

Down to One

The photographer was dead and his work was, too, in Gideon's jaundiced view, but not in that of the museum curators. Oh, it came alive briefly, but it was a corpse all the same, even that shot of the society woman, sleek, her hair slicked, her lips pulled back. The cruel smile. Her feral intent exposed. The photographer in the throes of more, more. Grabbing for what was not his. As indiscriminate with his camera as with his cock.

The world full of distortion and false claims. Take those sadly plain women regarded as beautiful owing to a million dollar investment in their looks.

To express one's venom. To drain the cesspool in one's mind.

Gideon had to exit the thronged museum. Patrons hungry as wolves devouring one unsatisfying image after another. His back was crying for relief. Walking was something he did now between sit-downs. His spine had seen to that.

Recompense for the innocents. The blind battalions of the deceitful. Old man gibberish entered his mind as the sunlight struck.

He pulled out his Samsung cell. No smart phone for him. Why pay eighty bucks a month for a service plan when he could have his Vonage voice over Internet land line for half the price and buy minutes, as needed, for his cell? Was he a keyed-up executive? Did he want to be a slave to the Internet outdoors as he often could feel when at home? *I don't think so.* Isn't that what the young people would say?

He called home. He had gotten in the habit. Two or three more times he would check for a fish on the line when he was out and about in the city. Mostly he would get some woman on the recording, saying in a nasty voice, after instructing him to enter his password, "You have no messages." Saying it in a tone of reproach as if addressing a

friendless loser and saying it loud too. Try as he might, he would terminate the call with a sheepish expression, as if others had overheard, and all because of that woman taking savage glee in letting him know nobody loved him. Because that's all it was, you were looking for signs, confirmations, that somebody was out there. Not that you would settle for just anyone. Not the ones who called to tell you their cares and troubles. Not those. The men in his life called him with that sort of stuff. And it wasn't as if he didn't care for them and wouldn't try to respond to their needs. But he was looking for something softer, even if he didn't truly want it. That thing, it died hard, hard. I'm not age appropriate. That is what he had come to say, not to women, he hoped never to do that, but to men he would confess that he was stuck with some idea that he was young despite all the mounting evidence to the contrary. A few drops of water on his head used to get snagged in a thicket of hair. Now those drops penetrated quickly to his scalp and ran down his forehead. Hairs sprouting everywhere except where they were supposed to. And all those people calling him "Sir" and offering him their seat on the subways and buses. The truth was he liked the park bench, saw how it could become his universe. Already his world was constricting. It wasn't lost on him. People telling him to travel when he really didn't want to, not anymore, not since his last injury. He shouldn't say that. Shouldn't make it a definitive thing. Maybe next year. Let others travel if they liked it so much. All that talk of a bucket list. Like he had to venture to the Outback because he had never been there. He kept saying that as he got older the journey became more internal but people stared at him pityingly, as if he were the coward he knew himself to be, entirely ruled by his fears. And he had them. No doubt about that. Some Jihadi with a knife or bomb on the subway or a plane or the streets he walked. Even sitting on the bench he didn't feel inviolate. Any

second a rabid rat could bite his ankle or a rabid raccoon rip off his calf muscle for a late lunch. They were all over the park now too. How to tell people he was afraid of bears and even coyotes lurking in wooded areas.

When the world doesn't want you anymore, you have to practice the necessary detachment.

"Some things slip into the past," a deceased mentor had said, years before. The dead slip into the past, but before they do, they slip into detachment.

A girl in jeans and sandaled feet and a T-shirt. Her full, thick hair. The multiple dwelling places her beauty would find for her. The straight ahead stare her physical magnificence required if she was to live. The tracking scheme of his eyes that followed her path.

But what did you know. He had gotten a bite.

"Gideon, it's been a long while, I know. I apologize for not having been in touch. I'm afraid I'm calling with horrible news. Maury died this morning after what was supposed to be minor surgery, here at home. I won't say anymore Please call when you can."

So there it was, the tableau of vanishing. Maury had disappeared, as did the girl structured supreme, but she got to live. Where was the evidence that Maury didn't, too? I'll show you the body, you say? The body?

Gideon saw grass and heard the screams of children chasing each other across the sweep of green. He felt the kindness of the brilliant sun and bore witness to the gay colors of soda cans and potato chip bags on the stands of sidewalk vendors. If all that he had wanted—sex—was gone from his life, he could live with that. As for the sudden

disappearance of Maury, he sensed with unease the morning glory of happiness rising in his mind. Now his sister would know what it was to be alone. He lived with the awareness of his abnormality when it came to death. All that talk of his of throwing dirt on family members—not his mother but his father and his three older sisters and older brother. Not normal at all to be in contempt of the remaining members' grief, to view their tears and sobs as so much maudlin histrionics. And the way he held himself apart, as if the dream of his early years of being the only child was being slowly realized with each departure.

But he would say the right thing, even if he couldn't always think it. And he could even begin to think the right thing after a period of thinking the wrong thing, that he wouldn't call her at all. Because love began to seep through. She was his sister *hearing Faulkner's Quentin Compson: have you ever had a sister? Well, have you?* and only remaining sibling. They were shy with each other. Therein lay the source of their friction, the animosities that ensured safety from the unbearable closeness that had been theirs in the long ago, that time of him wanting her to be more than a sister and she relating to him as more than a brother. Those endless summers at Bible camp, his mother saying, "You will be out in the fresh air," and Vera's betrayal, saying, "I will have nothing to do with you. You are not my brother." This after he had been caught stealing candy meant for the canteen. Mars Bars, Necco Wafers, Good n' Plenty Good n' Plenty (even now he had to simulate the chugging of a train, the Good n' Plenty Good n' Plenty train).

She answered on the second ring. Such availability was not Vera's way. You could leave a message and not hear back from her at all. Distance was her strategy for death,

bleaching white the word *brother* so no trace remained. For a long time had the policy of extermination been going on.

“I’m sorry I have not been in touch. We will have to talk about that at some point.” Her mind was elsewhere now. Her voice had the expected sadness in it.

She gave him the story. Maury had entered New York Presbyterian Hospital for routine and minor surgery. A blockage had occurred that was preventing him from moving his bowels. Following the operation Maury had been in pain and looked pitifully weak. Vera pleaded with the hospital staff not to eject him from the hospital the next day, but they said “Get out! Get out!” So did they say in their hospital way. Back at home he was fine for a day but then complained of great pain and began bleeding heavily from his nose and mouth.

“I’m dying,” Maury said, but still was the hospital a fortress of adamancy. Dr. Ruhlbahni, the chief surgeon, came on the line. He prescribed a stronger pain medication, Morphone, and said Maury should substitute liquids for solid food for the next few days.

“Doctor, I’m terrified for him. He needs hospital care,” Vera said.

“No need to worry. He’ll be fine,” Dr. Ruhlhani replied, bending Vera to his will with his voice so confident.

“He lied, Gideon. Dr. Ruhlhani lied. He didn’t care. Maury was dead the next morning. Why did I listen to that moron? Why didn’t I just call for an ambulance?”

But it was not only Dr. Ruhlhani who stood in opposition to an ambulance. Maury too was angrily opposed to being hospitalized again.

No shade had been pulled over the sun, but Gideon did begin to experience the weight of the event.

“How’s your back?” she felt obliged to ask, in light of his availability to her.

His back was fine now, he said. He had been laid up in the fall because of a compression fracture, his fifth, but that was behind him, thanks to physical therapy and the continuation of exercises at home. The doctors had finally convinced him to acquiesce to a course of treatment that required the daily self-injection of a parathyroid hormone into his abdomen over a period of two years. That was to be followed by three years of reblast infusion, a treatment involving a semiannual fifteen-minute injection of a bone-strengthening medication by hospital staff, in order to lock in the gains of the first medication.

“Why such a long-term treatment?”

“The doctors convinced me that though my T-scores had improved to the point that I had osteopenia, not severe osteoporosis, the numbers were virtually irrelevant. ‘We have to stop the fracturing. We have to stop the fracturing,’ became the mantra of Dr. Ausabinden, my endocrinologist. Trust me, I had tried a holistic approach, but it hadn’t worked. The fracturing continued.”

“Were you alone with this Dr. Ausabinden? I’m not liking his name and I’m afraid I’m not liking him,” Vera said.

“Yes,” he acknowledged.

“You mustn’t do that, Gideon. Next time I will go with you. Promise to call me so I can deal with the likes of him.”

In that moment he felt smothered by his sister’s love. No, he felt in the clamp of it. Terrible love. He stared up at the blue sky and saw those words written large. *All or*

nothing love. War or peace love. Total control or be gone from my sight love. All these appeared, contrail from an invisible plane.

From another source, or the same, came other words, these ones spoken: *the iterations are not forever. The ghost of finiteness spreads grayly down the footpaths of the pretty park.*

And his mother singing “Bringing in the Sheaves” and “In the Garden,” as she was wont to do.

A river ride was for happiness meant. How the train negotiated the concrete horror for leaves of grass and a water view. Spuyten Duyvil, Riverdale (from where a love of his had originated), Yonkers (once the city of a flame of his), and, in a short time, Dobbs Ferry. He lingered on the platform following the train on the long straightaway until it disappeared around a bend and only the lonely, beckoning tracks remained. It was hard to leave all that, the promise of eternal adventure there where nature shared its space with the artifacts of man, but Jen, Vera’s daughter, would be waiting for him topside. She would have seen and heard the train come and go, and he did not want for her to attach the word *dilatory* to his person.

She stood outside her father’s car up the hill from the station. A black Infiniti, a name that stood out owing to the vicious cleverness of the advertising genius who knew the abundance of *i’s*, especially the last, would lodge in your brain like the thinnest of needles. The car so black and yet not at all funereal and she in a strangely long dress for summer or any season.

“Hello, Uncle Gideon. Thank you so much for coming. How was the trip?”

A greeting reserved for a guest. He deserved no better. Far apart from his sister, how could he expect to be close to his niece? She was back from San Francisco for four months and living in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and yet he had only learned of this change from Vera the other day when he spoke with her. Still, though he was on high alert, he could hear no mockery in her use of the family title.

“Fine. Just fine,” he said, and made a point of hugging her in lieu of what he saw as the blather road of “I’m so sorry for your loss” and all of that. If he could be fearful of the silence in the presence of others as to what it might signify, he wanted to come to the place where he could trust it to enable a deeper truth to emerge than words could convey.

Thirty was young to lose a father, he supposed. He himself had been twenty-four when his own father passed away, and at the same age as Maury. But Jen had adored her father. He could do no wrong in her eyes, while Gideon’s father could do nothing right. He thought to tell Jen that we internalize the dead, that they become a presence we carry within us for the rest of our lives. It had taken Gideon many, many years to miss his father and to understand how great a loss it had been not to have had a close and positive relationship with him. Maybe Jen would heal more quickly.

“I want to live by the railroad tracks. They are the ticket to eternity,” he finally said.

“You are as strange as I remember you being. And it’s a surprise that you remember me at all. I thought maybe I should carry a sign saying ‘Jen,’ like those drivers waiting for their passengers at airports.”

“Whatever do you mean?” he asked, while knowing what she meant.

“The Guggenheim Museum. That’s what I mean. I called and waved to you from the spiral below and you looked down at me with smiling incomprehension.”

“But is that not as good a way as any to look at the world?”

“Not when I am your niece. And even when I came rushing up and stood in front of you, you wore the same look of smiling astonishment. I had to identify myself, and in front of my girlfriend. Do you know how that made me feel?”

He had not been prepared for intensity of this kind, or any kind.

“I am putting myself in your shoes right now,” Gideon said.

“And well you should.”

And well she placed her adverb, Gideon thought, as the Beatles shouted, Hey, you have to hide your love away, for in the time between his first awareness that a young woman was staring up at him to her face-to-face arrival, the thought had come that love of the carnal kind, not that of an adult for a child, was materializing. Even after she had shouted, “It’s me. It’s me,” his face remained a mask of smiling bewilderment until she was compelled to come forth with her given name. With belated recognition came the shock and shame, and the dreadful fear that she had seen what he now was so desperate to hide.

But that was five or six years ago, when she was still a college student. Why would she remember such a thing? The answer was quickly apparent. They had not seen each other since. Again, without closeness to Vera, how was he to have closeness to her daughter? The laws of relationship did not seem to work that way.

How soft the air. How quiet the streets of the river town. The Hudson commanded peace—and greenness. That was its eternal law. And yet to live here would be to die,

from the slowness and the atomization. A feeling of loneliness sought to engulf him even as he sat in the car.

She was not a restless, distracted driver, endlessly texting or doing the Speakerphone thing. He gave her a high vigilance rating. He could detect no sly and secret, even from herself, desire to be gone. Her father had departed, but she had another love to live for, if she could only find him.

“Colin and I are living apart. He stayed in San Francisco when I moved back to New York. The thing is that I don’t know if I want to marry him,” Jen said, as she pulled up in front of the house. Clarity sought its way in her textured voice.

Vera was still upstairs, and so they waited in the living room, where a memory he deemed a propos demanded expression. It could be a life-changer and save her years of agony.

When he was twenty-four and living in Hell’s Kitchen, in New York City, his girlfriend, Sarah, called one spring day from Boston, where she was finishing up art school, and said, in an angry, demanding tone, “So are we going to live together? Are we?” Things weren’t working out for Sarah. She sensed that she would not win the fifth year competition, and with it money to travel and study abroad. In all likelihood, the genius she had thrown Gideon over for would claim the prize. She had said previously that someday Gideon would take care of her, and that day was evidently coming. Gideon was in another place in his life; in his mind he had grown more distant from Sarah. In spite of the voice within him screaming no, no, don’t do that, do not say yes, do not ignore the fact that she is talking to you as if you are a nobody, a consolation prize at best, he heard himself say “Yes. Sure,” because he could not go down the road of pain

that saying no would have placed him on. Years of rancor and emotional turmoil might have been avoided if he had only responded with honesty.

“The old are always seeking to bury the young in the avalanche of their past, so I will conclude with some economy, some pith, not of the quality of La Rochefoucauld or Pascal, but pith nonetheless. Marry only when you’ve found the person you sense you want to grow old with,” Gideon said, seeking to make an amend for his verbiage.

“You *are* strange, Uncle Gideon. You take so long to say so little.”

“You have spoken truly,” Gideon replied, and suddenly, on his face, at least in his mind’s eye, appeared the beard of Papa Hemingway.

“You see. Your weirdness mitigates any sense that you are in full earnest.”

“How would you spell that?” Gideon asked, her last word exploding gray shrapnel in his consciousness and leaving him to wonder what manner of psychic she might be.

“What?”

“Never mind,” he replied, waving away his own question.

Vera was hovering above them, wandering about the upstairs rooms. It was her way. No one must take her for granted. No one. No one must see her as the afterthought she had been as a child, the hanging string, the sixth of six of tired parents. She must be the last to enter but also the last to leave, while he was Mr. Early, afraid of missing the train. Children of abandonment. Children of neglect.

The living room walls were floor to ceiling with books, many in paperback. Books are a bloodless substitute for life, he had read in an essay by Robert Louis Stevenson back in high school. The things people said. But if Vera had hidden herself

behind her books, he had his own means of maintaining his distance. That's what it meant to be an Armenian, if only on one side. Armenians hid their love away, as the song said. They peered from behind curtains at the street life below, their skin covered from the desert dust of forced marches.

He had not come without an invitation. He would never put himself in that position. Even so, there was an asterisk next to the visit. In speaking with Vera, he had tried to place himself at her service. Death had a unifying power. He had been down that road before with family. But had emotion caused him to build a bridge too far, one that would leave him stranded? Only after he had offered himself had Vera suggested that he make the trip. He had heard a note of falseness when she said he was needed at the meeting with the funeral home director. Possibly she was just trying to fit him in, to find a use for him, now that he had made himself available.

"Are you ready, Jen? We'll be late if you aren't," Vera called out as she descended the stairs, causing a squeal of protest.

"But Mom, you're the one holding us up."

"Jen, do as I say and get ready."

"But I am ready. Can't you see?" Her mother's war on logic was bringing Jen close to tears.

"There's no need to yell. I am right here."

"Mom, what are you doing?" Jen cried out.

In his mind, Gideon could hear Bert Bachrach and Dusty Springfield emoting from a long ago time about a house not being a home when there was no one there.

“It’s OK, Sweetie. It’s OK. We’re all having a hard time,” Vera said, as she turned to Gideon. “Hello, brother of mine.”

Swagananda have mercy. More gibberish entered his head. He gave his sister a quasi kiss on the cheek, she acquiescing by pulling back before contact could be made. The black, one-piece gown she wore—he wouldn’t go so far as to call it a dress—had a sheen that suggested a synthetic and even highly flammable oil-black fabric. In any case, a gown that called out for a close reading of the label and the avoidance of hot stoves.

This is a time of mourning, Gideon, of mourning. Have you no shame? Do you wish to be beaten half to death and then be beaten some more?

Mr. Jed Tremblette, assistant director of BodyWorks Funeral Home, was ready for them.

“We are open and at your service 24/7, because death waits for no one and no one waits for it. A smile should be essential for American citizenship, but in deference to the occasion and in full empathy with your pain, I am wearing my best sad today.”

Mr. Tremblette did have All-American and blond features, and did a decent job of looking stricken, as if he had just loudly passed gas. Nevertheless what Gideon understood the young man to be saying was that the family’s loss was his gain.

But Vera and daughter were more than enough for Mr. Tremblette, who from his fixed gaze, seemed enamored of Jen, a kind of torture he could not help inflicting on himself in spite of the wedding band that committed him to the monogamous path. Life does call to life, and evidently he had howling wolves in the night within his person. His presence served to make of the bickering of mother and daughter but a brief interlude and to resurface their natural and eternal bond.

Nap time was coming in the confines of the little conference room. Gideon's thoughts began to race as he sat at the head of the table but apart from the conversation, with which he had trouble keeping up. Maury had suggested cremation because it was less expensive than embalming a body, but Jen said was opposed. She wanted a Jewish service, with a rabbi present, though her father was more culturally than religiously Jewish; he seemed, if anything, to have an affinity with Christianity. Vera showed no strong conviction either way; she seemed intent on acquiescing to her daughter's wishes.

The burial had to be delayed pending an autopsy. Vera had to arrange for the autopsy on her own. The hospital claimed it bore no responsibility for having one performed once a patient had been released.

"The memorial service should be a happy occasion, and it can't be with a body there. We should separate the burial and the memorial service by at least a week and preferably two," Jen said, with a display of assertive smartness.

Delivery of the body to the autopsy site, and then the gravesite; the cost of a casket; tip money for the gravediggers; fees for the death certificates. Mr. Tremblette went down the list. Itemization brought order where there had been none. Suddenly Gideon wanted to sing about Johnny in the basement mixing up the medicine. Suddenly he wanted to ask Mr. Tremblette if he had ever been experienced. The stuff of irrelevancy seeking to assert itself again.

The issue beyond drowsiness and inappropriate utterance pressing in on him was how to stay present in his clothes. Mr. Tremblette, who wore a suit of mortuary black, had the advantage of formality, while Gideon felt himself shriveling in his Land's End seersucker shirt hanging outside his Docker's quasi jeans. Old fool. Old fool exposed as

trying to look younger than you are and now being punished for it. Surely Mr. Tremblette had written him off. Why else would he be addressing himself solely to Vera and Jen? Gideon's garb alone had exposed him. Because if you showed no respect for the dead, then what were you showing for the living?

On the wall were urns of varying sizes and shapes. There was the "Squat Box," which resembled a sturdier version of a container for your takeout order of General Tso's chicken. There were ceramic urns with names like "Morning Glory" and "Golden Hue" and "Ashes to Ashes" and longer names, a bonanza of buffoonery, like "Wink Once If You Love Me" and "Wink Twice If You Care to Do Something About It." Many had the decorator's touch and were suitable for the mantelpiece.

The fire next time for me. The annealing heat, Gideon thought.

Mr. Tremblette led them into the adjoining room to view the selection of caskets.

"Gee, boxes for the vertically challenged." Though it was clear the models had been shortened in the interest of economy, both of space and wood, Gideon couldn't help himself. Mr. Tremblette, in a departure from funeral home decorum, turned a castigating eye on him, as if to say his patience was wearing thin.

A pine casket having been selected, it only remained to decide where to lay the body down.

"What was the name of the place where we buried Luke?" Vera asked. Luke was their older brother. He had fallen down dead in a Florida parking lot. The story of it was not for then.

"Castle Nuevo," Gideon called out, as if he were a game show contestant.

"Very good," Vera said, with amusement in her voice.

“Castle Nuevo would be a very good choice,” Mr. Tremblette said. “It is only a ten minute drive from here.”

Yes, and train tracks and the river run alongside, one keeping a close watch on the other, Gideon thought but didn't say, remembering his brother's burial site.

Do people live here? Gideon wondered, seeing, as they left, kids sliding down the bannister to the main floor. It seemed ghastly that in the basement corpses were perhaps then being embalmed. It was not the medicine Mr. Dylan had in mind.

“We're going to take you to the Dobbs Ferry Diner. If it is not world famous, it should be,” Vera said, when they were once more in the car.

“My dad went there all the time, especially in retirement,” Jen said.

“Is the diner OK with you? I know you have fussy ways when it comes to food,” Vera said.

“It is more than OK. It is fine, and more than fine. It is perfect.”

“The last time Gideon came to dinner, actually the only time he came to dinner, he stared at the crab cakes on his plate as if they were boiled cockroaches.”

“No,” Gideon said in feeble protest, though he did recall eating around the crab cake she had prepared especially for him that night. He had done himself and her wrong. He had not spoken his mind beforehand, when she had given him every opportunity to do just that. Could he not have simply said, “No, but thank you, I don't eat crab cakes,” when she informed him in advance of the proposed menu? Fear, of a kind, had gotten to him, fear that she would strike him dead, or, if that was not likely, take slow and Sicilian revenge upon him, or pull off the mask of friendliness suddenly and show him a livid

stare as she ordered him out of her house. No warning came with her flash floods of anger that swept you from her life.

“Well, Uncle Gideon, just know that our eyes are going to be on you in the diner,” Jen said.

I have done it again, Gideon thought. Where truth was required, I have offered dishonesty, as if declaring who I am could yield a catastrophic consequence. He had not shared with them that, in his view, diner food was croak food and one step up from eating out of a garbage can. It was food for those committed to maintaining their high cholesterol, high sugar diets. Yes, he could be put on trial before the world community for ingratitude and stoned to death, given that many on the planet went to bed hungry and malnourished. After all, the whole world did not have access to the foods of OrganicOnly, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, or the financial resources to pay for such provisions. But he was who he was and he thought as he thought, the only problem being, as he had noted, that where thought and speech diverged, a man ran the risk of being unstable in all his ways, as the apostle James had warned.

“I will be up to the challenge. I am right now putting my game face on,” Gideon replied.

Of course, Vera had an issue with food herself, an excessive fondness for it. She had made no secret of this abiding fixation. But his sister’s eating habits were not a place for him to go, even if she was free to explore the same territory where he was concerned.

“You’re sure this is going to be all right?” Vera asked, as they settled into a booth.

“Diners are happy places for me. I can’t really explain why, but they seem to put me in touch with my childhood, a more innocent, or should I say, more ignorant, time,

when you felt you could eat the food of America with impunity. Heaven was a Robin Dell or Prexies hamburger. The latter advertised as having an Ivy League education. Yummy yum yum.”

“And you can’t do that now?” Jen asked.

“No. The food chain has been poisoned. Hot dogs contain the fecal matter of rats and hamburgers are ninety-five percent pink slime, the residue of horses that have been substituted for beef.”

“Well, that’s too bad. We’re sorry to have dragged you here.”

“But I’m happy to be here, as I said. Sometimes I think I would like to spend the rest of my days in a diner.”

“Stop being ridiculous,” Jen said, and indeed it did sound like an order. To be rebuked in such fashion, and by the young. On the verge of recoiling deep into his shell, he found a way to rally.

“My thoughts are my thoughts. My feelings are my feelings. My experience is my experience. I am not aiming for a predicate nominative trifecta. I am just speaking the truth as I know it to be.”

Jen did not meet him with a jeering frontal attack of sarcasm. She did not send shrapnel into his face with a simple but mocking “Really?” Rather, she showed a measure of deference. Perhaps it was his age.

“I was only saying...” she said.

“A coffee shop is a means to the past as a church is a means to God.”

“Uncle Gideon. You are trying too hard. I’m sorry, but you haven’t found your place in the universe.”

With no place to hide, Gideon could only say, “This has the ring, if not the solidity, of truth, to it.”

“Uncle Gideon, you stand up when you are supposed to fall down and fall down when you are supposed to stand up.”

“Who can say what is what in a storm?”

“Exactly,” Jen said.

Whether she spoke from the summit of irony or was hugging the baseline of sincerity, Gideon couldn't be sure, but went with the latter. “I'm relieved to hear you understand.”

“Well, the moment of truth has arrived,” Vera said. “What are you going to have, Gideon?”

“It is a tossup between a Belgian waffle and the pancakes. Because the cakes are more filling than the waffle and I have a great hunger, I will go with those.”

“You could get a stack of silver dollars instead.”

“I would rather spend money than eat it. And a silver dollar can be hard on the teeth.”

When he still did not receive a smash to the face, he had the tentative sense of being in new territory. And yet he had to ask himself, Have I begun building on quicksand? It did not feel like an irrelevant question.

“Well, you're a growing boy and need your strength, so eat up, whatever you choose,” Vera said.

“Mom, Uncle Gideon is not a growing boy. He is older than you.”

“Gideon will always be a growing boy.”

Though time had taken its toll, infantilism was still in play, and he could not hold himself entirely innocent. He did not ask what they would be having. Food was their domain, and it was not for him to enter, as his pronouncements had shown him. Still, he listened keenly as Jen ordered a burger deluxe, in memory of her father, and found himself reentering territory, if only tangentially, he had resolved to stay out of.

“Do you remember when we could eat without consequence?” he said to Vera.

“I sure do,” she said.

“What do you mean, without consequence?” Jen asked.

“We ate whatever we pleased. But after age thirty your metabolism changes. At least mine did. Now I gain weight if I so much as look at food. Actually, that’s not quite the case. Recently it’s been different.”

The exclusionary tactics of Hieronymus Bosch

“How so?” Jen asked.

He saw a green light holding steady and heard a voice say, “Go, go.” Sympathy, love, understanding. All these awaited him before promising to disappear in a cloud of forgetfulness.

He had brought the situation on himself by not heeding the warning of Dr. Ausabinden, his adenoidal doctor, young and yet withered but presumably gifted, given his undergraduate and medical school degrees from Harvard University. That exercise and nutrition and mega-doses of calcium and Vitamin were insufficient. Without medical intervention, the past would predict the future.

A mystery attached to the origin of Dr. Ausabinden’s orneriness. On Gideon’s first visit, the doctor had had the nerve to say, “Are you depressed? Your facial expression

hasn't changed in the half hour we have been together. Are you seeing a psychiatrist? Are you on meds?"

Gideon was stung. Such provocative patter required a strong response. "So I have to walk around with an expression of convention cheer to avoid the label 'depressed'?"

"Would it hurt you to smile once in a while?"

"Have I missed something? You are not, if I may say, the ambassador of good cheer." Though Gideon didn't say, as he waited for his appointment, the good doctor had seemed to scowl at him and the other patients as he came down the corridor to his office. How disappointing to find that Dr. Ausabinden, too, was among the ranks of the face police.

Gideon was resistant, if not quietly defiant, to Dr. Ausabinden's recommendation for a while. It did seem that the doctor worshiped at the altar of a medication with the unnecessarily peculiar name Puissant. What distinguished the medication from others was that it not only improved bone mass but significantly reduced the risk of fracturing, and so was said to be tailor-made for someone in Gideon's circumstance. The downside was that it had a black box warning, the highest, from the Food and Drug Administration, after studies showed that mega-doses caused osteosarcoma in laboratory rats. For this reason, a two-year limit had been placed on its use. During that period the patient was required to inject himself or herself in the abdomen with a small dose from a device with a pen needle on a daily basis. The FDA warning about bone cancer and the method of delivery came to seem less of a deterrent when, after the latest fracture, he showed up for an appointment with Dr. Ausabinden twenty pounds under his normal weight and his face haggard and etched with pain.

“You look ill. I didn’t recognize you when you walked through the door. You need to go directly to the emergency room. “ So Dr. Ausabinden declared.

“You can’t frighten me onto the path of destruction. I will not go to any hospital. I am not in need of such care.”

“Do you always speak this way?”

“Only when I am forced to.”

“You have lost a great deal of weight. We need to be sure it isn’t cancer.”

“I’ve lost weight because I’ve been in pain. Food is not as appealing when you are hurting. And my exercise regimen is out the window.”

“I understand, but I saw you six weeks ago and you were fine and now you are emaciated.”

“Food *and* exercise have always been my only defense against hanging string-ism.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Gideon said, with savagery in his voice. I will go to the emergency room if you will accompany me and turn yourself in as well. You are a bag of bones as well, Gideon thought but didn’t say. Blinded by the light. The oxymoronic phrase came to him, though rendered meaningless by overuse, the reference being not to Saul of Tarsus but Manfred Mann holler heading the hideous song of the same name. Gideon it was who had been blinded by the Ivy League status of his doctor and the institution he represented, equating both with safety and competence and probity. But suppose his physician was nothing more than a body mechanic and a shill for the pharmaceutical folks?

Three or more times a day he would step on the bathroom scale, as if he were a runway fashion model. He was used to trying to shed pounds, not gain them. Seeing the needle barely hit one hundred sixty after a night of gorging himself was dismaying; it meant he was in free fall and would soon disintegrate.

Then it occurred to him. A while back, thinking he had a painful hemorrhoid, as he had been told following a colonoscopy, he made his first visit to a proctologist, who informed him the problem was an anal fissure, most likely the result of a traumatic bowel movement. Suppositories, an ointment called Diltiazem, and one rounded teaspoon of psyllium, powdered corn husks, were the treatment recommended by Dr. Berger. So effective was the psyllium that he became the prisoner of his own poop. Every morning he had to struggle to the toilet and learned to carry a plastic receptacle on his journey when several times he couldn't reach the bowl and did a bombing on the floor. The poop he gathered in the receptacle was magnificent and a personal record in terms of volume. A shit show supreme. Such a color, light brown, and the glistening texture, of a kind with that of a moist birthday cake. Indeed they each deserved a candle. His creations, he called them. It was only a matter of time before the art world reached a literal nadir. He could see the title of the MoMA show now. *Art of the Fundament: The Excretions of Lydia Bulge*, it would be titled, or some such, a real caca fest on every floor.

Dr. Ausabinden referred Gideon to Dr. Eli Farbman, a colleague at the medical center.

“He will put a suspicious eye on you,” Dr. Ausabinden said.

“And I on him,” Gideon countered.

“He is a hematologist at the top of his field.”

“I am sure to win his trust with facts on the ground,” Gideon replied.

“You need to take this seriously,” Dr. Ausabinden said.

“This? What is this?”

“Your health. Your life.”

You’ve got to hide your love away. That song came back to him again. He had come to love Dr. Ausabinden, but did Dr. Ausabinden love him? Hardly. And what exactly was he loving, Gideon wondered? Excellence. Harvard Yard. High board scores. Dr. Ausabinden’s scrawny frame housed a powerful brain that could bend people to his will. It was like Ava Gardner’s illumination as to the magnetism of Frank Sinatra. He might be all of ninety-six pounds, but ninety-five of them were in his cock.

Gideon rearranged his face and his mind. He felt the shift into a lower gear. Too much noise. Too much rhetoric. Too much posturing. Too much contention. One billion Chinese. One billion Chinese. Did you hear me, Gideon? Well, did you? And almost as many Indians. And most of them smarter than you could ever dream of being. No problem for them to put those blocks together. You performed miserably on the SAT. Your IQ is an embarrassment to you. You graduated, barely, from CCNY, not Harvard. You were deemed unfit for military service without even trying to avoid being drafted. You are a retired editor. You never made more than ninety thousand dollars a year. For one quarter of a century you idled through the workday. Show some respect. Are you listening? R-e-s-p-e-c-t, just as Aretha commanded.

With a new face and a new attitude did Gideon show up at the office of Dr. Farbman, and both were put to a quick and severe test. Vertically challenged the doctor was, and his natty bowtie and Beethoven-sized head caught Gideon’s attention even

more. But other data, related to deportment and demeanor, were streaming in to Gideon, sweeping aside the physical appearance the doctor was manifesting. Gideon's inbox was taxed and maxed. Never mind his big head and big brain, he is of my own kind. His engine too is idling, and as I was when I worked for the org. and a visitor would drop by my cube, he is afraid that I will see that there are long and plentiful empty spaces in his day.

Oh my God. The medical center is his ball and chain. It is the home he cannot leave. When I applaud my acquaintances—I have no friends—for leaving their office jobs and their bosses behind to venture out on their own, I tell them they have stepped up to the Major Leagues. Office or no office, Dr. Farbman is suffering the same cubicle rot as I did. All is quiet around and within him. Nothing is going on. I may be his only patient.

Gideon kept his insight to himself, as he did not want to roil the doctor's waters or his own. Besides, the doctor had a substrata of amour propre that would have required him to strike Gideon dead for such unwarranted presumption.

Dr. Farbman listened respectfully as Gideon described in detail the record-breaking poops he had been creating, and the connection he made between his increased fecal production and the daily dose of psyllium he was required to take. And Dr. Ausabinden, God bless him, was being unreasonable in expecting Gideon to put the weight back on instantly.

“It is like this, Doctor. Say you have a ship going full speed ahead. The captain then orders the engines to be cut so the vessel can perform an about face. But can it do so on a dime? Does it not have to exhaust the momentum that it has developed before

beginning the turnaround? I have been in the ranks of the feeble and incapacitated for months. No NordicTrack. No weight-bearing or stretching or balance exercises. Atrophied muscles. Virtual emaciation as pain diminished my appetite and my stomach shrank. My default hanging string status has returned. It is only by an effort of will that I can ever approach resembling a normal human being. There are those who could subsist on a protein bar and a bottle of water weekly and look no worse after a month. I am not among those folks and never have been. A hanging string is, after all, a hanging string, whatever additions he seeks to make to his core.”

Dr. Farbman had maintained his silence and attentive gaze as Gideon spoke. He did not put, in a visible way, the laughing thing on Gideon for his nautical metaphor or any other thing from his mouth. Dr. Farbman did not plunge Gideon into the lake of shame. But now Gideon was to find out that, in addition to amour propre, the doctor had that signature share of steel which enabled men and women to become physicians in the first place. His affable and patient manner aside, he had invasive capacity.

“Interesting. Let’s say you are correct in your hunch that the psyllium is a powerful diuretic subverting your body’s ability to gain weight. Let’s see what happens when you cut back on the psyllium. We will continue to monitor for cancer with blood work over the next two months and if, after this time, you have not put on any weight, then we will do a biopsy.”

So there it was. Bowtie and genial manner aside, Dr. Farbman was willing to stick a needle into you sufficient in length to scrape a tad of bone and perhaps employ all manner of implements. Behind that mask of opaqueness Dr. Farbman had a blood thirst going on.

But Gideon denied the good doctor. He denied him once and he denied him twice, for the scale needle began moving up. Gideon's ship did turn around. It did. And now it was for Gideon to see, beyond the veil of opacity, a trace of disappointment on the face of Dr. Farbman that penetration of Gideon's flesh was not his to perform.

But then love came in the door, casting all suspicion aside, and Gideon wept, and was obliged to sit with the emotion to understand why. His short stuff frame notwithstanding, Dr. Farbman had represented excellence, and in the womb of that excellence had Gideon lived for these weeks and months, and now he couldn't. An idea came to him designed to cause embarrassment all around if he acted on it. Dr. Farbman had fallen in love with him, and the needle of exploration he had hoped to insert had merely been an expression of that love. All Gideon knew was that his need for love and acceptance had been summoned by contact with the doctor and that leaving the medical center was unbearable. How often did he get to meet such excellence and be embraced by it? Who, who had given him recognition such as he had received from Dr. Farbman? Gone was Buddha breath. Gone was detachment. All that awaited him was a desert of loneliness.

He decided to walk and came to One Hundred Fifty-first Street, summoning an image of Kertesz's wide-angle photograph. It had taken in not only Riverside Drive and the Henry Hudson Parkway and the Hudson River and perhaps a battleship docked at One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street but the soul of the city at dusk. Nineteen forty-four would have been the year, three years before his birth. The walk and the photo only added to his pain. His history was here, lived outside the gates of Columbia University, which he could invade as a child but never be accepted into, unless as a patient at the medical

center. All those times he had been booted from the TV room in the Columbia dorms. And then there was that day the campus guards caught him and other neighborhood kids vandalizing the cafeteria in the John Jay Building. The police officers he had been turned over to told his mother he belonged in reform school.

Among the masonry buildings along the drive there had been wood-frame houses whose ruins he and his childhood friend Jerry Jones-Nobleonian had explored. Gone too was the pier at One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street from which his brother, Luke, had dived into the vile river, the water filled with the untreated sewage of the city. The terror Gideon had felt, seeing him struggle back from the midpoint of the river. “That boy got no mind,” an old black fisherman said. “That river got a strong current, and more than one. It will take you down. That river for looking at and fishing in, unless you want to drown.”

The bait shop farther east, where they had bought night crawlers for their fishing hooks. The slimy eels, a nauseating off-white, Luke had deposited in the kitchen sink, to the horror of their mother.

“Uncle Gideon, we have heard enough. We get the picture. Snap to.”

Jen’s sharpened voice brought him to an abrupt halt. He had not told them all of the preceding, only the bare bones of it, but even that had been too much for Jen

“Oh yes. Of course. The picture. It could be written on the sky, but then the galaxy and other galaxies and eventually the entire universe would have to be utilized if one were to have a big enough canvas. The past is demanding, entirely demanding, so much so that it is dangerous to go there.”

“Tell us about your life today, Uncle Gideon? Do you date?”

“‘I’ve Been Lonely Too Long.’ Do you know that song? It’s from before your time. It’s by the holler head Young Rascals. I guess that’s a better name than The Young Scamps. Is that where you are going? The poor divorced old man needs companionship?”

“Do you know who asks about you? Pam Becker. She says she wants to see you when she comes to New York again.” Vera had come from left field.

He had a history with shame, and now he flooded with it. “I don’t understand. Even now, the one date I had with her, the memory of it, can stop me in my tracks.”

“Why, Uncle Gideon?”

“I was in the eleventh grade. I wore white socks, with my gray flannel school pants, thinking they made my legs look less skinny. We went to see a movie. *Jane Eyre*, at the Coronet or Baronet, one of those two theaters across from Bloomingdale’s. A step above the westerns I saw at the Loew’s. I thought I was expected to do something, and so I placed my arm around her shoulders, or tried to, which was a pretty awkward thing to do in those seats. And though I had the distinct feeling that she did not welcome this intrusion, it took me about ten minutes to overcome my self-consciousness and withdraw my arm.”

“That doesn’t sound so terrible, Uncle Gideon. It doesn’t sound terrible at all. You’re just like me. You’re too hard on yourself.”

Gideon was chagrined to find himself placed on the same emotional plane as a young woman less than half his age, and yet he suspected that he allowed it to happen. He could use some of Dr. Farbman’s amour propre, he thought.

It's two against one. They're working on me. I lack stature with them. I am but a guest they hardly know. These things he thought.

"What time is your train back to the city?" Vera asked.

"The next one arrives in a half hour." He had written the return times in his notebook.

"You're welcome to come back to the house with us, but Jeanne and Moses will be coming. You know that Jeanne went to Sweden and is just back, don't you?"

That knowing smile on his sister's face and the sudden, provocatively teasing tone as she dispensed information were her way of reminding him that she was centrally involved with and in control of the family remnant—he made it sound like a piece of carpet—and he wasn't. It seemed to give her satisfaction to see him flinch and observe the flash of hurt in his eyes at the mention of his nephew and niece.

Vera knew his vulnerabilities and was not above exposing them. And hadn't he given her information she could use against him, as when he suggested sometime ago that Jeanne was trying hard to be part of a family that no longer existed? Still, he had to accept that it was his problem if the mention of his niece's trip to Sweden filled him with irrational fear. Sweden had been his mother's native land. In visiting the country, Jeanne was only confirming that even into death was she pursuing his mother and seeking to displace him and deprive him of her maternal love. But then, such a fear did not come from nowhere.

I'm sorry I have not been in touch. We will have to talk about that at some point. Jeanne and Moses and the closed circle they had formed. That was what she had been referring to the other day. But now was not her time, and that was understandable, or only

in this taunting fashion could he expect to hear anything from her related to her absence from his life.

“Thank you, but I need to get back to the city.” He too could be tactical by reminding her that he had an existence apart from them.

At the station Gideon stood at the rear of the station so the train could see him before all others as it hit the straightaway and had his little bit of surreptitious chatter with the tracks that beckoned to him. Never had he seen anything more beautiful than rails on a roadbed of ballast and a gantry spanning the three sets of tracks, all in sublime interaction with the greenery around it and the peaceful river that kept its secrets well.

And he too had a secret that he could keep well following the invasion by Vera. If Jeanne and Moses’ train arrived first on the northbound track, they would see his back and not his face, and his back was not where his secrets lived. Not at all.

The next morning he had something to set right. He could not leave the door open for his sister to walk into his life with a proxy. He could not leave her and Jen with his feckless, abashed reaction at the mention of women. He was not the little boy shamed by his older sisters. He had a right to a do over.

About dating, Jen. Alas, sixty-six is not twenty-six or even forty-six. To be entirely honest, I feel no physical attraction to women in my age range, and being neither wealthy nor famous, have little chance of drawing younger women to me. Not sure I would welcome that, even if the opportunity arose. Some things have a way of slipping into the past. Also,

the compatibility I have with my ex-wife Celeste on a mental and spiritual level probably reduces the inclination for such adventuring at this time in my life. But who knows? The novelist Elizabeth Hardwick wrote that “to be single in New York City is to be married to possibility.”

Though it was a dangerous vortex full of murky shit, he had some history to tell. He warned himself, but went there anyway, and heard the words “boring” and “not again” and “are you kidding me? Are you a broken record, or what?” as he went. But the past was like an unmade bed. It had to be set right, even if it did not exist, as the wizards claimed, and until the bed was made, there would be torment. *Torment*.

His niece Jeanne had been born when he was five years old. She had been brought home to his family’s apartment and placed on the sofa in the living room. The sofa was really a single bed and a pillow to lean your head against so you didn’t dirty the wall. Gideon had felt fear and dismay staring down at the infant. Even as a boy his whole being required order, and there was no order in the rent control apartment the family lived in or in the entire building, twelve stories of single and double rooms overrun with roaches.

“Isn’t she beautiful, Gideon?” His sister Naomi lived upstairs with her husband. Chuck was much older than Naomi. His jeep had overturned in France during World War II. It was there that he learned to drink wine. Now he drank wine all night long as he sat in a chair in the lobby guarding the building against thieves.

“Where will she live? In that room with you and Chuck?” Gideon asked.

“That is none of your business, little Flathead. Besides, you didn’t answer my question. Isn’t she beautiful? Not all babies are beautiful. You weren’t, with your flat head. But Jeanne is. She is a beautiful baby.”

No. She wasn’t beautiful. Her tiny face was that of an old woman. And Naomi wasn’t beautiful either. Not anymore. Not with the bloat in her face and body from all the pills his mother said she took.

Pain went where you did, Pastor Cohn said, in the Sunday afternoon sermon. Gideon felt the pain finding him after his sister struck him with the name. He felt it in his bones and all parts of his body and wherever his mind tried to go. Like a loud and harsh bell did it reverberate. Boxhead. Squarehead. Flathead. Vera didn’t call him by these names, nor did his mother or father or his other older sisters, Hannah and Rachel. But the neighborhood kids and his classmates did. “We wish for him the other part of his head,” read the caption under his photo in the eighth grade yearbook, some years later. And he had mirrors and the shadow of his head on the wall to tell himself that they weren’t lying, that part of it was missing.

When Gideon was twelve, Hannah brought home a baby of her own, whom she named Moses, and laid him on the same sofa. Hannah did not ask Gideon if he thought Moses was beautiful.

“No one will ever deprive me and my son. Tell me you understand this so I do not have to slap your face.”

Gideon said that he did. All three of his sisters were fast with their hands, but Hannah was the fastest and hit the hardest and the most often. She was also the only one to clamp her tongue between her thick lips when she smacked.

Hannah did not have a husband. She had the wind to tell her sorrow to.

“You must not ask her who the father is if you do not want the walls to shake and the floor to quake. Do you understand, my son? Do you?” his mother said, in the apartment of many secrets.

Gideon felt anger that his mother had to whisper and that Hannah was still around. He didn't understand why she and Naomi didn't go away to live, and not just to a room in the same building.

“You do not understand what it is to have children and you may never know.”

“Why would I not know?”

“Do not ask what I cannot tell you. It is fine for now that Hannah is in room 2B3 and Naomi is in room 9B4, but ultimately we must all be in heaven together. That is my only prayer.”

His mother was love itself, but it was not a love for this earth.

“This world has nothing that I want. Nothing. Since the conviction of my sinfulness came to me have I known this.”

Gideon had done it again. Where love and forgiveness should have been, he had succumbed to self-righteous anger. He had sought to win a few cheap points by living in the sins of his siblings. And he had been a gasbag of repetition in so doing. But he did not beat himself with a stick or call himself the filthiest of the filthy. He could only hope that they would not be waiting for him on the other side with their hands raised to the correct smacking position.

The thing was that “You've got to hide your love away” was a moral instruction, not simply the title of a song. Gideon had Gideon love to give, and revilement had a place

in its expression. Besides, he was in ongoing communication with his mother, and even though that was a gross exaggeration bordering on an outright lie, he had a dream to peg his claim to.

He had spotted her heading west toward Eighth Avenue in the arcade of Penn Station. In spite of her years she was moving at a fast clip, not so much as glancing at the shops and food stands to her right and left. It was the same path they had taken to the Church of Righteousness Forever when he was a child to hear the disappearing words of voluble Pastor Cohn. As he came alongside her, he could see that she was far away from him and that his presence was bringing her no closer. Her time with him, with all of them, was done, just done; she had her own business to tend to now. As if to say as much, she stepped on board an outbound train and showed no dismay that the door closed before he could follow after.

She had given him her back after giving him her love. It was only fair. She was telling him to grow strong so he might survive and that life was not a Hallmark card. A fact from his childhood came to him with the claim that it had meaning: Gene Fullmer, the middleweight boxing champion of the world, had washed his face in brine.

Just as he believed that considerably older sisters should go off on their own, he believed it to be doubly so if they had children. It wasn't right that his sisters crowd in on him and even less natural that they add their progeny to the mix.

Where is the love, Gideon? Where is it?

He did not hear from Vera for the next week. His contact was Jen, and while he tried to be understanding, he couldn't help but feel his sister was saying she was too busy for the likes of him.

The burial was set for Friday. Only family would attend. That meant only Moses and Jeanne and Gideon, in addition to Vera and Jen. Jen would pick him up at the train station. Could he be there by 12 pm?

He saw Vera's hand here. She had instructed Jen to write to him separately from Jeanne and Moses to arrange different meeting times at the train station. But wasn't that impractical? As if Vera and Jen were thinking the same thing, Jen wrote back to him the next day to ask if he and Jeanne and Moses could arrive on the same train.

While he remained in the city, the subway and the public buses served as his Infiniti. To leave the boroughs highlighted the reality that he was without a set of wheels and equally dependent for transportation as Jeanne and Moses, in contrast with Vera, with her two cars in the garage lifestyle. For the first time since being informed of Maury's death, the old irritant of Vera's higher professional status surfaced. He saw himself as one with his niece and nephew, three lowly commoners come to see the queen.

He had his habits. He slept with his underpants in hand or in proximity. Should he lose touch with their whereabouts in the night, the light had to come on so he could secure them once again. And he had to tap on his keychain five times—quietly, quietly—if the anonymous figure on the other side of the front door was not to break it down and do his mayhem thing. And then there were the bathroom tiles, three per night, that had to receive the light touch of his knuckles five times. And there were the numbers he would scramble

signifying the amount in his retirement account that he would outline on his thigh with his finger as he lay in bed, but only with the covers over him. And there were the five times a day he had to whisper “Line a double, Sam, the ice cream man,” if perdition was not to find him.

The world was dangerous, dangerous, ready to snatch the happiness of his aloneness from him. A place of face police, who equated a smile with happiness and lacking in understanding of the pain that had to be experienced to achieve that state genuinely.

In meditation he sat three times a day: forty-five minutes in the morning, twenty minutes in the afternoon, and ten minutes before bedtime to quiet his mind and withdraw, as much as possible, from the long reach of the world. He had never embraced the lotus position; his body was insufficiently supple. He simply sat in a chair or the side of his bed with his eyes closed. The fractures made it difficult to maintain the position for long; numerous adjustments were needed in the course of a session. The important thing was to put in the time. To be a seeker meant just that, to invest time in the sitting. And sooner or later, when you thought it never would, the door would open into a recessed chamber and then another and still another. But finding was not the same thing as knowing.

It had been a long time since the doors opened to him. That was all right. He didn't need to be in the constant state of euphoria he had experienced when he first began. Too many potholes on his spine for the smooth transmission of the kundalini, but no matter. He rather liked the idea of being a toiler.

God restructures us without our full consent. These words came to him and he kept them in the privacy of his mind. He could only hope he was not channeling the balding fathead Dr. Phil.

Jeanne. She had spoken to him insolently in front of Vera and Moses and Maury in the family apartment, where Moses lived alone now that his mother had died. Hannah had been right. No one was going to deprive her or her son, if by deprivation she meant losing the apartment. He had turned the living room into a sort of gymnasium, the main feature being a large apparatus for a full body workout with special attention to the development of his abs. Well, some people lined the walls of their living rooms with books; Moses was focused on strengthening his body more than his mind, and the gymnasium décor offered testimony to the narcissism in which he was imprisoned.

From his early years Gideon had lived in fear of Moses. Surely Hannah had programmed him to be her avenger. Gideon could only imagine the attitude of resentment she had infected her child with, and it pained and astonished him that, having survived her, he should now have to contend with her tough and muscular progeny. But was *contend* the word? Was that not the problem? He had feared his nephew too much and loved him insufficiently. In place of compassion he had regarded Moses with scorn and revulsion. But wait, no, there was more to it than that. When Moses was a young boy, had Gideon not showered him with gifts? And was he not ecstatic when Moses was accepted to an elite public high school and even more joyful when Williams College offered him a full scholarship as a transfer student? On the other hand, should he have greeted the news that Moses punched an elderly man in the face and showed no remorse with equal joy or

respond similarly to his expulsion from the state university where he was enrolled for once again striking someone, this time his roommate, and then defying the student body that reviewed the incident?

What is the point? Gideon asked himself, even as he succumbed to the pull of the past and heard the machinery of self-righteousness whirring. Was there no contemplation, no grieving, over the sadness of a promising life ruined? No, it wasn't there, not even with the passage of years and the end of his own life approaching. Such compassion might have surfaced if Moses had changed direction after his college fiasco, but his path to ruin only seemed to accelerate.

At a family gathering following the expulsion, Moses attached himself to Celeste. Gideon and Celeste were to be married that month, and he became alarmed at Moses' attention to her. From room to room Moses pursued her.. Gideon was sufficiently upset that he remarked on Moses' behavior to Celeste afterward.

"Believe me, I tried to get away, but it was impossible," Celeste said, that night.

Some weeks later Hannah came to him at the reception following the wedding.

"They have arrested my son. My son. Do you know this? Do you even care? My son would they dare to try to deprive me of."

"Arrested him for what?"

"For the crime of rape. Rape. Can you believe it?"

Yes, of course he believed it. Of course. "I don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? That's what you are? You of all people should be sorry," she whispered furiously.

It was that which struck Gideon and would continue to strike him, down through the years. She held him responsible. The world had given Gideon too much. It had given him a college degree and a job and a beautiful woman to marry. It was not right for him to be happy when Hannah was unhappy. A woman with dark moods she had always been, her depression spreading through all the rooms of the apartment to find him. He was outraged. He had no room in his heart for her or her son. It gave him no comfort to realize that he had not been paranoid about Moses' intentions toward Celeste at the family gathering some weeks before.

Moses was not a nightmare; he was a reality. Without having heard any evidence, Gideon equated his safety with Moses being placed behind bars. Gideon was not a court of law; he was a court of feeling. Like a hyena, Moses had marked his prey, and would next be coming for Celeste. Gideon had grown up in a family without boundaries. Why should he believe there were any now?

But at the trial evidence was introduced. Moses had turned from academics to drama studies, and went on a first date with a young woman from his acting class. After dinner at a restaurant, he walked her home and asked to use her bathroom before saying goodnight. The end of the evening turned out to be only the beginning. An hour before dawn a call came in to 911 from the woman, who stood bruised and half naked at a phone booth across the street from her building. She screamed into the phone that she had been raped and that her assailant was still in her apartment. The police arrived minutes later and found Moses passed out in the woman's bed.

Lauren Holden was the young woman's name. She testified that Moses refused to leave after entering her apartment and forced himself on her. The few times he had to

relieve himself in the interminable hours that passed he would drag her with him into the bathroom so she could not escape. When she told him that she was expecting a friend in the morning and the friend had a key, Moses replied that there would be no morning. If not for all the grass Moses smoked that night and the unconsciousness it brought on, she might have been dead, she said.

Moses' defense was no defense. He had been invited over and they had spent a wonderful night making love before she decided to drop a dime on him, as he put it. What had he and Ms. Holden talked about? The prosecutor asked. Just the things people in love talk about, Moses replied, offering no specifics when the prosecutor pressed him. And he could offer no explanation for the bruises on her neck and face, other than to suggest that maybe she had inflicted them on herself.

Moses was young and attractive. He drew many people to him. But as the trial proceeded and his testimony remained that he was the innocent victim of Lauren Holden's lies and madness, his supporters began to fall away.

Others may have left, but Hannah remained. She was, after all, Moses's mother. Every day the court was in session, she could be seen sitting behind her son and his attorney, a garrulous man given to emotional pitches that focused on the hardships Moses had overcome in his young life. Mr. Donifides wore shiny suits a size too big for him. The prosecutor, Mr. Barnes, leaned toward tailored lightweight suits and posed questions that had an economy to them.

"Isn't he a creep? Can you believe how he tries to manipulate and trick my son?" Hannah said to Gideon of the prosecutor after one such session. Moses could see no

wrong in himself and his mother couldn't either. More troubling was their assumption that other family members would see no wrong in Moses either.

When Gideon's mother expressed some doubt about Moses' innocence, asking only if Moses had some part to play in the difficulty, Hannah raged at her for days. "How dare you call my son a liar? How dare you?" she roared.

When Gideon asked the same question directly of Moses, his nephew put a baleful stare on him.

"Don't be going down that road on me. Don't be doing that. You understand what I'm saying?"

Evidently the jury asked the same question and answered it unanimously. Moses was forcibly removed from the courtroom and some days later was sentenced to a minimum of five years in the Clinton Correctional Facility, in Dannemora, New York, near the Canadian border.

Baleful. Just like him to impose a word on the page without verifying its meaning. But now that he did reach for the dictionary, he felt strengthened. There it was. *Malignant. Evil.* Could someone living in the light cast a baleful stare? Hardly likely. Only in the darkness could the things of darkness grow. When mother and son turned in synchronicity in the courtroom and gave Moses a double-barreled dose of the BS, then did Gideon know for certain the terrain they were on. Behind the eyes, portals to the soul, was a carousel of fixed expressions: anger, love, hurt, fear, shame, etc. Such expressions were universally shared. But not the BS. While universally understood, it was not universally shared. It was within the capacity of only the few to generate.

He had been given his warning. Now it was for him not to allow time to ameliorate the perception he had been gifted with.

A year passed. Gideon flew in a small plane to visit his nephew on a summer morning. The village of Dannemora was memorable in his mind only for the African American man in prison garb walking about in boots that lacked laces. In a cab was Gideon driven to the facility, notable for the monotony of a high wall. On either end guards in towers kept watch with high-powered weapons.

Moses had been a presence in Gideon's mind for that year. Incarceration had reduced his fear of his nephew, and in its place had come guilt for having passed judgment on Moses. When Hannah came to him for a financial contribution to Moses' legal defense, Gideon had declined. Why would he help with the legal fees of someone so indisposed to tell the truth about the incident and who greeted the mild request for some explanation of his part in the incident with a menacing stare and equally menacing words? But Moses' ominous words and expression had faded, just as Gideon had feared, and he was left with the anguished thought that he had not loved his nephew and in fact had failed him completely. Did not even those manifestly guilty deserve proper legal counsel? Standing on some bogus principle Gideon had denied his nephew the financial support he deserved.

The visitors' center was structured for love of the spoken, not physical, kind. Inmates and their wives or girlfriends had to make do with knee touches and gropes under the tables at which they sat. In his head did he hear the fat-lipped one, Mick Jagger, torture-singing "Love in Vain." A shiver ran through him down as he took in the sterile

environment. The Hemingway title “Men Without Women” rose to his consciousness, and with it the image of frenzied mongrels biting each other over all their torn, bleeding faces and bodies.

The echoes of violence could be heard beyond the confines of his nephew’s mind, not his own but all that he had witnessed of the brutality from guards and inmates in his year of incarceration. Moses was out of his league in this facility.

“Don’t be looking around. The brothers don’t like that and will make me pay. They have a system of infractions. Enough of them and they confiscate your life.”

Deprived of the sun, Moses had grown pale. And he had lost weight. The coarse green uniform hung on him.

“How are you holding up?”

“This ain’t the Hilton.”

“No, I don’t suppose,” Gideon said.

“All this I got to deal with because a bitch dropped a dime on me.”

“Do you have your own cell?”

“Yeah, but they can reach you if they want. Some of them have agents among the guards. You’d be surprised at the shit that goes on here.”

“What are your days like?”

“Eh. They have these programs. They’re pressuring me to join a group.”

“What kind of group?”

“A sex offender group.”

“Why don’t you?”

“You don’t listen too well, do you?”

“How do you mean?”

“You heard the bullshit they were peddling at the so-called trial. You saw how the judge forced the jury into a verdict they didn’t want to deliver. You were there.”

“For some of it, not all.”

“A kangaroo court, that’s all it was, like that phony court at college.”

There was no going forward without the truth. That is what he wanted to tell his nephew. All Moses could hope to do by avoiding the truth was to endlessly circle the lie at the center of his life. For that very reason had Gideon traveled to Dannemora. During the plane ride the conviction came to him that an earnest appeal to Moses’ sense of honesty would be well received. And yet the confidence he had felt thousands of feet above the ground had faded. Seeking to regain it, he drew on sources he wasn’t fully sure would support him.

“You know they have studies on people who commit the kind of crime you were charged with. You know that in their eyes you fit their profile.”

“Who are they?” Moses whisper hissed.

“Psychologists. All I’m saying is that it might go easier on you if you showed a degree of cooperation by joining one of these groups.” Gideon words seemed to echo, as if they were bouncing off his nephew.

“You really are a fool.”

“I don’t understand. Why is that?”

To Gideon’s amazement, a supremely confident smile had vanquished the tension on Moses’ face. If anything, he had been expecting the return of the BS, and it took nothing away from his shock to witness its reappearance a short time later. In truth, the

smile left him unprepared for its emergence. By itself the smile was disconcerting; the two in sequence were chilling.

Gideon returned home dismayed. Once again he resolved to hold this aspect nature of Moses' nature in his mind, but with no conviction that he could.

And what of Jeanne? What had become of her in the runaway phase of her life? Predatory men. That became her life. Men with case-hardened souls after the passing of the flower children and the summer of love. Men of the autumn shadows and wintry coldness. Men of the cesspool stretches of major cities. Men who addressed women as bitches. Men with mothers but no fathers. Men who beat her with broomsticks and belts and fists and jammed the barrels of guns in her mouth. To them she turned to structure her days and for the love that she was seeking.

Jeanne too developed a look in this time. It was not Moses' signature BS. There was no malignant threat. The look was a PS, not a BS, a penetrating stare of the kind that streetwalkers display to plumb the depths of every heterosexual man's nature, the desire to linger between their legs. It was a look she privileged Gideon with seeing when she began to resurface.

By this time Jeanne's mother had vacated the premises of her life and her father had, too. *How you speak, Gideon. How you speak. Don't you know they will be waiting for you, with their own belts, their own guns, their own knives?* Jeanne had great if conflicted love for her mother and for her father, but she could not save her mother from the mental asylum where the wolves were placed in with the lambs and where the wolves were not only part of the inmate population but among the institution's staff. She could

not stop the extortion, the beatings, the rapes, nor could she keep her mother from the river that flowed past the asylum or the treacherous currents that took her down toward the river's mouth, opened wide for the ocean. Nor could she stop her father from going into cardiac arrest as he sat one night with his pint bottle of Swiss Up wine.

But that was in the long ago. The alcohol she had relied on to keep the horror of her life at bay fell away when she entered the rooms of recovery and *felt the love* reach inside her. And once she *felt that love* she had to have more. The thirst for booze had been replaced with a hunger for the things that the RoR could give her. Homeless, she slept in doorways and then on the floors and sofas of those she had met on the sober path, some of whom had known the broom handle love she had experienced.

Gideon was happy that his niece had found a sober beachhead, as he too had found the RoRs five years before, and gave her, when she asked, the financial support she needed to maintain herself. She would call frequently and ask how he was doing, but frequently, he began to notice, she would at some point say, "Let me cut to the chase." She would then follow with a request, generally for more money. Now a man who had grown beyond the dimensions of the dinky on the Buddha breath would avoid the pit of judgment, but Gideon was not yet of that kind. He saw her as on automatic, a mechanical arm reaching out. The involuntary ask was a legacy of her streetwalking days, when men were a mark, her ticket to a Big Mac with fries from some of her proceeds. He could not say, as a reasonable person might, that she was merely behaving as countless nieces do with their uncles. He had to go and put her approach in hooker terms.

Then too she would call him at work, and if she got a coworker, ask for her uncle in a mournful voice, which in one instance brought a laugh from the bearer of the

message and the question, “How old is this niece of yours? She sure doesn’t sound like a spring chicken.”

Then came the day when she asked for a large amount—rent and two months’ security—to secure an apartment of her own. Though he gave her the money, it was not without a scolding. As he saw it, an unhealthy dependency had developed and he wanted no part of it. His outburst leaving him far from the graciousness he aspired to, he felt ashamed. At the same time he tried to leave himself alone over the mistake he had made, if it even was a mistake. Maybe it had been OK to yell at her. Maybe it had been necessary, and something good and clarifying would come of it.

And so he maintained some distance from his niece as they journeyed through their sober lives, and as he did she became less admiring and more caustic toward him. On one occasion, having been asked to lead a RoR meeting, she all but accused him, in front of the group, of having molested her as a child. “The person who did this knows who he is,” she said, in a loud, angry voice while staring directly at him. Her boldness shocked him and he sought to remember any such instance when he might have exploited her physically but the only memory that came to him was of her sullen, aggrieved face. Doubtless there was a history of sexual abuse, but could she not direct her wrath at those who deserved it? And so he had another reason to stay away. She had become treacherous. He became afraid of her, and that in itself was a reason to keep his distance.

During his drinking years he had lost his way and could only experience Vera’s success as painful. He had been displaced as the family star. His sister was now the center of attention as she earned a PhD at Columbia University and then secured a tenure track

position at a local college. She had beaten him and in his own area of interest, that being literature. Intimidated by her newfound eminence and stung by her emasculating assertion that she was the one to carry on their father's name, he found reasons to avoid her. He failed to show up at her PhD graduation ceremony and missed her wedding. Even in his dreams he fled from her, as from a terrifying invading army. Run Gideon, run. Run down the hill in the lower level of Riverside Park. Run from the colossus astride the great Columbia University your sister has become. Run for the refuge of the railroad tracks in the tunnel under Riverside Park and there find the power that the feckless men in Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha* seek to draw upon as the trains of America rumble past.

But now he had a newfound power by which he could go to her, not away from her, and say he had been wrong not to show up for major events in her life and why. Some years later the need arose for him to confess that back in high school he had nudged the schoolbooks she had left on a window sill so they fell from view into an alleyway, the fear having gripped him that someday she would outstrip him. "Have you ever considered therapy?" she said, as he sought to make his amend, as if to say he was sick and needed professional help.

There. He had exposed his rottenness to her. There. He had beaten himself with the stick of violence. These words came to him, seeking to move him out of tranquility and into an enduring state of agitation.

It was not for Vera to acknowledge her part in difficulties. It was for her to say, "I don't get resentments. I give them." She had the fortitude to resist the inner prompting to admit to wrongdoing; conscience was not her guide. *She could just walk on by.*

And you, Gideon, you, could continue not to be a proper older brother to her.

But then she broke with him.

It happened this way. So Gideon wanted you to believe, even as he doubted that he knew, it suddenly appearing that a vicious windstorm had come to blow all the elements of his life into permanent disarray so the way forward was back or vice versa and nothing he thought had anything to do with anything anyway.

Luke resurfaced after many years of being completely out of touch with the family. Not so much as a birthday or Christmas card or a phone call. Even the death of their mother had freed him from his apartness. He brought with him a wife with a severe disability and two teenage children. He was not in the RoR, though Gideon believed he would have benefited from a spiritual community. He was a man out on his feet—bloated and depressed and reliant on St. John's Wort from the shelves of Rite Aid to get him through the day. Gideon loved his long absent brother but was dismayed not only by his condition but his circumstances. Luke was broke and able to find only minimal employment as a low-paid office clerk. The family would have been homeless without the apartment provided by his wife's relatives in a remote area of the Bronx. My brother has come back to die. What else could Gideon think? And he did die, two years later. His son had fled the scarred landscape and spirit of the borough and the school of violence where students regularly told their teachers to suck their dicks for the relative placidity of central Florida and the trailer in which the family had lived before coming to New York. Luke was tied to his children and when his son called him to him, with anger and reproach in his voice, Luke jumped on a Greyhound bus so he might provide his son with the things he needed to make life livable in the trailer the family had abandoned.

But Gideon came to understand that Florida, beneath all that sun, was a cold state indifferent to the real needs of its people, that it took away their hospitals and services and jobs and daily pulled down its pants and took a daily giant shit on the people it was supposed to serve and convinced them that they were in fecal heaven.

And so, when Luke fell down and could not get up, his son called for help, but the first responders did a dawdle dance and finally arrived with few of the things for emergency aid but not without the chant of “Jesus, Jesus” loud from their fervent faces. “I’m not ready to die,” Luke cried out, but die he did before the medevac team could arrive to helicopter him to the nearest hospital, one hundred miles away, because a shithole state is a shithole state.

I don’t know what to say about you, Gideon said to himself, when the call came to him in the midtown office where he worked that his brother had expired. He tried to soldier on as if the word had not come, but moments of incapacity built into a flashpoint of disgust that he would even consider completing the workday after the *late breaking development*. He had an obese boss who reeked of Texas and had to be careful because of the slyness that lurked in every cell of her fatness and her frequent avowal of antipathy, “I’m not liking you a whole bunch, mister,” only added to the high alert he was on, but human resources assured him he had the protection of bereavement leave.

Because souls are omnipresent when they vacate the body’s premises, Gideon sensed to watch his step but couldn’t. Five minutes from the office he asked a woman to love him but she said her gangster boyfriend would be arriving in three minutes and so Gideon had better leave if he wanted to live. He returned home with a cassette tape

featuring loud but not entirely funny comedians and let it take him to the outer limits of escape before he could begin to return.

The next day he sat Gentile shiva, the widow seeking to stuff his face with Entenmann's doughnuts even as a eulogy formed in his mind. At a dreary funeral home with yellowing rubber plants and a gray-faced director some days later, it did not sit well with the family remnant that he should hold his father to account for beating and kicking Luke as a means of conditioning him to accept punishment in lieu of love or reference in passing the failure of his older sisters to establish independent lives. He spoke in the key of scorn as much as sorrow. Hannah, scowling, held up a sign. "Accentuate the positive/eliminate the negative/asshole." Her eyes spoke of fire, saying, We will get you for this, you little brat, we will get you.

And so for the next three years he was banished from all family remnant events, Hannah and Vera calling Jeanne and Moses to them but loudly saying *jamais jamais* to him, for he had, in their perception, flown off the rails. Forevermore would he see himself at fault, though not for saying what he did. He was but one person, one voice, in a world of cacophonous sound. Let them break free of their code of *omerta*, if they dared, and look at the blackbird in their own way instead of focusing on him. But their timidity, their reticence, was not the issue. The issue was the eye contact he made with Hannah and then with Vera, a look that expressed pride at his boldness but also punishment-seeking guilt for that same boldness. He had, in that moment, given them license to do as they would. He had caved, in essence denying himself the right to be who he had become.

And so there were many family remnant events, starting with a Fourth of July barbecue, at which he was persona non grata.

Now Hannah had her sly ways and Vera had her sly ways as all creatures, large and small, have their sly ways, and was led by this way in her to try to appropriate Luke's teenage daughter, Rebekah, having deemed Luke's widow unfit for motherhood after the widow put a load on, got plotzed, sozzled, and in her loneliness/hunger/grief wet herself and the sawdust floor of the Shady Saloon on Buhre Avenue, in the Bronx. After hearing of the widow's bender, Vera swung into action of the underhanded kind. Unbeknownst to the widow or Gideon, she initiated a legal action to become the guardian of the girl in her heedless drive for hegemony. Rebekah had been living with her and Maury for close to a year, the widow reluctantly having accepted Vera's offer to have Rebekah stay with her during the week in Dobbs Ferry, where the public schools were better, and return home to the Bronx on the weekends. Jen was off at college by this time.

Gideon was astonished when he got wind of Vera's maneuver. Why would one mother seek to deprive another mother of her child? What form of cruelty would drive her to such an action, particularly when the widow had a disability and the children were her life? And to take such action without the widow's knowledge. It was all too much.

But the time had come for Gideon to reveal his own hidden way. Out with it. Out with it now. He was roused from his own lair of deceit, emerging with his hands up and confessing that he had wanted Luke's children to love him more than they did Vera or Hannah or Moses or Jeanne.

Because a sly way is a sly way and all sly ways have to be confessed to.

But Rebekah had a mind as well as a heart and a mouth with which to articulate the thoughts and feelings of both, and her own *jamais, jamais* moment, saying to Vera and to the court that no way would such vileness be done to her mother, and so she was returned to the widow, and if the two of them were recipients of the blackness that Vera dispatched on them, they received it from afar, where its harm could not be great, and Gideon could rejoice that justice had been done and the kind of sad and unhappy ending he loathed had been avoided. Because moral outrage is moral outrage and wrongs must be righted. They must.

Now there were conflagrations large and small to follow, but none were as revelatory as that which occurred on a Saturday night in July in the apartment where life began for Gideon but did not end.

It had become Gideon's way to send a card to Vera on her birthday and a dinner invitation at a restaurant of her choosing, as he did not have the means in his mind for cooking or the fortitude for launching the logistical operation that clearing the table would require. What was in place in his apartment needed to stay in place if order was to prevail and anarchy be kept at bay.

By now he was out of the workplace that had sought to bind him and had the resources to eat the food of America where it was served. He was in the days of his freedom if he would only claim it. To his surprise Vera broke her silence and said yes, she would meet with him, but not alone, that they must gather where it had begun for her as well, in the apartment on the Upper West Side where Moses held sway now that death had exited both Gideon's mother and father and Hannah from the premises. *Like those flat stones you skipped along the surface of those placid upstate lakes do you seek to treat*

life, Gideon. When will your stones stop skipping that you may sink into your sorrow, man?

She has put me in my place. She has said I am but one of many. In this manner did his mind speak to him.

He had not been to the apartment since Obama's first campaign for president. Several times a year he would meet Hannah at the Hungarian pastry shop on Amsterdam Avenue, across from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. He owed her his presence. She was, after all, family, and he felt an increasing obligation to better understand her. It could not have been easy, as the firstborn, to receive the crushing burden of parental dictates. Perhaps they had burdened her with their pain, their disappointment, and made her feel responsible, as she sought to compel others to feel for her. *"Put aside your Penguin Freud," the withering Laurence Harvey said, in Darling, circa 1966. Are you listening, Gideon? Well, are you?" "I will listen when and where I can. Are you listening?" Gideon replied.* All those years during the Great Depression when his out of work father was alone with Hannah while his mother served as a domestic to a Park Avenue couple. All those years of his father wiping her face with his saliva in a force field of sizzle pop Armenian anger, as Gideon sat with her now with her own brand of anger. *And your own anger, Gideon, your own? When do we hear of that?* Her world and that of his other two older sisters in the time before his birth were largely unavailable to him and for the first few years thereafter, before memory could take hold. How surprising that she should tell him of the trip to Washington, D.C., he and she took for a weekend when she was in her teens. She was vague about the year; chronology was not her strong suit. And as to what they saw on their visit to the nation's capital she was vague as well.

He sensed that memory lapse was not the only issue and that her lake of shame was even bigger than his own. She never discussed the father of Moses. She never discussed her hurt. She went to the movies and watched *Court TV* at home for long stretches of the day. “He did it, Gideon. He did it. He killed his wife and threw her cutup remains in the river. Don’t tell me he didn’t.” Books she had no use for, choosing to wash her face in the *New York Post* and for added information turning to Fox News.

So they continued to meet at the cafe, but then, a couple of years before her death she would badger him to come to the apartment after their outdoor get-togethers. Their meetings at the café were not enough for her. He would find excuses. He had to be downtown. He had someone he needed to see. But she surprised by putting her look of knowingness on him, that his wife had dumped him, that he had nowhere to go and nowhere to be, that all he had was his increasingly old man ways, the smell of it being on him. That look said further that there had been a time when he was young and free, but that time was gone. Now a smile visited her aggrieved face. It had a sufficient hint of wickedness to increase his foreboding. It must be understood that there are executioners among us, and while the slayings are on different levels, they are slayings nonetheless. Gideon’s time for being slain had come, her smile said. Murderers can afford to be brazen, living as they do in the infinity of death.

Gideon did not want to be back in the house of pain, as in the days of old, when by her hand in correct smacking position she ruled. *You just leave these brats with me. You just do that. I’ll straighten them out.* It was in his understanding, though she did not say, that Moses would be there, but he hadn’t expected the living room would now be a gymnasium of sorts, with a kickboxing stand and a punching bag and barbells and a

contraption for a full body workout, with particular attention to the abs. The room seemed a monument to Moses' narcissism; the boy was still there in his aging face, as was the smile that revealed his pleasure with himself. In that same room had Hannah done her devouring of quarts of Breyer's ice cream, eaten with a tablespoon right from the carton while watching "Million Dollar Movie" in the dark. *Weep for her, Gideon. Weep for all those impacted with pain to a degree that does not allow them to speak its name. And weep for the phony self-righteousness that deprives you of life. Just weep.*

Now when two are together and they are one it should be understood when they are separate and yet perceived as one that they are not one in the same way. The things that she began to talk to him about were not the kinds of things that she would talk about in the oneness state, that is, minus the presence of her son. Because viciousness will always obtain when the majority hold sway, and the goods and services will be of the wretched kind.

"Who are you voting for, Gideon?" she asked, taking him back to Watergate, when Nixon was her man and polarity was what she lived for and the isolation it would ensure.

"Voting for when?"

"You know when. The presidential election."

"Me. I'm voting for me."

"My mom asked you a question. Don't be disrespecting her in front of me,"

Moses said.

"The election seems far away."

“So does death, but it can come in an instant,” Moses said, in a voice that conveyed the importance of the choice. “So stop dodging the question. This is serious business.”

“What is serious business?” Gideon asked. *New sectarian violence has broken out in the Middle East.* He might have thought they were dealing with a conflagration of the innocents from Moses’ dire tone.

“Why do you have to be playing with us like this? We invite you into our home and now you’re disrespecting both of us.”

“Leave him alone, Moses. He won’t give us what we want, no matter how nicely we ask,” Hannah said.

“You’ve got the devil in you. That’s what Vera used to say,” Moses went on.

Gideon did not make devil’s horns with his fingers. He did not allow a spirit of evil to induce him to stick out his tongue.

Now it was a trait of the Garatdjians that when the anger sickness was upon them, it showed its staying power. Judgment was theirs to make.

“He’s a socialist. You know that, don’t you? A socialist,” Hannah said, making one more attempt to reason with him.

Beyond the vehemence, Gideon heard a tone of pleading in his sister’s voice. A feeling of hopelessness came over him. Hannah and Moses lived in an apartment far below the market rate because of rent control, legislated and regulated by the government. His sister might have been on the street without the monthly Social Security check she relied upon and perhaps not even alive without the quality of care she received

through Medicare. What was this blind embrace of a heartless plutocracy bent on taking away what little she had?

As Moses sought to caricature Obama as a crack dealer on the streets of Harlem, Gideon's only thought was of the door, and his fear that they would not allow him to leave.

"And then there's that 'I'm not playing with you look he gives the press when they ask him tough questions, the kind of look that makes them afraid for their lives and the lives of members of their families,'" Moses went on.

Yes, the BS.

"I don't understand why you would badger me into telling you my voting preference and then attack me when I do," Gideon said.

"You shut up. You don't get smart with me and my son," Hannah shouted.

Gideon counted to ten and then stood, fearing a barked command from Hannah to the son she controlled to seize their guest, or for Moses to take the initiative on his own. And yet just a few unimpeded steps later he was gone.

They have tried to claim me for their own, but I have claimed my freedom for my own.

I have walked these Broadway streets one time too many. I am saturated with a past I don't care to think about anymore.

I am tired to the bone with the repetitive banality of my life.

In my aloneness am I trapped, with the city in a static whirl around me.

To the dreary fundament of existence have I been dropped, and I am a part of that fundament.

I should lie down on this sidewalk and just die.

Such were his thoughts.

In the building he had left there had been the men and women whom aloneness had claimed. Men with names like Tall Tommy and Little Tommy who had done handiwork on the premises, painting rooms and replacing fuses and hauling the garbage cans out onto the sidewalk at night. He had not loved them enough. He had not identified with them enough. He had been busy trying to prove he was not like them when in fact he was just like them.

I am a man of great feebleness. Why else would Hannah have tried to claim me for her own?

This too Gideon thought on this night.

Did you try to help your nephew, Gideon? Did you try to understand? Or did you do the dinky thing and judge, ignoring the reality that for Moses Obama meant Obamination, meant Obliteration, meant the territorial imperative of the brothers at the Clinton Correctional Facility trying to bend him to their will. Do you not see the menace he was trying to keep at bay? Do you not see he is your brother in fear?

But let's move on. So OK, Hannah and her son tried to raise a glass to your defeat and were denied. That is not a wonder of anyone else's world but your own. What else have you got to show us?

Now it was two years later and he was journeying once again to the apartment where he had had his beginning. True, Hannah was deceased but even so, it was difficult to contemplate an evening there. Still, duty called. Had he not run from Vera in his drinking years? Was he not supposed to show up as an ongoing amend?

As he turned the corner of Broadway, he saw down the block Jeanne and Maury coming toward him over the crest of the hill leading to Riverside Park. Vera and Maury must have picked up his niece, who lived in Washington Heights, on the drive from Dobbs Ferry. Even from a distance their eyes locked, as if they had been on the lookout for each other. He worried that she had seen his fear, and that now she would have the advantage.

Panic began to grip him when no one answered his knock on the apartment door. He must get in and settle himself before Jeanne arrived. He pounded and the door yielded, Vera popping her head out from behind it with a mischievous smile. Was some funny business he wasn't in on going on? Why was it Vera was in the apartment before him when Jeanne and Maury were yet to arrive? Maury must have let her out in front of the building and searched for a parking space. In that way she could have time to draw Moses closer to her.

The apartment was not conducive to putting dinner on the table. There was no table. There were only two chairs.

"You need to be respecting my house. You need to get your shoes off," Moses instructed. No sooner did Gideon comply than he felt something wet underfoot soaking his sock.

"Jesus, I just stepped in pee," Gideon said, eyeing Moses' Jack Russell as the culprit.

"Victor has to be free to express himself in his own home. And don't be trying to dispute what logic can only tell you is the truth." Moses came at him with his usual voice of authority.

“He’s a dog. He needs to be housetrained.”

“You’ve got to go with the flow. You’ve got to have the will to chill.”

Unfettered access to the mainstream. Is that what you mean? So he translated his nephew’s live jive. Moses was stoned, and not on shitake mushrooms.

His mother, Hannah, had been dead in life the last twenty years. Do you know that, Gideon? Do you care to know? She slept with chicken bones from KFC she gnawed at even as she was dozing off. She slept with Fries—no, not French Fries, speak English for once—in her unwashed hair. She became a monument to her own apathy. This is your sister and your nephew of whom we speak. Your sister and your nephew.

Maury was a taciturn, benign presence, as always, when he and Jeanne arrived. Unobtrusive, or was the word “hidden”? Having had a hysteric for a father, he went in the direction of stillness.

But Jeanne was malign, not benign. So Gideon experienced her, though outwardly she offered only the pleasantry of a greeting.

“Did I tell you, Vera? I got a call from my brother, Roger. He says he is doing great. Isn’t that amazing?” Jeanne said.

“That is great news,” Vera said.

The question was moot as to whether Roger was in fact her full brother or half brother, the rumor having been her mother had gotten pregnant by a man other than her husband. Now at least fifty, he had been put up for adoption as an infant and had been seen infrequently since. Just as well, since he had a history with drugs and alcohol and domestic violence. The year before he had called Gideon while in the custody of a bail bondsman down in Maryland. He had violated the order of protection his wife had been

granted after threatening to kill her and frantically pleaded for five hundred dollars in order to keep out of jail. He came at Gideon hard and with the power of the lawyer that he was. The experience was unpleasant. It felt to Gideon as if he were being assailed rather than talked to. Finally, he gave in and wired him the money and hadn't heard from him since.

Jeanne's had come to Gideon in a state of distress the year before, fearing that Roger would drive up to New York City and shoot her dead with the gun he claimed to have. And so Gideon had offered to talk with Roger and encourage him to get help for his drug and alcohol problem. But since sending Roger bail money, he had heard nothing from Roger and little from Jeanne about him. And so her announcement to the family about Roger served as a deliberate irritant. To remain silent would only draw attention to his distress. His fear would not allow for such vulnerability.

"Roger is nothing if not manipulative," Gideon said.

His response alone did not provide the leverage Jeanne needed to smite him. If anything, she was deterred by its emphatic nature. What revved her bile engine was the sudden look of doubt she saw in his eyes. As he had given Vera and Hannah the right to banish him at the wake for his brother, Luke, he was now giving Jeanne the green light to attack. His insecurity became her strength. He saw the momentum gather in her body and her face.

She started slowly, seeking to find her range. "You have a lot of nerve. Of all people, you should be supporting Roger, not tearing him down. To tell you the truth, I'm sick of your negativity. I'm sick of you criticizing and tearing down everyone in the

family. Sounds like you have a resentment. Why don't you deal with it? You're nobody. Just a divorced bum. A bum with a pension. What do you do for anyone?"

In his numbed state, he took the questions to be rhetorical. Anyway, she had answered them for herself with her tone of voice.

"Sorry," he heard himself say, from a place of utter defeat. Without looking around, he was aware that the eyes of the others were upon him, and that their gaze was not sympathetic. Her power had not come from him alone; she had drawn it from all of them. She was their spokesperson.

Improbably she stood over him and held out her hand. "Let's shake."

He stared at her small fat paw as if he were being offered stinky food. How quickly she had brought him low. He hadn't gotten through the first round. And now, with all eyes feasting on his pained, shamed face, she could make her gesture of magnanimity.

"Why would I want to do that?" he asked, in a soft voice.

"Because it's what mature people do," Jeanne said.

Though he prayed every morning for release from the need for the approval of others, he lacked the strength to leave. The orgy of gossip that his departure would bring was too much to consider.

A shit in the pants family will always opt for eating out over a home-cooked meal. It is in the nature of all such people to do just that, and the family remnant (hereafter the FR) was no exception.

Stop, Gideon, stop. Stop before it is too late.

They found a restaurant around the corner where soon after being seated the vortex of the past sucked the FR into it. Vera was its first victim. She shared with the

others the indignities that Gideon had inflicted on her in her early years, such as the time he tried to shove her into the incinerator in the basement or push her off the parapet on the roof. Her favorite hits she could not help but play, which provided a not entirely expected segue from Jeanne.

“You’re so evil,” she said to Gideon, her words more devastating given the casualness with which she delivered them, as if she were stating what was only common knowledge.

I have gone where I do not belong and have been with people I don’t belong with. The FR is a jury that long ago came to a verdict. From now on I must live beyond its reach if I am not to be bereft of all amour propre, as they would have me be. Let me be answerable to the wind before I am answerable to them. Such were his thoughts as he walked home that night. A newfound sense of freedom had entered him.

Still, he did not quite sleep the sleep of the just. There were interludes of tossing and turning and groaning in the dark before he would again drift off. In the morning he opened his grade school composition book with a mottled cover and wrote. From the point of view of his feelings, he wished all manner of vileness on his niece: that she be bashed repeatedly by the Broadway bus, that a flesh-devouring disease afflict her, that she die and die and then die some more. Then he tried to examine the badness of himself that placed him in a position to be hurt. Then he asked for the power to see his niece in the higher power’s light and to be grateful for the gifts she shared with him (hah) and the universe. He followed with a period of meditation and prayer, that he might have a day that was his own and without the FR messing up his mind.

He had called on himself and he had called on the infinite, and now he called on Rory, his RoR mentor, to help vanquish his pain. But first he said the Serenity Prayer that he might bring some calmness to the situation and not act like the flibbertigibbet he sometimes did when speaking with Rory, who wore the dark mantle of Gideon's father though he was no such thing. Because a truth of Gideon's understanding was that Rory had the power of life and death over him and could commit him to dying and then dying more and more should Gideon deviate from the path of perfection in his contact with him. Life was a perilous journey where people of power were concerned.

"You had every right to say what you did. That was your experience of your nephew or half-nephew or whatever he is. He demanded money from you and then didn't pay it back. A manipulative son of a bitch is a manipulative son of a bitch." Rory said.

Rory knew the whole story. Gideon had called him in the time that Roger had laid siege to his fortress in order to bend him to his will. But then his mentor went further. He asked Gideon to drill down deep. "The question is why didn't you say, 'Whoa, whoa, you trying to ride so tall in the saddle. You have your experience of Roger and I have my experience of him. If you don't think he is a manipulative son of a bitch, tell us what you think he is. But don't interfere with the expression of my experience. I'm the one who gave him the five hundred dollars, not you.' My question to you is why you didn't have the wherewithal to pull her from her high horse onto level ground with you." With this question did Rory push Gideon into the ponder place, as it was Rory's way to often do.

Gideon was not in there long before he came roaring out. "I couldn't. In the moment I felt guilty as charged. I saw all my crimes and misdemeanors, the high and the low that situate me in the province of guilt."

“And what crimes would they be?”

“Just one, really. I read a eulogy for my deceased brother, Luke, some years ago. It contained some criticism of my father. It wasn’t upbeat enough, I guess.”

“And what about their eulogies? Did you get the opportunity to critique what they had to say?”

“They had no eulogies. They just sat there.”

“They just sat there? Well then, the problem is theirs, not yours.”

“Meaning?”

“You had your experience of your brother, just as you did of your manipulative relative, and you shared it with them, but they shared nothing with you though they had the same opportunity to do so. You’ve got to do a better job of standing your ground in the moment so you don’t have to carry this stuff around in your head.”

His mentor Rory had his selfhood and it was all his own, and Gideon could only live in the gratitude and wonder he was feeling, as in that moment he understood everything, everything. The image of the Bluecoats of France coming to the aid of revolutionary America blossomed in his mind. Rory was his Bluecoats. He was the ally he had never had in his father with which to stand his ground vis a vis the women of the family and now the women of the FR. Rory had given him *raison d’être* for sustainable amour propre. A confab parfait indeed.

Now it might well be asked what was this freedom that Rory had validated in Gideon? Quite simply, it was not to die at the hands of Moses, or if he must, then to meet such an end without soul-destroying guilt, for if Hannah had assigned Moses as his primary goal the extinction of Gideon and Gideon had summoned the courage or the

foolishness to go not against Moses with words but toward and around and inside Moses with those words, it was only so he might be known to himself and Gideon and the world and all lies and half truths and evasions consigned to the bin of permanent disappearance. Toward this end had Gideon commissioned the creation in cyberspace of a website on which to post his writings, long and short, so order could prevail and those who cared to know could know that he was on this earth with a purpose that his silence had for too long hid. Because he did not want to be a transgressor. He did not want to appropriate the lives of others for selfish reasons but only that these lives be remembered as he remembered them from his evolving point of view.

Gideon wasn't at the One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street Metro North station for a minute when he saw Moses on the opposite platform.

"You're on the wrong side," he called to his nephew.

"No I'm not," Moses called back, and turned away, as if the truth was his and his alone to possess.

"A track change was announced a couple of minutes ago. You must have missed it," Gideon called out again. *Do my words mean nothing? Am I speaking to the wind? He heard his mother say.*

The station was elevated above the Harlem streets and on a straightaway far down along Park Avenue. It took the appearance of a rapidly approaching train on the northbound track to gain Moses' attention and force him into a loping run for the stairs. He reappeared just in time to board, his poverty showing in the old and baggy jeans and ill-fitting blue blazer he wore for the occasion. And there came Jeanne, making a close

call of it as well. Gideon left them with each other while he found a seat apart. How strange to sit by himself but at the same time how satisfying to maintain, if only physically, the distance an uncle deserved to have from a nephew and niece who had crowded him for much of his life.

The train stopped at Yonkers, where, in the long ago, a love of his would meet him. “You are looking for someone to lead you out of the life you now lead, but I am not the one,” the woman, whose name was Anna, said to him, a year into their affair. She had grown less and less available, citing, among other things, the need for a partner with more substantial means. A truth teller Anna had been, in her own way.

If he had any doubt about the course he was on vis a vis Jeanne, it was erased at the Dobbs Ferry station, where Jen picked them up. He had anticipated that Jeanne would go for the front passenger seat not simply so she could be next to Jen but to relegate Gideon to the back with Moses. And he had further anticipated what he would say.

“Is it anywhere in your emotional makeup to be aware that, in addition to being older and taller than you, I have a back condition?”

“Do you want the front seat? All you have to do is ask?” Jeanne replied. She had a low center of gravity. She could not be knocked back too far. A chill went through him as he realized that nothing could permanently halt her insurgency. Still, he had shown an ability to stand up to her. He was not the passive soul he had been at Moses’ apartment.

Rabbi Tebbe, a wizened wisp of a man, arrived with the gathering clouds at the cemetery. Merriment and the hint of a capacity for mischief seemed to have a permanent place on his bearded face. He accompanied the FR into the office, where Vera and Jen had paperwork to fill out in an office overflowing with file cabinets. Feeling awkward in

the presence of the rabbi, Gideon wandered over to a secretary at her sand-colored IBM Selectric Three.

“Typewriters are definitely for the living. The Selectric, with its rotating golf ball element, is what made America great. I am galvanized by the sight of it.”

“What is that you say?” The secretary had the glory of her youth.

“Worlds without ends, have maybe been created on them,” Gideon replied.

“You see these forms, mister? That is the world I create.” She held up two of them for his general inspection, but he passed.

“I belong to the world of things as much as people, I must confess,” Gideon said.

But she beat off his old man drivel with sparks that flew. “Mister, you go to church for your confession.”

Before he could respond he heard and felt the power of an onrushing train as it rattled the old building that housed the office. “To be continued,” he shouted, and tore himself free in time to glimpse the last of the silver commuter cars disappearing past the trees and grass and river the train had become a part of in this pastoral tableau. Warily he sat himself on a bench near a low-hanging tree in anticipation of an eye feast when the next one came his way. But he also had a sense that the odds were not with him. After all, he had been playing an indoor game when the train came and went, and the shudder it caused could be taken as an indicator of its wrath for his neglect. It was just another thing to take to the ponder place in a world of mystery.

“The hills are not alive with the sound of music. Instead we experience the muffled sound of death and only words, loving or harsh, kind or spiteful, words that split the air and crack the teeth they pass between can push back against the gray stillness. But

only in words spoken in the key of God and sanctified by God can the possibility of eternal life be maintained. And so we come to this kaddish, this mourner's prayer, which I will now read, and at each pause ask you to give the response." The rabbi gave them the English version of the response, but even that was too much for Gideon to retain. The rabbi then held the small prayer book close to his face and read, from right to left, with much mouth action, like a man doing the gnosh gnosh on an ear of corn.

Gideon's mind wandered to the familiar Upper West Side scene on Saturday mornings of congregants streaming from temple out onto the sidewalk, the men in dark suits and the women in dresses and the children also properly attired for the occasion. Often Gideon would step into the street to avoid trying to navigate the dense and happy crowd. There was power in faith and in belonging to a tradition that reached back millennia.

Rabbi Tebbe had an interactive approach. When he saw their shyness, he encouraged the gathered to repeat the response, "May His great name be blessed forever, and to all eternity," but some contrary spirit had entered Gideon, causing him to ignore the rabbi's prompts and hold his silence.

The rabbi understood his limitations. He didn't assume his eulogy would be the only one, given that he had only met Maury briefly, and that on the occasion of Maury's mother's death. And so he called on others to say a few words.

Moses remained silent. He had tried to speak at the memorial service for his mother but words had failed him and he quickly sat down. Gideon had been touched. How childlike Moses had appeared in the moment he returned to his seat, how wounded, all the forces within him in collision. His silence seemed to speak eloquently for him. His

mother, his relationship to her, his life had left him speechless. He had the humility and the intelligence to acknowledge as much. Moses was not one thing. He was a tragedy Gideon wouldn't allow to live in his consciousness as such. If he did, the guilt would be overwhelming, for then he would have to ask what he had done to help him.

And Vera too held her silence, reserving for herself the eloquence of the mourner. She had done the same at the services for his mother and his sisters Naomi and Rachel and her brother, Luke. But she had broken that silence at the memorial service for Hannah a few years before, at the Lutheran Church on Broadway and Ninety-third Street, where the pastor had been kind enough to receive them. The service had been held in the church proper, and Vera chose to address the gathered from the pulpit. Her genial nature fell away and she began to thunder, as if cloaked in the preacher's dark robes and imbued with the fulminating temperament of an Old Testament prophet. Her many quotes from the Bible only supported this image. And yet, underneath that sternness he heard fear and hurt. He was her brother. He should know.

But Jeanne heeded the rabbi's call, saying Maury had always been nice to her, nicer than some of her uncles.

At the conclusion of her brief remarks, Rabbi Tebbe singled her out for praise. She should be a rabbi herself, the wizened one opined. Gideon wasn't surprised. His niece had some strange power to enthrall old men.

"And you, staring into space, do you have some words for us to keep life alive?" Rabbi Tebbe turned to Gideon, who indeed had been staring up at the heavens as Jeanne spoke. Though suddenly Gideon wanted to press the bile button, he called on his higher

self to keep all vileness in check so he might maintain himself on the road of normalcy and not be labeled once again a rogue nation.

He had always regarded the marriage of Maury and Vera as built to last and took comfort in their happiness, given the instability that was rife among his other siblings. In his bedroom was a photographic triptych. In one panel was Vera with her infant daughter seated on her lap; in the middle panel was Jen alone; and in the third Maury held Jen over his head, as if she were the crowning achievement of his life, as Gideon had to believe Jen was. Maury had been a man centered in family life; it was the source of his happiness. But he was also a man in need to relief from the tensions that built within him. His mind was quick and agile but in danger of overheating. The cooling mechanism he relied upon was cinema, and there as well his good nature showed. He never seemed to see a movie he didn't like; even the worst had some redeeming quality.

Gideon abruptly sat down, having run out of things to say, and held on as Rabbi Tebbe sought to drown him in shame with his fulsome review, unmindful of the Hemingway ditty, "Praise to the face is outright disgrace."

In the near distance were several men in work clothes, lounging against a backhoe as they smoked. Now and then they would turn an indifferent eye toward the ceremony under the canopy, which the rabbi had requested as protection from the threatening clouds. On a beckoning hand signal from the rabbi they drew near, slipped canvas straps under the pine casket, and lowered it on a winch into the rectangular hole. The men brought with them a sense of dark finality. No more pretty words. They would all disperse, and there Maury's corpse would remain under half a ton of earth.

Rabbi Tebbe had distributed flowers to the mourners to toss on top of the lowered casket.

“Flowers, not shoes. Keep your fucking shoes on or I’ll kill you,” Vera whispered, as Gideon approached the hole.

“Yes, of course,” Gideon could only think to reply. His sister was an enigma, but he had long ago accepted that there was no such thing as a simple soul. People were no more of one piece than a table, with its whirling electrons; strangely configured elements were likely to visit and depart from one’s being with great frequency, like the traffic in and out of a busy airport hub.

And though it was mean of him, he couldn’t help but notice that Jeanne, after making her toss, had to go histrionic, lingering long after the others, as if her devotion was of a singular kind, the lunacy of her fraudulent pose apparent to him but evidently not to her that she should believe Maury was in that wretched hole and not cosmically distributed or at the least an orbiting satellite beaming rays of love.

“Don’t go falling in. You’ll have your own hole soon enough,” Gideon heard himself say.

“Not before you have yours, I hope,” she retorted.

Rain of the treacherous kind began to fall, conspiring with the oil it found on roadway surfaces to create a slick and death-dealing emulsion for those secretly wishing to be ushered into eternity because of their sly absence of vigilance, even for those at the wheel of vehicles whose tires had an adhesive grip. For this reason was Gideon happy to be in Jen’s car, as he sensed her commitment to the earth more than her mother’s at this

particular juncture, having as she did a life still ahead of her while Vera would now and perhaps forever be looking back.

He ordered chicken au jus (chicken of the just, he wanted to believe, just as the French had their sleep of the just). The menu said cage-free, which was not the same as born free, but whatever filthy word games the poultry industry was playing, consuming roasted chicken was more appetizing than eating hog meat if he could get past the vileness of the creatures' fecal matter. The trick was to stay mum about your belief so mocking disputation would not have its day.

The menu, with its elegant font, and linen tablecloth and napkins and polished silverware and crystal glasses brought into question whether the FR was worthy of the restaurant and the amiable, professional-looking waiter, who inquired whether anyone would care for a drink.

“Let me have a cup of black coffee and tea to bring my system into balance,” Moses said, his odd request summoning a look of doubt to the waiter's face. “And don't be looking at me funny. Someone just died, and I don't want to join him. It's about my health,” Moses said.

“Of course,” the waiter said.

Jeanne followed with her request. “Would you happen to have cranberry juice? I am trying to get over a bladder infection, and cranberry juice, I have read, helps with that.”

“I believe we do,” the waiter said.

“But not too much. I don’t want my system overwhelmed. Do you know what I mean? And can you wait three minutes before bringing it, so my body has time to prepare?” Jeanne asked.

“I will do that,” the waiter said, maintaining a straight face in the presence of the peculiar.

The meal was drawn out over several hours, far too long to spend in a restaurant, even one experiencing a slow afternoon. We are treating the place as if it is our home, Gideon thought. Irrational as it might be, he couldn’t shake his concern for the waiter, who was kept coming and going.

All conversation flowed toward Vera and Jen. It appeared to Gideon that any contribution he sought to make drew an immediate response from Jeanne, not for his ears but for those of her aunt and cousin. Vera and Jen were the axis of power at the table. He was merely a rival, with Jeanne, for their attention. And so, he grew quieter as the afternoon passed rather than get caught up in verbal swordplay. How had such a state of affairs come to be that he should be on the same plane as his niece Jeanne. *We neither of us have children. We are the children. And Vera has become our mother;* came the answer.

“Vera, let me contribute. This is an expensive place, and our waiter deserves a generous tip,” Gideon said.

“No, this is on us. You are our guest,” Vera replied.

“He’s not a guest, Mom. He’s family,” Jen said.

“He’s a guest all the same,” Vera said, in a tone that would brook no more argument.

If his relations with Jeanne remained cold, he nevertheless sensed a warming trend on the part of Moses, who had whispered a few words of approval to him following his min-eulogy at the cemetery. In fact, Moses had done the same at the memorial service for his mother several years before. He had the capacity to give a person his due; he was not small in that regard. In such moments Gideon saw Moses' need for a role model, someone to emulate. Such awareness brought with it pain that he had allowed fear and judgment to separate him from his nephew.

But then the talk around the table turned to gypsies. The question came up as to where the Roma originated.

"Hungary? Romania? Somewhere in Eastern Europe?" Gideon conceded his ignorance.

"India. That's a fact. Don't go running home to Google it. And don't bother arguing with me. A fact is a fact. Unless you're looking to challenge me," Moses said, turning directly to Gideon.

"Does it look like I'm challenging you?"

"Don't be playing with my facts, man. Don't be playing with them."

And so there it was, or so it appeared, the other face of his nephew, the bullying, domineering one Gideon had seen during the Obama harangue.

As if he had suddenly gained the capacity to enter Gideon's thought stream, Moses sought to soften his uncle's perception.

"You're all right. You really are. You're a little weird and hard to take sometimes, but you're all right. You mind my saying that? You mind my kneading your shoulder like I'm doing?" Moses' hand had closed on Gideon's shoulder.

“I do mind. Remove your hand, please, and right now.” Gideon’s reaction was visceral. There was revulsion in his tone.

Gideon did Google the Roma that night, and to his dismay discovered the correctness of his nephew’s assertion that they had originated in India. And so, from a place of empathetic caring, he was once again recoiling from his nephew’s imperial reach and that night double-checked the locks and went through his other rituals of safety. But his dreams were another matter. A giant bird with Moses’s unpleasantly smiling face held him in its talons as a cat might hold a mouse in its paws before commencing to devour it.

Jen had also been watching him. She had ascertained his mindset and determined, in consultation with her mother, that an e-mail was required to set things straight. While pleasant around the edges, it had the steel of one accustomed to achieving her goals in the most direct fashion.

Dear Gideon. Mom and I are so glad that you have been there for us and would like very much for you to come to the memorial service for my dad. His two closest friends from DataWorks will give the eulogies and I will also speak. *There will be no other speakers.* Mom says hearing a little from you is the same as hearing a lot from others, and she means this in the kindest way. We are trusting that you will understand. Love, Gen.

Gideon needed time to rearrange his face. It was all right. The signal had been given by Vera through her proxy to move him back after moving him close. Though still young in years, it was for Jen to inform him that death remained near and that they all died alone.

On the morning of the memorial service, Gideon added a glowing gold tie to his white dress shirt and black suit and gave himself a talking to. If there is an omega in the supposed darkness of death, let there also be an alpha. Let me start at the beginning, on solid ground, and build from there. Let me go where Cary Grant made his dash in sunglasses onto the Chicago-bound New York Central where Eve Marie- Sainte awaited him. Let me go to granite-solid Grand Central Terminal and draw on the strength that it can bring, it being a feature of his mind that architecture could summon strength, and not so he could cause the terminal to fall down as Samson did the temple of the Philistines.

The service was held in a town several miles south of Dobbs Ferry, close enough for the river to look on. And, of course, the train was faithful to both the river and the town below which it ran on the sun blessed and apocalypse-free day. He stood with the station behind him staring up at the steep hill. Some joy was he buoyed by that could not abide containment. Though it was surely obvious to all but those who suffered from topographical cretinism, as Trotsky had called it, that the town was built on the hill and that climbing that hill was the sole means of bringing him to his desired destination, he felt compelled to reach out to a woman who had herself left the train.

“I am looking for Main Street. Am I right to believe it is at the top of this hill?”

“Absolutely. Everything stands at the top of the hill,” the woman replied. She was young and her sunny response suggested she too was afflicted with morning cheer.

“Thank you,” Gideon said.

“Where on Main Street do you want to go?”

“The Church of Righteousness,” Gideon said.

“Oh, I know that church. I worshiped there for many years, before I couldn’t anymore.”

“I like that. It says a lot.”

“What says a lot?”

“All of it, especially ‘I couldn’t anymore.’ In fact, it’s perfect. It expresses my own experience of church. I couldn’t anymore. Such finality, brought on not by choice but by necessity. Do you know what I mean?”

“Possibly,” she said, suggesting by her altered, now guarded tone and appraising stare that a character assessment was underway. “You can follow me. I am going in that direction,” she added, and turned to begin a power walk ascent, as if she had come to the conclusion that her brief conversation had been with a lamprey eel disguised as an old man seeking to attach securing devices to her person so he might slowly eat her alive. Generational lines were often dangerous to cross. Alarm bells could be set off. Shouts of “Trespass! Trespass” might be heard.

But Gideon rallied strong. He put on the face and mindset of innocence and maintained a slow gait, gazing into shop windows with more interest than he possessed. A drama had commenced. He had created it by entering her world. She surely understood her part and was feeling all the fear a woman can when she has allowed a stranger into her midst. And so the least, the very least, he could do was allay that fear by establishing the purity of his intentions in her mind. *What is this slavery to goodness, Mother? What is it? What ails me, in your parlance?*

When she reached the crest of the hill and vanished, he paused to rest and assess the small buildings that rose over the shops and cafes. Here I could find a place of safety

and peace, he thought. Here I could find a place of utter loneliness and shrivel up and die, he also thought.

Some minutes later he was sitting in a back pew in the stillness of the stone church, having been the first to arrive. A gentle light entered through the clerestory windows. He felt the abandonment, the call of the dead in the empty pews and the old hymnals, a whole world of Sunday formality that had slipped away. The vibrations of the deceased passing through him were a matter of some sadness as he closed his eyes.

Some minutes later he could hear footsteps fast approaching up the aisle. And then there was a voice, loud and manly and bracing as a cold wind.

“Have we a meditator in our midst?” he called down, rousing Gideon from the darkness.

“I’m sorry. Should I not be here?”

“Where else should you be, my friend? I am Pastor Peterson.” The mouth of the black-robed minister was a thin line of grievance. In that moment Gideon understood himself to be everything the minister stood against, those who pursued their individual path apart from the collective and in so doing loosened the ties that bind. Gideon saw cold anger in Pastor Peterson’s blue eyes that he, so well trained to tend to the flock, should be so abandoned. Gideon remembered seeing professionally trained waiters standing haplessly at empty linen-covered tables in the restaurants ringing Piazza San Marco in Venice as tourists flocked to the food carts siphoning off their business. Was it true that expedience always won out over ritual?

“I am related not to the deceased but to the widow of the deceased. I am her brother. My name is Gideon Garatdjian.”

“They will all be here shortly, I am sure. It will all come to pass.” And with that Reverend Peterson moved on, having seen all he needed to see of Gideon to know who he was.

Gideon stepped outside and stood vigil on the air.

I understand everything.

It was not him speaking but a deceased mentor. Like a train the words came and went. He did not get in their way.

Certitude is found most often in the insecure.

This was not his either. He left it there, like a rotting carcass in the middle of the street.

All thought means nothing.

Could it be?

“You look like KGB.” Moses had arrived, with Jeanne not far behind.

“Call me Boris,” Gideon replied.

Others quickly followed, the lot filling with cars.

He went back inside and took his seat. The first few pews filled quickly, and it came to seem conspicuously odd that he was so far in the rear. He found himself moving forward, struggling against the conviction that he wasn’t wanted in the front pew and had done nothing to deserve being there, given his constant betrayal of the family and the real possibility of risking Vera’s visible outrage.

“Would you like to sit next to your sister?” How easy Jeanne made it for him.

“Sure,” he said, as if the idea were hers and not his to vacate her seat next to Vera.

No one wishes to go where he does not belong, unless he be a murderer or thief or have some other criminal intent, or unless he be to snoopiness bound or suffer sensitivity deprivation. Had Gideon covered all the bases? He couldn't be sure. A riot of feeling overwhelmed him to be in such proximity to his sister. A criminal he was not but a fool he definitely was. What other explanation could he have for such a blunder? Masochism? They were strangers to each other. The years had left them with nothing in common but memories. But she did not hit him. She did not strike him dead nor turn her head and debase him with a basilisk eye.

Reverend Peterson did not go down the oration road. He acknowledged that he did not know Maury, but that Maury was a child of God and, as such, a candidate for the resurrection. Because wherever Maury went, God was there, as God is there where each of his children wander. In the mantle of humility did Reverend Peterson wrap himself, saying that when we read one book on a subject, we are an authority but after reading nine more we realize we know nothing. So it is with God. No one can hope to know God, but he can and does know us and we can have the experience of God in our daily lives if we rightly relate ourselves to him. Reverend Peterson's words came with swift exactitude, and Gideon gave himself to him as readily as he did to airline pilots on hearing their calm, crisp announcements from the cockpit, while maintaining the right to measure the size and nature of his wound, to see that Reverend Peterson was standing before those who had not seated themselves in the pews of his church before nor would they again. His flock had gone to cemetery graves. Gideon could only wonder if others had their eyes of assessment on the reverend, as did he.

The gathered then with gusto sang “Amazing Grace,” while Gideon abstained, heeding the admonition, “A man has to know his limitations,” by the terse one, Mr. Clint Eastwood.

There followed a reading of Psalm 139: 1-18, in seeming support of Reverend Peterson’s earlier assertion that God is and will always remain a mystery to his flock but not they to him.

“Oh Lord, thou has searched me and known me. Thou knowest my
downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandeth my thought afar off.”

Gideon had not read the program, and so could not anticipate that a stick in the eye awaited him. When the deed was done, he did not yelp but inwardly winced. Up next was Jeanne, who as she rose turned to him with an eyeball to eyeball communiqué that said, “I got mines, Bones, and you got nada, zilch. You can displace me from my seat but you can’t displace me from Vera’s heart. Look far and wide on that program for where you stand and see the nowhere status that you have.”

Jeanne dawdled at the pulpit, seeking to keep the focus on herself, before reading a poem by Emily Dickinson about the exultation of the soul’s journey from inland out to sea. The dreary solemnity and authority she sought to impose gave the impression the poem was her own and marred her reading of the two beautiful verses. Gideon bore witness to what some would call his own smallness in his evaluation of Jeanne but made no attempt to check it, as intuition told him his hard-eyed angle of vision was necessary if he was to stay on the path to freedom.

Question: Where is your mind, Gideon? Where is it? She is the daughter of a suicide and a drunk. There is a river named Compassion. Have you not located it on your internal map and bathed in its waters?

Answer: This river, does it also go by the name Bilge? Do not ask me to go where the waters so contaminated flow. Onto higher ground is where I must journey.

The eulogies were not named as such in the program. They came under the heading “Remembrances.” And so there were no eulogists. There were only “rememberers.” Gideon took note of this oddity. Not that he would necessarily place it in his suspicious file. It was just something to be *remembered*.

Jeanne was in the leadoff position, and expressed a daughter’s love for her father. The song “I Only Have Eyes for You” filled Gideon’s ears as she spoke, the sharp-suited Flamingos singing that their love must be a kind of blind love. She lived in the highlights of her father’s life. Oh, that he could have that unequivocal devotion. Such a pang did Gideon feel.

In the second position came a colleague of Maury’s at DataWorks, a man named Solo Ranger, who gave the gathered to know that in the world of data research, Maury had achieved preeminence with dazzling algorithms and a steady stream of lucid papers that were now required reading throughout the industry. Indeed DataWorks had become a kind of mecca, with admirers traveling great distances just to meet him. Maury had never spoken about his work, at least to Gideon. Now he took on the aura of a junior Albert Einstein, with his bushy, unmanageable hair and untrimmed mustache. His pathway to excellence was cited—Stuyvesant High School, Harvard for his undergraduate degree, and Columbia for a PhD in mathematics. But Maury’s achievements were not solely of

the cerebral kind. Solo Ranger challenged the gathered to ponder the fact that one year Maury ran the fastest one hundred yard dash of any student at his high school.

The choice of Solo Ranger was a wise one. Maury began to emerge in the round. He had not so much been self-effacing about his achievements; it was more that he had nothing to prove. The inner light of self-love glowed in him. How could it not? He had been chosen.

Solo Ranger was followed by another colleague, Jasper Jonquili, who added his own paean to Maury's intellectual prowess but mainly focused on the personal. Maury had set Jasper Jonquili on the course of love by introducing him to his future wife and then challenged the insecure Jasper to seal the deal with a kiss. Thus was Maury presented as a mischievous Ariel with a devilish grin.

As Maury grew larger thanks to the three-dimensional portrait, Gideon grew smaller. Maury was something more than a quiet, innocuous sort. Not only had he been stunningly bright; he had also come equipped with afterburners to propel him along the cinder running track.

Now Gideon too became a rememberer. There was Maury in the long ago saying "But I don't understand. You're so skinny." Because the essential fact his logical mind required for understanding was lacking. Vera had been going on and on about Gideon's basketball skills back in high school, but Maury was saying her assertion about Gideon did not compute with his physique. With that one comment did Maury expose the lie, and with it Gideon, showing him to be nothing but a hanging string not only in the meagerness of his mind but in his body. And Maury had known it all along. He had seen without saying, before he finally did, if only obliquely.

Reverend Peterson had been accommodating, but he drew the line at Jen's request that Rabbi Tebbe himself conduct the service. Not in his house. So had Reverend Peterson said. That line was as straight as the line of his mouth and not to be crossed. But Jen had another idea for breaching the barrier, and showed no shyness about expressing it. Suppose she played a recording of Allen Ginsberg reciting his poem "Kaddish"? In this way could Jewishness be in the house of the Christian Lord. Fortunately for Jen, her relative youth and beauty had a melting effect on Reverend Peterson's wintry heart.

"Fine," he said, succinctness ruling all his days.

But succinctness did not rule the poet's days. He went on at length in a tone of mourning not only for his mother's death but for her life, his voice sounding thin on the tinny iPod speakers. He seemed, depressingly, a creature lost in the rush, the avalanche crush, of history.

"Well, I suppose it is for him to understand what he means, if I don't," Reverend Peterson said, when the reading ended, which brought a gasp from Jen. Reverend Peterson had given, and Reverend Peterson had taken away.

The reception was held in the parlor, a spacious room to the rear of the church, where Gideon sought to make amends to Vera for having encroached on her space.

"I guess I will be going," he said. His announcement drew a gasp of protest and an anxious plea that he stay. He was genuinely surprised by his sister's reaction, but then realized he shouldn't have been. He saw once again that while she was not one to arrive early, she was one to leave late. And in this instance, what did she have to leave for but a house full of memories, including the room where she had found her husband dead.

Seeing Reverend Peterson across the room and not wanting him to feel that he had lived and loved in vain, Gideon went and thanked him in full earnestness for leading the service and making the church available to Vera and Jen. The man's quality and worth were undeniable, and demanded acknowledgment.

"I am here to serve in the ways that I can," Reverend Peterson said.

"Yes, in the ways that you can," Gideon replied, relying on repetition to galvanize some thought action in his own mind, but when nothing came, the minister gave him some frosty face and left the room.

Gideon did not berate himself for Reverend Peterson's exit, and why should he, when he was making great progress in understanding the minister's personal ways, and his departure added a great clue. The minister was a man who lived in and for the echo of the words, sparse as they might be, that he spoke from the pulpit. In addition, the gathered were not of his kind or pedigree. They were people far from the fold and the path that had called him to it. He lived in the lonely severity of his life and spent his days tending to the fire that burned within that excellence should be so little recognized and poorly rewarded.

Vera was not one thing that afternoon. She did not in her sorrow dwell or allow love and considerateness get in the way of her communications.

"Gideon wanted to steal your love away," she said to Jasper Jonquili, whose acquaintance Gideon had made.

"Is that right?" Jasper Jonquili replied. He still had hair thick enough for a dab of gel and a face with traces of youthful vigor. A man who had his puissance flowing.

“Absolutely right. Gideon took a real shine to Ann Marie when he met her at the memorial service for my sister Hannah five years ago.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding at all. And it all began with radiant heat. You remember that, Gideon?”

“Radiant Heat? Didn’t he finish first in the Kentucky Derby?” Gideon asked.

“Come on. You don’t get out of it that easily,” Vera said.

Gideon turned to Jasper Jonquili. “Actually, I was taken with the concept of radiant heat, as I recall, having had no idea what it might be. Your wife—I guess she was your fiancée back then—said you were a master at providing all forms of heat and that, in your new home, you had installed under the floorboards an intricate structure for its delivery so from wall to wall and floor to ceiling you would be in its embrace. Wherever she was in that house she would not be beyond its comforting reach and so, by proxy, within the force field of your love.”

“Your love, Gideon. Your love,” Vera chided. Turning to Jasper, she said, “He couldn’t take his eyes off her. He asked me about her for days afterward.”

“Really,” Jasper Jonquili said, as Vera continued with what Gideon perceived, if she herself didn’t, her dangerous game. Did she not notice that the man’s hedgehog face had begun to fill with the peeve that she herself was fueling? Not that peeve was ever far from the face of Jasper Jonquili. The man had not displayed the appearance of Mr. Equanimity before her inappropriate disclosure.

“I don’t remember it quite that way,” Gideon said.

“What way do you remember it?” Jasper Jonquili asked, and in that moment the intensity of Van Gogh in a self-portrait entered Gideon’s consciousness.

“I believe it is like this. When death is in the vicinity, light must be as well, and there, within the valley of the shadow of death, did the light of your now wife fall on me.”

He had spoken truth in the presence of the FR. He had not gone down the road of happy horseshit nor dawdle danced on either side of the equivocation line. His oldest sister, Hannah, had worn the raiment of blackness in his growing up years. Her hand had been the instrument of savage retribution for crimes not committed. The emotional wounds from her blows had longevity in his psyche. Even to say for the thousandth time that she smacked with her tongue clamped between her thick lips brought the reminder of her brutish ways back to him. He had not stood before the FR rejoicing in the fact of her darkness. He was merely playing the record she had made and installed within him. But given that the time for bogus rhetoric had long since past, he went on to say to the FR that the light not of love but of understanding began to come to him. He saw, as a young adult, instances in which he too had raised his hand to the correct smacking position, as had his father and Hannah before him, and so, with that understanding could forgiveness begin to enter. By no act of his will had the mental image of the blackness that cloaked his oldest sister moderated. It had just happened.

But it had not ended there, he now explained to Jasper Jonquili, with Vera looking on, as it was not right for him to be defined for all time by her. For this truth telling had the FR once again inflicted on him the shunning thing.

Q: Must you communicate in this exaggerated fashion, Gideon? Must you?

A: Must you “must” on me? Must you?

But into the space in which he had been sequestered came a presence, a woman offering love and acceptance in her voice and manner, saying “Thank you for what you said. It was very helpful to me.” And so, for a brief moment, he had loved her because she had loved him, and for some days was in mourning for her, as she was committed to a man on knowledgeable terms with the mysteries of this thing called radiant heat.

Jasper Jonquili held his fisticuffs fire. Just stood there with his smolder face. Gideon had no more time for him. His hunger called him to the buffet table for a sandwich. Never mind that the white bread had been stripped of all nutrients that bread should have or that the ham was tainted with hormones and antibiotics or that embedded in the cheese were flecks of a cow’s stomach lining. If he was doing a violation of himself, it was OK with him, as he was far from OrganicOnly and he must feed himself if he was not to fully return to the hanging string status that defined his earlier days. I will eat the food of America and listen to the sounds of America, Gideon resolved, Jen having kicked off Maury’s playlist with the Bee Gees doing their “How Deep Is Your Love” thing so sad rags could be changed to glad rags even in the face of death.

A woman approached Gideon in his wanderings.

“I am Moldova,” she said.

“I hear assertiveness in that. Are you bragging?”

“I simply state a fact. I am the wife of Solo Ranger.”

“And I am Gideon, the brother of Vera.”

“This I know. I see you seated together.”

“You have an accent. Where do you come from?”

“I come from the region of Ukraine for which I am named.”

“Of course. You have the sadness of your separation in your eyes,” Gideon said.

“No sadness. No sadness at all. I am happy to be American. Happy.”

“Good. We need more patriots, people who will affirm their love of their adopted country and love of love itself.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“We are all fled from somewhere, including my mother and father. We are a nation built on escape, though I wonder what that means.”

“You have much reason to wonder. You are not a man who speaks as he looks.”

Moldova had a mournful spirit. The music of her sphere was somber and restricted to a lower key. All the glitter of Soviet architecture was in her serious visage, but why not? She had a bloody, tragic history raging in her genes.

“We are together for a reason, but is it a good reason?” The term *free radical* he held in check, but in that direction was he leaning in his perception of Moldova. She had come to add to the pall of death. She had come to bond, and in so doing to tear herself and him asunder.

“Now it is for me to say I wonder what that means.”

“The open air is advantageous to everyone.” Gideon paused. “Do you know that to this very moment I have thought nothing of what it means to say the words ‘open air.’ But quite clearly, it simply means air that is not confined by walls. And is it not an expression of the American metaphysic, ‘Don’t fence me in,’ as sung by the irreplaceable Roy Rogers on his dancing horse Trigger?”

‘There is no profit in speaking with you. Your mind goes where the wind goes, and that is everywhere.’

Tumbling tumbleweed, he thought but did not say.

He crossed the room to Jen, who was huddled with a young friend.

“Reverend Peterson was a bit snippy about the ‘Kaddish’ reading,” Gideon said.

“That is his prerogative. It’s his house,” Jen replied.

“There is a tendency toward silliness in all of us.” To be among the young was to lose one’s bearings.

“We weren’t being silly at all. We were quite serious, weren’t we, Ellie?” Jen’s voice had settled into the plaintive key since her father’s death.

“We sure were,” Ellie said, adding adamant reinforcement.

“Actually, I was referring to Reverend Peterson,” Gideon said. Eric Burden and the Animals, he heard them now holler-singing, something about being misunderstood, from the graveyard past.

“But it doesn’t matter. It’s what I said. It’s his house to do and say what he wants in,” Jen replied. A further refutation. No give in these young women.

“Of course,” Gideon said.

“Ellie is my friend,” Jen said, as if suddenly aware that she had not introduced her. “She helped me find an apartment in her neighborhood when I moved back to New York City.”

“I am Gideon. Hello.”

“Hi,” Ellie said. She was slender, like Jen. A quiet sort.

“She knows who you are. She was with me that day we saw you at the museum,” Jen said, with a hint of reproach in her voice.

He had wandered into the young people’s corner and was paying the price. They were being imposed upon. There being nothing fetchingly avuncular about Gideon, they had found nothing to like. But perversity was having its way with him, or maybe it was simply the need for connection, not with graveyard material like Moldova but to those with the spark of life still in them.

“I will tell you a story. A brief one. Surely it is worth as much as Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs on the hit parade,” Gideon said, as the time for “Woolie Boolie” had come, and it was for everyone to get their mind around Maury boogying to that. “His name was Mr. LeGrande, Mr. James LeGrande, a man who discovered daily when he stepped out of his apartment that he was not built for this world, his head swelling like a pus-filled boil at the obstacles in his path, whether a customer ahead of him on in the grocery checkout line or a pedestrian too slowly taking the steps into that filthy mode of transportation for the masses, the New York City subway. He was the librarian at my high school and in the hushed quiet of his domain would sometimes violate the space with brief emissions of poison gas, low volume mockery of comments made by students, always males, as essentially he was a dink of the oedipal kind, one who had to kill his father and male competitors of all ages to secure women to his premises. It had become common knowledge throughout the school that he was indulging in this vile practice. On this one day he was holding close to him the prettiest girl in the senior class, Sandra Soames, as not far away I sat reading *The Grapes of Wrath*. A classmate asked me how I liked the novel. I said that I had read fifty pages and it was great. I then heard Mr.

LeGrande snicker say to Sandra Soames, ‘Listen to him. He’s read fifty pages and has decided the book is great.’ This, of course, is a small aside but I wanted to give you the sour flavor of the man before coming to the main part, which is that one day Mr. LeGrande was allowed out of the library so he might supervise our class during homeroom. Rather than leave us to ourselves, he pulled from his pocket that slender volume “Howl and Other Poems,” published by City Lights, and prefaced his reading with this warning: ‘Pay attention, brats. This poem I am about to read is the real thing, not that Tennyson crapola you have been sentenced to. Rip off your chains. Tear off your clothes. Run naked through the streets and make your beds in them if you want to know truth.’ In fact, we had read *Idylls of the King* back in eighth grade, as I recall. In any case, he read us this poem *Howl*, amping up his snicker so it was now a voice of snarling rage. But a dink will always be a dink. I believe I was not alone in perceiving that a small man was trying to use a greater man to increase his own stature, but the poet Ginsberg’s angel-headed hipsters and negro streets and starry dynamos could not save him. The sense that he was reading at us, not to us, brought us together against the invader, who was soon dismissed for impregnating one of the girls who had fallen under his spell.”

“I don’t like that story,” Jen said, and her friend Ellie concurred, leaving him with the sense that in the telling he had become as sordid as Mr. LeGrande.

The time had come to leave, the limits of connection having been reached. The sun was still bathing the day as he walked down, not up, the steep hill. A ball of pain, as from something he could not digest properly, sat in him.

“Mission not accomplished,” he shouted, as a train ricketed past on the middle track, bypassing the station. It was minutes before another came and had the courtesy of stopping.

Some days later he had dinner with Celeste, the one he loved but with whom he could no longer live and who could no longer live with him and with whom he must relate within the bounds of circumspection, having gone beyond them for the longest time. As best he could he gave her his report on all that had happened, she being the one in whom he needed to confide, before she retreated to the boundary of her home and he to his.

The next day he revisited the museum, seeking to determine if he had been fair in his initial assessment of the photographer’s show, but the museum had taken an action of its own; the photos were no longer to be found on its walls. They had been disappeared, as everything would be. This he could only think while walking to the park bench on which he had listened to Vera’s call some weeks before. He turned on his cell phone. As he had expected, no messages awaited him. He left the phone on for a short while, just in case, but then shut it off, lest the battery run down before he did.