

2010-01-01

All the Things I've Been

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ALL THE THINGS I'VE BEEN
A NOVEL

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Richard Helmling

2010

Dedication

For Claudia, who survived it.

“The love story is the tribute the lover must pay to the world in order to be reconciled with it.”

-*The Lover's Discourse*
Roland Barthes

ALL THE THINGS I'VE BEEN

by

RICHARD HELMLING, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2010

Acknowledgements

I want to extend my thanks to all my peers in the MFA program at UTEP and online across the globe who have helped me grow as a writer during my time studying alongside them. Special thanks go to the members of my committee from whom I have learned so much (and in such different ways).

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Introduction

In the spring of 2009, I wrote a short story titled “Freshman Composition” as an exercise in intertextuality for a Postmodern fiction class. In this story, the narrator becomes disassociated from reality and allows tropes and plot elements from literature to consume his consciousness. He copes with his professional and personal disappointments by imagining himself transposed with different protagonists from Victorian and Romantic literature. I was dissatisfied with this first effort as it amounted to little more than a literarily themed Walter Mitty. I wanted to explore a plot driven by a narrator who went beyond simply escaping his reality through literature. I wanted to create a narrator who actually fashioned his own reality with these elements of fiction so that the final work would act as an interrogation of the process through which an individual’s conception of reality is constructed. My second effort was a short story titled “All the Things I’ve Been,” which preserved little more from “Freshman Composition” than this central concern with intertextuality as a means of defining identity and the original narrator’s impulse toward vengeful rage. This second attempt features a narrator who has withdrawn into a subterranean lair beneath an urban center, where he maintains a liminal existence. He imagines himself separate from the reality of the world above him, even as he frequently interacts with it, and he reshapes his perceptions of that world and his own confused memories of his past life both consciously and unconsciously through his readings of the literature he has hoarded in his basement. This draft functioned much more satisfactorily for me, but it also began to open spaces that I felt were worth greater attention. I decided that the ideas in “All the Things I’ve Been” warranted a fuller exploration and resolved to expand the short story into a novel-length piece structured in a similar fashion and dealing with the same underlying story.

It may seem obvious that a novel that grew out of work for a Postmodern fiction class would situate itself within a Postmodern context, but that was not a placement I was immediately comfortable with, even as I started early planning for the project. Obviously, Postmodernism has developed a

reputation as a particularly difficult paradigm to characterize. Hutcheon's sentiment that "labels are always comforting, but often also castrating" (5) seems a particularly apt caution in trying to define a Postmodern context for any contemporary work of fiction. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot argues that, "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone." The bearing of his argument on a Postmodern tradition rife with, if not dominated by pastiche and intertextuality is obvious. Julie Sanders offers a concise paraphrasing of this common lament, saying, "Nothing new, nothing original, be it in the domain of art, music, film, or literature, is possible anymore. We come too late to do anything unique" (157). According to these writers, the weight of history creates for an individual artist a sense of despair at the lack of novelty, at the inability to create an existence of any consequence in a society engineered to meet the needs of post-industrial capitalism's cruel and inexhaustible logic. Eliot, of course, wrote before the onset of this malaise, but his thesis anticipates it. He writes that, "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know." Definitions of Postmodernism that frame the paradigm in terms of this relationship to the past and the products of popular culture seem particularly castrating, leaving only a sense of what Jameson called "depthlessness" (12).

In *The Postmodern Condition*, though, Lyotard utilizes a lexicon to articulate the boundaries of Postmodernism in a way that is inclusive of the thematic territory covered by *All the Things I've Been* and, rather than limiting, offers a scaffold to incorporate a wide array of thinking about consciousness and narrative. Lyotard identifies narrative as a type of knowledge, distinct from the rational and empirical pretensions of scientific knowledge (7). Under Postmodernism, the metanarratives that formerly dominated Western thought have been delegitimized (37), allowing for a plurality of "language games" that can exist outside the traditional boundaries dividing fields of scientific knowledge (39-40). As a result of this erosion of metanarratives, Lyotard argues that the individual's sense of place within a grand narrative is also lost. The "self does not amount to much," but each individual does exist "in a

fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile” (15). Individuals become nodal points through which the language games of lesser narratives are negotiated. Lyotard describes the power of the individual to alter the structure of this narrative knowledge, asserting that “no one...is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent” (15).

The function of narrative for Lyotard is to define the nodal point at which one finds himself--to both explain past behavior and rationalize subsequent actions. My interest lies in examining the mechanics of these contextual language games, of these narratives that define us. In my early thinking about my novel, I found myself connecting this role of narrative to Cognitive Science and Meme Theory, both of which attempt to couch themselves within the language and legitimation strictures of scientific knowledge. Cognitive Science holds that narrative is the fundamental currency of human thought (Turner 4) and that all “higher” thought can be reduced to expressions and permutations of narrative knowledge. On the other hand, Meme Theory describes the transmission of ideas using a Darwinian model, describing discreet, transmissible ideas as “memes.” Those ideas that are most successful, that confer some sort of motivational advantage on their “hosts” will be more likely to be adopted by others and then be propagated further (Lynch 8-9). These quasi-scientific models offer useful lenses to view the moment Lyotard references, the moment I wanted to explore in my novel, when an individual is a node in the exchange of narrative knowledge. Lyotard argues that individuals are “not entirely powerless” at these points of intersection between infectious narrative memes and the unconscious, but Cognitive Science and Meme Theory insist that the individual’s power is bound by a number of involuntary processes, suggesting that the power of the individual at a nodal point over the narratives that “traverse and position” him is difficult to wield constructively. *All the Things I’ve Been* depicts a narrator suspended in just such a nodal state--in fact, the narrator operates in this capacity at a number of different levels. The text itself represents what Chatman would call the “discourse” of the

narrative, which is comparable to Lyotard's metanarrative. For Chatman, the term "story" refers to a series of events contingent on elements he calls existents, but "plot" represents the rendering of these story elements through discourse (43). It is in the rendering of story as plot that an author emphasizes incident, sequence, and the like to create, at least in classical narrative, a sense of causality between events within the story (46). The discourse of a Postmodern novel like *All the Things I've Been* rejects these tidy delineations and argues that story, plot and discourse do not exist in discreet hierarchical linearity, but rather are contextually constructed in all instances of narrative knowledge.

Through this lens, then, Postmodernism is a mode of discourse that breaks away from a linear understanding of reality as the subject of consciousness, and hence narrative as a process of consciousness. Postmodern narrative challenges the causal relationship between reality and narrative, resulting in works of fiction through which causality is revealed to be a false construction used to give meaning to events. An important model text for *All the Things I've Been* in this vein is Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*. Superficially, the novel is the story of Sidney Orr, himself a novelist recently recovered from a brush with death and trying to move forward with the life he has shared with his wife Grace. As a protagonist and narrator, Orr is often bland, even passive. A surface reading might uncover little plot, scattershot character development and no coherent theme. Auster, though, has constructed wheels within wheels in the undercarriage of this novel. Orr is a novelist trying to work again. On a particular day during what he describes as "the morning in question" (3), he purchases a peculiar blank notebook from an equally peculiar paper shop. In this notebook he begins to freewrite inspired by a story related to him by a family friend, one who may or may not have been his wife's lover during his illness. Though only described through exposition from Orr, this plot becomes the first story within the story of *Oracle Night*. Inspired by a minor incident in *The Maltese Falcoln*, Sidney Orr's character Nick walks away from his successful but mundane life, launching himself on a journey that becomes Kafkaesque and which then intersects with Orr's own life, sometimes prophetically. There is another story within

this story as well; Orr's protagonist is fixated on a once-lost manuscript about a blind prophet named Lemeul Flagg. The lost manuscript is itself titled *Oracle Night*. The layering of plots goes further, with still other stories embedded within the larger discourse of the novel but never coming to the forefront and becoming part of that discourse. Again and again these stories within the story are dropped and left unresolved, creating a pervasive ambiguity in the novel. Even Orr's central and passionate creation, the story of Nick and his quest to reinvent his life by chance, ends in limbo. As a model text, then, Auster's *Oracle Night* explores themes also at work in *All the Things I've Been*--the power of creation, the transformative potential of narrative, and the impact of sudden violence--but its presentation of these themes defies pat interpretations or allegorical readings. At times Orr seems to apprehend the duality of the world that Auster has situated him in, saying he inhabits a "state of double consciousness" where he is both writer and the subject of the story (29). Yet the violent clash toward the end of the novel in which his wife Grace is nearly beaten to death is seemingly disconnected from so much of what transpires in the rest of the book. Orr entangles this violent episode with the "morning in question," but the exact nature of this connection remains ambiguous and elusive. The entire novel seems to be an effort--perhaps an effort as incomplete as any of the stories within the story that are left hanging--to reconcile this penultimate event in the plot of the novel with some notion of causality.

Sidney Orr, as a character and first person narrator, is engaged in the construction of a plot just as the narrator of *All the Things I've Been* is striving to construct an explanatory narrative that will lend meaning to his own sense of loss, betrayal and guilt. While *Oracle Night* seems to question causality itself, *All the Things I've Been* argues instead that a sense of causality is the salient lens through which all understanding is resolved, but that causality remains an impermanent and malleable construction. The central argument of my novel is that causality, and hence plot, is entirely a narrative construction and that any linear relationship between events and our narrative understanding of them is specious. In the novel, the narrator leads the reader on an ostensible search for his underlying truth through the layered

discourse of the novel. This discourse concerns itself with two underlying stories, which are rendered as plots through the narrator's voice. The first of these stories, the outer plot, is the narrator's own overt struggle to recover a sense of identity and history, both of which he actively resists at the outset of the discourse. The inner plot is that history, the series of events which the narrator represses, but eventually begins to relate and explore for himself. The outer plot constitutes a nodal point, with the narrator broadcasting via the discourse of the novel shifting narrative explanations of his own identity and past, but those memes are reshaped by other forms of narrative knowledge acting upon him as he tries to understand his state of exile. Ultimately, though, *All the Things I've Been* implies that all such causal rendering of events are fluid constructions.

The structure of the novel reinforces this Postmodern view of narrative knowledge as malleable and ultimately synthetic. Though the structure resists easy generalization, *All the Things I've Been* can be demarcated according to shifts in the narrator's relationship with his own memories. Initially, the narrator is expressly working against memory, actively suppressing it. In the middle section of the novel, the narrator is striving to recover his memories, but by the final section of the novel, he tacitly accepts that his memories are constructions and begins to attempt to assert his "power" as what Lyotard would term sender, addressee, and referent of his own language games. This division parallels the three sections of Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*, which tells the story of rock star Bucky Wunderlick's dramatic withdrawal from the public world. The three sections of the book revolve around shifts in Bucky's relationship to his "idea," the protagonist's central concern throughout the novel. While *All the Things I've Been* is not explicitly divided into sections like *Great Jones Street*, the first parts of both novels are highly episodic, with only the protagonists' personal fixations tying the discourses to any coherent story. Within the early episodes of *All the Things I've Been* and the narrator's later exploration of his past, there is a singular concern with the constant reworking of narrative knowledge. The novel argues that the construction of discourse through the narrator's point of view, the appropriation of

existing narrative knowledge from literature, and the construction of plot through the fabrication of causality are all the same process, one overarching language game in which literature is memory is plot is knowledge.

The novel opens with the outer plot dealing with the narrator's attempts to reconstruct his identity, an effort that confuses his own understanding and the discourse of the second plot, that of his buried past. He chooses, for reasons that are concealed within that second plot, to utilize literature as a means to understand the events of his own past and the surreal subterranean existence he finds himself in. The narrator references several works of literature, and allows the stories, plots, events and existents of these narratives to influence and reshape the plot of his buried past. These novels, which the narrator steals and collects in his basement, act as what Sanders calls "hypotexts" in the larger "hypertext" of the novel's discourse (6), such as Auster's incorporation of a minor episode from *The Maltese Falcon*. Though her definition of hypotext describes any text that is appropriated by another, the hypotexts at work in *All the Things I've Been* operate in broad ways within the discourse of the novel. The narrator not only references them consciously and unconsciously, sometimes echoing their language unknowingly, but it also becomes apparent that they act as substrata to the reconstructions of his own past revealed through the plot.

The first and most conspicuous of the hypotexts is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The narrator never refers to these texts by name; rather, he is fixated on the persona of the author as a Romantic notion of creative faculty and only directly addresses the various texts by their authors' names. That it is *Invisible Man* which influences him in the first chapter of the novel is obvious, though, and this chapter establishes the paradoxical psychological relationship between the narrator and the literary memes which intrude into his existence. As the action opens, he is explicitly searching for a word from the first chapter of Ellison's novel and it becomes apparent in later chapters that he is consciously aware of having modeled his existence on Ellison's narrator's "hole" in the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible*

Man (6). However, the narrator's actions and discourse in this first chapter of *All the Things I've Been* reveal a broader interest in literature, and authors in particular.

Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* utilizes a similar underlying fascination with literature. In this novel, a rogue school of literary aspirants calling themselves Visceral Realists allude to literature and other authors as a sort of iconography, a short hand notation for the identities they are attempting to construct through their own writing. Texts and authors are not evoked explicitly in the various narratives of *The Savage Detectives*, but instead represent a general ethos that Bolaño's characters are consciously and unconsciously attempting to emulate. This represents one of the most peripheral types of intertextuality in Sanders' lexicon, but one in which the texts are still privileged and empowered in relation to Bolaño's own characters. The authority invested in these texts is part of why Bolaño's characters profess that "literature isn't innocent" (154), but beneath this fundamental inequality, the novel also suggests a deeper, more transformative potential in its characters' relationships to literature. This deeper, more ineffable role offers some consolation through literature's ability to reframe meaning dynamically, leading toward a "momentary disconnection from a certain kind of reality" (10). The narrator of *All the Things I've Been* reveals a fixation with the pervasive social construction of the authority and privileged position of the author as an instrument of creation, but this dimension of his relationship to text, and the intertextual dynamics of the discourse of the novel, is colored by his overt disdain for these figures. There is obviously a motivational advantage for the narrator in his internalization of these memes, but that purpose is starkly different than the interest shown by Bolaño's narrators.

The mechanics of the narrative voice seem, initially, to be wholly borrowed from Ellison's novel, but that voice is modulated in an interchapter which follows the first chapter. This interchapter is the first of several which introduce what the narrator calls "dreamspace." Though *All the Things I've Been* does not attempt a realistic depiction of psychological dissociation or of homelessness and its associated

psychological disorders, one account of dreams reported by tunnel-dwelling homeless people documented by Terry Williams in 1992 demonstrates the subconscious possibility for the transfiguration of space through dreams:

One Dream tonight was about a mushroom tea that a friend told me to take so I could be healthy...When I came into the tunnel the whole place was bright and full of light, not dark like I know it is. My place here was bigger, with rooms all over...When I got up in my dream and went to the kitchen I could smell the tea all around and I saw this bright light come in through the window that I don't have. (qtd. in Williams 73)

In the dreamer's unconscious mind the memory of living in a home with many rooms, including a kitchen, has been superimposed onto the dreamer's current living situation in the tunnel, with rooms replacing the "nests" and "colonies" of the tunnel dwellers. The first interchapter uses a similar fusion of separate lived experiences. Like all of the interchapters and much of the novel, it focuses on one figure who is tangentially introduced in the first chapter. When the narrator first examines the mural on the wall of the bookstore, he critiques its artistic merit, but then qualifies his thoughts, "I don't know whose voice is saying this, but for a second I see her, small black eyes like moons six days past full" (3). In the interchapter, he unconsciously superimposes her presence into the preceding scene, giving this character dialogue as she looks at the amateurish mural along with him. At this point in the discourse, he is unable or unwilling to acknowledge this character's identity and her central role in both the plots at work within the novel. What he is able to do--much like Orr in Auster's *Oracle Night*--is disrupt the boundaries between the literary worlds of his hypotexts and his own narrative much like the spaces of memory and dreams become intermingled. In a narrative discourse in which metanarratives have been delegitimized, *All the Things I've Been* presents memory, dream and fiction as equally privileged modes of narrative knowledge.

The second full chapter also establishes a broader range of intertextual operations within the discourse of the novel and in the narrator's conceptualizations of the elements of literature as a frame for the narrative dimensions of his own submerged memories. This chapter explores the narrator's alienation from any conventional life rooted in interaction with the world and from his own memories by evoking literature with similar themes. He opens his eyes to Solzhenitsyn and later imagines himself plagued by Siberian cold. To try to distract himself he searches through other books, but orbits passages from DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Camus's *The Stranger*. The passages he focuses on are telling--his paraphrase of the opening of DeFoe suggests he believes his own life to be "scarce capable of a greater variety," suggesting an overpowering self-absorption (16), while from Camus he dwells on a passage of idealized masculine repose, strolling along a beach and lapping in the water with a sexually available young woman (17)--but these memes also intrude on the outer plot. The most striking example of this is when Crusoe's fear of distant, savage drumbeats becomes transmuted to the narrator's fear of strange, barely human figures in his alleyway. This pattern continues into the next full chapter when the narrator, while reading Kafka, begins to hear voices emerging from the walls of his room. These voices reveal themselves to be partners engaged in some kind of counseling or therapy, and the narrator imagines them in a stereotypical setting for such an exchange long before he claws through the wall and actually sees them in exactly such a space--a space which his journey above ground proves cannot exist. The dialogue between these two characters is banal, tedious and fruitless. Like the bureaucracy and irrational townsfolk faced by the character K in Kafka's novel *The Castle*, these two characters present gratingly self-absorbed barriers to one another, creating an absurd circularity. In light of later revelations, though, this chapter is evidence supporting the book's claim that memory and allusion comprise the same kind of narrative information and that both act on the addressee's consciousness memes.

Throughout the first chapters of the novel, the narrator insists that he does not recognize the woman who lingers in his thoughts, appears in his dreams and then bewilders him as an actor in his prolonged Kafka-esque delusion. His efforts to ignore these delusions fail and she appears again in the next chapter. While searching for more books in the city above, the narrator believes he is watching the couple from the therapy session as they shop at a large retail bookstore. This time the literary trigger for the narrator's break with his ostensible reality as a homeless and "invisible" scavenger is a display of Philip Roth's works in the bookstore window. In short order, the narrator will acknowledge that the scene he imagines himself witnessing is actually a memory and that the man he has been watching is his former self while the girl who has haunted him is his own wife. Later, he remembers her evoking the closing lines of Roth's *American Pastoral* as she considers the commercial setting and its patrons, wondering aloud, "Could there be anything less objectionable?" (43). These exchanges between these two characters are the first substantive development of either, but the entanglement between the narrator's discourse and the hypotext of *American Pastoral* again begs the question of the veracity of the plot. To what extent is the narrator idealizing this incident, just as Roth's Nathan Zuckerman initially idealizes Swede Levov's seemingly perfect position within the mid-twentieth century class structure, and is the narrator's wife's superficial attachment to anti-corporate beliefs an echo of the Swede's daughter's anti-establishment politics or a genuine source of division between them?

These questions find expression in the emergence of the only other character in the outer plot of the novel. Just as the narrator resolves himself to remaining inside his hole permanently, the boundaries of this space break down. The lights begin to fail and an invader appears through a hole in the wall--a hole that quickly disappears behind him. The old man who emerges introduces himself as Abbé Faria and the narrator eventually recognizes him as the character who instructs Edmund Dantes, the protagonist of Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Initially, Faria follows a pattern of behavior lifted directly from Dumas's novel, but he quickly begins to question the narrator, aware that he is a

manifestation of his imagination. Again, the literary hypotext influences the unfolding plot. Under the sway of Dumas's novel about vengeance, the narrator expresses growing rage and resentment toward whatever forces or individuals have transplanted him from the comfortable and prosperous life he lived before to the subterranean hermitage he now shares with Faria. Despite Faria's attempts to redirect these vengeful thoughts, the narrator becomes more convinced he has been wronged. Faria's sage counsel is chased from his subconscious and he goes out into the world in pursuit of his "destroyer," explicitly referencing Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" as he does. Though these delusions further erode the narrator's connection with a sense of conventional reality, they also mark the collapse of the barriers between his memories and his conscious mind. This demonstrates the illusory nature of these barriers and the novel uses this collapse to question the barriers between fiction and reality beyond just the narrator's frame of reference.

The inner plot now becomes the principal focus of the discourse and the point of view of that discourse undergoes significant modulation, emphasizing the process of narrative construction. The narrator is apparently unaware of the extent to which this sort of unconscious transfiguration crosses out of his dreams and takes place within his ostensible reality. In this regard, the point of view of the novel closely resembles that of Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*. Just as Ishiguro's protagonist's motivations and purpose shift with each new location within *The Unconsoled*'s surreal cityscape, the narrator of *All the Things I've Been* witnesses a changed reality each time he incorporates some new understanding of his past. The point of view is also markedly similar to that of Bolaño's *Amulet*, particularly since both rely heavily on internal monologue. Bolaño's narrator, Auxilio, has a narrative voice that consists largely of a kind of self-talk, personal verbalizations that reinforce the individual's behavior patterns and provide explanatory narratives to rationalize and justify those patterns. This reflective and self-absorbed perspective, similar to many Nabokov characters, undercuts the narrator's reliability. Auxilio's narration also includes chronological shifts similar to those in *All the Things I've Been*. Differences arise,

however, in the way in which the discourse of the novel itself is also modulated by changes to the narrative voice. In *All the Things I've Been* changes in the narrator's sense of reality are reflected in changes to the story-telling dynamic and its mechanics, much like those Joyce Carol Oates employs in her novel *Black Water*. The book fictionalizes the infamous 1969 Chappaquiddick Incident, casting Ted Kennedy as an unnamed figure known in the novel only as "The Senator" and replacing Mary Jo Kopechne with protagonist Kelly Kelleher. The narrative, though focused almost entirely on Kelleher's stream of consciousness just before and during the accident that will cause her death, is presented using a third person point of view. The novel regresses in time through several waves back from the actual accident, which is replayed with increasing resolution over and over again throughout the first part of the text. These recollections of Kelleher's also vary in their resolution. Sometimes the action of the past, whether it is the party earlier in the day where she meets The Senator or flashbacks to her own history with parents or friends, is presented in conventional prose including dialogue set off with quotation marks and traditional paragraph breaks. At other times, though, Oates renders phrases of dialogue or internal musings in italics interjected into Kelleher's stream of consciousness. In still other passages Kelleher's thoughts take on a breathless quality, which Oates conveys by dropping most punctuation and combining dialogue, exposition and inner monologue in jumbled, rushed paragraphs. *All the Things I've Been* employs similar techniques, including the alternating styles of rendering dialogue. In the opening chapter, the narrator overhears conversations on the street as he ventures out from his hole in search of a copy of *Invisible Man*. In these conversations, quotation marks bracket dialogue for the reader. In the bookstore chapter, dialogue is once again rendered with quotation marks. In the very next chapter, though, when Faria appears, his dialogue is represented by italics while the narrator's responses to him are not punctuated differently than his inner monologues. (This same technique is repeated in a much later section, when the narrator's responses to other characters' dialogue marked in quotation marks is also undifferentiated from his own exposition and monologue.) Initially, these punctuation changes

might seem to be clear clues to the reader indicating which dialogue represents the narrator's "real" past and which, like the encounter with the fictional Faria, is simply part of his delusion. Like Oates' use of a similar varying punctuation, though, later examples defy this easy characterization. The narrator's eventual confrontation with his wife's presumed lover takes several absurd twists and culminates in murder, making it seem less like a true memory and more like a violent fantasy, yet this dialogue is punctuated in quotation marks. This modulation of such a basic convention heightens the ambiguity of the novel and, just as Oates's modulation of narrative reality questions the veracity of historical discourse, thus undermines any simple reading of the plot. The most significant impact of all of these stylistic elements, though, is to emphasize the inextricability of the plot from its discourse.

The disappearance of Faria and the narrator's failure to locate his "destroyer" close the first section of the novel. In the middle section, the narrator reaches out to his memory, trying to recover it under the assumption that it represents a reality from which he has been severed. He still fails to see the extent to which memes from literature are scaffolding these memories. The chapter that follows this shift into the second section of the novel is a bildungsroman in miniature, deeply informed by the patterns of Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. Most of the narrator's past is seen through his relationships with women, relationships often colored by his misogynistic narcissism. Those few incidents he relates that do not deal with "human bondage," reveal the narrator's middle-class White sense of entitlement. He resents any paradigm or players that might suggest his success is due as much to white privilege or gender bias as to his "Midwestern do-it-now work ethic" (74). Like Maugham's Philip Carey, the narrator is introspective and troubled by a vague sense of incompleteness, though he never explicitly questions his ironic attempt to equate himself with the "Invisible Man" from Ellison or even with the club-footed Carey. All of these acts of narrative construction are ultimately self-serving, privileging the narrator as a referent of the language game.

As the novel refocuses on the inner plot and the narrator dispenses with the rendering of his early life under the influence of Maugham, the structure of the novel continues to evolve. While the outer plot dominated the discourse, the structure was linear. Though the chapters exploring the narrator's relationship with his wife are still couched within the conceit of a single first person narrator, the structure takes on non-linear characteristics. Some possible models for this structural change are directly referenced in the text; the narrator identifies Faulkner as an influence while rifling through his books and Llosa comes up during later dialogue. Novels like Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury* or Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral* utilize layers of narrative within structures closely tied to their points of view. Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury* is divided into sections based on its different narrative voices, while *Conversation* uses a complex mix of multiple threads of dialogue and first-person internal monologues. These devices are not immediately clear to the reader, but ultimately both of these tour-de-force Modernist novels reveal an underlying truth--a central narrative waiting to be uncovered in the discourse of the novel. By contrast, Postmodern novels like Oates's *Black Water* and *Libra* by Don DeLillo that reprocess history as if it was a hypertext use similar shifts in perspective and chronology, but toward other ends. DeLillo also utilizes a number of different points of view in *Libra*, typically moving from one limited third-person perspective to another, though occasionally allowing characters to narrate the action of the novel directly. His cuts are abrupt, but clear, with quick exposition orienting the reader. The thematic repetitions and the insightful dialogue hold the main thread of the novel together as he shifts vantages. He also feels free to unmoor the narrative style at key moments, particularly when relating the murders of Kennedy and Oswald, by bombarding the reader with information, not in stream of consciousness, per se, but in what might be called stream of mass consciousness. Within these shifts in perspective, he also executes shifts in time, like Faulkner and Llosa, and builds toward an inevitability. DeLillo's discourse, though, retains a degree of ambiguity that resists the easy characterization of the underlying narrative that is possible for Faulkner and Llosa. Whereas the

Modernists create narrative as a means toward an end, a vehicle toward apprehending the underlying truth, DeLillo's work argues that the means are the ends, that the construction is the only reality.

The narrator of *All the Things I've Been* eventually enters into sustained passages of stream of consciousness that most closely resemble Quentin's chapter in Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*, but he launches into recollections of his life with his wife using a more bounded achronological structure. The first moment on which he dwells frames the romanticized portrayal of his courtship and early marriage. Recalling a morning before their marriage, he finds a copy of *Jane Eyre* in his future wife's apartment and asks if the novel was her namesake. She answers, "you decide" (92), hinting at his own agency in the shaping of the inner plot. The diction in this exchange idealizes their bond with language like "swept off [their] feet" and it lionizes their different temperaments and interests as a source of constructive tension. The narrator appropriates language from a passage in Chapter 36 of *Jane Eyre* when an observer notes, "Mr. Rochester was about forty, and this governess not twenty; and you see, when gentlemen of his age fall in love with girls, they are often like as if they were bewitched" (430). This connection to Rochester also accounts for the narrator's purported burns, as he has imagined himself as a Rochester-like figure: disfigured and pining away for his lost Jane. As a touchstone, Brontë's novel evokes a love story that is unlikely, troubled, but ultimately fulfilling. Its role as a hypotext at this juncture of *All the Things I've Been* establishes the narrator's hope for a satisfactory resolution to the outer plot, one that restores him in some capacity to a life in the world, and simultaneously raises questions about which elements of the story of the inner plot are simply melodramatic embellishments sprung from his readings.

The narrator continues to relate moments from his life with his wife in the following chapter. These events are presented chronologically, but to maintain his idealized view of his relationship, he is selective about which events he relates. Many of these gaps will be filled in through chapters to come, but initially they work similarly to those in the Oswald plot in DeLillo's *Libra*. By the end of the

chapter, though, the gaps required for the narrator to be able to construct his romanticized version of their relationship grow wider. When he describes the birth of his son, his self-reassurances that “everything was perfect” are beginning to overpower the plot, leaving a growing sense that the story being presented is incomplete. Another interchapter sees the narrator facing this explicitly through a recollection of Faria, leading to a chapter centered around the house he bought for his wife--a symbol of his expectations for their marriage. This chapter leaves the outer plot behind, drawing its intertextual cues directly from dialogue. Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Llosa are directly referenced in the extended conversation at the center of the chapter. Obviously, *Conversation in the Cathedral* is a novel heavily reliant on dialogue for character and plot development, though admittedly *All the Things I've Been* never approaches the complexity of its multilayered, simultaneous conversations. Likewise, while some of Hemingway's most iconic shorter works such as “Hills Like White Elephants” and “A Clean Well Lighted Place” are sustained almost entirely by dialogue, the exchanges are generally not as prolonged as this dinner party chapter in *All the Things I've Been*. Still, these works have a clear formal influence on this chapter, particularly when taken together with the pull of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. As in *Gatsby*, the house is a symbol of expectation and false hopes. The dinner scene parallels a moment in *The Great Gatsby* which is, despite the presence of witnesses, essentially a triad between Gatsby, Daisy and Tom. Just before the novel's climax, Gatsby orchestrates a confrontation with his lover's husband in the hopes of rending her from him. For much of this encounter, though, Daisy's husband Tom seems unaware of the threat Gatsby really poses to his marriage, a dynamic that is inverted in the dinner chapter of *All the Things I've Been*.

The narrator returns to Poe's “Cask of Amantillado” for the violent climax of his revenge fantasy against the man he presumes has cuckolded him. Ascending the stairs to the man's apartment mirrors the language of the descent in Poe's short story. The Victorian melodramas of the Brontë sisters' *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* weigh heavily in narration attempting to lay claim to his wife's very

soul, building quickly to his act of sudden violence. This singular moment of violence has a similar role in the novel as the violent climax of Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*. The principle difference in the mechanics seems to be that the violent attack on Orr's wife is the trigger for his effort to reconcile events to causal relationships, whereas in *All the Things I've Been* the narrator's apparent homicidal rampage is the product of this attempt--a response that seems so burdened by surreal bathos that it strains credulity, particularly in light of the rather mundane interpersonal issues in the previous chapter.

The dissonance between these two chapters closes the middle section of the novel. The dinner chapter offers a lensing down to a narrow, but sustained view of the couple with examples both of what seems genuine in their connection to one another, but also of the superficial nature of that connection and some basic fault lines in their relationship. The narrator's actions afterward present a response that is incongruous with his portrayal of their marriage. The narrator believes both chapters represent objective reality, and he must find a way to reconcile this tension--both to resolve his sense of guilt and to resolve the outer plot of the novel. One cue for the direction he will take appears in Jane's comments about world views during the dinner chapter. "Nobody's world view is realistic," she tells him, adding, "We're all doomed to only see the world our own way" (132). Her offhand comment meant to impress their guest speaks to the shift in the narrator away from insisting on a single objective reality. In the last interchapter--which is no longer a flash from his unconscious, but an inventory of it--he acknowledges the influence literature has on his thoughts, admitting after echoing lines from Maugham and Dumas that he is, "only a rubbish pile of pilfered ideas, received passions" (143). Once he has completed a broader inventory of his memories of his relationship with his wife, one unbound by chronology in which his stream of consciousness has agency to weave causal relationships between events, he finally understands the plurality of his own accounts. This de facto acknowledgement opens the last section of the novel in which the narrator works with memory and accepts the plasticity of narrative. Having dispensed with his romanticized version of his relationship with his wife, the narrator nevertheless believes his story

needs an ending, and for his first attempt to construct that ending, he consciously models his next moves on the themes of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, saying, "Redemption is never lonely. There must be another" (167). For a moment, he imagines himself approaching a somewhat haggard book clerk and presenting himself to her as an object of pity. The monologue he imagines sharing with her offers a tentative working of a unified plot, connecting both the inner and outer plots. Ultimately, though, he cannot broach it and slinks away comically.

Before he can attempt a more salient resolution, he returns to his first meeting with his wife. This recollection, though, has no title or author cues and shows no obvious signs of literary distortion. Unburdened by the fetishistic desire and recriminatory emotions of the other chapters, the scene plays out simply, ending with a cliché glint in her eye. The narrator has returned to the beginning of the love story he wanted to frame around his experiences. He has tried to be, as Barthes says of the lover, both "pathetic and admirable" (43). When he leaves the memory behind, he tries to return to his hole, only to find a padlocked door. The outer plot collapses, ending his self-imposed exile from reality. Bolstered now by lines borrowed from Dickens and Dumas, he recasts himself, donning a mask of nobility. He is capable of letting go his sense of betrayal, able to accept his estrangement. In the scene that closes the novel he is no longer scarred. He apparently shares custody of their son with his wife. The note of gratitude in the final line might well be directed to her.

Like all of the narrator's readings of literature, this last appropriation is problematic. Whatever his actual actions might have been, his choice in the last chapter represents another failure to accept responsibility. He has not grown past the sense of entitlement and narcissism that has characterized him throughout. Though the nodal point of *All the Things I've Been* is personal, contemporary politics loomed large in my thinking during the later stages of its composition. In the narrator's stubborn insistence on framing self-centered narratives for himself, I see parallels to the conservative backlash underway in the United States since the election of Barack Obama. Such an allegorical reading begins

with the narrator's dunderheaded misappropriation of *Invisible Man*, which Jane's dialogue underscores in the dinner chapter, and connects with his own biased portrayal of his interactions with women and ethnic minorities throughout the recounting of his past. The narrative knowledge in the memes favored by members of the conservative Tea Party movement are really no less personal and are no less self-serving. These political myths must still have what Lynch calls "motivational advantage" for the sender if they are to be transmitted. In the mythology of this movement, its largely affluent, white middle-class adherents are, despite benefiting from more than half a century of Keynesian policy, victims of "big government" (Zernike and Thee-Brenan). The soundest means of ensuring this sort of motivational advantage is to privilege the addressee and referent in those narratives, just as the narrator of *All the Things I've Been* repeatedly chooses memes that allow him to restructure his reality in such a way as to see himself as a victim.

Just what constitutes reality for the narrator remains ambiguous. Did he murder his wife, her lover and his own son in a fit of rage after some psychotic break and only later construct a delusion of a "less wrenching" ending, allowing him to assuage his guilt? Or was the entire outer plot an elaborate psychological coping mechanism to aggrandize the rather mundane failure of his marriage? This overriding ambiguity is similar to other texts I have drawn connections with earlier, such as Auster's *Oracle Night* and Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*. These comparisons, though, do not highlight the specific role intertextuality plays in creating that ambiguity in *All the Things I've Been*. *The Unconsoled* features a malleable narrative space, where the existents of setting shift unpredictably, but the much more subtle shifts in *All the Things I've Been* are not born only in the protagonist's subconscious as in Ishiguro's novel. Likewise, though *Oracle Night* explores very similar thematic territory when it questions the imposition of a narrative framework over the events within its plot, its intertextual dynamics are fundamentally different than *All the Things I've Been* because Orr is a creator, already convinced of his own sense of agency. Graham Swift's novel *Ever After*, though, features a much more comparable

intertextual pattern. Swift's text has a deep and abiding dependence upon narrative conventions. The only way to reconcile the seemingly whimsical and fairy tale title of the book with the serious and sincere story of a widower coming to terms with his past is in recognizing that it is through the construction of plot from the raw material of his own story that the narrator, William, believes he can be at peace. Though the plot he constructs is meant to serve as an explanatory narrative that reaches beyond simply his choices and includes those of his wife, his mother, his father, and even his ancestors in the remote past, it also owes an important legacy to Swift's principal hypotext. Even before his father's death and his mother's subsequent marriage to his "uncle," the protagonist asserts that, "for the large part of my life...I have imagined myself...as Hamlet" (7). The *Hamlet* parallel runs through much of the action of the novel and colors the reader's understanding of many characters, particularly William's mother and stepfather as Gertrude and Claudius, respectively. There are many other subtle literary allusions through the book. William, who narrates the novel after his own suicide attempt, evokes *A Tale of Two Cities* when he claims to be "restored to life" (13) and channels *The Count of Monte Cristo* when he claims that his would-be mistress is drawn to his unhappiness because it is evidence of past happiness. Swift's purpose in evoking these hypotexts is to suggest that the process of understanding the past is one of narrative construction, but his discourse also raises an interesting question about the direction of this process. Swift's protagonist admits that he is "not so sure if our passions seek out models of behavior or if models of behavior are the springs of our passions" (7). William's insight illuminates the motivational advantage that drives the narrator of *All the Things I've Been* to reconstruct his identity and history from elements that he believes his wife might approve of, but which also position him as the wronged lover deserving both vengeance and redemption.

The novel's epigraph comes from Roland Barthes' *The Lover's Discourse*, and alludes to the framing of a love story as a means of reconciling with a world external to the lover's inner state. In his opening note, Barthes also asserts that the lover's state is one of "extreme solitude." *All the Things I've*

Been is such a lover's discourse, created in the extreme solitude of the narrator's isolation (whether it is psychological, hallucinatory or actual) with the aim of reconciling himself to the world, which can only be accomplished by understanding the inner plot and resolving the outer plot. The narrator's sense of victimization and his need for vengeance shape the process of narrative construction, just as these feelings are themselves narrative constructions. Viewed apart from these motives, the last chapters of the novel offer themselves as beginning and ending to a rather unremarkable love story. By closing with these moments, *All the Things I've Been* asserts the Postmodern critique of causality in narrative as a means of understanding reality. The reader can be no more certain about the boundaries of what is and is not "real" or "true" in the narrator's story than the narrator himself. The narrator's frame of reference in the last lines of the novel suggests that the only meaningful causality is whichever is in operation in the present. Ultimately, whatever other explanatory narratives the narrator has constructed or clung to in the rest of the novel, he is best able to function by revising the context of his own nodal point. All the things he has been do not bound what he chooses to be in the end. As a representative of Postmodernism, the novel does not presume that narrative is a rendering of some external reality, but instead describes the mutual recasting of reality and narrative through the nodal points Lyotard identified. It goes beyond simply understanding narrative as a product of reality or reality as a product of narrative and insists that narrative and reality are ultimately facets of the same process of narrative construction.

All the Things I've Been

It hurts the eyes, coming back up into the light.

No matter how much wiring I string through the drywall down there to juice the sockets, the sun's always brighter, always an adjustment.

Through shut eyelids, I picture my location. I think over the city grid gone sick, warped by strange attractors. No even squares here. I'm standing on trapezoids and triangles, street angles like trigonometry problems. I've left little lines of string going every which way, mapping out my routes, ways to navigate the walls and sewer grates, the booby traps and spiked pits, the city people and the robots that the corporations send out among the citizenry so they'll behave, like the cow that's trained to walk up front and lead the others into the slaughterhouse. That's how it is up here in the light, but I've got to come up. There's something I've got to find.

I take a baby step into the alley, a couple more inches away from safety. There's a name for it, for what's down there, for what I'm stepping away from. Not my name, someone else's.

But I can't see the word.

Instead of the letters, I see animals in dens. I see fur and fat cells. Warm mammalians snuggled into balls with half-blind kin laid lengthwise across smooth belly fat like bacon sizzling on an iron. Prehensile dagger-toes twitch away the last simple sugars so the body can dig deep, go deep into reserves and keep a pilot light going through Decembers that look like blank spaces in memory. Feathered cloud bottoms doing nothing, a perfect-still dance of nothing on the underside of the sky for months on end so that the world stops and time stops and small, hairy beasties just wait below the surface, surrounded by the rich insulation of mother earth too deep and black with nutrients to be

frozen, sleeping an unsleep down there where tree roots stretch themselves to leech off nitrogen and hope for spring.

All that I can see, but I can't see the word.

I pass out of the alley, still in the band of sun whizzing between the buildings and dodging their shading hulks. The little old proprietress of the restaurant on the corner is just shaking the rust off her padlock to open up the metal gate covering the windows. She's got her black socked feet stuffed into those little imported shoes that look like too-tight house slippers. She lets the gate rattle up, spring driven into its recess above the first floor ceiling, and grumbles something in Cantonese to herself. She's skinny from the waist up, except for the paunch bulging out her green blouse. Her face could even pass for young except some master engraver pointed at the space around her eyes and said, "etch here," leaving deep, fine creases. Below the too-high waist line, she's all misshapen, with a rump like two square pillows shoved next to each other and then deformed by the python-grip of the elastic in her grandma-length shorts. When she bends over to pick something up, she splays out the network of varicose veins marking up the back of her knee joints, like stress fractures in a dam wall.

Eyes down. She can't see me so I shouldn't see her. Just walk past and out into the intersection. Blend in with the crowds so a car doesn't hit me and leave me there to be ground into mush by every subsequent double-belter. Die up here and I'd just rot. Rot and rot until somebody comes and sweeps me up, bits of black film like over-read newsprint. The destination I've chosen isn't far, but something ominous is happening around me. All the light is going out. There's a fine gray veil being stretched over the city. They're mummifying the whole town, in super slow motion, one semi-opaque bandage at a time.

There's no English in the air as I keep moving. It's all Chinatown voices I don't understand and the stink of cabbage even I'd never consider eating. Just out of the sunlight, produce sits on beds of ice in plastic-lined boxes labeled with ideograms. Leeks, apples, pears and strange fruit wrapped in delicate

styrofoam sheaths. A whole market sitting four feet from a covered dumpster the size of Wisconsin. Under the blue tarp, its sides are crushed in as if it had been submerged at the deep end of some abyssal trench. The corners are rotted through with corrosion and it's dripping something back onto the pavement in a sick parody of the water cycle.

It takes a little time to navigate the turns, to breathe uneasily at lights with crowds doing their power-walk commutes and urgent errands to nowhere for nothing. Every time I have to stand still I get nervous. Somebody might try to walk through me, might try to light a cigarette in the space occupied by my head.

It's morning. I can tell by all the coffee cups.

Green light and I flow along with the foot traffic.

When I get close to the shop, they peek around from the side wall, bigger than Jesus. I try to avoid their eyes, but there's too many of them and I know them too damned well now. I can tell when they're watching. Their heads are four feet high. Hemingway and Poe. They have eyeballs like ostrich eggs. Eliot and Dickinson. There's a dozen of them up there in the mural painted on the brickwork that flanks this bookshop, each of them boxed in a little square. The oldest, dearest of them are all black and white, but a few of the lucky ones get color. Vonnegut and Wolfe. Geniuses all. Wilde and Faulkner. Whoever painted them up there traced them out in thick black outlines, probably took their likenesses from book jackets or encyclopedia entries. Maybe some Mass Art drop-out just ripped jpegs off of Google, then used grid enlargement. A simple matter of proportions. There's no art in that.

That's not me. Those thoughts aren't me.

I don't know whose voice is saying this, but for a second I see her, small black eyes like moons six days past full. Then her face, wherever it came from, is gone and I'm just left looking at the frozen heads of the great masters glazed onto the wall in acrylics.

They're leering at me as I pick through the outdoor bookshelves, the discount merchandise left out in the vacant lot beside the shop to chance the elements and thieves. If the rain picks up, though, the staff might scurry out and secure the outdoor shelves. Then I'd have to go inside, subject myself to some other space, some other physics. I keep looking, looking quickly. There's no order to the books out here. N.F. Potopova, *Russian, an Elementary Course*. Granof, *Sweet Sicily*. Dickson, *Dictionary of Baseball*. I keep looking. Up one row. Down another.

Eight rolling carts with two tiers of books each. Blue. Blue. Red. Orange. Green. Blue. Gray. Blue. There must've been a special on blue carts at the warehouse. Free blue rolling cart with every purchase. With enough stamina, I could just roll one away. Off down the sidewalk. People would jump in fright, seeing a cart of books making its way down the street. *American Philanthropy*, Bremner. Caulfield, *Greenlanders, Whales and Whaling*.

Sometimes you do find needles in haystacks.

There.

That's it. The one I need.

Ellison. Flip it open and right away I find the word. First page. *Hibernation*. That's what it is.

With the cloaking rain spattering the street around me, I move through the mist it leaves hanging in the air with Ellison tucked underneath my arm, coat wrapped around it, protecting it instead of my own clammy flesh. My eyes stay down, catching the splotches of blackened gum resin stamped into the pavement, little ant corpses locked inside like amber. The sludge puddles lay stagnant, the color of tobacco spit on the side of the street. I try to make out bits of white scrawl, graffiti at the base of lampposts, but it's all unintelligible. Can't be real words. The cold breeze clings to me as I keep moving along the sidewalk with my eyes down, spotting subterranean passages--doors leading into basements and boiler rooms. I pause for a second at one and stare at the descending staircase, looking five steps down into a narrow, brick-lined chasm with cigarette packages, some plastic bag bloated with air, and

bits of foil all half-buried in the sand that's collected against the spillage of the rain like a tiny beach. At the bottom is a wrought iron screen door with a plank board over the bottom quarter to keep vermin in or out.

That's not mine.

There's some shelter, though. I can hide from the wind in the corner, looking out on a deformed chain-link fence. Only three or four little wire fingers are still holding its two bulging halves together in the middle. Ants scurry back and forth beneath its arbitrary boundary. The parking lot it's meant to mark off is a broad shallow pond, stirred gently by the wind. If it weren't for the noise of delivery vans--quality meat product trucks pumping their heat and din into the air to keep sides of beef frozen inside--someone could sit right on top of the old unused handicapped space that rises like an island in the pool and just meditate, stare through the other tones of the brick walls and wait for enlightenment.

The tenement across the street is being remodeled. The bottom floor is cocooned off in plywood with ladders jutting out of odd spaces. Hammering pulses out of the upper floors draped with strings of Christmas twinklers and studded with long-dead potted plants on the windowsills petrified in their last reaches for sunlight. A sawing noise whines out of the enclosure, sends me walking again. It's cutting through my bones in a high-pitched wail, something you must hear in hell, rattling all the old fire escapes still clinging to the walls. Smoke or steam or something drifts up out of all the gaps in the plywood into the air, into nothing.

I'm close now, almost back where I belong.

I cross through a broad-mouthed alley between two tall, overhanging buildings. Office windows with paint peeling down along the bottom boards overlook chipped cement that runs all the way to street level, revealing small patches of wet earth sneaking up into the city from underneath cracked sidewalks. Bits of tape. Cigarette butts. Engine noises everywhere. Then, just below some open windows and vents the size of three men, there's something like a garden. A few solitary things hanging

on to life. A few shoots of grass and ivy. A few plants that look like rubber trees in miniature, stunted at two feet. The tiniest, least appealing, most desperate little flowers fill up the bed of soil three foot squared.

I pass it by, cross out of that alley.

I'm on familiar ground now. There are restaurants every ten feet ahead. The whole neighborhood exists just to export Asian cuisine. I pass under construction frames, under orange cross beams keeping the drizzle out of my eyes, passing the strange crannies formed between a building being refurbished and the shell of scaffolding they've wrapped around it.

People hobble by me quickly, even the diminutive old woman with a red cap and cane, though she's about to be passed handily by a young mother dragging her little girl out of the fast food restaurant incongruously jammed between so many other, more authentic eateries. It makes a bid on its plate glass window to belong, joining its huge, universally recognized corporate logo with some Chinese characters. The two arches must be the ancient Han symbol for "mass marketing."

She stops in my path as her daughter whines that her toy--gripped in her free hand and still inside its protective bubble of plastic--is "the wrong one."

"I wanted the green one, Mommy!" she wails.

Mommy looks back through the plate glass, shifting her weight from one two hundred dollar shoe to the other. "The line's too long to switch it, Cindy."

"But I want the green one!" The girl's arm jerks like her elbow's spring loaded--caught between her mother's tug and the gravitational pull of her desire.

The little old lady, whose sandals cost sixty-two cents and were manufactured in 1982, bends down and fixes her narrow eyes on the little girl in her straight, black ponytails. She says something in Chinese that shakes her belly, pregnant with too much soup. I don't know what the words mean, but the tone is clear enough, "My, what a cute little girl."

The mother smiles demurely, even mock-bowing, and responds in her own Chinese. It's a broken, awkward voice she brings out, though. I've moved through these streets enough to know the cadences, to have an ear for accent, and hers says she hasn't spoken a word of the mother tongue in ten years.

The little girl, confounded, stares up blankly at the strange old lady. Her mother chirps something. I catch the emphasis on the *xie xie* at the end. She stares fiercely at her daughter to make her understand.

The little girl just swings her dark eyes between their two faces, saying nothing.

The mother repeats herself. I get it. I hear her thinking: Say, *xie xie*, damn you!

"Mommy, I don't talk China!" the girl shouts. "I want the green one!"

This time the mother musters the mettle to yank Cindy away from the siren call of the green plastic princess. Mommy doesn't look back at the kindly little interloper, but I see the old lady dodder a bit as I pass her by.

Almost there. Just past the scorched brickwork wall with plywood over every window, there's one street to cross over to the corner with the restaurant with the red lantern and eighteen stories of god-knows-what above it. The owner, bun up in a hair net, is back out front. She's sweeping the street in front of the door now and looks up as I swoop by, distracted by the rush of air. She says something in Chinese, cursing the wind--not me. She can't see me.

I turn down into my alley, catching the wafting smell of frying noodles and overdone strips of beef. The rain bounces wall-to-wall in the too-tight alleyway and aggregates into giant globs. One catches me in the eye but I ignore it. Pigeons drink the cancerous water flooding the street, maybe looking to end it all. Metal stairs climb up the sides of the buildings like creeper vines all around me--their tendrils blossoming in flowers that are actually late '70s model air conditioners--but I'm eyeing the steps going down, the ones that withdraw out of the world downward. Just beneath another

indecipherable mess of graffiti, just beside a once-white grate turned sunset orange with rust, there's the descending chute of stairs leading to my hole.

Glance back to make sure the restaurant lady hasn't followed the splashing of my footfalls. Look up the alley to make sure there're no bystanders smoking at the other end. I climb down through the tightening stairs. Walls painted over with Optic White #5 so many times that the passage has narrowed two inches since the building was raised over top of it. One more check behind me when I reach the door at the bottom, the door that leads to my den of hibernation.

No one is looking. Nobody attends to my movements. The unaware are everywhere.

Somewhere in sleep I dream and I see the girl with the half-moon eyes. She asks me, looking up at the mural on the brick wall, “Did someone with skill and dedication paint these images from memory and imagination or did they simply enlarge like a kind of stencil, a crude paint-by-numbers...is this art or is this advertisement?” And in the dream I feel this desperate, agonizing longing to answer her and answer her well, answer her well enough that she will love me and go on loving me forever.

But I don't say anything at all and whatever else happens is lost in dreamspace.

At some point that I can't remember, I switched books in the night. It's Solzhenitsyn I peel away from my face when I come to.

I remember looking for a different book up in the world and tilt my head from where I lay prone on the floor to see the door so I can remember when the switch happened.

I remember sliding through the outer door and hearing the empty metal frame clanking with the sound of a child seesawing on the playground. Then the second door, wood so rotted through and alive with parasites and decomposers it smells like moss, like deep forest verdancy.

Forty-two feet of concrete slab tunnel way to the last door, my door. Secret door to a secret hole.

I opened it, Ellison still in my hand, and on went my 1,369 light bulbs to start burning away whatever'd gotten stuck to me while out in the world.

Breathless. Closed the door. Safe.

I knelt down and placed the book gently atop the last stack nearest the door.

Squinting at it now, the white glaze of the bulb above it shines out the title and author. It casts enough of a shadow that I can see the names on the bindings beneath it. Roth and Poe. Tolstoy and Zola. The rows continue, four or five books deep, all around the edge of the room, bordering the gray floor. Thirty-one paces deep, nineteen across. It's empty but for me and the books. Featureless except for the lights. The stains and splatters on the floor are erased by the glare.

Coming back into the light before collapsing into sleep, I saw the bits of detritus on my shoulder and wiped frantically to rid myself of it. Damned world and its pollution. Its lice. They filter down through the clouds the companies lace the sky with and dig into your skin, hungry little chiggers. Chew

on you, from the inside out. I'm long since sick of their world. I'd rather pass through, unseen and now, unseeing. I'd rather just exist here.

I lie still in the center of the floor scattered with discarded books and my refuse, the waste products that living on the margins of their world produces. My half-awake eyes are warming up, the retina resolving finer details in the glare. Plastic wrappers from scavenged vending machine throw-offs, white smudges of cream filling still visible pepper the edges of the room. Pea soup colored splatters from emptied aluminum cans, contents eaten unheated and without utensils, meet the brown trail left when I brushed a soggy, ruined paperback out of my way with a sweep of my boot the day before. I can still see its the younger Brönte through the splatter of half-dissolved coffee grounds on the cover.

I kicked it aside, but as far as I remember, never picked up another. I didn't take off my coat, just eased myself down onto the open space. My limbs folded in as much as they could and I pressed my nose into the hard pungent smell of the damp floor to keep my eyes pointed away from the lights. Still the photons peeled through my shut eyelids, making them glow like red iron. I thought of fire and my skin, melted tessera like the surface of Venus, throbbed with remembered pain. I laid inert in a bath of sensations that wanted to drive me mad.

But they only lullabyed me to sleep.

Now, my coat is as stiff as I am. It keeps the curve of my bent spine even as I roll myself over and try to get on my feet. There's some extra gravity fighting me. My damned legs are more stubborn than usual--as stiff and immobile as the hardened wool of the coat. Nothing in the universe wants me to get up.

I do, though.

I'm still blinking away the blood-orange glow left by the lights penetrating my eyelids for however long I slept, when something cracks underneath my boot.

I just got off the floor, now something down there wants my attention.

I look down, but it's not the Solzhenitsyn. My eyes still aren't ready and I'm looking at the thing I just stepped on but not understanding. I remember hearing once about someone who took a kitchen knife to his skull and couldn't talk but could still paint--it's the sort of thing they like to tell students about in art school, I guess. I've read about cases of selective brain damage where weird tumors explode and afterwards a person can't recognize faces, can't tell what household items are, but is otherwise able to function. Maybe this is the same kind of thing. A railroad spike goes through the brain and suddenly you don't know what you're seeing. A hat looks like your wife. The dog's a throw pillow. Something's wrong with me, and whatever the hell I just stepped on is just a brownish blob.

I reach down and touch it.

It breaks apart more in my hand, leaving a creamy residue on my fingertips.

Chocolate.

A thin crust of chocolate. It must have melted to a fine sheet as I slept and then it went rigid and cold again in the night. I lick my fingers clean, then drop to my knees and start collecting the specks and shavings from the floor, placing them on my tongue like communion wafers. A symbolic act, without flavor or satisfaction. I pick at the last bit for a minute, trying to dislodge it from the floor, but I realize it's not the chocolate anymore. It's something else. Bending down further, I swab at the stain with my tongue. It has a salty flavor, like the drippings from a pan of hickory bacon.

But there's never been anything like that down here. I don't even remember how I know what that tastes like.

The stuff has mutated. The DNA that determines its flavor, shape and color's been warped and twisted by the radiation from the lights.

For a moment, I wonder what they must be doing to me.

If the spot on the floor isn't edible, then it's no good to me.

I get up and move to the door. Before I get to it my heart picks up its tempo. Throat goes dry. An anxious tremor passes through my fingers.

Every time I leave the room it's like having a woman for the first time.

When I pull the door open, the string leading up to the switch by the ceiling catches and the room is thrown into darkness.

The solitary 60-watt bulb in the tunnel flickers as my stolen current bounces along the copper filaments and back onto the grid.

I only pass through this hallway, I don't know it by heart. I reach up as I walk, feeling my way along the outflow pipe snaking out from the boilers that are buried somewhere down here with me. It looks like it used to be a bright red, but it's faded to a dull brick color. The white, stenciled-on letters and numbers reading S854 still stand out in a vibrant white--must be the same stuff they painted the stairs with outside.

The pipe is warm.

As least, as warm as a human body should be. If I can feel it then it must be warmer than my fingers. So I'm not. I'm not as warm as a human being should be.

The pipe turns upward, bending and snaking skyward, into the building above. I flip open the hatch of the old circuit box beside it, but all I find is my own handiwork--my own fingerprints in the ash-gray dust and a mesh of extra wiring and new fuses installed to handle the load.

I have touched all of this before.

There's a series of narrow metal lockers next, each with a latch rusted down to a brittle organic sculpture like deep bed-of-the-ocean coral. It smells like sulphur and there's a spider inside. Its web stretches from top to bottom--one foot across of fine support lines and anchoring threads that reach down four feet to the floor of the locker. The main mass is toward the upper left corner, a diamond shape thick with glistening fibers. Countless threads dug out of its own abdomen in hopes of future

flies and beetles to be sucked of their juices and turned to more silk--an elaborate architectural tribute to life feeding on life.

The spider's dried up corpse sits right in the center, like a wasted gargoyle with no one to leer at. The web around it is clean, untouched by the tender limbs of any prey.

Sometimes that's the way things happen.

We all have our plans.

I shut it loudly. Maybe the whole web is a swirl of dusty fragments now. Maybe I ruined the whole thing with one swing of my arm. If my lips were still capable of it, I might smile.

The other lockers are emptier still, but there's a pile of dingy cast-off items by the wide, tub-like sink in the middle of the hall. I kick at the collection of odds and ends, a mass of rubber seals and metal scraps and find something that'll do.

I pull out and shake off a splintered old scrub brush with its mop handle snapped off. The bristles are barb-sharp and have been discolored with age to the same sandy brown as the wood backing behind them.

I turn the faucet on and before it spews out a trickle of water into the flat basin it groans and shudders with sounds like a U-boat sinking below crush depth. The old brush doesn't seem at all grateful for the water and the stuff glides right through the desiccated and indifferent bristles.

But I drown the fucker enough so that it's still dripping by the time I get back to the room.

I wasn't aware of the smell before. Now, though, there's a rotting, gangrene stench in my nostrils, throat and eyes as soon as I walk back into the room. Most of the debris is along the walls by the stacks of books, swept out there by my pacing in the middle of the room. I carefully lower myself onto my knees facing the corner to my right. Dragging the brush back and forth in a straight path kicks up some fine dirt which does a dust devil dance all the way into my nose. With some effort, the

scrubbing reveals blanched, eggshell colored cement beneath the grime. I have to spit to remoisten the brush.

It doesn't take long--only the time it takes me to clear a six foot square area of floor--for my arm to begin to cramp. Some underused muscle in my forearm is tightening into a wad of pain.

That's not what concerns me, though.

My fingers are gone.

I can't feel them. They're numb. I tap them impatiently against the bare patch of floor in front of me, but no feeling returns.

It's not only my fingers.

I'm cold throughout. I'm so cold I've passed through shivering to generate heat--that phase must have come in my sleep. So cold my body's resigned itself to freezing. The stiff coat was not pressed into this shape, it was frozen into it, frigid with ice crystals in the stitching.

I am on the edge of an icy death.

In a panic, I move, dropping the brush to clatter and tink on the newly clean floor. Up on my feet, desperate to generate some heat, I stalk in long strides across the room.

There's something in my mind about chairs suspended by cables swinging by me. Somehow, as if it's my own memory, I feel that chill in my toes and the red stinging of fresh snow flakes blowing against an already tender face. The metal frame chairs swing round a giant pole and figures wrapped in puffy nylon jackets lurch their way off and slide down a little slope at my feet. Sometimes it goes wrong and some rich girl, her ass wrapped in padding an inch thick, plops down in the path of oncoming chairs. I have to hit the button beside me to halt the whole system and save the begoggled girl from getting a free decapitation with her seventy dollar lift ticket.

It's a memory. I did that, spent a winter working the ski lifts and doing odd jobs around a resort in the Rockies. It wasn't this cold, though. I would sneak off and warm my fingers by holding on to

mugs of hot chocolate and flirt with the girls in the kitchen at the restaurant on top of the mountain. It can't have been me, but I'm in the memories. In the memories, complaining to myself that dammit, it's cold enough to die.

Or is it Solzhenitsyn? Did I just read it? Read it and then the idea of the cold got stuck in my mind like plaque on the gray matter. Out of the half-dream of reading I see graven mockeries of men, gulag slaves marching through black snow, their breath coming out in clouds of steam like souls seeping away with each shallow rise of their weary chests.

My breath doesn't show in the air in front of me. Something else is happening.

I sit down in the center of the room, panting but suddenly calm.

It really isn't that cold. The lights keep the room warm enough to live. There's something else and for some reason it's the memories I dwell on. They've come up like phantoms and they're in my head and I don't want them there. I don't want them taking over my thoughts. They don't belong to me, these memories. I'm something else. I'm not that kid on the mountain earning eight bucks an hour. I'm not that young guy winking at cute girls in aprons and hair nets.

I am not him.

I scamper over to the nearest pile of books and start fumbling through it.

I grab DeFoe and read how the wonders of one man's life can exceed all that is to be found extant, the life of one man being scarce capable of a greater variety.

There are so many ways to be alone.

I'd stand on the mountain after the lifts stopped at the end of the day. I'd stand there and watch the sun setting as an orange blur below the cloud line, making the crystalline sheets of snow around me twinkle like diamonds. I'd stand there and just look out, suddenly grateful to be alone. Even as the cold was nipping at my fingers through the gloves and at the lobes of my ears sticking out underneath my cap, I stood there just grateful to be whatever I was in that moment, in and of myself. Perfectly alone.

Perfect.

For a moment then, it seems like these aliens, these invasive, cruel memories from someone else's life might serve me, might help me pass through this moment, might let me lose myself in the book and just forget the cold that isn't really the cold. But the moments, they never roll by, they never hasten by a second. The pages just hang there in front of me overloaded with dull words gone stale after three centuries.

I make it through a hundred and eighty pages but I'm still in the same damned moment. My hands are still frozen.

I can give up on it now. I'm dozens of pages past the halfway point, so I can give up.

I shuffle through more stacks against the wall, decide on Camus. I sit down and the words move side to side in front of my eyes, very obediently. I try to make it as real as the mountain top, as real as the snowfields bent into slopes, pouring little person-bundles down to ground level so they can ride the chairs back up. In the book, I'm looking at the sky and it's blue gold. I'm walking along the beach. I'm brushing up against a girl's breasts as I swim in the water.

But I'm somehow still cold.

I doze off. Wake again.

I try reading on. Try walking with the men on the beach, two overalled figures behind us and the women's laughter and talk ringing in my ears, but then--then I've just got to stop. I've got to put it down.

I'm trembling and I'm not sure why. It could be the cold that isn't there, but I think it's something else. There's something in the book and I don't want it to get out.

I hold it tight with both hands. One on the binding, one on the other end, so it cannot flip open, so that whatever's in there can't get out. I shuffle along the hallway, past the pipes and the circuit boxes and the lockers and the sink and the piles of old junk, still clutching the book to keep it shut. It's hard

to negotiate the doors without releasing my vice grip on the covers, but I manage and crawl up into the world.

It's gone dark. It's night.

Cars make intermittent swoosh noises on the street. It must be late, then, if there's no activity on the streets to slow them down and if they are so few that they can zip freely past the alley.

I peek around the corner of the building, checking for activity, then walk carefully toward the row of dumpsters just past the next corner. As soon as I'm there, I get a little anxious. With another step closer to the big blue trash receptacle, I feel my own heart pounding.

Then I can't move.

There are shadows just ahead. Shadows with arms and legs and head shapes and skinny, malnourished trunks. They're digging through piles of trash between the dumpsters.

Suddenly I'm not cold. A hot rush of blood and I'm not cold or alone. I hear their drumbeats. Distant pounding from the savage island they came from caught in their invisible ribcages, lost in the blackness of their unseeable beings.

I can't tell what or who or what they are, if they're some real danger to me, to my food supply or my refuge. I could be crunching under foot the bones of their victims, sucked dry of marrow. Savages or spooks. Gulagees. Something lower even than me, maybe, from some subterranean strata I don't even know of. There might be whole hierarchies of wretched creatures living on the underside of the city. If they could not find enough cast off bits of food in the dumpsters, would they turn their eyes on me? Half-human rats, ready to grind down their ever-growing incisors on the hardest bits of my bones.

They are human shapes, thin creatures hunched over as if they should have canes under the silhouettes of their dangling arms, but I cannot see their eyes. I feel a momentary temptation to call out to them, to shriek at them and see if they evanesce back into the nothingness of the night around

them, but I suppress it. I treat them as invisible and hope for the same favor in return. It's hard, though, because I see them most when I'm not looking in their direction.

There might be food in the container ahead of me, but I don't dare stay out here long enough to find out. I'd turn around and leave them be if it weren't for the Camus in my hands. I have to get rid of it. Maybe, once I've tossed it into the trash, they'll turn and leap on it, tearing it page from page and feasting on it, leeching out the binding glue for sustenance.

I move as timidly as a child creeping up to the armchair where his drunken father's sleeping, not even sure why he has to do it, to creep up in the first place, but knowing that he has to. As quietly as possible, I work my fingers under the plastic lip of the trash bin and lift up the lid, just the inch or two I need to slide the book in. Then I shove it through, scraping against the metal edge and letting it plop into whatever lies down below in the recesses of the container.

I back away, trying not to be seen, not to see. I'm too terrified to be sure, too shaky and hurried, but I think the head-shaped bulge of one shadow moves as I step away, as if it's orienting its eyeless face toward me.

Once I'm back around the corner, I do my best impersonation of a human being running and lunge back to my stairs and down to my hole, knowing I am in peril. If I can't co-exist with whatever it was that wanted to come out of that book and with whatever those things were in the alley, then I'll be forced back into the visible spectrum, back into the world.

Though I don't let myself remember why, I know that if anything in the world sees me, the cosmos will insist on a reckoning.

Snap of a Hawthorn branch under my toe. Look down, then back up and there's a clock in front of me with only two hours on the face. Cars are whooshing by and I know that I've got to watch the building across the street. Have to watch it because something's going to have happened there.

I watch the clock go all the way around and then I see myself leaving the building across the street. I don't know where I've been or why this other me's been waiting for two hours.

I only know that I want to have blood on my hands. Want to be elbow deep in gore. That was the plan, the intent.

But the me I'm watching is just walking away and I hear someone shouting.

You crazy son of a bitch. I don't know what the fuck you're talking about. Get the fuck out of here.

Two hours and I wanted the blood, but all I get is a ringing in my ears. It's like that when I drift off. Things won't be what they're supposed to be.

Waking in my hole, the thousand incandescent bulbs glaze the rough, red scar tissue of my hands in their whiteness. I flex them, stretching out the stiff, cooked tissue as I pace the boundaries of my room. Something, either whatever it was that was trying to get out of Camus or whatever I saw up in the world, has agitated me and I cannot be still. My mind is the cobweb in the locker. Delicate little lines that convey orderly signals from point A to point B, up one axon and across another so that applesauce tastes like applesauce and sunrises are dawn. But now something has blown apart all the gossamer connections. Lateral lines have crashed down, pulling concentric rings in on themselves, so that the signals jump their wires. Now applesauce feels like rhino skin and dawn is perspicacity and everything is nothing that it's supposed to be.

Something has changed.

I keep pacing, rubbing my coarse palms together, passing by the stacks against the wall without understanding. At some point, and who can say when or how, I remember cause and effect. I remember that things proceed one from the other. One of Newton's laws or something like that. And before I have time to resent these ghosts from the Enlightenment for cooking up all these laws by which the universe is governed, I realize why I am restless, why there is a tremble quaking in my chest.

Cause and effect.

One thing before the other.

Vestigial thoughts of time. It's the worst contamination from my trips above ground. There, time is always on display. People walk around with it blinking at them from their little phones and they put it on the big bank signs made up of blinking lights (as many bulbs as I could ever need) and they even engineer it into the movements of the sun through the sky. It's pollution. They pour it down from

boiling buckets on every rooftop and the people don't feel it being slathered all over them. The pedestrians are boiling alive in time as they walk the streets. When the buckets run dry they seed the clouds with it and let it come down in the rain so it can dissolve into people's ear canals. The passers by think it's free. It's time, they think. It's everywhere. They don't know they're being billed every second for every second. Fine print transactions. Surcharges. Interest calculations moving like c^2 . Shipping and handling. That "handling" part is all time payment. They manufacture it, but it's distributed unevenly. The trucks don't deliver it properly to the boondocks, to the sticks. Sit and watch a sunset over a wide, open plain. The time is different out there. Einstein proved it changes pace. Slows and starts. When I walk across the room, it'll go slower. Nobody could ever notice the difference, but they've measured it, on the space shuttle.

A stray book catches my eye where it's slid off one of the piles and onto the floor.

Somehow it's intruded in the perfect geometry formed by where I left DeFoe, Camus and Solzhenitsyn beside me as points of a triangle with $\cos\theta = 2\pi$ and a hypotenuse exactly the length of my arm.

It's Ibsen.

What the fuck is this lousy playwright doing here? I go at him. Sturdy little trade paperback. The wrapper feels rubbery, impervious. It takes doing. I have to get the tear going with my teeth. Then it comes apart in two handfals. I fling the halves behind me and they flutter down like seagulls bouncing off the Charlestown bridge.

The exertion leaves me spent and I crumple to the ground. There, almost ready to slip back into unconsciousness, the shaking out of the center of my bones starts up again and I see a girl. A slight girl with dark hair and when she turns her eyes to me, her dark, dark eyes, then they seem familiar. Warm and terrifying.

I close my eyes and she's gone.

In the dark, there's a far-off voice, amplified and echoing in some open chamber, telling me that light is outside of time. A photon shares none of its motion with the fourth dimension, the voice says. Something's gotten into my head and it's posing as memory. Something wants me to believe that I once sat in lecture halls and listened to people talk about the physics of light and the nature of time. Stiff backed chairs like toboggans turned upright to orient the spine and cephalized sensory organs toward the sliding black chalkboards at the focal point of the room. Row after row of mottled, disheveled heads bobbing in unison to formulas scrawled in sloppy, incoherent letters still more comprehensible than the thick accented voice giving the lesson.

Images sharp and clear as if real, as if I was there, as if there was a time before this, a time before my hole, a time before this hibernation.

Hibernation.

Ellison said *hibernation*. The hole. The light. It's an incubator. A site for hibernation, and hibernations--

I'm not a slave to that. It doesn't have to be how he said.

Hibernations can be overdone, he said.

They're preparations, he said.

I try to void my mind of it, but I know the book--that I just got yesterday--is telling me something.

Yesterday?

Was it yesterday?

Agitated, I jump up from my sitting. Change is time. Yesterday. That's what slipped in, slipped inside this hole with me. That's the contamination--it was time.

I'm starting to feel time.

If I have time I might have a past. If I have a past then this would just be the present and then there'd be a future.

I get up again. Go digging again, find the new copy of Ellison I got the day before.

It has to go. It brought time in with it. He brought time down here and he's got to go.

I open the door and the room goes dark. There's a crack of stray city light creeping in through the doors at the end of the long hallway.

My hand clenches. The book creaks under the pressure and there's a little snap as the pulp and glue adjust.

Why did I get another copy?

I had one already. I knew the word I was looking for before I got this copy. I must have held this book before.

What became of it?

Did I do this already?

Did I discard it in the same way, for the same reason? Am I in some kind of loop?

Repeating.

Is this the second copy? Third? Fourth? How many times have I tried to save myself from Ellison, only to go back out and find another copy?

Still holding the book, I step backward, back into the room, closing the door and letting the lights come back on.

My legs crumple beneath me. I don't open the book, just hold it. Sit there, feet and shins going numb with a needly feeling, listening to the rhythm of boilers, the pumping of exhaust and the whole sound of the city above me, as if it was all the slow ticking of a clock.

Dreams all happen in seconds, each jerk of the eye an hour in dreamtime.

“Sir, are you okay?”

His head/my head/somebody’s head lifts off the wide, flat, smooth woodness of the desk. The papers get peeled off by gravity and fall into the stacks. Words like *mens rea* and *decrea nisi* written in blood throughout the margins of evidentiary disclosures and summaries of discovery. Cackling figures leer out from picture frames. Snide, cruel girls and fat babies, all with the same damned eyes. Touching the papers, the tar-like ooze sticks to my fingers, drips in long viscous cords.

“It’s just that we’ve never seen you like this. I know--I mean, we’ve all heard that, well, you know...but, well...I know it’s a difficult time, but...”

Brush one sheet off and there’s another beneath it and another, then more still. Each with ever finer print, until their shapes have burrowed down into the desk, like the unseen interior of an accordion.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I was just concerned.”

Reach into the hole and my hand comes out somewhere else, some other place. It’s an Einstein-Rosen bridge to an alternate reality, to some setting safely removed from all these things taking place in times that never happened.

One of my eyelashes falls between the pages of Kafka as I read.

I stretch out one digit to brush it away, but it stays, caught in the course grain of the thick paper.

I have to wet my finger with my tongue and press until the hair clings to my saliva, then lift it out.

There's a spot of me on the page now.

I've forgotten whatever I was reading, so I lay the book down.

It takes me a minute to move. My heart had been beating hummingbird-wing fast and standing up suddenly leaves my legs shaking. I've got a novel aching sensation deep in the muscles of my thighs.

Trying not to know has worn me down, drained me. I'm trying not to think about time, but it wearies me, the effort. One marker I can't escape is the hungry pit in the center of me. My stomach keeps me alive with its want. If I let myself I could count the days since I scraped some browning, half-chewed scallops off a wad of paper towels in the dumpster outside. But I don't want to know.

There must be something in the room. Something I can eat.

Pacing, with difficulty, I circle the perimeter. As I shuffle by one wall, there's something odd, some sensation that passes as I move on. Then, when I come around again, I feel it one more time. The hairs on my arm stand on end, pressing up with panic against the heavy, dank material of my coat.

There are people in the room. I'm not alone.

I pull back to the center of the room and stare through the white blaze from the lights, looking for human shapes.

I hear them. They're here. They must be right in front of me now.

I step forward, hand outstretched to touch whatever's there. My fingers only find the wall. But they're here. I can hear them. A man's voice. A woman's voice too. A woman's voice. The sound is

missing all the cues of distance. It's not muffled, not dampened to a distant whoosh like the passing cars on the street above. Their voices are faint, but close. They're not whispers, just voices projected through a speaker after the volume knob's been spun down several notches. I fumble over the wall, looking for some doorway or passageway I've never noticed before, snatching words out of the air as I go.

No, not too close...

As I brush my hands along the powdery drywall, I find nothing unexpected.

Our relationship is based on a lot of...

I manage to press my ear against it to listen, scalding my forehead when I come too close to one of the lightbulbs. The sounds become less distinct and I pull back to hear them again.

I think the problems really began before...

I finally realize the voices are right above me. I scurry up to the wall, cock my ear toward the ceiling.

Real voices coming from a room above and to the left of mine.

I know her voice. The woman's voice is familiar.

They're hardly even muffled through the flooring, which I know to be cement--solid, reliable 6-inch thick blocks spaced out like checkerboard squares on long steel I-beams. The world could come down in Chernobyl-Hiroshima hellstorms and these slabs would hold, but somehow the voices are traveling right through them.

I imagine them, these people producing these voices, squatting on their haunches in some dim, carpeted office--just beside broad over-stuffed leather couches and a wobbly end table with a green lamp shade. They must be kneeling on the floor with their lips aimed at the baseboards so I can hear.

You never trusted me, the female voice says. You were always waiting for me to step out of the lines you wanted to fit me into. It was a trap, the marriage you wanted was really just a trap, she says.

And you never appreciated me, the male voice answers. Nothing I did meant anything to you. You would've been happier if I'd neglected you, it would give you an excuse to feel the way you did.

A distant voice comes between them, but I can't make out anything it says clearly, as if it was speaking from an entirely different room, behind walls of sound-absorbing material. It is little more than a reverberation. I'm not even sure how I know it is a voice at all. They must ignore it, though, because they keep addressing each other without any change in tone or direction.

You never appreciated me, you had this unrealistic expectation, you had all these standards, you wanted this person with all these qualities, the man's voice says. You wanted me to be an intellectual...some sort of reader. You were always trying to get me to read those books. Like you looked down on me, as if I wasn't as good as you because my education was practical, useful. I just can't live under this standard anymore, this ideal that you're holding me to. Always pushing me to be something I wasn't. I don't even know if it's possible. Is it? Is there someone like this out there? Have you met this person? It's just like when you talk about our marriage. You talk about what you thought marriage would be like and I ask you, who has this marriage that you want? Who are your models for this? Who has this ideal marriage? I point to...to everyone we know and nobody we know has this, this fairy tale marriage that you're wanting. No one. You can't show me one person who has this thing that you're looking for. We just go round and round with the same argument. We wake up every morning and you want me to be someone else. I can't be anyone else. You're always wanting me to be somebody different. I can't change the way you want me to change. I can't change into this...this myth...this myth of a person you have.

Is it dreaming where I went wrong? Is that what's so wrong? the woman's voice asks. Is it wrong to imagine something better? You criticize me for wanting a perfect marriage. Why shouldn't I want that? Why shouldn't I want that kind of connection, that kind of bliss. It's joy I want. And you don't want to lift a finger to show me that, to show me that kind of passion. So that's what you're always faulting me for, that I want passion, that I have dreams, that there are things I want to feel, that I want you to feel for me, to make us

whole. That's what you see as wrong in me? That's your big critique. I need more. I do. I need more than just sitting around comfortably. I can't settle. I need more. I need to be inspired, to be stimulated. I need more than this. I need more than what you're offering. I believe that you can give me more, but you don't want to lift a finger. You get everything you want out of this. Everything you want is here and you're leaving me wanting. That's the way it is.

The other voice comes between them again. I still can't understand it. *Family? My family?* she asks. *Yes, I always thought of my family as secure. Safe. I guess that's what they want for me, but I need more than just that.*

More mumbles from the other voice.

Yes, my parents divorced when I was much younger, the man's voice says. *What? That makes me wrong? Makes it wrong of me to want a family, to want to provide the way my father didn't?*

I want them to stop. If I pounded on the ceiling, on their floor, would they wonder who I was, down here, or do they know? They keep at me, the voices. They keep at me and I lose all my thoughts. I try to retrace my movements. I try to return to worrying about the food that's not in my stomach. I think about reading, about picking up the book and reading. I find my spot and pick the closed book up off the floor.

There are no voices, I tell myself.

I flip through the Kafka in my hands over and over but can't find the last page I read.

I'm talking about something in the spirit, her voice says. *Something deeper. The freedom I'm talking about is not just something material. Yeah, I can take a credit card and buy a plane ticket anywhere, nothing is going to stop me. Nothing and no one. That's not the freedom I'm talking about, I'm talking about an inner freedom to really pursue ideas and passions, wherever they lead. It's something so alien to you that you don't even understand what I'm talking about when I talk about this. We're just so different. Inside and out, we're so different. Everything that makes me tick, you don't even begin to understand and you don't want to put forth*

any effort to comprehend. You don't care if you ever get me. You never do, you never will. It's the same thing over and over again. I'm just some alien monster to you.

I press bits of paper into my ears and try to curl into a ball, wait for them to go quiet or die. I don't know the time outside in the world, but it must be late. It has to have been hours they have gone on like this.

I know them.

I knew them before they started. I know these voices. The room, I can see the room in my mind. Dark. The wood panels are stained to six shades past midnight and it's lit only by the occasional peek of sunlight through the slat-like blinds swaying almost imperceptibly like stiff reeds and the dim glow of that green lamp swiped off a noir PI's desk. All so familiar.

I pull myself up off the floor. Hesitantly, not believing I'm doing this, I creak open my door and go out into the dim hallway, then all the way out into the twinkling light of the alley after sunset.

I stand there, away from the voices but unnerved by the city noises, and let headlight flashes bounce about my knees for a few minutes. Then, in smallish, fearful steps, I walk around to the mouth of the alley to the front of the Chinese restaurant. On the other side of the plate glass, diners lean over their noodle bowls, lifting their buttocks off red velvet cushions as they slurp. A cackle of Cantonese achieves escape velocity and rattles its way through the glass. I hover there in the dark. I walk backwards to my door and then forwards again, this time counting my steps.

I'm calculating the dimensions of the underworld, my world down below. I have to find this room where the voices are coming from. It's up and to the left, so to find it I have to open the door to the restaurant and step inside.

The green paint around the entryway is peeling, a few flecks sprinkle the outer edge of the plate glass that takes up most of the door. I stare at the corroded bronze dragon that snakes his way up the door handle, ending with a grinning face of sharp scales and two long whiskers.

In one quick motion that surprises me, I grab it and fling the door open.

The patroness points her wide face at me and squints. She barks out something in Chinese, but I ignore her.

“Can I help,” she says in imitation-English syllables.

I keep counting my steps, walk right past her.

“What do you want?” she asks, but I can’t even look at her or I’ll lose the count. At first, I assume she’s talking to the open door, but as I count steps past her little baluster and its golden tassels, she turns and follows me. She’s never seen me. I’m letting them all see me, all these people I live underneath and they’re seeing me now, but I have to find this room, have to see these two people, have to know if I’m right about who they are, have to tell them to shut the hell up.

I’m there, I realize. I’ve mapped my way right back to the edge of my room.

I’m standing on the threshold of the kitchen, a long row of cooks in tight, white caps look at me befuddled, pans steaming and hissing right in front of them. The lady is shouting at me now to get out of her kitchen.

I start backward, checking my geometry, checking the map in my mind. Right out of the restaurant, right past the leering faces of patrons and waiters, back into the alley, down my steps, through the hall and into my room.

I was right.

I was standing where the voices should’ve been, just above and to the left, but they weren’t there.

They’re here.

There are so many needs of mine he doesn’t recognize, yes. That’s it exactly. He doesn’t appreciate my ideas, my perspective.

Shut up.

Exactly. He doesn't appreciate my contributions to the relationship. He insists on seeing things only on his terms and that's just so limiting.

Die. Stop.

He thinks I'm unreasonable. He thinks my behavior is juvenile. He's not interested in me as a person, only in the ways I fill a role for him.

I can't stand her voice any more. I'm sure now it's been days of this prattling tedium resounding in my skull. Weary of the drum taps of complaint, I toss my still-unread book away and jump to my feet.

Out through the door, and charge down the cement tunnel, fast this time. The segmented pipes blur into dull colored lines as I dash awkwardly through. I smash through the outer door and cast about, looking through the piles of refuse.

The dumpster is piled high with mountains of foam S-shapes. I pull myself up and dig through, hunting deeper. Something pricks me and I jerk back my hand to find a triangular sliver of green glass a quarter-inch deep in my index finger. I shimmy off the dumpster and shake the shard out of my hand, leaving a splattering of blood on the asphalt.

Still dripping, I stalk further up the alley, drawing closer to beams of sunlight at the edge of the street. Then I spot two empty crates. Thin beams of wood held together by slim, overtaxed black nails. I snatch them with a jerk, shocking the squat cook smoking away his lunch break on the corner, and drag the boxes back to my stairs. I don't even bother to take my usual precautions to make sure the cook doesn't see me descend into my hole.

When I make my way back into the white glare of my room I stack the two crates atop each other against the wall. I'm breathing in long, desperate gasps, with a high wheezing noise slipping through my nostrils, as I stand there looking over my make-shift ladder. I raise one foot to the top and lean toward the wall to test the weight. There's creaking as it responds to my mass, but it seems steady

enough. I tremble when I pull my other foot from the safety of the solid floor and press myself against the wall, my hair brushing against the lit bulbs attached to the ceiling. One thin board snaps and I tense up, ready to tumble to the ground.

The rest of the makeshift support holds, though.

I stretch out my hand and press my palm against the ceiling, feeling the vibrations of the voices.

It's like they're in the wall itself.

I start clawing at the white plaster. Furiously scratching at the thick, dry surface. The nail of my middle finger snaps back like a flap, leaving chalky powder all over the tender flesh, each white granule stinging the exposed capillaries beneath my nail.

I wince, but keep scraping and digging with my hands. They're in there. They're in the wall. I hit harder material, but push on, undeterred. I can't make out the words anymore through the frenzied scraping noises of my tireless digging and the white hot noise of pain pounding in my head as my bloody hands go numb, then past numb. Sheets of skin are coming off and maybe I'm losing more of myself than I'm chipping out of the wall, but I don't stop.

Finally, my hands ragged and bloody, I bore through into the other room.

Panting, I push myself up on tiptoes and jam my left eye into the hole and look inside the poorly lit space.

The walls are all dark wood, like oak stained three-quarters of the way to black. It's much as I imagined it--the only light is a greenish glow from a lamp at the side. Pointed away from my peephole I see two chairs with backs dotted by buttons marking out the vertices of diamond shapes stitched into the leather. At the tops of the chair backs, a woman's hair and a man's head bob alternately, as if they're still speaking, but now I can't hear anything. They trade off, moving, shaking their chairs, but their faces never turn to one another so I never see their features. A third person, a gaunt, balding man with a

bland face sits across from them, so far back in the room he's little more than a pale smudge to me.

Occasionally, he nods and shifts his gaze between the two.

If I could see, if they'd turn their faces, then I'd know who they are. Then I'd remember something before this room, before I came down here.

But I don't need to do that. They've gone silent. That's all I need.

I climb down off the crates and step backward. I drag one of them across the room and push it against an open spot on the wall. I fetch the book and sit down. The cheap wooden crate gives just a little under my weight as I peel back the pages.

Too many people now. Too many people out here. Pretty girls' hips send long brown coats and green scarves sashaying with each step. Delivery workers slouch against their trucks. An old couple--hand in hand--strolls along in nylon wind breakers colored like sour-apple candy. A dozen heads descend at once to sniff the wares at the flower market. Ridiculous dogs squeezed into sweater vests plead for merciful, swift deaths with their big, black eyes.

This is too much, too many people. I shouldn't be here on a street this crowded, but I have to cross through. I have to vary my targets, can't go to any one shop too often.

Head down, I pass by shouting vendors and traffic cops in fluorescent green warning jackets. Some man, his arm around a blonde with a bust held up by unseen iron trellises, gets in my way he's so busy sneering at advertisements plastered on the wall. I dive to the right to avoid knocking him and his buxom plaything to the pavement and then suddenly, I'm passing a great construction chasm. A whole building's been gutted out, the lot dug down three stories deep. People standing beside it are swaying to unheard music piped into their ears by little white wires. The only real sound is the traffic. The only traffic is trucks bringing product. I'm sloshing through nonsense and commerce deep enough to splash over the tops of my boots.

I step faster, trying to get away from it all, but it's hopeless. They're everywhere, these people with their contented bellies and minds made pillow-soft by bread and circuses, marketing and branding, trans-fats and phone-in-to-vote-for-your-favorite reality shows. Dish soap for the soul that leaves them squeaky clean and empty.

I'm tired now. Tired from trying to outrun them. So tired I have to catch my breath, have to stop, stop and shift the weight off my legs. Ironically, the industrial-chic concrete column I lean against

is the frontis for a bookstore. No where I'd step inside, though. It's some four story cement and glass corporate affair. The windows are coated with micro-sensors to track your inner most desires and reshuffle the inventory to present books tailored to your insecurities. Novels of adventure for the pot-bellied college drop-out who thought he'd be tramping through Thailand and banging spry-legged brown virgins. It's-okay-to-be-you self-help guides for the girls who ate their sisters in the womb and are showing all the weight now. If I go inside the machinery will lock up, turn all the shelves in on themselves. Even if I got my hands on something useful, the birds outside are programmed to smell merchandise that hasn't been swiped over the red lasers and they would follow me, peck at me Hitchcock/du Maurier style. The only thing I'd want to do in there is take a shit. Too many attractive white-faced people, pale as birth with shallow smiles.

The sun is dull enough above me that there's no reflection on the window and I don't risk seeing myself by looking. There's a whole panorama display up front of Roth novels. Maybe they're making a movie out of one of his books or maybe he died--the only reasons this warehouse would erect a set-up like this.

As I breath my long and desperate gasps, a couple walks by.

Passing the window, the girl tightens up her arms, pushing her hands deeper into the pockets of her jacket. Her shiver unsettles one strand of her dark hair and it falls over her brow. He smiles at her, setting off a cascade of laugh lines on his face.

"Don't you want to go in?" he asks.

She squints suspiciously at the window and shakes her head.

"Really? Let's stop in," he suggests again.

"Yeah, but..."

When I hear her voice, my blood goes jelly-thick and my legs seize up, yanking me out of my recline.

“You’re cold. We can get a coffee or something.”

“In there?” she asks.

“You love books.”

“God, but it’s so...you know.” She scrunches up her nose like the Swede’s daughter passing judgement on, well, everything.

“Oh, give it a rest, it’s starting to rain,” he says to her. “We’ll wait it out inside and if it doesn’t stop we’ll catch a cab home.”

But the sky is clear. The sky is clear today.

She relents and he pulls the door open for her. She flicks a bemused dart at him with her eyes, so small and remote they seem black to me. They walk inside, into the ground floor with ceilings so high the designers must have planned for a full size plane to be flown in for the promotion of a new Amelia Earhart biography. Despite her reluctance to go inside, she pauses at several displays on their way to the café and he stops beside her, peering over her shoulder at whatever catches her interest. Bargain books of Post-impressionist masterpieces shrunk to pocket-size. Stationary sets with blue cranes inked in the margin. Sometimes she comments, but he only emits low noises in reply before they move on together, cutting an uneven and plodding course toward the line snaking out from the café counter. Once in line they pass the time easily, sharing jibes and talking at length about their possible selections. It all reeks of familiarity.

There are rings on their fingers.

They drift away languorously from the counter, cradling foam cups in their hands. When she sips, she scrunches up her face and he smiles at her.

“You don’t like it.”

“I haven’t decided.”

They've reached the periodicals where manicured prima donnas mull over *Cosmo* and men wearing flannel shirts with buttons about to pop and smelling vaguely of old sweat crane their necks to check the cover stories on *Wizard*. She sips again.

"Okay, no. I don't."

"I told you not to get that."

"I wanted to try something new."

"Look there's no line now. Go back and order that latte thing. You'll like that."

"No, I'm not going to spend money on--"

With a grin, he lifts the cup from her hands and begins to gulp it. She swats him lightly, but he continues. She berates him, but he goes on, undeterred, until it's empty.

"You're right. That's terrible."

"I'll just drink yours then."

"I'm going to finish mine," he says, holding it to his chest defensively. "Go buy your own."

"Oh God, you're ridiculous. You're going to be up all night now."

"I'll sleep like a rock."

"You'll have the jitters," she tells him as she walks back toward the cafe.

"I won't."

"You stay in the living room. I don't want you shaking the bed all night long."

"There's a joke in there somewhere."

"Be right back," she calls to him as she walks away. He thumbs through the magazine racks closest to him, pulling one out and settling into an article.

"What're you reading?" she asks when she returns, catching him with his face buried in a *Popular Mechanics* with some lattice of white beams suspended over a painting of the Earth.

His head pops up in surprise. "Oh, it's about...well, the space station."

“Seriously?”

“Sorry,” he says, putting it back on the shelf--in the wrong space, among the ladies’ magazines. “I always loved that stuff.”

“Space stations?”

“I always wanted to be an astronaut when I was a kid.”

“An astronaut? Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve never told me that before.”

“Oh, it’s just a silly, childish...” he trails off.

“It sounds dangerous, going into space.”

“Oh, I guess five year olds don’t care about that.”

“It’s kind of romantic.”

“Romantic?”

“Wanting to do things nobody else does, risking death just to get away from gravity. It’s romantic.”

“You think?”

“I never knew you had any romantic sensibilities,” she says warmly.

“What? I’m plenty romantic!”

“I didn’t think so, but now, now I’m wondering about you.”

“What? I buy you flowers all the time.”

“Oh, don’t be offended. I just mean...you kind of calculate your romantic gestures.”

“No, how could I be offended?” he says, flinging his hands away from him, as if sweeping troublesome jungle fronds out of their path.

They meander, picking at this stack or that table. He picks up little, but offers teasing barbs to several of the books that catch her interest. She seems amused, but still looks out to the windows and the rain falling outside.

But it's not raining today. The sky is clear.

When she says they might as well call a cab, he shakes his head and drags her upstairs to the Fiction and Literature section, which quickly swallows up her attention. She begins narrating her reading history to him as they walk. Though he takes the books she hands to him and considers them politely, he smiles at her as someone smiles at a child explaining the intricacies of a particularly pointless game.

"Oh, Ellison!" she says, charging forward suddenly and grabbing a nondescript paperback from the shelf.

"Invisible Man?" he reads over her shoulder. "I didn't think you liked science fiction."

"Oh my god, you did not just say that."

"Just kidding. I know that's H.G. Wells."

"This is a classic. It's my favorite!"

"A classic about invisibility?"

"He's not literally invisible. It's a metaphor for how people and society don't see him as anything but a construction of identity based on his race."

"Oh, of course, that makes sense."

She swats him with the book.

"You're too literal! I told you that you lack romantic sensibilities."

"Again? I'm romantic. I'm plenty romantic!"

"Yes, but all by the book."

He groans.

“Oh, don’t get sore. I like that you’re dependable...steady.”

“That sounds good to me, but you probably think those are dirty words.”

“No, no. Don’t be sour.”

“How can this be your favorite? I’ve never seen it.”

“I read it in college, but I’d checked it out instead of buying it. I’ve never owned a copy.”

“Well, let’s get it.”

“No,” she says, setting it back on the shelf. “It’s better this way. This way we only meet in passing, Ellison and I.”

“I still don’t have you figured out,” he calls after her.

“You still don’t?”

“Nope.”

“That’s too bad. There’s only one thing I don’t understand yet,” she tells him looking back with a grin.

“What’s that?”

“I still don’t know what a Fibonacci sequence is. That’s the only reason I’m hanging around,” she said.

A gray-skinned woman, face serious and drawn tight as sailcloth in a squall, pushes a folded five dollar bill in my direction. Confused. I look at her. Her eyes, pale and cashmere blue, fix on me. She and I are looking at each other. She doesn’t speak, but bounces the bill in her veiny hand to draw my attention.

I lift a trembling hand and take it from her.

She turns away from me with a huff and I hear her mumble, “...could say ‘thank you’...” as she slips into the bookstore.

I am still outside. Dropping the bill, I look up at the expanse of smooth, icily perfect glass rising up to the concrete slab of the roof. The morning sun and its all blue, too blue, cerulean blue sky is caught in the sheen of the glass, with just one little tuft of cloud smudged onto two adjacent panes.

I am still outside.

I step slowly backward, inching away like you'd back away from a spider, a spider you thought might be able to leap on you, a spider you suspected had fangs of flesh-rotting, paralysis-inducing neurotoxin.

Whatever errand I am on, I abandon. Whatever brought me out into their world today, I forget. Whatever has happened, I ignore and retreat, withdraw, abscond with all speed to my hole, to safety, to a world that makes sense.

I won't go out again.

It's an elegant solution that has never occurred to me. Time only exists out there. If I seal the door and do not open it, then time cannot crawl in on its spider legs. Without time, there is no cause and effect. Without cause and effect, my not eating can no longer produce hunger. Ergo, if I never go out again, then I will not need to go out again.

I almost smile it is so perfect.

Just then I see a dark spot on the ceiling. The glass of one bulb has turned brown. Burnt out and useless.

And another.

I fumble to my knees and start pushing my hands through the stacks of books, searching.

Another light goes dead. Another.

The room is going dim.

There isn't enough light. There aren't enough books. If I never go out...

I find Roth. It's the same cover I saw in the window of the bookstore.

Before leaving, she had hovered by the door and looked back over the tidy aisles and the immaculate prefab shelving units and their shiny products, their crisp edges.

"See, this wasn't so bad? Even though it's commercial or whatever."

She'd grinned a little bit and said, looking over it all, "You know what I think when I see a place like this? I look at it and wonder: What if this was the world? You know, what if this was the whole world? Just people going about their business. People just trading money for the things they want-- food, books, whatever. Could there be anything less objectionable?"

She looked at me up and down, with that smile, and then pushed the door open, adding as she went out, "But it's not the whole world."

She looked at me. She said that to me.

The stack of books in front of me trembles. Then the Updike on top flops to the floor. Joyce and Hawthorne follow. The wall behind begins to crumble. In another moment, as I scamper back, an aperture appears in the wall. A head emerges, then shoulders. Finally a whole body creeps out of the hole with surprising agility.

I get to my feet just as the man from the wall does too. He's short, with hair white as winter and gray thicket for brows that almost hides his eyes. He swats the dust from the blanched burlap he wears for clothes and looks at me expectantly.

At long last, he says.

I knew there were people here, I tell him. But you're not them.

I'm not one of them or I'm not both of them?

I don't know which.

Are you sure then that I'm not one of them? he asks me, screwing up his eyes to inspect my features as I answer.

Yes. Yes, I remember them both.

Who are they?

I don't know who they were. They were here, though. No, their voices were here.

I see.

And I saw them, I add excitedly. I saw them outside, out in the world.

You have been outside?

Yes, yes. I go outside for supplies. For the wiring and the lightbulbs. For books. Food.

He goes around me with small, shuffling steps, and surveys the room.

How long have you been here? I ask him.

I have only just arrived.

I mean, down here. How long have you been down here? That hole, I say, pointing. How long have you been digging?

Two years. I thought this wall would lead me to the outer wall of the prison and I could escape into the sea. The want of a compass has led me astray.

The water's half a mile away.

That would be a lot of digging.

I don't understand how you could be down here. For two years?

How long have you been down here?

No, no. I--no.

You don't know.

It's not like that. It's not a matter of time.

Not a matter of time?

Right.

I'm not sure I follow you. I'm asking you how long it is that you have been in this place, this location?

There's no time.

Again, I don't understand.

There wasn't a time when I wasn't down here.

Then it's your contention that you have always existed like this?

Yes. Always.

I suspect we shall have to redress that later. For now, we should dispense with introductions. What is your name?

My name?

Don't you have a name?

No. Do you?

I am Abbe Faria. I was imprisoned here because I meditated a grand design to unify Italy into a cogent nation state, but was thwarted in my ambitions by the profligate scheming of Caesar Borgia, Alexander the Sixth and Clement the Seventh.

I don't know them.

Yet, you have considerable tools by which you could educate yourself. These books! He waves his hand to his right without looking. *There are many. I have had to write my own books on parchment I made from goat's hair and semen.* He stopped beside the pile of books his entrance had disturbed. *Tell me, what is your purpose here? What do you look for in these texts?*

Purpose? There's no purpose.

To any of it?

Any of what?

This existence you have crafted for yourself? This life.

This isn't life. Is it?

I think you must answer that.

I watch him as he moves around, studying the titles and covers in the dim light of the four or five remaining bulbs. There's something wrong even with them, and the room looks like it's lit only by moonlight. *Have you ever considered alphabetizing all of these?*

No.

What do you do when you need to find a particular book?

I just look for it.

That hardly seems efficient. Have you read all of these?

I think I have.

Have you always been a student of literature?

I don't know.

Before you were here, were you a professor of literature? Perhaps simply an ardent reader?

Why do you ask?

There's clearly a pathological reason for your hoarding of these objects. It seems logical that its roots lie in your own past.

I don't understand what you're saying. I already told you that I don't have a past.

Yes, so you did.

For a while he studies my room, asking more questions I don't want to answer. He runs his hands over the book bindings, flipping over some and peering at the letters. *Fascinating*, he says once or twice and then resumes his interrogation.

I wish I had a sack to shove him into and force him back through the hole.

Instead, I pretend to be tired. I curl up and close my eyes, hoping he'll go back to wherever he came from. But when I get tired of lying still and open my eyes, I find he's just sitting against the wall, his limbs all folded up like a disheveled Buddha. I try to ignore him. I count the dead bulbs. I restack the books, take them down, stack them again. I can't concentrate enough to read them with him here, but, for what must be hours, I pretend. When he thinks I'm reading, at least he shuts up. He's always talking about treasure and Italian politics and making ink from blood and ash. I want to get away from him, but when I look for the tunnel he came through I can't find it. He keeps telling me that all he needs is two years and he can impart all his worldly knowledge to me. He offers me instruction in history and four different languages.

Mathematics and physics, he adds.

What can you teach me about physics?

The laws of motion, for example. The first is that a body in motion will remain in motion, at rest will remain at rest. Commonly known as inertia. Second, that the force of an object in motion is the product of its mass times its acceleration. And the third law states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In essence—

In essence the third law dictates that all forces are interactions and that no force is unidirectional, I shout in irritation. The fundamental concept beneath the third law is the conservation of momentum, which when derived through Noether's theorem demonstrates that the forces in any physical system can be expressed as an integral over time of the kinetic energy minus the potential energy. In contrast, the second law dictates that the net force of a body in motion is equal to the derivative of its momentum. All of this works pretty well for approximations of the behavior of macroscopic objects moving at non-relativistic velocities but the laws are, strictly speaking, not law, as they cannot be utilized to calculate the behavior of systems where scale or velocity requires the application of quantum mechanics.

Faria bounds up to his emaciated, yellow feet. *Ah, ha!* he shrieks in my face. *Where did that come from?*

I must've read it.

Where? Show me the book.

I told you. I don't know what order they're in. They're just--

Show me!

I can't.

I've looked through your books. All you have is story books. Novels. Literature. There are no scientific texts. There are no manuals with wiring diagrams. How did these lights come to be here?

Wait, you're from the 1800's, how do you know what wiring is?

A fine question, but I'm asking you: How do you know what you know? You did not read it in any of these books. If, as you claim, you have always existed down here, like this, then where did this knowledge come from?

I don't know.

I think you do.

Someone told me.

Who told you? Who?

Someone.

Someone, where?

Someone...in a lecture hall. He wrote it on black boards and I copied it down.

You see!

No.

Yes. Admit it. Say it. Acknowledge it for yourself.

I won't.

You have a past.

I don't.

Tell me about the voices. The couple you spoke of—who were they?

I don't know.

You do. The woman. The girl. Who was she?

No.

You know already. You've known since you remembered before.

No.

You have to say it.

She was mine.

Who was?

The girl. The girl with the eyes. She was mine.

Your what?

They had rings on their fingers.

My wife, I tell him.

Then what does that mean?

It means they had me once. They had me in their grip, in the sensual bourgeois embrace the world wants to get everyone in. There was the wife. A child. Mortgage. Promising career and pension benefits. My television had more surface area than an average dining room table and the bundled video recorder's storage capacity exceeded the combined cultural knowledge of several third world nations.

He lets me try to sleep. He doesn't bother me, but something else does. It could be the hunger, the bodily knowledge that my cells are dying. I haven't even been out into the hall to suckle at the leaky tap since Faria appeared. Equal and opposite reaction. I deprive my body parts--tissues, valves, lymph nodes and cartilaginous phloem--of the nutrition they demand and they, in return, in revenge, deprive me of existence. A cruel but civil exchange between warring parties.

But it does keep me awake.

That and the dreams.

Are you rested? he asks me when I pull myself up off the floor. I don't answer him. I crawl over to the stacks. I can use memory against him. I can remember other things.

I think you've made progress, he says. But I think we need to return to my earlier question. What is your purpose here? What are you seeking in this?

Go away. Go away. I keep flinging the books backward, right at where he's standing over me, but they never seem to hit him. He just keeps talking. Finally I find the book and stand up to face him.

You can't really be here.

Why not?

Because you're in this book. I hold it out to him so he can see, but he barely glances at the open pages.

Maybe you're in this book also.

I squint at him, then at the book. I turn and begin flipping through pages, scanning chapter titles.

I don't think so.

What's happening in the book?

He's in a cell.

Where are you?

I can leave whenever I want.

Are you sure you leave? After all, if I'm in the book and now I'm with you, but you sometimes leave, what guarantee do you have that when you leave you aren't simply imagining that you leave? How can you be certain that in reality you aren't always here in the book with me?

Why is this the first time you've spoken about this?

What makes you sure we're even speaking?

You're trying to trick me.

Am I? Why would I do that?

I'm not in this book.

Good. Then where are you?

I'm here.

How did you come to be here?

I've told you. I've always been here.

No, think. We're past this. You've admitted as much. You have a past. You have not always existed like this. You said yourself, you had a wife.

Yes. I had a wife.

But you don't now?

No. Not now.

You had a home, a family, a livelihood. What happened to those things?

Gone.

How?

I open the book and flip through the pages. Someone took them from me, I say.

Really?

It has to be. Someone did this to me.

Someone?

An enemy.

A foil for you to combat?

Yes.

A subject against whom you must have revenge?

Exactly.

Isn't that a little too convenient? Don't you think? That you in your predicament, in your isolation have been made the victim of a crime worthy of revenge? Isn't it possible that you were not wronged, nothing was taken away from you, but that you have manufactured all of this to excuse yourself?

Then why...why would I do what I did?

What did you do?

You know what I did!

See, the very presumption, your certainty that I have access to your thoughts implies that I am only a projection of your imagination.

Why are you saying this?

Because I think you need to face the very real possibility that none of this is happening, that none of it happened, that there is nothing really keeping you from the world but your own mind.

And where is she, then?

Who?

Her, with the eyes.

Perhaps she is out there, living a life without you, and that is the reality you refuse to face.

No.

You must consider it.

No.

At the very least, will you admit that I do not exist?

But I've been talking with you for days.

You haven't opened your mouth. You haven't made a sound.

No, of course not.

Then how is it we have been talking with one another?

It doesn't matter.

It does. I'm afraid now I have instilled into your heart a feeling that previously held no place there.

Vengeance.

He sighs and walks to the corner. I put the book down on the stack nearest me, then turn to begin collecting the others I have distributed haphazardly around the room.

It occurs to me, he says, that you could be right. It could be that we are all characters in some story...that you and I are being written.

Who's writing me? Who is he? Why?

Who can say? What moves the artist to create?

I don't know. That's exactly what she told me I could never understand.

I'm in a long black hallway. Its walls are featureless until I lean in and squint. Then I can make out the shapes of rivets beneath the corrosion. Rust and waste thickened into a smooth, black paste coat everything. Unframed canvases hang from the walls as I move deeper into the passage. They keep changing if I don't keep my eyes on them. There's one that's got an old-fashioned diving helmet painted in the middle of a suspension of pea soup, but when I look down the hall and then back to it, the background's darkened and the shapes are less distinct. Another painting's only discernible form is a series of fence posts in front of a landscape of swollen blue magma, swelling and bursting so there is no sky. As I look closer I think I can see a human eye in the Van Gogh swirls of blue, but the shape doesn't hold.

The last canvas is different. Even though it's clearly fabric-nailed-to-wooden-frame, it's not brushstrokes but grains of photographic film that define the close up of a woman's torso. A smooth line of slender human bone rises beneath brown skin. A girl's hand, with black nails that look covered in satin, floats before the bare shoulder blade.

But she doesn't have a face. No matter how many times I look away and back again, she never has a face.

I dream these things often, maybe every night, but who keeps track.

He's gone.

There's no trace of the entrance of his tunnel. I've conducted a search. I moved all the books away from the walls. No holes. I replaced them, then moved them all away again in the opposite order. Still nothing. I put my ear to the wall at various spots to see if I can hear him scratching away inside. Nothing.

He's gone.

But he is here. He burrowed into me like he dug through the wall. An excavation into all my soft tissues.

Or maybe in the night he died. He died, went stiff and I wrapped him in canvas. Only I was supposed to take his place before the jailers carried the lump of deceased matter in sackcloth outside to be hurled unceremoniously into the sea. Then I could spring upon the lazy, unalert gaolers and seize my freedom. That was how the story was meant to unfold. I would be free, free to find the long buried treasure and use it to exact my revenge.

Yes. My revenge.

Walking to the center of the room, I strike each wall with my eyes--each a network of exposed copper filaments and stolen glass spheres against dull, must-colored plaster. My feet, weary and rotted, hold me up on a slab floor I sleep on at night. But once, once I slept in comfort. Once I had unimaginable luxuries. Cushioned sofas--throw pillows. Once, down comforters. Space age, lumbar-supporting foam mattresses imported from Sweden.

Without knowing it, I find I have clenched my hands into knots, fists so tight I feel the bones in my fingers bowing inward, bending like heated rods.

There's a flash of anger so hot I remember burning.

These hands.

My face.

I reach up and touch my face and enough nerve endings are still firing beneath the thickened, scarred flesh that I can feel how both are ruined. I am a broken, cast-off nothing that used to be human, used to enjoy a life. Against my otherwise numb fingertips, I feel vents of moist breath rumbling through my nostrils like a horse snorting with displeasure.

I do remember.

I remember the feeling of her body beside mine. Her warm body radiant with the whole of her curled up beside me, child-like within the protection of my embrace.

I remember hating everything and burning in it.

I was wronged.

I may not know the broad strokes of what happened to me, what laid me low and made *this* of me, but I know one thing, and this one thing must be enough: I was wronged. And if I was wronged, then there must be someone who has wronged me. I stoop down and rip wires and other obstructions from the wall. Ignoring the buzzing sensation that cascades up my right arm and into my left temple as I yank several bulbs loose, I dab two fingers in a convenient pool of slop that has collected in the corner near me. Green-black grime, the origin of which I don't care to remember. I smear these two fingers and their thick, viscous medium on the fresh canvas I've made of the wall.

Broad, cleft chin. Small, pigeon-point eyes.

I conjure him, his image on the wall, and then there's a cycle of memory birthing memory. Deeply recessed data pulled forward. A feedback loop of memory to action, action to memory and back again.

I know this man.

I am staring at the man who has destroyed me. I see him there as if he was more than just smudged lines on the chalky surface of the wall. Blue eyes. Smirk. I see him. I want to find a tool and hack his face back off the wall, but I know in my abyssal depths that would not satisfy me. I have to do more now. Now that I can see him again, now that I feel the burning sensation all along the innermost edges of my skin, now I have to do more. I have to do more to him. I have to.

Suddenly, I'm aware of a further coarseness to my own breath. It's lost even the vaguest animal quality. Now it's rattling like Halloween funhouse bones. Without even intending to--puppet to these memories--I lift my finger and extend it toward this crude face I've put on the wall.

He's the cause.

The cause of everything.

The thousand injuries I have born. He did this.

He put me here.

He picked up my life, my world in his careless hands and he let it slip.

He's the cause. I don't remember how, nor do I wish to. But he made this of me. Whatever I was before, he rearranged somehow, reshaped somehow into this. I live in a hole instead of a home. I have no face. I'm not human.

All this, his doing.

Nemesis.

Destroyer.

He did this so casually. It was a simple matter of brushing away some filth from his sleeve--can he even know how much I hate him? Blind and aloof Fortunato, come into my cellar.

I can't find him in the dark, smooth heads and slit-like eyes milling about above my hole. I have to cast a wider net. Up past Chauncy, I spot him, recognizing him from the tousel of brown hair, short

but slightly amiss. He's heading away from me, darting through a crosswalk as the flasher goes orange. I hurry, shambling faster than my lumber-beam legs want to carry me. A twelve-pound blonde with a pink bag full of \$800 dog toys gets in my way and I knock her down. She lies there, spouting obscenities and complaining about her skinned knee. She shouts out that if she scars, she'll sue.

I'd laugh if there was time.

A Lexus painted with the liquified remains of sixteen thousand shells from some endangered species of oyster tries to start into the intersection, but I slap its eager hood while I chase him. In confusion, the driver pounds the horn. I can't afford to be rattled, have to keep after him.

All the ruckus hasn't caught his attention. It's the city, after all. Too much happening for any of it to matter--especially to him, someone like him. The smug son of a bitch in his polished, polyblend suit over chrome exoskeleton. I'm on him. For all his latte adrenal supplements, all his pH-balanced nutritional infusions, I'm on him. He's spent more on gym membership this month than an Indonesian family needs to eat for the year, but I've still overtaken him.

I clamp down my claw over his upper arm and spin him around.

"Hey, what the fuck?"

The sideburns are all wrong, but he could easily have grown those to disguise himself. The eyes are more brown, but over-the-counter plastic lenses could affect that change. The problem is the face itself. The superstructure's all wrong. Narrow, scalpal-sharp chin. He could have had the bone filed down and the skin replaced.

He shakes his head and turns away.

I spin around several more figures, gripping them by the shoulders and yanking their confused faces into view. Always the same, their mouths drop open, about to speak, but they just shake their heads and go on about their way--as if the wind or some other natural force had interrupted their business.

Halfway back, down Hudson street, I slink through some entryway tight as Alice's smallest door. Despite the tinkle of the bell hung over the door, the clerk keeps staring deep into a scratchy-sounding eight-inch TV set and yapping excitedly to somebody on his phone. In defiance of the natural laws of the universe and any sense of reasonable retail space management, the proprietors have crammed four aisles worth of merchandise into this little convenience store. I shuffle into the furthest corner, between shelf-mounted baskets of junk food and floor-to-ceiling coolers humming loud enough to mute the sounds of the television up front. I quickly peel the wrapper off a Snickers bar and shove it into my mouth in three quick chomps. Carefully, I open up the glass door of the cooler, watching for signs of alertness in the clerk. I fish a sixteen ounce Gatorade out of the cooler and use it to lubricate my mastication in lightning fast gulps like college guys jumping out of their pick-up cab at a pit stop before driving straight through the night on peanuts, nougat, milk chocolate and high fructose corn syrup. Straight through six AM until their jittery brains clank against their skulls like the sonorous centers of those Chinese relaxation balls.

Before heading back out into the daylight, I stuff a few grab bags--damned fools actually call them that, put it right on the packaging--of chips into the flaps of my open jacket. I keep shooting the guy up front shoplifter eyes via the convex mirror but he remains inattentive. Some magical Snow White slumber spell has made him forget all his corporate loss prevention training. Then, I see that right on the counter, inches from the elbow of the enchanted clerk, a phone book thick as timber is waiting. As I draw closer to him, he jumps up and curses at the soccer game on his screen. I flip the phone book open and thumb through the pages. I don't remember the name I'm looking for, it's true, but he must be in there somewhere. He must have a name.

Scanning the tiny lines of print, fine as gothic inscriptions, something catches my eye.

Anderson. Andreeson. Andrewson.

Numbers float into my memory.

An address. 12345...12405 Andrews...Lane or Street or Boulevard. I'm out of the shop and walking before I even know I've remembered the address correctly.

A green-bellied garbage truck almost runs me down as I start walking south, moving parallel to the turnpike. It pulls me out of the shadows of the building and into the full yellow glow of sunlight. Kids are smacking a ball against the greentop surface of a chained-in lot as I stumble over uneven red-brick sidewalks, choking on exhaust fumes the whole way. By the time I cross the bridge over a river of whizzing steel--cars and rail lines beginning at the end of the earth and receding into the distance beyond the range of my vision. I'm wearing my own perspiration like another layer of clothing.

The address is reshaping itself as I walk. Numbers keep sliding around from one slot to another. The A gets smaller, turns into something else. It doesn't matter, I know where I'm going now. I know the building when I see it. Burnished brick with colonial windows. Painstakingly restored. I know when I step inside everything will be white. The banisters and walls coated thick as wishful thinking with virgin white paint.

I make my way unmolested through the lobby and up flight after flight of stairs to the eighth floor where I find myself at a familiar door. The light from the window at the end of the hallway is hitting it just so and I'm sure I've stood right here before.

But I don't think I've ever knocked like I'm doing now.

Something mechanical stirs on the other side of the door and it opens, just a bit. Two little brown eyes peek out of the crack and then turn big as billiard balls.

"A monster!" the little girl gasps, lurching back and screeching.

"What have I told you about opening the door without--" a mother's voice begins, but as she pulls back the door and lifts her eyes from the child she stops mid-thought, mid-sentence, mid-life.

She can see me.

She can actually see me.

“Can I help you?” she asks, tremor of fear simmering underneath the simple, functional words. The flat front of her nose bent to the left as she scrunched up her face. It was an unfamiliar gesture on an unfamiliar face. “I’m sorry,” she stammers from beneath the cold, hard line of her brow. “Do I?”

No, I don’t, I answer for her in my head. I don’t know her.

Then a third figure comes into the door frame. A man, a full head taller than her slides in behind the other two. He’s built like a reed with a tangle of curly hair at low tide on the pinkish slope of his skull. His eyes move in my direction, but I’m not sure he sees me like she does. I see him, though. I see him up and down. I look over every pore on his speckled face.

It’s not him.

The man. The woman. Their daughter clinging to her legs, peeking out. A tight little bundle of nuclear joy staring back at me without recognition.

This is not what I came here for.

But looking at them maybe looking at me, I remember something else. Canary colored paneling between slate-colored roof and a brick foundation with basement windows peeking out at ground level like cat eyes.

Another address.

I shuffle back, down the hall and to the elevator this time. They must lean out their door frame, must look past the border of their ordered family photos, past the threshold and watch me waddling away. I ride the elevator downward, never turning to face the doors until they slide open with a chime at ground level.

I walk. I walk further and longer than I have in years. The city goes flat around me. The churning of a million misaligned tires breaks into distant waterfall-like rustling--a Doppler shift in my wake. One of us is moving; either the city or me is moving away. The echo is all wrong without the

shadowy buildings lording over everything. I walk until my heels bleed and my shins go brittle as driveway salt. My legs are just pistons now, machines operating outside my voluntary control via the perpetual motion of agony counterweights hidden somewhere inside my boundaries, somewhere inside the edges of what I am. He must be where I am going.

I'm seeing it before I see it. Precognition, maybe. Neighborhood streets like volcanic magma gone cold and black, bordered by vast yards covered with pleasantly colored leaves. Manicured shrubbery and immaculately swept driveways with all the homey touches lorded over by flat-fronted pastel houses big as medieval castles. One in particular steps forward. Two stories. There will be three trees around it. One by the garage and two spaced out on the other side. Late faux-colonial. Modern mish-mash of what expensive houses should look like for upper-middle-class Americans. It's yellow. The whole outside of it is a light yellow beneath charcoal shingles and dead center there are steps rising to a broad door flanked on each side by brass fixtures styled after Paul Revere's lanterns.

My legs are gone. I can't feel them, but now it's only another half-mile down the road. No side walks, just a quaint country road, except it's the suburbs and the fields are not farms but golf courses. I pour the remaining granules of what used to be potato chips out of the last of my grab bags straight into my mouth and leave the wrapper behind me in the dark.

I keep walking.

It's silent. This corner of the world has been sanitized of all sound. There are no whooshes of late cars returning home. No birds or crickets rustle through the roadside shrubbery. Silent as a grave. Something's wrong. Something in the center of my chest is malfunctioning. A crushing sensation, as if the pump that keeps me going is being squeezed, being sucked in on itself maybe, by a vacuum.

That's when I know I've gone too far. Somehow in the dark, I've passed my destination. I backtrack. I have to hold the address in my mind this time and count backwards as the house numbers--lit by porch lights or emblazoned on mailboxes--cycle downward. There's a number missing

and a cleared lot where it should be. It's just rubble. There are machine tracks of backhoes and little devil machines that have dug up a foundation. I walk onto the lot and finally let down my guard, willfully allow the memories to flood back in if they will.

But they don't.

Now, they keep away.

I bend down and pick up something, thinking for a second it's an immense piece of black chalk.

The charred piece of wood is so brittle it just comes apart in my hands, leaving me choking on soot. I stumble. I drop to my knees and more fine ash swirls up--invisible in the darkness. I'm sure I'll never get up, never think about rising back onto those granite pistons that were legs. Raw and pulsing, the skin of my hands and face is seared from exposure to the sun's angry little UV particles. Burn on top of burn, the skin maybe has evaporated. What I'm feeling could be the raw collisions of Oxygen, Nitrogen, Carbon Dioxide, Bromide Philistinate Triglyceride against a subcutaneous field of pain receptors 6×10^{35} strong.

Worst of all is the pain in my chest. Something broken deep inside. Broken and beyond repair.

When my lungs clear I start the walk back. I can't remember anymore why I came out. Hours later, when I stagger back into my basement room away from the world, I see a face drawn on the wall but can't remember who drew it or who it's supposed to be. I just rub it out with the black powder from my hands before I curl up on the floor and sleep.

The brass-trimmed purple letters advertising the shop's name still hang overhead, but the windows are covered over and a metal sliding door is closed tight by padlocks the size of children's fists. Posters advertise the space for rent. Through a tear in the brown paper coating the inside of the glass, I can see the dusty nothing that's left behind by the missing books.

I can't fight the urge to touch the worn iron. I can't remember how long it has been since I tried this shop.

Print is dying around me everywhere. There isn't much time. They'll all be gone. All the shops shuttered. Then the big corporate place will stop selling actual paper books, switch to all books on tape and DVD's of television adaptations.

If I knew how long since this one closed, then I could establish a baseline, formulate an equation to track the decay rate of the written word, fix a date after which there will be no more books.

Then I'd know how long I had.

I lay on the floor.

I failed to secure the door, and some gust or tremor in the steel girders that tie the building above me into the ground has shaken it loose. When it opened itself, it pulled the cord and for once I am in the room in darkness.

It is not altogether objectionable.

Laying here, I start to lose my bearings. Perhaps I've suspended myself in light so long, my inner-ear and all those other subtle orienting senses have atrophied. I have the sense of spinning, as if my body was a top staked through the middle to the floor and some giant malevolent child is flicking at it, sending the spinner around and around in wild pointlessness. At the same time, I feel I'm falling. The two sensations back and forth, the whirl of a spin and the lurch of a plunge. So really, it's like I'm gyrating. I'm wobbling through space, though I'm really just lying on the floor. I know this, I know that I am static and still on the floor, but my body isn't me anymore and whatever is me has this undeniable sense of motion. Like I'm not in my room at all, but in a wider space, a broader and more expansive darkness than just my four walls deprived of light. I'm floating in an empty universe all my own. I'm not real. It's not real. If I got up, felt my way to the door and jerked the cord again to switch on the lights, the solid feeling I might trick myself into believing wouldn't be real either. None of it is real.

I lay there spin-falling. Lay there outside my supposed body. It's pleasant to be something else for a time.

When I finally pull myself up, bones creaking, and walk to the door, tripping the cord and bringing the lights back to life, I have the sudden impression that I have brought on the dawn.

Then I raise my left arm and turn my wrist toward me as if looking for a watch.

It's a familiar gesture sneaking out of memory. This is something I did once. I checked the time. Time used to matter to me. I stumble about, pick up Maugham and leaf through it.

How long since I read it? How long?

Dropping the book, I open the door again and move through the corridor. It's bright when I open the last door to the white-washed steps. The sun is hanging directly over the alley, firing its rays straight down so that it's as bright out as it is under the heat of my lightbulbs. This trip up is so different. I'm deliberately crossing the boundaries, moving into their world with its clocks and schedules. It's dangerous. I might be seen. I have concocted a cover story, though. I am even prepared to use my voice if need be. If anyone sees me as I do this I will lie. I will tell them I am an agent of Thompson and French, simply taking an inventory of all the valuable property that is irresponsibly left on the sidewalks of the city. If I say this with enough authority, I am sure they will accept the explanation.

I pass by the restaurant on the corner, and actually find an area in the shadows where I might be less conspicuous. In my safe gray shadow, I find a red box with a glass front. Even though it's obviously around noon, there are morning papers left in the vending machine.

It is December 12th.

I turn and head back into my alley. I pause only for a moment to dig through the nearest dumpster. There's a mass of oily noodles inside so I use some old newspaper to scoop them up and carry them down with me.

December 12th.

When the door's shut behind me, I lick the noodles out of the crinkled paper, probably smudging the rough, dry skin around my mouth with ashy newsprint smears. When I've finished the last of them, I toss the newspaper--yellow now where the oil soaked through--toward a clear corner of the

room. There's a rough square of flooring there that looks different than the rest of the floor, but I can't recall why. I start my calculations and sit still for a very long time before I reach my solution.

I have been alive 13,403 days.

Out in the hall, I find some discarded metal tool that can act as a stylus and go back in. The walls are full of bulbs, but I find enough space to begin marking off the days. The first gouge, the day of my birth, I make bold. It will be taller than the rest. I count up from there, careful to factor in leap years when making the longer slashes for my birthdays. I'm a boy. I see myself with knobby knees and striped shirts, hair that won't obey and freckles. I don't know anything else about these days as I mark them off on the wall. I only know I grow taller and lankier, more awkward and carbuncular.

Somewhere in these slashes is the game we would play. Somewhere in the low three thousands. My friends and I would tramp through the snow in my backyard until it turned to brown slush under our boots. The pressure of our back and forths would reveal the yellow lines of the long, beaten-down grass underneath.

It was some game of superlatives without a particular name. We weren't children anymore in this game, but had grown up--and had grown up remarkable. Each of us had the distinction of being the best at something, best in the whole world. My friend Andre was the strongest man in the world. Don, the fastest runner. David, the smartest. I was the fastest swimmer in the world. Each of us--as some exercise in balance of power--would also be second or third in one of the other's area of greatness. I think I was the second fastest runner and the third smartest man on Earth.

Because of these extraordinary endowments we were, of course, recruited by the government to be secret agents. Our neighborhood was not our neighborhood, but an exact reproduction of our neighborhood on a secret island shielded from sight by rays. It served as our training ground and base of operations.

On one of these slashes, I broke the game. Early in our history as super agents, I had decided my agent-self would wear an all-black body suit, like Snake Eyes from the *GI Joe* cartoons. It was initially a bullet and fire proof costume, but the suit became more and more powerful as we kept playing. I know that once it protected me from the effects of enemy mind control and allowed me to save the day when all of my other extraordinary comrades in arms were incapacitated. But when I tried to walk right through a force field that had been erected against us by some villain, Don cried foul. He gave me a stream of his best nine-year old repertoire of profanity to communicate that I wasn't playing fair and walked away, kicking plastic Tonka trucks out of his path as he went.

"I was going to make it bounce me back!" I called after him, a lie. But it was no good. He was gone.

Obviously he was back the next day, but we played something else. We threw the football around or hurled chunks of ice at each other. Never anything as imaginative as that game again.

It was around that time that I took the last trip with my father. He took my sister and me to visit our aunt. Her cabin was a small, squarish place on the upper peninsula. It was nestled in the woods on a narrow strip of land pressed on each side by much-wealthier neighbors. Their million dollar houses stared down at hers. My sister especially noticed this. She would cross her arms over her budding chest, back turned to the lake, and squint at the sunlight reflected in a bank of windows on the house next door. It was the same sullen dissatisfaction she'd carried with her as we'd driven up the gray roads to get there, but now I think that she understood, with her three more years, that mom wasn't just too busy or too tired to come along. She knew the real reasons it was only the three of us who took that trip.

"I want a house that looks on the water like that," she told me.

“Me too,” I said, thinking of splashing and boats zipping through the infinite expanse of Lake Michigan. “Come on!” I shouted, sprinting to the dock in flip flops and trunks, but she just stood there, walking the property line in long sleeves and jeans like it wasn’t summer.

I remember ruining that, too. Ruining the summer. My father tried to teach me to water ski. My skinny feet felt dangerously loose against the rubber cups of the skis but he reassured me, “That’s how it’s supposed to be. You’ll be fine.”

I held the line as tight as I could, shivering as I watched the backwash of the motor recede from me, trying to ready myself for the jolt. When it finally came I was sure my arms were going to be pulled out of their sockets. I held on as long as I could against the rhythmic jarring sensation as I popped over each little wave in my path, each one a little hillock that popped me momentarily above the water. Finally, one splash was high enough to box me fully in the face and I let go. I tumbled end over end, feeling a thwap against my skull as my eyes filled with the brown water.

I didn’t breath.

I just flailed there, head down looking into nothing, unable to figure out that I just needed to flop over to find the sky and all its oxygen. I didn’t gasp, though, so when the boat swooped back in and my father yanked me out and spread my skinny limbs out on the deck there was no water in my lungs. I didn’t cough or struggle for air. I just moaned.

“My head!”

“What, what about your head?” he asked.

“My head!”

I think the ski had come off my right foot and I had found it with the corner of my temple when I crashed into the water. We never found that right ski. Though it shouldn’t have been able to, somehow it sunk.

“What’s wrong with your head?”

“My head,” I wailed.

“Dammit, answer me. I need to know if I’m going to have to call an ambulance out here--which is very expensive. So what’s wrong? Are you really hurt or not?”

My aunt grabbed him by the shoulder and squeezed. She was eleven years older than my father and had gone pale with age and grief--her husband and two sons were all gone by then--so I saw while looking up from the fiberglass deck of the boat that her fingers went from white to bright red where she pinched him.

“He’s just scared,” she said.

I wasn’t angry with him then but that night, when he beat me at chess, I stormed out of the cabin and walked the uneven planks of the dock, staring at the black sheet spreading out to the horizon and thought of how much I hated him.

I went on being angry with him through the long drive back home, through his announcement two months later that he and our mother weren’t going to be married anymore, all the way through the birth of my half-brother when I was eleven. I never met him, but my father told us about him in one of his letters. He’d call on our birthdays and Christmas but two or three times a year we’d also get these letters addressed to both me and my sister. He would mostly tell us things about himself, his new business and then our new brother. He never mentioned his new wife and I don’t think I ever learned her name. At the end of the letter he would always ask the same few questions about us, which we would never answer.

I keep hashing, not much of significance rising out of the pool of memories. I see across many of the marks the sullen face of my mother, her jowls grown heavy with loathing, the only parts of her that really started to show her age. I shouldn’t linger here. After all, Philip Carey’s mother was disposed of in the first pages and he was free to focus on the other women in his life.

Past five thousand, events take on shapes again.

In high school, I was second string on our winning football team. Good enough for girls and getting invited to the best parties, but it wasn't going to be good enough for any scholarship money. When my PSAT scores arrived my guidance counselor pulled me in excitedly and convinced me to sign up for summer classes in trigonometry and analytical geometry to get me ready for Advanced Placement Calculus. I still worked out with the team and suited out for every game the next year--I even got three minutes on the field in one game mid-season--but I stayed in most weekends to study. During my junior year in the locker room, I'd gotten to brag to all the guys about Diana and Audrey, my conquests from after-game parties, but senior year there was no one until Dorothy. She was notoriously unpopular, even though she'd grown into a pretty blonde with broad hips and slim legs down at her ankles. The *Wizard of Oz* teasing that had followed her all the way through grade school had left her sensitive and withdrawn. She lived two doors down from the house we'd bought after my parents' divorce and my mother had become fast friends with hers. So much so that when Dorothy and her mom went to Texas to look at schools in March, I was asked along. She and I fooled around by the hotel pool when her mom went to sleep early the night we got there. Under the cover of a tall hedge and the shadow of a freestanding supply room she let me uncover her breasts and fondle them, but when I accidentally pinched her nipple too hard she stiffened, covered up and started looking at every lit window on the building above us.

The schools we visited didn't make an impression on me, with one exception. In Austin, Dorothy and her mother attended some parents' reception without me. Her mother had told me to come along, suggesting, "We can say you're Dorothy's brother," which made her daughter blush Christmas package red.

Instead I walked around the campus. At one point I found myself in a garden of sorts, almost like a glade. It was like stepping into another world. The campus was gone, whatever building I'd

walked behind was hidden by the trees and patio. The sounds of the university were filtered out by the spring branches.

I sat down beside a half-circle basin full of water with a series of patinaed bell shapes hanging over it. I wondered if it was a fountain and were they supposed to trickle water, but I didn't investigate, didn't look for the hidden pump or peek inside the bells for nozzles.

I just sat, watching the light play on the water.

"What're you doing here?" She was a tall, too-thin girl with raven hair falling in uneven waves down to her waist line. "Nobody's ever here."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. There weren't any signs."

It's my voice I hear. My voice. If I spoke now, that is what I would hear, that voice.

"Nobody ever comes here unless there's a dinner at the alumni center. I hate those nights."

I watched her wordlessly as she stepped to the edge of the pool and looked in. She reached her long arm in and fished out a dark penny.

"It froze in December," she said. "It actually froze."

"The fountain?"

"It's not a wishing well," she said and put the penny in the pocket of her jeans. They were too tight and too blue.

"Is that unusual? For it to freeze?" I asked.

"You must not be from around here," she answered.

This could have easily been the beginning of some back and forth, some "I'm from Michigan, where are you from" chit-chat but instead I couldn't speak to her. I wanted to pull those jeans off her hips and push inside her right there.

I would have. No condom, no sense of who this girl might be, AIDS-terror be damned, I would have. Right there.

But she just walked away without another word. By the time my erection subsided and I could follow, she had disappeared into the throngs moving, laughing, talking along all the sidewalks of the campus.

Though she wouldn't give me a shot at her blouse again I cajoled Dorothy into sneaking over to my room where somehow without saying anything particular she understood I wanted her to gratify me in some way. She tried to manage with uncertain fingers but after a few amateurish tugs and gasps of "careful" from me, she finally dipped her head to my lap. I said her name softly over and when it was over she grabbed my hand and squeezed.

"Thank you," I told her.

In the summer, just after graduating beside each other in the top ten, she finally let me inside her. Her mother was out of town to Vegas with a new boyfriend and I think something about it upset Dorothy. She led me up to her mother's bedroom and laid out flat in her bra and panties.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, so sure."

Without ever saying it, she had told me she loved me every time she looked at me, but I didn't know anything about it. I hadn't understood that earlier when I'd told her MIT was my first choice and she'd said that she'd applied to Harvard she was proposing something--just as she was later when, after Harvard rejected her and she was forced to her fallback, Rice, she told me about good engineering and math programs in Texas.

I never heard her, though, and when I left for Boston in August there were no understandings and no promises between us.

What struck me most about college was how much it failed to live up to expectations. I think I went with a whole slew of ideas about what my experience would be like. There would be wild

parties, spontaneity, round-bottomed girls and demanding coursework--all of which was meant to test me, stretch me, change me.

Instead, I would stand around tepid gatherings, nursing beer from bright plastic cups and trying to keep a bemused smile on my face. My days were undifferentiated: Riding the T, working in the admissions office for work study, over-paying for dinner at one of the six eateries I liked around campus, studying, watching TV with the guys from my floor, sleeping. It was clockwork. There were women. Pasty-faced, frumpy girls with lips that turned downward when they meant to be laughing. I would go around with them, eat pizza and talk about physics classes. I slept with a few but I have no memories of holding any of them closely afterward or of any noteworthy excitement during. Worst of all, I would come to think, the classes didn't challenge me as I'd expected them to. I saw people distressed all around me about the work, but I drifted through the accumulation of my units without serious exertion, fueled by a Midwestern do-it-now work ethic and an ease with numbers.

I can't even remember when, beyond it being sometime during my sophomore year, but one night I remember laying awake while trying not to listen to my roommate copulating with his little Korean girlfriend (in his defense, he did his best to mute the proceedings). In the dark, imagining the landscape of everything in my life then, I could not help thinking that something just wasn't right.

My junior year, a few things finally changed. For one, I finally had a professor who made things less than easy for me and it also came time to hunt down internships.

The two would collide.

She was some Yale-educated Indian woman on a crusade. It was supposed to be just another industrial engineering course, but invariably we would veer into ethics and social justice. She lectured, but then she wanted discussion.

“What we build will have meaning in the world, whether we acknowledge those meanings or not. Are we establishing tools for the perpetuation of a status quo founded on privilege for the elite

based on race, inherited wealth, or simply conformity to a behavioral norm that is non-threatening to stake holders in post-industrial Capitalism, or are we creating revolutionary possibilities, systems and structures that allow for the transformation of others' relationships to power?"

We--most of us, like the whites and the Asian kids--would emerge from her sessions shaking our heads, rolling our eyes.

"Christ, this is MIT."

"I know, who does she think she's talking to?"

But not her darling, Bart.

He was a black kid who'd never really been black. Growing up in lower middle class black neighborhoods in New York, he'd had two serious handicaps. He was gifted and he wore glasses as thick as his thumbs. He fiddled around with gutted Comodores in high school and missed by five years the window when a kid in his garage could do something with computers that would matter.

He'd been in the shadows his whole time at MIT, but now, with Professor Lakshmi or whatever her name was, he came alive.

He spoke up. He agreed with her through startlingly specific narratives connecting the disapproving snobbery of white ticket girls to the traffic flow patterns of theater lobbies.

She loved him.

He had never before been a threat to anyone except maybe in setting a curve, but now he had the eye and heart of this woman who, more and more, we were being told knew everyone. I had been set to waltz into whichever internship I wanted and now it looked like this woman's recommendation could throw me behind Bart, or any of the five or six Latinos in class and all the Chinese and Korean kids who usually ate the white students alive but who I'd stayed ahead of in line.

I hated him.

I don't know if I'd ever hated anyone before and Bart had always been so inoffensive and invisible that it felt strange to suddenly see him as the object of a new passion.

I tried--consciously and for the first time in my academic career--to ingratiate myself to her. Tried. It seemed I was linguistically incapable of actually agreeing with her. I would intend to. I would believe I was saying what she wanted to hear, but invariably she would ferret out something I had said and analyze the language, laying bare assumptions she told me I wasn't aware of.

I started having fantasies about sexually dominating her. I would stay behind in the lecture hall, staring at the sway of her boxy hips, the long flat slope down her back to her legs, the great swell of her chest. When she was done packing she'd notice me and ask in her thick accent if I needed something.

"No, but you need something."

I would stride up to the front, bend her over a table and hike up that sari while she moaned in delight, begging me between breaths to fuck her harder.

As the interviews for the coveted internship at CDM loomed, I finally just asked her for a meeting to discuss my prospects. We talked politely and obliquely around the issue for half an hour, but at some point she stopped talking, leaned back in her chair with a creak and rubbed the bridge of her nose with her eyes closed.

"It's plain that you feel you are being treated unfairly."

"Excuse me?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"You believe Bartholomew will receive my recommendation to CDM and you are keen to have it yourself."

"We have, he and I, the best scores, so it's natural--"

"And what is it you hope to accomplish today?"

"I guess I feel like you're dissatisfied with my work somehow."

"Not your work."

“What then?”

“With the quality of your ideas.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Let me ask you, what will you do if you receive this internship?”

“I’m sure I can perform competently--better than competently. I know I can excel and serve the firm--”

“Yes, no doubt, but what will you do with it?”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, of course not.”

“Can’t you explain?”

“Your ambitions, is there anything in them beyond making money by doing a good job? You build, they pay?”

“Obviously I want to make a positive contribution. I’ve studied sustainable practices under Dr. Odoni and--”

“You say these things, but I don’t feel your heart in them.”

“What, because I’m white?”

“Perhaps.”

“I don’t think that’s fair. I’m not some pampered elitist. I’m here on scholarship money, too.”

“You asked if it was an explanation. I suggested you might be correct. Listen, my recommendation is hardly required. You will undoubtedly be scheduled for an interview. Just say those nice things you said a moment ago when you do and I’m sure you will do fine.”

I left seething, but she was right. Though for days I ground my teeth and replayed the encounter with her in my head, imagining new retorts, thinking about throttling her, shouting, anything, when the invitations were made, she was right, I did get an interview.

I bought a new suit and practiced smiling in the mirror. I went in and was as charming as humanly possible. I schmoozed. I was articulate. I said everything I should have said and the men in dark suits and gray hair smiled approvingly in return.

At one point, though, while the division head was explaining something about the company that I already knew from reading up ahead of time, I discovered I was thinking about Bart. He'd be sitting in that very chair a few hours later. I saw him there--thin, dark and quiet. I saw him blink with a repetitious twitch in his bespectacled eyes.

Why had I ever been worried?

Despite her interference, I would get the job, be set on a path to the kind of life I wanted. Who was she to question my ambitions? All I aspired to was usefulness--is that so wrong? Is it not grandiose enough for her? Let her fill her head, and Bart's, with self-aggrandizing myths about social justice. It's all vanity, really. Telling themselves they're part of a noble campaign, telling themselves they're victims of some inhuman system bent on oppression. There's no wicked system. It's just people going about their business. Just people trying to make their way. That's all I wanted, to be useful to some firm so I could build a stable, comfortable and pleasing life. I wanted to be a decent man living a good life and that's what she thought limited me. I imagined her in some dark room, folded tightly, waiting for sleep, alone.

At CDM, I made the sorts of contacts that you need to land a job, but I also met Jerry, who would become a solid friend eventually. At first, he seemed to be just a sycophantic underling. He was three years older than me and was assigned as a kind of handler for me while I served out my internship. He was in exactly the kind of position I wanted right out of college, but somehow we developed a relationship where he felt like the junior partner. He would always present assignments and information the same way: "They told me you should..."

Somehow it made it feel like he was my subordinate, a secretary or assistant of some kind bringing me memos.

“Great,” I’d answer. “Let’s do it.”

He was a natural organizer, a little mole that burrowed in straight lines. An MIT grad, too, but he never would have found himself at CDM if it weren’t for his father’s contacts.

I didn’t make any effort to keep in touch with him when I started classes again in the fall--though he would, from time to time, and I’d accept his little invitations politely, even later, as I passed him by professionally. I had already exchanged e-mails with and answered social invitations from some of the more dynamic executives higher up, so he wasn’t a particularly useful contact. When my twenty-first birthday rolled around in early fall, some of these guys took me out, treating me to rounds of Jameson in little bars downtown and then to cap it off a lap dance from a leggy stripper supposedly named Mathilda at a club you couldn’t buy your way into. Jerry wasn’t there.

My mother flew out for my graduation, but I heard nothing from my father. I’d attended my mother’s wedding the spring break before but her new husband always struck me as sheepish. He was a small pot-bellied man six years older than her who’d been a bachelor all his life. When he didn’t join her on the trip to Boston, I told myself it was because he was intimidated by me.

I took my mom around the area, touring the historical sights and feeding her at restaurants I couldn’t afford--I’d start my new job in June with an outrageous credit card debt to pay down. I even took her to a Sox game with some of the guys I’d met at CDM.

“Who’s Caroline?” she asked me as I drove her back to her hotel in her rental car.

“Huh?”

“One of your friends asked about Caroline.”

“She’s just a girl I’ve been seeing.”

“Why haven’t you introduced me?”

“Oh, she’s nothing serious.”

“How long have you been seeing her?”

“Um...since November.”

“Seven months?”

I nodded. She quieted, seeming to take it as some sign, maybe even an indictment--though of my relationship with her or with Caroline I never knew. I broke it off a few weeks later. I was never sure why. Her life as a college junior seemed trivial once I started working, but somehow I also felt my mother had something to do with it. I even made a point of mentioning the break up the next time I talked to my mom.

“I’m sorry,” she told me and we didn’t talk about it any further.

For some reason she almost never called after that. I seemed to slough off everyone and everything I’d known as I launched my career. My friends at MIT, Caroline--the job I accepted wasn’t even at CDM where I knew everyone.

My mother died two years later.

My career unfolded quickly. Within three years I was already past the low level positions that required the grunt work of doing project logistics. Once I was in management, though, I earned a reputation for fostering esprit de corps because I liked to get my hands dirty with the numbers and actual plans behind every project. I was easy going, inoffensive and efficient. I greeted calamity and acclaim with the same thirty degree angle smile like it was molded from durable fiberglass. Once my secretary confided in me that the only thing said about me behind my back was that I was the partners’ golden boy.

Looking back I’m made very conscious of the limits of memory. My work all bleeds together into scene after scene of barking orders from my desk, peering myopically at computer screens jammed full of numbers, and directing meetings from the head of long tables in board rooms. My brilliant career

can be reduced to me posing in an office. My accomplishments are all embodied in the fine print needed to bring into being gigantic structures, all scattered around the country and most of which I have never seen with my own eyes.

For the firm's IPO we threw a huge party at the Intercontinental Hotel downtown. Too many of my colleagues got themselves embarrassingly drunk at the open bar. I spent most of the night nursing a long series of shots while leaning in to talk to a tall, broad-shouldered blonde in a satiny red dress.

Her name was Nadja. She was born in Hungary but adopted as a baby and brought stateside before she even had an ear for the language. Still, I thought something of Eastern Europe showed in the hard lines of her bone structure. We talked casually through the night. As I became affected by the slow but steady flow of alcohol into my system, I found myself somewhat repulsed by the little horns of bone sticking up at her shoulders and by the long bluish vein snaking along the inside slope of her left breast.

At some point I gave her my number, though. On Monday, the guys ribbed me about spending the night talking to a model. They saw her height, her bust and the long blond hair and assumed I'd been trying desperately to get her to bed when in reality I distinctly remember thinking that the last thing I wanted was to have sex with this woman.

She called me on Wednesday night and we talked again for two hours. I can't say what we talked about, but I remember the conversations as comfortable. She worked for a marketing firm we used and her office was only two blocks from me. We met for lunch a few times in the next three weeks. Then dinners. Then a Sox game with the guys and their wives or girlfriends.

"Nice to meet you," they would say cordially to her and then they would catch my eye to make some gesture--mouthing out "damn she's fine" or pulling at their collars to release imaginary steam. More than one of them was caught by his own date and one guy's girlfriend called it quits after his display.

Despite their envy, I remained ambivalent--which only seemed to endear me to Nadja.

I think she slept with me sooner than was usual for her because I was so obviously not pursuing it. Once we were together we moved side-by-side with the same ease with which we had talked when we first met.

A year into our relationship, Jerry--who had called me from time to time over the years with invitations to play racquetball or to attend socials that his family threw--called me and asked to get together for lunch. He had apparently met a nice Jewish girl from a family with long-standing ties to his and had prevailed upon her to become his wife. To hear him talk about it was like listening to a discussion about an arranged marriage. Even though at the time I hardly would've remembered to list him among my friends, he wanted me to be his best man, a request I found more of an embarrassment for him than an honor for me.

I accepted and within a week I met Grace--a curious name for a girl whose family seemed to take their Jewishness somewhat seriously. She was very small, but broad across the chest and hips. Her skin had an opaque alabaster quality to it, almost as if she had powdered up from head to chest like Marie Antoinette. We met in Jerry's place and I noticed when she stood up from the couch at one point that her skirt went down past her knees. Somehow I didn't think it was meant to. She seemed quiet, humble and basically undemanding which I figured made her perfect for him.

There was one moment I remember in that first meeting when I had something like a feeling of envy for Jerry. She stood up again later, after we'd all been talking for a time, and as she walked to the kitchen I saw the tight balls of muscle in her calves spring up with each step. I found her suddenly very alluring. The little pang of lust, though, only made me happier for Jerry. He was a solid guy and he deserved to have men envy him a nice little wife, an unsensational career and a decent home.

Nadja was obviously my date to the wedding. She never complained about having to sit alone while I held my spot beside Jerry. The wedding, though, coincided with a transition for us. Even before

Jerry's invitation, she had started to explore our boundaries, test my intentions. So when I'd come over to tell her that Jerry wanted me to be his best man, she took the opportunity to ask me, "Do you ever think about us getting married?"

"We're not even thirty."

Talk like this lingered in our relationship for another year, but then we just settled into a routine that didn't seem to demand anything from the future. For several years we were just together like that. Parties, dinners, movies, strolls through the shopping districts she liked while we talked our easy, weightless talk. It was all very pleasant and there wasn't much else to say about it.

We befriended Jerry and Grace. Once we even spent a long weekend with them at Martha's Vineyard. After I did turn thirty, Grace got pregnant and I became once again envious of Jerry's good fortune. Grace glowed like they say women should. The roundness suited her. I decided it was time and I solicited Grace's help in picking out a ring for Nadja. Grace's fingers had swollen so she had taken to leaving her wedding band off. Even in the prissy boutiques we surveyed it was often assumed she was my intended and that the baby was mine. We laughed every time a clerk said how wonderful a particular ring would look on Grace or when they referred to her as my fiancé or girlfriend.

We laughed, but we never mentioned it to Jerry.

I staged my proposal in Lorenzo's, a place that had been talked about at all our recent dinner parties. I arranged for a dozen roses to be waiting for us on our table. When she lifted them away, the box was underneath.

She smiled, charmed.

"I'd figured it was earrings," she would tell me later.

When she opened it, nothing changed in her face. She held the same smile. I went down on one knee, asked the question. With a dozen tables' attention turned on us, she accepted and we were treated to warm applause.

But during dinner she didn't preen over the ring on her finger. She didn't gush about telling her parents. We didn't speak about the proposal. It was any other dinner.

In the car she slipped the ring back into the box and held it against her thigh with her right hand. "I didn't want to embarrass you in front of all those people, but I can't really accept."

After the way dinner had gone, I wasn't shocked, but still I mounted my protests.

"I don't understand. You always say you want to get married. I thought this was what you wanted. I thought this would make you happy."

"Say? I haven't said that in years."

"But what's changed? We've stood the test of time. We've been happy for more than four years--why would you hesitate now?"

"Give me some time to think."

She took a month, then she gave me back the ring, suggesting I take it back and we use the money on a nice vacation instead.

I accepted it. She wanted to keep what we had; didn't want to risk a change, I told myself. Our lives went on just as they'd been. The only change I remember in my day to day was that I started hitting the gym more. I would push myself on weights and then stay on the treadmill for an hour or more, just burning through excess energy.

I scratch at my temple, still staring at the wall, then press my finger against the closest series of marks. Inside this scrawny arm, weak like the ten year old boy playing at heroes in the dirty snow, I feel my old self, a stronger, larger, more muscular arm overflowing with lactic acid. I feel the previous me. Remembering it is like living it again. Biochemically that's what the brain does when memories are triggered and that's what explains the feeling now, this feeling of disappointment. I'm reliving the sensation of feeling that my story was faulty, that the expected ending was not approaching as it should.

Nadja and I made it to our sixth anniversary like that. Then, not long after, we just gave up. I honestly don't remember who said it first, but I remember looking at her and feeling a little emotion as she let show in her face when we made the decision to end it together.

It took us weeks to finally remove all traces of one another from each others' apartments. We called each other as frequently as ever, but every call began with, "I just realized I need..."

The last time I saw her like that, we both realized we had finished emptying our lives of each other. There were no more old teeshirts from college. There were no more DVD's to shuffle from one place to the other.

She turned and faced me in the doorway of my apartment.

"I guess," I said. "we should've known."

"Known what?"

"When you didn't want to get married, we should've just known it was time to give it up. Might as well have started over with someone else then."

She looked at me with those hard blue eyes. They were dry as stone at first and her face didn't tremble or shake, but suddenly one tear dove down the length of her cheek. Then another on the other side. They flowed wordlessly for several moments. Then she left.

I jab the metal lance into the wall, deepening the mark for that day. I remember the empty, pointless feeling of looking into her eyes, her wide blue eyes suddenly gushing. When I'd closed that door, I wasn't sure any longer. I wasn't sure letting her go was the right thing. After so long, I felt as though I would not really be living without her. It seemed improbable. We would be together again. A few weeks, maybe even months, but eventually, the inertia of all our time together would draw us back. Inevitably. But no. It's like reading ahead in the story. I wipe a crumb of drywall out of the mark for that day, knowing I was wrong. I've cheated and looked ahead. I know what becomes of us, of me and Nadja.

I know that within two years of that day, we would both be married.

Getting back into the swing of socializing took some time, so I relied on Jerry and Grace to an almost pathetic degree. I would sit around with them in their living room while Jerry talked about his crazy dreams. He told me all about his grand design, to pay off their place in the city and put away a nest-egg so he could buy a boat and sail to the Caribbean.

“Where?”

“Puerto Rico.”

“What’re you going to do there, fish?”

“Oh yeah, fish for dinner every night.”

“You’d get bored.”

“I’ll teach high school math or something.”

“You don’t speak Spanish.”

“I’ll learn. It’s a beautiful language.”

“You’re crazy, Jerry.”

He would go on and on like he never would have if Nadja had been around. Maybe unconsciously he sensed I was a captive audience and felt free to go off on his rants about politics and celebrities and what-have-you without having to be afraid of alienating me. He was amusing enough but I felt bad for Grace, wondering if the quiet forbearance she showed as we both sat there listening was what her whole private life with Jerry was like. Afraid it was me bringing this out, I would try to turn the conversation to her now and then. I’d ask her questions about her work, or try to draw her into whatever Jerry was going on about. She seemed to appreciate it, smiling warmly and telling me about the challenges of balancing her career with motherhood.

“Oh, but she does,” Jerry would say proudly. “She’s amazing!”

She blushed at the praise and they seemed to me the picture of marital bliss.

I rub my finger along the newly made tallies, to the night I showed up for an evening with them and Grace opened the door instead of Jerry. I greeted her with a peck on the cheek and strolled inside with nothing more than a hello. Thursdays had become a regular night for us somehow and I guess I took it for granted. I got all the way into the kitchen before I realized something was off.

“Where’s Jerry?”

“He didn’t call you?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said, taking out my phone to check.

“He got dragged into a late dinner meeting with some clients from China. Can I get you something to drink?”

I hesitated, but it was me and Grace. We were chums, after all. We talked for a while in the kitchen but when she went upstairs to make sure the baby was still sleeping soundly she invited me to sit down in the living room until she came back.

When she did, she sat beside me on the couch.

“How’ve you been?” she asked.

“You mean--about Nadja?”

“Yes.”

“Oh fine.”

“Really? But you haven’t gotten back out there.”

“You sound like a guy, or the dad in a sitcom. Telling me to get back on the horse.”

She laughed and her palm landed on my knee. For a moment, I felt apart from what was happening. I knew exactly what it was as she framed the words, “I hate to think of you being so lonely,” but I didn’t react. I turned my head toward her as she spun her eyes up to meet mine. I felt her lean slightly into the air between us. I saw her tight little lips open slightly.

“No,” I said finally.

I stood up and looked down at her. She kept her eyes away from me while I glared at her.

With quick strides, I left her behind, tearing my coat off the rack as I plowed my way out of their condo.

Jerry asked me a few weeks later why I'd vanished from their lives. I fed him some line about needing to get out of my routine to meet new people, about needing to get away from things that reminded me of Nadja for a while. He said he understood and hung up. What I discovered, though, was that I was ill suited for moving on. It wasn't hard to meet women, even who had, like me, come to a point in their lives when they were interested in settling down. If anything, that was the problem. Every date felt like an interview laden with expectations. A few developed into more, but then ended bitterly, with the bad blood spilling over and tainting my relationships with the friends who'd introduced me to these women in the first place.

There is no wall left. I've reached the end. I think of poor, helpless Jerry. I hated her. I hated her for trying to cuckold him--for ruining his story. My story. It was my story, too. My model for marital bliss. In that moment I'd spent looking down at her, I had wanted to hit her. I'd seen myself not just slapping her, but throttling her, beating her until she begged me to stop.

I get up off my knees. Lines of notches and cross hatches snake around light bulbs and the wires stapled against the wall that feed them. It's the flow of my early life. Looking back I see clumps and clusters of years. Each major relationship leans a certain direction. The college years form a sort of galactic spiral toward the center of the wall. My childhood is a thin stream stretching back toward the corner.

What's next I don't want to remember. It takes effort, but I count through the days without seeing them.

1,257 days I mark apart from all the rest, on one wall by themselves.

It must be hours later I make the last mark and set my tool down. Stepping back again, I can't quite see any shape to these years, but I don't want to. I return to the last mark, the last day. The stylus is on the floor a few feet away, but with my thumb nail I gouge the mark deeper until it's more of a dent than a slash, until it's unlike any other day.

And the days since then? How many of those have there been?

I'm not ready to know that yet either.

I just keep looking back at that last mark.

The last day I was alive and real. The last day I belonged to *that* world. All the things I'd been, erased by this one mark. I put my finger over it, feel the emptiness I have gouged out of the wall. I don't know what these 1,257 days were. I won't let myself know. With my finger touching that last day, though, I feel bile rising at the back of my throat. My chest tightens, drawing my rib cage in around my heart and lungs. Anger that dwarfs the hatred I felt for Grace. Pain worse than saying goodbye to Nadja. None of the rest seems to matter. Everything that is really of consequence is in those 1,257 days. My hand starts to tremble against the wall. I jerk it back, make a fist and lunge it against the plaster. Bulbs rattle in waves from the impact.

Again.

Again. My knuckles go bloody, but the long mark of that day is still there.

Defeated, I step over to the next wall, sit down and begin tallying the days I have spent in this room.

When I force my eyes shut, stapling the lids closed when I have to, all I dream about is fire and I have to pry out the little metal clips. When I do, it's not my four walls that I see anymore. Instead of the snagged line of hash marks amid failing light bulbs on bland, peeling plaster, I see a broad surface--painted a soft tangerine color with picture frames that look like polished brass. Beyond this room there is a foyer and a wide, white door with inset glass carved with precise bevels like diamond edges. I can see a banister from where I'm sitting--stairs lead up somewhere--and the open entryway to another set of rooms, but all I can see of them is one tall silver lamp. There is a whole house around me.

It melts quickly enough. Gone in an instant. But it will come back if I try to close my eyes again. I'm afraid to even blink now.

So I will read.

I pick up a book. Blank.

Another.

Blank.

Pile after pile, the bindings have gone blank, the pages white fields. The contents have escaped. I sense them scurrying on the ceiling, but when I look up, it's not happening in light or sound. Still, I feel them moving, trying to find a way out of the room.

There's only one left with any text. I see it, a paperback with puffy pages swollen with brown stains along all the edges. It's near the far corner, by the wall I'm avoiding. Even before I walk over to it, I'm hearing voices.

"Good morning." My voice.

I see her, too. I see her spread out beneath ivory-colored sheets, fine like onion skin. Her eyes barely open. Only slits between the black tufts of her eye lashes. Her slender bare arms appear from beneath the covers and she stretches back, arching her whole body with the movement, and groans.

“What were you up to?” she asks me.

This happened. There was a night before. A night before and we were together, together undressed underneath those sheets. I made love to her in that bed, hardly a bed, a mattress on the floor. In the morning she slept late. Of course, she always did. She loved to sleep late. Even though my stomach was grumbling as she slept on, remote and unreachable, I stayed in the room with her so I wouldn't have some awkward run-in with her roommate on my way to the refrigerator. As the block of sunlight from the window inched toward her motionless body, I poked around the bedroom quietly, pausing to look over her bookshelf full of old paperbacks. This was one morning. There were days of her before and after. Our clothing, my tux and her strapless blue gown, were bunched on the floor by the bathroom door. We were together the night before. We were together and then we woke up there and when she stirred I said good morning and she asked me what I was doing and I said to her, “Just looking over your collection here.”

“You want to borrow something?”

“If I didn't read any of these in high school then I don't think I'm going to start now.”

“You really never read any of those?”

“I may have read the Cliff's Notes.”

She hurled a pillow at my face.

With a chuckle, I slapped down the pillow, thwarting its parabolic arc toward my lap. She groaned again and sat up, holding the sheet to her chest. I reached away from her to the shelf.

“Jane Eerie?”

“Jane Eyre!”

“I’m just kidding. I’m not a total ignoramus.”

“Could’ve fooled me, you illiterate.”

Jane. I pick up the book from the floor. Its pages crinkle in my hand. My living Jane. Kiss me, embrace me--before you go.

“So are you named after this book?” I asked her.

“Oh, I don’t know. You decide.”

She was younger, my little bride. When gentlemen of my age fall in love with girls, they are often bewitched. They believe they can make these little creatures happy, can fulfill desires, provide shelter. I put a little studio in the house. Wide, bay window facing out onto the rolling greens of the golf course, the water traps pretending to be miniature oceans. Replicas of the seas and lakes we’d see on all our well-planned, perfectly groomed vacations. I can’t see her there now standing in that light, trying to use the easel I bought for her, trying to enjoy the little cage I put the pretty birdy in. I try, and all I see is a glow--a ruddy haze. Something burning through the spaces of the second story and I am a prisoner in the luminous orchestra, amidst the rondo of crashing timbers and cracking glass, all the sounds of something solid coming to an end. I am weeping there in the dead of night, sitting, hands on my face as the house passes into ash and insubstantiality.

I’m still holding the book, right in front of the wall, staring now at the marks, at all the days I haven’t faced.

There was a drinking game in college.

I wasn't much for them. I'd burned out on debauchery young. Football and cheerleader parties in high school soured me on the pointlessness of it all, but I played this game once in college during a particularly boring spring break spent holed up on campus. It hardly qualifies as a game. A circle of players, a few bottles of anything strong. Start at one. Count up. Every time you hit a prime number, someone shouts "bizz," and everyone drinks. The featherweights are giggling and stupid by the time you hit 59.

One is not a prime. I skip the first mark.

Two is prime, but people forget that. Nothing happened that day.

Three.

"I've been thinking about you," she admitted through the scratchy connection of her cell phone to mine. Different networks. It would cost us premium minutes to talk.

"That's encouraging," I answered.

"Oh, don't be so sure."

She told me she felt a little uneasy. There was a moment of silence. A pause before she asked me how old I was, which she must've been wondering since she gave me her number two days before.

"I'm thirty-four."

"I'm twenty-three. Do you do this?"

"Do what?"

"Date much younger girls."

"Apparently I'm looking to start."

I could hear her uncertainty, her hesitation. I started talking. I asked her things. Little things. Things you're supposed to find out about people when you meet them. She was working an office job, but had graduated from art school. She'd grown up in a middle class neighborhood in San Antonio. She'd done well in school and gone off to New England on her own. Her parents divorced while she was in college, but they remained close.

"I actually think they'll remarry someday," she confided to me with enough of a lilt that I realized she was optimistic on this front. It was something she wished for. She was a Romantic like that.

Eventually, after half an hour of biographical exchanges, I told her I had to go, but that I would like to see her.

She answered, "I'm still not sure about this."

"Tell you what," I said. "Let's make it something simple. Meet me for a movie or something."

Slide my finger down to five. If I was playing the game, I'd have to shout "bizz" and take a shot. We met outside some suitably equidistant theater and gabbed over the choices on the marquee. Somehow, after fifteen minutes of have-you-seen's and it's-like-that's we ended up with tickets to a slick remake of a 70's horror movie. She thanked me for the tickets and demurred when I offered to buy her popcorn or some other snack. The last time. That was the last time she'd turn down food in front of me. We settled into our seats just before the lights dimmed and sat through the movie, silent from teasers through credits. I glanced at her once in a while as the uneven light of twenty-four frames a second reflected off the screen, but even when the whole of her face was lit up red, she betrayed no emotion--and no sign that she was aware I was looking at her.

She was lovely, though.

As we left, she started her complaints. "That wasn't horror."

"It had no suspense," I agreed.

“And the gore was terrible.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be?”

“You know what I mean. No flare to it. There was plenty of it, but it wasn’t good gore.”

“You like gore?”

“Well, hey,” she said, smirking. “Give me something to look at.”

We talked for a few minutes like that, walking together toward no particular destination. I broke in, anxious that at any moment she might simply say, “Well, thanks,” and walk away.

“So, do you want to get something to eat?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if you can handle it.”

“What, you have terrible table manners?”

“No, but I’m a serious eater. It’s all business. You’ve got to be careful or you could lose a finger once I get going.”

We found a midnight diner nearby and squeezed into a booth with facing lime green bench seats, each side barely wide enough for one. We ordered bacon cheeseburgers and she told me about her art. I told her I’d like to see some of it, a claim she received incredulously but did not dwell on. Just before the food arrived, I made an effort to communicate to her what precisely a project development manager did, but every explanation seemed somehow to disappoint her. We munched on the burgers, discussed the proper technique for distributing ketchup over french fries, and talked long into the night. It was light, frivolous talk, but it roared between us as if carefully scripted and we both enjoyed it. At some point we simultaneously decided it was time to spare the impatient staff any more of our cackling laughter and we left.

Outside, I offered to drive her home.

“Where’s your car?”

“One block that way.”

“The train’s farther,” she said. “Walk with me.”

So I did.

We lingered at the steps of the station before saying goodbye.

When she was two steps down, I asked, “So, do you want to try a real date next time?”

“Let’s just keep doing this,” she answered.

We went to two more movies. I don’t remember them. I do remember kissing her goodnight and the electric, schoolboy thrill of touching her face, and then, reaching behind her head as she moved her body close to mine.

She scoffed when I suggested I take her to a Sox game and we spent an afternoon walking through the park instead. We walked under trees that had surrounded their bases with numberless pink petals, and as we drew near the rotunda, she asked if we were allowed to sit down there, but I said I didn’t think so. Her feet were tired and she wasn’t suited to physical exertion, she said, so I found us a park bench and we sat down, this time without prattling on endlessly about pop culture and without her railing about commerciality and without my endless flirtatious come-ons. We sat quietly beside one another and let the shade turn the wind cool as it swept over us. She traced lines over my knuckles with her finger and I rubbed the bulb of her thumb.

I invited her over to dinner. I would cook, I told her. She agreed and though we didn’t make love that night, she told me we would. She told me she knew we would be together and I was happy, so happy because I wanted her to be mine.

Maybe I had never wanted anyone more.

A few weeks later, we came home from dinner, a real dinner. She had complained the whole way back to her apartment about the price of the food and my insisting on paying. I stayed mute and refused to answer her protests. Maybe somewhere inside I knew it would be that night, maybe I knew it in my bones. Maybe that bone-deep knowledge is what affected me, what altered my behavior, made

me so quiet, so distant. It was like I was apart from the rest of the world, as if my hands were moving whole miles away from me as they turned the wheel and I was sitting way, way back from my own eyes so that what I saw was just a small window against an expansive black space. I was watching a world that I wasn't a part of.

When we reached her door and went in, I felt that we were alone. She explained her roommate had gone out of town to her cousin's wedding.

"Do you want a drink?" she asked.

We were still standing. Only one little red lamp was on.

"No," I said, sounding like my voice had rusted up during the drive.

She turned and looked at me, maybe six feet in front of me as I stood in my jacket and tie. She opened her mouth as if she meant to speak, but something she saw in me stopped her. The tilt of my head, maybe, or the the geometry between my eyes and her lips. Those lips closed again and she tossed her coat to the sofa beside her. Then she reached behind her back and I heard the brip of her zipper. She let the dress fall off her shoulders and then pushed it down over her hips until it was pooled around her feet.

I studied her without moving. She hadn't worn a bra and all that was on her was a thin, checkered panty. Her small breasts sat lower on her chest than I would have imagined, but did not cast a shadow on the smooth featureless plain of her belly. I ran my eyes along the slow tapering from her hips to the pinch between her arm and torso.

"You're biting your lip," she told me.

I walked over to her and laid my palm across the space around her collar bone.

"This is the first I saw of you."

She laughed fully and wrapped her arms around me and while she did I felt her ribs bouncing against me with each laugh.

I scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom.

I've lost track of the marks, lost count of the days and weeks. I can't remember if it was a prime or an even or a factor of five. I only know that I was lost in her after that.

The next day was Sunday. I fought the urge to call her every minute. After serving her bagels in bed--the only breakfast I could scare up from her pantry--I'd driven home to meet a friend from the office and head to the gym, as I had every Sunday for a month or two.

"Alright, have fun getting sweaty. I'm going back to sleep," she'd told me as I'd said good bye.

I'd almost told her, quickly and without any formality, "I love you, bye," but I was nervous to spook her. I felt it, though. So much I wasn't sure I'd ever felt it before. Only knowing that she'd already fallen back to sleep kept me from dialing her as I drove off. At the gym, I was a pathetic conversationalist. My friend kept asking what had gotten into me, but I gave him no explanations, only shrugged before hoisting up the bar.

I held her in my mind, my secret, like a little boy who catches a moth and closes his hand like a cage around it.

Somehow I held out until she called me at three in the afternoon--but it had been an afternoon of sitting on the couch, channel surfing and jittering my foot. We talked for more than an hour. When she told me she was getting hungry, my heart tightened. I didn't want to let her go. I was desperate for her not to hang up. A love drunk teenager keeping the line open. I tried to distract her from food without letting on that I just didn't want to hang up.

Finally, she burst into a story I was telling about work, saying, "I'm starving."

"Oh right, well," I stammered, as put off as I was disappointed. "You'd better tend to that little stomach of yours."

"But I don't have anything to eat."

"You going to go out?"

“I could...or you could grab some take-out on your way here.”

I was in heaven.

I sent her roses the next day.

“That was very sweet,” she said with the voice I imagine she would use to praise a child’s stick-figure doodle. “That’s very nice, Jimmy. I like the way you put five slashes for a hand. Nice attention to detail.”

“You don’t like roses?” I asked.

“I said it was sweet.”

I sent her a different flower every day. On Friday, she called me from work, all laughter.

“I thought you couldn’t call me from the office?” I asked.

“This is a special occasion.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, you’ve just got to stop! It’s too much!”

“But--”

“You got it today. Tulips. Tulips are my favorite.”

“They are?”

“They are now!”

For a moment I see some other time. I see her under dim track lighting, girders showing through the walls, black and white panels hanging all around us. I see her as I glance back over my shoulder and I’m flush as she smiles to me.

I remember my sister telling me when I was eleven and she’d started dating the boy who she almost married right out of high school that someday I too would meet someone. “Someday you’ll just know and it’ll be perfect.” Her voice makes me feel warm, warm and safe as a little boy who’s not

afraid of anything because the divorce has already happened and that's the worst thing that can ever be so now everything must be fine. Safe. I felt safe with her.

I sleep beside the wall, warm despite the weather I hear whisking its fingers against the side of the building above.

I don't know anymore what I was afraid of.

I plan my next expedition. Listening to the noises above, I count four Mississippi between car zooms. The city's sleeping. The best time to move will be when it's just about to wake up. First, I'll eat. There should be reasonably fresh food in the dumpster upstairs and I can fill up before heading out to collect supplies. There are eighty four bulbs burnt out along the walls. It will take dozens of trips to scavenge enough replacements, unless I am unusually lucky, like the time early on when I found a whole box of bulbs sitting unattended just inside the open back of a truck outside a hardware store. Twenty-four boxes of four each, bundled up for wholesale in bulk. Ninety-six lights. Look left, look right. Peering into the window of the store, I could see where the driver was leaning over the counter just inside, the crevice of his sweaty backside showing over the drooping rim of his pants. A moment later, I shuffled down the street with the package in my arms, a mangled grin showing my limitless joy.

Joy.

All the words have settled back onto the books. I sit down to wait for the sounds to change above me, for the reverberations to signal my time to set out, and I pull Faulkner up and flip to the last pages. I cannot stay inside the book, though. My eyes keep drifting up to the wall, looking on the marks with something like fondness.

After six months together, on another Sunday morning, she had opened up my closet while I shaved in the bathroom next door and called out, "I have half your closet."

I shudder a little, remembering myself in the mirror. Remembering me as I was. The white froth covered most of my face, but the swipe I had already cleared with the razor was smooth, healthy. Normal. Me, in the prime of life. Really about to begin life. For a flash, I was living in a razor ad.

“What?” I asked her, lowering the razor to listen.

She appeared in the mirror behind me, wearing one of my shirts as a night gown. It stopped just above her knees like a dress, but the open sway of it as she stopped moving flashed a few inches of her thigh, and I felt the usual rush of desire. And pride. The guy in the Schick ad is smiling because there’s a pretty girl who’s too young for him wearing his shirt and wrapping her arms around him.

“I’ve taken over half your closet,” she said. Her mouth was pulled in on itself, so that the lips that looked so wide during a smile or a laugh were tight and small now. Her whole face narrowed with the frown.

“I know. I’ve been meaning to say something about the intrusion,” I jibed.

“What’s going on with us? Where’s this going? Is it going somewhere?”

“Do you want it to go somewhere?” I asked.

“I’m asking the questions here. I want to know if this is serious to you. Am I just some fling? How can you take me seriously? I’m just some twenty-three year old clerical worker and you’re some big time going-to-be-partner in a big company that makes money doing things I don’t even understand.”

“You’re not a clerical worker. You’re an artist.”

“Oh, don’t kiss my ass right now! I mean it.” I saw in the mirror that her face had changed again. Her chin had pointed down, drawing her eyes forward. It gave her the appearance of animalistic fury, which might be laughable if I had not seen it before, if I didn’t know her.

I put down my razor, leaving one swath of my left cheek foamed up.

“You want to know if I take this seriously?” and without waiting for her to say anything I left her by the mirror and went to my dresser drawer. I came back and opened the box in front of her face.

Her mouth fell open.

“When did you buy that?”

“The week after we were first, well, after we first spent the night together. I’ve been swimming like this, in a daze ever since. I knew I wanted you then but you’re young and pretty and talented. I didn’t want to try to pen you in, or maybe really I was just afraid to scare you off. I bought this, just in case you ever...well, just in case.”

“You’re proposing to me?”

“I’m proposing to you.”

“But we haven’t ever even said, ‘I love you.’”

“I know. I guess...you know I said ‘I love you’ every day for five years to Nadja. It was a routine. You know, ‘Dinner at six, I need to drop off dry-cleaning, I love you.’ Said it all the time but now, what I feel for you makes that seem small, so I figure I needed something else to say.”

She took the ring out of the box and slid it on her finger. I’d kept it simple. Even then, in the beginning, I’d known well enough that much.

“It fits,” she said, as if surprised.

“I have an eye for precision.”

“Oh god,” she groaned and wrapped her arms around me. “I can’t believe I just got engaged,” she said, her voice muffled against my chest. “To a man without a shirt on.”

Later we flew down to Texas so I could meet her family for Christmas. We were greeted at the airport by her rotund little mother who squealed and swallowed her up in an embrace before turning to me and trying to squeeze the life out of me. I pumped her father’s hand as he eyed me warily. For most of our stay, her mother or aunts or others whose identities I lost track of would prepare us big meals with orangish rice and main dishes heavy with cheese and green chile seeds, but that first night--

since we'd warned them ahead of time that the flight could be delayed that time of year--I was allowed to treat them. It was their pick so we ended up at a casual dining chain and though Jane said nothing negative, her father baited her while squinting at the menu in the low light that was probably supposed to simulate a fire-lit Tuscan inn or something.

"So I hope this isn't too commercial for you," he said, without irony.

"Dad, cut it out."

"Well, if you're going to marry her, then I guess you must think like her."

Her mother only shook her head, as if to say, "this is why...this is why," but her sister looked up and seemed to study me closely, as if their father's acrid tone was some elaborate test that had been formulated beforehand and of which she was the judge.

"Actually," I started, trying my best to beam. "I have a serious soft spot for Olive Garden."

"Really?" her sister asked, laying the menu flat before her and tightening her eyes on me so that suddenly I saw that they were sisters, saw that they were built out of the same raw materials.

"Yes. When I was a freshman in college many years ago," and I realized I'd slipped up, that I'd called attention to my primary disqualification. I was, after all, prosperous enough. Though at that point, even Jane wasn't really aware how much money I had, I was sure she had conveyed to them in advance the broad strokes--successful career, professional, established, stable, etc. I was respectable enough, not like the long haired boy with the volatile temper who had frequented their nightmares for their youngest daughter's future through most of her college years. I was a sound applicant for son-in-law, save for the number in the age box of the form. I went on, though, ignoring the you're-a-moron alarm bell in my head. "And three months into my first semester, my roommate--who was another scholarship case--invited me to go out with his parents when they came into town. They took us out to dinner in Dorchester to, of all places, Olive Garden." Jane set down her menu, too, and was watching me suspiciously along with her family. "I ordered the Fettuccine Alfredo because it was the

cheapest thing on the menu and I didn't want to impose. Well, maybe Spaghetti and meatballs was the cheapest thing, but I would've felt five years old if I'd ordered that." They chuckled, all except the father. "But I order this fettuccine, and because I'd been living off of food from the dorm cafeteria-- scrambled eggs made in bulk, really bland ham sandwiches and soggy Salisbury steak three nights a week--this Fettuccine, I mean it was just noodles and cream, but this fettuccine was the most incredible thing I'd ever tasted. Compared to the so-called food I'd been living off of, this was just, ah, divine!" I kissed the tips of my fingers like something out of the *Godfather* movies and I got another laugh. Her father still didn't break, though. Not until the waitress came around and I ordered last, and of course, I said I'd like the Fettuccine Alfredo. The girl eyed us uneasily over the edge of her little black notebook as we all laughed at the simple matter of my menu selection, even Jane's father. I felt I'd won them over when her sister reached out and touched my future wife's shoulder and, facing me with copies of those eyes I knew so well, said, "So, you want to marry my baby sister, huh?"

"Yes. That's what I was hoping to do." Jane smiled to her sister and I saw all the warmth between them, all the love that had survived squabbles of one hiding the other's toys, of one nosily prying into the other's diary, of shouting matches between done-up high school girl and preteen *baby* sister. Then Jane turned to me, and God help me, her smile widened. For me.

Mercifully we weren't forced to spend the night in separate bedrooms as she'd teased me we would. As I held her near me on the creaky mattress, trying not to remember that we were lying in the bed where she'd lost her virginity, she told me, "Rest up, tomorrow you meet everyone."

"I thought I just met everyone."

"Oh no...there are cousins. So many cousins."

The cousins' principal form of recreation seemed to be toying with the new white boy. I was introduced, in the course of the day, to molé and menudo along with a cavalcade of names and faces I had no chance of remembering. Powered by little sugared cookies, dervishes ranging from age two to

ten ran around in frenzies until nearly midnight when they were finally allowed to open presents before collapsing into dreams of sugar plums and playstation games.

The visit was exhausting, a long series of exactly the kind of family entanglements that had become unfamiliar to me since the collapse of my parents' marriage and my mother's death had left me cut off from extended family, even from my own sister. Once we were on the plane heading back, though, she told me, "You did alright."

I'm still not sure which mark is which day any longer. I press my finger to the general vicinity. It's somewhere here, in this clump, but I can't be precise without going back and recounting. It's not that, though, that's bothering me. Something's gnawing on me. On edge, a feeling like there's someone standing right at my back, hovering, looming, towering just behind me, just close enough that we have only one shadow, but it's someone else and I don't know what he wants.

She was self-conscious about the money, that I had it and she didn't. So we planned an economical wedding and a modest honeymoon--which turned out to fit well with a particularly busy time at work. Our nuptials unfolded in a dizzy spell of out-of-towners and lace invoices, but when the tsunami was over, she was mine. Mine, forever.

Our lives didn't change much after the honeymoon, basically an extended weekend in New York walking in the park, touring the museums, finding interesting little dives to eat in. She'd already spent most nights with me at my place and moving over the last of her things didn't change my space much. It was a painless transition into married life. We had five months until the house would be ready and we spent them pretty much the way we'd spent the previous five--except this time our attention was tied up planning for the move instead of the wedding.

We spent our nights roving, soaking up the city before we moved and it wasn't going to be in walking distance anymore.

I was also teaching her to drive in the parking lot of a nearby high school. I wanted her to learn so I could have her pick out a car for herself once we had the house, but I didn't want to tell her that part yet, afraid that the future outlay would make her uncomfortable.

"How'd you get by in San Antonio without being able to drive?"

"There were always people who would give me rides."

"Boys, you mean."

"Often, but not always."

"Let's do a few more laps."

"Oh, do we have to? This is why I moved to a real city."

"But when we move--"

"I'll just catch the train."

"Even to work?"

"Well, I've been thinking maybe you're right."

"About what?"

"Remember when you suggested that I quit my job at the office?"

"I remember you ripping my head off about it, yes."

"Well, maybe you're right. Maybe this is my chance to throw myself into painting--to just create and nothing else."

"That sounds great."

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it?"

She smiled and then let out the clutch, stalling the car.

"Let's go buy you an automatic," I said.

We did. She even let me hire movers so that everything we owned was in the house three days after the last paint-dripped tarp was rolled up. We lived among boxes and notecards marking where new furniture belonged for a few more weeks, but then everything was finished.

One Monday morning, the alarm went off and I rolled over and kissed my drowsy bride, asking her, “What are you going to do today?”

“Paint,” she told me groggily. “Today I’m going to start a new painting.”

“Great.” I kissed her again, showered, dressed, went downstairs for bagels and coffee across the table from a tousled, still-pajamaed Jane, then I walked outside. The sun was unobstructed and it made the morning feel unseasonably warm. Blades of grass craned their necks at me and grinned. Some passing neighbor raised his hand in silent greeting and I waved back.

Everything, absolutely everything was perfect.

Barely a year later, our son was born. He was three days early and his arrival was concluded within the span of three hours. While munching on a hamburger, Jane had felt the first contraction. She called me and I rushed out of a meeting to race to the hospital. Unfortunately it was already late Friday afternoon and I had to wade through thick traffic. By the time I got there, they were prepping her for surgery. Apparently the umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby’s neck and it was affecting the flow of oxygen. It was quite common and only meant they’d have to perform a very routine c-section, the doctor told me. The only complication was that they hadn’t had time to give Jane an epidural and she would have to be sedated.

Within forty-five minutes I was watching my son being washed up and tended to by the delivery nurses. While we waited for his mother to wake from the anesthetic, I got to hold him. I think he looked more like me, a lot like me, but with darker eyes.

“When they put me under, I wondered if I’d ever wake up,” she said in a fog once she came to. She was watching him sleep through the clear plastic wall of the rolling crib they’d brought him in on. I

wanted to tell her that it looked like they'd brought us our son in an unsealed tupperware container, but instead, she said this.

"That's crazy, why would you think like that?"

"I was just remembering all these characters in Victorian novels who die in childbirth. It would be a good way to go, you know, death for life." I shook my head at her, bemused. "And you, it'd be good for you."

"What?" I barked, turning away from rearranging the new diaper bag as the baby slept.

"You'd remember me fondly, but you could move on, find someone more suited to you. Maybe seduce the governess."

"Governess?"

"Maybe."

"That'd be awful, the worst...losing you."

"No, no...it'd be like a novel. I want to die like in a novel. And you, you need more drama. You should have a life like in a novel."

Her family arrived the next afternoon, setting a calm day of first feedings and first diapers into a storm of excited conversation and fawning over the baby. Her mother stayed for three weeks. I'd hoped to take more time off, but we'd just launched a new contract and I had to be back in the office more than I'd intended.

During that first three weeks, we hardly spoke beyond requests and instructions about bottles, wipes, ointments, etc. The time was so full that we didn't have to think about one another. The night we came home from driving her mother to the airport for her return flight, I came upstairs from unpacking the car and found her cradling the baby, her back to the doorway. "Look James," she told him as she rocked him in front of the window. "Look, it's the big wide world." I smiled. "Well, that's not the big wide world," she added. "That's just a golf course, but out past it is the real world." She

kissed his small forehead, darker with jaundice and birth trauma than either of ours. “It’s all yours, okay?” she said to him. “All yours.”

There was one last conversation, before he disappeared.

I think we have made progress, yes, he said.

You remind me of someone, I told him.

I know.

You know who you remind me of?

No, but I must remind you of someone.

Why?

Perhaps we should focus on you.

I don't want to.

That much is evident. He hobbled over to me on the stick-thin legs that protruded from his worn breeches. *Let us review. You have now accepted that you have not always existed in this fashion.*

A wife. A child. A home. Respect. A career. I toiled in the way I was fashioned to toil and I was rewarded in the comforts one expects. I made my simple contributions to the world--such as it is: commerce, industry and complicit indifference--and took what was offered to me in return. Did I do wrong? Who did I harm? What sins did I commit that deserved judgment? I only wanted, only asked to keep, a place of my own to stake out a quiet living. Wife. Child. Perhaps someday a fluffy dog. Perhaps some flowers by the door--in great pots by the front entrance. Storybook material.

So in this narrative, you are a man of sound mental health who has somehow been laid to ruin.

Yes. I was undone.

How?

I don't know.

Have you ever heard of multiple personality disorder?

Yes.

Would it interest you to learn that some experts believe it doesn't exist, that its symptoms are manifested by patients prone to self-aggrandizement and conflagratory fantasies?

How would you know that, you're from the 19th century?

You must've known it. Though your primary knowledge base seems to be in the physical sciences, clearly you read beyond that range at some point. Something must have prompted you to read about psychology. Perhaps you came across some mention of this topic and it struck you as interesting enough that you're integrating it into your delusions now.

Why would I? What does it have to do with me? I don't have multiple personalities.

Clearly you have suffered some sort of dissociative event, something that has unhinged you from reality.

Reality? I slapped the wall, sending a thwap through the room. What's not real?

Again, think of these people who construct multiple identities for themselves. It's all a testament to the power of the mind as a sieve through which reality is created.

Reality isn't created. It just is. That's reality.

Is it? He paced before me. This all strikes me as farfetched—let's call it psychologically improbable.

Even if something traumatic did happen to ruin this life you believe you enjoyed—

I think she did it.

Excuse me?

I think she ruined it, I said with sudden fury.

Regardless, this scenario...it doesn't actually seem as though it could be real to you, does it?

She was real.

How can you be sure?

How could I love her if she wasn't?

“It’s not on a golf course. It looks over a golf course.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, this whole half acre would be ours.”

“Ours.”

“Yes.”

“We don’t have to join some country club just to live there.”

“No.”

“We don’t have to follow any rules?”

“Nope.”

“Can we let our half acre grow wild?”

“Sure.”

“So the grass will get to be twenty feet tall and all sorts of wild animals will move in--”

“I guess so.”

“And then they can roam out and stalk and devour the golfers.”

“Of course.”

I made my first plans for the house as she slept on our flight back from San Antonio, the first time I met her family after our engagement. I was never any kind of draftsman, but in sketches I started conjuring the spaces I was imagining for us. I built the house in my mind around the foyer, drawing a series of hash marks fading into an invisible second floor from the front entrance. I wanted to see the idea made real. Like Gatsby’s castle, a whole edifice raised up as a testament to my will and my love for her. I wanted its Coney Island dazzle and steady green light to be a surprise for her, so I took my

sketches to a friend and had some initial plans drawn up before breathing a word of its inception. One night, though, with fresh snow settling in over the city, we sat beside each other watching a movie. Nursing a hot chocolate and growing bored with the Bourne movie I'd rented, she looked around the ceilings in my apartment's living room, corner to corner, studying all the lines, and then commented on how odd it felt to her to know this would be her official home after the wedding. I hit pause and led her to my desk to show her the plans.

"It can't be ready by May," I told her. She scanned over them, scrunching up her face as if the printouts were a particularly troublesome puzzle. "But we can live here for awhile, and then move in sometime in the fall."

"I don't really know what I'm looking at."

"This would be a foyer, which leads through the living room, back to the kitchen. That's a deck."

"They're going to build this...for us?"

"This is just an initial plan. We could change anything. If you don't like the floorplan we can scrap it, go back to the drawing board."

"No, no, it's nice...but this would be ours?" She leaned over the plans and steadied herself, pressing down and deforming the stiff, creased paper beneath the pulse of her burgundy finger tips.

"Of course. Look, this is what I wanted to show you." I rolled back the first sheet and pointed out a space on the second floor. "See this room. It'll have south-facing windows for great light and the best view. It's for you. A studio."

"A studio?"

"Yeah. What do you think?"

She looked them over wordlessly, brushing her fingers along the lines of each page.

"We can change anything you don't like."

"Why would we change anything?" she asked softly.

“Do you like it?”

“What’s this?” she asked, pointing to the bottom corner.

“It’s just a ballpark figure. He’s a friend so he wanted to give me a rough idea.”

“One million, two hundred thousand?”

“It’s a ballpark figure--”

“Is that in American dollars?”

“It’s just a rough estimate.” She splayed her fingers against the edge of the desk like legs on an easel.

“How much money do you actually make?”

“It depends on bonuses and--”

“Give me a ballpark.”

“About four hundred.”

“Jesus.” She stepped away from my desk and paced the length of the room. “Do you know how much I make?”

“The firm’s grown a lot and I’ve been there through its best times. That’s all.”

“I just didn’t realize how rich you were.”

“Come on, I’m not rich.”

“You could take over both my parents’ mortgages without breaking a sweat.”

“Did you want me to?”

“What!”

“Nevermind. Why does this upset you?”

“What’s the point of me working? I don’t bring anything worth talking about to the table.”

“You don’t have to work.”

“What? Jesus, I want to have my own life. I can’t just sit around.”

“I mean that you could work here,” and I pointed to the plans, to the studio. “You can just paint if you want to.”

“But...”

“All the time you need.”

“I’m feeling a little overwhelmed. Can we not talk about this now?”

“I just thought you’d want to talk to the interior designer about colors and--”

“Not now, okay? I need some air. Let’s just go out.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“Okay, okay,” she said while wrapping a scarf around her neck. I followed her out the door and we rode the elevator down. The drizzling snow blowing through the streets didn’t deter her; she marched forward without comment.

It took three blocks, but finally her pace slowed and she reached behind her for my hand. I gave it to her and we pulled in close.

“It’s freezing,” she said without inflection. “I want another hot chocolate.”

I had a flash of inspiration the next afternoon and sent her a text message to meet me outside a particular movie theater. She didn’t recognize the name but once she found me outside the marquee, I could tell from her smile she remembered.

It was the theater where we’d had our first date.

“There’s only one movie playing that could pass for horror,” I told her.

“But is it real horror?” she asked.

“Only one way to find out.”

I deliberately stayed quiet through the movie. She caught on and did the same. I stole glances throughout but she kept looking at the screen with an ironic smile on her face.

Afterward I didn’t have to tell her where we were heading. We walked together to the diner.

“I get it,” she said after we ordered our burgers.

“Get what?”

“It’s us. You’re trying to show me that we’re still the same, that we’ll always be okay.”

“I just wanted to see a movie.”

I winked.

“Okay, but you know, if this is our first date all over again, then that means you’re not getting any tonight.”

“I don’t think we have to be slaves to the concept for the evening.”

“No, no, I’m all about authenticity.”

I made every accommodation I could to keep the price down, but I could never get the figure under a million like she wanted. I tried to make her more comfortable in other ways. We were modest with the interior, didn’t buy furniture from the upscale places my colleagues would. We shopped around department stores, even thrift shops.

Still, we never had her friends over.

Not until after the baby was born. Not until after the couple’s counseling. Not until after she started taking the night classes with her old friend from art school.

Not until him.

“Can you get it?” her voice boomed down.

She’d picked a night for her little get together when a game was on, of course. I was trying to set up the TiVo to tape it when the doorbell rang. Her being gone one night a week for her classes was one thing. I was happy to tolerate it if it made her happy, if it meant she didn’t want to drag me to the therapist any more. I wondered if she had just taken all the complaining she did in therapy to her outings with her friends after class. They would probably arrive with eyes ready-stuffed with judgement. It was all my fault. Typical male insensitivity, or something like that.

“Me?” I asked while trying to find the right remote, as if there was someone else who might appear.

“Please!”

The bell rang again and I started furiously punching the buttons on the remote to get my recording scheduled. Too many damned menus. *Accept. Confirm. Set.* The bell rang a third time.

“Please!” a shriek from above insisted.

“Okay,” I mumbled, way too low for her to hear. I crossed out of the den, past the base of the stairs. I noticed the sudden absence of a certain dust bunny that had been living under the useless little decorative table stationed by the front door. I had allowed this particular ball of lint to take shelter there for the past five days to make a point and now, he was gone. Moved on to greener pastures, I suppose.

I pulled open the front door. There was only one person there. A mid-twenty-something guy with frazzled blonde-brown hair. I’d caught him with his hand about to hit the bell again.

“Oh hi,” he said, dipping his eyes to my feet and then back up again to size me up. “You must be--”

“Did you get it?” she asked from behind. I heard her words bouncing in time with her steps down the stairs.

“Yeah, but--” I said, stepping aside to reveal our caller. I had remained dressed--eschewed my usual running shorts and tee shirt--under the pretense of an impending dinner party. Our guest, though, had arrived in jeans with a worn knee and an untucked button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. It was green and kind of shimmered in the mixed light from our foyer and the twilight just outside.

“Hi, it’s me.”

“Oh,” She slowed her aggressive romp down the stairs. I tilted my head back toward her. She’d worn black slacks long enough that her feet disappeared beneath the hem and a top I’d always told her was my favorite because it fell off her shoulders with only a little knot of fabric in the center snaking back to her neck. “Where’s Glenda?” she asked our guest.

“You know what,” he answered, looking past me. “She couldn’t make it. She said she was real sorry.”

“How’d you get out here then?”

“Oh, she let me borrow her car,” he explained.

The two of them looked at each for a minute and I was left out of some nonverbal exchange like a doorman or lawn gnome or something.

“Okay, okay,” she said, but it didn’t sound exactly like disappointment or even surprise in her voice as she took on, for a moment, a blank look, like someone posing for a passport photo.

“Well, please come in,” I told him.

“Oh yeah, thanks,” he said back, as if the thought had not occurred to him. When I closed the door he stood in the entryway, just in front of where my wife had perched at the base of the stairs. I stepped between them and offered him my hand.

The subject of his name had been a topic of earlier discussion.

“What’s his name again?” I had asked her an hour before, while steam condensed on the mirror. She’d shouted something through the sound of the running water. I couldn’t hear her, asked her to repeat herself. She stuck her head out of the shower and with hate in her eyes said his name slowly and clearly. “That can’t be a real name,” I answered. “Sounds like a pirate.” From inside she shouted back, “Last time you said ‘porn star.’”

“Drake, right?” I asked him with my hand outstretched.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, taking it and shaking it vigorously, but with a weak grip.

“Nice to meet you.”

“This is some house,” he said, eyeing the blank ceiling of the foyer. After a pause, it was me who replied, “Thanks.”

She just stood there, apparently befuddled.

“Was James awake?” I asked.

“No, no,” she answered, facing me and smiling. “He’s out cold.”

“Then we should eat fast,” I said by way of a joke, but Drake didn’t laugh or smile. “Before he gets demanding for Mommy.”

I saw her face twitch as she looked from me back to him.

“That’s right,” he said in wonder. “I always forget you have a kid.”

“Come on in,” she said stiffly and walked between the two of us.

“You want the grand tour?” Somehow neither of them heard me. She just walked past the den and into the dining room, clicking on the light with a backward flick of her right arm.

“Here, have a seat.”

“Thanks.”

I took up a station beside her and watched as our guest settled into his chair across from our side of the table. I suddenly felt, looking down at his scruffy face and wrinkled shirt, that he was a job applicant we were smiling complacently at even as we knew--instantly--that he was a no-hire.

“Can I get you something to drink?” she asked.

“Sure, I’ll have a beer.”

Whatever thin patina of Susie Homemaker was painted onto my wife’s soul recoiled. Her pupils quavered in shallow zig zags and she pursed her lips.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any beer,” I answered for her.

“I’ve got a bottle of red wine to go with dinner.”

“Okay, well, I’ll wait for that,” he said, nodding and leaning forward over the dining table. “That sounds great.”

“Oh,” she chirped, suddenly remembering. “I’ll get the food.”

“I’ll get the booze,” I jibed before following her out. He bobbed his head and sort of grunted something meant to, I think, resemble a laugh. I smiled sheepishly for his benefit before disappearing. When the door clacked against the jamb behind me, she scurried just ahead, looking from drawer to drawer, then picking one and fishing out a pair of oven mitts shaped like rabbits--a wedding gift I’d never touched with my own hands.

She pulled open the oven and hopped back when the door dropped, letting out a clanking thud when it fell to ankle level.

“So, who’s this guy again?”

“I told you. He’s Glenda’s friend.”

“Yeah, but--she’s not here.”

“Well, he’s my friend too.”

“So where do you know him from exactly?”

“He was in that photography class with me.”

“So he’s a photographer?”

“No. Why would he be in an amateur photography class if he was an actual photographer?”

I shrugged, but she didn’t see me. She’d turned her back while she peeled aluminum foil off the pan, which was hot enough that I saw little mirage waves refracting the green lines of light from the clock on the stove.

“No,” she continued. “He’s a writer.”

“A writer? What does he write?”

“Um...plays, I think.”

“Plays?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? Or ‘you think?’”

“No, he is a playwright.”

“You hate plays.”

“Do not!”

“Do so. When I bought those tickets for that show when we went to New York, you complained through the whole cab ride.”

“Did I?”

“Yes, something about the tyranny of performance art versus the printed word. And here I just wanted to indulge your taste for culture,” I added in a mumble joined with a rolling of the eyes.

“I guess I was being too reactionary.”

“Now you like plays?”

“I’m just saying I can respect someone as an artist and not be crazy about his medium.” She looked at the pan and said, “I’m afraid to cut this.”

I stepped over and eyeballed the gurgling tomato paste.

“I think it needs to cool down first. You want me to handle it?”

“Jesus, no. I can cut lasagna.”

“You just said--”

“I’m fine,” she said, picking up the long knife.

She dove in with it and drew a long incision down the left half of the pan. “Are edges better?”

“I think middle’s better.”

“How do you get the middle first?”

She shrugged this time and went about the messy business of extracting an acceptable block of lasagna for our guest.

“Should it be leaking like that?” she asked when a rivulet of watery drool streamed from one side. As an answer to herself, she dabbed with a paper napkin at the puddle it formed.

“Aren’t we supposed to serve a salad or something first?” I asked.

“I don’t know, are we?”

“Did you make any bread?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. It’s somewhere here.”

“And the salad?”

“I hate salads.”

“Aren’t dinner parties supposed to have salads?”

“I don’t know. It’s our party, we can do what we want.”

“Cry if we want to?”

“Exactly,” she answered, but she didn’t laugh or smile or let light into her eyes, she just kept looking for the bread.

“I don’t know how much of a party it is, if it’s just the three of us.”

“I know. I don’t know why Glenda didn’t come.” She located the bread in--lo and behold--the bread box, another mysterious wedding gift that I’d assumed was mostly decorative. “I forgot it was here. It’s the first time I’ve ever used this thing.” She arranged the rolls on a plate. “What am I forgetting?”

“Wine,” I answered and picked it up by the neck. “I think the better question is why he came if she wasn’t going to make it.”

“I guess you’re right,” she agreed faintly.

Surveying her handiwork, she nodded and lifted two plates. “Oh, there’s one more thing,” I said and set the bottle down to spin around and exit the kitchen.

“Where’re you going!” she barked, loud enough, I assume, for our guest to hear.

I didn’t bother answering her, just returned a second later with the blue and white plastic baby monitor. The first of its indicator lights pulsed red, emitting a sound that was equal parts infant’s breathing and RF static.

“Oh, okay. Now I guess we’re set.”

In two or three waves, we ferried out all the plates and glasses to the next room. She set a plate with a carefully carved block of lasagna down in front of our guest and beamed a self-satisfied smile at him.

“Thanks, looks great,” I heard him tell her.

I realized that the plate she set down at the head of the table was meant to be mine. A not-so-neat stack of noodles, from the edge of the pan so that one side was hardened and brick red. I uncorked the wine and poured them both glasses to murmured thank you’s. “You’re welcome,” I said as I filled my own glass, still standing as she took her seat.

After one last trip into the kitchen, I shimmied into my seat and set the baby monitor down on the lacquered surface of the table with a click.

She thanked me again. Afterwards he kept looking at the device with surprise as if he still was unconvinced of the existence of the child on the other end.

“I’m not sure how this came out,” she apologized, head bent. I saw her eyes flash up at him, waiting for his response.

“Hey, this is really good,” he answered after swallowing down his first bite.

“I’m glad you like it,” A little grin of pride jumped back on her face. “I haven’t made it in so long. Last time was in my first apartment, sophomore year of college, for a guy I was dating.” I know all about this guy she was dating, but I’ve never heard him called just a guy she was dating.

“I made lasagna for my prom date in high school,” I volunteered.

“I can’t cook worth a damn. I still live like a college student, off ramen and cereal.”

She laughed but I found myself thinking, “Aren’t you basically just a college student now?”

I avoided an inevitable wave of grief and untold hours of passive aggressive broiling dissatisfaction on her part by keeping that thought to myself.

She took another bite, still kind of chuckling, with little joke after-shocks shaking her chin. “God, my roommate in college lived off that crap.”

“Ramen? It’s not crap. It’s the staple diet of millions!”

“You’re so full of it,” she told him, grinning manically. “I’ve seen you swallow burgers whole.”

“That’s just because you met me during my post-vegetarian period.”

“Post-vegetarian?” I interject.

“Yeah,” he answered, looking toward me for a second. “I was a vegetarian for six years. Actually, it was until, what--like three months ago?” he turned to her for verification.

“When the class started?”

“Yeah, that photo class? When we went to Uburger afterwards with Glenda--that was like two weeks after I started eating meat again.” A single drop of wine had fallen from the rim of his goblet. It beaded on the smooth finish of the table like a crater turned inside out. When he set his glass down the base cut the bubble, slicing it into a half-moon shape, deforming its immaculate geometry.

“Yeah, three months,” she agreed.

“God, that was a great burger!”

“I don’t know how you didn’t get sick going back to meat so suddenly.”

“Oh, I did. I got sick all the time and I loved every minute of it.”

She laughed. I laughed a little. Mostly I was wishing I had a burger in front of me.

“I thought about it once, going veg.”

“You did?” I asked.

“Yeah, you know how I love animals.”

“Yeah, love to tear the flesh from their bones,” I said.

Drake thought this was funny and huffed a little.

“I thought about it.”

“You love meat.”

“I know, that’s why I didn’t. But I thought about it.”

“When?” I pressed.

“I don’t know. It’s crossed my mind,” she answered with a shrug before forcing a smile for our guest.

“It’s hard as hell. I don’t know how I did it for so long,” he volunteered after swallowing down another bite.

“Are you ever going to go back?”

“I don’t know, I should. I mean, it bugs me--my conscience, you know. I think about the fucking factory farms and about the greenhouse gases. It’s just not sustainable.”

“True,” she agreed, wrinkling up her nose.

“But that’s exactly why it’s so hard. The whole industry has reached such a scale that you can’t get away from it, you know?”

“I can’t imagine doing it,” she said.

“Didn’t you just say you were imagining it?” I asked, but I was ignored.

“Plus, temptation’s just a bitch to resist, you know?” Drake added, leaning in over his plate and winking.

She laughed again.

“Oh, hey, hey, speaking of guilty pleasures,” he said with an excited urgency. “I’ve got another horror movie for you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah, what’s it called? This guy was telling me about it and I thought of you and your weird thing for horror. Dammit. I can’t remember the name. But it’s supposed to be good. He told me all about it and I thought of you. What’s cool is that for the first hour and a half, it’s not even a horror movie. It seems like a love story, right? This guy he, he fakes like he’s holding auditions for an actress or something like that, but really he’s just looking for dates. He goes through all these girls and there’s this one, real shy but talented girl. He starts seeing her and it seems like a love story. But then, when they have sex she makes him promise to never love anyone else. Then she just kind of vanishes on him and he starts digging into her past. Then she goes psycho and like tortures him, cuts off his feet and stuff.”

“Did you just give away the whole movie?” I asked. He looked at me with slack-jawed surprise.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of that one,” she answered. “You didn’t give away the ending. I knew that already.”

He took the interruption as an opportunity to shovel another bite into his mouth. She filled the space in the conversation, saying, “But it doesn’t get gory until the end, right? See--it’s got to have lots of gore or else it just doesn’t work.”

“I try to buy her these ridiculous movies for her birthdays or whatever, but I never get the right ones. It’s hard to figure out what meets her standards,” I explained.

“It’s got to have a certain stylistic edge,” she said, facing me. “I’ve tried to tell you. It can’t be this sort of Hollywood, manufactured gore-horror. Can’t be one of those *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake things. The spirit of it has to come from somewhere else or else it’s not art, it’s just product.”

I rolled my eyes and took a chunk out of my bread, assuming the lecture would run its usual duration. Instead, and suddenly, they veered together into reminiscences of their nights out with Glenda after their class. There were many details that I was sure I had never heard before during the breathless debriefing sessions she’d subject me to after returning home in the deep, thick black parts of the night.

“Hey,” he lurched forward with sudden enthusiasm. “Did you ever finish that Llosa novel I lent you?”

“I haven’t...yet.”

“Are you not liking it? It’s brilliant! You’re not going to read it?”

“No, no, I’m reading it. It just hasn’t caught me yet. I’m working on it.”

“Which means you’re not reading it.”

“No, I am. I’m working on it. I haven’t given up on it.”

“Sounds like you have,” he said, tilting his head in apparent disapproval.

“No, I never give up on a book until I’ve read at least halfway through. If it hasn’t convinced me it’s worth finishing by then, then I don’t mind letting go.”

“But this is a great book! I thought this would be one classic we could actually agree on.”

“I don’t know if it’s a classic. Let’s not get carried away,” she quipped.

“What book is this?” I asked after swallowing down the least appealing bite of my lasagna.

“Oh, you wouldn’t have heard of it,” she told me and then continued with him, “I mean, the voice is interesting. The time shifts in the narration are well done, but I’m not sold yet on the actual story.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Too political.” He gasped and leaned back in his seat, palms on the table and mouth agape in abject horror. “I’m not dismissing it, but I can tell you that there’s very little danger of it becoming one of my favorites.”

“How anyone with your education can have such pedestrian tastes!”

“So, I have a taste for the classics, so what?” she protested.

“Okay, never mind what a problematic concept that is. Next you’ll tell me you like *Wuthering Heights* or something.”

She swatted him with the back of her palm.

“I love *Wuthering Heights*!”

“God, you’re unbelievable!”

“Why?”

“Don’t you read anything postmodern?”

“Like what?”

“Pynchon? Acker? Danielewski? DeLillo, at least?”

“I don’t think I’ve read any of them, actually.”

“Unbelievable! You’re stuck in the nineteenth century,” he said with ringing laughter.

“Am not.”

“No?”

“No. I like plenty of books from the twentieth century. Maybe some from the twenty first, too.”

“Oh yeah, name one?”

I looked beneath the dip of her chin and saw that there are only two or three bites missing from her dinner. Maybe for a moment right then, just a moment, it occurred to me we were Gatsby, Daisy and Tom--we three. Or no, maybe I never did think it.

“Alright,” she gasped in mock-exasperation. “Ellison. I love *Invisible Man*. My lit. professor junior year said that it should be considered the great American novel.” She positioned her fork as if she was about to scoop up another bite of lasagna, but didn’t. Her hand, wrist bent and fork dangling, simply hovered over her bent arm. “He said we should read Fitzgerald and Hemingway if we liked, but Ellison was essential.”

He looked at her with a sideways grin, “Ellison? How drab.”

“What!”

“Boring.”

“You just don’t get it because you’re white.”

“What’s that now?” I interjected.

“You too,” she said to me.

“Me too, what?”

“You wouldn’t appreciate Ellison because you’re white.”

“I wouldn’t?”

“The novel deals with the marginalization of black identity in modern America.”

“Alright,” Drake leaned in, extending two fingers. “One, we’re in post-modern America,” he folded back one. “And two, you’re not black either.”

“Yeah, but I’m not white.”

“You grew up in the suburbs,” I pointed out.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not Mexican. You two have never had somebody look at you like you don’t count just because of your skin.”

“Wait,” I said, reaching over as if I could literally grab her attention. “You don’t think anyone’s ever looked at me cross-eyed because I’m white?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“White privilege.”

“How so?”

“When minorities hassle whites, there’s no assumption of inferiority. If anything, they do it because they’re expressing internalized feelings of inferiority themselves.” She collapsed the delicate arrangement of her arms, folding them in front of her on the table and leaning away. “See, that you even have to ask proves my point. You can’t understand because you’re white and assume the world revolves around you,” she said, lifting her hand suddenly to stab it in my direction.

“I do?”

“Sure you do.”

“Where the hell is this coming from?”

“See, you don’t want to accept it. You want the world to go on exactly the way you expect it to.”

“Now I’m racist?”

“Of course not,” she said, looking askance as if I’d just said something particularly stupid.

“But you don’t have to be racist to benefit from white privilege,” he answered for her.

“See, there’s hope for you yet,” she told him with one side of her mouth curled up.

“And not me?”

“Don’t get upset. I know you don’t have a racist thought in your head. You just want the world to be tidy.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“It’s just not realistic,” he answered for her again. This time, and finally, I gave serious thought to smacking him.

“Nobody’s world view is realistic,” she countered. “Any one person can see only a slice at a time. It’s like Plato’s cave. We’re all doomed to only see the world our own way.”

“More of your Classicist world view,” he said.

“See. You prove my point.”

“Wait, were you just doing some devil’s advocate thing there?” I asked.

“Maybe.” She winked and smiled. We went silent for a second, eyes on each other.

Then, and somehow he seemed suddenly deliberate, he snapped his head to the side to face me and asked, “What do you think?”

“Sorry, about what?”

“All of it. This moldy stuff about her great American novel?”

“Oh, that.”

“I don’t think he has an opinion on the subject,” she said with an isn’t-he-cute kind of grin you might reserve for a child that has wet himself but for whom you are not responsible.

“No? Are you like me then?”

“How’s that?”

“The whole notion is a myth perpetuated by effete intellectual snobs generations ago. All those modernists were still establishment tools, you know?”

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “Great literature is great literature,” she insisted, laying her palm flat out on the table. “Some art is timeless, Drake.”

“You buy that?” he asked me again with a cock of his eyebrows.

“I suppose so.”

“What? You afraid to disagree with the Mrs.?”

“Oh no, I disagree with her plenty.”

“He doesn’t read novels,” she said at last. Her voice went flat with the sentence and she scooped up her wine glass to take a long sip while he and I watched her together wordlessly.

“Poetry?” he asked.

I laughed this time.

“Just not literary,” she added, setting the flute down.

“No?”

“No, ‘fraid not.”

“So,” he said, leaning back and tracing a forty-five degree arc with his finger around the circumference of the wine glass’s base. “What is it you do again?”

“I’m an engineer.”

“So, that means what exactly? Not like a train engineer, right?”

She laughed and he laughed back and though he’d said something stupid, somehow I felt like the butt of the joke.

“Well,” I managed. “That is how I paid my way through college.”

“Really?” he asked, the smarm going out of his voice for a second.

“No, Drake, not really.” She shot me an annoyed look.

“No,” I continued, “I work for R.W. Beck.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re an engineering consulting firm.”

“You consult engineers?”

“No, we’re engineers who consult,” I answered. “We do contract work for other companies, cities, utilities, that sort of thing.”

“So you design things?”

“Most of the time we’re assessing the engineering challenges of certain projects. Buildings, bridges, tunnels. We just finished a project with a new casino in Atlantic city, studying its electrical load and its impact on the local power grid.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep.”

“So, that must pay pretty well, right? I mean, this is a big place and you’re pretty young, right?”

“I guess so.” I reached out and grabbed my own wine glass, looking away from him, but I didn’t actually pick it up.

He turned to her. “But you’re only, what, twenty-five?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re?”

“A little older,” I said and winked. Either he didn’t register it or he was working too hard trying to do the algebra with the x and y of our ages to notice.

She finally went after that next bite.

He looked down at his own plate.

I became aware of an uncomfortable sensation in my stomach and wondered if I’d eaten too much.

When the steady sound of breathing from the baby monitor broke into a chortling sound, her eyes started and leapt from me to him. “I’d better--”

“No, that’s okay,” I told her, wiping the edge of my mouth with the napkin. “I’ll get him. You take care of our guest.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes,” I assured her while I got up.

“Thanks,” she answered, and then added a weak, “honey.”

I walked out of the dining room and took my steps up the stairs more slowly than usual. I carried the baby monitor with me, but despite the rustling, restless sounds coming from its crackly speaker I could hear the reverberations of their conversation continuing without me in the background. At the head of the stairs, I crossed the hall and reached his room. His demeanor didn't really shift when I came in. I hadn't rescued or disturbed him. He was like this. Too independent. We barely felt like parents. The sounds that brought me up were not noises of protest or of dismay. He was simply exerting himself in a favorite past-time, reaching with his chubby mitten-like hands towards the dangling blue elephant and purple rhinoceros--the only two adornments left on his mobile. I put the baby monitor down on the changing table and reached in to the crib to lift him out. His weight settled into the crook of my arm and he looked at me, looked at me with her dark eyes.

I said something I imagined would be comforting to him and paced around the room. I made wide figure eights, swinging low on one arc toward the open door, but I couldn't hear anything of what was happening downstairs.

I've replaced all the bulbs, but they continue to fail. Something's wrong in the voltage. I don't have the equipment to test the lines. I can't stop them from popping, from snapping their filaments and going gray--marred by black starlets against the glass like spectral insects flattened on a windshield.

It was like her not to think of the phone bills. She was a careless liar. I didn't catch her often, but I imagine she did not need much practice as a little girl. She could charm whoever she needed to with fleshy cheeks and those eyes. The eyes don't grow. We grow into them. They would've loomed large and dark over her face then. So she grew up a poor liar.

I never saw it. Not until the phone records. The calls increasing in frequency, building from even before he was in our home, came to our home, my home, and accepted my hospitality. My home.

I should've seen.

But she was the instrument of my happiness, a part of me. It was like my own hand lashing out and boxing me about the ears. You don't suspect your gal bladder of treachery. Your medulla oblongata does not scheme against you. How does your soul itself undo you?

So the cuckold leaves the house alone. He seeks out the man who has stolen from him, who has sullied his marriage, dishonored his family. Rapacious devil-scourge.

He is easy to find, thanks to that ridiculous name.

Two hours.

Two hours waiting in the car, eyes darting to the patch of sidewalk across the street and the double doors leading into the apartment building behind the shadow of thornless Hawthorn trees and the claw-like shadows of their denuded branches.

I occupied myself with the instrument controls, fiddling with the dial of the air conditioner. Far left for heat, spin it back to the right to cool off. I reset radio stations. Then set them back. I wiped the fine line of dust off one of the creases in the leather of the dashboard.

All the time imagining, seeing it happen.

All the energy captured in my dreams of her, my love for her, my plans for our years together, folded, twisted, turned back on itself. My love story--a parody.

Two hours.

Things only exist in their ends. We think events mean something as we live them, but it's only when the punctuation mark is put on the last sentence that we can know.

Two hours watching the glow of the instrument panel.

I was ashamed when I caught myself wishing I had something to drink or eat. Should've brought a book. That time I had to wait two hours in the dermatologist's office just to hear, "nope, just a mole," I'd tapped my foot and turned pages on ladies' magazines with hostile flipping motions I hoped the receptionist would hear.

She told me later, after hugging me and telling me how relieved she was and listening to me complain about the pointless wait and nodding considerably as I railed against the monumental inefficiency of professionals who set appointments they know damned well they can't keep, she told me, "You should've taken a book."

Two hours becoming intimately familiar with each of the white spots on the windshield left by the drizzling rain earlier in the day. I thought of counting them. Then of counting the stars, but the stars weren't there.

Two hours imagining, remembering all the details of her, then knowing they'd been laid out and exposed for someone else.

Then, finally, he showed himself.

He sauntered up from the left, turning the corner and brushing his fingers through the unkempt mess of brownish thistle on his head. A little pinpoint of red ash fell away to the pavement from the cigarette pinched between his forefingers, like breadcrumbs sprinkled by children avoiding monsters in the woods. He never lifted his hand to take a drag, as if he'd forgotten he had lit it. Something had him distracted. His lips moved and he nodded to himself with each step.

I opened the car door and set after him, catching the door to the building before it swung closed behind him. He didn't notice me. I followed so close I could see the hairs at the back of his neck stand up as I breathed. He still did not turn, though. We climbed a long and winding staircase. Once we reached a landing and crossed through a long hallway, only to ascend another series of steps.

Finally, he came to his door--a solitary frame in the center of an otherwise empty hallway.

As soon as he opened the door, I followed him in and he finally became aware of my presence.

"Oh, it's you."

"Yes. Were you expecting me?"

"No, why would I be?"

"Because that's what jealous husbands do--they hunt down their wives' lovers, don't they?"

"Is that what you think?"

"Are you sleeping with my wife?"

"Shouldn't you know?"

"What?"

"If she was yours and you belonged together, wouldn't you know?"

"Stop trying to--"

"That's what she thinks you think. That's why she won't leave you. She thinks you'd be devastated without her. She says you think she's your soul mate even though you're obviously not."

“How would you know--”

“She says you’re obviously not. She says you had no business getting married, that you’re all wrong for each other.”

“Don’t say any more.”

“That she wishes she didn’t have your kid to keep her there.”

“Stop it.”

“You just need to accept that she’s not yours, never was. You can’t understand her. She’s beyond you. Too much for you. You should set her free.”

“Free? I’ve given everything. She can do anything she wants.”

“You don’t get it. She can’t be free there, with you in your mansion. It’s not about comfort, it’s about the spirit. You can’t understand her. You’re too entrenched in the structure of this post-industrial capitalist society that negates all--”

“Shut up! Shut up, can’t you people ever just shut up!”

“Violence. That’s how someone like you confronts ideas you can’t understand. You shout, you yell. You demand she love you for all that you’ve provided. You’re conceptualizing her in economic terms, but she’s--”

“I hate you.”

“You can hate the truth all you want.”

“I hate her.”

“Then letting her go should be easy.”

“I’m going to kill you,” I said calmly.

He laughed.

I lunged at his throat. He was thin and he grabbed at my arms with spindly, weak fingers. I squeezed until his eyes bulged and his face turned purple. His eyes like fruit about to rupture, about to

crack open in the baking light of day and spill out some doomed seed. I knew I could keep squeezing and end him, but it didn't satisfy me. He was an invader who'd robbed me of everything. I wanted more from him in return. I released him and he crumpled, semi-conscious and trying to gasp. I must have crushed his wind pipe because he still wasn't able to breathe.

I punched him in the head and he fell. My fist swelled instantly, but I knelt down and punched him again anyway. Again. Again. I lost all feeling in my hands. His head was a mess, half of the blood must've been mine.

I stood up and watched him, listened for some sign of life.

Nothing.

Once, when I was very young, maybe twelve or thirteen, I had a nightmare that my sister and I had killed someone together. I remember waking from the dream in a panic, sure it had all been real. I was frantic to undo it, to put it right. No, I thought, I can't have done it. There has to be a way to go back, to undo it. Guilt. Remorse. I was swollen with horror for a few pained seconds and then, it all washed away. It had been a dream. It had only felt real, but it was all a dream.

Looking down at his still shape, I felt nothing.

I drove home.

I sat in the car in front of the darkened house for what felt like hours. I laughed at her for leaving the outside lights off again. So forgetful. I checked my cell phone. A dozen missed calls since I'd walked past her at the front door without explanation, saying only, "I'll be gone for a while. Don't wait up." Outside I heard crickets and frogs. I'd never heard frogs croaking out on the golf course before. I got out and walked around the exterior of the house. The smooth green yard had become overgrown. I had the distinct impression of stepping carefully along the edge of a wetland, something wild.

When I finished my circuit, I went inside, slowly climbing the stairs. She'd left the bedroom door open. I could see parts of her protruding from the bed spread, a foot, her left arm, her face, stretched out atop her kinked neck.

She was mine again.

Mine.

She sighed. When she opened her mouth, I remembered the way she sighed during her quiet, trembling orgasms.

She had done that for him.

I saw his body over her. I saw him dripping over her back after satisfying himself with her body. I saw him debasing her again and again and her loving it.

She moved. Her mouth, the pouting lower lip slipped open further as if she was sighing. The subtle, eyes-closed gesture of her climaxing. A sigh of her pleasure. I saw him there, in my bed, atop her, thrusting himself into her. Saw her sigh for him. Saw her snicker in scorn at me, at all I had given her, all I had wanted for her.

Everything! Everything for you!

I moved feverishly, wildly. No methodical errand like dispatching him. No, this was rushed, inflamed. Not like the satisfying rhythm of crushing his skull under my bare, closed fists. No, every second of this hurts.

In the garage. Paint thinner. Good. Gas can for the lawnmower. Excellent. The oil for the torches the landscapers hung on the the back patio but that she hated. Perfect. It made a racket as I clamored back up the stairs with it all, but she was a sound sleeper. She didn't wake up, even as I kicked the gas can over by the open doorway.

I lit the match, and turned away from the glow. I made it halfway down the stairs and then sat. I sat and began to weep.

I didn't hear anything, but the smell of smoke was beginning to spread. I ripped the smoke detector from the ceiling upstairs, but soon it would spread and trigger the one in the kitchen. Still no sound from the bedroom. Could she have suffocated in the smoke?

For the first and last time, I remembered the baby.

Too late.

Now there was a sound. A roaring sound as the fire spread along the walls of the hallway toward me. Cracking as beams started to split in the blaze.

And I heard my own sobs.

Then it hurt more.

It touched me, the fire.

It's touching me and I'm dying in it.

Everything hurts. My hands are on fire from the oil and gas and my hands are on my face wiping away my tears.

I don't know when I do it but I get up and walk, slowly. I walk away from the house without looking back. I see the flicker against a canvas of leaves before me as I walk down the long, empty street toward the city.

Looking at her in the blue light of that last night, I knew, knew there was neither happiness or misery in the world. There was only whatever was felt in one moment laid beside what was known before, only the comparison of one state for another, nothing more. I'd felt the deepest grief and so, looking at her after taking him from her forever, I was best able to experience supreme happiness.

Now, though, the bones still sore from pressing into his neck and the skin still stiff and brittle from the burns, I feel nothing but the aches. All this time, and I feel it all throughout the physical thing, this body, what remains of my body. There is nothing else.

I do not confer praise or blame: I accept. I am the measure of all things. I am the center of the world. Am I saying this? I never know. I think out words and they feel like mine but, dammit, the books might just as well have put them in me.

My whole mind is theft. I'm only a rubbish pile of pilfered ideas, received passions.

“I like you,” she told me once, early on. “You’re not like anyone I’ve dated before, or like anyone I imagined I’d date.” Unlike what she ever expected. Me either, me too. I didn’t expect it, but I was willing to face it all, never afraid of what people would think. So independent, so bold, so free, supposedly, but she was afraid, maybe afraid more than anything else.

Above us, pinpoints of light followed their angles of refraction through shards of sculpted crystal in the chandelier. A little geometric galaxy shining down on the assembled guests. She was wrapped in a blue dress, straps falling off the lines of her shoulders and clinging to the outside of her upper arms. It fit her like snake skin about to be molted. Her hips pressed out against the stiff material with each swaying step but when she was still it seemed it could slide past the square protrusions of her knees and expose her bare, tender underskin to the whole assembly. This was the public unveiling of our relationship, a full ballroom downtown. I parked us at the outer edge of the room and put a champagne glass in her hand. She whispered, “Thank you,” like someone sneezing in a library. We watched without discussion from the periphery, but when I saw Mr. Stepp pass by, I reached around behind her and brought her out with gentle pats against the small of her back, like guiding a helium balloon with little taps. After waiting patiently for several moments, his attention finally fell to us. I shook his hand and reminded him of my involvement in the Portland spillway project. I introduced her as my date and he smiled benevolently. “Nice to meet you,” she said, dipping her head and its closed-lip smile as she accepted his hand. He asked us if we were enjoying the reception, and we both politely told him we were. He asked me if I was involved in the new pipeline project in Virginia and I had to tell him I was not. Then he excused himself and drifted off, drawing a retinue of hangers on after him, like remoras trying to catch up and feed off him while cleansing his ego of any doubt with their effusive sycophantry.

"So he's your boss?" she asked as he drifted away. He's the CEO. He and I have met twice, including just now. She smiled a bit, but did not laugh. I glanced at her and then looked back at the crowd, catching one of the account managers I knew very well staring at us. When she saw me, she turned up one corner of her mouth by ninety degrees, and then looked away.

Jane broke the long silence of the ride back to her apartment afterward by saying, "I don't belong in your world." I told her it was just a boring party, not my world. Just some people who I work with to pay the bills. Just something I do. Not me, not my identity, don't you see? "Those are your coworkers, your friends." Maybe yes, but it doesn't matter. I don't fit in your world either. We can be an odd couple. We can be the people other folks envy because they don't work on paper but they're deliriously happy anyway. Don't see it this way. Please, don't. Don't give up on us. I don't fit in your world either, but it doesn't matter, I told her. "I don't have a world," she said. Your art, your friends, I told her. That world. "I missed the boat somehow. I can go to galleries and pretend. I can keep in touch with friends from school but somehow it's not my world." Stop, stop hurting yourself. You're just getting started. It's hard to break into the arts. It can take years. You'll persevere. You're brilliant. "No," she said. "I wanted to create objects, but the vanguard's doing other things. There's nowhere for me. Somehow I've missed it." She didn't say anything more. I tried to stammer some more encouraging platitudes but she wouldn't respond. I found a space across from her building and turned off the engine. Under the little burning bulb of the dome light, she looked like she had been captured in a blown-up 35mm shot. Her cheeks were sepia blooms over flags of gray shadow leading down toward the point of her mouth. She wasn't looking at me. I told her I felt like a cretin, a fool, a dick. She'd been feeling like that all night, all night as I walked around reveling in her, feeling secret pride that I was willing to brave controversy, defy convention and tool around with a beautiful young girl. I didn't care what any of those people thought, didn't care what Angela the account manager was sneering about, I was just glad to be with you. Just so damned happy you were with me. Here you were

feeling bad and, jerk that I am, all I could think about was how much I wanted to get you back here and get you out of that dress all over again so I could make love to you. She looked at me and without letting anything change in her expression said, "Then let's get upstairs so you can do that."

She grew more comfortable at those functions. After we were engaged, there was another party at the new offices. At the edge of the reception area, all done up in holiday cheer, evening gowns flitted like wrapping paper against a backdrop of fluorescent-lit cubicles and workstations visible in the next corridor. I was about to lean in and comment on the aesthetic juxtaposition, but something stopped me. A shape in the crowd had flipped a switch in me, the way a jostled hair on a venus fly trap clamps the thing shut. Jane's attention was elsewhere, so she didn't see my eyes jump at the tall blonde blur moving through the crowd. Even though Nadja's company hadn't done any promotion for us in years, their brass got invitations to this soiree. She'd apparently been promoted in the time since I'd last seen her; still, I was surprised she accepted, knowing I'd be there. I saw her across the room but tried to keep our distance. That wasn't her intention, though, because when I left Jane with some people we knew and cut over to the restroom, Nadja ambushed me. As soon as I saw her, I noticed it and for some reason just blurted out that there was a ring on her finger. "There's one on that little girl's, too." I followed her eye line across the room to where Jane stood sipping at a glass of champagne. "What's she, Mexican?" she asked. Something ugly in her voice I'd never heard there before, never in all those years together. Yes, her family background is. I asked her if she was a bigot now. "I'm just saying." What? What was she saying? I didn't recognize her anymore. Her cheeks looked sunken, lifeless. "She's tiny, dark and Mexican. Were you looking for my opposite?" I told her I wasn't on any rebound, wasn't looking for an anti-her. It's not like that, I told her. She took another gulp from her glass, which was not holding champagne. "What is it like then, just another older man trying to prove he's superman by nailing some child?" I asked her how many of those she'd had and left her, half afraid that when I ducked in the bathroom she'd storm over to Jane and make a scene. When I

came out Nadja wasn't there anymore, wasn't anywhere that I could see. I rejoined Jane and we chatted with friends and colleagues for a while. Once we drifted away, she asked me, "Who was that?" I stopped. Shrewd little thing. I told her she knew who it was. "I've only seen a few pictures. I couldn't be sure from across the room." I promised her I didn't know Nadja would be there. "If you had, would we have still come?" Of course. I would've just mentioned it. "She's very tall." I wonder if she's comparing. "And blonde." Comparing just like Nadja did. Yes, I tell her. That too. "What did she say to you?" she asked. I related the whole exchange. I told her that I thought what she was trying to say was that she hated me. "Maybe that she loves you." Before I could say anything more, another ghost--a pair of them--appeared. Leading Jane by the arm, we had virtually collided with them. A pair of ghosts. Jerry looked startled and unsure until I shouted his name like a punchline and grabbed him in a bear hug. When I released him, he looked almost teary with delight. His lips had pulled apart, showing off his saucer-white teeth. Grace hung just behind him and smiled. I had no choice but to greet her, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek. She smiled receptively. I introduced them to Jane, felt a jolt of pleasure rolling out the word "fiancé," and kept grinning as they exchanged pleasantries. Jerry made me promise we'd get back into our old racquetball routine. As we were parting, Grace smiled warmly and said to Jane, "Oh, you're just lovely," then to me, "So lovely." Bile backed up in my throat as I kept an increasingly artificial smile plastered on my face for Jerry's sake. I gripped Jane tightly, held her like a talisman against some evil, a charm to ward off bad luck. When they were clear, Jane pulled me aside, "Did you fuck her or something?" Never heard her talk like that. "Something's up. You reacted more to seeing her than to Nadja. I think you bruised my arm you were squeezing so tight." Sorry. Sorry, you don't understand. "Who is she?" I told her she didn't miss much. "Who is she?" she repeated. Jerry's wife. "And?" She wanted me once, came on to me while he was away, duped him, would've cuckolded him, would've made a fool of him and crushed him for her own selfishness. A good man. A simple man. A man who only wanted her love to make his world sane and ordered. I told her what

had happened. I told her that I hated Grace for it. She stared up at me and then nodded. “You’re a really good person.” She drew herself close and held me. “But maybe you need to be more forgiving.”

Forgiving. What did you say his name was, Caderousse? She corrected me, but again, I didn’t understand. Mondego? She shouted back, but her irritation only made her words less distinct. Danglars? “No, Drake! I’ve told you about him before.” I asked her to remind me what she’d told me. “He’s the playwright.” Playwright? “As in, someone who writes plays.” I didn’t think they made those anymore. “People still write plays.” How can they call themselves playwrights, though? Do they introduce themselves at parties as playwrights? What do you do? I’m a playwright. Is there a higher caliber of pretentious ass than someone who, in the twenty-first century, could call himself a playwright with a straight face? I told her his name sounded more like a porn star than a playwright. The night he came to our home, I never said goodbye to him. I spent his last moments under my roof holding my boy, thinking that the company was better up there. After an hour--I heard the door open and close, followed by her footsteps coming up the stairs. She saw my look when she came up. “What? Oh, be nice.” I was always nice. I was the nice guy. Everybody said so. Always the nice guy and she was my reward. Her love. Youthful, spirited, brilliant, beautiful. I earned her, deserved her. “He was telling me about his novel.” But he’s a playwright. “He’s branching out.” Nice guy who takes an interest in his wife’s friends and their activities asks what it’s about. “A teacher who falls in love with his student.” A pedophile. Great subject. “She’s eighteen and he’s a young professor. She returns the feelings. She actually kind of seduces him.” That makes it alright. Not his fault, if he was pursued. No one resists temptation. It never happens that way. “He leaves his wife to be with her.” I told her he sounds like a dick. “No, he loved her so much that he gave up his life to be with her, but then she wouldn’t be with him.” I suggested that maybe he should’ve loved his wife that much. “Oh, you just can’t understand someone who lives outside of convention.”

But that sounds like a pretty conventional love story gone bad, and I pointed out that it sounded like precisely the type of thing old Drake would hate. "Oh, that's just what he's got so far. It's just the beginning. He said he's not sure where to go after that. He wants the guy to go on some disjointed sexual odyssey." Nice guy husband asks what she wants. What would you like to see happen to this character, my love? I am interested in your thoughts. Enlighten me. What would you suggest, I asked. "I don't know. Maybe pine away for his lost love." I suggested something different. "Revenge for what?" She betrayed him. "How'd she betray him?" He left everything for her and she just changed her mind. "You can't help what you feel," she told me.

For a week or two after the lopsided dinner party, I kept hearing about funny e-mails Drake sent or clever things he said online. Then, mercifully, he seemed to recede into the background along with all the other characters Glenda rotated into our life. Maybe Glenda bailed that night to avoid spending time with me. We'd only been crammed together once, at a party we spent in someone's loft surrounded by Glenda's loud friends and their glistening jewelry stuck into any dangling bit of flesh the guy at their local tattoo parlor could find to pierce. "Nice to finally meet you!" she'd shouted at the door, using the elevated tone stupid people use when they talk to the hard of hearing. The music pulsing inside had apparently deadened her tympanic membranes so that she could no longer reasonably modulate her own volume. She was in a transition from the blue mohawk she'd sported when I first met Jane, though her final goal was impossible to discern from the partially bleached mop atop her head that night. I told her we'd almost met before, that I remembered her. "Oh yeah?" Yeah, I assured her, but such was the limit of our small talk at the door. She took Jane by the arm and led her inside, whispering something that made her giggle.

We were the only couple, sunken into a too low chocolate-colored sofa. Jane leaned forward and chatted excitedly with Glenda and her friends. I reclined and occasionally patted the meat of her lower back to remind her of my presence. While she enjoyed herself I thought of work. We were

starting a power supply study for a town in Mississippi and while the people around me gossiped about avant-garde performance artists who were secretly heterosexual, I ran megawattage figures through my head and imagined cable forming elaborate lattices over my mental map of the sleepy little deep-South burg. Something pulled me out of my calculations. What? "I asked if you wanted to try it?" Try what, the dip? "This couple's yoga thing." I told her whatever she wanted was fine and went back to imagining the power backbone of little Greenwich, MS. Glenda, though, would not be satisfied. "Come on, it's supposed to be great for your sex life. It's like tantric meditation." I curled up both corners of my mouth in a short-lived imitation of a smile. "Can't say it lacks appeal now," Glenda goaded further. "Can you?" I repeated the gesture and then just leaned back again. Jane didn't look at me. Glenda cocked one eyebrow, and went on with whatever they were talking about. I went back to visualizing transformer bushings on H frame arrangements with 14.4 Kilovolt lines. "I don't appreciate that," she told me afterwards while we walked to the car. "You could make an effort." I didn't even answer, just let the argument fail to materialize, just kept my attention elsewhere. Next time, I promised. I'll be better.

But there wasn't to be a next time. Glenda didn't come that night, he did. Afterwards, Jane went back to the same routine, except that it was a summer term so she was going to her classes every weeknight instead of just two nights a week. "It's only three weeks and then I'll take a break, I swear," she assured me, but I was happy to keep her happy, so I never complained. It didn't work, though; didn't keep her happy. Her first week went fine but that weekend she became distracted, irritable. She even snapped at the baby when he wouldn't eat his rice cereal. "I just need some air," and she left for a drive that lasted an hour. On the next Wednesday I fell asleep without her while she was out with Glenda. I woke to the alarm, disoriented, shaken. Like waking from a dream too real to let go, too real to convince yourself, hey, it was only a dream. Like the dream where you cut your foot and sure enough you wake up bleeding. I didn't know why. She wasn't in bed. I found her in James' room

giving him a bottle. She was dressed but her hair and make-up were a mess. "I'm so sorry," she said, looking only at James. "I won't let that happen again." I was still groggy so I mumbled something indistinct and took my shower. I didn't understand her until I checked my cell phone. She'd sent me a text message at 12:30 reading, "Had too much to drink will crash at Glendas." I intercepted her in the kitchen, asked her about it. "I just had to sleep off some drinks." I asked her when she had come home. "About an hour ago." I stared at her as she fumbled with bottles and the baby pounded his little palms against the high chair's food tray. She turned around. "Sorry. It won't happen again. I won't do it again. I--I just got carried away." Nice guy husband is forgiving. He assumes his wife's good virtue, her dedication to him, home, and offspring. He smiles upon all that she does because she is the light of his life. I told her I hoped she had a good time. She forced a smile and turned back to the bottle rack. "It was okay, but I won't do it again."

We hardly ever drank. Wine with dinner. Never drinkers, either of us. At our wedding, my best man Matt, with whom I had shared credit on a few multi-million dollar projects and at least sixteen Sox games but not much else, had hovered around our table, booming about the fate that awaited me and urging me to drink up. I'd obliged to be good natured. A few in a row as the music played. Jane looked to the right, avoiding his shadow. Her chin was tied up with little chains that kept her teeth pressed tight. "My mom and dad aren't talking," she said. Her dress killed me. I told her so. Take my breath away and bury me in the ground. "Are you listening? My sister won't tell me, but something definitely happened on the flight up." I leaned in to her neck and sniffed. "You reek," she snapped, swatting me away. I think I said something. Something she didn't like. "God, this is marriage."

After the baby was born and back from the hospital and after her mother's three week stay came to an end, I thought we were done with it all, done with her restlessness and anxiety. We were happy. We had to be. We had everything. Now, she would be happy. I wanted her. Wanted her all day long. When she bent over her mother's suitcase, helping her pack, I wanted her, wanted to be inside

her. When she covered her eyes with those too big sunglasses she was always wearing, I wanted her, wanted her to close her eyes and moan my name. Once the baby fell asleep she came to the bedroom, took a shower--she was bathing obsessively since she started breast feeding--and then lay down beside me. I rolled over and kissed her. Careful of her fresh scar and leaving her nursing bra on, we made love quietly. After two months of abstinence, it felt deeply satisfying to empty all my tension inside her. I had wanted her and I had her. She was mine. Everything was perfect. I pulled my shorts up to go to sleep. I patted her side as I turned toward her. I told her goodnight. "We've missed a lot of appointments," she told the dark. "We should call to reschedule."

When we started the counseling sessions again, her tone was the same as it had been before the baby. I tried reading up on post-partum depression. I was growing more impatient with the way she, and our therapist, were indulging these errant feelings of hers. I complained that it didn't seem right that the first time we'd gotten a baby sitter was to go there, not to go out together as a couple. I was told this was not constructive. That was when she and the counselor struck on the idea that she'd sacrificed too much of her own life to be my wife. Their solution was for her to strike out on her own more often, pursue her own interests. Her friend Glenda was teaching classes at a community college and Jane decided to audit, reconnect with her friend and dabble in a new medium at the same time. So, Tuesday and Thursday nights I came straight home, received my son like a parcel at the front door along with a peck on the cheek and she was gone for the night. They always went out after class so I tended to fall asleep before she got home. I would wake to James' crying, but usually find that she had beaten me to him after stepping in past midnight. In the mornings, she'd chirp at me excitedly, telling me her ideas for photographs and how different photography was from her painting and then there would be two or three trivial stories from her night out. I could never keep straight the pantheon of other names and descriptors--who was the sculptor and who was the poet. It didn't matter to me. All that mattered was that these outings into a world of pompous, self-important artists and gadflies seemed to

make her happy and I was spared any of it. I got to sit at home doing guy stuff with my boy, watching games on the TV together--he mostly dozed off--and playing catch--I rolled balls to him and he giggled while swatting at them. By the end of that semester, she'd stopped nursing, the baby was sleeping through the night, and we'd stopped seeing the therapist. Of course, when the class was over, she started looking for other excuses to keep in touch with her artsy crowd. She'd signed up for another class, but it was still a few weeks away so she came up with the idea of inviting a few of them over for a dinner party.

It was me who had first suggested we see a therapist. I'd confided to Matt, in what was probably our most involved conversation in several years of working together, that we were expecting but that Jane was young and this was sooner than we'd planned and I was worried that she felt too much anxiety about the whole thing. "Go see a couple's counselor," he advised. I didn't want someone in all our business. We were happy. We didn't have real problems, not problems worthy of counseling. She was just anxious. Just young. We'd be fine. No, we didn't need that. "Let me tell you something," he told me. "My wife caught me messing around three years ago. We weren't going to make it, but when we went to this guy he talked us through things. He got her to see that even though I screwed up, there were problems with us that set us up for this sort of thing. Trust me, it'll help. You get someone impartial and they see both sides, get you both to see each others' sides." So I went to her with the idea. She asked for time to think about it. But she developed a new little ritual soon after. Before we would go to bed, she would turn herself to profile and rub the shape of her belly while craning her neck to see herself in the mirror. Within a week, she agreed and we scheduled an appointment with Dr. What's-His-Face. Just the promise of eventually sitting down with a professional to work things through seemed to help her. She became more invested in picking things out and making decisions for the baby. After the ultrasound, she started talking to her belly, asking him what names he liked best. It seemed to be better. The first of the sessions felt exploratory. Dr. Rubarb

talked us through our backgrounds, our family histories, and our current situation. Jane did most of the talking. She aired out her feelings, which to my ears sounded mostly like a complaint that she was too young for this. When, under cross examination, I paraphrased her this way, she objected. “This is not about my age! Am I just some kid to you?” The therapist tried to interject but she’d become rankled. “Is that what you see in me? This is about the kind of life I want to lead--now and always--not about sowing my wild oats!” In a tone something like horror I said she made it sound like she didn’t want to be with me. “I just don’t want my life to be about some big house and being fully insured and just being comfortable!” So terrible, to be comfortable, to be safe, to worry or want for nothing. She huffed and turned to the doctor, “You see? He doesn’t even begin to understand me.”

She had never accused me of this before. I drove home without a word, dropped her off and went to the gym, an hour with weights, an hour on the treadmill. When I got to the locker room, some bald guy with arms like barrels commented, “That’s your locker? Check your phone, man. It was going off in there when I got here and it’s been going off again the whole time I’ve been getting dressed.” Sixteen missed calls. I still didn’t dial her back. On the drive home, I talked myself through my anger. I convinced myself that she wasn’t ungrateful or even restless, but just hormonal. I’d have to be understanding and help her through it. “Where’ve you been?” I told her I went to work out. “Why didn’t you answer my calls?” She wouldn’t look at me. “Is this how you’re going to react every time I tell you how I’m feeling?” I told her I didn’t want to talk while I was so angry. “Fine. Then I guess I shouldn’t talk now.” She got up and went upstairs. I don’t know if she ever came back down for food. I watched a game and then fell asleep on the couch.

Before the baby, I’d known she was getting bored and lonely at home by herself. On a lark, I decided to fight her boredom with a surprise trip. Two tickets to Philadelphia for the weekend. I left for work like it was a normal day, knowing I’d be back in three hours after attending to a few things, a few things that had to be seen to at the office. Signed some paperwork, left some detailed instructions

for the rest of the day, then motored home and snuck in quietly. I didn't find her in the den. She wasn't in the studio. The door to the bathroom off the master bedroom was open just a crack. I pushed the door further and looked inside. I'd never seen her so small. She was undressed, sitting on the toilet bent forward, almost folded in on herself, with one hand reaching down between her knees into the bowl. She looked up with sallow eyes. I was looking through time at what she'd be in twenty years. The soft underside of her legs quivered at the edge of the seat. All of her was trembling. I saw the empty box on the counter. "I've been sitting here for twenty minutes," she said. "I'm afraid to look." Hunched forward, her narrow face was stretched long somehow, every muscle in her body shaking from having been held in that position for too long, her arm between her legs, afraid to draw the little white stick out and see what it said. I told her it would be okay. I told her to look, for us to see together what it said. She pulled out her unsteady arm and we both looked down at the two dark bars on the little white wand she held. "That means yes," she explained.

I'd thought it was a block in her work that was affecting her. The canvas in the studio she was dedicating all her energy to changed less and less each day. I suggested she just drop that painting, start another, try something different. "It's not that simple," she snapped. "This means something, you know?" I was trying to help. Don't bark at me, I'm trying to help. "But you're not. You can't. It's not you." She placed two fingers tipped by flecks of blue nail polish to her temple and said, "it's like this is a dam and it's holding back so many thoughts, all these thoughts you don't want to know about, don't want to hear because they don't belong. I don't belong." She swung in and out of these moods for the next several weeks. One day she'd tell me she wanted to start looking for a new job, the next day I'd find her in shorts, watching TV and swirling tortilla chips in bowls of artichoke dip. "I want to take up smoking," she told me one day. When I laughed, she pouted. "It would make me more interesting." After the first therapy session, her cold shoulder routine continued for two days. Finally, I couldn't stand it. How can you do this to me? I asked. How can you question what I've given you, what I've put together for our

life here? How dare you! I shouted. This is all for you! Everything for you! I swung my fist, pounding until my knuckles were raw and bloody. But her whimpers of apology that followed were imaginary. I was shouting at the wall, pounding on the exposed beam of the work room off the garage. After a few days, she just seemed to let go. She started talking to me normally. One day she pinched my butt as I walked by her in the kitchen. I pinched her back.

The sessions continued to be tense, though. I came to see them as some sort of release for her and thought of the person sitting across from me as a different woman--not my wife, but some part she had to play. When we came home, I would work hard to pretend I hadn't had to listen to her pointless negativity, to help her come back to me and be calm in our day to day life. I bought some books on pregnancy on my way home from work and left them lying out for her. I even underlined passages about depression and mood swings, but she never let me know if she read them. She never talked to me about any of it outside of the counselor's office and she never talked about her paintings anymore.

Before we left for our second Christmas with her family in San Antonio, I had peeked into the studio. The large canvas we'd picked out together in November was still propped up in front of the window then. It had some basic forms marked out in dark strokes of blue and purple, but I couldn't tell what it was becoming yet. On the trip out she kept her mind off the typical December blizzard buffeting the plane by burying her face in a copy of *Anna Karenina*. I alternated between sleeping, reading issues of *EE* that I'd let pile up on me, and just listening to my MP3 player while watching her. In Texas, we rented a car from the airport and as we came closer and closer to her mother's house she got jittery and her face came alive. Before I put on the parking brake in the driveway, she bounded out of the door and sprinted over the pebbly xeriscaping littered with dried, worm like leaves from the neighbors' trees. She caught her sister as she came out of the door and wrapped herself around her. I hung back, kicking at a pebble on the walk and looking down to study how the lower edge of the stucco wall was stained with fine, red dust. Inside, Jane hugged her mother and cooed "mama" with a

Spanish accent I'd never heard her use before. We sat most of the evening in her mother's living room with cable news looping endlessly at low volume, saying little. They sat apart from me on the long sofa. "We're so happy you're settled and secure, *mija*. We used to worry," her mother told her. Jane rubbed her head into her mother's shoulder. "You didn't have to worry, Mom." She closed her eyes and looked like a child who'd fallen asleep during a long car ride, head slumped to the side and pleasant weariness weighing down her eyelids. When we left, she seemed sullen. She only picked at her book on the flight back and I had to put my arm around her to comfort her. Still, she said little, only giving me a smile of thank you. As we'd driven away, her sister stood in front, where we'd found her four days before, and waved goodbye. Jane leaned over the seat and waved back as I watched her in the rearview mirror, her eyes dead and unusually wide and her blue dress turned triangular in the breeze, like a child's drawing of a dark haired girl. When Jane turned around in her seat, I thought I saw a look of concern as she watched us roll away, but I might have imagined it, might have just been remembering the morning a year before, during our first trip, just after the engagement, when I woke up and found her sister was the only one up. I had helped myself to some coffee, and she came in and sat down at the kitchen table, watching me stir in some sugar under the shards of colored light from her mother's stained glass hummingbirds hanging in the windows. "Can we talk?" she had asked me, gesturing to the chair across from her. I told her I thought I'd already won her over the night before. "It's not like that. I'm not trying to come off as disapproving. I think you're a great guy. I do. I just need you to understand. She's special." I know. Believe me, I know it. "Do you? See...I don't think I mean what you mean." I told her not to worry, that I wouldn't hurt her sister. "I believe that. I don't think you're going to hurt her." Confused, I asked if she thought her sister was going to hurt me. "That's possible. But you're not the one I love." I'm not going to hurt her. You're not worried about her hurting me. "Those aren't the only two possibilities." Help me out here, I said. "She could hurt herself." People don't hurt themselves. No. Why would she do that? "Sometimes people just do. They don't mean to.

They don't want to, but they do." I tried to laugh. I told her this was a very deep conversation for seven a.m. "I need you to understand that being a great guy won't keep her happy. You understand what I'm saying to you? I'm not trying to hurt your feelings or offend you." I understood, but I wanted to know, I asked her, bottom line, do we have your blessing? "As long as she's smiling like that."

Her smile. She smiled for me when I opened the door, the first night she came to my apartment. I'd run to the door in a rush when the bell rang, almost shouted my hello and then sprinted back to the kitchen. "Everything okay?" I called back that there were noodles sticking. "Put salt in the water, genius." My attention on a boiling pot, I asked if she was good in the kitchen. "I'm good everywhere." I told her that comment had possibility and that she might as well get in there and help me. "Okay, but fair warning, I may have been exaggerating a little." I told her I hoped she meant about the cooking. She teased me for inviting her over then putting her to work. I told her there were actually ten people coming by and her maid's uniform was hanging in the pantry. She checked.

After dinner we sat and talked on the sofa while sipping red wine. The wide mouthed goblet seemed precarious between her child-like fingers and I watched the wine slosh back and forth in the glass, expecting a spill at any moment. At one point she folded her legs up underneath herself. As she adjusted her position, I took the chance to slide in closer to her. My impulse was to make some cheesy compliment, but instead I just reached out to her cheek with my free hand and leaned in to kiss her. As we moved into a closer embrace, the spill finally happened. "I'm so sorry!" I told her not to worry, it was hard wood, and I tried to set the goblets down quickly, without letting any momentum dissipate, cataloging in my mind the forces that could bring a moving body to rest. Hungry for her, I pressed myself toward her. As we kissed I felt the tips of her fingers brushing lines along my back. I worked my hand into the back of her blouse and in a moment unclasped her bra. I sat back and reached toward her waist to draw her shirt up. "Wait," she said, as if in surprise. I told her, yes, in the bathroom, I think. I twisted to make a dash and fetch them. "No, that's not it." My disappointment had to show on my

face. She sat up and fished her bra from inside her shirt in the same quick motion. She bunched it in her hands as she sat stiff-backed beside me, looking forward. "I should explain."

I told her she didn't owe me any explanations. "No, I want to." She knotted her small face as she tried to choose her words. "Through most of college I was with one guy. We were serious, well, as serious as we could be then. We split up when our junior year ended. After that, I went through this promiscuous phase, but it felt very empty. When I graduated, I just didn't have any prospects." I found that hard to believe. "I mean jobs," she answered, looking at me again. "The two are related in my mind." I told her I wasn't ready for a revelation that linked her job and sex. "No!" she laughed. "I mean, I didn't want to go teach art in a middle school or anything like that. I didn't want to go on to a masters. I was so burnt out on school. I couldn't go back to Texas and live off my parents while I waited for something. It had already cost them so much to put me through school. I couldn't sell my work; I couldn't even afford to buy new supplies. So I took the job I'm in now and just...well, I feel like I'm waiting. I've met guys and gone out on dates but I never really wanted things to go anywhere because I was still waiting for this other thing so I just didn't let them go anywhere." This was her telling me she didn't want things to go anywhere with me, I thought. "No, that's not it at all. It's just been a while since I've been with anyone." Slow. We'll take it slow. "You still don't get it, though. I'm not good at being alone. It seems like I'm alone by choice, but that's not it. I just haven't found anyone who wasn't going to make me feel more alone, more isolated. Now, though, I'm scared." I was never more glad, never happier to hear about someone's fear. Scared of us? "I don't know. Maybe." I sat back and straightened out beside her. I reached around her and put my hand on her shoulder. I told her it was okay, that I enjoyed her company and wanted her to be comfortable. We sat there for a long time, very chaste but with her head reclined into my chest. After a while, I asked her if I could make one little request. "Yes?" To keep her bra as a souvenir. She socked me in the upper thigh.

That night she let me drive her home, making cracks about coming off the rails at every turn. I walked her to her door, finally met her roommate in a flurry of pleasantries, and then left like a staid gentleman after one more kiss. When I got back to my apartment there was a steady red pulse announcing a voice mail on my land line. I went right to it without switching on any lights and stood listening to the message in the blue darkness. “I’m too chicken to call your cell, but I wanted to tell you something: We are going to be together, you and me. We are.” She paused for a long time and then added, “goodnight.”

And we were. In the city, we were good, we were happy. Once, after we’d moved, she ambushed me at the door when I got home from work and asked if I wanted to go back into the city, to get out, “like we used to,” she said. I’d just driven forty minutes through neck-jerk traffic to get away from it, though. I didn’t want to go back. I just wanted to enjoy her, to sit in the house and hold her, watch some TV, quietly, just the two of us, the two of us in our own little world, our own four walls. Our own fairytale. “Maybe I’ll just go by myself.” I offered to go, said we’ll go. “No, fine. I’ll go by myself. I should’ve gone on my own today anyway.” She snatched her keys off the counter just inside the kitchen, but caught the nail of her index finger on the edge of the tile as she did. After she slammed the door, I stood there breathing slowly, trying not to explode. Finally, something still boiling inside me, I headed out the door to chase her down. I only had to walk across the drive. I found her crying in the front seat of her car, a spot of blood below her fingernail, and seeing her defused my rage. I told her it was okay, opened the door and eased her out of the seat. I called her names, honey, dear, baby, and told her again and again it would be okay. We would be okay. I scooped her up and carried her upstairs. She sniffed back a sob as I unbuttoned her blouse.

She had warned me. She warned me on the flight back from meeting her parents. “Actually picking a date seems so real.” Wasn’t it real already, I asked. “Not really. Not yet.” Not real, like too good to be true, like a fairytale, I asked her. “I never wanted a fairytale.” I tried anyway. Knowing she

wasn't happy in the house, knowing she was frustrated and lonely, I planned an elaborate evening for Valentine's Day. I picked out a lecture she'd like at the Museum of Fine Arts, booked us a table at Clio. Naturally, I sent her tulips. When I got home, I found her in the studio, working on a new painting. She was doing something with the flowers I'd sent her. She'd never just paint a literal representation, but I recognized the splotches of yellow on the canvas from the bulbs in the vase I'd passed downstairs. Right as rain. That's the spirit. Start fresh. She turned around and smiled faintly, stains on her shirt and paint all over her knuckles. I told her she'd better put it on hold that I had quite an evening planned. "Oh, do we have to?" It was Valentine's Day. "Can't we just order in and watch something? Isn't there a Red Sox game or something?" The season hadn't started yet. She was trying to get back at me, get back for the week before when she'd wanted to go out and I'd only wanted to stay in. "No, nothing like that. Come here," she said, motioning me to her. When I came near she reached for my face and pulled me into a kiss. "Come on, we haven't had sex in this room yet." Her voice was weighed down one octave with something desperate and yearning. Pleading. "Now." She slid to the floor and slid her jeans past her ankles. I was stunned for a moment and just stared at her pale legs and the triangle of dark hair between them. "Come on," she said again and closed her eyes before reaching down and touching herself. I obeyed. Rushed and frantic, I obeyed. I was panting and dripping sweat when I was finished. I tried to get up, but she said, "No," and held me there until I went soft while still inside her.

She first showed me her work before we were even lovers. After a few dates, after she'd told me she was scared of us, amid protests that she'd given away most of her best pieces to family and friends, she pulled out eight canvases of varying sizes from her closet and lined them up against the wall for me to inspect. She stepped back and nibbled at her thumbnail while I looked them over.

Bizarre Dali-esque monochromatic dreamscapes. There were recognizable shapes and forms but they were lost in some kind of psychological distortion. Someone's nightmares, another person's dreams. I could see that there was skill behind their rendering and I assumed they somehow represented some talent.

"I like that you're sincere."

"What do you mean?"

"I like that you're not falling all over yourself pretending you love them..."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what to say. They're good, but I don't know anything about art."

"Curse MIT and their focused curriculum."

"I can b.s. you if you want. I can talk about the way you've got a real sense of contrast between this organic mass here and the tones on the other side that suggest a sort of luminous liquid. I could pretend that I think these discernible fence post shapes suggest that the painting's all about boundaries, if you want," I said before rising from a crouch and turning to face her.

"That doesn't sound half bad."

"Look, this is what I really see in these paintings: One, you're good."

"Stop it."

"I mean it. I finger painted as a kid so I can tell when somebody knows what they're doing."

“Oh, really?”

“And two: your mind works in really interesting ways.”

“These are your conclusions?”

“Yep.”

She came up and kissed me.

A year later, when she was mine, we were walking lazily, as we would often, just walking, waiting for some unexpected inspiration, something absurd out in the world that would stoke up her mirth, something I could make fun of and make her snicker. We were in a shopping mall, and I cannot remember why we'd gone there, why we would linger there, where we had been earlier or what had landed us at that spot between the glass wall of a perfumeria and rows of gilded mannequins wearing silk halter tops, but while strolling there we passed by an inverted metal V-shape that supported the level above.

“I remember that,” I told her, gesturing to the brace.

“What do you mean?”

“We consulted on this place, when I was new to the firm. Somebody in the architecture firm had screwed up and the whole second level was going to be unstable.”

“Really?”

“It happens. I remember sitting around the table with the lead architect, some guy from France. We went through all these changes that would have to be made and it just set this guy off. He was shouting, literally shouting at a room full of us because we had the unfortunate job of telling him his building was going to fall down.”

“Seriously, this happened?”

“He went on and on about the purity of the space, about the expressive quality of the lines.” I moved my fingers through space before us, tracing the border between the two levels. “He took a breath and I just kind of jumped in.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him he could preserve the concept he was going for with the lines and comment implicitly on the demands of industrial commerce by incorporating support braces into the design and just leaving them out like this.”

“You suggested that?”

“I just wanted him to shut up, mostly.”

“And he liked your idea?”

“Well, there it is.”

“Huh. So you actually have a long history of taming unreasonable artist types? I thought I was your first.”

“The partners were ecstatic. I got a promotion out of that one comment.” She squeezed my arm, smiled and stepped away from me. With delicate steps she approached the wide iron beams painted to a sheen with bronze-colored paint. Her head panned slowly up the line of the support to where it met the level above. She laid her palm flat against it and then stepped under it, looking at it from inside its shadow. Her searching look lingered for a moment more, but she said nothing. The smile came back onto her face and she walked back to me, took my arm, and we continued on.

A man who has lived for nothing finds a girl. Improbably, they win each other’s hearts. She has always yearned to create, but her paintings that earned her solid grades in art school won’t sell in the real world. He, though, has means. He has all that both could need to survive, to prosper even. He has come along to rescue her. He puts a studio in the house with a wide, bay window from which she can

follow the movement of the sun across the sky. A man builds things. I built that. Maybe not my hands, but my will. Isn't that artist enough? Isn't that a writer? I was writing a story for us, wasn't I?

I kick a copy of Dostoyevsky to the wall, begin flailing about wildly. My arms swing low, limp hoses without intent. Stack after stack of books surrender to entropy at my touch and disintegrate into just pulp and ink.

Why did you do this to me? And I don't know who I'm asking anymore. Why? Why!

I hurl them. Whole bundles of them. As they strike the wall, bulbs shatter. The remaining lights catch the flying shards as they parabola across the open space of the room, toward terminal points on the mottled floor. Insensibly, I gave myself a refuge from all the distress; an unreal world which would make the real world a source of bitter disappointment. The damned books. Stories.

Someone has stopped writing my story.

My author has abandoned me here. Here in my hole. I did not do this. I did not do this to myself! Who would? Who could? There's no one who would do this to himself. I see, when I close my eyes, retinal burn-in of my dreams--hopeless endless dreams of kneeling monks flagellating themselves with increasingly sinister instruments of violence: tailed whips, flail maces, giant mechanized claws mounted to electrified razor wire. Someone else created this. Someone else ruined me, laid me low and abandoned me. Where is he? Where is the author?

"Why," I say aloud. First word in a thousand days, only word in a decade, last word in my life, maybe. Why did you do this to me?

I stagger across the floor, leave a mass of my own vomit in the corner. The other Brontë ends up in the pool of backed-up acid, destined to fermentation and stench. Two steps back. Turn. The walls spin. Curse words rattle in my head and I come down to my knees. I clench my hand so tightly the knuckles blanch and I drive them--piston-like--into the wall where the faint outline of a face still mars the plaster.

Again and again until the beam behind cracks and fractures like a snapped bone misshapes the flesh it's wrapped in, leaving a depression. A shallow basin the shape of my mashed hand and behind the pestle, a mortar rich with chipped splinters of wood and fresh blood.

She was mine. Mine, I told myself. Mine entirely.

But not. Not entirely. There was a space in her soul--her soul, she told me--where I didn't belong, territory within her that I could not understand. I built you the studio, I said. I gave that to you. Her eyes went dim, her chin--sharp, gorgeous little chin--dipped because I did not understand.

Crumpled on the floor, I feel a long, wet tear going down the length of my face, riding the ridges dug into my cheek by the fire. I pull my ruined paws up to my face again and I feel, feel in my raw, reddened fingertips the wetness all about my eyes.

I pull myself off the ground, peppered now with a thousand reflections of me in the shattered bits of glass lying at the juncture between wall and floor.

My author should have ended this already. He should have written that I turned out alright at the end, that it was what preyed on me that was foul and wicked and base. The final lines should make it clear I was never to blame.

But on the lower frequencies, I hear the drum beat of other stories being written.

There I am just a bit player.

Not the measure of all things. Not the center of events. Not even a victim, maybe.

The villain.

There it's not my story at all. I am not some Rochester waiting for my scarred and forlorn happily ever after. I am not the exile or prisoner. Not society's invisible whipping boy. I did it all to myself.

No. That can't be. I am waiting in a hole that I've been cast into, forced into by circumstance. There are things I have done, yes. Things I have done, but which I had to do. I had to act, had to do

something. You can't watch what you've built disintegrate, fade away. I did what I had to do. That is my harmartia, maybe, but there is something coming to reverse my fortune. It doesn't end here.

The solution is so simple. There must be another. Someone else must come into my life. I must go out and then someone else must be written into the story. I feel it completely with the whole of my renewed being. Even my crime, even my exile, seem now something alien and external. Not of me. Not intrinsic to me. I can be something other than those things, something other, even than the burns and memories.

Another, yes. There will be another. There must be. Perhaps a blind woman, to look past my scars. Or someone fallen, someone with her own secrets, her own shame. Redemption is never lonely. There must be another.

Then, though I will know what I have been, though it will still have been, once there is another, none of this will have happened to me at all.

I turn my back on the scattered bindings, the fragments of glass, and all the stench of living.

Living.

Up my steps, out in the world, the sun's coming out, catching glints of silicon trapped between the tablets of asphalt beneath the black, cold slush. For the first time, I don't know where I will go; I have no plan.

I just walk, trying to see the city through new eyes.

Early birds have already snatched all the parking spaces along the curbs, filling the streets with car hoods of various colors, a flower garden of candy-apple red, reflective forest green, royal pearl blue. Through the crevices of the trapezoidal buildings of Chinatown, the forty-story layer cake down on Lincoln street peers over, cutting the sun into a brilliant half-starburst as it creeps up.

Suddenly, someone jostles me. Someone is trying to engage me in conversation--to speak to me.

“Hey, what the hell is that?” a twenty-something kid with white wires running into his ears from the bulge of his jacket asks me, looking out into the street with disgust where a kind of algal mass has left a bright, shining green streak across the black and gray wasteland of asphalt. “Seriously, what is that, man?” I turn to him. He looks through me at last and suddenly, he doesn’t care about that thing growing in the street, that thing somehow being nourished by freezing rain water and whatever else people have let spill into the road. Suddenly, he is not so interested in conversation with me and simply slinks away.

I continue, but the ruts I’ve dug into my mental map of the city are so deep I find myself rolling into them, walking the same routes I have used in the past, the back-ways and circuitous trajectories behind buildings, through alleyways--tacks to avoid detection. With a so-cold wind lancing through my coat’s seams, I find myself on the top of familiar steps past a yellow and black hydrant. I have been here many times, though it was not one of my favorites. The store was too enclosed, too tight, making it a difficult place from which to beat a retreat with merchandise in hand. There are bargain shelves exposed to the elements up top, but their selection is sparse compared to other store’s outdoor racks. Still, I’ve drawn from their inventory many times, enough times that I know what’s down there, know how inviting the womb-like space is compared to the frigid blasts walloping me now.

A wave of heat rises off the rough stone of the walls down below. An iron railing leads down--so familiar, so like my own, that I descend without thinking. I walk right down the steps to the basement store, placing my foot carelessly on each step, ignoring the missing slip-grip-strip on the second to the last, slipping because of it, almost falling as human beings are wont to do when they are not careful.

It’s warm. Hearth-heated warm. Vents hiss from the floor.

Seven foot high stacks on all the walls are punctuated only by a velvet curtain on one side and a nook for excess fluorescent bulbs and extension cords on the other.

“Let me know if I can help you find anything,” a woman with gun-gray skin and deep fissures about her mouth offers from behind me. I can tell she smiled largely once, but not now. She interprets the shudder that goes through me as a reply and leaves me be.

I don't know why I'm here, beside the heat. On the ends of the freestanding shelves running through the middle of the store, authors taunt me. Authors' photos. Authors' obits. Their comings and goings clipped from newspapers and pasted with yellowing strips of tape to the pale pine edges of the shelves.

I rip Faulkner down out of spite, but leave Manuel Komroff (*Dead at 84, Author of 45 novels*) alone because I've never heard of him.

The newsprint stuffed in my pocket, I want to walk up to the counter, to the woman with the drawn face and clearly no joy in her life, and say, I have suffered immeasurably. I suffered terrible injustice, but...I have done horrible things. Unforgivable things, perhaps. No, yes, unforgivable. I've hidden from them for so long, but now, now I know that there is only one way I will be redeemed. I need to find someone who will forgive me, even though I'm hideous, even though I'm unforgivable. That's what must happen now. That's how a story like this ends. I wish she could forgive me, but she's gone, so it has to be another, someone else. I see you here, and I've seen you here before, and I see you are someone who knows disappointment. Working here alone, in this basement, with hardly any one coming through that door, hardly anyone exchanging niceties across this counter, you must be terribly alone. I think that maybe, with that in mind, maybe you are the one I need. Maybe you are the Sonya to my Rodya. You are the instrument of my redemption. If you would only love me, love me as she once did, even for a moment and I would be whole again, able to start again. I'll never be what I was before, never be that man, but I don't have to be this. I can change, grow, live again. Can you do that for me? Can you be that for me? Will you love me?

When I approach her, I see the pea-soup glaze over her eyes bear down on me in irritation.

“Yes, can I help you with something?”

I shake my head.

I shake my head and turn away, taking the steps up into the world.

It takes a long time to walk to the beginning.

The place is closed. Permanently. The gallery used to fill one third of an old brick warehouse, with arched windows rising, tier after tier, five stories up. Some savvy entrepreneur bought the empty space and carved it up to lease three ways. The short-lived gallery had set up expositions in the three levels of their narrow share of the space--the left-hand side with no freight elevator.

I'd heard about it by accident. Walking into the break room one morning, a trio of girls all looked up suddenly, little tremors of surprise spreading out in the center of their coffee cups. They were aides and secretaries of the 20-something mini-skirt set that populated the outer office. I wasn't entirely sure I knew all their names, so I offered only a blanket "hello." They greeted me and tried to call me "sir," asking if they could get me something.

"Cut it out. I'm just out of coffee and Liz is running some papers downstairs for me," I explained. They smiled and pretended to be at their ease. "What're you ladies talking about?" I asked, hoping to help their conversation back onto the rails.

"Oh, Suzanne was just telling us about a friend of hers who's opening up a new art gallery."

"Really?"

"Are you at all into art?"

"As much as the next guy, I guess."

"Oh, you should come then!" The other two girls shot her looks of muted alarm, but she wasn't phased.

"Should I?"

"It's a really cool space. You should come check it out!" I wouldn't have, of course. I wouldn't have if things hadn't been so odd, if I hadn't lost my friendship with Jerry and Grace, or if any of the dates I'd been on lately had led anywhere. You have to try new things, I'd told myself. So I went.

"You came!" Suzanne cooed when I shuffled inside, hands in my pockets. She separated from a group of people sniffing around the hors d'oeuvres to greet me. We only talked for a moment, just long enough for her to realize she didn't know what to do with me. I said something about going to check out the exhibits, excusing her from any obligation she felt to entertain me. She all but leapt at the chance for freedom and I never saw her again that night.

Rows of paintings were mounted to the exposed beams in the hastily-built wall between the gallery space and the next tenant's third of the building. Out of courtesy, I decided to do one lap of the exhibits before heading home to watch TV. Each of the three levels was connected by a different set of steps. Iron planks spiraled up from the ground floor. I moved quickly through the paintings and sculptures on the second level, then made my way up a set of narrow metal stairs leading to the third.

The photographs there slowed me down. One wall had a series of tight shots of body parts, all women apparently. One showed a woman's ebon shoulder pointed toward the camera, with a single streak of white paint down her back. Another was a tight fist wrapped in barbed wire. The one that captivated me, though, was a landscape shot across the shoulders and upper chest of a very slight girl with light, sandstone-colored skin. Nestled precariously in the divot at the end of her right collarbone was a small parcel of dark soil holding a tiny purple flower. The girl's hand was raised into the shot as if grasping at something that was no longer there.

I stood in front of it, staring, when I realized there was someone else beside me looking at it too. I turned just as she did and we exchanged quick friendly smiles--mine said, "I am not threatening" and hers, "I am not aloof;" then we went back to looking at the photograph.

She was small framed--thin and short. Her dark hair was pulled back over her small forehead by a dainty cap, clearing the view of her dark eyes. The smile she showed me was long and thin and dominated her face, defining the sharp lines of her cheekbones. As I processed her features, no longer really attending to the photograph, I realized she was both very young and very pretty.

I snuck another glance at her. She noticed and turned again. I repeated the smile. I still wasn't threatening. She still wasn't aloof. I looked back at the art work as if there was some detail I hadn't yet examined.

"So what do you think?" she asked. Her voice--richly tonal but not overtly feminine--wasn't flirtatious or plying.

"Oh, it's...lovely. Very captivating. I wouldn't want to guess what it means, but it's just a lovely picture. I guess I've just caught myself staring at this girl's hand for ten minutes."

"It's mine."

"You're the photographer?" and I bent in to read the little white card beside the image.

"No, it's my hand." She raised her arm and splayed her fingers as evidence. When she did I noticed how her wrist bone didn't protrude at all from the thin conical shape of her arm.

"Oh, this is you?"

"My roommate took it. I mean, she was my roommate in college for a while. This was two years ago," she said pointing at the picture. "She invited me here but didn't tell me she'd be showing this. Now I don't even know where she is."

"That happened to me, too. The girl who invited me abandoned me."

"She did?"

"She's only an acquaintance from my office, so she wasn't obligated to shepherd me around."

"Your office, huh?"

"Pardon?"

“You sounded very territorial there.”

“Oh, sorry. Do I sound overbearing?”

“No, no. I like the way you talk. ‘Abandoned’ and ‘shepherd.’”

“You’re very detail oriented.”

“See, there you go.”

“That was another interesting word choice?”

“Yes. It shows you’re observant.”

“This is a good quality we’re attributing to me, right?”

“Definitely. Are you an artist, too?”

“No, engineer.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You seem surprised.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met one is all.”

“I’m sure you must have.”

“You never know. So, you’re a well-spoken engineer.”

“You’re really intent on classifying me.”

“I just think it’s a complicated combination.”

So then, I decided to dip some litmus paper into this conversation by saying, “I do like it when girls with pretty clavicles say I’m complicated.”

She laughed.

“You do, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Does this happen to you a lot?”

“I’d say once a week.”

“Since when?”

“Oh, puberty.”

“Clavicle, though?”

“You’re back to critiquing my word choice.”

“You could’ve gone with collarbone. Clavicle is so...clinical.”

“But it would’ve been the wrong number of words for the sentence.”

“How’s that?”

“In addition to using interesting and complicated words, I also choose the number of words in each sentence carefully so that the length of each successive sentence on my end of a conversation fits into a Fibonacci sequence.”

“Oh no, it’s engineering humor!” but she laughed anyway.

“No, not even other engineers would find that funny.”

“But would they use ‘clavicle,’ that’s the question.”

“I guess some words just aren’t...” Our eyes met--probably not for the first time, but for the first time that mattered. “Beautiful enough for the things they describe.”

She cocked her head half an inch to the left. When she started speaking again, there was something different in her voice. It was less animated, softer.

“You know what crepuscular rays are?”

“Yes, I do.”

“That’s another example, don’t you think? It’s an ugly word, ‘crepuscular,’ but they’re just about the most beautiful thing in the universe.”

“Just about,” and I looked hard into her.

She smiled.

From the other side of the room, someone shouted “Jane!” I turned and saw a pasty girl with a blue-flecked mohawk talking with a group of hangers on by the stairs. She waved at my companion to join her as she kept gabbing with the group around her. It seemed as if she might have shouted the name in the middle of a sentence.

“Oh, there she is.”

“Jane?” I said.

“That’s me.”

“Jane, can I get your phone number before you go?”

She looked up at me. Her mouth opened but at first she said nothing. Then she pursed her lips before answering, “yes.” I introduced myself and she told me her number.

“Aren’t you going to write it down?”

“I’m good with numbers. I’ve got it.”

“Okay,” and she began to walk backwards away from me. “But if you don’t remember, then you’ll never see me again.”

I didn’t say anything as she turned to join her friend’s party by the stairs. Instead I looked back at the photo under the wavering glow of an overhead halogen bulb. A moment later, I had to walk by her to leave and, as I passed, she looked outward to throw me another smile.

The light caught her right eye and gleamed, as if a sliver of glass was wedged into her iris.

It's night when I reach the corner in Chinatown where the red lantern glows in the restaurant window. The cars on the sides of the street have all been rotated and a laughing group of forty-somethings in wool and silk cross before me and open the door of the restaurant, setting the bell above it jangling.

I leave them to their pleasures, leave them to live as they will.

Around the corner I stop at the top of my steps and look down into the shadows cast by the alley. Maybe it is a trick of the light, but the well no longer looks white, as if it was never painted. The door is sealed and a thick padlock is clamped over the latch on the outer gate.

I could find a way to remove it.

Pick it, maybe. Find some hairpins or paperclips, visualize the mechanism and finesse the tumblers and pins set in opposition inside the casing.

Or pry it off the door. There must be stray metal--rods or misplaced tools--at the construction site a few blocks over.

I go out to the sidewalk, look in the window of the restaurant. If those boisterous people look out they will see me standing alone. I wish I could will her to be there, conjure her into the space beside me, to come with me through that door, to sit at one of the small round tables by the window, say *thank you* to the waiter as he passes us the over-long menus, wonder aloud together whether it will be the Szechuan Scallops or the Mongolian Beef. I wish I could have her smile to me again.

But I can't.

Nothing has survived but me. Nothing has survived me. She might have lived. I might have just let her live, released her. I could have unlatched her cage. I could have just delighted in what had been.

I might have remembered her well from the past. I might have loved her well enough to let her go. She was so much. Too much to belong in a safe little yard, behind dear paper-thin walls.

What if you were alive now? What if you could see me now? Like this. What if I had only done this to myself? Oh, would you touch my hand, darling Jane? My hideous shriveled hand? What would you regret now? What would you wish might have been different between us? Would you wish you had come to me, come to me honestly with your feelings for him?

Yes, do it that way.

Rewrite the story, please. Less melodrama. Less wrenching. Make it calm. Make it simple. A child's story of gradual renewal, gradual rebirth, gradual transition from one world to another.

You, my love. You will be gracious. You will bring me your feelings, share them with me, your partner. Before there is anything like betrayal, you will come to me. Let's have a fire in the hearth. A fire burning in the hearth because we were a family and it is our home. There will be a fire and I will be reading and you will come to me, and you will say, *There's something I have to tell you.*

And I would be better. I would nod gravely, because I am hurt by this news, because I love you. I love you so, even now. But I will be better. I will not shout. I will not protest. I will ask you, calmly, civilly, heroically, what it is you want to do and when you say that your feelings for this man are so strong, so strong that you cannot resist them, then I will nod again. I will close the Dickens in my lap and rise. I will walk to the window and look out, look out at the manufactured lawn that rolls behind the house into night and I will say to you, *Then I release you.*

You would protest, *But I don't want to hurt you!*

And I might answer, *It's not your fault. Your heart wants what it wants and I can't blame you for it. I'll be alright. It won't end me. I will just have to be determined to wait and endure.*

I will say to you, with the firelight behind me and your tears falling for my nobility, *All human wisdom is just two words—wait and hope.*

Yes, better. It might have been better. Could be.

It could be just that way and that is why I am alone on the corner, envying the crowd inside their pleasures. I reach out for the door handle with unblemished and untroubled lily-white fingers. I breathe out heavily, trying not to think of you and where you might be tonight, trying not to dwell on how lovely you were when we last spoke, when we last passed James between us, taller now, speaking, calling me *Dad* and you by your name.

I go into the restaurant, take the round table by myself and sit. The waiter passes me an overlong menu and I say, without the echo of a partner, *thank you*.

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Vita

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