughtlessness. The hurt you expressed was not owing to her incompetence but to her tendency to invariably snooze out at some point in your sessions, and the indignity of enduring her snoring during these absences. Rather than accept that she might be a narcoleptic septuagenarian, you were hurt by what you perceived as her lack of interest in you as a*



*patient. And then there was the matter of her wandering husband, who would stroll into the room even as Mme. Gilot's meter was running to inquire about dinner—could it please be his favorite, boeuf bourguignon—or where on earth his slippers might be. Clearly he was in his dotage, as one day he entered holding an open parapluie. Or maybe not so clearly, as you soon discovered that his eye as well as his feet had a tendency to wander; his French-ness inclining him to remark on your beauty and inquire, as his wife sat somnolent, if you might be free for un assignation, un affaire de la coeur, un liaison très dangereuse with someone such as he with his adeptness in the art of love.*

*Now do I hear my warning devices seeking to shatter my eardrums with their piercing sound. Time out for love, Celeste. Time out for love. Such is their hysterical message. Impropriety must not be allowed to be the cause of its cancellation. Why? Because where there is ire there is bound to be fire, and already do I whiff the smolder that precedes conflagration. I have transgressed and am awakened once again to the possibility that my life has been one long transgression. Reader, I wish to declare, a thief is among you, a parasite. Starting with my mother's pocketbook and the key I borrowed to enter Auntie Eve's apartment to pilfer small sums from the rent payments and escalating to the renting office in my early twenties. A man who, even as a child, went where he did not belong, what can I do but ask that you practice forbearance and not beat me with the stick of righteous wrath fueled by historical injustice. But the fire was already coming, and nothing could stop it. Your grievance was profound, the nature of the assault criminal, a betrayal of the norms of parental behavior. Such was the long repressed awareness in you stoking the fire. You paid dearly for his transgressions, your*

*life lived in the shadows. You wore the mask of congeniality well, until it came off. Your body now a battleground, conception would depend on my behavior. If I was good, I would be rewarded with a child. If not, no dice, though it was never for you to speak so crudely. You were bringing me under your power, as if I had not been there all along, with my impotent anger hiding my fear. Driven by my own terror of fatherhood and your stated prohibition, it was for me to summon discipline.*

With summer came an intolerable heat wave. Luther left his mother with a fan as the only means of protection against the swelter as she lay in the bedroom he had shared with Luke, and in the early years, with Vera. Guiltily, he drove off with Celeste to Montreal along the Northway with the windows rolled down and the inescapable hot air blowing in, the air conditioning having failed. Only as they drew near the Canadian border did the heat break.

That night they collapsed into bed, having booked a room at a hotel on Rue Sherbrooke, and the next morning, after breakfast, sought refuge from concrete in Mont Royal Park, with the intention of viewing the city below from far above. A seismic shift, subtle as it seemed, occurred on their hike. The earth didn't move, but Celeste did. Having grown weary and not feeling well, Luther suggested they head back to the hotel for a nap. "You go back," Celeste said, calmly but firmly, as if speaking from a place unknown, to that point, to Luther. Shocked by the power she had manifested in those few words, Luther trudged back down the mountain with the disturbing sense that he had been cut loose.

From his hotel room Luther called his mother. He had no choice. Since leaving New York she had been present in his mind, and now he was seized with a fear that she was dying. She was grateful for his call and for his expression of concern.

Some days later, while heading toward the Gaspé Peninsula, they stopped in Percé for the night. Over dinner, Luther observed Celeste merely nibbling on a leaf of lettuce. “Why are you not eating?” he asked. “I’ve been stuffing myself all day,” she replied. Because they had not been away from each other, he assured her that she hadn’t touched a morsel. “You worry too much. I’m fine,” she replied. But she wasn’t fine. Had it happened all at once, or had Luther been blind to the deterioration that was now so evident? She had been withering right before his eyes on a starvation diet all along, and aging as well, the lack of nutrition robbing her of her beauty. Later, she would acknowledge that she had gone down to eighty pounds, spread over her five foot six frame, giving her the appearance of a concentration camp survivor.

*Celeste, I could have given you a definition of anorexia nervosa close to any dictionary’s, but I had never witnessed the illness up close. And so I made the foolish, if human, mistake of trying to scream it out of you. The Al-Anon folks have a saying that trying to talk a loved one free of his or her abject dependence on alcohol is like trying to blow out a light bulb, the takeaway being to save one’s breath. And so it was here, seeing you committing slow suicide before my very eyes; my outcry was met with a wall of denial. And when I turned my back outside the restaurant you went and stood upon a low and narrow retaining wall over a steep drop with a strong wind blowing against you and an eerie smile your sunken, sallow face. It was all there before me, you falling backward*

*and the nightmare that would initiate, the termination not simply of your life but all it would have done to family, friends, and me.*

*No story has to be told, Celeste. So some would say. The world is overrun with yip yap narrative. Why bother? But if we are to forego full transparency, nakedness before all of America and the world, thus relegating ourselves to munching on oblivion sandwiches for all eternity, is that truly an alternative? Do we exist if we are not seen? No, no. Order must be preserved. Avanti, Celeste, avanti, even as your murmur of haunting protest persists.*

To Luther's understanding, as it was given to him by Celeste, Mme. Gilot was of no great help in her crisis. And so Celeste reached out to a specialist recommended by the book she was now reading, a true pioneer in the field. Vanguardia took Celeste unto her that very first session by asking if she had Celeste's permission to get up from her chair and walk across the room to greet her with a handshake, in this way conveying to Celeste her understanding that many times had there been a man who had been made by his own urges to rise from his chair without Celeste's permission and enter her room in the darkness hours as she lay in her bed and the house was in slumber. In that instant did Vanguardia also convey that she had the deepest understanding of the fear that ruled Celeste's life and the transgressions that had brought this torment to her mind.

In this time Luther came to witness a role reversal. Whereas he had been Anger Plenty for the first few years, well before Celeste's mask of amiability was burned away

by the ire that grew to fire, now had Celeste's time come. Empowered by Vanguardia, who flew the flag of freedom for all women enslaved by fear, she would snap, "I cannot breathe with you around me," refer to him as "lord and master," and mockingly bow. And so he would go away, by himself, for weekends, and sometimes with Mia, only for Celeste's complaint to begin anew within minutes of his return. "You are a leech sucking my blood." This too she would scream.

As a bar to doing the dinky *by omission*, Luther was compelled by his soaring vigilance to acknowledge a further transgression. A baby was off the table, at least for the moment, owing to his insensitive outburst, but now he had made the additional mistake of suggesting that he leave his job for six months to a year so he could devote more time to writing. The vehemence in her response felt like a door being slammed in his face. The harshness rankled and so soreness came to reign. "There's no way you're going to park yourself here all day sitting on top of me anymore than you already do." The injustice. Again there was the invidious comparison. Had she not permitted Peter to abandon the workplace and maintain a life of indolence as a self-confessed genius, spending her money freely? Why should she not support the same freedom for Luther? Was he less than Peter in her eyes? Mommy, you gave to him. Why couldn't you also give to me? The loud sound was fueled by his ire; if there was consideration of the fact that Mia was in their midst, there was no off switch. He probably would not have left his job in the first place if the choice had been given him, but no was no, and that was that.

*Celeste, lost to my understanding was the large fears you held about any invasion of your space. You cherished your time alone in the studio; art was your calling. The rest*

*of the day was yours to give to us only if you had the morning and early afternoon to yourself. You brought everything to your work; in it you were most alive. You did not have my dawdle thing going, long periods given over to fantasy and frequent trips to the kitchen for another cup of tea, or the equally frequent trips to the bathroom to relieve myself.*

*Reality can be a hard landing, and the question that gnaws at me now is whether exploring old wounds will move us closer or farther apart, though really, the question is more about whether it will affect you adversely. Celeste, you saved me from myself. Miss Carmelli and GoA had offered me refuge from the storm; there was no place else likely to have me. As it was in the beginning, so it was now. I was in the care of women. "Walk Like a Man," as sung by falsetto Frankie, was not ringing in my ears.*

For a while Luther would threaten to move out. He would find a place in Brooklyn. Never mind that his income was barely sufficient to support himself. But he had learned to retire that threat; what was the point of making it when Celeste showed no enthusiasm for his being there in the first place? If he needed any further proof, he angrily abandoned the marriage bed one night for an exercise mat in his study and lay there, ears pricked for her soft tread, as he had once waited for his mother's footsteps approaching his room after spurning her food in a fit of anger or later for Sarah's footsteps on the gravel at the entrance to the guest house, only to realize the futility of his vigil. She had left him; his premonition in Montreal had been correct. And all the pain he had felt then he was feeling now. He was living with someone who had become a stranger. His resolve to stay apart meaningless in the face of her indifference, and his

need for her touch too great in the night, he returned to their bed where he never heard her say “You’re sucking my blood. I can’t breathe.” There she met him with equal need and could open to him willingly. That channel of communication was still intact.

*Glanton surprised me, Celeste. No chuckle plenty this time. He was far away from it, or it from him. It was not for me to say, as I don’t know how these things work. There are mysteries abounding in this universe, including the true origins of sound, and the time and resources have not been there for the full deployment of my research team. When I told him, in a braggadocious moment in defiance of all reality, that I fly high above the earth and need only the support of RoR to see me through this impasse with you, he said it gets quickly lonely in outer space and that the time was right for a return flight. “OK. I’ve landed. My feet are on the ground,” I said, pulled down by the gravity he was showing. “What’s going on?” he queried, and so I gave him the full ish kabibble, the Celeste did this and Celeste did that and all such manner of utterance until the narrative we have constructed of she done me wrong-ness is exhausted and we have no choice but to elevate above the realm of dinkydom. But much savaging, many lonely nights of cry me a river and wee small hours of the morning must we endure before the miracle of transformation can be achieved. “Find a marriage counselor,” Glanton said. When I balked, insisting on the efficacy of RoR for all my needs, he hit me hard with the stick of his truth. “See a counselor unless you want to see a divorce lawyer.”*

*The Oiseau lived in a high rise rental, a white brick affair over on York Avenue in the eighties, with a glitzy lobby and a doorman in red livery. She had been done the dirty by her husband. He had dismissed her to the lonely space that her beauty could not prevent, as nothing could prevent Celeste from dismissing Luther. Hearts are broken, even on a sunlit days. The Oiseau was slender but also tall, and many were the branches that she had hoped to perch on as resting stops on her restless journey only to have them break beneath her bulk. The apartment was musty and confining. It smelled of air in need of freshening by its own kind, not Lemon Pledge. Her improvised office, for which she offered no apology—this a testament to her oiseau strength—was three hard-backed chairs from her dining table set out some feet beyond the front door. Nothing plush for us or her. May I not be arrested and placed in chains for the rest of my life for saying she had a fine pair of legs, surely waxed, and wore a skirt not quite to her knees to show them off. And may I say once more to the posse of the righteous to cease and desist with your merciless pursuit. Just check it at the goddamn door, I say. She was at the stage of life where the second look was not as frequent, though the self-advertisement of her body wrapped tight to reveal its contours kept her hope alive, for a beautiful woman unseen was a beautiful woman dying a slow and painful death. In any case, she had my attention. Was there something in my gaze that compelled her to reflexively attempt to pull down her skirt, to no avail, the hem remaining above her knees? Should I lie and say I did not enjoy her discomfort or that I was unaware her bedroom was less than three feet away? Should I be beaten to within an inch of my life for revealing my predatory nature?*



*Whether it was her first question I do not recall, but in that initial session she asked how the two of us would rate the marriage on a scale from one to ten, with ten the highest. Incapable of restraint, I went first and gave the marriage a ten for the first few years and a six, at best, in the time that your ire turned to outright fire. Celeste, you had a very different rating, one that her scale could not register, as you had no number to offer. The number you gave was five, but it served as the modifier to minutes. For five minutes, approximately, though it could have been six or seven, the marriage had been good, those minutes of compatibility occurring on a drive back from the country to the city. For those five or so minutes had we been equals. Everything before and after had been an abomination, a reign of unrelenting oppressiveness imposed by me.*

*Now Celeste, the Oiseau posed a second question. "Have either of you experienced abuse in your childhood." Here again my hand shot up. "Flathead. Box Head. Squarehead. Many, many were the times they showered me with these wounding epithets, even rousing me from sleep with their chorus of scorn, all of them free to do so because they had been blessed with round heads. And my father. My father, with his smacking hand when he had been made to get up." Palpable to me was your disgust, that I would wear with an exhibitionist's pride the injustice I alleged to have rained down on me. You did not wear your injury on your sleeve. Your pain was sealed away in a leakproof vault, but now, with time, leakage had begun, and it was altering you. The Oiseau was on high alert. You can be sure her vigilance was soaring. 'Duly noted.' These words flashed on her forehead. By what you didn't say, you said everything, and here the Oiseau fell in love with you as the wounded being that you were.*

It was not for Luther to express his hurt, to say he felt crushed, wholly abandoned, by Celeste, and did not deserve her vilification of him. He had one emotion, anger, to run on. He had been attentive. He had been caring. And all she could say was that there had been five minutes when they had been equals? And now, here she was, holding up her wedding band, and noting that she had chosen it for its thickness as a symbol of slavery?

The Oiseau leveled with him. The marriage, as he had known it, was history. If there was to be any ongoing connection, it would be on the basis of a new relationship rising from the ashes of the old.

Luther continued to spend weekends in the country, sometimes with Mia, sometimes alone. One afternoon he drove into Rhinebeck and bought furnishings—two night tables and a lamp, for the apartment over the garage. He would find a way to live within the marriage in this new relationship. Celeste was still the woman he wished to spend the rest of his life with; he could not imagine his existence without her.

In this time George H. W. Bush, of America, was preparing to order the spanking of Saddam Hussein, of Iraq, and a very hard spanking it would be. To General Norman Schwarzkopf was this spanking delegated. When you went where you did not belong, at the cost of suffering to others, then a spanking was due. But that name, Schwartzkopf. The two parts did not fit. Besides, it was too close to dummkopf. George H. W. Bush. That was OK. Those initials showing his pedigree. In any case, Luther was staying abreast of any late-breaking developments by keeping the radio dial tuned to WINS-AM, the all news all the time station, as he had in the time of Jane Thayer, back when she had

left him by going to Mexico. As then, the news was his narcotizing companion, now that love had gone and pain had found him.

On one such weekend, he was cutting thick vines with a dangerous stranglehold around the trunks of trees when it suddenly struck him with great force that he would never father a child of his own, that the opportunity had come and gone, and now that it was gone, he was left to see he had missed his calling. The sense of loss overwhelmed him. Desperate for relief, he climbed down the ladder and headed quickly for the apartment, where he fell to his knees and begged God to take away his pain, to remove any plan he might have, to remove everything that stood in the way of God's will for him. He saw himself on a flimsy vessel tossing overboard that which might sink it. A great, if temporary, peace came over Luther and he soon fell asleep on the floor.

At this time Glanton stepped in. No kachunking. Just straight talk from his wisdom bank. "A chicken crosses the road after looking both ways. A house falls down. Does the chicken bear responsibility for the collapse of the house? No more are you responsible for the state she is in. Do not take her attacks personally." Luther was fortified by his mentor's words. A relieving perspective had been offered. Even so did his anxiety continue.

That summer he returned to Milan for two weeks. Alone, he found himself longing for the phone to ring. Surely, after a couple of days, she would be on the line. But a week passed and nothing, only silence and more silence, one beautiful early August day after another bringing no relief. An image came to Luther of himself as a squalling baby, his cries unheeded. No softness of Mommy. His tears unheeded. The Oiseau had said that

in every relationship there was a pursuer and a distancer. The cardinal rule was simply this: never pursue a distancer. The pursuer must allow the distancer to come to him. Cardinal rule or not, the strategy seemed futile in their particular dynamic. Even so, and with great effort, he did stay away from the phone, realizing as he did that any outreach to her would be futile.

On his return to the loft, Luther entered to find Celeste in deep conversation with the satyr, Nathan Sbar. The conversation was one that evidently bore no interruption, and so Luther withdrew to his room with the image of Celeste standing with one foot on a chair. For two weeks she had starved him, and now she was treating him like a ghost. This was his home, too. She had no right to treat him with such cold disregard. All desire to understand her had been drained away.

“Please go,” Luther said to Nathan Sbar, in as firm a voice as he could muster.

“We can talk later,” Celeste said to Nathan Sbar. And so the satyr left, taking his time. Even before the door had closed behind him, Celeste turned to Luther. “I want a divorce,” she said.

Clobber was clobber, in whatever form it took, her words striking him with the impact of a meat cleaver. The dreaded “D” word had been spoken. But he didn’t leave. Did he not have some rights, too? Was all power with her? Over the next few days he fought openly with her and reached out to Glanton for guidance, with an emphasis on his rights. No kachunking here either from Glanton, only a loving firmness.

“You have to consider the common welfare. There are two others under that roof. One is a child. The other doesn’t know whether she is coming or going.”

If only for a brief time Luther felt himself elevated above his own self-interest. He would be offering Celeste or Mia a gift with his absence. And wasn't it a spiritual axiom that the more we give, the more we receive. For a precious few minutes, he felt in the embrace of love, not fear and resentment.

“At some point you will have to stand still. If you do, you will probably get everything you want.” Luther hung on Celeste's words, spoken after he told her he was leaving. They were all he had.

“The help is in the asking,” Glanton said to Luther. When Luther went to the meetings of RoR, he was to ask individual members if they had any leads for a sublet where he could go and lie down with his pain or pace back and forth with his pain. A man named Benzatroid with a fire-scarred face and body came to him. In his drinking life he had lived under a bridge and one day, parted from his ambition and his lady love by alcohol, had set himself ablaze, and over his whole body had the fire raged before it was quelled.

“You think I am ugly but I am beautiful inside. Beautiful, I say. Beauty is not skin deep. It is deep deep. That is what I have been put on this earth to share. Do you understand? ”

Luther nodded his head, struggling to maintain eye contact with Benzatroid, whom new pain had found. “I have lost my wife to cancer,” he went on. “But I have not yet lost my life. This love—I am asking it to pull me through. But I have to leave my apartment. I cannot be there one minute more. I must go to the Fatherland.”

“The Fatherland?”

“When the mother goes, we return to the father, painful as that may be,”  
Benzatroid said.

Luther remained quiet. He had no fatherland to go to. But he did have Benzatroid’s apartment for three months. Luther woke that first morning and for a brief grace period lay there among Benzatroid’s and his departed wife’s possessions before it came to him where he was and he groaned, “Why me, God?” And God did his chuckle plenty, as Glanton would, and said “Why not you, Luther?” leading Luther to a state of temporary surrender. He wandered out of the building with his hair wild upon his head and as a stranger approached cried out and the man, being University of Chicago bright according to his burgundy sweatshirt, said, “You will have to meditate on the distinction between reflexive and reactive, for in the one your pain will surely lie and in the other your freedom,” before walking on by, as if he too had internalized the message of the great Dionne Warwick. And there was a movie theater calling to him that night, but Luther couldn’t go to it, because then he would be unfaithful to his pain, and that he must not do, because pain was the measure of his attachment to Celeste, a love he must never yield. And there was Tosca’s Pizza, right there on merciless Third Avenue, with the rampaging northbound traffic and shed of even a ghostly reminder of the el that had dominated the avenue, and as he crossed over to the other side so he could order his two slices and get filled up, he remembered the fine dinners that Celeste had prepared but that would have to be OK, he was doing right by himself in preventing the return of his former skin and bones status even as a voice whispered that on his own he would lack the necessities to properly feed himself. And there was the deep disappointment to discover

that Benzatroid's Betamax player was broken, depriving Luther of the video porn he longed for, though he did purchase a shrink-wrapped magazine as an aid to release. Two or three times a day Luther, fearing for whatever sanity he possessed, would reach out to Glanton, who told Luther his longing to return to the loft was being driven by euphoric recall of an earlier time, when love ruled Luther's land and the agony of abandonment had not yet come to claim him. And there was the Korean deli and its salad bar, where Luther would make his dinner of broccoli and shredded carrots and beets and tofu and a container of hummus—the classic kind, so no funny stuff could be added. And there was Frankie Valli and his Four Seasons, seeking to actualize in Luther their imperative to “Walk Like a Man.” And there were the high class East Side call girls in the adjoining apartments who had Johns visiting them all hours of the day. In spite of the call girls' beauty and high-powered sex appeal, Luther could not be among those Johns at their doors and in their beds, for the call girls appeared to him as human receptacles with no room for love in their transactional nature, and many, many were those who jumped from their windows and crashed through the awning below to the pavement, in their early mornings of despair. Luther did want it known that confinement to the marriage bed had been dropped now that Celeste had given him the boot, and if you didn't believe him, both the Oiseau and Glanton had said that very thing. What he less wanted you to know was that it terrified him that Celeste had the same freedom.

There was one who lived farther north than Benzatroid, and who placed himself beyond the reach of humankind. Avoidant was his name—Charles Avoidant—and he made his apartment available when Benzatroid would no longer have him. Charles

Avoidant would be vacating the premises for six months because he, like Merle Haggard, had rambling fever and was not about to allow any woman to tie him down. One with blondness among her features had come too close, compelling him to buy a new mattress because she would not lay herself down on the soiled and smelly one he possessed. Yes, he bought the new mattress she had selected, though he had no great love for its Sealy Posturepedic name or the thing itself, but now he could sink into her until he couldn't, Claire Muncy having a staying power and a vision for their future together he could not abide. And so it was that Avoidant vacated his own premises on a sublet basis on the condition that Luther not undertake any improvements of his own. Luther promised full compliance with the terms laid out by Charles Avoidant, being quite comfortable living with the possessions of others, as to put his name on a lease could only mean permanence, the finality of death.

The sessions occurred once a week, and because Celeste did not ever call, they became Luther's lifeline to her. He would give himself extra time, leaving work early, and begin to feel a state of panic coming on when the subway was slow to arrive or paused between stations. Sometimes he would arrive as much as a half hour early, while Celeste would invariably show up only a couple of minutes before the session was to begin, as if the whole thing was a matter of indifference to her.

At one such session, at a different location from the Oiseau's apartment, Luther could not find his way back from the restroom. Terrified that precious minutes were slipping away, he wildly knocked on doors. The Oiseau, hearing his distress, went to



Luther and warmed him with compassionate understanding. And so his tie to her deepened.

Now Luther, if he was to be honest, was dubious in the extreme when Glanton proclaimed his love for Babs unconditional and eternal; with full certainty did he assert that each would die for the other, should it ever come to that. Luther felt sad for Glanton, hearing what he considered to be such an inflated claim. But a world of strange wonders was Luther in since being struck sober, and though Glanton tested the limits of Luther's credulity, he also had the capacity to expand them. If Luther had been relieved of his obsession with alcohol, why couldn't other miracles manifest in his life? And was not a shift occurring even then? Now that the unthinkable had happened with his separation from Celeste, he was seeing his only hope in the example set by Glanton and Babs. They could be a model for him and Celeste. Not that he had given up on his dream of reunion with Celeste. Jamais jamais to that.

*Now Celeste, the satyr, the odious one who would have been consigned to a life under a bridge were it not for his breadwinning wife, was yet, in his way, responsible for keeping my dream alive. Let us banish the dinky and give credit where credit is due. Monique Sbar, betrothed to Nathan Sbar, was industry personified, with the seamstresses she employed for the manufacture of her extraordinary fashion statements. But while she was in this world, she was not entirely of it, having the extraterrestrial ambition to moonlight among the stars and not simply to underwrite the fantasies of her artist hubby and keep the family afloat. Desperate for a means of transcendence, she had immersed herself in a three-volume spiritual text that may have given her succor at one point in her*

*life and made a gift of them to me, saying, from the depths of knowingness that she possessed, "Someday you will need this."*

*And Celeste, there are threads of connection invisible to the eye. These threads that pass unseen are elaborate beyond our conception, but there are others that manifest before us. So it was with this text—The Way Forward. Was this not the same as I had been appalled to see in Glanton's Scarsdale studio? Hard times had come to Monique Sbar. Hard, hard times. In desperation, she was divesting herself of all but the necessities. The text was mine for the taking. As if an aperture in my forehead gave her access to my mind and a portal into the workings of my heart and at her disposal was a crystal ball had she anticipated my need, for there in the sublet of Charles Avoidant did a great cry go out from me to you that required communication neither by phone or face to face, so mitigating of distance was its power. "I must have it if I am to continue breathing on this planet. Now now now. Pronto pronto pronto." And pronto was the text received.*

From his cursory sampling of the three volumes a fragment lingered, and now it served as his lifeline. It had to be there. It had to be. With the persistence of a prospector for gold he tore through page after page seeking the passage that would save him, save her, save them. And there it was. The special relationship versus the holy relationship. The relationship in which couples stole from each other, feeling incomplete in themselves, and the relationship in which, whole and complete, couples gave to each other. Thus had the model for the new relationship been provided to Luther and the roadmap for achieving that state of being. Luther needn't be afraid. True love never died. Nothing unreal existed. Therein lay the peace of God.

*Luther, en garde. Rein in any pomposity before it gets fully underway. Do not presume to elevate above your spiritual station. Tell the reader of your anxiety-driven phone calls to Glanton, sometimes thrice daily. Tell the reader what he said, when you pleaded to know what the outcome would be and would you ever live with Celeste and Mia again? "You are seeking a guarantee, and that is not very spiritual," Glanton replied. And tell the reader what else he said: "You two are like a couple of three-year-olds whacking each other with plastic shovels in the sandbox" He recommended you see a therapist, in addition to the Oiseau, to deal with your childhood issues. You offered no resistance, did not refer him back to an earlier time when you were seeing Dr. Rosner and Glanton's assertion that therapists had the sickest egos in the western world. You accepted that time had mellowed him—his mind had been opened to new pathways because of the pain his own marital rupture had wrought.*

Dr. Tobin had Luther lie down on the couch in his small and windowless office just off University Place. Luther did not resist, as he had with his German analyst, Dr. Dressler. He would take his chances. Dr. Tobin sat slightly behind Luther in a high-backed chair and spoke in a soft. Initially, Luther was quite certain that Dr. Tobin was gay. Then, in a dream it was revealed that Dr. Tobin had the power to pass through walls, as if by osmosis. He was also a murderer with a sadistic bent, standing at the foot of Luther's bed with a plastic garment to protect his suit from blood splatter when the hacking and whacking with the axe in his one hand and a meat cleaver in the other got underway. Luther was also alerted, in a dream, of the oubliette in Dr. Tobin's office

through which he dropped his patients prior to dismemberment. When Luther confronted Dr. Tobin with his revelatory dream, Dr. Tobin would only say, “You have big fears.”

Dr. Tobin said the analysis would require two years of weekly sessions, and Luther was on board with that timeframe. He needed a forum for his pain and the doctor was a good listener, unlike the Oiseau, who would cross-check everything he said, requesting clarification, although it was true that Luther did succumb to ranting about the injustice that had been inflicted on him by Celeste, prompting the Oiseau to say matter-of-factly that Luther had a verbal abuse problem, while also adding, “Luther’s bark is worse than his bite.” The offhand manner and the kindness in her voice in making the observation left Luther open to its receipt as he might not have been had it come as an accusation or heavy-handed denunciation. Still, all that cross-checking, as if the Oiseau were a defenseman impeding the rush of a forward seeking to send the puck into the net. One needed unfettered access to the spoken word, did one not, so one could see not only where the words began but where they ended and all the points in between.

Though Dr. Tobin spoke in a dulcet tone, he was not averse to the occasional heavy bombing run, should powerful detonations be needed to usher Luther from an old and unsuitable frame of mind into something more congenial to successful living.

“She is having a prolonged tantrum. When you did not stand up to her and assert your rights, that emboldened her further. You mention your verbal tirades. Do you know what some husbands and wives put their spouses through? Expressions of guilt can destabilize a relationship.”

Luther dreamt that he slowly and with an ache of longing climbed the many steps to the loft to find that a soft yellow mist had spread through its expanse as Celeste and Mia lay sleeping. The atmosphere was one of profound peace. The dream was only an extension of his longing in the waking hours. The sight of a Subaru could be devastating, or hearing an aria, a reminder, with euphoric recall, of his nights at the opera with Celeste. And the country place, how he would kiss the earth it stood on should he ever be able to return. And Dr. Tobin's office on Twelfth Street. No way would he venture farther south to SoHo and the pain that would bring.

Luther's every fearful thought was of Celeste. The injustice. That she had discarded all memory of how good he had tried to be, his bursts of anger notwithstanding. Their entire life together reduced to five minutes of equality on the drive back from the country, the rest of it colored black in her memory bank. And now Mia was gone too, painful as it was for Celeste to send her daughter to Peter, up in Greene County. Love for her daughter could not get in the way of her need to be alone. And Mia loved her father, and his new partner Redding. Luther felt no regret that Mia was not in his care. Blood lines were strong. Besides, he could barely take care of himself. Dr. Tobin said Luther should not expect to have the same influence on Mia as her father. She was of her father's flesh and blood. She bore a facial resemblance to him. But he also said that over time—years and years—she would come to appreciate him. Again, that was fine with Luther. He didn't mind being an appendage, a sideshow. He accepted that he was a man with a limited capacity for responsibility. How like his father he was in that regard, a man reliant on a woman to take him in and provide structure in his life. The difference was that

Luther's mother hadn't discarded his father. Sure, he raised his voice to the children and sometimes struck them, but then, he had never raised his hand to Luther's mother or been verbally violent with her, not that Luther had seen.

Luther had great fear of losing not only Celeste but Mia as well, and voiced this concern to the Oiseau. Given that it was the only parenting he had done, however poorly, it would have been a loss for her to disappear from his life. The Oiseau got very big on Luther, very strong. "You are the adult. She is the child. If you want a relationship with her, you will have to pick up the phone and call her." There were guards posted before and after those two short sentences, so nothing might be allowed in to dilute their hard substance.

"So bracing are your words. Lights are on within. The totality of my being salutes you," Luther exclaimed.

He wore his wedding band that first year. Removing it would have signified uncoupling. Only for ablutions of his hands and body must such a separation occur, and only for the briefest time. That Celeste had vacated him from the premises of her being as she had known him did not matter. He had his own heart to contend with and its guidance to follow. The ninnies and nincompoops and all those unable to walk in his shoes could just walk on by, as the so very great Dionne Warwick sang on a long ago night in Central Park. And the N & Ns were all about, in cowardly delegations, suggesting he must have done something to merit such a fate. Snickers galore did they offer.

A woman named Annie invited Luther for Thanksgiving dinner. The apartment was funereal, one dark room after another, and matched his mood on the overcast and cold November day. Annie said he looked depressed and that the answer was antidepressants, but he remembered the mood elevator medication he was on throughout his first year in RoR, which did not constitute the spiritual solution he required for him to have an effective defense against the first drink. He didn't argue with Annie. She could go her way and he would go his, but was he supposed to be doing cartwheels down Second Avenue? Sing "Volare" on Third Avenue? He was still heartsick over the marital rupture and living day to day. Wouldn't anyone be depressed? Besides, Annie wasn't exactly a walking advertisement for the drug she was pushing. She was haggard and listless, and her grooming and hygiene were not great, her hair untended to, and giving off a faint but unpleasant odor when she drew near. Before dinner preparations began she fell into a snooze in her armchair. Loud snoring followed. Luther wrote a note, saying he did not wish to disturb her, and slipped out the door to a diner some blocks away, where he indulged in his all-time favorite, a grilled cheese sandwich with pickles and a small container of Cole slaw and an order of French fries, heavy on the ketchup.

The next night Luther cried out his pain, but not the solution, in the basement of an Episcopal Church on east Eighty-sixth Street. An older man, in baggy pants and a worn dress shirt, spoke next, with fire on his breath. "Go help a newcomer," he said. The man's words stung. Later, Luther was to say that he wanted to bang a chair on the old man's bald head, but that was just stuff, for even then he understood where the man was coming from. He was old and beyond the time when a woman's love would come to him.

His love was now for the alcoholic who still suffered. That was the connection left to him. Someday Luther would be like that. He could see it happening. Already he was like the sad sacks he had witnessed down at his Saturday night meeting when he was new to RoR and still with Sarah, the ones who would follow women out the door after the meeting and, when spurned on the street, rush back hoping to find someone else to help them through the night. Well, he wasn't rushing out the door after the women, but he was thinking of them, the prettier ones, and wondering if they could be his for just one night.

The fact was that Luther was reaching out. He was mentoring several men, among them Drednot W., a one-time All-American hoopster but now a disheveled, distraught middle-aged man seeking to come back from a relapse.

At night the phone would break its silence. Hearing the ring Luther's hope would soar that it was the angel voice of Celeste he would hear coming through the receiver. How deflating to hear instead the distressed voice of Drednot W. Luther prayed while holding the phone to his ear to give Drednot his all and be where his feet were, with no past and no future. Only in the now did he ask to be immersed in, and while his words of support and comfort to Drednot, who had drunk himself out of job and wife and home, seemed hollow, if not pointless, and but a band-aid for himself on a gaping wound, he got off the phone feeling not so alone. After all, he had Drednot, shaky as he was. "You can't love God unless you love his people." So Luther had heard it said. And no love was like the love of one alcoholic for another. This too he had heard it said. And so Luther escaped the darkness of the night, with all the fear and anxiety it inevitably brought in the wee hours, as if the world were little more than a cauldron of hate and conflict and



misery. He soon fell into a deep sleep. He was sleeping the sleep of the just, as the Frogs across the pond might say.

Luther tried some cooking. The time had come to nourish his bones with food he had a hand in making. What was that, a lifetime of cheery cheese danishes and cherry Cokes and vanilla egg creams and malted milks and hamburgers and ham and cheese sandwiches, heavy on the mustard, and hot dogs, heavy on the mustard, and Wise potato chips and the lesser Lay's, and Chef Boyardee ravioli eaten right out of the can, and liverwurst and canned tuna and Drake's cakes and Hostess Twinkies and Mrs. Wagner's apple and cherry pies, and the Rooty Toot Toot beer, all of it All-American all the time? He would retreat to the safety of his domicile, even if it wasn't really his, and familiarize himself with pots and pans and familiarize himself with patience at well and show that he could follow the intricacies of a simple recipe.

Though it looked on paper like a formidable name, ratatouille was easy to pronounce and he was promised it would be easy to make. "Failure, stay outside the door," Luther said out loud, on his big night, and took deep breaths so he could be sure that failure would not go where it did not belong, for by this time Dr. Tobin was giving Luther heavy duty reinforcement, saying he was a good man possessed of his mother's spirituality, and though Luther did not raise up on Dr. Tobin from his supine position, the turmoil unleashed by the doctor's kind words levitated Luther two feet off the couch and summoned a raging desire to say, as he often did, "Beat me with a stick that my bones may be broken in many places," for the doctor was not living in Luther's universe but his own in daring to accentuate the positive. But on this night Luther said, "I am coming

home to myself. No, Dusty Springfield, no Bert Bacharach, a house *is* a home when there is only one person there, as a chair is still a chair.” Eggplant, tomatoes, potatoes, sweet green peppers, onion, garlic, olive oil. Many were the elements Luther assembled on that night, so meat could remain on his bones without his sitting in the diners of New York City on a Saturday night. And when Luther complained the following week of a throbbing in his forearms, Dr. Tobin was quick to note that eggplant was in the nightshade family, along with tomatoes and potatoes, and could cause inflammation to occur, thus showing himself to have knowledge of more than the workings of the mind.

In this time Luther also began to walk great distances over the expanse of Manhattan, to and from work and points beyond. He was now the walking man, as his father before him had been. Every weekday morning, on the avenue, Fifth Avenue, he saluted the World War I doughboys as his feet skipped over the hexagonal tiles along the footpath on the east side of Central Park but also shuddered at the gruesomeness of life, that men should be called upon to pierce each other’s bodies not only with bullets but also long and honed bayonets of high-grade steel. He called out hello to the doormen of the avenue and gave Grand Army Plaza and the south entrance to the park and the zoo their due, feeling his very soul bursting free of the confines of his fear as the endorphins were released. He saluted Saks Fifth Avenue and Bonwit Teller for the audacity of its name even as he grieved its termination from the scene. It was morning and the city was awash in the light.

Now it happened in this time that Luther, while at work, received a call from his sister Vera. She was on the line to tell him that their mother had suffered a heart attack and was being rushed as she spoke to the hospital by ambulance. The workday was a slow one, as most of his days were. In fact, he was in snooze mode following a gigantic salad heavy with red kidney beans and shredded carrots and cherry tomatoes and florets of broccoli when the phone rang, and it was a measure of his growth that soreness did not reign in him as it had when this same sister informed him via the phone that their father had passed away back in 1971. Luther was not walking as a giant on this earth, but he was making limited progress in certain situations—home and the job were not two them—controlling his tongue. It was also to be noted that the provocation was less than all those years before; he could detect no histrionics. Vera was just delivering the facts. No gnashing of teeth, no river of tears. And so there was no need to raise up on her. That said, a man had a right to walk on the wild side with his tongue in the event there were histrionics and all emotion that was not in proportion with reality. From what command center she was speaking he could not say and did not ask.

Luther next arranged his face so he could go to Miss Carmelli and inform her of this family circumstance. He went without the illusion that he would win her heart with his news, for by now he was seeing her gifts were a ritual ingrained in Miss Carmelli's being and a poor indicator whether soreness might be lingering in her vis a vis him, as it was his way to strain the bonds of amity and reduce relationship to mere civility, at best, with the occasionally harsh word flow from his mouth. Miss Carmelli, as he suspected,

did not give him a love embrace, nor did she give him trouble. Rather, she brusquely told him to be on his way.

And so he was, quickly leaving the building, but a dilemma presented itself as he approached the subway entrance. It was not called rapid transit for nothing, but even so, was it possible he was being disrespectful? Sure, the trains, when they weren't stalling you, had *vitesse* on their side, but weren't taxis even more rapid, especially now, well before rush hour? Was he doing the dawdle at a time when his mother possibly lay dying some miles away? Was his mother not worth a taxi ride? This *was* his mother, and spirits *were* watching, and in fact keenly observing. Did he wish to be consigned to the shame corner for all eternity with such contemptible thrift?

That trip to Canada with Celeste and his unease about leaving his mother behind in the heat of New York City with only a fan to cool herself a few years before. And his call to her, fearing that she would die. His thoughts went back to that time as the taxi sped through Central Park.

The driver required no flogging to keep the pedal to the metal. In fact, Luther was now having qualms about the appropriateness of such *vitesse* in the current situation, as it did not fit with his emotional tempo. Once again was the spell of death finding him, his internal rhythm now in slow mo. Even the specter of death could place you in a zone like no other. Yes, you were in the world at such a time, but you were not of it. *Amor fati* was making its presence felt.

"Respect is due," Luther said to the cabby, who wore a bandana around his neck to absorb his sweat.

“What’s that?”

“Adagio. Lento. Go with the flow. Do not mock God.”

“Fuck is wrong with you, mister?”

“I will say no more.” Luther thinking, I can go slow if my recalcitrant cabby won’t.

The past came along to deal him a wounding blow. He had only to see the stately Frick Museum from the window for that past to launch its attack, for down the block from it was the former mansion that housed the Claremont School, where he had spent halcyon days before his dream of graduation to Ivy League basketball stardom turned to enduring sadness. But now he wasn’t dwelling on what might have been. Instead he saw his mother walking slowly down that street in her clunky support shoes and rubber stockings and standing by herself amid sophisticated East Side mothers with their two-tone hair on parents night. There had been, to that point, the review with her of each report card, in the privacy of the bathroom, she holding the watermarked bond paper, and next to each subject the As and A minuses and B pluses. The intimacy unbearable, her pride in him unbearable. A love he had to get away from, to hide from her and himself all that he was feeling. But now there she was, alone, unsupported, only to learn that her number 2 son had been missing for three weeks. Weeping as she came to him that same night. “How could you? You children treat me like the dirt beneath your shoes.”

Luther rallied strong, lest the memory cripple him. A pointless road to go down. Lots of teenagers made mistakes, and he with no one to reach out to with his pain at the time. His truancy hadn’t put his mother in the grave. Anyway, by the next year, now a

senior, he sensed she had lost interest in him. Yes, a mother's love was unconditional, but only to an extent.

*Celeste, we must always speak plain and allow truth to be our guide, so it is no calumny to report that the receptionist at the hospital emergency room had a mouth on her, saying to me, "Is your mother one of those without a last name?" as if I didn't mean to be forthcoming with that crucial fact if she would just give me a chance. This after I had merely asked "Is my mother here, in the spirit or in the flesh, for she has portability in her being." Even in the halls of death and sorrow does rudeness find a place, the receptionist responding as if both my mother and I were the dirt beneath her shoes. And then, with full coldness in her being, saying simply "Nope. Not here," when she had the crucial fact at hand.*

*It was not for ambulances to deliver corpses to the hospitals. Such institutions were for the still living. No longer was I on a mission to rescue the perishing, to care for the dying. I should have listened to my inner guide and taken the people's train and ignored the faux voice my conscience spoke in.*

As he walked from Amsterdam Avenue to Broadway, memories were summoned—the boy who held him up with an icepick pointed at his belly on the south side of the street or the revelation on the north side, this in his teenage years and the time of Jane Thayer, that he had been released from his mother, as if, through the previous years, it had been a problem awaiting a solution.

*Celeste, though the dinner hour had not arrived, as I entered the apartment my sister Rachel stood with a plate in her hand, waiting to be served, the sight summoning*

*the reality that she would be lost without my mother, and so sorrow had its way with me that I should witness this sister, who had been my guiding star in her college years, once again in such an abject state of dependency as well as seeming denial. And Hannah was there and Vera too, Hannah seeking to introduce an element of mystery beyond the mystery of death itself where none was called for. In a ruminating state she was, focusing upon the position she found my mother in, lying there on the floor face up with a sheet twisted around her and her neck at an odd angle when the likely reason was that my mother had jerked about in the throes of the heart attack and fallen from the bed. And then it was time for me to go dark, to notice that Hannah was dry-eyed, unlike Vera. She had time for rumination but not for tears? It was not for me to know what her relationship to my mother had been, as the first born, but the sense came over me that our mother's death marked a liberation for Hannah and made possible the realization of a lifelong dream. Was her crossness, her anger, so readily expressed, and the fact that she had never ventured out on her own indicative of a claim on our mother? Did she feel that she was owed something, the transaction being that she would receive the apartment in exchange for staying put?*

*I had business to tend to, and so pushed on, not wishing them be an obstacle to my progress. After all, my mother awaited. And yet, in the next room, an obstacle showed herself in the form of an officer of the law seated at the dining table, squawk box chatter coming loud and crackling from the bulky contraption.*

*“Are you here to arrest me? Are you in pursuit of justice under the law?”*

*“You need to quiet your mouth and go on in and see your momma. But first you got to tend to your fear. I can see you afraid. Where you living that you never seen a dead person before? I was born next to a dead person. My momma. My momma dead before my baby eyes. Grew up with the dead. Slept in the same bed with them. No reason to be afraid. You just go on in and pay your momma respect.”*

*“But why are you here if not to put the cuffs on?”*

*“You never hear of a mortician? You never hear a mortician has to be here with the body and an officer of the law has to be here before he get here. Now you be understanding?”*

She lay in the hallway, off the kitchen, It had been some years since Luther had penetrated that far into the apartment. There was the money closet, the one his mother kept under lock and key so the thieving children couldn't get at the rent receipts or her medications—codeine for pain and barbiturates for sleep and the bathroom in the middle and the two bedrooms overlooking Broadway at the end. Her expression was attentive, as if she were receiving instruction from a parent or a teacher. Attentive it may have been, but what Luther was staring at was surely an encasement. Her soul had journeyed elsewhere, wherever souls went. He was happy for her release. At the same time, an attitude of self-righteousness, born of judgment, had come over Luther seeing his three sisters standing about in the living room. The difference between him and his siblings was that she had something that they wanted. Hannah coveted the apartment and needed a cook and Rachel needed her for her life and Vera needed her as a daughter will always



need her mother, whereas Luther needed nothing. So that he would not be entirely in the land of the dinky, it was for Luther to fess up to such thoughts.

In truth, he had been there the Friday before, as he was every other Friday afternoon in summer, to visit with his mother. He had come to her with cheese and crackers, not only because it was the proper thing to come bearing a modest gift, but because he had become phobic about touching foods stored in the apartment. For long periods they sat in the silence. It was not the awkward silence he might experience with others. He had not become a stranger in her midst.

As he was leaving, she said to him, “Who is this Buddha I was visited by in a dream? Tell me.”

Luther told her what little he knew, about the palace and the courtesans and the horror that came over Buddha as to human impermanence on hearing the gnashing of the courtesans’ teeth, which propelled him under the Bodhi tree for weeks and weeks and the enlightenment that followed, including the Four Noble Truths, though he could not remember exactly what they were.

“The Buddha has elaborated a way forward and has contacted you personally,” Luther said. “You should be honored. And if I may say, I have been noticing an Asian cast to your face recently, particularly your eyes. Signs and wonders, Mother. Signs and wonders.”

“Ushtah. Stop with your foolishness.”

And so he did. It was no small thing, no small infidelity, to switch from the Blood of the Lamb track to the Buddha breath track.



Now there was one who strode the floors of the org with an imperious step and who furthermore went about perfumed in his finery, leading Luther to ask, in the privacy of his mind, whether a similar scent would he exude when laid in his casket preliminary to departure to his final resting place. His name was Dimond Derl (he had no use for the “a” in his given name, if in fact it was his given name and not one he had given himself). In his mind as well would Luther assign DD peacock feathers trailing from his butt so he could be known as he was all the times that Luther would conjure his image or see him outright. Dimond Derl was no one to cross swords with. He was a high echelon man in a predominantly women’s org.

And there was one named Tilly Van Helsen, a new member of the Publications Team, and Dimond Derl had a mind to sex her, or so Luther surmised, seeing the dynamic of interaction develop between the two, she shedding her baggy duds for sleeker attire and slicking her hair for the wet look to stoke his lust fire even more and he taking his perfume to the next level, and before you could say *sex me*, she was moved to his department as personal assistant. In this way did Dimond Derl claim Tilly Van Helsen as his own, and in this way did she come to assume airs about herself in regard to her physical and intellectual status, both inflated, at least in the workings of her own mind. But Luther was understanding there were things only to be noted in this world as you walked on by, you just walked on by, in line with the instruction of the great Dionne Warwick on that eventful summer evening in Central Park circa 1965.

Miss Carmelli was sad for Luther, and aggrieved not with him but with Celeste for giving him the boot. Luther had not done the dinky. He had not done the “she did this and she did that” to Miss Carmelli, nor did he sing her a mournful song of having done Celeste wrong. Luther just gave Miss Carmelli the fact that Celeste had asked him to leave. It was for Miss Carmelli, drawing on her life experience and what little she knew of Luther, to draw the picture that she did. Though single herself, a wedding was, for her, a joyous event, as were birthdays, with a card and a perfectly wrapped gift on their desks in the morning. Indeed, she and the staff had presented him with a lazy Susan and a set of matching coasters. And it was only right that Luther should reciprocate with a gift for Miss Carmelli on her birthday, and let shame forever be his name if he didn’t. Now, with only a small gesture of support, an “I’m sorry. You’ll get through this,” she had made an emotional home for him. Love was a precious thing to Luther, his lifeline. It was all well and good to rely on God’s love, but a human hand reaching out when he felt cast away, that was special.

*Celeste, am I forfeiting your love in saying these things? That is a fear I am seeking to hold in abeyance so my true self can emerge, not in reaction or anticipation of you, but flying the flag of necessary independence.*

Altogether the staff were quite fond of Miss Carmelli. Sure, they made fun of her with names like Squawky for her unmelodious voice, but they also recognized her goodness and caring, her dedication to Girls, Inc. and her staff, and her social consciousness. How memorable that she should say, “We have stopped caring,” this in regard to the homelessness visible on every street, seemingly middle class people out and about suddenly approaching you with their hand out for anything you could give them. And that she used the word “we” in place of “they.” Was the use

of the first person plural a means of safeguarding against the self-righteousness to which she was prone? No matter. She was acknowledging that she was part of the problem as well.

The staff left him alone. Perhaps they felt sorry for him. He couldn't say. He did feel vulnerable. Celeste, in cutting him loose, had returned him to his humble station in life. Now it was harder to live through her vicariously. He would have to apply himself with greater diligence so he did not lose his job as well as his wife. Was it not said that if you lost your spouse you could take refuge in work and vice versa should you become unemployed? I had better mind my Ps and Qs, Luther said to himself, and lest he forget, wrote the two letters in reverse order on his desk calendar each workday, taking this precaution should anyone snoop in his stuff and seize on their meaning, as some British genius had done in cracking the German communications code during WW II. The stakes were very high; a hiding place was everything.

Now there was one who did get involved, or tried to, and that was Luther's sister Vera, who volunteered to speak with Celeste on Luther's behalf, but this was a *jamais jamais* in the core of his being, his fear spiking on hearing her offer. His sister was acquisition bent, and what she acquired she did not give back. She would claim Celeste for her own and that would mean curtains for his life. This apprehension Luther could not share with Vera, or dared not, lest her soreness rain down on him. He did, however, strongly urge her not to intercede in a tone that verged on pleading. His fear might be unfounded, but it was a lifelong fear, and one he had no hope would ever lift.

Glanton's response to Luther's concern about his sister came as a surprise. No chuckle plenty, no telling him nothing real could be threatened. "If it is a lifelong fear, it can only be because she has taken something from you." Luther was grateful for the validation. Exposing his

vulnerability to them would only serve to increase it. “I will go to you, God. I will believe that in you lies my peace.” This Luther whispered in his cube and in the toilet stall and on the streets of Manhattan all that day.

“Unbelievable. Your credit rating is up there with Rockefeller,” Tommasso said, in his Italian accent. A real estate broker, he had brought Luther to an Upper West Side apartment. The prime tenant, Lisbeth Joiner, was planning to follow her star out to Hollywood for a year. Luther was fine with being a subtenant. Even seven months into the separation, the thought of a lease in his own name was terrifying.

The Upper West Side was not his ideal. He pictured old men on on those islands in the middle of Broadway sitting on benches and feeding the pigeons. One big retirement community. To move there would render him instantly old. And, of course, it was but a mile south of where he grew up, with all the dark associations that brought. But Avoidant had returned, and this new apartment was a one-bedroom in a doorman building and the rent was incredibly low and he would have a whole year, not just a few months, to understand where he was and where he needed to go with his life.

*Now Celeste, Lisbeth Joiner had her listening devices, too, the name “Rockefeller” bulging big time in her brain. How do I know? Because of the actions that followed. Tommasso was a man in motion, no indolence in him, with many deals to do and the word Avanti! written on his forehead, and so he vacated the premises promptly, leaving me with Lisbeth, who came with her arsenal of feminine wiles. She had been a Southern belle, a debutante, and was well practiced in the art of getting her man. I, of course, anyone would assume, was outside her*

*profile of what a man should be. After sitting uncomfortably close to me on her sofa, she rested her hand on my thigh as she asked if I would be willing to add an extra month's security to the two I had agreed to. In that moment did loneliness come calling on me, and with it, an understanding of what you had endured with the mixed blessing of inherited wealth. Why do I say that? Because in the moment that Lisbeth Joiner placed her hand on me, I recognized that she was not seeing me but the dollar sign. Take that away and I was nothing to her. And though you might think, knowing my tendencies, that I would go the way of most flesh, that was not so. Yes, Lisbeth Joiner was showing courtesan capacity, but she was also showing her age. No model of decrepitude, she was nevertheless far beyond me in years and the beauty she had evidently been blessed with was fading. Both face and body were bloated and the shiny film that coated her skin suggested uncleanness, all of which protected me from the king size bed that dominated her bedroom, done up in boudoir bliss decor, with sheets of silk hung from the walls and erotic lingerie scattered about. A further barrier was that we were now in the time of AIDS.*

*Celeste, I did give Lisbeth the extra month's security, over the protest of Tommaso, who saw her as the manipulator that she was, but I resisted her overtures for dinner and the further requests she would subsequently make to stay over for a night on the few return trips she made from Los Angeles to New York. Luther's reason—and it was more than an excuse—was that, like Greta Garbo, he needed to be alone. Luther did need to be alone, but if Lisbeth had been ten years younger and many pounds lighter, and the scent of springtime had lifted from her skin, Luther might have sought to cook in her kitchen. His loneliness had not yet transformed into aloneness, much as he might aspire to the latter, consciously or not. So that night he could sleep*

the sleep of the just, having stayed within the realm of his own personal truth and not strayed beyond its border.

*Celeste, there was young blood and old blood and blood at every stage of life on the streets of Manhattan in this period, animate beings infused with the power of crack cocaine for the glimpse of heaven it could bring. Vials littered the streets and men wild in the night took their delirium into the morning light, one bare chested and swinging a honed machete at imaginary foes. But drawing on the words of wisdom of the great Dionne Warwick, I walked on by, I just walked on by, while wearing out the Serenity Prayer, lest Whacking & Hacking throw a party on my body there on Amsterdam Avenue, as the young bloods were of the run and gun and sleep in the streets variety, one in fact living two floors below, saying, "Don't be giving me that white boy mofo'ing attitude, less you want me breaking down your mofo'ing door and partying all day and all through the night on your skinny white boy ass." Saying too, "I got my dignity going on. Don't you be fucking with it. Don't got time for your stupid assed white boy pale faced mofo'ing bullshit."*

*Now Celeste, a new American poetry was riding strong on the air and struggling to break Young Blood free of all that would hold him down because for sometime now Run DMC and others were on the scene and energizing Young Blood's bones and the bones of everyone, if truth can be known. But that may be a place for me to visit but not to linger.*

*I was but a shadow passing through, barely visible. This I understand. Though on the periphery of my life, as I doubly was on theirs, I will note here my immediate neighbors, Samuel Jesse Jermaine, whom I was never to see, as he lay dying of AIDS and Solomon Shalom, a performer supreme on stage and screen. On the floor below lived Agnes McKenzie, whom I drew*



*near sufficient to meet for dinner, over which I saw there was no way forward, however wide the door she left open, that it was not for me to touch her flesh or have her touch mine. A wall of aversion came down. I saw my oldest sister, Hannah, with her tongue clamped between thick lips while engaged in her smacking and whacking. I saw what I saw and now had to live in discomfort each time I ran into her as I was entering or leaving the building. And yet there was another, on a floor further below, I also had dinner with some weeks later, as if I had learned nothing about searching too close to home. Raisa Gynne was her name. There, at the same cafe where I had sat with Agnes McKenzie, I saw Raisa in a different light, literally. She appeared more ravaged by time and then there was the spanking sound of her voice, as if I were being thwacked by a board. And so, again, the wall of aversion came down, no brittle structure susceptible to navigation but entirely adamant. Many, many were the times that the wall of aversion was to come down following the impulse, driven by desire, to connect.*

In this time Luther took off his wedding band. Under the base of the lamp atop his dresser did he place it, a comfortable and secure resting place in daylight hours and when darkness fell. All through the night, as he lay in bed, would it remain as a reminder that, though separated, he and Celeste were still present in each other's lives. And there was much much more. They got together. They really did. Not only at chez Oiseau but at the coffee shop down the block, where he would have his grilled cheese sandwich but hold the fries, though he was dying for them, and a seltzer bubbling in the glass until it calmed down. Celeste had her cup of afternoon tea. She had an energy source all her own, notwithstanding her fact-certified statement that food was fuel. Their talk mainly centered on the Oiseau, whom Celeste thought to be beautiful, while Luther focused on the Oiseau's obstructionism, never allowing him to verbally extend. These little

meetings kept him hopeful. Afterward he would escort Celeste to her car, for by now she had bought a house in Teaneck, New Jersey, needing the Hudson River to serve as a moat between her and the past she was trying to leave behind. A decisive and bold action, and also a hasty one. It came as a shock, her intuitive master plan unfolding to fully shed every vestige of her old self. No matter that the only contact she had in her new community was Maxine Loud, a longtime friend but also a nemesis of sorts. A troublemaker, said Celeste. Maxine, while supremely intelligent, did not have the artistic gift Celeste possessed. She had no SoHo galleries importuning her. She participated in craft shows and was a member of an outfit for carvers called The Wittle Ones.

*You walked quickly to your car. You were not a dawdler. As you sat behind the wheel, I made a motion diagonally across my chest for you to buckle up, but ignoring my pantomime, you drove off. Our meeting was over, and when something was over, it was over. I stood and watched until you were out of sight. Above me, on the second floor, was a warmly lit apartment, in which I imagined you and Mia and me. Just the three of us.*

As Luther continued to let her go and establish himself in his new life, she began to come back. They could do more than the diner down the block from the Oiseau. There was Asia House and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and the Whitney Museum. There were even movies. She would come in from Teaneck on an afternoon or evening and drive back that same night. The Oiseau put her blessing on their get-togethers, even if, to Luther's ears, it didn't sit quite right to hear her speculating about how he and Celeste felt when together. Was the feeling one of sweetness, she asked? Sweetness? The accuracy of the word, as she applied it, frightened him. Was she saying that their emerging compatibility fit a pattern familiar to her, a sort of precursor to parting, a

long, slow goodbye? The very thought filled him with dread and was enough to darken the sunniest day.

Summer came. Luther hailed a cab on Amsterdam Avenue, his Samsonite hard-shell suitcase in tow, and grew uneasy when the cabbie headed north into Harlem, leaving behind the stately buildings along Central Park West for rundown housing stock and the penetrating stares of two African American teenage boys styling their way through the crosswalk.

“I can see you lack the cojones to rumble,” the cabbie said. “Your fear talks loud in my ears.”

“And I can see you live for violence, for knives and guns to be pulled and blood to be shed.”

“All you want is to save your white boy ass. You don’t care what happens to people of color.”

“The goal is oneness, the end of fractiousness.”

“You keep talking your white boy shit,” the cabbie replied.

There had been rioting. There had been buildings brought to quaking down to their foundations by black rage.

With Harlem behind them and arriving and departing jets flying low overhead, Luther could begin to relax into a contemplation of his trip. Once again was he hearing “It’s a Big Wide Wonderful World,” the sun as dazzling as it surely ever was and his new life ahead of him. A do-over. He was receiving a do-over. He was leaving home, leaving Mommy, only now he would not be curled in a fetal position in a mildewed cabin room at the Bible camp for the Christ Jesus.

He would not be a homesick little boy, as he was then. He carried with him Celeste's love and the Oiseau's support. He could feel her admiration for his ability to leave town. Goodbye to GoA. Goodbye to Miss Carmelli and Felicia Marcos and and Blanche Givenchy. Goodbye to the smallness of his life. At the same time Luther couldn't help but wonder if he was going off on his own for Celeste, performing for her, seeking her approval. If he went away and proved his independence, would she then love him more?

The flight was exhausting. As always, it required Luther's vigilance to be soaring, and Luther did not do exhaustion well, having no reserves of strength as a defense against the darkness. Fatigued but unable to sleep, he tried to read Don DeLillo but a whiff of pretentiousness lifted from the pages. "The deep." Was he trying too hard for significance where there was none? Was he, Luther, trying to do the same? He struggled gloomily through customs early the next morning at Fiumicino Airport. It was a boost to receive no fishy look from the agent examining his passport and scrutinizing his face for a match with the photo, and Luther was proud to be able to say *un biglietto andare et ritorno and pronto and scusi* to separate himself from the boorish American horde, and it was no matter to him that context might be lacking. That word *pronto* Luther tried out several times, as he had taken a shine to its sound and where *pronto* went *prego* was sure to follow. And it lifted his spirits further that his passport was being stamped as proof that he was an internationalist. As a spur to progress, he whispered the command *Avanti* several times.

The concierge, a gaunt man, had significant stink upon him. A drinker, with whiskey on his breath. Then there was the body odor and the acrid smell of cigarettes coming from his clothes and person. One was burning now between his nicotine-stained fingers as he checked the

register for Luther's reservation. He could burn this pensione down, Luther thought, a concern that only added to his anxiety as he lay, a few minutes later, curled on the bed in his small room, once again the homesick child out of his depth in a new environment, the three week stay now a completely daunting and insane commitment he could not possibly see himself through.

Luther sat up on the bed and began to meditate and, as he did, new life flowed into him. The internal darkness lifted and he was in the light and energized for the day. What was there but to be grateful for this inner resource now so readily accessible. Within a half hour he was out and about, ready to race up the steps of the Victor Emmanuel II monument and cartwheel along Piazza Venezia. At the same time, the whiteness and the monstrous scale of the monument and the imperial power it suggested were frightening. Monuments. Relics. Rome revealed in its history and ruins. Castel Sant'Angelo, the Coliseum, St. Peter's Basilica.

Luther wandered about, his focus being the evening English-speaking RoR meeting on Via Napoli. Luther ensured the reality of the premises by visiting it beforehand and gave himself plenty of time to return, for the meetings were as mother's milk to an infant. And this one, in a room set aside in the parish house of an Anglican Church and filled with expats, was no different. He was asked to lead the meeting, being a new face in town. Surveying the room, he saw several attractive women and was not above wanting to shine for them. And though he was speaking disappearing words, like Pastor Horvath, surely the cumulative impact of all his words spoken would have some meaning. Because though those words would not be around for posterity, they were around for the day, and maybe in combination with the words of others would be sufficient to impact someone who was new and struggling. Overriding any of that was the simple need to communicate, to tell his story, and that included the experience in recent years with Celeste. He

said he had a love beyond all loves for his wife, though she had ejected him. He said true love never died. He said RoR had done for him what could not do for himself. He said his love existed outside the confines of time, *domani* was but an illusion, and there was only the ever expanding now. All this did he say and when the time came for group members to share, none ventured that Luther had been talking some serious flapdoodle.

Now there was love in the air and one named Ramona who stepped forward to claim him for herself, or so Luther hoped, instantly having thoughts of amore on receipt of her invitation to join her for coffee afterward, saying to himself that he was not responsible for what entered the premises of his mind though he couldn't, in good conscience, say the same about what remained. He wanted only to be alone with her even as, from somewhere, came "Love in Vain," as sung by the Holler Heads, and while Luther did not care in the least for the portent of the dreary song, he held onto the crumb Ramona had offered and saw it as a loaf and could only imagine the night of pleasure that lay ahead.

Now the maliciously dawdleacious were not manifesting in New York City alone. The obstructionist mindset had clearly gone international. Even when the others at the cafe dispersed into the darkness, a snaggletoothed one named Quincy tagged along with Luther and Lady Love, and just when Luther gave up any hope of losing him did Quincy abandon them for the Spanish Steps, for nothing, he declared, was more beloved to him than those white steps beginning at Piazza di Spagna and the Fontana della Barcaccia and leading to Piazza Trinita dei Monti and the two-towered church of the same name.

With gelati in hand, Luther and Ramona continued their stroll toward Piazza dei Popolo, and yet the intimacy induced by the sudden aloneness with her brought with it insecurity; the

feeling only grew that the luster he had gained at the meeting was slowly fading. Luther's hope revived when she invited him into her apartment; however, he was to learn, at least for that one night, that a crumb was a crumb, for Ramona quickly excused herself so she could be on the line with her New York therapist, Manhattan having been her home base before setting up overseas. Would he please excuse her for ten minutes? And so he waited. From the next room he could hear faintly her voice but the specifics of her conversation eluded him. The ten minutes passed and then another ten and then it was an hour and still the conversation continued. Frustrated and perplexed, he told himself that she would reward his patience with an invitation to spend the night. On the basis of this flimsy hope was he still there an additional hour and then one more with not one word to him from Ramona. And yet he stayed on, reasoning against reality or trying to before vacating the premises and receiving, as he passed her open door, a goodbye wave.

Stunned and discombobulated, Luther wandered back to the pensione, where Lorenzo sat passed out with his head on the concierge desk. The poor man. To have such an illness and not know it. Or maybe he did know and couldn't stop. Such an acrid smell from the booze and the cigarettes and the body odor. The man seemed not to have bathed or shaved or changed his clothes in a week, if not more. It was a couple of hours before Luther himself could pass out, such was his pain.

And yet the next day was indeed a new beginning. Maybe some possibility of connection with Romona still existed. And though the question lingered as to what kind of lunatic spent five hours on an overseas call with her shrink, and what kind of lunatic he might be for enduring it, he was drawn to the phone for new pain that morning, as if in the grip of a fever that had to run its course. Once again the crumb had become a loaf. But she was not there, or if she was, she was

not picking up. Seeking to apply reason to the situation, Luther concluded that a talkathon of that duration would fatigue anyone and wasn't it perfectly understandable, seen in this light, that she would shun further yip yap. Or suppose she and her doctor had pulled an all-nighter and she was only now finding her way into desperately needed sleep? Or maybe Ramona was in crisis, with big-time stuff going on in her world, and needed to get intense with the Manhattan doctor. Shine the light of understanding on the world and its people, just go on and shine it, Luther. So Luther told himself. All possibilities had to be considered, as it was not every day that a woman called you to her. And yet the light of truth was there to be shone on himself as well, Luther exclaiming, between bites of a panini stuffed with ham (no, he could not always be faithful to his red kidney beans and bean sprouts and shredded carrots and burdock root and all the rest; sometimes meat was the thing that called to him), "I am a slave to love lust," before heading back toward Piazza dei Popolo and traversing the long corridor in the light of day to the site of Ramona's passive dismissal of him. As he drew near her building his footsteps seemed to have a mind of their own to lead him inside and up the stairs to her very door. But at the threshold the brakes were applied and he let his guidebook direct him, heading off across the square to the Santa Maria dei Popolo basilica, where luminous paintings by Caravaggio were to be seen free of charge.

*Now Celeste, smacking and whacking may not be in order, and in any case are not in your repertoire, but I sense a cold rebuff emanating from your person. What is lower, after all, than a predatory male who feels compelled to report in detail on his predatory intent, successful or failed? But I am here to inform you of a development that bears telling. Seeing couples who walked hand in hand or embracing in public, I would now mock them silently. Look at them, Just look at them, clinging to each other. So I would think, my singleness now a virtue and a basis for*



*judgment of those who couldn't give up their coupling ways. One kind of couple in particular was worthy of my scorn, that being the ones who only pretended to be apart, like children claiming a measure of independence from their parents by racing ahead of them, but only so far;. Look at them, just look at them, I would chuckle mirthlessly, seeing a woman in one room of a museum, only to be joined a minute later by her husband, that being the extent of the independence they could claim from each other. And worse. Look at them trying to bait me with their sly viciousness by getting my hopes up that the woman was alone so I would approach her and hubby could then mosey over and once more claim her for his own and thus inflict on me abject humiliation. Or there were those who would stand in relative proximity to each other without saying a word, a single word, not so much as even glancing at each other, playing their monstrous game and patiently waiting for you to take the bait. These too was I definitely onto.*

It was for Luther to acknowledge his dishonesty in seeking to forge an identity beyond or below his authentic and simple self, and to offer a corrective with the following from his journal:

“Dear God, I love my wife, Celeste, and I miss her. But I am an alcoholic, an intemperate alcoholic, and now must take care of myself after years of failing to do so. I have to learn to love myself, as the plaque on the mantel at Forget About It says, and give up the language of self-denigration/castigation in which I seek to live. I place the marriage in your hands. When fearful thoughts arise, I can bless them and send them on their way. I can remind myself that I am tired and still trying to adjust to the wholesale negation of the past with Celeste, years she views through a lens darkly. It is for me to love unconditionally and to have faith that I am loved in return, even if I do not always feel that love but a cold north wind instead. And if I feel too that

something has been taken away from me, I can hold onto the possibility that the opposite is true. And yet the fear lingers that pride has led me to cover up her dismissal of me, the reality that she wishes to move on and leave me behind. All my holy relationship talk just that. And Glanton is no different. Two sad men left by their spouses and pretending they hadn't been. ”

Luther rode the city bus free, entering through the back door, not having mastered the method of payment. In a small park across from St. Paul's Outside the Walls he began to weep. It was a struggle to eat the panini he had bought for his lunch. But the grayness of the day fell away that evening as he sat at the RoR meeting, in spite of the presence of Ramona. He made no attempt to engage her. No swivel head action did he perform. And though she was a constant presence in his mind throughout the meeting, he was able to mingle with a couple of the men afterward, the three of them heading off to the Trevi Fountain to eat their gelato. By her action, or inaction, did Luther know Ramona as the executioner she was, and yes, the great Dionne Warwick was singing softly in his ears to walk on by, just walk on by, so his dignity could be retrieved from the ditch where he had left it. Nor did he remonstrate with the men about Ramona, lest his words revive his sense of loss and increase his pain. Neither did Luther ask Warwick, one of the men, if he had seen the French film *Breathless*, and yet the fat Gauloise that remained between his full lips put Luther in mind of Jean-Paul Belmondo. Influences were everywhere, but it was not for Luther to suggest that Warwick had an affectation going on. It was not for Luther to make trouble where there was none, but simply to live in gratitude for the warm night and the company he had found among strangers.

The pensione had only one other tenant, an older American woman who invited Luther to sit with her in the dining area the next morning. Eleanor Akroyd was her name. She spoke fluent Italian, which she didn't have much opportunity to speak back in Akron, Ohio. Her husband had died the year before, and now she was seeking to leave her loneliness behind as she committed to wandering the earth in the remaining years of her life.

“There were other things I did not get to practice much either, if you catch my drift,”

Eleanor went on.

Luther did not comment directly, not wishing to feed her innuendo. “I can tell you that I am adrift in my own way. My wife has cut me loose, and only a year later am I coming out of shock. I am here from New York City seeking to get my bearings.”

“Are you in the care of the Lord or the Devil?”

“I was the Devil's apprentice for some years. I do not wish to be in bondage to him once again.”

“What do you do, Sonny?”

“I insert commas where there were none and iron sentences free of wrinkles.”

“Do you mean this as a riddle? Are you saying you are an editor?”

“That I purport to be.”

“Do you know Hank Lefstater? He was my editor at Houghton Mifflin.”

“I do not recognize the name, but clearly it is one with weight and substance upon it. It would be improper and quite uncomfortable to seek to connect with a man of his echelon.”

Luther was only seeking with this information to impart the principle he held to, that it was for everyone to understand his or her station and stay within it, that to seek to elevate is to

experience pain. The authentic self was essential if the promise that nothing real can be threatened, nothing unreal exists, and herein lies the peace of God was to be activated. He threw in for good measure that in his defenselessness his safety lies.

“And lest you think I am to an unnatural and fraudulent holiness bound, I throw in the bearded bard himself: ‘Unscrew the locks from the doors/Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs.’ Such exhortation is needed in a city where the pull of death is everywhere, the centuries old deceased speaking from their graves and the monuments as relics piping up as well.”

Eleanor asked Luther to join her at an outdoor concert that evening, but he could not be a party to her plan, hearing though he did with his inner ear the loneliness from which she spoke and the burden it would place on him to carry the weight of it. And then there was her “catch my drift.” No, no, Luther rallied strong to avoid the ditch his misplaced sense of responsibility would cast him in, it coming to his understanding that older age had enhanced her gift of bending people to her will.

“The concert is free and not a whole lot is in this town. Ten thousand lira for the Palatine Hill, five hundred lira for a gelato. Only the city buses are free, at least for now.”

“You have reconnoitered the city and extracted the essence of it. Well done,” Luther said, seeking to give credit where it was due.

“You are playing with me, are you not?” A look of full knowingness had taken command of her face.

The peal of the church bells could now be heard, a comforting sound on that Sunday morning that told Luther he belonged to something, was part of a community and a part of God, whose love and grace were in the ringing of the bells.

“Oneness is yours, Eleanor. Oneness. You can never be truly alone. Those pealing church bells are free, and oneness too is free,” Luther said.

He visited Vatican City in time to hear the morning mass at St. Peter’s Basilica, stepping past several Swiss guards in striped uniforms, one holding an enormous lance. He grew weepy seeing worshipers genuflect, acknowledging something greater than themselves. From somewhere—was it a recording?—came male voices singing in Latin, the purity of the choral sound only adding to his joy. And there, just inside the entrance, stood the Pieta behind bullet-proof glass. He stood back from the crowd gathered in front of the marble sculpture of Mary and her crucified son. A priest in a long black robe, his hands together behind his back, strolled past. Luther shuddered, seeing, on the other side, wheelchair-bound men and women herded together.

*Celeste, there appear to be no dogs here in Rome, neither leashed nor roaming the streets. I am on shaky ground offering such a generalization as I have not ventured out into more residential areas, where canines are more likely to be found. Even so, let me offer another dubious generalization. Europe is not America. People eke out a living here. Not much left over to give to pets. And don’t expect a heaping plate of pasta in the ristorante. And yet their quality of life is better than ours. It’s all the sunshine and olive oil. And the young remain slender by not eating between meals.*

*I finally said something more than buon giorno and buona sera to Lorenzo, the concierge. He has been to America, he said, and is on good terms with Richard Nixon and his*

*wife, Pat, and is also on a first name basis with much of Hollywood—Kirk Douglas, Elizabeth Taylor, Gary Cooper, Victor Mature. Possibly he was delusional. We all embrace realities that may be at a distance from the truth. And look at the Romans, with their gilded Vatican City. Their art shouts of Madonna and son and yet today they are spiritually adrift. Look at poor Lorenzo. They seek God in these churches, but he has vacated the premises. God is with us, and at no time more than when we are communing with each other. Let these priests drop their vestments and stand naked among us....Do not strike me another blow of dismissal. I know nothing. I know as much. All talk can ever be for me is distraction from the silence.*

Luther was to see, in a new way, that Ramona went to the beat of her own drum and the peculiar rhythms it laid out for her. She powered up and called him to her at the RoR meeting that evening, saying he was to accompany her to the cafe afterward, and in so doing summoned in Luther all manner of anticipation, as if the shrink-a-thon had never happened. But they weren't to be alone. She brought along with her an Australian woman, Maybelline, leading Luther to inquire if her parents or she herself had been in love with the incomparable Chuck Berry, whereupon Maybelline was led to inquire whether Luther was named after the apostate from the sixteenth century. Luther let it be known that, unlike his predecessor, the doors he sought out were not of wood nor were they churchly nor even inanimate but of the flesh. Maybelline treated his response with silent disdain for the yip-yap she considered it to be. Now it may be that Ramona was on a mission of mercy regarding Maybelline, who was only two months back from a relapse that led her to places she had not before been nor wished to visit again, from the

vantage point of sobriety, her entire being recoiling at the memories. Not that she elaborated; she had no need to.

As they headed from the cafe to Ramona's apartment, Luther sensed the direction of the evening. Maybelline would have more staying power than he; Ramona would indulge in another shrink-a-thon, only this time she would be the therapist and Maybelline her patient. Though she was clearly a suffering relapser, Luther also perceived Maybelline as an impediment to his desire, and even as this thought came to mind, another was to follow, and that was his brother saying, "You want things fast." Luther did not say, "I have no time for you, Luke," nor did he take his brother's words to heart. He just returned to his concern that the loaf sparked by Ramona's invitation might once again turn into a crumb. If the universe was trying to tell him what true love was, he was not hearing it.

Luther was to learn on his trip that Australians were the true travelers. Maybelline had been wandering about Europe and Scandinavia for six months, from Sicily to Stockholm. She said she lived on the air she breathed and fed on the smells from restaurant kitchens. She said she had no need to take from the earth and no need for its people to take from her. She had a mind devoted to its own vaporous path. Luther tried not to get in too deep as her interlocutor lest he be washed downstream. But he could not stay silent when she addressed him directly, saying "The Stendhal Syndrome. It is an affliction that overcomes tourists—I say tourists, not travelers, lest you confuse your vacation with the challenge of true exploration. Here in Rome and even more in Florence are the corpses of tourists of your description with their credit cards and American Express travelers checks littering the floors of museums and galleries. The endless art

overwhelms their senses and leaves them vulnerable to attack. And the hospitals, with their endless numbers of Honda wards.”

Luther let pass her mention of Stendhal, though it was cause for wonder that the French author of *The Red and the Black* should be associated with art-induced illnesses. But “Honda wards” had his attention, and so he inquired.

“Do you see the helmet-less young ones, younger in spirit than you have ever been, you with your face that looks like it has the cares of the world on your thin shoulders? Do you not see them racing about the rain-slicked cobblestone streets on their Hondas and Vespas? Do you not see them in their vanity and youthful arrogance, as if they will never grow mournful in middle age as you have done? You must look at them closely and drink in their essence, as they will not be here long. Their motor scooters hit a bump in the road or some other obstacle and they shoot like human projectiles, their skulls fractured and spinal cords snapped. Like human vegetables they lie in these wards, in endless comas. And why? Because their vanity drove them to show off their full heads of hair and provide unobstructed views of their pretty faces?”

“You are giving me the willies. I don’t have a motor scooter. I did once own a motorcycle, but always wore a helmet,” Luther said, feeling an *ad hominem* thrust to Maude’s rant.

“I can feel you shuddering as memories come to you of safety lapses. Am I wrong to say so?”

“I’m obliged to say you are not, but let’s move on. I’m not comfortable with this emphasis on human suffering.” Even as he spoke was Luther hearing the engine of a motor



scooter straining like a chain saw on the street below and imagining a helmet-less girl on the buddy seat with her thin arms around her lover's waist, having placed her life in his care.

They were in Ramona's apartment by now, and what became obvious was the competition he had entered with Maybelline for their mutual acquaintance. Ramona showed photos of her artwork, paintings that prompted effusive praise from Maybelline. "You have the ability to distill the essence of the world into the tiniest dot," she exclaimed. Against an entirely white background a slightly off-center speck held the eye that should have strained to see it.

As she had summoned Luther to her, now did Ramona dismiss him, saying she and Maybelline had business to get down to if she, Ramona, was to be faithful to her mission as a member of RoR. Luther lodged no protest. Though it was hard, he sought to just walk on by her dismissal, and when that wasn't sufficient, to rally strong back in his room by putting pen to paper and leaching the poison of resentment from his system. He let his pen lead him onto the freedom highway in regard to Ramona and Maybelline, seeing he had gone where he did not belong and had made sex, not supportive friendship, the goal. He then went to God with a prayer to forgive Ramona and Maybelline, and to be forgiven for judging them in the first place. Because it was one thing to try to just walk on by and another to truly elevate. Luther affirmed furthermore that he was not in need of any woman and that sources of strength were being tapped that would lead him not only to the understanding but the acceptance that he was whole and complete as he was, and no Bodhi tree was required to effect this change.

The following day Luther walked about, map in hand, seeking this site and that so he could check them off his list. If he found the location, he was briefly happy and gave himself the thumbs up and felt his soreness rising the times he lost his way, and felt it even more after

reaching out for directions, only to encounter a wall of incomprehension, the stranger he had approached speaking not a word of English. I am an unmanly man, Luther thought. Real men don't ask for directions. I am a confused American with nothing better to do than to find places that will quickly be erased from my memory. At its peak his soreness made him want to tear himself to pieces for being in the failure gulch.

The midday sun was intense, causing Luther to seek refuge in a church near Piazza Navona. A mass was in progress, hymns being sung by the congregation in English to the accompaniment of a guitar, though the guitarist was nowhere to be seen. Again Luther got weepy at the sight of worshipers aspiring to another world, a world not of rancor and strife but of peace and acceptance. Luther thought of Celeste. She had turned her retentive mind to religion and was now part of a Bible study group. "Jesus taught us how to love," she said, so simply and beautifully. And now she was attending a church, a Christian church, following an impulse she first had as a child, only to be blocked by her atheistic parents. She also attended a Sunday service, although she had reservations about the pastor, as he seemed all puffed up by his own oratory, though Celeste did not say her pastor had the sort of disappearing words that Luther's had spoken back when. She was searching. She was looking to believe. I want so much for her to come through this horrible ordeal, Luther thought. I pray for the wounded child in her, the beautiful wounded child. About his own wounded child, he had nothing to say.

*Now Celeste, rejuvenation is occurring at all levels of my being and jubilation bells are pealing after my descent to the darkest dark and deepest depth. My spirit has risen and I am airborne and streaking far into the universe, powered by a chorus of acclaim sounding in my ears. Yes, I*

*hear you demanding the why and wherefore of this stuffalini I am spewing, and I assure you my grounding is imminent as I touch back down on terra firma. I have only to compose myself for a straightforward accounting . Just the facts, as Jack Webb said in days of yore—yes, the Jack Webb of Dragnet fame, who let his seriousness reign over everything, making no allowance for frivolity.*

*I was asked to lead a second RoR meeting, this one at a different Anglican church. I will not dwell on what I said, but only provide a review from the sharing part of the meeting: “So grateful for a ‘New York’ lead and the correlation between words and feelings.” Now the sorrow gulch is a habitation for many of us, and invisibility as well, and then there is the disgrace of having our manuscripts flung from the windows of the tallest buildings into the filthiest of streets below for dogs and beasts in human form to desecrate before we are vanished from the earth forever. Celeste, do not beat me with the stick of scorning judgment for savoring the acclaim. The fellowship raises us up only to deflate us. Individually we try to articulate the miracle of recovery that has seen us struck sober and living in the light. Does it not help to know that the fuss made over me will be gone by tomorrow when someone else takes the lead and I am returned to the anonymous mass of RoR, of no more interest than a days old newspaper? I say this knowing the silent scorn you held for your father’s advertisements for himself. But it is not for me to be punished for the sins of your father, not when I myself accept in my heart and avow to you that I am nothing but a hound dog.*

Ramona was present, front row center, but Maybelline was not. Luther considered it entirely possible that the odd one was lurking and fully primed to indulge her obstructionist ways, should it be necessary, and possibly it was, as Ramona once again claimed Luther for her

own, the luster of the group's approval an irresistible draw. They headed for the cafe, Luther feeling as if he were locked into groundhog day, but this time so bold as to order a cup of hot water, hold the caffeinated tea bag, as he had brought his own herbal supply, but he would pay in full. All this he said in Italian accented English, to the complete incomprehension of the waiter, but Ramona bailed him out, evidently having mastered the native tongue.

"I do feel bad that I cannot put together a sentence in Italian. I am now identified in the waiter's mind with all the other arrogant Americans. We really should stay to the other side of the pond."

"Don't be silly," Ramona responded, a note of kindness in her voice that he had not heard before, as if it was Luther's own mother saying, with full affection, "Oh, go on, you with your foolishness."

*But now, Celeste, there was one who had gathered himself for the night. He had earned the nickname "Wretched of the Earth" and wore it proudly on his forehead with the acronym "WOTE," and with whatever flair the demonstrably sullen can muster pronounced it WO-TE. He showed himself negative about the RoR meeting. Not a positive thing could he say other than it mercifully ended.*

The when and wherefore of Ramona drawing WOTE to her stood as a mystery it was for Luther to at least attempt to solve, saying "Are you, by any chance, related to an Aussie who goes by the name Maybelline? Well, are you, huh?" Because Luther was not in the take it lying down mode anymore. Having been stymied twice in his desire to cook in Ramona's kitchen, all roadblocks to amore were to be removed, including WOTE head.

*Celeste, it is no exaggeration to say that odoriferous gaseousness unsurpassed in my personal memory bank of unbearable smells soon arose, driving patrons in the packed space into the streets. Now you will say I am straining your credulity, that no one exists along the line of WOTE, nor would gaseousness abound in any one person to that degree. But obstructionists exist far and wide, so deep is the bench they have developed, so devoted are they to stymying my pursuit of pleasure.*

*(There is another awareness that has come to me, and though it is an aside, I will take the liberty of sharing it with you here. The motorists and pedestrians of Italy have a more benign relationship than what we find stateside. Those on foot cross the street trusting the driver behind the wheel not to run them over and drive smaller cars than the behemoths we have on the road. That said, accidents do happen. A woman lay unconscious on the Appian Way, having been struck by the driver of a Fiat, who stood outside his vehicle holding his head in disbelief, while in the distance could be heard the wail of an ambulance. Now later, I was to share this perception about the Italian character, the emphasis on civility and community and respect, with Miss Carmelli, which elicited from her an expression of amused dubiousness, an effective tool for putting someone in his place for speaking foolishness. Miss Carmelli was only seeking to tacitly remind me that her knowledge of the Italian people was, because of her origins, greatly superior to mine, her expression serving as a rebuke of my presumptuousness.)*

*Celeste, perhaps WOTE's over the top assault on our olfactory sense caused Ramona to cease or at least pause her desire to block my path to pleasure, but we found ourselves alone at last, the third wheel having fled. And maybe the time had simply come for her to authenticate her true self by revealing that self far more than she had previously allowed. She led me to an*

*expensive restaurant near Piazza del Popolo. Its priciness was a concern I felt obliged to set aside, lest it eliminate any chance of being with her for more than dinner. Ramona's parents were both artists. Her one sibling, an older brother, was a successful businessman. Her opinions were bold. Woody Allen was a nebbish. The Australians were all asleep. Maybelline was crazy and on drugs. The Italians lacked superegos. All they cared about was cheating you.*

Luther began to sense the gap between them. The more she stepped forward, the more cowed and unsure of himself he became. Her power to crush him became increasingly manifest. And yet the source of her dominance was unclear. Was it simply the boldness of her assertions. Her obvious intelligence? Or was her whole being mobilized to assert control? What might have seemed out of context he would later regard as logical, the knockout blow she had been led to deliver, Ramona saying, "You wish to slip between the sheets with me, but it is not God's time for that." Luther had no basis for argument with her statement. She was educating him to the realities of the time. He was not in the decade of the 1960s. It was not the Summer of Love. Time had moved on.

Luther wandered the narrow streets that night ruled by a state of abashment, reason having no adequate defense against it. At Piazza di Spagna he stopped to observe a handsome, darkly tanned man wearing a tailored black suit with his ultra white shirt open as he kissed a woman in a sleeveless summer dress that stopped well above her knees. Luther stood there absorbing the new pain induced by the further spectacle of the man placing his hand on the woman's breast. Her slender body and short black hair brought to mind Celeste. She was in the man's power. She was his to do with what he would.

Often in his wanderings, Luther would come to the ponder place, where he would pause to consider the thought or question posing itself, the scene of amore in the Roman night prompting the following: How about me? Should I not have a companion for myself? Have I not been banned from the marriage bed? Is my life to be one of nothing more than fear and shame?

Luther took his mortification and the whole shebang of his pained consciousness into sleep that night and it awaited him in the morning.

Dear God, I won't make it. I will die. There will be no love ever again. There will be no happiness ever again. The street and homelessness await me. My mind races ahead instead of seeking to stay in the moment. Do I hear you to say 'You are with me.' Do I hear you say that this direness crowds you out and you are always with me?

His prayer and meditation completed, new inspiration, and with it, new life, entered Luther, and Via di Ripetta, and it happened that the street on which Ramona lived called to him. If the night had changed him, who was he to say it hadn't changed Ramona? Who was to say God's time hadn't come with the morning light? Luther mumbled the Serenity Prayer before ringing her bell and when he received no response, rang a second time with more insistence. Yet now was Luther hearing Dylan singing to him to go away from her window and leave at his own chosen speed, that he was not the one she wanted, not the one she needed. Luther heard it for what it was. Dylan had sided with Ramona. The two shared their God speak with him, painful as it might be to hear. Luther sought to rearrange his face and maintain an upright posture as he

slowly walked off, as for sure Ramona would be peering down from behind a curtain so as to verify her final victory. But he did his walk on by. He did it. He did not dawdle.

The humiliation was deep and he could only pray that it was final—that he would not go back for more—as he walked the streets having a tete a tete with himself, all of it sotto voce. Many were the times that he verbally punched himself in the face before the muted diatribe exhausted itself and he heard himself say, in a softer tone, “Would you like a delicious panini, Luther? Would you like a cannoli, too” and heard himself respond, “Oh, yes, I really, really would” so he could begin to be the parent to the child he needed to be.

Fortified, he stepped onto the number 64 bus headed for the Vatican, where he would revisit the museums. The bus was crowded and a drama only he appeared to be witness to was clearly in progress. Behind a woman with her bag open hovered a thin, unshaven man with a beak-like nose. As if he were a gunslinger in the westerns of old with a twitchy trigger finger, he bided his time, but as his hand darted deftly into her bag another woman bopped him on the head with her bag and called out “ladro, ladro,” forcing the foiled pickpocket to dart out the back door.

There was a line out the door of tourists waiting to enter the museums. Luther shuffled along with the crowd. In the Egyptian room was the mummy of a woman with a closed left eye, the theory being that her brain had been removed through that eye. The ceiling frescoes, the colors still dazzlingly rich centuries later. In the Sistine Chapel sat visitors on benches against the walls. Luther tried to appreciate the frescoes that covered the walls without a name to attach to the artist, having left behind his guidebook. What did it matter if it was Raphael or someone else, he thought, and yet it did. The congestion soon summoned a growing feeling of claustrophobia



and drove him toward the exit. A glorious spectacle, but he longed for a simple church on a quiet street with only a scattering of worshipers where he could sit in peace.

“Pain, you are my teacher but you do not have to be my master, and do not get your hopes up of ever being so,” Luther said on this same day. “Dear God, I ask you to remove this fear that Celeste is in trouble. I ask for the power to see her in your protective light. Celeste is your child, your perfect child. I pray that your will is done for her as for myself.”

Luther reminded himself that they had an appointment with the Oiseau later in the month. He then wrote out a gratitude list:

- My sobriety
- This vacation
- My health
- Whatever spiritual progress I have made
- Learning how to love
- My improving relationship with Celeste

But soreness found him again. Once more he got her answering machine. He told himself he was concerned about her safety and well-being, but suppose he heard her voice and learned that she was doing fine, thank you very much? Would he be happy to hear that she was flourishing? Luther prayed to let go of his fear and the anger it triggered. He prayed to let go of any claim on Celeste. He prayed to accept her perfect freedom to do as she pleased. At the same time, he sought to enumerate the possibilities:

1. Something happened and she was unable to call. Was there anything he could do if that were the case? No.

2. She received his messages and chose not to call. Was there anything he could do about that possibility? No.

3. She has been up in the country taking care of the house. A real possibility, since the buyers want to be in by the end of the month. No, he could do nothing if she was upstate.

Writing the last summoned pain. Luther was frightened by Celeste's decisiveness and efficiency in selling the property, and also her determination to get a full return on her investment. An artist she was, but also savvy in matters of business. She understood how money worked. More than anything, the absence of sentimentality, her ability to leave the past behind, shook him. She divested herself of the house and acreage as she had divested herself of Luther himself, and without regret, as she speeded triumphantly into the future, the Hudson River serving as a moat between her and all the pain that had gone before. Luther saw what he didn't want to see in Celeste—her mother's coldness—and saw as well that if he didn't reach out to her, she would slowly drift away. Whatever he might feel, Celeste was not doing him wrong. She was merely doing herself right. The past she was shedding went back far before he entered the scene. So Luther reminded himself. She was recapturing the joy innate to her that her father had diminished if not altogether destroyed. Agency was her means for doing so.

Luther had his own journey to continue on. Nothing lifted his spirits like travel by rail, and the next day he showed up at the Rome termini, booked second-class passage to Florence—*un biglietto andare e ritorno*—and soon was beyond city limits staring out at the green fields of Tuscany. The train would find its way for him; he had no need to burden himself with a rental

car. Oh, life that he hadn't known. He too was being born into something new, an experience for which the word *separation* might not apply.

He had saved himself the anxiety of finding a lodging in a strange city by making a reservation at a pensione on via Laura. The proprietor, Miss Havershaw, was an elderly Englishwoman. She took Luther into her confidence right away, saying of her son-in-law that he had been born with his brain put in backward.

"Whatever do you mean?" Luther said, attempting to approximate English diction and wondering now if he had made a faux pas, given the pause and scrutinizing stare she placed on him. In small gestures could great meaning be found. Quite possibly she was putting Luther on notice that she had her own vigilance thing going on and was not to be fooled with. "It was not my intention," he blurted, which only seemed to puzzle her more. "Never mind. Please forgive me. Your trust means everything," he went on.

And so she did. "My daughter married poorly. My son-in-law, the wretch, is trying, through legal machinations, a blatant act of theft. He is seeking to take this pensione from me. He is cunning and manages to say all the right things while seeking to master me with his duplicity. Only my son stands between the cad and the fulfillment of his evil intent."

With some effort Luther managed to stifle the wildly inappropriate fit of laughter seeking expression. Had he not brought his own form of insanity to the building his family managed in those last years? Had he not done more than anyone to bring about the end of the operation by Simon Weill? Had he, too, not been born with his brain in backward position?

"I am sorry to hear this," Luther said, speaking with feigned solemnity. Only behind the locked door to his room, mercifully, did his hyena-like laughter erupt. "I must rein in this inner

mockery. It is not becoming of a gentleman,” Luther said in a whisper, when finally he had collected himself, continuing with the faux Englishness he had been placed under the spell of by Miss Havershaw. A moral dilemma had presented itself. Was it proper to be vigilant against the laughing thing in others when it was so clearly abundant in himself? And yet he took a certain pride in the mystery of his own laughter, laughter that came from the depths and seemingly was in accord with the American dictate that could not abide being fenced in. Yes, there are multitudes in me as well, Luther declared to the air around him.

The art of Florence gave a purpose and structure to his days, and so too did the mild and sunny August weather, as if to reanimate the childhood within him. “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy oh boy,” Luther sang-chanted as he made his way to the Uffizi, stopping first on the Ponte Vecchio, where he stared down at the Arno, whose present calmness was belied by the periodic imperiousness of flood waters overflowing its banks; in this way might he recognize the look of guile of this river with its history of treachery and be better able to keep an ever more watchful and informed eye on his own river, the Hudson.

At the gallery Luther met a Japanese tourist, Yoshi, and wandered with her amid the paintings by Cimabue, Giotto, Leonardo.

“I like Leonardo. He is good. Who is your favorite?” Yoshi asked.

“I don’t have one. I guess they are all in the hall of fame for a reason.”

“What is that, your hall of fame?”

“In America there is a baseball hall of fame, and for others too, who’ve achieved excellence in their field.”

“And for artists and musicians, too?”

Well, no, not so far as I know. They are recognized in other ways, though there is now a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.”

“I like The Beatles. They fill me with their song. I go to England after I see Rome. I go to Rome tonight.”

“And you go to America, too?”

“No, no. Guidebook say many drug addicts and murderers. Steal your pocketbook and kill you.”

Luther wanted to tell Yoshi that he was lonely and would she stay with him, but he didn't dare. Her guidebook probably had something to say about sex fiend Americans, too.

“You have Japanese friends in America?” Yoshi asked.

“I have my friend MacDuff, though not so much anymore. Anyway, he is only partly Japanese, on his father's side. His mother is Scottish. That is why he is so brilliant. The Japanese and the Scots have great genes. Acknowledgment must be made where acknowledgment is due.”

“I will go now,” Yoshi said, a firm goodbye so Luther would know she meant business and their tenuous relationship had ended. Her abrupt departure threw him and so Luther sought to draw strength from he who wore his hair slicked down and parted in the middle. “In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo.” Did the poet not write that, Luther? Did he not? So Luther queried himself, as he hurried back to the pensione for his afternoon nap so he could be alive for the evening sky.

*Now Celeste, it is important that we at times depart from the beaten path with caution as our guide lest the boom be lowered as the penalty for flagging vigilance. That said, a mind that*

*torments itself with the prospect of cowardice must rise to the occasion. Arezzo called to me for just this reason, being only a two hour train ride from Florence, the added inducement being the art treasures available. In the Arezzo train station a woman with raven black hair was following the lead of a TV instructor doing stretching exercises so her body might be limber in all its different places. Seeing that she was taking a break, I approached and asked for directions to the Basilica of San Francesco so I might see the frescoes of hall of famers Cimabue and Piero della Francesca. She was quite helpful with directions, but also cautioned me that if I wished to be happy and accepted in Italia I must make the syllables to sing when I spoke them, for Italians were nothing if not musical. "Capisci?" "Oh, yes, I very much capisci," I replied and was on my way. And so I saw The Legend of the True Cross at the basilica, and saw too, as I often did, my limited appreciation of art, that I had come those fifty miles by rail to stand in front of amazingly detailed panels of a centuries old masterpiece for five or ten minutes before continuing my stroll through the small city and giving no greater amount of time at the Basilica of San Domenico to The Crucifix, by Cimabue, a dying Christ on a gilded cross at one end of the single nave of the medieval church.*

In front of a romanesque church at Piazza Grande stood a beautiful blond girl in jeans and a T-shirt with an open map. You're the real work of art in this town, Luther thought to say to the girl, but kept moving as he imagined her poor reception of such corniness. Still, the sight of her pierced him as no piece of art could seem to do.

Luther called Glanton that night to say he had been lonely too long. It was not for Luther to speak the language of the Rolling Stones, with their talk of "girlie action." He could not bring himself to that level of expression lest shame find him. What Luther heard in response was

Glanton putting the laughing thing on him for getting no sexual satisfaction. Glanton did not offer the comfort and solace that Luther was seeking so soreness grew in Luther that Glanton should be doing him as he did. And so Luther shared his concern that Celeste would simply drift away should Luther fail to secure her to his premises with timely phone calls, whether near or far.

“Did you not give her every reason to hate you? Were you not verbally abusive?”

Luther cried out in protest. He did not dispute Glanton’s factual accuracy, but what purpose did it serve to remind Luther of his verbal misdeeds when he had freely acknowledged his shortcomings many times over to Glanton in regard to Celeste? Where were Glanton’s previously comforting words that Luther should not take Celeste’s fury personally but see it as pent up historical anger going back to childhood that she was now unpacking? Where was the hope that Glanton had held out that Luther and Celeste were being born into a new life? All Luther heard was Glanton identifying and siding with Celeste and delighting in the pain Luther was experiencing. Luther in that moment was not liking Glanton, not liking the liberties Glanton took with him, not liking his own dependency on Glanton. Not liking the liberties Glanton took with his own circumstance either, saying he and Babs would be together again when that wouldn’t happen, it being little more than a candle in the wind. But Luther also sensed his anger was a passing thing. He would process the resentment through writing and prayer and leave it by the side of the road as the journey continued.

The pensione offered a cozy refuge on a pretty little street with a name that came so softly from the tongue—Via Laura, “Lau,” rhyming with “wow.” There was nothing not to like except for the host of mosquitoes arrived from the Arno to infest his room. Luther had hoped to

rally strong for the following day but the pests spent the night zzzzing in his ears and feasting on his blood. When he lodged a complaint at the front desk, Signore Grassi replied, “Mosquitoes are doing what mosquitoes do. Capisce? What would you expect? A circus act? You must learn to meet the world’s creatures where they are, not where you would have them be.” Luther had no answer for Signore Grassi but to draw on Glanton’s admonition to check the spirit of others he engaged with and if it was unkind, full of attitude, and oppositional, he must just do the walk on by.

*Celeste, I was prey in this time to fear that you would discover my interest in other women. Even though you had asked me to leave, I felt I had to be perfect for you, entirely faithful and devoted. It was also possible that I feared my interest in other women would spark your interest in other men. But to be alone was to feel sad and to feel loss. At other times, as I have said, I regarded the couples I saw clinging to each other as bound by chains of dependency.*

*Piazza della Signoria, Via dei Servi, Piazza Annunciata, the Hospital of the Innocents. The artwork became a blur, the architecture a torment. What was I but a discarded middle-aged man wandering about trying to believe I was in a new and exciting chapter of my life and only dimly understanding the significance of the sights before me? The bus trip to Siena and the vineyards en route lifted me, as did the medieval square and buildings.*

*Celeste, I did the avanti out of Florence to the great city of Venice, where outrage driven by heartbreak seized me to see waiters, handsome in their tight white jackets, stand by their empty tables staring helplessly at the tourists drawn to Piazza San Marco munching on paninis and licking their gelato purchased at concession stands. How cruel, how even sadistic, how*



*thoughtless. To be so rejected, so ignored, so dismissed. The painful spectacle drove me from the square.*

*Now Celeste, I must admit that soreness was on me at the very outset of my Venetian experience. There was the stocky man who came off the vaporetto and gave me forearm whack to the chest without so much as an apology, causing me to glare at the offender. Then there were those who stepped in front of me or who went about at full speed looking everywhere but in front of themselves as a sly means for moving me out of their way.*

*Celeste, I can appreciate art, but am not sure after all this exposure that I can distinguish between Tintoretto and Tepelo, Donatello and Della Robbia. I go from one repository of art to another, my guidebook leading me on, success being able to check off everything it says is worth seeing. I ignore churches and other sites that are not in the book, making me effectively its slave. It is OK to be ordinary, Celeste, to not possess an exceptional brain. Sooner or later I will come to embrace what I say. Anyway, so now I am just strolling about, with no set destinations, including the entire Grand Canal. In the evening soft lights from the restaurants along the canals beckon in the surrounding darkness. A tourist Mecca it surely is, but the sense is there of a city that has lost its year-round population.*

That first night at the pensione, as he was letting himself into his room, he saw, at the other end of the hall, a slender young woman wearing a thin red sash around her sleeveless black dress. He restrained himself from calling out to her, and then, back in his room, struggled to keep from knocking on her door. The effect she had on him was electric, such that it was hours before sleep could take him. In the morning, he sat in the garden cafe having tea and toast and praying for one more opportunity to meet her. He had purposely sat with his back to the pensione so she

would not encounter his gaze on stepping out and be turned off by any sign of overeagerness. And now here she was, walking quickly past his table but not, as he had hoped, availing herself of the complimentary continental breakfast he himself was enjoying. Wearing the same dress and sash as when he had first seen her, she walked quickly over the small footbridge spanning the canal. A woman with places to go and people to see. The day, so gloriously sunny, was not starting well.

I will go where I go. I will push through this longing for the elusive Red Sash. I will stay in the moment and let go of mission impossible. I will align myself with the sun and not the darkness. I will assimilate my pain in the art of Giovanni Bellini, the very great Canaletto, the all stars Tinteretto and Tiepolo. I will attach myself to my nation state with guards at the ready lest anyone seek to make off with my heart in the daylight or darkness hours. With just such a mindset did he enter the Gallerie dell' Accademia. Once again did he have his disdain thing going on, thinking look at them, just look at them, Mr and Mrs. Stuck Like Glue and Pretending They Are Not, one in one Room and the other in another, and approximated a Glanton chuckle which he silently put all over them, and offered more of the same when not a minute passed before they were arm in arm, having ended their vicious charade. Luther in that moment not Heart of Stone but All One even as he drank from the bitterness cup.

Then he saw her. *Her*. Red Sash. Saw her without her seeing him all alone in the next gallery room. I must clear a space so she doesn't think I am on her trail, so she can't say I can't breathe with you so near. I must embrace the Oiseau's cardinal rule and let her come to me. Luther stood vigil as nonchalantly as possible against the wall to his right of the entrance. He was there only a few minutes before she emerged.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he said. It wasn’t what he had meant to say.

“What do you mean you’ve been waiting for me?”

“I saw you at the pensione last night and again as I was having breakfast in the garden and now in the gallery. I was hoping to meet you.”

“And now you have,” she said, as if to say, what of it? She had no give in her.

“The sun has grown a little brighter since I did.”

“Could you be any cornier?”

“I have been lonely too long as a stranger in a strange land.”

“Are you putting me on with this nonsense?”

“Why should the truth be called nonsense? I lit up when I saw you here at the gallery. It may be your red sash. But I believe it is something more.”

“And what would that be?”

“I feel an affinity with you, though we have only just met.”

“You remind me so much of a friend of mine.” When Luther didn’t respond, she said, “Aren’t you going to ask me how?”

“How?”

“You both lack a filter for your thoughts.”

*Now, Celeste, a delegation of the righteously concerned for my well-being—Hah!—has come to surround me. Many hundreds and thousands in concentric circles, ever expanding, and with them have brought their surround sound noise, shouting “Love in vain! Love in vain! Do not go where you do not belong. Contemplate the sorrow acre where you have come to live that you must go about your days in pursuit of only one thing. Who is this woman you elevate to goddess*

*proportions but don't know in the least? What are these eggshells you walk on, that the slightest faux pas can result in the loss of her and cause you to fall down dying forever and ever. Go, go with her to Murano Island and watch the glassblowers create their wares. Go to Torcello Island and visit with her the Cathedral of Santa Marie Dell' Assunta, that she may add to her store of knowledge as you struggle to say something intelligent to impress her. Abide her mockery when you say of the water, "It is a natural tranquilizer," and she replies, "Is that your one original thought for the day?" Journey back to Piazza San Marco and wander exhausted for hours through the Museo Correr, captive to her insatiable curiosity about Venetian history and art, thus allowing her to shape your day. Bow down to her eminence as a graduate student in architecture at the great Yale University. Endure those moments of sheer panic when suddenly you realize you have lost her in the throng. But know this too, Celeste. I walk on by their primo knowingness.*

Exhausted after hours at the Museo, and seeing that Isabella was not ready to leave, he suggested that she meet him back at the pensione for dinner. when finally we emerge from the Museo, that she come to me at the pensione. But she balked. She could not afford another night in Venice and would take the evening train to Udine, where accommodations were cheaper.

"I could help you," I say.

"I'll have to see."

"Then I must embrace amor fati,"

The ball now in her court, through the confusing network of streets Luther tore, lest Isabella somehow arrive at the pensione before him. Seeing the desk clerk tied up with two newly arrived guests, he went directly to his room, where he meditated for twenty minutes. It occurred to him to call down to the desk to inform the clerk that he was stepping out of his room

to take a shower down the hall, should Isabella show up, but what was the point? He had no great expectation that she would.

A half hour later, as Luther passed the front desk on the way out of the lobby, the clerk called to him. "Signore, a note." *Stopped by. You were out. Thanks for a nice day. Isabella.* Luther turned his anger on the clerk. Had the clerk not seen him? Was he invisible? Luther tore from the pensione and raced for the termini and arrived only to find that the Udine train had departed five minutes before.

That night he sat alone at a restaurant in a small square. The one waiter was kept busy serving a table of ten. It was close to an hour before his order was taken, by which time his invisibility had been impressed upon him. Back at the pensione he lay in bed softly moaning, while praying for unconsciousness.

The emotional turmoil continued for days. What was it to have the enemy, the self-saboteur, the hunger artist, dwelling within? And yet, once again, he also saw the pitiful dependence on and domination by women, and all that went with it: his need to please, his need to be good. Speaking of good, Luther thought to purchase gifts but most shops on Via Condetti were closed, it being the day after Festivo. Ravenous, he said the hell with panini and pizza and entered a MacDonald's and wolfed down two big Macs and a double portion of fries, heavy on the ketchup and salt, and downed them with a giant container of Sprite. Arabs in headdresses, Japanese kids with Nikon cameras hanging from shoulder straps, loud German men speaking in their unmelodious native tongue—an international assemblage doing serious chow down. Behind the counter stood earnest young Italians eager to serve. Somehow so painfully sad to see. Oh God, the power of American imperialism. Go ahead, fly your own flag, Italia. Just give us your

markets. But oh God, too, how good the junk food tasted. And over the speakers Berlin singing “Take My Breath Away,” igniting a fantasy of his own apotheosis, Luther strapped into a fighter jet in place of Tom Cruise in *Top Gun and* performing aerial feats of wonder. Enough of culture. Enough of antiquity. Give me the pulse of life. Give me America. So he thought and felt in Piazza di Spagne on that August afternoon in Rome.

Outside the MacDonald’s a man stopped Luther and asked the way to the Piazza del Popolo. His accent was that of an American. Luther had been him when he arrived. Now he knew his way around to direct him to Via del Corso.

That evening, after the English language RoR meeting, a woman named **Alma** spoke to Luther. She had come to Rome ten years before from Copenhagen following her divorce. She wanted a man but the neighbors gossiped if you were a woman and lived alone. It was OK if you saw only one man, but several men was a problem. You were condemned as a loose woman. She had been sober for ten years before going on a long binge . “I was lonely. I made myself available in the bars. There was always some creep who would take me. Now I am back in RoR for over a year. It has been difficult.” Luther was used to confessional talk in RoR. Was she just sharing or was she offering herself? The attraction wasn’t there though a spark of interest was briefly struck by her candor about her lust. Luther was relieved when Jeff, an older man, came from the meeting place and claimed her for his own with an arm around her shoulders. With him was a young woman named **Diana**, who suggested that Luther join them at the cafe. Luther’s attraction to her was immediate, though she was new to RoR and he reminded himself that the fellowship wisdom was for those under a year to avoid entanglements so they could focus on

recovery. The excitement was there in Luther, but so too was Glanton, saying there is no right way to do a wrong thing and putting his chuckle all over Luther.

“Enough,” Luther fairly shouted.

Startled, Diana said “Enough what?”

“Sometimes people enter my mind uninvited and with an objectionable message.”

“Really?” Diana said.

“Oh yes. But I have ways of dealing with them.”

“Well, that must be comforting.”

“I will say no more of the matter, as my mind is now into action.”

“Of course,” Diana said.

Over dinner it came to Luther that while Jeff was with Alma, his real interest might be in Diana and that he was slyly courting her with his avuncular manner. It shamed him to recognize that it took a hound to spot a hound.

“Where are you staying?” Diana asked.

“It’s about a fifteen-minute walk from here.”

“I will give you a lift,” she said, within earshot of Jeff.

Instantly erased were all thoughts of Ramona and Isabella. Now his job would be to avoid saying anything stupid to alienate her. However, Jeff had his ears monitoring their conversation, and put his eyes heavily and knowingly on Luther, so much so that Luther felt saturated with his knowingness. He has taken the measure of my love lust, Luther could only think, and now he is trying to shame me in his hall of justice, but I will not bend or break under the weight of his self-serving morality. I will carry the ball into her end zone. Diana and I will go on a pleasure cruise

long into the night. If he was mixing his metaphors, so be it. But it was not so simple. Jeff had the power of his big brain behind that high forehead emanating power and control thoughts in an attempt to bend Luther to his will.

Forty minutes later Luther was back in his room. He was alone. There had been no ride, no Diana, no hand on her knee as he sat in the passenger seat and no invitation for her to spend the night with him. There had been nothing, nothing. There had only been his hideous “goodness,” his need to please, his fear of the consequences for him and his sobriety if he didn’t. The anguish was back upon him, as it had been over Ramona and Isabella. Over and over he pictured Diana walking alone back to her sports convertible while he went on foot with loathsome Jeff and Alma. One should be punched into oblivion for such grotesque insanity. One should race to the top of the building and take a flying leap off the roof. One should be fully engaged in completing the total act of self-annihilation, and yet all he could do was lie there and moan.

That fall Luther packed his bags again so he might elevate his status above Manhattan provincial and take his place as a citizen of the world. “A Foggy Day in London Town” was playing loud in his ears as he booked his flight on British Airways, the Brits being potent on the ground with their fine minds but also in the air, having demonstrated their aerial prowess in blasting the Luftwaffe from the skies. Love filled his heart when Celeste showed some eagerness to water his plants in his absence. He had no mind for the analytics of love, only the feeling of it. And what was that feeling but of warmth and light?



Seated next to him on the plane was an elderly Indian man returning to his home in Bombay. Luther had brought with him *The Dhammapada*, Mr. Biswas shared his wisdom and erudition in offering *Dharmapada* as the correct title. Luther had no desire to get disputatious with Mr. Biswas, rooted in the spiritual heritage of India as Mr. Biswas surely was.

“I have been visiting with my son in Iowa. He is an engineer with a firm that makes synthetic materials. I cannot live without my son,” Mr. Biswas said, and Luther could only wonder that a father would travel thousands of miles to see his offspring. Surely it was proof, if any was needed, of his abiding paternal love, that he would make such a journey to press his forehead against his son’s, as he had always pressed his forehead against his son’s, so they could have a meeting of the minds and the son would be filled, from an early age, with his father’s essence. But Luther held himself in check. He did not draw on his personal history with the family’s building and share with Mr. Biswas his personal perception that from India came big brains calibrated not for the paperback books of Luther’s ilk but the hard sciences and applied sciences, such as Mr. Arvind Singh from room 7B2 and Mr. Gopal Patel in room 9D3 studied. What need for page after page of “I said,” “he said,” “she said” had people like that, for words that lay dead on the page?

*Now Celeste, several stretches of turbulence afflicted our aircraft. Every half hour, or so it seemed, the seat belt sign went on and fear would rule me that the rough weather would be bolt-loosening and cause our engines to fall into the ocean and our plane to plunge after them. The chant “shark shit” grew loud in my mind, as if the remorseless creatures were taunting us as to our inevitable fate as waste matter. No carts, no flight attendants, no stewardesses coming through the aisle. Everyone buckled up for safety. In all of this, Mr. Biswas seemed the model of*

*aplomb, having his multiplicity of gods to see him through. I reached into my bag for another book on Buddhism and reviewed the Four Noble Truths.*

*“What is your interest in Buddhism?” Mr. Biswas asked.*

*“Buddha breath is everything to me. Nirvana may be unattainable but I am shooting for bodhisatva status in the next life if not in this one. I will be honest with you, Mr. Biswas. I have not spent all my time in the library, if you know what I mean, but have dallied in the fleshpots of Egypt and remain on the wheel of desire with no abiding wish to be freed of love lust.”*

*“Are you a university professor?”*

*“I make my living ironing out sentences so they are wrinkle-free, inserting commas where none had been, and removing them where their presence is an impediment to a smooth flowing narrative.”*

*“And for whom do you provide this service?”*

*“For GoA?”*

*“Goa? The state of Goa? You work for India, sir?”*

*“Girls of America,” I quickly explained.*

*“You work for girls? How can that be?”*

*“Sir, your disappointment is predictable, and compels me once more to comment on the problem caused by looking more intelligent than one is. Many are the times that I have seen this combination of puzzlement and disappointment slowly come over the faces of those who would seek out, in their estimation, my worth, and inevitably their disappointment summoned my own.”*

*“You will go to Bombay and New Delhi, but to know India you must go to the small villages as well.”*

*“Thank you. I shall place these on my long-range itinerary. All bases must be covered if I am to be secure within the premises of my own mind.”*

The reminder to mind the gap in the tube had Luther on full alert against a faux pas, for the Brits were offering a terse imperative, with no “please” to soften it. It can only be that passengers have gone heedless of the warning, with many, if not all, slyly courting suffering by feigning distraction that has resulted in grievous injury, Luther was led to think. And so he posed the question to himself, not for the first time, as to whether vigilance was too high a price to pay for safety? A resounding no was the answer. Put your mind on the gap. Was it not this that the signs were saying? And if one was to enjoy the economy of the people’s taxi, then it was necessary to bring his full consciousness to the experience.

Seeing the look of anxiety on Luther’s face as he stood in the train with his two bags, a young woman literally rose to the occasion, lifted from her seat and put herself at his service in assuring him that he was on the right path to the Pimlico Station. Luther was brought to full attention by her beauty, and though he did not fall down weeping when she departed at the next stop, a mental image of him prostrate formed, so devastating was the lightning speed with which goddess Maya could offer the promise of love and then disappear.

In his room on Belgrave Road Luther slowly came back to himself. He had only to unpack and sit quietly in meditation for twenty minutes and soon was living in the anticipation of the adventures of exploration and the savoring of English names: Charing Cross, Tottenham, Vauxhall, Grosvenor, Knightsbridge, Notting Hill Gate, Ladbroke Grove, Kensington, Gloucester Road, Chancery Lane, King’s Cross, Whitechapel. Such, such Englishness, an orgy of it, to be

on the outside looking in at. Oh happy day. Oh happy, happy day. But first he would have a spot of tea before setting forth.

*Celeste, I was grateful that morning to take refuge in the National Gallery, as the damp chill in the air had the power to penetrate into my bones. I was grateful, too, for the structure the museum provided. From one room to another I was led, one minute I was standing before a Rembrandt self-portrait, seeing the artist through a haze, and sometime later a Turner seascape. Now and then I would pause to overhear a docent presenting an explanation of this or that work, of the story it told that I had entirely missed. It was all right, Celeste; it really was. We all have our own way of seeing. We needn't be sunk by comparison. We needn't compare at all. So I told myself that morning.*

Piccadilly Circus was bustling that afternoon. Traffic. Tourists. Gone from the scene were Punch and Gouge and Stomp, the trio of intimidating skinheads back in 1970 as he walked about this same area with Sarah.

“A ticket for one?” The woman at the booth asked. Was he defying the norm in seeking to attend the play on his own so he might say I had been to the theater in London? I nodded, as a feeling of shame came over me.

Back in his room earlier that day, Luther received a call from Celeste. She was in high spirits, asking him about his trip and expressing her admiration that he could venture forth as he did. She herself was rooted locally and expressed no desire to travel. He could not quite match her animation but did his best, as anything less would work against him. Not that she would punish him exactly, but sadness would not work in his favor. The apartment and the plants were fine. It comforted him that she would be willing to look after them and collect the mail. He was

reassured that there was still a place in her life for him. In fact, it filled him with light. That was the thing with Celeste. The light was in her, even if she didn't see it. It wasn't summoned through meditation or religious devotion or any of that. It was just there, as if she were the crowning achievement of a stellar lineage.

He was not alone at the theater. There were other solitaries scattered about the orchestra, or so it appeared. The play was a musical. *Aspects of Love*, it was called. Just as the title suggested, the play focused on different kinds of love, such as love of a parent for a child and romantic love.

*Now Celeste, I will surely be beaten with a stick for saying this—savagely, savagely beaten—but emotion came over me when the main song, “Love Changes Everything,” was sung and took me on a direct line back to ninth grade and the early days with Jane Thayer, and that night I lay alone in my room, Luke being out, and wept while listening to the plaintive song “Where Is Love” from the musical Oliver.*

Luther had some prayers he wanted to share, to show where he was at and where he was not, but he also had some reticence that he could not easily overcome, as the laughing thing was never far away. What he wished to say as a disclaimer was that he was not big Soren Kierkegaard, nor big Thomas Merton nor big Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who had fully earned his bigness, as it cost him his life) nor any of the prayer masters who might be in the prayer pantheon. He was only himself. Nevertheless, there were moments when he could pray in earnest, and with full devotion, from the God place within him, moments when the camera was turned off and he was not performing for you and you and you but simply in the grip of his own desperation, saying “Dear God, this life feels lonely. I feel invisible to women. I feel unattractive.

I feel unwanted by my wife or anyone else. Must I forever be a hanging string, a piece of old newspaper blowing in the wind with fecal matter smeared upon it?"

*The next day I awoke with great fear but also outrage, as it was revealed to me in a dream that extreme treachery was unfolding back across the pond by she who knew where the bodies were buried because she herself had put them there, Blaze McAndrew, the GoA Communications director. She who buried hatchets deep in the head was plotting the elimination of the Publications Department, saying there was no reason for our existence, that from now on Communications would provide its own commas, its own that clauses and which clauses, its own who versus whom, and that we had conducted our charade of usefulness long enough. And so I wished to leave in her path a foul and sulfurous trail for the rest of her days for such brazen aggrandizement, having gotten wind of her machinations before departing on my trip. Now once again the song "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" came to mind because, like Robert E. Lee, the Gray Fox, Miss Carmelli was the very best and here was Blaze McAndrew, her scheming inferior, trying to drive her down. I did not do the dinky on Miss Carmelli by willfully ignoring her worth. It was there for all to see. Mostly, of course, it was about my job. GoAN was my lifeline. Where would I find employment with such benefits? And so I had to write out my resentment, that soreness might not live within me, and pray to be grateful for the gifts the truly sick one shared with GoA and the world.*

*Now there was another named Falconer West who hid her ambition in a steel compartment of her mind impervious to the strongest and most probing X-ray. She had her wiles and bores signs of infection with high-level pomposity, but it was entirely in lieu of the intelligence that Blanche Givenchy or even Mary Terezzi were capable of manifesting, and she it*

*was who put herself forward as a stalking horse for the inimitable and unspeakable Blaze McAndrew. Perfidy and Impertinence were the two names justice called for her to be tagged with, never mind Falconer East West North or South, for Miss Carmelli had taken Falconer West in, given her refuge from the storm, when Falconer was at a low point in her life, the sole support of a young daughter; her husband having taken it on the lam en route to 23 Skidoo Street. In a moment of uncharacteristic candor Falconer acknowledged that a coup was underway and that Blaze had dispatched her on a high level stealth mission with these words: "you are my ace agent and will, I rest assured, get the job done." And yet I emerged victorious, all my AWACs in the air and my vigilance soaring to an all-time high. More importantly, Miss Carmelli emerged intact. The mothership had been defended.*

*All this I could recall with no real satisfaction while in foggy London Town, as there would surely be more machinations. A shirker had become invested in GoAN, had made it his lifeline.*

With evening came depression Luther could not alleviate with meditation and prayer. For this reason was it necessary to have a tete a tete with his inner child and pledge enhanced communication for the rest of the trip. "If I am feeling bereft, there is no reason that you must feel the same, mon petit, as I am faithful to your presence within me. And you will be my dinner companion tonight. Loneliness will not be abided, whatever appearances might suggest."

*Now Celeste, I had myself a sit-down for another meditation in Sloane Square. All around were buildings showing themselves strong so I might know where I was, in a country with a heritage it could stand proudly on powered by a great national intelligence. It was best to be well aware that as a people, they also had hardiness aplenty and a warrior capacity, what with their*

*stiff upper lip (no trembling there, not ever. To that I can attest, having given their upper lips intense scrutiny and seen not a quiver.) The nippy weather notwithstanding, going within rallied me strong for the spaghetti dinner I ordered at the Chelsea Kitchen, an eatery where value was given for your pounds and shillings and twopence. And it is well that I did arrive fortified, for oldies but goodies were being played on a tape deck. Tony Williams lead-singing for The Platters on "Only You" took me on an emotional ride and then came Dusty Springfield with "You Don't Have to Say You're Sorry," and she too worked big time on my heart, summoning a great longing for you, but equilibrium soon returned. The world presents one illusion after another in support of the idea of loss, that I might destroy myself. But sooner or later the evoking music ceases and you get to walk on by, just walk on by. And I got to do the same at the Rock Circus in Piccadilly Circus the following day. Yes, I stopped to admire the wax figures of Cliff Richard and the Eurythmics and everyone else, but then my feet took me to Covent Garden, where a blond young woman model thin in bluejeans came in and out of my life. She was the greatest challenge, animated as she was by her own spirit, and in truth, it took everything not to fall down dying given the longing she summoned to linger lovingly beside her and feel her warm breath. Here began a revulsion with the thing-ness of life. This thing, that thing, the stalls at Covent Garden stuffed with things and she, beauty incarnate, giving the lie to everything else. Once again did my aloneness present itself as a monstrosity I could not escape, and once again was it necessary to walk on by, just walk on by, though considerably more exertion was called for, love addiction being a fever that has to run its course.*

*But suppose, Celeste, I am getting exactly what I need, as alone as I sometimes feel? Suppose this constant aloneness is a kind of purgative, without which the new cannot come in? In*



*our aloneness where can we turn but to God? Have we not been endlessly distracted, and thus deprived ourselves of his strength and guidance? Is that not the purpose of our separation, to turn to him who has all power? And this very word, separation, is it appropriate for what has happened? Why not consider the possibility that connection is being established on a higher, non-corporeal level? Why not consider that we have entered the realm of spirit?*

*Celeste, I can live in this world, and can go strong for it. I am not some ethereal Eddie. My feet are securely on the ground, wherever my head might be. And so I sat in the dress circle for a show called Five Guys Named Moe, and did not give myself to the performance of these jazz singers to the degree the rest of the audience did, as I was out of step with Big Moe's didacticism, saying to myself, Oh Moe, please don't bore me. Accept that you know nothing. I could swear that at that very moment he looked up at me and a minute later was standing right behind distributing fliers in an attempt to get the audience to participate in singing the chorus of some Caribbean love song.*

*Could it be possible that Big Moe sought full vengeance for my dismissiveness by casting a spell and directing my feet down a set of stairs into a den of carnality, foxed there by an attractive siren at the door wearing a black leotard and a low-cut blouse showing off her cleavage and promising more of the same down below? Had he metamorphosed into that siren or was he the obese and hygiene-poor and horrifyingly nude creature down below servicing a young Irishman drinking from a bottle of Jameson? I fled back up into the street amid the flow of revelers, feeling I had escaped a snare that posed a threat to my sobriety. A warning from the gods not to ease up only vigilance?*

Luther rallied strong. He did not allow the incident to fester in his mind but took it to RoR. London or no London, British reserve notwithstanding, he told the truth of his misadventure, allowing in his share that if the Young Rascals had been lonely too long, so too may he have been, for if such affliction should come to the Rascals, then why not to Luther G. as well. Was he too not human? Did he not suffer in darkness and in the light?

But it was not so simple. Had he not seen the “no dumping” sign? Had it not flashed in neon even as he spoke? A wave of shame knocked him to the ground. There had been a woman at the meeting with fine features. Had he been trying to humiliate himself in front of her, to show himself as the lecherous sort? Was he trying to make himself singularly unattractive? Had she not brushed right past him at the end of the meeting, in so doing signaling her disapproval? Was he perversely trying to keep her at bay? Was he still a prisoner of the idea that he was guilty as charged—or not charged—and so in need of apologizing for his existence? More needed to be said. More. Dear God, take me. If you love me, let me love myself. Tell me that the viciously dawdleacious bloke blocking the leader’s view of my raised hand was your sign that I was there that day to listen to learn and learn to listen. Tell me that the insane anger that gripped me at his gross obstructionism and my frantic need to be seen and heard was an attempt to force a solution not in keeping with your will. Or is it my life to live, and motherfuck all those who would try to muzzle my sound? Just motherfuck them to hell. This too I said and thought on a London street long forgotten.

This *is* my sound.

*Dear God, I can love my wife as she is. I do not have to take it personally if she seems cold and rejecting. She pushes everyone away, after all.*

*Dear God, with your aid, I do not have to seek out a prostitute. I do not have to do that.*

*Dear God, it is early evening and I am established in my loneliness and undecided whether to see another play or attend another RoR meeting. If a meeting, am I going with the intention of meeting someone, which never seems to happen, or if it does, to work out?*

*Dear God, the answer has come. I will shelter within your infinite confines and go where I go.*

*Dear God,*

*I am well aware that I seem to be goddying up, and that in turn the posse has saddled up and is riding hard that it might exact its peculiar and changing brand of justice. And the laughing brigade would also descend on me with their ear-splitting mockery and outright guffawing. And yes, I hear those, disputatious in mind and body and soul, who will try to shatter me into oblivion, masterfully weaponizing their tongues and acidifying their tone in preparation for saying "Stop already. Just stop." As always, though, we rally strong, dear God, in dispersing them from our midst.*

*Now it happened that I did have some words with someone. A woman in fact came to me after the RoR meeting. I had mentioned Glanton in my share, Glanton's name having evidently*

*traveled far and wide in the fellowship, crossing many ponds, including the Atlantic, and so she came running, as she wanted me to know that she too was a FOG, that is, a friend of Glanton. She wanted me to understand her worth, that she was not a depleted nation, that she had assets above her gross national product. At no point did it become a duel as to who knew him best or loved him most. I would not allow my nation to be sullied in such a contest. I merely noted her references, her essentially grasping nature, giving her no energy and so allowing her to do the walk on by. Then I spoke with myself, saying self, do not take this personally. Stay within the borders of your nationhood. Therein lies your safety. And so I was comforted, and could lay my head down and sleep in this nation—England—that is separate from me, its private gardens off limits.*

*But my sleep was not peaceful, as my dreams included a brief appearance of my eldest sister Hannah directing her son to go against me with all his manly might. I took it as a signal that where I went there they would be as well. And though I sensed that the dream was sparked by the birthday card I had mailed to Hannah before setting out on my trip, I also knew that right action was the answer, and that I must act like a good brother and uncle even when I did not feel up to the task. We don't have to fall down dying because of a dream, or let it blemish the day that has been given us.*

London was a musical at the Albery Theater and a Turner exhibit, a bare-chested lad in a sleeveless denim vest, his bare chest bared and sporting an orange Mohawk giving chase to the #24 bus in Trafalgar Square and sporting a Mohawk, spiked black bands on his thin wrists, determined to give the bus a serious bashing with his balled right hand. Such a blow he delivered, startling the bloke who had been peacefully slumbering.

“You want some as well, matey?” Said Mohawk head, Luther having been caught staring. Luther raised his right hand, fingers pointing upward, the abhaya gesture he had seen on Buddha statuary, while his left arm remained at his side. It seemed to have a pacifying effect on Warrior Nation.

In the tube Luther struggles to remember the Four Noble Truths. Something about suffering. All four lumped together in that one word. Well, that is OK. Maybe the general idea can suffice. In the crush is he briefly pressed against a young woman and instantly all four of the Noble Truths are erased from his consciousness by the power of human contact. In exchange for eternity would he linger for an hour in the sensation of her warmth.

Tell the truth, Luther. Tell the truth. London is a nocturnal pee in your hotel room sink.

One evening, two years into their separation, they saw a foreign film at the Lincoln Plaza Cinema, down on Broadway and Sixty-third Street. Afterward, they went to a diner, where she had her cup of tea and he again went for his grilled cheese sandwich, so he might nourish his bones and entire being and remain within the safety zone of perceived normalcy and out of range of foods unfamiliar to his palate or possibly unfriendly to his health.

“Don’t leap across the table when I say this, but maybe we can have our physical relationship again.” Luther was startled. There had been no warning, no prelude. He was also conflicted. He had grown more eager for sexual adventure. Hadn’t Elizabeth Hardwick written, in her novel *Sleepless Nights*, that to be single in New York City was to be married to possibility? And wasn’t that possibility diminished or even eliminated if he resumed with Celeste? He had to

remind himself that he could have his love and still indulge his eros. Hadn't the Oiseau and Glanton said as much?

*Now Celeste, the film has been erased from my memory. Neither the title nor the actors nor any element of the plot can I summon to consciousness. Only the skimpiest of recollections remains, and yet that shred contains a truth on which to build. The words of Father Abraham come to mind: "With malice toward none and charity toward all..." We must seize on the word charity and let go of the rest, however loud the bells do chime in celebration of Father Abe's brief offering of eloquence after witnessing scenes of grisly death on the battlefield at Gettysburg, for it was not Father Abraham but a woman of great means dispensing charity in that film, the recipient being a young man of no means whatsoever, she having the power derived from financial resources that he lacked. This was to my understanding in the days of early darkness in 1991, when the spanking of Saddam Hussein had been more than done and Souen, the organic restaurant, was still available on the west side of Broadway and a clock still stood above the bank on the southeast corner of Broadway and 90th, so all of us could know where we were in relation to our day and perhaps pause to enter the ponder place and consider what we were doing with our lives in that very moment, as actions—and inaction—have consequences that stay with us in the moments still to come.*

*Now Celeste, a shower of blessings did you rain down on me in this time. There was the Gunn teddy bear, cuddly as all get out that you gifted me with, knowing, as Jane Eyre knew—and Grace Slick and the Jefferson Airplane didn't in singing their loud song "Somebody to Love" all day and all night in the summer of love—that in lieu of somebody to love we will, in our primal need, turn to something to love, and so Teddy has been there on that bed with me through all the*

*days and months and years since, and so he will always be, lest the void created by his absence be insurmountable.*

*The marriage bed was different now. A different location. A different time. And yet nothing was forgotten. You knew how to handle me (your word), in that bed. You still raised your legs. You still pulled in your lips and moaned. You still ran your hands over my forearms afterward as if to note the texture of my skin for any changes. And yet it seemed now my concern was with your pleasure more than my own. About that first night you said you felt like a real woman, which made me sad, as you had always been a real woman.*

*For six months did we continue, dinner at Souen and then our time in bed on a Friday evening before you returned to your car and New Jersey. No more full nights together. Only visits. This was our new life. Separate and yet together. No communication about this new agreement needed. Simply something we both understood.*

*Now Celeste, it did not seem likely that someone would come along to claim you for his own, given your struggles in this time, and yet my fear factor was astronomical. That said, I understood that vigilance was not the order of the day; rather, it was for me to let go of the controls I never possessed in the first place. And yet the odious one soon materialized, having been summoned by the universe that he might serve as a torment to my mind.*

Jim Boulee was his name. He was in search of an illustrator for a book he wished to publish, and settled on Celeste, whose table he had joined at a downtown restaurant where she was dining with Wound Tight, her friend from childhood. Luther fully understood that normalcy was not in the cards where Jim Boulee was concerned; the very mention of the man's completely stupid name by Celeste was sufficient to summon waves of terror in Luther. And yet was his

name often on her lips, as if she was seeking Luther's demise on the spot, as when she mentioned to Luther, over dinner, that Jim Boulee had called Celeste to him that he might review her goods in the privacy of his apartment, leaving Luther to stagger from her uttering the words "jamais jamais" as he wandered the streets of Manhattan seeking to restore to himself the center that had gone missing. Celeste did not rise up strong against Luther and cite freedom of speech as her inalienable right. She did no such thing, for innocence was her name and cruelty was far from her borders. His emotional response was beyond her ken.

*Celeste, at Chez Oiseau you mentioned a book launch party at the home of Jim Boulee and that I was invited. A warning born of desperation flew from my mouth. The party would be an opportunity for you to see how poorly I compared with Jim Boulee, who would sweep me out of the way, as any man could, especially one with an Ivy League degree such as he possessed. Together you seemed to represent the society outside of whose gates I had always felt myself to exist, the elite class that, rightfully so, would not have me. I could no more have attended that party than voluntarily show up for my own execution. Driven by fear engendered by the looming celebratory party and seeking to avoid my demise, I uttered a shriek heard in every nook and cranny of our metropolis, and a stranger answered my call. With Sausalito Sue for company I sought refuge in a movie theater, where Carlito's Way, with big Al Pacino and big Sean Penn, was playing. Sausalito Sue was into the soundtrack, going to the loud sound in singing along and grooving in her seat to "Oye Como Va" and getting a deeper groove on gyrating in the aisle to the even louder sound of "Got to Be Real," thus showing her disco damsel cred to one and all in the packed theater. If I was mortified, Celeste, that is my problem, as Sausalito was only doing her out there thing.*



*Now Celeste, at home alone that night, with all the dogs of Manhattan barking, as if to signal things were amiss with the initiation of a new world order by Jim Bouleee by virtue of his claiming you for his own, I fell to my knees and prayed for your happiness and that of this aggrandizing creature. The greater the need, the greater the grace, we have heard, and in those moments grace was granted that elevated me above the dinky domain that had kept me in its custody my whole life. I saw that the answer was love, was wishing you and Jim Boulee well. (Many many times have I been tempted to double up on his name, for was there not one from a time gone by introduced to us on TV as Jim Bowie Jim Bowie, with a knife of hideous length and formidable tensile strength as his trademark weapon for justice?)Forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others are just two currents in the same river, both shut off completely by the dam of resentment. Once that dam is lifted, both currents can flow.*

*Now Celeste, Dr. Tobin was very much on the ground. He showed no pretense of being in a celestial orbit, yet plainspoken as he was, he wrapped himself in an unholy truth in laying bare the mechanics of a vulnerability that had afflicted me since puberty.*

*“You are a little boy of six or seven. You are close to your mother. You love her. She is your lifeline and you are her little husband. But your father comes home every night and pushes you aside. He is bigger, stronger. How could you be expected to compete? As you grow older, any man can replace you. You have given your heart to these girls and later women and now you must live in terror as to what they will do with it.”*

In this moment did the scales fall from Luther’s eyes and the light of understanding enter.

Luther came to Glanton with a concern. Simply writing out his resentments, as he had been doing, no longer felt entirely adequate. What could Glanton offer him from his spiritual toolkit? Glanton didn't disappoint. He had Luther write out a question and then importune the higher power to speak, or forever hold his peace. The exact words Glanton gave to Luther were these: "May I hear from you now?" Luther was not loath to give credit where it was due for such masterful phrasing of the question, and one, to be clear, that exuded great humility. And yes, it opened the channel wide. Instantly, Luther was on a deeper wavelength with HP. When Luther expressed some concern that his vileness toward HP might bring retribution, Glanton reassured him that his fear was unfounded. Luther's relationship with HP would continue to evolve and the "childlike freshness," as Glanton called it, would likely fall away, but there would be no penalty whatsoever if it didn't. I have been given access to a new life within my new life, Luther could only think. How extraordinary. And he would be lying if he didn't also feel that he had been given a leg up on the mass of RoR now that he had this new tool. Was he not special after all? He was at pains to hide this spiritual conceit, but it was there all the same, and if the filthy ones were inclined to reach for their cudgels and smack and whack, so be it.

Let it further be noted that this breakthrough occurred in the time of Miss Carmelli, Blanche Givenchy, Mary Terezzi, et al, some who are still among us and some not, and that the site of the breakthrough was the conference room on the eleventh floor at GoAN.

And finally, let it be noted that this voice he called Vox.

Luther: May I hear from you?

Vox: The world falls away when all lessons have been learned and all hearts and minds are open to me.”

Luther: Why have I not succeeded as a writer?

Vox: What is success? Your writing has been an attempt to come to terms with your past so you can live in the eternal now. That is its true value.

Luther: Do you truly love me?

Vox: More than you can know.

Luther: I feel enveloped in your love. Am I imagining this?

Vox: Your mind is merely accepting what always was.

Luther: How long must I be here in this body?

Vox: It is important for you to be with your brothers and sisters. Therein lies your salvation.

Luther: Why am I still prone to fear regarding Celeste, in spite of Dr Tobin’s insight?

Vox: Your focus is in the process of shifting from the body. Miracles of new perception await you.

Luther: All very well but I still live in the realm of the dinky-dimensioned. It wanted me to call Celeste vile names when I came home from my night at the movies with Sausalito Sue. It wanted me to be the god of wrath, the god of my father. It wanted me to get up, as my father would often threaten to do.”

Vox: But you didn’t. You are being changed. You are love itself. That is your destiny. Vengeance and punishment are not of you. Attack is not of you.

Luther: She says to me, “I hear the sadness in your voice when you ask if Jim Boulee and I are starting our own imprint.” Obviously I made another mistake, but what can I do? She listens so carefully and knows my vulnerabilities so well.

Vox: Mistakes are not the problem. Your holding on to them is. Your ego then wants to interpret the consequence of the mistake. Stop analyzing and move on. It is nothing in and of itself.”

*Celeste, the great failing of my life is that I don't accept and love people as they are but feel obliged to criticize them for what I perceive as their faults. No one has borne the pain of this cusp of Virgo temperament, September being my birthday month, more than Luke. Let honesty be my guide in navigating through the mountain of gibberish this document amounts to, even as I assert my right to move forward as I please.*

*Luke got on the line with me, and if that is not a felicitous mode of expression, so be it. I will say it again. He got on the line with me, and where he was calling from was Chaos Acre or Depression Gulch, or Luther, cry a thousand tears and they will not come close to being enough. Why be a Sullen Sammy, a Dour Dan, when, ostensibly, he was bringing, if not glad tidings of great joy, at least evidence that his vital signs were strong? Luther, did the man not say that he was sober for two and a half years? Should that not have been sweet music to your ears? Should not you have been dancing in the streets to hear that he and Kelly had bought a house in Elmira, New York? Should you not have been singing “Ain't No Stopping Us Now?” instead of offering your Fretting Freddy vibe? Could you not see that he had been cast down, down, by the same illness that had afflicted you, and that now he was being lifted up by the same power source lifting you and countless others? Where was your generosity?*

*Instead, Luther, the vibe you projected was one of judgment, thinking, Luke, you're a man in your forties. You are now the father of two young children as well as a stepson. You have no income and yet you are setting out to earn a four-year degree at a local college. How can this be other than drawing heavily on your wife Kelly's monthly disability check?*

*Now Celeste, the hanging string image came to me strongly. There I was, blowing in the wind, and Luke had come to join me, being hanging string material himself. A house more than likely decrepit, with a crabgrass lawn, and Luke sitting in classes with kids less than half his age while Kelly struggled with the children and her disability. But really, what was my main concern?*

Luther: Speak, Vox, speak.

Vox: You're afraid Celeste will see Luke and you as birds of a feather. Celeste will see that, just as Kelly has kept Luke afloat financially, Celeste has done the same for you. That realization will bring her to move quickly for divorce, leaving you with only your identity as a Garatdjian. You will lose not only your specialness but your financial security. For this reason primarily do you want him to disappear from your life."

*In that moment, Celeste, I asked Vox to marry me to the truth, that it should forever be my lawful wedded wife.*

Luther: No messages on my answering machine. Three days with no phone contact. Zed says I must remember that she lives in fear of suffocation as I live in fear of abandonment. Too much pain. Too much. I feel I will never hear from her again, but I know that can't be so..

Vox: Love her. See her as strong. See her as love itself. She has not left you. She draws closer and closer to you, and you to her. The outcome is certain.

Luther: Is not the problem that she wants a bigger life and that I am an impediment to that life because of my insecurities?

Vox: The problem is intimacy. She is afraid to trust. She is afraid of being smothered. Her problems have nothing to do with you and everything to do with memory. You need do nothing.

*Celeste, I hardly have the heart to go on. Vengeance to the nth degree awaits me in the spirit world for judgments I have made and betrayals unconscionable. I fear I am carrying seriously bad karma for the perfidy I have practiced. The spirit world will not be my refuge, as I had hoped. Rather, an eternity of damnation awaits me, as the pastor with the disappearing words forewarned. And yet I must go forward, and in order to do so, there must be an airing of my uncertainty, my grave doubt. The weight of my conscience I must unload, if only temporarily, because to not go on is death. That is the consequence of not leaving something, anything, behind. To be seen is to be alive, or maybe not. What do I know, after all?*

Once again another grind it out day, time stalling him, as it inevitably did, when all he asked was that it move itself along. Not that it started out that way, thinking as he did that the morning would bring a call from her but wouldn't you know, it didn't, in the full viciousness of its thwarting mentality. Then I foolishly allowed my hope to renew itself after lunch only for it to be dashed and was about to shout liar, liar, to Vox and all those responsible for instilling false hope and failed to savagely beat back the impulse to reach out to her when the fear demon assailed me with the possibility that she was the victim of some terrible accident or crime. There she soon

was on the line. And while malice was not in her nature, ever, ever, and charity was, she had none of the latter for me in that moment, only the cold annihilating threat of divorce.

Fireworks had erupted at the last session with the Oiseau. How dare the Oiseau take Luther's side and advocate slyly for a continuation of the union, when secession was Celeste's only goal? How dare The Oiseau say Luther was the very best man in the world for someone like Celeste? Was that not bias in the extreme? How dare The Oiseau fly treasonous patriarchal colors and abandon her own sex? Did The Oiseau not recognize her monstrous cruelty, knowing Celeste was on the 24/7 lookout for love from a woman, the nurturing her mother had been unable to fully provide? Celeste was compelled by her fury to fly into the face of The Oiseau, then fled out the door with the Oiseau in full pursuit, the fracas continuing in the hallway for neighboring tenants to hear.

Now Celeste was raining down her fire on Luther, saying, "I was never there for you. I was only there for The Oiseau, as you insist on calling her. And unless that crackpot therapist apologizes, I'm not going back to her."

Luther: Vox, I am at the end of the line. Surely it is time. Celeste has acknowledged that divorce is in the picture and that counseling is not about the marriage for her but about her connection with The Oiseau. And so crying time has come. She's going to leave me. The Hudson River is her moat. She has moved on."

Vox: Fear nothing. Love her. Trust her. She is navigating both of you to safety.

Luther: But we are headed for divorce. She said so.

Vox: Divorce is not the issue. Love is the issue. Freedom is the issue. She needs to get free of her past.

“But she sees me as her past. She needs to be free of me.”

Vox: You are not her past. You are her future.

Luther: Are you on something?

Vox: I am on the side of joyous eternal life.

Luther: Without The Oiseau to mediate, I am sunk. It is sayonara, Luther. Welcome endless pain born of separation.

Vox: There is nothing to fear. Your relationship, your life, are not dependent on The Oiseau, as you insist on calling her.

Luther: I feel this desire to retaliate, to say to Celeste, “If you don’t want to see The Oiseau, then I don’t want to see you.” What do you say to that?

Vox: Love does not attack. Love loves.

Luther: I feel she is walking all over me.

Vox: Hardly. She is trying to put a life together for herself. She is trying to emerge from chaos.

Luther: And what do I do? Be a patsy? Just be nice while she gets well enough to take up with another man?

Vox: That is your projection of your own desire to find another woman. Your fantasy is that you can replace her with someone else.

Luther: Why shouldn’t I replace her with someone else?

Vox: Because that is not what you truly want.

Luther: I give up.



Vox: The word you are looking for is *surrender*.

Now in this time Celeste left Dr. Gilot for a therapist named Vanguardia. She had no choice, given Dr. Gilot's complete incomprehension of the nature of Celeste's pain and the steps needed for healing. Dr. Gilot was Old World, tradition bound, patriarchal in her disposition and locked into outdated treatment modalities. She also snoozed a lot, as has been mentioned, and those surprise guests who would intrude on the session, like her befuddled husband. Well, no more bonbons for Dr. Gilot. And that was the thing that bore noting. Celeste had the power to leave you behind. Whether a therapist or a husband, she could put you in the past and close the door. Despite her amiability, it was best to understand that. A coldness power, Luther thought of it as, that she might keep in abeyance but could summon at will. She was as much her father's daughter as her mother's, objectionable as she might find that, given the grievance she was bearing toward the lord and master, and all the harm he had wrought. And what had her father said but that sometimes to move ahead or move on you had to hurt someone, because if you didn't, you were only hurting yourself. Celeste had the hurting ability there in her mentality.

And Vanguardia? Vanguardia was revolutionary. She had theories and scenarios to spin, ghastly accusations about malefactors among the adults with children in their power. "That's unfortunate," Dr. Tobin would only say, recognizing her name when Luther mentioned it. Unfortunate, meaning Vanguardia would steer Celeste down a wrong path, of a different kind from that of Dr. Gilot. Dr. Tobin let his statement stand in its stellar brevity; he was not driven by insecurity or fidelity to truth to dish any dirt on Vanguardia. A man who knew when to begin and when to end. Luther's heart sank on hearing Dr. Tobin's terse judgment. Still, Dr. Tobin didn't

know the rationality, the innate balance, of Celeste's mind, how it was continually sifting and assessing as to where sense ended and lunacy began.

*Now, Celeste, all my forces were on high alert as relates to Vanguardia, who surely was overjoyed at the prospect of The Oiseau being removed from your life. Even as I speak is she likely doing a victory dance, as her sole purpose in life is surely to remove all obstacles, human and otherwise, that would prevent her from claiming you entirely for herself. And surely sly vilification of yours truly is at the top of her agenda that she may claim you forever. And yet, sometimes there can be joy when we are compelled to stand up straight and bring ourselves to full attention and acknowledge our own wrongdoing, namely the unbridled anger I would display, at times in front of Mia. To subject someone of your refinement to such tirades, as I had done with Sarah.*

*And then I had a first, Celeste, a fantasy of being with another woman at the Met for a night of opera, and afterward we ran into you, and I was in fact relieved to be free of the morass of pain stemming from our enmeshment. No longer dependent on you, I was gaining a different perspective on our relationship. Frankly, the fantasy did not bring hope but mental anguish.*

Luther: Does this fantasy signal a weakening of my tie to Celeste, as I fear it does? Does it mean my commitment to my pain is weakening?"

Vox: It means only that you are angry at your wife. Love is love. It is not transferable.

Luther: What does that mean? I can't stop loving my wife and love someone else?

Vox: Love extends. It does not transfer. Therefore the fantasy signifies only a transfer of anger.

Luther: Always she has to be the star. That's her whole life's ambition, to be the sexy star who captures everyone's attention. And what of me? My manuscripts get thrown into the street. Sometimes the envelope isn't even opened. They have only to see my name on it and they are chucking it out the window. And so I compare, and that separates me from her. But I stand up to the dinky. I let go of these judgments, this envy, this fear, this competitiveness.

And there were truth bombs from Glanton to detonate Luther out of his soreness, Glanton saying,

- “Learn not to personalize her history.”
- “She always eventually sees past her resentment of you to the love.”
- “You are the one with the recovery. You have to be aware of this.”

*Now Celeste, Glanton, as I may have said, was caught up in old man love for a woman half his age with the ominous name Scylla, but Glanton paid no mind to Greek mythology. He was all about the here and now so don't be bothering him with ancient ruins, whether artifact or human. Gone was gone. Give him instead a glass and steel tower of power reaching for the sky. And give him the love of Scylla, that he might swim in it like the unborn in amniotic fluid. She did him no wrong. She did not cut off his cojones, nor did she massage them. She had no relationship with his junk; that she reserved for the workings of his mind and the reputation he had earned as a savant for navigating the written word into print and the fame that could bring. Now Glanton would live in real world time when he looked in the mirror after a shower and saw his old man body ravaged by the years and major surgeries and his mostly bald head. He understood in that moment he was not stellar in the looks department, not the way he had been as a studley young*

*man before the medical misfortune occurred. But he did not understand it the next day, not in the way he had, not when he asked Scylla if love of a bodily kind could be on the horizon and whether that could happen sooner rather than later, compelling a forthright response from Scylla, who bluntly said the Tuesday that followed never was a possibility, not anticipating the funk of depression that would follow, months and months of abject despair with Glanton reaching out to the Hemlock Society and other death-assisting agencies and brooding over an exit plan. But Glanton was Glanton. He rallied strong. He did not do the walk on by with Scylla, not exactly. With divine guidance he was empowered to do a side step of the ceaseless longing that had heretofore been his state and even summoned chuckles, some of them mammoth, to lay on her when she became exercised with him. Celeste, there is no law against laughter, whether yuk yuk or more refined. But Glanton's chuckle plenty brought me in mind of my mother, who would elicit my fury when she would say we were in the last days, that Jesus was coming. A child at the time, I would react violently, screaming at her that she had had her life and now she should allow me to have mine. What I am saying is that Glanton was playing with Scylla instead of addressing the cause of her upset, as my mother derived pleasure from my distress instead of offering a response that might allay my fear. But then the threat of damnation hung over me and the entire congregation every Sunday at the tabernacle, did it not, and so my mother had no reason to reason with me, as fear, not love, was the prime mover in the religion she and my father had embraced and fear required no explanation, it was an emblem of one's faith to tremble before the image of an eternity spent in the fires of hell. But Glanton's laughter was not from religion born. Rather, it stemmed from joy that he had the power to fire up Scylla's emotions. To see her riled was to see her testifying to her love for him. A starving man will take even crumbs,*

*will he not? What he did not see was that Scylla's anger was an aggression unmet, and gave her license to turn it up a notch or two. I am not saying that it was a reenactment of Chamberlain at Munich with Hitler, but it bore some similarity in terms of the dynamic. Chamberlain did not hold the line nor did Glanton nor did I when you raged at me and mocked me. I did not laugh or chuckle, but I did not hold the line or even establish one. It did not occur to me to say, "You have no right to talk to me in this manner." In my case, guilt was a destabilizing factor, as Dr. Tobin said. It did not allow me to stand my ground.*

*And yet there was an inevitable march to freedom in your rage. Neither the Oiseau nor I could hold you back. You had tapped into your own power, and all my fulminating would be in vain as the new order established itself.*

And another yet. She hadn't closed the door on him. She was only asking that he accept this new reality and allow her into the league of nations as an equal. Stop with the peeve, stop with the impotent fury.

They had theater tickets. Were they to go to waste? He was afraid. Celeste would offer him no comfort. Rather, she would only unsettle him, now that she had chosen personal growth ahead of the marriage and placed herself in the care of her bizarro therapist, Vanguardia, a woman who belonged in an institution with her elaborate theories of depraved sexual rituals involving children and even infants. He told himself that he was overreacting. After all, what had Celeste done other than collaborate with a man who was seeking to become a publisher?

Luther: Am I to have dinner and go to the theater with Celeste this evening. Am I helping or hurting myself if I go?

Vox: You are only hurting yourself.

Luther: Why?

Vox: Because you are not ready for the pain you will experience.

Luther: Under no circumstances should I go?

Vox: Not in your current state of mind. First rid yourself resentment. Rid yourself of fear. Rid yourself of personal responsibility for her feelings and attitudes. Go only if you go with me, not your illness.”

Luther wrote out his resentment and his fear and prayed for release from both, and the evening went well enough, though he sensed throughout that Celeste was evaluating his performance. He wasn't entirely wrong.

“I feel obligated to come over tomorrow because we had a nice evening. I feel that you will be angry if I don't,” she said, as he walked with her to her car.

“Let's see what tomorrow brings,” he managed to say.

“Tell me what to do.”

Vox: I have nothing to say. You know what to do.

“What are you talking about? Why would I come to you if I knew?”

Vox: I have nothing to say. You know what to do.

“Please stop repeating yourself. It's moronic.”

Vox: I have nothing to say. You know what to do.

Luther: This is not helpful.

Vox: Give her the freedom she is seeking.

Luther: So I should tell her not to come over unless she wants to?

Vox: No control.

And Glanton: “If you’re concerned about what you can get, you’re coming from fear. Discipline your mind. Otherwise what comes out of your mouth will cause trouble.”

Do my words mean nothing? Had his mother not spoken these words to him many times? And did Glanton and Vox’s words mean nothing, that his pride should demand he have the last word and punish Celeste for a crime she had not committed. Could he not see that the woman had done nothing to hurt anyone? Could he not see that she was merely seeking to save her own life? That her mind was free from thoughts of sexual adventuring and it was he who projected his own lustful thoughts onto her?

And did he not go and do the dirty in finding another Sausalito Sue to attend the theater with him the next week when Celeste begged off and then, when she asked about the play, volunteer the information that he did not go alone? And did not the posses—yes, many, many, of them—ride hard in the night from all directions to punish him savagely for summoning a look of pain from Celeste with this reference to another woman? And were not pride and the sick need for revenge and the desire to reclaim power he never had in the first place the motivating factors in this gratuitous revelation? And did he not feel hopeless because he never seemed to learn?

Vox: She needs to know that you can look after yourself and structure your own life. She needs to know that you are not dependent on her.

Luther: It’s the sex thing. That’s where the getting is focused.

Vox: Let go of sex. Sex should be an expression of love, not a form of attack. The body does not exist. Cease to focus on it.

Luther: It feels like we have had incomplete communication without sex. I have this sexual need for her and can't can't feel secure and settled without it. But I was able to take the pressure off her. There are times when sex can be a poor substitute for communication.

Vox: Guilt is toxic. The absence of guilt is freedom. You haven't lost her. You have drawn the two of you closer with this gesture. Do not listen to your body. It will only distort and deceive.

*Now, Celeste, I am but an ear for my brother and must run silent and deep when in his range, as it is for Luke to have a receptive audience for his self-promoting noise. A man of joyful presence when not mired in a funk, he has built a screened-in porch for the house they purchased and is amassing credits for a bachelor's degree and has finally gotten sober after receiving a DUI. He is seeking my approval, and monitoring for any rain I might pour down on his parade, as I have been known to do. But brotherly love runs deep, and I am pulling for him. I see the little boy in him. I see the love our father withheld. I see his neediness. I get off the phone exhausted.*

Luther: "You don't know how to close doors behind you," Sarah's father once said to me.

Context is lacking, and if I tried to provide it would only add confusion. Vox, the holiday season is upon us. The carolers are out singing their songs of joy and peace and my mind has turned to Sarah. Each year since our divorce I have sent her a Christmas card. Why? Guilt. Fear that she will die of a broken heart if she doesn't receive such a token offering. Is it for me to be heartless in this season of remembrance and negate all our years together so closely bonded? Am I to



negate her love for me and mine for her and do the walk on by on this relationship as on so much else? A life is a storehouse of memories and without the warm ones our blood runs cold and a stark loneliness becomes our domain, the grilled cheese sandwich and order of fries at the local diner, the waiter a shuffling old man drained of life by the bottles he drained. Am I to pretend I do not feel her illness deepening her solitude? Or am I to rise up and slay the beast of ego that would tether me to my past and rob me of my future by presenting me as her lifeline? Vox, may I hear from you?

Vox: Her life is not in your hands. You did not give her life and you cannot take it away. Send the card or don't send the card. Your time with her is over. It has been completed. Release all feelings of guilt. Do not allow the ego to rule you.

Fear found him again. Again he felt the bridge they were building would crumble. But again he rallied. Love was the bridge, was it not? And love never died. It had an enduring claim on perpetuity and went higher than any mountain and deeper than any sea. Luther identified the ego as the source of this fear and asked that it be replaced with love in his daily prayers.

*Celeste, please do not think that MacDuff was absent from my pantheon of heroes despite the darkness my perception cast him in. The other day I ran into a friend of his, a woman named Faith who speaks in the distinguishing accents of the wealthy and cultured and whose lineage traces back many generations here in America. She missed his joie de vivre, she said, and still took extreme offense that cancer should have laid him in the grave and at such a relatively young age. Even greater offense did she take that after animating her life with his love lust he should*

*have moved on to Josefina de Leon, a passionate Cuban beauty, for whom she reserved her ire, saying Josefina had cast some sort of spell on him with her island witchery. It was not for Faith to countenance that her wintry New England wit had been passed over by Josefina's lowbrow mumbo-jumbo. Luther's sole piece of evidence that jealousy was ruling Faith's mind was her haughty reference to MacDuff's "beautiful if vacuous young wife."*

Now it was not fully clear to Luther whether Faith was new love hunting, but her vibe made him nervous, as oldness was showing in her face and brittleness in her temperament, and so he did the walk on by when he could, feeling in that moment that if all love was not farcical and worse, hers might be. And yet as he left her the jealousy bug bit him as well, Luther hearing himself saying of MacDuff, a man who could do science like nobody's business, "Let him just wait. He'll have some trouble before this is all over," schadenfreude having spread across Luther's land that age should be paired with youngness beauty, the notion now that MacDuff had spoken to Faith in a pitying tone about poor Luther and his endlessly problematic marriage. But once again he rallied strong, driving a pith stake into his distress, whispering three times, "What Faith and MacDuff think is none of my business. End of story."

It continues. Celeste deprives herself of the Oiseau and I am deprived of both of them. One bold action after another. Again, I am in a futile holding action against an irresistible force. Mia dispatched upstate to Philip, the loft sold, a house purchased in Teaneck, New Jersey, the country house sold. New friends. A new life. I want to lash out, to call her irresponsible and heartless, but what is the point, as such judgments would only reinforce her guilt. To the extent that I try to control her do I align myself with the losing side, the forces of reaction. The Vietnam War comes

to mind. Bombing runs along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Napalm showers. And for what? The past is done with. She has broken free into the open spaces. Her blinders have fallen away, as have her shackles. No more servitude to the lord and master. What is there to do but focus on letting go of my fear, which seeks to contain her and recognize the utter futility of seeking to force a solution. The more I advocate for a return to counseling, the more she identifies me with the Oiseau and sees the two of us in alliance against her. Dear God, let me see Celeste as your perfect child.

*Alas, Celeste, there came one to remind me that the past is not over and done with, her place of residence the building right next to mine, so that each day I would have to do the walk of death on stepping out or returning home. As I understand it, intuiting her newborn's omniscience on emerging from the womb, her mother so named her. Her mother's intuitive powers were verified when Omni, as she came to be called, starred academically from grade school on, always, always at the top of her class and 99th percentile on all standardized tests of scholastic aptitude. Ordinary in appearance and with bags under her eyes, Omni was humble in manner, having no need to proclaim she was number one in all the universe, as is the American way, nor did she walk with one hand in the front pocket of her pants, another American ritual signifying supremacy. But if excellence claimed her academically, she was also nonpareil in the art of shunning, of rendering you persona non grata on first sight and keeping you there with an initial look of disapproval and then the look away.*

And so it was in regard to Luther from the very beginning. He took it as a message from on high that he wasn't to go where he didn't belong. But now, on his walk on by of the shunner's building, Luther did some shunning of his own, averting his face in passing, whether she was

present to do her shunning or not. Soon he read, in *Publishers Weekly*, a late-breaking development. Omni had ascended to the very highest level at Scholastic, the primo publisher of books for children in the country and surely the world. She was now capo of all capos. All the walk on bys in the world could not assuage his pain. Such a nobody he felt himself to be. And now so vulnerable. Though long gone from Cromartie Wonders and Rafta Blackning, upper echelons had a way of communicating with upper echelons. In fact, they had need for such communication, and surely Omni, in the full flower of her puissance, was likely to shed light on Luther's past, to divulge his mediocrity at the Claremont School, his poor SAT scores, his abysmal social failure, the full exposure the crew cut he wore at that time gave to the hideously flat back of his head. Failure drove him to his knees, where he queried Vox closely as to why his life should be so meaningless and was there not some way to hide himself away forever short of dying. A nobody in the day and night. A nobody in the day and night, he went on, demanding that Vox repeat these same words over and over. But Vox failed to oblige. Luther collapsed into bed, getting up only to relieve himself. A profound torpor held him in place. It was a struggle to lift his head. But he rallied strong, sort of, chanting feelings are not facts, feelings are not facts, and forcefully decreeing that henceforth all comparison would be banished from his land. There would be no more trying to match his insides with the outsides of others; he was whole and complete and blessed as he was.

Vox: You lack for nothing. Rest easy in this truth. Be loving of yourself and others.

Luther: What is the purpose of this pain I live with because of the marital rupture?"

Vox: To show you that love is the only reality. To shift your focus from the body and the mind, to focus you on the pain informing the pain, which is a longing for me.

Luther: Why can't I just live like everybody else?

Vox: Why can't you drink?

Luther: To drink is to die for me.

Vox: There is your answer. To live any way other than as you are doing would be to die. This is your path. There is only one way out.

Luther: And what is that?

Vox: Love. You must learn the meaning of this word at all levels.

“Who *are* you?”

Vox: That in you which seeks eternal life.

Luther: And eternal life isn't a given for everyone?

Vox: Some are more involved with dying than in being born.

Luther: Sausalito Sue intimidated me. She is a graduate of Brown University and is employed by IBM, which can only mean she has beaucoup smarts. And what am I? Mr. Nobody with my modest job and modest salary and modest title.

Vox: The problem is not outside you. There is nothing of value outside of you. All that you need is within. Tap into the love, God Luther. Tap into the love.

Luther: Will you be with me always?

Vox: Always.

Always for Luther was the torment he endured when Celeste did not call. A child screaming for his mother. A squalling infant in his crib. So it had ever been. And yet to call her would weaken

him even more and rekindle his resentment. It would signal her full control and domination of him.

Luther: I'm beginning to lose faith in you.

Vox: I'm crushed.

Luther: Are you playing with me? You some kind of comedian? The second coming of Woody Allen?

Vox: I have better lines.

Luther: What do you want from me? Boils on my ass?

Vox: A pretty thought.

Luther: I watch lewd videos. Women performing fellatio on men with giant members. And worse. Why do I return over and over to these videos?

Vox: To convince yourself that women enjoy sex.

Luther: Always with the answers. You're just an ordinary Joe like me.

Vox: Hello, Joe.

Luther: What wit.

*Now, Celeste, there was in this time a woman named Juniper Tree whom I met in the Korean salad days of living apart from you and when she was new to RoR and in need of love and affection, as she had been strong for her own destruction back when juicing ruled her nights and cutting dominated her days. At the time there was an Upper East Side RoR meeting called Paradise for Swells to which I went every Friday night in the hope of finding the love that you were denying me. A man named Tubby tended to the coffee pot and and an elder of the group*

tended to me, saying, "Luther, you have good points to make, but maybe you could focus on making only one point per share. Sharing means sharing time with others." He had not only put his stopwatch on me but had listened with his third ear; understanding that I was seeking the attention of all the Lady Loves and so coming from a place of ego and self-aggrandizement in whatever it was I had to say.

*Juniper Tree* received me and received me well when others were turning me away. She had deep roots in her own complexity and did not live on the shallow surface of appearance. Yes, Her pedigree included a Park Avenue upbringing and a Radcliffe education and the editorship of a leading magazine for women. She was at the beginning of her recovery when first I met her and had drunk away her life. After a meeting and a sit-down at a nearby cafe, she invited me back to her apartment and though we continued to connect for a brief while, her innate superiority and superior breeding inevitably moved us apart. One evening she asked me to set the table for a dinner she was preparing, and had the tact not to fault me for my incorrect placement of the silverware. Nor did it escape her that my powers of analysis were meager in comparison with hers in discussing a play we had attended one evening. And so she moved on in order to take her place among her own kind. But she liked me, Celeste, she really did, enough so that even after she had reclaimed her status and married Augustus Von Troth, a man of noble lineage, she invited me to a party at her East Side apartment one evening for the purpose of introducing me to a writer friend of hers. Now Celeste, great were the warning bells sounding internally, for a man knows his own nature and his own capacities and where he stands in the world when he has been in it for some time. I will not say that *Juniper Tree* in fact had her hype machine going in mentioning me to her girlfriend, but I can easily imagine that, meaning well,

*she elevated me above my station. Allowing myself to believe this was true sent me into a deep freeze, and such was the state I showed up in against my better judgment. There I stood among the intelligentsia, in full recoil, and kept company with the books on the floor to ceiling shelves until I could bear it no longer and ran out the door. Now, in spite of my dismal showing, Juniper Tree and I had a sit-down a few years later and I was surprised the next day that she would call, but her lake of shame owing to her past was still big and she had fallen deeply into it as a result of our meeting, her assumption being that I had been putting her down. I had suggested there was sexual tension between us after she said I looked handsome, and now she was calling to acknowledge it. No spark was struck to reignite the physical connection. Juniper Tree was passing out of my life, and there would be no big pause in her exit. What our discussion kindled was fear that you and Jim Boulee Jim Boulee were operating on a somewhat similar plane of connection, and so, with nowhere to turn, I called on Vox.*

Luther: Please help me. Throw me a lifeline I'm drowning in this stuff. Has sex entered their relationship?

Vox: Their circumstances are different. You will learn as you go along to stay on course more easily. But this is good, as it shows your great need for me, and you are learning that need can be a sign of strength. That need will always be met."

He would be seeing Celeste that Saturday. Given the turbulence he had experienced over Jim Boulee, he felt unsettled. His pride was involved. Celeste had dealt him a blow and Sausalito Sue had simply been a band aid on his pain. Was sex possible or advis



His runaway emotions gave him little mercy in this period. Insane thoughts of retribution took hold of him. In one relative lull in the storm he picked up the phone and called her. She sounded distant, distracted. She offered nothing for him to hold on to. A big mistake. He had been cut loose, dropped into a vast sea in a flimsy raft. And Vox. What had he to say?

Vox: This is your great journey, your pathway to deliverance from all the lies you have taught yourself or have been taught by others.

Luther: The crap you try to peddle.

Luther spoke with Vox as if he was talking to someone separate and distinct from himself. How could he believe in his own divinity if this was a kind of ventriloquism, Vox merely his unseen puppet? No, he could disparage Vox, but he couldn't dismiss him. Who else did he have to turn to, other than Glanton? And hadn't Glanton essentially turned him over to Vox? Was that it, a means of getting rid of Luther? It wasn't entirely unreasonable to think so, given the evident unhappiness Glanton sometimes displayed when receiving a call from him.

Luther didn't keep Vox a secret in the RoR community. He didn't say he had a private pipeline to the divine. He presented his communication as that between his higher and lower self, or at other times as a dialogue between his adult self and his inner child. He did not want to be seen as putting on airs and indulging in spiritual pride. Still, Vox was coming to mean everything to him, and so he listened as if Vox was the oracle itself after his unfortunate experience with Celeste on the phone.

Vox: Let go of all judgment, of yourself and of her. You are not a doormat. She has not wiped her feet on you. You acted from love, wishing to make an amend for what you considered a strident tone in your earlier conversation. You were placing a higher value on your peace of mind than on

being right, because there can be no right where there is wrong. Your relationship does not hinge on one phone conversation. Old ideas have been assailing you. You think this pain will never end, but the layering over of the present with the past is abating. You are seeing the insanity you lived with and understanding it at a deeper level. Accept that she has the right to do the same. She is not guilty, nor are you.

Luther: Failure is assailing me. Celeste's friend Maude has received a two-book contract. The woman has been writing for less than a year. She has only to will such a contract and it happens. Why? Because she has determined it is her due. And me, I get nothing but boilerplate rejections. Into the street do the publishers throw my manuscripts. Could I not receive a crumb?

Vox: You are not a writer. You have never been a writer. You are a child of God.

Luther: Say again?

Vox: Your destiny is not as a writer. That is just a means of organizing your day. I have other plans for you. Again, you are a child of God. I need your attention to this reality.

Luther: Are you saying that unlike Maude I can't be published and that I have no talent.

Vox: Your talent is without limit. If you want to publish, you will publish.

Luther: What does that mean?

Vox: It means stop attacking people.

Luther: I have to be perfect in order to have success in this world?

Vox: You are perfect. When you understand that, attack will not be necessary.

In this time Zed raised up on Luther, saying "Stop the self-indulgence. Say 'I feel' or 'My ego wants me to believe,' etc. Distinguish between you and the ego....You were carrying Celeste's

burden. That is why she could have a good time at the party...Don't give her big information directly. Give it to her in prayer.

Luther: Celeste is getting too healthy for me. She needs a bigger life with more people in it than I will be able to deal with. I will have to get out of her way and let her go.

Vox: A bigger life means a bigger spiritual life. Remember that the illness focuses on the body. That is how it attacks. The world is running out of time. It needs your focused attention.

Luther: Am I not to be writing fiction? Is this so-called fiction of mine an exercise in self-indulgence?

Vox: Suspend judgment and do as you are led to do.

Luther: Why does Celeste keep bringing up Sarah? "Oh, you'll refer to me the same way you do to her, as someone out of touch with reality."

Vox: She's afraid you will leave her.

Luther: Was it a mistake to mention Juniper Tree to Celeste?

Vox: You can't increase your sense of security by using people against her. That won't make you strong. It will just add to your fear. Your illness will have you believing she is doing the same thing.

Luther: She doesn't appear to be threatened if I mention another woman. Why is that?

Vox: To some degree she sees you as her father, and if her father is occupied with someone else, then he won't be bothering her. But that is no reason to carelessly mention other women."

Luther did not go against Vox with intemperate words. In that moment was he channeling big Barbara Streisand and her "People who need people" thing. He was understanding that life

could be a lonely business and that an invisible friend was still a friend and more of a friend than someone he had to call on the telephone or whatnot. Luther had a friend who went where he did and to whom he had instant access, and a friend, he might add, who was never at a loss for words and never spoke shame shame, double shame words at him.

Luther: Where does this desire to punish come from.

Vox: It is an inheritance from your father and seeks to hide your powerlessness. You were raised to believe in a jealous god, a wrathful god. Your father and this god of your childhood had the same attributes. In your mind they had the right to kill if their will was thwarted in any way. This is a lesson you are in the process of unlearning, and Celeste is your teacher. For you to live, you must allow her to live. Do not underestimate the difficulties placed in your path by your will. At the same time be without fear, as you have all you need to proceed. Practice only love, for that is what you are.

Luther: All I hear from her is blame and recrimination. Acknowledging my wrongdoing means nothing to her.

Vox: The memories she is experiencing bring her to the point of madness. In desperation she focuses on your behavior to divert her from the terrors of the distant past.”

MacDuff was gone from Luther’s life—banished by a judgment—but not from his mind. How could he be, with his science brain and his depth and his kindness/caring manifesting and the experience he brought to the table. He could sing of laboring as a high school dropout in a Canadian Pacific rail yard and work the periodic table backwards and forwards combining the elements in one dazzling association after another and stand both chemistry and physics on their

heads and yet congregate with the bottle gang booze hounds down on the Bowery. For this reason was MacDuff installed in Luther's hall of fame. But David Copperfield's mistrust of Steerforth had to become Luther's mistrust of MacDuff in one terrifying flash of insight as to his friend's intention to remove Luther from the life he knew with Celeste and Mia and insert himself. Because it must be understood that MacDuff was in the mold of an older brother, and Luther's older brother had trespassing ways and so, ipso facto, MacDuff must as well.

*Celeste, there was no water under the bridge where MacDuff was concerned, or if there was, MacDuff saw it with his science mind as water that flowed back and forth, as did my thoughts in regard to MacDuff. Should I have explained that MacDuff's request to "borrow" Mia for the day and show her around the town had left me virtually speechless? The audacity was the thing, or was it MacDuff's insensitivity to how his interest in the child might appear? And how would Mia herself feel about being turned over to a virtual stranger, and one whom I knew to be hyperactive sexually? Moral outrage, Dr. Tobin had called my reaction. But was that anything to say to a friend, that I was morally outraged and ascribe to MacDuff a lascivious intent that might not have been there?*

Now it came about that as Luther was arriving for an RoR meeting, MacDuff was leaving the one that had just ended, for MacDuff knew as well as Luther that the glug glug days of the past could also rule their future should vigilance not soar, though MacDuff, it can also be said, had some laxity in his nature in this regard, having taken some holidays from the meetings. Not that it was a good thing to judge, but Luther was predisposed to "evaluate" the strength of other members' programs. He brought his competitiveness to the meetings. Shameful though it might be to admit, he wasn't entirely sorry when certain others relapsed. MacDuff he would not have

wanted to see go back on the bottle, but there were some he took secret pleasure in hearing had fallen. He understood that it was sick and reprehensible not to be pulling for everyone, and prayed to be healed of such baseness, but it was a program of honesty, meaning he must not do the dinky. The nitwit posse could ride hard all day and all night, but he must stand naked and be seen as he was for salvation to draw nigh.

And so Luther settled for an awkward silence interrupted by a few pleasantries before MacDuff went on his way and Luther went on his, taking his sadness with him. And from this coming and going, there came this: was it possible that he was wrong, totally wrong? Was it possible that he was projecting his own lasciviousness onto MacDuff and that he was the untrustworthy one? Was his real problem paranoia that made it difficult for him to trust enough to share? Had he deprived Mia of a positive experience with a grown man? Luther did not dwell in the ponder place overly long with any of this. He let his concern die of its own accord.

Luther: Where would I be without Zed? I feel I owe all my progress to him and would surely flounder without his guidance.

Vox: Guidance comes from me. Zed is a medium for that transmission and is in your life forever. You needn't fear death or termination or any form of rupture of your relationship with him.

Luther: Why must I appropriate so much of my day to writing, and often very little writing because of the distractions I succumb to?

Vox: Because your ego would have you believe you are not enough in and of yourself.

Luther: Won't I disappear if I stop writing? It feels that way.

Vox: Did you disappear when you stopped drinking? Quite the opposite. The authentic you began to emerge.

Luther: I imagine a life without writing as empty and intolerable.

Vox: Just as you imagined not drinking as hell instead of the heaven you have found it to be.

Remember that you are not being asked to give up writing, but only to distinguish between truth and illusion.

And in time there would come a day when the lifeline Dr. Tobin had been would grow to seem a confining rope tethering Luther to something he no longer wanted or needed. No matter how fine the therapist, they would inevitably seek to extend themselves beyond the point of their own usefulness. All relationship was transactional; one gave to get. In RoR, a mentor gave to the newcomer not for money but to offer guidance without strings and in so doing stay sober and himself grow. There was that aspect in therapy as well, but there was also the monthly check that came due. At some point the patient became more the doctor's lifeline than vice versa. An economic lifeline. As with Dr. Rosner, the checks became harder to write. When asked by Luther what benefit further therapy would yield, Dr. Tobin said, "It would benefit your spiritual development." That he would make such an assertion. Luther was embarrassed for Dr. Tobin. Luther's spiritual development depended on his dedication to recovery, including prayer and meditation. No doctor could do that for him.

*Celeste, I feel I have wandered into dangerous territory. The barbed wire, the minefield, the barking dogs, the powerful searchlights of copters overhead, leaving me with nowhere to hide. Is it too late to say to you this is not an invasion but an exploration? Is nuance permissible*

*in this forbidding land? Is the voice of wrath the only voice I am to hear from here on into eternity?*

Luther went to Glanton with his concern. In his head The Clash were holler singing their do I stay or should I go thing, and because his concern was monumental, Luther went with trepidation. At the same time, was it not true that Luther was developing reservations, on his own? On top of Dr. Tobin's unfortunate reference to spiritual growth, had Luther's checkbook not grown heavier? Had he not begun to stagger under the weight of each check he handed to Dr. Tobin? Was that not a sign? Luther withheld from Glanton the stuff about spiritual growth, as he did not want Glanton to put his chuckle on Dr. Tobin. Respect was due the man for all he had done to bring Luther out of his benighted state. He had been a benign and enlightening presence in Luther's life. In any case, Luther's fear that Glanton would denigrate Dr. Tobin proved unfounded. And why would he take such an attitude? Had Glanton not directed Luther to individual therapy following Celeste's demand that he move out? In so doing, Glanton was only being true to his own experience, for had he not surrendered his old disparagement of therapists—"Some of the sickest egos in the world"—when he himself began to see a shrink, this after Babs's departure left him on his own? Luther imagined friends of Glanton being concerned for him and encouraging him to seek outside help. They did not want his fierce fidelity to RoR—"the spiritual path we have here can eliminate tooth decay"—to be his undoing. Yes, Glanton walked an exemplary road, but maybe that road could be broadened a bit? And yet it was not Glanton's way to expound on his therapeutic experience. That he kept to himself, whether from pride or circumspection, Luther didn't know, nor did he need to know. All Luther had to focus on



was that Glanton was seeking to provide support for the battle ahead, as the Frogs did in sending General Lafayette to assist in our War of Independence. Glanton did specify that the therapist should be skilled in treating patients who had experienced abuse, whether emotional or sexual or physical, in childhood or beyond. So Glanton remained Luther's man. He was the decider as to whether Luther should not only stay or go, but to do the Clash one better, whether he should have begun at all. So yes, Glanton was all powerful all the time, and it was not anything for Luther to bring to the ponder place. Not then, in any case. What was, was.

For the record, if not for future generations, Luther felt guided to document more fully his soreness regarding the party thrown by Jim Boulee Jim Boulee, with particular emphasis on the laughing thing that Maude, Celeste's friend since childhood, surely indulged in, gleeful that Luther's baleful presence was nowhere to be found at the Boulee man's party, thus leaving the path clear for him to put a final move on Celeste and fully claim her for his own, as Jim Boulee, a Columbia man, was clearly in their league, as Luther was so conspicuously not, and worthy of the treasure that would now be all his.

Luther went to Vox, so Vox might speak his or her or its truth to him and offer the comfort or at least consolation that Luther could not provide himself.

Vox: Maude does not mean you well. She can't help herself. With you out of the picture, she can have more of Celeste and doesn't have to suffer your dreary, insecure presence. But do not fear. Maude will fall far short of her goal. Celeste will see her as she is. Maude is an embodiment of the world and its corrupt values."

Luther: Caramba, you're as bad as me with the judgments you make. I'm the one in whom the soreness is supposed to reign. You can't be making that kind of noise. Step it up.

*Now Celeste, there came into my life at this time a man named Bonaventure. The song he sang was of uncertainty and perplexity ruled his face and mind. He was a man of the cloth and devout in his faith but he was also broken by his hunger, insatiable, for younger men. No phobes threw him a beating for this lust longing or tossed him from a high window. He was a cautionary tale, having drifted away after establishing himself in sobriety for a number of years. In essence, he got well enough to drink, and managed his alcohol consumption for two years, allowing himself two vodka tonics on Saturday and Sunday evenings. Then he turned to the bottle on Wednesday as well, and soon the other days of the week followed till he was all day all night on the sauce again. Bonaventure one day took my wrist in his hand and declared his love for me. This was a bunch of rubbish, of course. He was clearly a man in need, but it was not of me. And so I suggested that he meet me at the RoR meetings, which he did, and I introduced him to other men and women in recovery. I did not sing the song about people needing people. That would not have been good. But he got the point. He began to see that he had been lonely too long, all on his own battling the bottle and losing every time.*

*I was no better. Though established in RoR in terms of sober years, I was relatively new to the RoR community on the West Side. To get to know others, I would stand outside the meeting place and greet each person, male or female, entering the facility, like a glad-handing politician running for office. Perhaps I was seeking to bond with other men, but my real motive, or so it seemed at the time, was to meet women and be saved from another night in front of the TV watching the young'uns on Saturday Night Live living large.*

*The Saturday and Sunday meeting I settled on was held in a nearby community center that serviced seniors, and early enough—4 pm—that I wouldn't necessarily be seen as a loser unable to find someone to be with on a Saturday night. Many times I would return home alone with the evening's groceries, having shopped at Fairway and waited patiently for the Broadway bus to come along, there being nothing to rush home for.*

Bonaventure found a young'un to hang with, a blond and beefcake young'un. A slipper and slider, like Bonaventure had been and still might again if he didn't stick to the straight and narrow instead of his usual let it all hang out style.

And another, Calcitron, was resistance personified. Luther, being mindful that God stood for good orderly direction, sought to provide some for Calcitron, who wasn't having it. Calcitron had the whole schmear: a Park Avenue duplex and a condo in Boca Raton, a fleet of fancy cars, a yacht, and a wife and two teenage children. He also had hookers galore. All this he maintained on the income he derived from his law firm. But Calcitron had no truck with God or the things of God, and had no truck with the Steps of RoR either, especially inventory.

“Don't be annoying me with your bullshit,” Calcitron said. “All I care about is schlonging women and snacking on pussy.” In just that way did Calcitron speak, needing, in his desperation, to be a force of his own nature. Calcitron had a slack mouth and thick lips permanently coated with saliva. He also had horse teeth and a bulbous nose and met the world with a crafty smile, as if he knew what the real deal truly was. He sought to be as unattractive character-wise as he was physically. And why not? The world was full of fools and he wasn't one of them.

“I do think you need to get right with yourself. I mean, you’ve admitted to illicit activities and managed to bilk a senile old woman out of her life savings just because you could.”

“Look, Luther, you’re a nincompoop. I feel sort of sorry for you with your earnestness, but understand something. You have no light to offer me, and if you keep bugging me with your nonsense about the Steps, I’ll need to trade you in for an upgrade.”

In this way did Calcitron speak, and yet he was a model of circumspection at home, as he did have two teenage sons and a wife who hadn’t yet pressed the eject button. And with his clients and when standing before judges and juries, he surely could not perform the wild man act he was putting on for Luther and RoR. Lately, he had taken to bringing his sex workers to RoR meetings with him, not for the sake of their souls but to agitate the blood of these men who were now trying to live on the straight and narrow and to consternate the women. And when a few remonstrated with Calcitron, he put a laugh storm on them, as he knew in his heart that they would give a lot to have the unfettered sex life he was indulging in. As for safe sex, he gave that no never mind, assigning it a measure for sissies afraid to savor the full flavor of life in the fast lane. It was not for Calcitron to express a note of sorrow at the passing of his mother and father when he was still a child or the disappearance of his older brother, whom he never gave a conscious thought to in the course of his thirty year absence. Here Calcitron broke into song, singing the full lyrics of “I Am a Rock” and showing the ability to carry a tune.

“You’re a man of many talents,” Luther said. “I guess that’s why you’re in the big leagues.”

“What big leagues?” Calcitron said.

“You have the downtown swing. You hit the ball out of the park every time.”

“What’s this bag of bullshit you’re handing me?” Calcitron replied, genuine irritation in his voice.

“No bullshit. You said it. You have the whole schmear.”

What followed was revelatory of an aspect to Calcitron’s character.

“Listen, dull one. I say what I want to say. You don’t get to make up shit about me.”

“What shit would that be?”

“I got fired by every boss I ever had. They couldn’t tolerate me and the feeling was mutual. So they told me to take a hike. That’s the only reason I’m in business for myself.”

Calcitron was not a chest thumper. He had no great regard for himself. He was not the great I am. So he was telling Luther.

Still was alcohol waiting for Calcitron. Luther could caution him that he was cruising for a bruising, but to what purpose? Was it not clear that Calcitron had his wall up and that Luther’s words meant nothing? He had been on the sauce and off the sauce before, and being a rich man, he had his pleasures that he still placed before his pain, the year before having blown forty-five thousand dineros on brothels. He went so far as to offer Luther a week all expenses paid at the primo brothel in NewYork City.

Vox: He is just a little boy paying to have his penis played with. There is no need to appease his disease. Continue to relate the principles of RoR to his living problems. He will proceed to rectify those situations or he won’t. There is nothing to concern yourself with here.”

In this way did Vox direct Luther, should Calcitron choose not to walk with him, to walk on by the recalcitrant Calcitron.

On a slushy street on a winter evening Luther ran into a woman he had seen the week before at an RoR meeting, a woman who had galvanized his interest on first sight with the fishnet stocking she had worn. And now here she was, right in front of him. She was only six months sober, he learned over dinner with her at a Polish restaurant the next evening. In RoR, the collective wisdom was that a minimum of a year was needed for the newcomer to establish a connection to a higher power. Premature romantic relationships often led to relapse because they served as a distraction from recovery. But maybe he could keep her close over the next six months. How cruel to have to let her go. There was a second obstacle. She had a boyfriend, a CIA operative causing mischief in all different parts of the world so he might, by his lights, keep America safe. By now Luther had a recorded message to play, and out it came. Celeste was recovering memories and had grown increasingly angry at the full dimension of the wrongs—call it crimes—that were painfully surfacing in her consciousness, long buried crimes that had a hugely adverse impact on her life. Luther acknowledged that he had been no saint in the marriage. He could be intemperate but he was also devoted and became, in the last years they were together, a safe proxy for the one her rage eventually needed to be directed at.

“Are you telling me more than I need to know?” Leah asked.

“I am telling you what I need to know so that I may live,” Luther said.

Leah laughed and then laughed some more. Her laughter was infectious, and so Luther began to laugh as well. By then he had finished his kielbasa and potatoes so he could feel filled up and substantial for the night.

“I cannot believe you said that,” Leah said, when her laugh-a-thon had ended.

“I am a prisoner of my own truth, which marches me forward to my own freedom.”

Leah pulled out the card Luther had given her the previous evening. “Your name is at the top left and your contact information at the bottom right. There is nothing in the middle.”

A dangerous phase had been entered. She was now running a credit check on him, her dubiousness level clearly on the rise. Any moment he could receive his walking papers.

“That is very astute of you. But I am more than a hole in a doughnut. I am more than a doughnut, for that matter. I am slowly and imperceptibly being filled in. A work in progress I am, as we all are.”

“Gotcha,” Leah said, as if she really didn’t.

The avenue sloped down to Forty-second Street. Leah paused at a salumeria, closed for the day. Sausages hung from hooks above displays of pastas and cheeses. “I am taking a cooking class,” she said.

“I was born with a glass in my hand, not a fork,” Luther replied. Nothing he could say about food would amount to much, and so he stopped there.

As they approached Grand Central Terminal, Luther used the traffic as a pretext for touching her lightly on her back. Though it was only the first night, he wanted his mark upon her. The concourse only added to the magic: the chattering arrivals and departures board, the vaulted ceiling, the information booth at the center of the vast concourse. The huge open space and the trains beyond the gates promised intrigue and adventure. It was the stuff of dreams, of America, as Leah herself was.

“Sisterhood is powerful. A cardinal rule is to not take another man’s woman.”

“This is powerful, too,” Luther said, pointing first at Leah and then himself.

He stood on the platform and watched as the Metro-North train that would take her to Hastings-on-Hudson eased into the tunnel, following the red lights on the rear car until swallowed by the darkness.

Leah did not disappear. She had a staying power all her own. Now when he went to Forget About It, his RoR meeting, after work, he would reflexively look toward the door as it opened. As his father before him, he continued to dress above his station, aware that he was using the credit card Celeste had given him to build up a fair-sized wardrobe so he could look the part of a man of success, though he sat idle in his cubicle for most of the day except for trips to the cafeteria with mug in hand that he might have hot water for his tea. What would Leah think if she knew that he brown-bagged it, eating a container of hummus, a slice of pita bread, and two oranges, for lunch, or that he took a long postprandial snooze in his orthopedic chair?

Now Leah had some soreness going on in regard to Benjamin Beau, her CIA operative, with whom she was allegedly on the path toward holy matrimony. Benjamin Beau was tight with his mother, who was tight with the Catholic Church. She frowned on Leah for rending her marriage vows asunder and now wanting to take those vows with her only son. This soreness Leah shared with Luther after the meeting, as he walked with her to Grand Central Terminal.

“She gives me the fisheye,. Have you ever been given the fisheye, Luther?”

“The fisheye is the story of my life. I am a veritable magnet for those with a hankering to cast the dubious glance, those committed to the art of looking askance,” Luther replied. “But we let them walk on by, just walk on by, and take their *looks* with them. That is exactly what we do in recovery.”

Whereupon, Leah said, “I’m wide open, Luther. I’m wide open.”



Whereupon Luther said, “Everything in me screams for a journey by rail along the historic Hudson River. It is not a place for kingdoms or for crowns. It is where Henry Hudson himself set the world on the path to democracy.”

Luther parted from her that evening with the task of calming the emotional turmoil triggered by her declaration of openness and the fear it summoned that someone would come and cook in her kitchen before Luther could claim her for his own. He had already begun to live for her phone calls. At work. At home. His insecurity was such that he had to let her come to him, lest she be frightened away by the depth of his need. And yet, there was also the realization that the choice was not between him and some faceless rival but between him and her boyfriend, and there Luther had the advantage owing to her fiancé’s dawdle dance at the goal line. Whatever his virtues, Benjamin Beau couldn’t take the ball into the end zone.

*Now Celeste, while strategies are evolving for placing controls on the weather, spring, like all the seasons, has a way of coming, and it is not for those of us with humanity at our core to offer resistance to this need for expression. Should you say I am only stating the obvious, my only reply would be that humankind, or a segment of it, has a hegemony-driven intent where Mother Nature is concerned and is working to impose its will on all facets of its creation. And the universe as well it would bring under its control. Fear is a factor here, no question about it. But spring came, and with it sunlight brighter than the world has ever known, for on Memorial Day Leah would be in the city and would I be free to meet her? We are talking of the morning, Celeste, with all the unfolding the hours can bring well before evening shadows have entered the picture. On that very day did I awake to pain that left me virtually motionless, such was the soreness in my lower back. “Assez, assez,” I cried out. A major effort was needed to get from bed*

*to a chair. And yet, doubt rose in me that the onset of this pain was purely physical, or physical at all. "What is this agony?" I wrote out. Pen and paper can lead us to the truth. The answer came, "It is your past seeking to hold you there and nothing more. It is your superstitious dread that to leave your mother would mean your death as well as hers." Celeste, as I wrote I felt the poison being leached from my system and soon my body was in service to me once more. For the record—yes, everything is recorded, everything—I dressed for the occasion, wearing the primo white khaki of Banana Republic, for BR was renowned for its quality goods, and though my legs were lost in the loose-fitting slacks, I tightened my braided belt and had two bowls of cereal and set forth on my sneakered feet.*

*America, you were singing that day. The Plaza Hotel, the hansom cabs and the poor nags that powered them, the south entrance to Central Park, the footpaths, the buildings tall and small—all were singing. Such a song of joy as my ears had never heard accompanied me as I went forward into my new day and my new life, but also music of instruction, from the great Michael McDonald and the great Kenny Loggins, that being This Is It. Confession must be made, and if it already has been, where can be the harm in repetition, as do not some things bear repeating?*

Luther's comprehension of the song was minimal, captive as he was to the sound more than the lyrics, but the declaration "This is it! Your back's to the corner" was all he needed in the way of bracing for the momentousness of the occasion. And there was Lady Macbeth, presumably not to put him on the path of bloodshed, enjoining Luther to screw his courage to the sticking post. Many many were the times that he had attached a fantasy of the great Bill Walton suited up in the blue and gold of UCLA for road warrior hardwood battle to that very song, but now it was for him, Luther. *Because, Celeste, voices will come to us, not always of known origin,*

*seeking our salvation or to lure us down the perdition path, and our listening devices are not always what they need to be.*

*(A pause is called for here, Celeste. In my bones do I feel your impatience growing, your pertinent question being will there be no end to this smothering, suffocating monologue that only promises to be a dialogue. And while I feel as well your revulsion at what you surely perceive as my cruelty in speaking in such terms of another woman, I maintain the road to freedom runs through the extended territory of pain. We must not go dinky that we may be in accord with the world's demand for half-truths and outright evasion. But yes, I do feel the dark cloud of your disapproval over my head, which sends me to the place of unbearable fear.)*

“It is truly morning in America, as our demented president says, not because the scales of justice are fairly weighted, but for a far more personal reason,” Luther said, when Leah had joined him on the park bench where he had anxiously waited.

“I will not ask you to explain, Luther, and would prefer that you not try.”

“I go where the light is. That is all I am saying.”

They explored the tropical rain forest, and stared at the sea lions in the outdoor pool and, with thick glass to ensure their safety, observed the massive polar bear gracefully glide underwater to its resting place on a rock where it stretched out. She had come from work in jeans and a short-sleeved top and sat in proximity to him with her legs spread. The longing to touch her was strong but the fear was in him that what he started he would not be able to finish. Why that fear should have been there he could not say. There was just a sense of diminished capacity where she was concerned. And so he resumed his babbleacious mode, prompting a somewhat gentle rebuke from Leah, she saying, “You talk so much.”

*“What did you talk about, Luther? Tell us.”*

*“The lifelong struggle with my mother. It was she I was in bondage to. It was she who had claimed me for her own and whom I was struggling to separate from. Celeste was not my mother. It was not Celeste who would die and die should I take up with Leah; it was my mother.*

They went for a late lunch at an East Side cafe he and Celeste often patronized. Though Celeste was not likely to be in the city on a holiday weekend, it still concerned him that he might be taking a chance. His anxiety only abated when they were seated in the outdoor garden and she was nowhere in sight. Even so he would periodically look about. His chatter continued but turned to a morose silence when he paid the check and left. Their time together was almost over and he had failed Leah and failed himself.

*Celeste, under Park Avenue ran the trains, bringing imaginative power to all those on the boulevard, as trains always do. These trains were faithful to their mission, never deviating from the rails they run on lest disaster be their fate. Up ahead was the MetLife Building rising above Grand Central Station, which block by block we were now approaching on a straight run, as were the southbound trains below.* The city was emptied out for the holiday weekend. Foot traffic on the avenue was minimal. Even so, he couldn't risk a public display of intimacy. Some privacy being required, he was now on the lookout for a nook amid the high-end automobile showrooms and buildings sealed off from penetration. Finding an entrance slightly set back from the sidewalk, he took her arm and led her into it.

“Can we kiss?” He asked, as casually as saying he needed to stop and tie his shoelace.

“Good idea,” Leah said.

A porter with a mop in hand, having noticed them, paused from swabbing the floor far down in the lobby but did not approach. People had a right to take time out for love. Was that it? Whatever, he let them be. They walked in silence the rest of the way, entering the terminal on Vanderbilt Avenue and coming to the wide stairway on the west side, with a view down to the concourse. In Luther's head could he hear Dion and the Belmonts singing "Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love?"

Leah's biological clock was ticking. So she said that summer. Thirty-four was still young, as Luther saw it; there was plenty of time to have a baby. But she had a sense of urgency, and the dithering of Benjamin Beau wasn't helping things. Nor was the fact that she had a precancerous condition that might threaten her ability to conceive. Luther listened attentively, or tried to; after all, he had experienced his own anguish when he realized a child of his own was not in the cards with Celeste. But there had also been relief. And maybe, though he dare not say so, Leah was herself conflicted. Maybe she too was a dawdle dancer. Or, maybe if she wasn't, she wasn't entirely unhappy that her fiancé was. There were times he had to repress an urge to laugh at the very word fiancé, sounding as it did so formal and rich with French foppery and of another time. Life without the bottle, her wine rack now empty, could seem overwhelming.

A thunderstorm broke the evening she first visited his apartment. "I feel safe here," she said, as she casually removed her blouse and skirt and soon stood before him in ice blue bra and matching panties.

"Do you like what you see?"

They made love, but only of a kind. Failing at penetration, he lay with his face buried in the pillow. Leah was too insecure for graciousness. He was sure to lose her without the ability to perform. And yet they found a way forward, their bodies growing quickly attuned. The kissing was a constant. They were joined at the mouth, if not down below.

It was “Night and Day” time. It was “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” time.

*Now Celeste, even as lovemaking was progressing did Leah call a timeout. Benjamin Beau, CIA agent extraordinaire, was on the ground and seeking a powwow. “Do you promise to leave your mother at the door?” Leah said, going snippy on Benjamin Beau, who had begun as “some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, you may see a stranger across a crowded room,” because she had seen him across such a crowded room, saw only him though her then husband stood right beside her. In that moment she only had eyes for him, Benjamin Beau, and he only had eyes for her. A magical moment, and many magical moments to follow. And then Benjamin Beau’s mother had to come along with her you can’t do this you can’t do that get thee to a nunnery Catholicism, all that drinking of the blood of Christ poisoning the drudge’s brain when all Leah wanted was to do the nasty with her only begotten son, do some serious schwinging, as Leah put it. Benjamin Beau was at pains to assure Leah of the confidentiality of their high stakes summit, summit being the word he chose—two great powers meeting for a tete a tete, with not a listening device in or out of sight. On this she had his solemn word. Nor would there be any tape recording to ensure that Benjamin Beau had a fully detailed and accurate briefing for his files.*

Luther thinking, they are but children playacting at love. Supremely confident of the outcome he was, seeing as he did that the CIA agent was the train that Leah had hopped aboard to free her from her marriage, a train with a dead end destination. Two people looking for an out; sooner or later, Leah would come running to him.

And there it was, two days later Leah on the line calling him to her, triggering happiness bordering on ecstasy, for all the elements were in play: Grand Central Terminal, the Metro-North, the Hudson River, the green Saab idling across the street from the station with Leah sitting at the wheel. It wasn't every day that a door such as this opened for him. But before she shared her body, she would share the content of her mind. They were to have a mini-summit of their own, because that was the point, was it not? Luther was not exactly a superpower. Rather, he was a satellite state. Leah laid it all out. A woman of her age with her biological clock ticking needed a man of means. It would not do to marry for love alone, not where she was in her life. And though he dressed as someone with an important position in the workplace, she had come to know differently, having visited him at the org. He was, despite his ties and suits and flashy jackets, a steady Freddy office worker, a desk jockey, a paper shuffler. A cubicle guy, not an alpha male with a corner office. The knapsack he carried was empty of everything but a paperback novel. No files. No work papers. She guessed it was mostly for carrying his lunch to work. All this she had ascertained. And something more. Leah had seen every episode of *Seinfeld*, and while she had regarded him as Jerry Seinfeld when first they met, she was now more of a mind to see him as Kramer, as there was the aspect of the doofus to him with his irregular features, including his flat head. This was not meant to diminish him or suggest that he couldn't be part of her life going forward. In fact, he would always be part of her life and cook in

her kitchen. She would always find a way to summon him to her, marriage or no marriage. Did he understand? But he was looking for a woman to give him a new life, to break the mold he was in, and this she could not do.

Luther listened with some sadness and at the same time marveled at Leah's power of perception. How right she was to say he was more Kramer than Seinfeld. How right to see him as an irregular sort, someone who could only play-act at having executive ability. Still, he could feel his soreness start at her mention of the mold. After all, was she not still living in the apartment her ex-husband had bought for them and that he consented to allow her to stay in until she was able to move into a place of her own? And so he called on reason to douse the fire that was starting, saying to himself that it would only alienate her were he to point out her own issue with the mold. Once again, the great Dionne Warwick telling him to walk on by, just walk on by, and RoR telling him to shine the light of right understanding on Leah.

There was also this. Did he not have a hand in her greater awareness? Had he not, in a rash moment, suggested she visit him at the org, as if to open his life to full inspection, so that he, like the woman in "Like a Rolling Stone," would have no secrets to conceal, the difference being that he would not be diminished in Leah's eyes but elevated for his honesty. He could tell her visit was not going as planned. Her disappointment was evident in her sour expression. "Your desk is so clean. What do you do all day?"

"I stand ready with my pencils, being at the beck and call of the women of the org." He held up a red pencil. "This little tool is all that keeps me from the street, And this here is my pride and joy," Luther said, pointing to the orthopedic chair with a headrest he had been given.



“My snooze chair. I sit in it for a few minutes and before I know it I am gone from this world. And when I return refreshed, I am ready to fire off directives.”

“Directives?” Leah’s frown turned to amusement at the idea of someone in such a cramped space issuing any such thing.

Luther had weathered the shame storm that found him and now he would weather this one as well.

“I will tell you a story,” he said. “A Garatdjian exclusive. A very revealing apercu of my own, which came to me as a teenager. Not a soul have I shared this with. I was a great fan of the Mick—Mickey Mantle—and Frank Robinson and Eddie Mathews and hammering Hank Aaron and Willie Mays and Duke Snider and all those who could do the downtown thing—launch booming home runs—with a flick of their wrists. However, I imagined myself as a second baseman, one whose plate production was far above the average of the light hitters typically found at this position. How could I clout thirty home runs when most second basemen were having a banner year if they hit ten dingers? Because I wasn’t burdened with the responsibility that comes with high expectations, as a first baseman or third baseman or outfielder might be. Clearly I am not in your CIA agent’s league, and yet I am hitting for a higher average and with more power, if I may make that comparison, because of the absence of expectation.”

“Are you OK, Luther?”

“Aces. I’m just aces,” Luther replied, and he was. He had said what he meant and meant what he said about playing second base, and even if he didn’t fully, it wouldn’t do to say differently to Leah.

“You’re sure?”

“Oh yes.”

“Good then. Let’s play some ball.”

And so Luther had a fun night with Leah. For a while, they watched a video, *The Age of Innocence*, sitting on a sofa in what had been her husband’s den.

“I’ll bet quarters would bounce off your thigh, it’s so hard,” she said, her hand having found his leg. Just then the phone began to ring. Leah went right to it without a pause and was on the line for at least three minutes with the CIA agent without saying much more than “I’m watching a video” and “yeah,” “Uh huh,” and “I love you too” before hanging up. The transition back to Luther was remarkable for being seamless. There was no pause for reflection or self-doubt from Leah. As if she could read his thoughts, she said, “I’m good at holding secrets. Been doing it my whole life.”

“Like what secrets.”

“Like the religious sect I belonged to briefly. I took up with the leader but no one knew this,” she said.

“Aren’t you concerned that he might just show up here. I mean, he is a CIA agent.”

“He doesn’t involve himself in domestic stuff. He keeps his action to beyond our shores.”

“So he’s overseas now?” Luther said, trying to keep anxiety out of his voice.

“He never talks location, but yes, overseas.”

“Does he have a key to this apartment?”

“Of course.”

“Does he, um, kill people.”

“He is trained for instant disposal. Can take you out in an instant. Knows all the vulnerable spots.”

“That’s comforting,” Luther said.

“Let’s watch the movie, and as we do, get slowly ready for schwinging.”

An onomatopoeic word, for sure. How she talked.

The casement windows in her apartment, including the bedroom, looked out at the Hudson River. Here he was living his dream of going north and remaining faithful to the river. The bed was king size and made for schwinging. But whether it was her bed or his own, farther to the south, the result was the same: a sense of shame and utter hopelessness driving his face into the pillow. But then came a ray of hope. More than a ray. There it was. He had entered her, and though his tool turned flaccid the next minute, he felt on more solid footing the next morning as they headed for the train station, it being the beginning of the workweek. He had shown her something, anyway.

The train was packed, row after row of white men, their expensive silk suits emblems of their wealth. Some had removed their jackets to reveal thick suspenders to go with their bright ties and crisp white shirts. A horde riding hard for the big bucks on Wall Street they could extract before heading back to their suburban estates. Men Luther could never be among, he thought, as they stared at Leah, she and he having been forced to stand until the next station. The kind of men she had been comparing him to the previous night, the kind who could provide her with the security and the amenities hapless Luther would never be able to offer. All of them with hunger in their eyes.

Leah went on to work while he headed home for a change of clothes. The light on the phone was steady, he was relieved to see. Celeste hadn't called. He would not have to lie as to where he had been. Not that she was the suspicious or inquiring kind about such things. But she was on his mind as he headed for the subway and GoA. It was growing on him that the pleasure in being with Leah was coming with a price tag, that being pain. And it grew worse when he snapped at Celeste, poor innocent Celeste, when she suggested they get together on a night he was hoping to be with Leah. Practically took her head off. Like a bear in a rage when some other creature came between it and its prey. Shaken by the intensity of his anger, he fell into a deep hole of remorse. This wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. The thought *you have to come clean*. He couldn't do this juggling act anymore. Couldn't keep up the pretense. Dr. Tobin had been right. "A sexual relationship could threaten your marriage. No doubt about it." How Luther hated Dr. Tobin in that moment. The good doctor trying to punish him with a painful dose of reality. Luther didn't need truth of that kind. He didn't. And yet the unthinkable was happening. Leah was displacing Celeste, and there was nothing he could do about it. Not then, anyway. Maybe sometime later. Hadn't Glanton said to him, "Don't run from it," meaning don't run from Leah. He was being led. He was going with the flow, as the saying went. He was letting go.

Letting go of the Oiseau as well. She had been his lifeline, his bridge, to Celeste, but now he was dreading the upcoming visit. The Oiseau with her listening devices on high alert and the double whammy of her keen Oiseau sight, recording every movement. So adept at reading body language, she surely was.

*Celeste, you were there at the session. You saw it. You heard it. I said, haltingly, "I have something to say." All the Oiseau's antennae going up. The moment of change, of transformation.*

*Everything quiet now. Deathly quiet. My death? Your death? How dramatic, you will say now, or maybe you won't. We never talked about that session, about your feelings when I said, "I've met someone." But I saw. I saw. You looked down. Pain, sadness. I had inflicted a wound. You still loved me. I still loved you. How could this happen? How? The rest I don't remember. What the Oiseau said, what I said, what you said. Nothing. We all said nothing. There was nothing more to say. Did we leave separately? It would have been too painful to leave together. It would have brought me too close to your suffering. I would have needed to die and die. And yet, surely something of what the Oiseau said would have gotten through to you at those sessions. Surely something. Her saying, with exasperation in her voice at some point early on, "He is the best person in the world for you," or words to that effect, trying to reach you. Not that I necessarily was the best. How is such a thing determined? Dr. Tobin said it. You chose personal growth over the marriage. As simple as that it was. And yet the burden of guilt rests on me, does it not? Though we were living separately, you came back. You offered yourself. But I was living in dinkydom, unable to get past my fear of Jim Boulee. My problem, not yours. He became, or my fear of him became, the impetus for change, for Leah Farrell, though she might have happened anyway. Because something else was happening, my addiction to sex, to endless possibility. I was back out there looking, our marriage bed no longer able to hold me. The separation had provided me with the justification for this wanderlust; the necessity for monogamy had eroded.*

Now in this time, despite the mini-summit Leah had called him to, it would appear, on the surface, at least, that her words had meant nothing, as Luther's mother's words to her second son had meant nothing back when. Luther needed an audience for his life, especially for late-breaking developments. Secondly, he had reason to believe hounds were moving closer and

closer, that they might claim Leah Farrell for their own should he fail to establish for the record his sphere of influence, his Monroe Doctrine. The timing was right for a declaration of love, and what better forum than the RoR meeting that he and Leah attended. Saying, “I have met my love and she is here, in this very room,” but even as he spoke, he heard a voice within him saying liar, liar, fool, fool, you have built a sandcastle in the air.

Afterward Leah rewarded Luther with sullen silence for his presumptuous pronouncement. Finally, she spoke.

“I feel totally violated. Do you understand, or are you a complete moron?”

“I do. I truly do. A man should never seek to rise above his station. In fact, it is one of my core beliefs.”

“Station? Core beliefs? Where are you, Luther?”

“I am here, and ready to go.”

“Go where?”

“Never mind. This is my day for misspeaking. So I will say what my mentor says. Cancel, cancel, cancel.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“The erasure of the faux pas. The correction of the error. Because there is no sin. There is only the mistake. So I have been told by informed sources.”

*Now Celeste, sometimes we take refuge in God and sometimes in gratitude, and when the shame storm would hit me anew following my blunder born of presumptuousness, I would find my refuge not in those two I have mentioned but in three words delivered to me by the universe, they*

*being Honduran National Economy. The gift, however, came with a price, as most often the SS would hit me in public venues. The price was simply this: the gift could not be kept to myself, that, is, kept within the privacy of my mind. No, it had to be articulated, and loudly, and so it was that, when with Leah Farrell or on my own, I would vocalize what became for me a mantra.*

*“What the hell?” She said, on first hearing my outburst, while strangers merely kept their distance.*

*I had no big thoughts about the small country, had never taken it to the ponder place and sought to make a serious assessment. I understood only that it had a history of its own and assumed that its citizens greeted the morning with a strong cup of Joe and a couple of huevos, as do many of us here to the north. But a gift from the universe is a gift and can be known by the trajectory of its arrival, generally a certain swoosh. The consequences for spurning such a gift, while unknown to me, are, I suspect, significant.*

And an idea for additional fortification came to Luther as well, this for the hours of darkness. Now would he lie with his boxer shorts clutched in his hand or cradled against his body. If, for any reason, he forgot, he would have to climb out of bed and fetch his new comforter. How delicious this intimacy with his undergarment. How tender the words he addressed to it. How meaningful the rapport being established.. More and more was he adding talismans against an unruly and threatening and shaming world, from tapping on the walls of the bathroom stall at work to shouting Honduran National Economy on the streets of New York City.

“You’ve heard we are as sick as our secrets,” Luther said to Leah.

“What have you done now?”

“I have not been sleeping alone, I am loath to admit.”

“What are you telling me?” He could feel as well as hear her soreness being summoned.

“The truth, and only the truth.”

“I said what are you telling me?”

“I have a thing going on with my underwear, if you must know.”

“And what is that?”

“In the darkness it is my comforter and my joy. Do you not have items you hold near and dear to bring you the same?”

“Luther, do you have to tell me every little thing you do?”

“Only if I deem it newsworthy, which you clearly don’t in this instance.”

“I’m beginning to worry about you.”

“I am a rock. I am an island. I am Staten Island.”

*Now Celeste, it needs to be said that the CIA agent had staying power. I am not speaking here of his sexual prowess. That is not for me to say, even if I knew. There are areas of life we must stay out of, that have high stink content to them. The word probity comes to mind, as does rectitude, though I understand they hardly apply to the likes of me, mucking about in the CIA agent’s garden as I had been. What I am saying is that he began to hit the comeback trail. Leah was giving him one last chance to stash his mother in the closet and end his ceaseless dithering.*

“So you’re saying he must carry the ball into your end zone and do a touchdown victory dance?” Luther asked.

“You know exactly what I am saying. He must deliver. And so we have decided to do some extra work on our relationship so he can do just that.”



*Now Celeste, it is said that a watched pot never boils, and I must take issue with this saying, as the pot certainly will boil if watched long enough. Truer to say that a watched phone never rings or a watched phone never rings as often as you would like or a watched phone seldom rings and it is the one you wish to hear from on the end of the line. Leah placed me on hold and the monotony of waiting became a feature of my days. No blinking red light on the answering machine. Not with her voice on the recording, at any rate. All excitement, all anticipation, removed from my days.*

Feeling he had to fill the void, Luther had dinner with another woman, but sitting with her only seemed to add to his loneliness. There was an RoR woman who interested him, though she was something of an enigma, always listening but never participating. She went by the name Fane. Luther asked if it was short for Profane but she replied no, it stood on its own, and nothing was to be inferred about her character or disposition from it. A name was simply a name, she declared. Unless, of course, Luther wanted to make it something more, but there she would have to leave it to his imagination. There was no spark of love here, only impetuous desire, of the kind that had a tendency to lead him from the straight and narrow. Alone with her as they spoke, he said simply, "You and I should sleep together."

"What?" She gasped, her arch manner displaced by a look of shock. But that shock did not come without a smile, and so Luther knew he had penetrated her perimeter and altered the wavelength of their communication. He sensed that he was speaking with someone who had her own loneliness going on, that she too was among the discarded.

"Here is my card," he said. "Call me."

And she did, the next day, saying, as she put it, she was ready for a good thumping.

*“Now Celeste, Fane lived in the Hudson River town of Irvington, not so far north of Riverdale, where you had grown up in a garden paradise not far removed from the concrete canyons of Manhattan, and not so far from where Leah lingered in the coop apartment of her ex-husband. Now that word ‘thumping,’ it lived in my mind, Fane demonstrating that she had penetrating power of her own. Evidently, I had set a fire going in her. I could imagine her day as one of anticipation, for as the Young Rascals sang, she had been lonely too long and looking, as was I, for the great if temporary escape that sex seemed to offer. And yes, let me elevate above the dinky once again and acknowledge that in a superficial way she reminded me of you with her slender body and short black hair.*

*I don’t know what the word for Fane would be. Sophisticated? Libidinous? Maybe just sexually experienced. I wasn’t as ready for her as I had presented myself. After serving a cup of tea, she said, ‘Well, should we begin?’ I followed her upstairs into the bedroom, where she casually removed her blouse and slacks and stood in a dull white bodysuit. I was still untying my sneakers as she lay on the bed and already having second thoughts when she said, “Do get a move on.”*

It didn’t go well. He was soft as an old carrot and remained so. And yet, Fane was quite understanding. “It happens. Don’t worry about it,” she said. Her calico cat had joined them on the bed and soon Luther’s skin was irritated and itchy. He had left his clothes and sneakers in one place, sensing he would not last the night even without the cat hairs, and there in the dark had one leg in his pants when Fane said, “Leaving already, my getaway artist?”

“I didn’t want to wake you, but the fact is, I have allergies and the hairs from your cat make it impossible to sleep. I’m sorry.”

Again, Fane told him not to worry, and so made it easy for him to leave. Dawn was already breaking when he arrived at the train station. He was grateful for the morning light and yet there was darkness in daylight too, back in Manhattan the spectacle of men in the subway, mostly black, sleeping on benches they could not fully stretch out on in their street clothes, men with no home to go home to, no private bathroom in which to shower and shave and brush their teeth. They would have no change of underwear or socks. They would come to hungry and dirty with no refuge from the streets and other public venues they could find. There would be no loved ones to call. Their future would be jails or other institutions or the morgue. Luther shuddered. The sight of these broken men activated fears of his own, fears that went back to childhood and his mother saying, of Simon Weill, “He can have us out in the street just like that,” snapping, or trying to snap her fingers, leaving Luther to imagine the Garatdjians out on the sidewalk with the rain pouring down on them and their sorry possessions. He was glad to surface on Eighty-sixth Street and Broadway and minutes later be home in his own bed.

He was not done with Fane. Things had to run their course. Tried her bed once more, but it was no go. Did manage to hear her story. The husband who ditched her. Just up and left. A Wall Street investment guy, one of the suspenders crew riding hard on the Metro-North for the loot that Gotham could yield. A man in the confines of his moneyed world. Left her nothing. Nothing. Her tone one of grievance but also amazement. “I rent. Can you believe it? I rent? Who does that?” Said other things. Her husband walked on the kinky side. Swapping. Orgies. She was all right with that. Said she didn’t care for children. Couldn’t be bothered with them, the little brats. This last bothered Luther. It didn’t seem normal to speak of children in such a way. And her scorn for African American kids prominent in the media for their after-school raids on stores.

“The young scholars,” she mocked. And other things. The copper pots hanging from hooks and collecting dust. The stacks of Burger King napkins, bearing witness to her addiction to junk food. And yes, the gas she more than once passed.

She had something for him as well. “Don’t be more important than you are. You’re not the love of my life,” she said, after that second night. And yet her availability called him back. She was generous with oral sex. Went all the way with it. Said it was in the natural order of things to swallow. Said it excited her to give pleasure. The thought occurring to Luther that maybe, just maybe, if he adorned her. The third night he came bearing a gift. She opened the box and delicately extracted the garter belt and black nylons.

“A gift from you to you. How thoughtful,” she laughed, then went into another room, and returned wearing the erotic lingerie. Aroused, he followed her up the stairs again, but it just wasn’t happening.

“I’m out of excuses,” he said.

“I haven’t heard you make any.”

“This is true. Am I of the age to be impotent?”

“Don’t worry about it.” There was acceptance in her voice. She was saying that she had seen a lot in the sexual arena.

*Celeste, I had been doing Fane up brown, as Marge on the line used to say. Compassion was lacking. She had been left and the wound hadn’t healed. Was it her fault that the light that was in Leah was not in her, as I perceived the light to be?”*

“You have lots of balls in the air. Sooner or later they will begin to fall to the ground,” Glanton said, in this time. No chuckle plenty. No soreness reigning.

In this time Glanton had a lady love of his own who loved him real good with words, being in love with his mind but not his body. Glanton said it plain. “She is not attracted to me. Why would she be? I’m old enough to be her grandfather.” As if he could defeat with a humble admission the ceaseless longing that gripped him when they were apart and out of touch. Holly Wood was the name she went by as part of the reinvention of herself. She had her blondness and her tan and her extra white teeth and her jogger’s body. *Now Celeste, Glanton would brag on him and Holly Wood as to the brilliant intellectual conversations they had on everything from world politics to physics. Hearing him go on, I could only feel sadness that she should be his everything while for her he was but a sideshow. Already have I noted the doubt I felt about his assertion that he and Babs had unconditional love for each other, and if he was wrong about himself and Babs, would that mean I was wrong about you and me? But life has a way of going on, and the doubt could not sustain itself.*

*Getting back to Glanton’s soreness, it did express itself when I mentioned my fear of what consequences might result from intimacy with Leah, at which point he exploded, saying “You want to f\_\_\_ her. Admit it. Just admit it. Stop with the BS,” in coarser words to that effect. He was expressing his frustration that I should have the physical intimacy with Leah that he was denied with Holly Wood. It was best for me to set aside the dinky and see his outburst in that light and let compassion reign where soreness had shown itself.*

The light was blinking on the answering machine the morning following Luther’s night with Fane. Leah was reaching out, saying she missed him, and would she see him at the RoR meeting that evening? Knowing that Fane would likely be at the meeting as well, Luther showed up anyway, hoping for the best. Leah arrived late to the packed room and took the only available

seat, which happened to be next to Luther. It also happened that Fane was sitting directly opposite them, on the other side of the speaker's table. By meeting's end, she sensed the connection between Luther and Leah, or so her stricken expression seemed to say. He followed Leah out the door, the alternative being to leave her with his nemeses; by this time, he suspected several of having an active interest in Leah and were seeking to displace him. Sex, even of the inept kind, brought with it attachment. Fane had been making room in her life for Luther. He hadn't meant to be cruel. It was more stupidity that had led to the blunder.

Fane had her dignity. Some days later a featherweight package arrived. No note. Inside were the garter belt and stockings to speak for themselves.

The issue of personal honesty had led Luther to confess to Celeste, in front of the Oiseau, that he was seeing Leah, and now another issue involving honesty was raising itself. Luther hadn't given careful attention to the matter of safe sex in his relations with Leah. After all, he had never strayed beyond the marriage bed in his years with Celeste, and was certain she hadn't either, and so he didn't consider AIDS to be an issue for him personally when he engaged with Leah, as his sexual experiences following the separation had been inconsequential owing to erectile dysfunction, if that's what it was. But Leah had been single and sexually active for some years during which the AIDS crisis grew. She was concerned not only about the virus but other STDs. For this reason she had initially requested that Luther wear a condom and only relented when he insisted that his penis sheathed in a prophylactic would doom him to failure. "I need to be able to feel the road. Do you understand?" he asked, provoking her to respond with laughter at what she considered his absurdity. Still, over time, it became a non-issue. But that begrudging trust was owing to the assumption that their connection was exclusive, never mind the fact that

CIA agent man could well have been spicing up his overseas life by intriguing himself into the bedrooms of beautiful women in the capitals of the world. But that was all speculation. The fact remained that Luther had been with Fane, and there had been unprotected sex, of a kind. It was for Luther to let honesty be his guide. He had no choice, as his qualms over this concealment only kept growing, and he couldn't go to Fane and ask about her sex life post-marriage, not now, not after abandoning her.

“How dare you? You are a lying cheat,” said Leah, when Luther came clean.

“But you are seeing your CIA agent fiancé. Doesn't that matter?”

“Don't you dare refer to him like that. Do you hear me? His name is Benjamin Beau.”

“Roger that. As in Beaujolais. I will remember. But do you hear *me*?”

“I have been open about seeing Benjamin. I notice that doesn't keep you away from me.”

“It's you who has been keeping away from me. A whole month for me to grow more and more depressed.”

“Didn't I tell you Benjamin and I had some serious work to do on our relationship?”

“What you say is fact based, I must admit. So how is the work going? Has a new infrastructure been put in place to shore up your relationship.?”

“Don't get smart with me, Luther.”

“All I am asking is if you two have built a bridge over your troubled waters. What's wrong with that?”

“I am beginning not to like you.”

In spite of everything, they made love, the kind Luther was capable of. “You will see. I am aces and good to go and all of that,” he said, afterward.

But soreness is soreness, and with Leah it had staying power. Though Luther got tested and the result was negative for the virus, Leah said to him some days later that Benjamin Beau was out for continuing to put his mother before her and that now she would be swinging into action.

“You did say swinging, not schwinging, did you not?”

“Listen to me, Luther. Listen. Since you insist on seeing other women, I will be seeing other men.”

“I don’t want to see other women. I was just intolerably lonely because of your prolonged absence.” But Luther could see he wasn’t getting through.

*Now Celeste, some years later the Dude said it better than I ever could. This will not stand. Or if it was to stand, I would not stand there for it. “Actions have consequences,” I said, words that would seem to have been more like a reaction than a response, though in fact, it was a response. I was through. I had tried to be perfect. I had made myself fully available. Enough. Her declaration struck terror into me, as your frequent mention of Jim Boulee had. Mr. CIA Agent Man had represented her past, in my mind. But for her to possibly begin engaging with someone from RoR would have been too great a defeat. She would have been saying, in choosing such a bloke, that I was less than eminent in my own RoR domain. I would have had to endure the humiliation of my fall from grace in front of the members of my home group. Call it false pride. Call it whatever. The next day I left work and thought, in a moment of weakness, to head east to the meeting place, but my feet took me west, and with each step, a feeling of exhilaration grew. Finally, finally, was I acting on my own behalf and confronting the obsession that had ruled me for over a year. “Each day brings new healing,” became my mantra, as if I had been coming off*



*the bottle or some powerful drug. I could sit home and focus on reading a book instead of fixating on the phone and trying to will it to ring. And yet there was pain. The phone did ring some days later; it took everything not to pick up the receiver when I saw her name in the caller ID box. And it took everything and more not to call her when I heard her message. "Hey, Luther. Where are you? I miss you." As if she had not said what she did. As if she had not heard my response. But then, maybe she hadn't. Or maybe she had spoken reflexively, her anger getting the better of her. And didn't her anger suggest jealousy, and didn't jealousy suggest that she had feelings for me? Wasn't her message a hopeful sign that we did have a future? And yet I didn't take the bait. Yes, I picked up the phone, but I called Glanton, not Leah, and screamed into his answering machine "I want out. I want out. I don't want this anymore." And as I did, this image came to me of having been dragged through a briar patch by some wild creature whose tail I had been holding onto. It was for me to let go. Celeste, the next week confirmed the rightness of my decision. There was no follow-up call from Leah. A space was opening up between us.*

Luther went to Riverside Park, to the western edge, where the water rats were, big as cats, though he didn't see them anymore, those ugly gray things, the way all rats, of whatever size, were ugly, with their skinny, ratty tails. They felt the hatred. A squirrel would ponder on the footpath its next move in the relentless search for sustenance. Just dawdle like it had all day, even as people strolled past. And there was nothing to do but regard them, with their bushy tails and cute faces as they nibbled on a nut, with affection. A person could show that regard for the furry creatures because they meant no harm to humankind. Couldn't call them vermin, a scourge, the way you could a rat. The very word, so uncompromisingly short and stark, conveying in its sound darkness and menace and disease. Maybe even worse. That they would inherit the earth

and grow big as humankind and maybe even walk erect instead of totter and dart about. But when did you ever see a rat brazen about in broad daylight? Not a chance.

I am not a rat. I am a human being. So Luther thought, staring out from the bench on which he sat at the boats drifting by. And Leah was not a rat. She was a human being, too. The anger was still there, but he had gone where he didn't belong. Being so new to RoR relative to his time in the program, she would have more growing to do. Still, he had no regrets. Couldn't say he truly regretted any sexual experience. Human contact of that kind meant something, even when it was random and reckless. Maybe that first experience he regretted. The prostitute who looked as old as his mother. Her gold tooth. He would have fled the whorehouse if he had only dared. And the several other prostitutes when he was still a kid, including the one who gave him crabs. Not good. Or later, the discount brothel he had bicycled to several times while living with Sarah in Chinatown. That was OK. But not now. Now he couldn't. Some shift had occurred. If ever he had the impulse, and he did, the threat of a transmittable disease was a check, as was the reality that these women were essentially human receptacles. The sense too that he would be left feeling lonely and sad after their short time together.

Cyclists whizzed past, bent over the handlebars of their fancy multi-gear bikes, many of them helmeted and wearing those tight fitting shorts and tops. Aggressive they were, as if competing in the Tour de France. They didn't belong on what was a footpath. Bad enough that the strollers had to contend with the joggers. The world in motion while he just sat there. That was OK. A lot could be achieved by just sitting. Don't just do something; sit there. I'm a human being, not a human doing. Didn't he hear these little sayings now and then in RoR? He was growing. He would be more comfortable punching himself in the face than acknowledging his

progress, but there had been a change, and it had been wrought by great pain. He could be with himself. No more need to rush about. Could be where his feet were. No more longing. All of that.

As if to test his assertion of change, a young woman happened by, not without looking his way. A pretty woman with an intelligent, serious face. The brief eye contact jump-started him off the bench in her direction but his legs felt like lead and so the distance between them only grew. He could, he supposed, break into a run to close the gap, but such eagerness would only draw attention to himself and it would not work in his favor to approach her huffing and puffing. She turned up a steep set of stairs leading out of the park. A quarter of the way up the staircase, Luther sat down, exhausted. I am pursuing what I don't really want. I have been knocked down and cannot get up. I am through with love, like the song says. These thoughts came to Luther.

And this. Across the Hudson River, her personal moat, is Celeste. I must talk to her. Not to right an ancient wrong, for there has been none, but because she is the only one I want to tell about this late-breaking development with Leah. The only one. I must have her ear. I must have her understanding. I must have this communication to bring her up to date on my life if I am to be spared the sea of emptiness all around me.

*In this time, Celeste, there was a man named Hot Blood who had savagery in his disposition and, as his name suggests, was quick to take offense and remonstrate with friend and stranger alike. A man on high alert for slights but a man nonetheless, and one made of rugged material that led him to excel in the military and rise to the top as an executive and to father a son who had the potency of his father's genes, enabling him to procreate in his own right when wedded bliss came to him. But Autumn Wind ran to coolness where his father was concerned. He had suffered outright neglect and abandonment when Hot Blood was led from the marriage bed*

*by nose candy and alcohol and the persistent scent of younger women. For this reason did I suggest to Hot Blood, in his anguish, that he needn't hide his love away, as John Lennon sang, because a father's love for his son, I presumed, could never be hidden away, but that Hot Blood himself might walk on the cool side where his son was concerned as an alternative to Hot Blood's typical mode of expression, so fierce and possessive and persistently demanding that Autumn Wind be present for him. I further suggested, as a practical matter, that he contemplate the reality that he was but a sideshow in his son's life and would increasingly be so as the years passed, and so to look elsewhere than to his offspring to fill his void. When he resisted, I had only to ask how attentive he had been to his own father when he, Hot Blood, was a young man moving out into the world. But reason is elusive for some. It hides out in different parts of the country and pays no heed to petitioning. For sure, Hot Blood treated me less as an oracle than an impediment to his desire when I spoke to him thusly. (Yes, thusly.)*

*Possibly to show I had not cornered the market on truth, Hot Blood said Leah had been sharing in the RoR rooms that I had jilted her. I had made a blunder truly sober men weren't supposed to make by robbing the cradle, he went on, at which point I told Hot Blood that he could remain in my life only if he spared me any further reporting on the trials and tribulations of Leah F, though at no point did I say mendacity was her middle name.*

*Now Celeste, it is not beyond you to speak to me through your silence, your land being ruled by tact, and what I am hearing is that perhaps I go a tad overboard and stray from humankind in assigning names that suggest a quality more than a person beloved of his parents, and even more when deciding on a given name to go with the family name, as who am I to usurp that precious function? And I have no answer for you but the one that you yourself have*

*provided, that I am distant from humankind and have been walking that path away from it for some time.*

*In this time I browsed the shelves of the mid-Manhattan branch of the New York Public Library at the lunch hour, and came across a quote from the philosopher Ernest Becker serving as an epigraph in a novel by the great Denis Johnson. Only that one time did I chance to come upon that quote; never since have I been able to find it, though I have searched every novel Denis Johnson ever published. A poor paraphrase will have to suffice. "Once our creaturely nature is truly perceived, with all its ramifications—the reality that we share with the lower orders of creation the need to defecate—then our perception of humanity is changed forever; there is no going back." Immediately I thought of Gautama in his father's palace, where he witnessed the courtesans as they slept, groaning and grinding their teeth. In that moment did he grasp the impermanence of life and was propelled from the palace to sit under the bodhi tree.*

Celeste consented to meet with Luther at Cafe Rienzi, just west of Broadway on the Upper West Side. Being with her was the same but different. He didn't apologize for going off with Leah. There seemed no point to that, and Celeste, he sensed, would not know what to do with such an apology. She showed no evident sign of animosity toward him, though he couldn't be sure there wasn't a hidden hurt and did allow himself to wonder if she would have received him so kindly if he were still with Leah. On the other hand, maybe her acceptance of him derived from indifference. Maybe she had moved on. These were things it wasn't for him to know, at least not then. He was merely grateful to have her ear; as always, she was the most sympathetic of listeners and seemed to have a genuine interest as he spoke with her about Leah and the wounds he had received for venturing into dangerous waters. It had been weeks since his last

contact with Leah, and he believed he was through the worst of it. In fact, he was feeling great about the rupture. If there was anything different between him and Celeste, it was the place of sexual neutrality in regard to each other that now seemed to exist. As if by unspoken agreement, the subject was one to be avoided. He didn't dare to assume that Celeste felt in any way deprived. He didn't want to be caught up in such presumption. Nor did he allow himself to speculate whether she had taken on a lover, though it did not seem likely, given the darkness from which she was still emerging.

With all of this concern for Celeste and any possible lingering hurt she might be experiencing, Luther tended to lose sight of the simple reality that Celeste had asked him to leave and gone through a startling transformation. She was building anew from the ground up and in the process he had been displaced.

Soreness, for Luther, had no radius, no circumference, no bounding due to time and space, and there being nothing Vox wasn't willing to hold forth on, Luther went to Mr. Know It All.

Luther: The soreness is in every part of my body and all of my mind as well. Mia does not return my phone calls. Clearly, her college life leaves her very little time for the likes of me."

Whatever the lassitude that had her in its grip, which only horses and John Lennon and the Beatles and Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel and Guns N' Roses could temporarily bring her out of, a deli in Columbia County, New York, did the trick, for it was there that the lowly circumstances of her life came to tax her amour propre and she saw doors of opportunity closing on her as Luther had seen after doing his hackie thing for several months back in the day. "Assez bien. Simplement assez bien," she exclaimed, and threw off the apron she had meekly been

wearing while handling the sandwich meats of America and laying the slices on beds of the bread of America and slathering them with all-American mustard and mayonnaise.

A high school dropout, Mia left SoHo to live with her father, Philip, in Columbia County, when Celeste needed to be alone in order to begin her recovery. Following her deli epiphany, she studied for her GED, received her high school equivalency diploma, and returned to New York City but not the loft to enroll at Eugene Lang College, in Greenwich Village. Here she dwelt for two years among those who feasted on the paperback novels of America. Never quite one of them, she began to yearn for the hard facts of mathematics and science, and sensed increasingly her aptitude for this more rigorous realm.

Vox: She has entered a new phase. Do not chase after her. Love is not ritual. You do not have to see her every two weeks for dinner to prove that you love her.

So Vox spoke.

*Now Celeste, Mia was small in body but big in her mind, and so ascension potential was hers to claim and manifest, which she did by going on to the very great Mount Holyoke College in very great South Hadley, Massachusetts, where picturesqueness was the norm and any deviation from it routinely abolished. And yes, the town had its commons and town hall and church steeples to signify its roots in a Sunday God for one and all. And because one thing has an innate right to lead to another, let me also say that my sister Rachel was a Mount Holyokian, though in a very different time, the late 1950s, and if you are going to sing it's crying time again, you're going to leave me, as Ray Charles inimitably did, then go on, do your wretched laughing thing, but that will not deter me from what you mockingly call sorrow acre, for she was born with great promise only to fall and fall and leave this earth alone with no comprehension of the word*

*loneliness, as she had her Lord Jesus Christ, though there was a time when grief and utter desolation had her in their grip owing to the departure of a boyfriend who couldn't love her enough to stay.*

Always would he come to Vox now. Believing, not believing. These were not considerations. Simple need drove him.

Luther: Feeling some fear. In my morning meditation the word *divorce* appears once again. It may be that Celeste has not let go of this option as a course of action. The word cuts like glass and the vision comes to me of Celeste, my Celeste, as a cold executioner. She is after my head as Salome sought the beheading of John the Baptist in that Bible story she is so taken with. My ego tells me she is planning my death. And yes, crass as it will expose me as being, I equate termination to access to the *money of the marriage* as a form of death, as I have read it is one thing to never had substantial means and quite another to lose it. Left on my own, would I not be truly exposed as a hanging string, altogether weak and needy? Would I not then reach out to her even more frantically, only to engender in her revulsion and further distancing? Separation seemed unthinkable, and it happened. Why should I not see divorce as an inevitability now?

Vox: Do not regard the present in terms of the past. There is no question but that she feels threatened. Divorce is possible, should that fear continue or worsen. She would be divorcing you to save her life. And you will not deny her that lifesaving measure, as you love her unconditionally. Know only this: nothing real in your relationship can be threatened. Love is the only reality. There is nothing to impede your continued healing.

Luther: And what about financial insecurity?



Vox: Sooner or later you must understand and accept that I am your provider.

Luther: My fear has only grown engaging with you. Divorce now seems inevitable.

Vox: It is a non-issue, and this you are in the process of coming to terms with.

Luther: Now Vox, it is a source of great consternation to me that Vanguardia should be doing her vilifying thing regarding the church Celeste has taken a liking to, in spite of Celeste's reservations about the pomposity of orating Pastor Thlink. Yes, she has confirmed for me that he too is among those who slap their bibles and slap them good, not as punishment, but as an expression of his gusto for this text that words alone cannot convey, and it is her understanding that such bible slapping has a long, long tradition. So she is forgiving in this regard. What sinks her heart is the foulness of the accusation unleashed by Vanguardia. Baby-faced Pastor Thlink the orchestrator of the ritual abuse of young boys and girls and even of infanticide? Why should Vanguardia cast such aspersions? Does she not know that Celeste is seeking spiritual guidance about the marriage? Because Vanguardia has but one purpose, and that is to keep Celeste tightly within her fold. Her abiding intent is to claim Celeste for her own. What can I do?

Vox: Only what you know you have to do. Let go. Vanguardia cannot harm her. Your course is charted. Simply stay out of the way.